

# The Sound of Irish Fire

**There's more to Moya Brennan's mystical Celtic music than her Irish heritage. She's a vibrant Christian with a heart for worship.**

Haunting vocals herald Guinevere's arrival. A mysterious melody can be heard each time the warrior queen appears in the blockbuster film King Arthur, whether she is fighting Saxons or embracing her king. Supplying the ethereal sounds for the latest retelling of this ancient mythical tale is Moya Brennan, lead vocalist of Clannad—the Irish band that is regarded as the pioneer of contemporary Celtic music.

Throughout the thrilling adventure movie, with its edge-of-your-seat action and historical grandeur, theater audiences are treated to the lush sounds of one of the most influential artists of her genre. But Moya is not only a sought-after singer; she is also a committed Christian. And it is her personal faith that compels her to engage with the wider world—including Hollywood.

Most recently that meant working with top composer Hans Zimmer on King Arthur. Moya co-wrote the theme “Tell Me Now” with him—as well as added her harmonies to the film score.

“He's fun, he's a lovely guy to work with,” she said of Zimmer, who composed also for Gladiator and Lion King. On the DVD version of King Arthur, he praises Moya for having “such a great voice.”

This latest version of the Arthurian legend is set in Britain around the fall of the Roman Empire—but was filmed amid the emerald peaks and crystal streams of Ireland, not far from

Moya's home. Moya believes she is reaching out by taking on assignments like this. "He [Arthur] is standing there as a Christian," she says. "I think most Christians should actually see it. ... They'll be nicely surprised."

Moya particularly appreciated the fact that the supernatural element of the medieval tales was removed from this version. "This is more about the man, a Roman knight who became disillusioned with Rome," she says.

Anyone looking for the "magic Merlin" of the old stories would be disappointed. "I liked it because of that," she continues. "It made it real, rather than Arthur the legend." The hero is shown praying and declaring faith as well as acting in emotional scenes and dramatic battles.

## **Road Warrior**

Strangely enough, around the same time she was working on the film, Moya found herself on a real-life battlefield while on a visit to Africa as a Goodwill Ambassador for the Christian Blind Mission (CBM). Based on Christian principles, CBM exists to cure and prevent blindness, deafness and other disabilities. The organization also supports blind, visually impaired and otherwise disabled people.

"Clannad Star in War Riot": That's how the headline ran in the Irish Daily Mirror last summer. Trapped in the middle of violent unrest in Congo, Moya faced the possibility of abandoning her trip.

She had arrived at Kinshasa Airport with her husband, Tim Jarvis, and a mission team. But the surrounding area was

becoming a battleground—and the terminal itself was not a welcoming place.

Via cell phone, they discovered that a colleague could not get through the gunfire of anti-U.N. protests. There were armed people even at the airport. So they decided to leave.

The public relations machinery kicked in, and others wanted to know what was happening. “Before we got back on the plane, I was talking to Sky News [a major European satellite channel],” Moya says. “It was on the front pages in about three or four papers here—and still we’re getting articles about it,” she explains. “It was in between doing all this King Arthur stuff.”

The team flew on to Kenya, where their schedule was changed to include a visit to Rwanda. Moya visited eye-operation and rehabilitation work run by CBM in that country.

She also gave an impromptu concert in a businessman’s garden. All she had were back-up tapes and a mono microphone. Yet she put on a full show—and raised \$13,000 to buy a bus for CBM.

“God works in the most amazing ways,” she says. Missionary work clearly appeals to her, and she expects to return to Rwanda with her band. “You do one trip to Africa and you’re hooked,” she says with a smile.

She speaks with as much excitement about this work as she does about her music. “It’s really good to be involved,” she adds.

Of course, Moya gives concerts in her homeland, too. As King

Arthur was showing in the theaters, she played her first ever solo concert on the ancient “holy ground” of Derry, Northern Ireland.

It was a perfect setting in which to project those dreamy vocals that have helped Clannad become one of the most distinctive sounds—not only on the Irish scene but also throughout the music industry.

The voice came from a woman with a charismatic faith rooted in the Celtic Christianity of her homeland. Ireland was a strategic base for the evangelization of Europe in the “golden age of the saints.”

Veteran Clannad fans joined younger people in Christian T-shirts for Moya’s concert at Derry’s Millennium Forum. They gave her a warm reception—two standing ovations and plenty of cheers. And for good reason. She sang her heart out in this town, one she used to visit in her younger days when she lived just across the border in County Donegal in what the locals call “the South”—the Republic of Ireland.

## **Humble Origins**

With its rugged coastline, golden beaches, windswept fields and open skies, Donegal is both wild and wonderful. Clannad’s ethereal tones were born there, amid the mountains and the ocean.

Their name had been concocted at the kitchen table from the Irish phrase “Clann As Dobhar”—or “family from Dore”—referring to their hometown. It was as simple as that.

Moya and her brothers and uncles all were part of a family who made music together. They wove a fresh, vibrant musical tapestry from the tales and traditions of a land that remains rich in folklore and faith.

They mixed their own blend of harmonies, presenting old Gaelic songs in new settings. It turned out to be the right recipe—particularly with the hit “Theme From Harry’s Game” in 1982.

“People were coming up and saying, ‘Where did you get that sound?’” Moya explains. “And we went, ‘What sound?’” It was the first time it dawned on the group that they had created a new style.

Since then, many others have followed in their wake, flooding the Celtic category in CD stores. “It’s a music that has been copied worldwide,” Moya says, “but it really did come from us.”

“Harry’s Game” started life as a theme to a TV drama about The Troubles—the civil unrest in Northern Ireland. But 10 years later it was also featured in the soundtrack for the film Patriot Games.

Clannad went on to sell truckloads of albums, win awards and supply theme tunes for other significant movies such as The Last of the Mohicans—part of which they sang in Cherokee and Mohican.

There has always been a sense of spirituality in Clannad’s material. The family had a strong Catholic background, and later, Moya began to express a renewed personal faith through

her solo recordings. The albums *Perfect Time* and *Whisper to the Wild Water* echoed those wistful vocals and atmospheric sounds—this time with tales of brave saints and prayers for healing the land.

Out of the Brennan household also came Moya's sister, Enya, who played in Clannad but went on to develop her own highly successful solo career. Both women have considerable followings in the so-called New Age market.

Moya sees that as part of her mission. She knows that when New Age fans listen to her mainstream material, they go on to investigate her Christian recordings. There are stories of people finding faith that way, she claims.

Not surprisingly, her albums have won her respect in the Christian community, too. She speaks with honor and humility about having shared platforms with well-known speakers such as evangelist Franklin Graham and author Philip Yancey.

And when she's not performing, she may well be playing as part of the worship band at St. Mark's Family Worship Center—a Pentecostal church in Dublin, Ireland's capital.

Moya realizes she is in a unique place. Her appeal to a wider audience enables her to be a positive presence beyond the church. "You will never reach people behind closed doors," she declares.

Her most recent album, *Two Horizons*, which received a Grammy nomination this year, is an attractive amalgam of storytelling, pipes, whistles and fiddles—all from Moya's Irish heritage—on which she sings of her culture as well as

her creed.

So what is next? Moya talks about a new album, going back to the studio with Clannad and a desire to be involved with the forthcoming film version of C. S. Lewis' The Chronicles of Narnia.

She would be just the right choice, for Narnia is rooted in the mist-covered fields and hedgerows of Ireland. Lewis himself was born in Belfast and was inspired by the island's myths and legends.

"I'm just open to ideas," Moya says. "We can all constantly learn all the time. I like to think that even though I've been in the music business for over 30 years, I'm still learning things.

"That's what makes it exciting for me. It's the same way that I view my faith—I'm still learning and becoming stronger and being excited by every day and the different people I meet."

## **Healing the Irish Wound**

In Northern Ireland, Christians are leading the way to reconcile the hurts caused by more than 30 years of sectarian violence.

When a bomb hit Johnny Diamond's car, an unearthly bang could be heard across the city of Derry in Northern Ireland. The blast partly lifted the vehicle and blew in its windshield. Yet driver and passengers survived.

The explosion had been caused by a massive 450-pound bomb planted on the roadside and intended for a military vehicle. The story hit the headlines the next day.

Diamond told journalists that God saved him. But he doesn't say it lightly. For he knows others who have not survived Northern Ireland's "Troubles."

Civil unrest has reigned for 30 years, with bitter discord between the Protestant unionists who want to maintain the north's union with Britain—and the Catholic nationalists who want a united Ireland.

The conflict reached a new level of horror when the Bogside area of Derry became the setting for "Bloody Sunday" in 1972. A civil rights march met resistance from British troops, and 13 civilians were killed. Even amid the peace process today, that neighborhood echoes the pain of those turbulent times.

Diamond was among the protesters on Bloody Sunday. He remembers how people's grief brought the city to a standstill. But now he hears a new sound of hope in Derry (renamed Londonderry in the 1600s because of its association with London merchants).

"We're very much aware that there has been a mountain of prayer going up for this country—from America, England or wherever," he says. "God has been putting Ireland on many people's hearts."

Both Johnny and his wife, Karen, treasurer and secretary respectively of Cornerstone City Fellowship, believe current peace efforts are a result of those prayers.

Part of the Assemblies of God, Cornerstone started in a member's living room with 15 people, most from a Catholic background. They hired as their pastor Andrew McCourt, fresh out of a Pentecostal Bible college.

Now, eight years later, the church draws 120 people to its latest meeting place at the Calgach Center. At the entrance, a display reads: "If stones could speak."

Those words were echoed prophetically at Cornerstone by Belfast church leader Priscilla Reid. "You are the living stones that God has placed here," she told them. "God is going to do something here that you can export to the nations."

Many charismatics believe it will take supernatural activity to make fresh inroads into the fiercely religious culture of Northern Ireland. But Derry is shaking off the shackles of its past. Tourists have replaced terrorists on the streets. Though the wounds of history hurt, there is healing on this holy ground—sanctified by centuries of prayer.

Healing meetings recently drew a crowd of 700 to the city's Millennium Forum theater. Similar events in Belfast generated reports of a deaf woman's being able to hear and a man's recovery from cancer.

"It's a different day in Ireland now," McCourt says. "It's better than it was eight years ago—but still not to the point of revival."

So what keys is Cornerstone turning to unlock a new spiritual awakening? "The biggest thing is still community," McCourt

says. "Trying to serve without a heavy evangelistic agenda."

Community involvement has earned them credibility. "Ultimately it's just perseverance," he says, "turning up, showing up, being there. Somewhere along the line, we need God to do something radical in the hearts of people that we can't do ourselves."

Another expression of church is being pursued by Tommy Kelly. He leads a Christian gathering named Wellspring in a small building near St. Columba's Well, an ancient historic site. People share stories about their lives, then play Celtic worship songs on traditional instruments such as the tin whistle and bodhran—a hand-held, frame drum.

"We encourage people to leave their Catholicism and their Protestantism outside," Kelly says, "and to come in to participate or inquire." They have produced a worship recording, *Restoration*, which has a homespun appeal that has earned it acclaim in the Christian music press.

Kelly is part of The Bogside Artists, who paint huge murals on local buildings that depict pivotal scenes from the history of The Troubles. Their stunning artwork has become a major tourist attraction.

Anti-sectarian Christianity is at the root of one of Ireland's biggest congregations, Christian Fellowship Church (CFC), in Belfast—which draws 1,200 worshippers each Sunday. Led by Paul Reid, CFC is home to worship leader Robin Mark, whose *Revival in Belfast* CD sold successfully at more than 400,000 copies and led to a follow-up record. American visitors regularly turn up at the charismatic church in search of the "revival."

CFC has actually abandoned revival rhetoric, opting to run prayer and fasting programs, send out missions teams and plant churches. Like their forefathers—the Irish monks who evangelized other nations centuries before them—members of CFC have taken the gospel into Europe, which they regard as “the sick man of the continents.”

At home, CFC works with others to pioneer a new terminology of love and reconciliation in a culture that has promoted discord and division. They are involved in a prayer group for the purpose of bringing people together from different backgrounds.

“There is a political process, which is what you see on your TV screens every day,” Reid says, “and there’s a peace process, which is what’s going on in everyday life—people building bridges and changing attitudes.

“The two sometimes run together, sometimes run on parallel lines and sometimes don’t go at the same pace. We’re on a journey. So long as we’re going forward, we’ll be OK.”

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