

THE NEW YEAR is well underway, and with it, I look forward to the music that it will bring. There is already a new album just released and well on its way to accolades, awards, and well deserved praise. I am referring to Heritage Hall from the talented Galway based band Back West.

I was very impressed with their original album *The Long Walk* and absolutely fell in love with their music last summer at Chief O'Neil's and Gaelic Park. Their skill, energy, and stage presence were over the top magnificent! They are returning with a new album that is brimming with great tune sets and songs to keep you listening many times over. Heritage Hall is a collection that will make it impossible for you not to be tapping your toes, dancing in the kitchen, and feeling the emotion of the songs. It is music performed by some of the best Ireland has given us!

All playing and dancing since they were toddlers, sister and brother Maureen and Brendan Browne, Peter Vickers, and Fabian Joyce are Back West. Maureen is wicked on the fiddle, whether a reel or an air, her style is clear, sharp, keenly expressive, and transports you as she plays. You won't find a box player any more emotive than Brendan; he tells the story with his music. It may be fast and furious, getting you all revved up, or he can wring you out as he pulls you into a slow piece. We often talk about how family members who sing together have that special harmony others never quite reach. Maureen and Brendan possess that same polyphony as they play. Take a listen to "Theme for Green Lands," a tribute to the great Irish musicians we have lost this past year. Brendan's playing brings out our feelings of respect, love and loss. Maureen's fiddle keens the grief for us, and Fabian and Peter lift it all and hand it to us so that we can cherish those who have given us so much. It is a special tune, a gift, that you will not soon forget.

Peter came to us via the world of Irish Dance, a champion with Lord of the Dance on his resume. Along the way, he experienced the play of John Jo Kelly, and his dancing beat turned into that of a master percussionist.

We often pay too little attention to the percussionist, the bodhran player, the person handling the shaker, but Peter is one to keep your attention. His play gives life and a roundness to their music making a significant addition to tunes you are listening to. Add in the excitement of seeing him get up to give you a dance, and you know you love having Peter there!

Fabian, newest member of the band, hails from Headford, County Galway and was raised with the music in his family's pub as he grew up. I first experienced his music in Matt Malloy's Pub in Westport and was quite taken by his guitar playing. You will especially enjoy his tune "The Malawi Shuffle" as well as all his brilliant playing on Heritage Hall.

The band has drawn from the music of Tommy Peoples, O'Carolan, Michael Coleman, Willie Clancy, tunes from the O'Neill Collection, those of Liz Carroll and Jimmy Keane among others. There are several of their own compositions sprinkled in and are well deserving of the company they are paired with. There are thoughtful quotes and excellent liner notes to help you fully enjoy your experience. It is very evident that this was a labor of love that they have presented to us.

There are thirteen cuts, and I cannot tell you I yet have a favorite. They are all excellent, very diverse, and call me to relisten. The opening set, "Crooked Road to Dublin/Fisherstreet Reel/ The Bond Store," will have your toes tappin' and have you feeling like you are at a kitchen session. The second set "O'Neill's Special Set," will make you realize how truly fortunate we are that, thanks to the Chief, we did not lose this music! Fabian's voice, smooth and rich like sipping chocolate, gives great meaning to Gordon Lightfoot's "Early Morning Rain."

One of my favorite Liz Carroll Tunes, *The Fly and the Dodger*, written for her husband Charles, leads the "Flyin' and Dodgin" set and is dedicated to Liz. They have put their spin on it, or maybe I should say 'sway,' and it works superbly. Maureen surprises us with two songs that show she may have a bend toward enjoying Bluegrass and Country music, but fear not, this album honors Trad sincerely.

There is quite a bit of Chicago to this album with the O'Neill Collection tunes, Liz Carroll, a tip to Jimmy Keane with their energetic rendition of "The Big Squeeze" and a clever and fun "Maggie's Uber Mile" that will have you envisioning them tooling along Lake Shore Drive with their new found Uber skills. What there is more of, though, is thoughtfully chosen music that is creatively arranged and exceptionally well played. It is energizing and at the same time seductive. You will do well to add this to your music collection, and be sure to do everything you can to get to a live performance here or in Ireland. They will be headliners at Gaelic Park's Irish Fest Memorial Day weekend. I will be front and center!!

BACKWEST

Heritage Hall

Own Label, BWMCD002, 13 Tracks, 45 Minutes

www.backwestmusic.com

Galway band BackWest's new album *Heritage Hall* picks up two years after their debut *The Long Walk* and immediately takes the listener deep into the heart of the tradition with *The Crooked Road to Dublin*, acknowledging in the sleeve notes previous versions of the tune by Michael Coleman and Willie Clancy. Perhaps played with a slightly more modern twist than the aforementioned lads, it nonetheless sets up the listening experience of *Heritage Hall* which sees Maureen and Brendan Browne leading the melodic line on button accordion and fiddle, a joined-up natural synchronicity that only comes from a lifetime of playing together. Indeed, such is their closeness, that outro of the opening set probably only took one take to perfect, a tag worthy of Mairtín O'Connor and Frankie Gavin. As sure as there are reels, the jigs aren't too far away and the next set takes aul *Young Tom Ennis* out for a trip in the *O'Neill's Set*, a solid backbone of rhythm supplied by Fabian Joyce on guitar and Peter Vickers on percussion (we're not told if there was any dancing from Mr Vickers during the making of this album!).

The blend of quality musicianship and variety extends throughout the whole musical journey with songs, marches, polkas, some Breton flair and a jaunty air, Liz Carroll's *The Fly and Dodger*, giving this finely produced album by BackWest some wonderful texture.

As mentioned, the CD includes a number of songs, sensitively performed intermittently by Fabian and Maureen separately. American folk and old time traditions come into play here, with the Gordon Lightfoot ballad *The Early Morning Rain* sung by Fabian, while Maureen takes the lead on the group's unique version of *Lazy John* before invoking a frightening similarity to Karan Casey on the familiar sea-faring tale told in *Captain, Captain*. Throughout the album, the accordion and fiddle share the limelight, with each subtly allowing the other to the fore every so often, no more so for the fiddle on *The Green Fields of Glen Town*, the hearty crunch of the bow on the low notes like a footstep on freshly-fallen snow. A very well-crafted album, with some sumptuous even voluptuous fiddle, and a deep understanding of their music evident on every track.

Derek Copley

BACKWEST
Heritage Hall
Private Label BWMCD002

BackWest is an exuberant foursome hailing from Galway, and new to me (although they released their debut CD, *The Long Walk*, almost exactly two years ago). It comprises siblings Brendan and Maureen Browne (button accordion and fiddle respectively), Fabian Joyce (guitars, banjo) and Peter Vickers (bodhrán etc.), and there's a real sense of purpose about their playing that pours forth from the speakers on the opening set of reels deriving from *The Crooked Road To Dublin*, with a great sense of assurance and bonding in the twin lead of fiddle and box. A similar sparky drive characterises the briskly dispatched jigs that follow and extends through a breathless set of fiddle-led reels into an affectionate rendition of Liz Carroll's "jaunty air" that prefaces the reel on the *Flyin' And Dodgin'* set. Shane McGowan guests on guitar on a few tracks including a set of Sliabh Luachra polkas and the nifty guitar-led reel-set, *Shufflin' About*. The album's title track is different in both mood and aura, being an arrangement of the baroque-styled O'Carolan tune, *Young Terrance McDonough*, melded to an original jig of Maureen's; the disc closes with a retreat march (*Green Lands*) by Breton composer/guitarist Dan Ar Braz.

In addition to the thrilling tune-sets, Heritage Hall intersperses three songs, in persuasive performances; Fabian gives a generous account of Gordon Lightfoot's well-loved *Early Morning Rain*, whereas Maureen's voice is well suited to the traditional *Captain, Captain* and the old-timey/bluegrass evergreen *Lazy John*. The disc's only other song, Alan Stivell's *Gwriziad Difennet*, is given a purely instrumental treatment and here serves as an effective prelude to the reel, *Dunrobin Castle*.

This is a finely wrought album, with plenty of spirit to complement the crafted nuances of the playing.

www.backwestmusic.com

David Kidman