

The Friel Sisters

By Fiona Heywood

The west coast of Scotland and the Irish county of Donegal have long and established links that are still very evident and strong in both places. In famine times, many people left Donegal and emigrated to south west Scotland and many Scots settled in Donegal during the plantations of the early 17th century. People have moved between the two ever since. So it is not uncommon to find thick Scottish accents in northern Donegal and it is similarly common to find Glasgow people whose roots are firmly in Ireland's most northern county.

And so it is with The Friel Sisters. Born and raised in Scotland but with their roots firmly in Donegal, these three sisters, Anna, Sheila and Clare, play music and songs gleaned from their family's rich traditional repertoire. Living, studying and working in Glasgow, they have firm connections there, and yet, the music that oozes out of them is predominantly from the other side of the Irish Sea. They frequently travel between the two – so much so that they are on first name terms with the ferry staff on their routes!

Having played together since childhood, they are gaining more and more recognition as performers. Equally at home in the session or on the stage, the girls are now moving their musical careers forward with the release of their first album, the eponymous *The Friel Sisters*. This release has been a long time coming, and perhaps wisely so. Rather than rush to produce a product (as many do), they have taken their time, finely honing their skills and developing their unique sound. They have learned their craft and fine-tuned it during the past years and now this release sees them come of age.

The girls' dad is from Kerrykeel, near Milford in County Donegal. All his family was from that area. He was born in Donegal but later moved over to Glasgow. Their mother was born in Glasgow, but her family was originally from Derrynamansher, near Crolly in Co Donegal. Though still residing in Glasgow, the Friels spend much time in Donegal and they have renovated the family home in Derrynamansher, a house belonging to the girls' great granny – Cissie Mhor. This was a house that has been well used to music over the years. "Everyone used to go to play tunes in this house," Clare explains. "It has a great atmosphere. Dad is a builder so he renovated it all with help from some cousins. He tried to keep some of the same design - there is a great view of Mount Errigal from the bathroom window. We spend as much time as possible in Derrynamansher - when we were building the house it was every weekend but we have been over a lot recently too – I think in the past two months we have been in Glasgow for two weekends."

Having a foot in two worlds can be great, but it can be difficult at times too. The pull of Donegal is strong, but for the moment at least, The Friel Sisters seem happy to have Glasgow as their base. "Glasgow is great," Sheila says. "There are so many excellent musicians around. I wish we could play more in Glasgow; we don't play there enough. We will, but we have been busy recently."

And indeed they have. Anna and Sheila have just finished degrees in dentistry and have started working, while Clare is in the second year of a pharmacology and biochemistry degree, so she has plenty more hard work ahead of her. On top of this is the constant travel to and from Ireland, usually just for weekends, all of which makes playing in the vibrant Glasgow session scene difficult. Anna explains: "It is

sometimes hard to connect and keep up both. Now Sheila and I have less studying to do we should have more time. Will we move to Donegal one day? Never say never. Stranger things have happened but at the moment it is lovely to have the best of both worlds."

Being very at home at the sessions, in whatever country, The Friel Sisters are excellent musicians. Sheila is an uilleann piper of note, Anna a first rate flute player and Clare a great fiddle player, although the girls are quite at ease with swapping instruments and having a go at the others (OK, maybe not the pipes which Sheila says are like a contrary octopus!). Together, they create a sound that could only be made by siblings, with an incredibly natural easiness – it is as if the sets just fall together. And they appear to know just about all the tunes going. Wherever they are, whether in the busy sessions of Ennis Trad Fest or the Willie Clancy Summer School, or huddled in the corner of a session in a local Donegal pub, the girls are completely at home and it would not be unusual for them to be last out of the bar, such is their passion for playing.

As well as being instrumentalists, The Friel Sisters also sing, mostly together in unison. Many of their songs are what they describe as "family songs" and they are

passionate about preserving them. Clare tells us more. "At the moment our songs are mostly family songs, it is all Granny's songs and some that came from her brothers and sisters. They have been passed down to us - Mum taught us a lot of them. She sings, but she would never let anyone know - she is probably a better singer than any of us, but she will not do it. The songs are precious because they are family songs, they mean something to us." Among them are songs like a slightly different version of *Free And Easy* learned from an old auntie, *Tír Chonaill* and *The Blue Hills Of Antrim*.

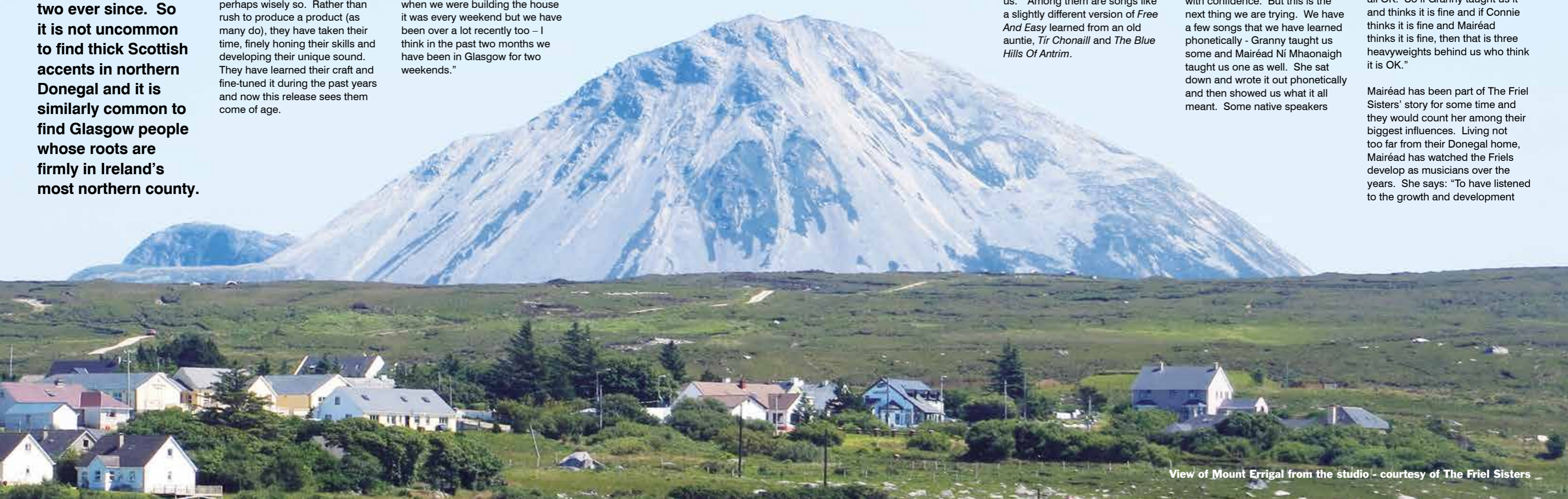
"We do a couple of Scottish songs," says Anna, "but our material is mostly Irish. We would be interested in finding more of the really old Scottish music though."

"We are learning a few in Irish as well," Sheila adds. "We don't speak it – it is one of our biggest regrets – but because we spend so much time in the Gaeltacht we can understand a fair bit, though we are not really able to speak it with confidence. But this is the next thing we are trying. We have a few songs that we have learned phonetically - Granny taught us some and Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh taught us one as well. She sat down and wrote it out phonetically and then showed us what it all meant. Some native speakers

saw what Mairéad had written down and were killing themselves laughing as it looked so strange on paper. The one we learned from Granny was done all by ear – that is on the new CD so we will see how that goes."

"It is nerve-wracking letting others hear it but Connie Mhary Mhici Ó Gallchóir, a local singer from Ranafast, came up the night before we recorded it and went through it to make sure it was all OK. So if Granny taught us it and thinks it is fine and if Connie thinks it is fine and Mairéad thinks it is fine, then that is three heavyweights behind us who think it is OK."

Mairéad has been part of The Friel Sisters' story for some time and they would count her among their biggest influences. Living not too far from their Donegal home, Mairéad has watched the Friels develop as musicians over the years. She says: "To have listened to the growth and development



View of Mount Errigal from the studio - courtesy of The Friel Sisters

“...what is innate and natural comes out anyway - you cannot hold it back. Likewise The Friel Sisters’ music cannot be held back; it is what comes natural to them. They breathe music, they live music, they love music...”



All photos - Steve Niblock

of Anna, Sheila and Clare’s music over the years has been a complete joy and revelation to me. We have spent many a night in Huidi Beag’s pub in Bunbeg where they light up the room with joy, devilment and glorious music. Musicians spend time perfecting skills and techniques, but I know from listening to these girls over the years that they must have an innate understanding of music for their musicianship to mature to this standard. It is something that cannot be learned. I can hear nuances of masters like Donegal fiddlers, Tommy Peoples and Danny Meehan in Clare’s fiddle playing; pipers Gay McKeon and Willie Clancy in Sheila’s piping; Northern flute players like Harry Bradley and Cathal McConnell in Anna and Sheila’s flute playing - the list of influences could go on. But what Anna, Sheila and Clare have done is listen to these great musicians, learn from them, and then make the music their own. “Briseann an dúchas fríd súile and chait” is an old Gaelic proverb, which literally states that nature breaks through the cat’s eyes, meaning that what is innate and natural comes out anyway - you cannot hold it back. Likewise The Friel Sisters’ music cannot be held back; it is what comes natural to them. They breathe music, they live music, they love music.”

Other musicians that have influenced the Friels are numerous

and when I asked for names a whole stream came flooding out of all three mouths, reflecting the same love for the same kind of stuff. There were no unusual responses, but the girls named a list of people who have inspired a whole generation of singers and players - Dolores Keane, Rita & Sara Keane (who also do the unison singing thing), Maighread and Triona Ní Dhomhnaill, The Bothy Band, The Chieftains, Planxty, Andy Irvine and Paul Brady.

The Friel Sisters are lucky to have been able to go on and play with a lot of these people, and indeed, they are no stranger to the big concerts. They have played at the Royal Concert Hall in Glasgow several times (the first time was when Clare was 12 and Anna and Sheila were 15), in fact they joke that it is kind of like their local, but they still retain the notion of how lucky they are to be able to play there. The gig that sticks out most in their minds was playing at the Concert Hall with The Chieftains. They admit to being a bit starstruck when they met them - being introduced to Matt Molloy and Sean Keane whom they had been listening to all their lives was a big thing for them.

But it is not just the big gigs that make them tick - it’s the sitting down the pub, playing tunes that they love. And you can see that

they do love it. The music oozes out of these girls, as natural as breathing.

And ‘natural’ is what they wanted the album to be. “It was kind of thrown down as it was played I think,” says Clare. “That was pretty much it. We tried to make it as natural as possible. We did all the recording in the family house in Derrynamansher in about two and a half days - it was really special recording it there, in the house steeped with our family history.”

The girls chose to record the CD just days after returning from the Willie Clancy Summer School where they had spent days on end playing in recitals and sessions. While they may have been a bit jetlagged, the music was tighter than ever and the fingers were flying, so it was a great time to record an album.

Anna picks up the story: “Within four hours we had put down seven tracks. We had most of our music done the first day and then the next day we thought we would do most of our singing. But we went to Huidi Beags that night (a local bar famed for its sessions), so that plan didn’t work - mum was raging with us. We finished recording the tunes about 11pm and were in Huidi’s at 11.30 playing a few tunes to let our hair down. We probably should have

just gone to bed and rested our voices, but that’s too sensible. The CD is a true representation of our music and our voices are never rested!!”

While the majority of the CD is pure Friel, they are given a hand in parts. Bodhrán player Seamus O’Kane put down a few tracks with them, as did Gearóid Mhaonaigh and Griogair Labhruidh on guitar. But the vital thing for them was getting the tunes they play and the songs they sing preserved.

“That is the most important thing for us,” says Anna. “We have never heard anyone else sing some of the songs we sing, like *Tír Chonaill* - we learned it from Granny. She learned it from someone up in the mountains. Only one other person has approached us and said, ‘you’re singing my song.’ So there are only two people other than us that we know of that actually know the song - Granny and this other lady - and so unless we sing it and put it out there then it will disappear. It is such a gorgeous and rare song. And we wanted to try some other things too. As a graduation present we got a present of a Tibetan singing bowl, it sounds crazier than it is; it is used for meditation, but it gives out this pulsing drone. We sing along with this on one track - it was a gorgeous present to get.”

Three voices singing in unison is fairly uncommon, but for The Friels it works very well. With perfectly synchronised ornamentation, phrasing and breathing, it again comes across as very tight yet very natural. “The first song we sang together was for Granny’s birthday - it was *As I Roved Out*,” explains Clare. “But we didn’t sing in unison - we took a verse each. Over the years we all learned songs at the same time so we would sing them together to try to learn them, so I guess that is how the unison thing happened. We don’t sit down and plan our arrangements - it just happens. That is the joy of being sisters.”

Anna continues: “Recently we haven’t learned so many songs together. One of us might pick up a song somewhere and sing it to the others, then they pick up the way the first person sang it, with their ornamentations; but then it develops and little variations get added by each person until the group version is created.”

But working so closely with members of your family can lead to tensions as well as having

benefits. In this case, Clare, Anna and Sheila live together in Glasgow, socialise together in sessions and arrange, record and play music together. There must be times when this gets hard and when the big smiles that are normally permanent features on their lovely faces fade a bit.

Do they fight? (Lots of laughter and sarcastic shouts of “of course not!”) Sheila and Anna both look at Clare for some reason. Clare explains it is because she is the peacemaker. “We never fight about music,” Sheila tells me, “but we would sometimes fight about the singing. People who know us really well can detect slight differences in our voices. Clare is slightly sharper than the rest of us, Anna slightly flatter and I am in between - I drift up and down. When the three of us sing together we level each other out I think, but we sometimes fight over getting that level right.”

“And we sometimes go back to songs that we haven’t sung for years and years,” says Anna. “As long as we can remember the words we can hold it together, but that can cause fights too sometimes - cries of ‘that’s the wrong verse’ or ‘that’s not the words’.”

But with so much in their favour and with their musical lives moving forward with the release of their album and with two out of three girls now graduated, what lies in store for them? Will they continue their career as fully fledged dentists (and a pharmacologist) or will the pull of the music be too strong?

“We know a lot of dentists who work part-time, so maybe further down the line we can do a few days a week dentistry and a few days being a musician. It is the dream - we would have so much fun. But we have our weekends just now and we are away just about every weekend which is great. We have a nice balance at the moment, but ideally we would all like to do a bit more. We could maybe do the music for a year or two and then come back to the dentistry or maybe once Clare has finished Uni we will hit the road. It is something to look forward to.”

And so will we! The Friel Sisters appear to have the world at their feet and with their natural talent, warm personalities and of course, the winning smiles, I imagine they will go far, whatever route they choose to take.



Clare



Sheila



Anna