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 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 a local Donegal pub, the girls are completely at home and it is lovely to have the best of both worlds. "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 Ni 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 McInì 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, then that 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
"...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..."