

Begley and O Raghallaigh follow their hearts

Their CD brims with invention and independence

Over the past month I've written three "Ceol" columns about albums involving either fiddler Caoimhin O Raghallaigh ("Comb Your Hair and Curl It" on Sept. 15 and "A Moment of Madness" here) or a member of the Begley family ("Disgrace Notes" featuring button accordionist and singer Seamus Begley on Sept. 29 and "A Moment of Madness" featuring button accordionist Brendan Begley here). At this point, "Ceol" readers may think I'm related to O Raghallaigh and the

Begley clan in Kerry.

Not so, though on a purely musical basis, I wish I were.

"Kitty Lie Over," O Raghallaigh's recording with uilleann piper Mick O'Brien in 2003, was not only the best traditional release of that year but also one of the best of that entire decade.

It is monumental. (Look for their second CD together soon.)

Since then, O Raghallaigh has issued the EP "Where the One-Eyed Man Is King" and the two full-length albums cited above, as well as another full-length recording, "3 Triur Sa Draighean," made with Martin Hayes on fiddle and Peadar O Riada on concertina, whistle, button accordion, and tambura.

It's obvious Caoimhin O Raghallaigh is on a tremendous roll of creativity and productivity, and I happily confess his music has dislodged me from the familiar forms of conceptualization and performance in the Irish tradition. "I am, I suppose, a traditional Irish fiddle player, a curious one, though: what happens if I let go those strings which hold me in place?" he asks regarding a track on "Where the One-Eyed Man Is King" at his "hidden" site-within-website (www.stateofchassis.com).

Perhaps more than any other Irish traditional musician alive, O Raghallaigh is gently and respectfully examining the status quo and using his ever-curious, ever-agile muse to explore other possibilities of melodic rendering. What distinguishes him from musicians who hope for disassembling yet wind up merely dissembling is that O Raghallaigh is not forcing it. He lets the music flow toward him, and he doesn't dissect-himself delights. That joy is transparent, that spirit is almost palpable, and that humility about how he approaches music is ennobling for it rather than for himself. He has the precisely right combination of skill, imagination, instinct, deference, modesty,



Fiddler Caoimhin O Raghallaigh and button accordionist Brendan Begley have a new album and U.S. tour.

manumission, and deep thinking with no trace of the ideology to pursue Irish traditional music in ways that are both sensitive and searching.

Brendan Begley is an ideal playing partner for Caoimhin O Raghallaigh. A former member of Beginish and still a member of the longstanding, pan-Celtic Boys of the Lough, Begley released an underrated gem of a solo album in 1997, "We Won't Go Home 'Til Morning," and his stirring singing and adventurous button accordion playing on stage complement O Raghallaigh's fiddling. "It feels a little like sliding down the snow-covered slopes of Mount Brandon, midwinter, on the threadbare seat of your pants," O Raghallaigh says of performing with Begley, who is a "force of nature," the fiddler adds.

A duo since 2007, Brendan Begley and Caoimhin O Raghallaigh have now released their eagerly anticipated duet recording, "A Moment of Madness," the title of which comes from Begley's horoscope in a Dublin newspaper many years ago: "Follow your heart. A moment of madness is better than a life of logic." He promptly acted on it, quitting his job as a Dublin schoolteacher to head back to Dingle and music making in earnest. (Far less known is Begley's TV and documentary production work, including "Se Mo Laoch: Joe Derrane," a 2002 film on the Boston-born button accordionist for Ireland's TG4.)

Without accompaniment, which is a seemingly growing trend in Ireland that I identified in prior "Ceol" columns, Begley

and O Raghallaigh deliver the full power of their joint music on "A Moment of Madness." Their use of dynamics and their control of tempo—descending into whispery softness or ascending into bright boldness, slowing the pace or accelerating it—are as deft as they get in Irish traditional music, and the passages of improvisation are so rich in invention and detail that each subsequent close listening provides further, deeper disclosures. Binding their techniques in service of the tune is unadulterated jubilation.

The tangy, eminently danceable, Sliabh Luachra flavor of "The Humours of Lisheen / The Munster Jig / Sean Coughlin's" summons images of Johnny O'Leary, Padraig O'Keefe, Denis Murphy, and Julia Clifford sitting in a session together. The swing in Begley and O Raghallaigh's box-and-fiddle playing is infectious.

Recorded live at the Lab in Dingle, "An Buachaill Caol Dubh / On Book Hill: Quail Dove (or Debut Kill) / I Wish I Had a Kerry Cow" begins hauntingly with Begley's solo button accordion playing and then switches in tempo to a brisk blend of box and fiddle for the next two tunes. This track has so much in it—Brendan plays the box with nimble slyness while O Raghallaigh plays pizzicato on fiddle at one point—that it demands re-listening, preferably under headphones.

Two other live tracks, "Tonn Clíodhna / An Seanchai Muimhneach" (also recorded at the Lab in Dingle) and "The Green Cottage / The Glin Cot-

tage / Julia's Norwegian Polka" (recorded at Airfield House), are equally magical. The latter medley seems to flirt with looseness until the realization sets in that the playing is a blissful, fun-laced meshing of individual virtuosity egging each other on.

The remaining eight tracks, all keepers, include Begley's beautifully soulful solo box playing of "An Chead Mhairt Den Fhómhair / Na Gamhna Geala" and O Raghallaigh's magnetic solo fiddling of "Ta Dha Gabhairín Bui Agam / The Glen Cottage / I'll Tell Me Ma."

Brendan Begley, who doesn't sing on this CD, and Caoimhin

O Raghallaigh nuzzle listeners toward the inner flame of Irish traditional instrumental music. It's where you want to be.

"A Moment of Madness" (IrishMusic Net Record CD BR01) is available at www.cdbaby.com.

Brendan Begley and Caoimhin O Raghallaigh will be on a U.S. tour this month. Here are the dates and venues: Oct. 15, Presbyterian Church Hall, Forty Fort, Pa.; Oct. 16, 8 p.m., Coatesville Cultural Society, 143 E. Lincoln Highway, Coatesville, Pa. (610-486-2220); Oct. 17, 8 p.m., Commodore Barry Club, 6815 Emlen St., Philadelphia, Pa.; Oct. 18, St. Mark Presbyterian Church, Rockville, Md.; Oct. 20, Blue, Portland, Me.; Oct. 23, House Concert, Vineyard Haven, Mass. (kctcd@earthlink.net); Oct. 24, Skye Theatre, South Carthage, Me.; Oct. 25, Arts on Q Concerts, Richfield Springs, N.Y. (sandy.peevers@gmail.com); Oct. 26, Buffalo Irish Center, Buffalo, N.Y.; Oct. 27, Nighttown, Cleveland, Ohio; Oct. 28, Madisonville Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio; and Oct. 30, Map Room, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Very familiar to "Ceol" readers in New England are these two venues that will also be sponsoring concerts by Brendan Begley and Caoimhin O Raghallaigh: Connolly House, 300 Hammond St., Chestnut Hill, Mass. (617-552-3938), on Oct. 21 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. (part of Seamus Connolly's Gaelic Roots series at Boston College), and the Gaelic-American Club, 74 Beach Rd., Fairfield, Conn. (203-333-4736, 203-243-5508, breda81@yahoo.com, www.gaconline.org), on Oct. 22 at 8 p.m.

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