

Frankie Gavin

by Simon Haines



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“...All I want to do is make a difference, a big difference...”

De Dannan are undisputedly one of the most famous Irish traditional groups of recent years, who since their inception in the 70s have been extremely influential the world over. From the outset, at their heart has been the redoubtable Frankie Gavin, who has earned a reputation for himself as a mighty fiddler, flautist and all round musical genius.

Known to many as “the prince of Irish fiddlers”, even amongst his contemporaries he is considered as one of the greats. Frankie can’t recall where “the prince” title originated from, but he does seem to like it. And rather than being “the king” he feels that, “there’s something more youthful about a prince, and I have no intention of getting old in my head.” Nicholas Carolan, director of the Irish Traditional Music Archive, also called Frankie a “musical force of nature”. There is no doubting his musical pedigree and the high esteem in which his music is held.

As I write, *Frankie Gavin and De Dannan* – the name of his current band – have recently returned from a week playing Irish music on a Caribbean cruise ship and a gig in Austin Texas, and are preparing for a Saturday gig in the Black Sea resort of Sochi in Russia, immediately followed by a Sunday gig in Tralee, County Kerry. After all these years, Frankie and his music are still very much in demand.

Frankie was born into a musical family in Corrandulla, County Galway in 1956. He received some musical training but is mainly self-taught. How did his musical career begin? “Well, I suppose the career began with De Dannan, but I was actually playing bars when I was 13. I started as a piano player backing Eddie Maloney and Vincent Keegan from East Galway. Eddie was a real mentor for me and he had me stand on a chair beside him in our local hall in Corrandulla and play a whistle and flute duet! I was about seven, I’d say.”

De Dannan was formed in Spiddal, Co. Galway, in 1973, the first line-up consisting of Frankie Gavin, Alec Finn, Johnny

McDonagh and Charlie Piggott. Dolores Keane joined for their debut album to become the first of many lead singers. Between then and 2003, the band underwent many line-up changes, but always included Frankie Gavin on fiddle and flute, Alec Finn on bouzouki, an accordion player (Jackie Daly, Mairtin O’Connor and Aidan Coffey to name but three) and an amazing singer (like Mary Black, Dolores Keane and Maura O’Connell among others).

During their time together, De Dannan became stars of Irish music, not just in Ireland and Britain, but in the USA, and other countries where there were Irish communities. The band played for the American bicentennial celebrations in Washington DC in 1976 and has continued to play at the highest levels of American society ever since, performing in front of three American presidents.

At the age of 17, Frankie won the first prize in the All Ireland Fiddle and the All Ireland Flute Competitions on the same day, and, in parallel to his life in De Dannan, Frankie Gavin also had success both as a solo performer,



Photo - Tom Collins
De Dannan c.1974 - Alec Finn, Johnny McDonagh, Charlie Piggott, Dolores Keane and Frankie

and in collaboration with famous names in the wider world of music, including Stefane Grappelli, The Rolling Stones, Earl Scruggs, Yehudi Menuhin, Elvis Costello and the legendary Irish-American accordion wizard Joe Derrane. In 2010, he officially became the fastest fiddle player in the world with an entry in the Guinness Book of Records.

For most people, the classic De Dannan sound was tightly based around the musical partnership of Frankie Gavin and Alec Finn,

the interplay between them and its resulting arrangements being quite unique. Both are geniuses, and at the helm of De Dannan, they were quite a force to be reckoned with. But in the early noughties, the band seemed to fade somewhat and in 2003 the band was wound up, with Frankie and Alec going their separate ways.

What happened afterwards is a long story, about which many people have strong and opposing feelings, but I believe

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Frankie Gavin and De Dannan

that immediately following the break-up, Alec Finn copyrighted the band name which effectively prevented anyone, including Frankie, from using the “De Dannan” name in the future and led to a dispute. How had Frankie reacted when he heard this news? Ten years after the event, he still has strong feelings: “It came as a nasty shock to my system when a close friend mentioned it and showed me a copy of the certificate on the website of the Companies Registration Office in Dublin. Alec and I had come to the end of the road in the Netherlands when things got ‘rough’. He decided he did not want to be in the band anymore, and he did not want anyone else in it, or running it, either. He made a written announcement that De Dannan would never perform again. The calls stopped and I was suddenly out of work.”

The Gavin-Finn musical relationship had been a special one which had lasted for 30 years. When asked about this, Frankie’s response was more emotional: “We were best friends for a start. The timing of your question is ironic as I just came across a lovely letter from Alec when he was in Mexico, hand-written and funny as hell as usual. It hurts me greatly what has happened.”

However, losing his main source of making a living was not the worst thing that happened to Frankie in 2003. Soon after the band split, he found himself dealing with complex family issues. Following a difficult divorce and the abrupt departure of his children to the US, it was a time of great loss, both personally and musically in his life.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Frankie’s passion for traditional Irish music enabled him to keep going despite the personal and professional setbacks, first in the short-lived group Hibernian Rhapsody and, since 2009 in *Frankie Gavin and De Dannan*. His use of the name still seems to be controversial in some Irish music circles (and I believe Alec Finn is also currently using the name, but with a different spelling, for his band which features some ex-members too), but, whatever the rights and wrongs of the split, for me, Frankie’s current incarnation is, musically at least, as brilliant as the earlier line-ups. Seeing the band at the Cambridge festival in 2011, took me straight back to 1983. The line-up was new but the sound was fresh and unmistakably De Dannan.



Photo - Gordon Hotchkiss

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When I suggested to Frankie that the current band had successfully recaptured that essential sound, he seemed pleased. “Please God you are correct! I am devoted to retain that special magic, and delivering a stellar show is priority number one at all times.”

So, what was the band all about for him? “Great music and great singers and musicians. I personally have been very lucky to meet and employ amazing singers and musicians over the years. It’s all about making a difference and we always managed that through thick and thin, lousy management, bad business decisions and so forth. We still rose above that and

made people cry for joy, and sure that’s all that’s important. And I would like to think standards have been kept to the highest.”

I wondered why there had been so many line-up changes over the years. Was Frankie a difficult person to work with? He doesn’t think so. “Some ex-members who went and pursued solo careers would say that about me, but they are, in my view, totally wrong. I have never wronged anyone, but sometimes people concocted stories to justify the decisions they made in their own careers and perhaps they scapegoated others to cover up that fact.”



Michelle Lally

any song from any genre and make it her own. She does this by allowing the song to sing itself, so to speak, and her crystal clear voice carries this through for her. Michelle presents her songs with charming background details and makes a policy of getting to really know what she is singing about. This is what Michelle does and audiences absolutely love her!” The band continues to include some of the old favourites like *My Irish Molly O* in their repertoire, but the new songs, for example, *Summer Of My Dreams* and *If You Love Me* are of a different kind. So who chooses the songs? Frankie again: “I find the odd one, but Michelle is the master of her song choice. She knows what to sing and especially what not to sing – it’s another gift she has.”

Frankie’s solo career seems to be on hold for the very good reason that the band is currently getting gigs at home and abroad, and last September they played in the ancient Teatro Romano in Verona, Italy. I wondered how Frankie regarded these high profile bookings in comparison with playing in small Irish venues. “I find playing in a parish hall more humbling, but having said that, playing for presidents and other world figures is an amazing feeling and on many occasions, I’ve had to pinch myself to be sure I was not in some sort of bizarre dream.”

Another significant feature of the post-2009 band is the emergence of a new lead singer: Michelle Lally. Like Mary, Dolores and Maura, Michelle has a unique and beautiful voice, and continues the tradition in De Dannan of having some of the finest singers in Ireland in their ranks. Frankie explains: “Michelle can choose



Frankie with Tim Edey

Photo - Gordon Hotchkiss

Frankie Gavin has gone through the mill in recent years, first with the band and then with his children, but he now seems very upbeat. The band’s star seems to be in the ascendant, combining modest gigs in small venues all over Ireland with high-profile appearances in the USA, Europe, Russia and elsewhere. The venue and audience are always important, but for Frankie it is the music itself and its effect on people that is clearly paramount. “Playing music means everything to me in the sense that when you see the joy it brings to people and how you can do this both when you get paid and when you don’t, it’s amazing really. What a privilege!”

The line-up changed again in early 2013 and Frankie is very optimistic about the future. Frankie has a number of new projects in the pipeline, solo recordings to catch up with, as well as performances and recordings to do with the new line-up. The band now consists of Frankie Gavin and Michelle Lally, with Barry Brady (accordion), Colm O’Caoimh (guitar) and Paul O’Driscoll (double bass). When I asked him how he saw the future, Frankie used a phrase he used several times in this interview: “All I want to do is make a difference, a big difference.” On the occasions I have seen the band recently, they do this very successfully. I have



Frankie's Ivy

seen sober-looking, middle-aged English audiences go wild with delight – wound up, as it were, by the visceral impact of the music.

And on a personal front what else is important to Frankie? “My children of course are top of the list. I have three of my own and one stepson and they are all fantastic. I love nature, birds and wildlife. I feed the song birds, mallards and swans who grace us with their presence every day. I love working outside, briar cutting and chopping ivy off trees is a serious pastime I have. I see a mature tree and the ivy wrapped around it and I think, if I don’t get cracking, that tree will be dragged down in slow death!” Is this

some kind of personal or musical metaphor? I’ll let you decide that for yourself.

I ended our interview with what was perhaps the obvious question to a man in his mid-fifties who is brilliant at what he does but who has suffered setbacks and disappointments. I asked him, “If you had your time over, would you do the same again?” His answer was instant: “Absobloominglutely!!”



Frankie in distinguished company