



# ALTAN

*Ireland*

## Irish Imaginery Tour

## Presentation

**No Irish traditional band in the last dozen years has had a wider impact on audiences and music lovers throughout the world than Altan.**

With their exquisitely produced award-winning recordings, ranging dynamically from the most sensitive and touching old Irish songs all the way to hard hitting reels and jigs, and with their heartwarming, dynamic live performances, Altan have moved audiences from Donegal to Tokyo to Seattle. Throughout, there has been the unwavering commitment of the band to bringing the beauty of traditional music, particularly that of the Donegal fiddlers and singers, to contemporary audiences in a way that brings out all its qualities and destroys none. In fact, Altan have always believed that Irish traditional music is a modern music in every sense and its growing influence and popularity have proved them right.



## Biography

The seeds of the band lie in the music and fun of gatherings and sessions in kitchens and pubs in Donegal where virtuoso music was heard in an atmosphere of respect and intimacy - it is here that the band's heart lies still whether they are performing on tv in Australia or jamming with Ricky Skaggs on the west coast of the United States.

And if those were the seeds, the actual kernel of the band was the music and personality of band founders, Belfast flute-player, Frankie Kennedy, and Gweedore singer and fiddler, Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh. As soon as anyone met them and heard their unique music in the early eighties, whether in a large noisy festival session, or in the little traditional clubs of Dublin and Belfast, it was immediately apparent there was a rare power at work. They seemed to be playing their own repertoire, in fact a combination of old Donegal fiddle music (then little known outside Donegal) and of unusual Northern flute tunes, they delivered it with a force and fullness that made it hard to believe there were only two people playing, and that combined with Frankie's immense wit and playfulness and Mairéad's beauty and down-to-earth charm made an irresistible package. It quickly became clear to them and others that they could go places.

Gradually the duo grew organically into a band in the mid-eighties, forged in the bustle and crack of a thousand late-night sessions and festivals throughout Ireland - the repertoire gave Altan (the name was taken from a deep and mysterious lake behind Errigal Mountain in Donegal) a totally unique stamp, while there was an undoubted inspiration from the great Irish bands such as the Bothy Band, Planxty and De Danann.

Altan's commitment to good natured fun was second only to their commitment to excellence in all things musical, and so the band members who were gathered in were top-notch. Altan has always been a virtuoso band. Earliest was bouzouki-player, Ciarán Curran from Co. Fermanagh, a session and festival veteran, nephew of fiddler, Ned Curran, and close friend of fiddler, Ben Lennon, and flute-player, Cathal MacConnell (of the Boys of the Lough). Like all accompanists of the time, Ciarán had invented his own style on the instrument, and his playing lies at the heart of the Altan sound, though like all great accompanists, the very perfection of what he does makes it difficult for the casual listener to notice!

With the inclusion of guitarist Mark Kelly in the mid-eighties Altan truly became a band. Though all band members have always had a deep knowledge and love of other musics, as well as Irish, ranging through rock, blues, jazz and country to classical, Mark, more than the others, had actually played other styles, and from the start he showed a gift for tastefully bringing fresh rhythms and chordings to the band arrangements. Mark and Ciarán were heard on the '87 album Altan, which, though not officially a band album, inaugurates the band's studio sound.

But it was live work in '84 -'85 that marked the turning-point for Frankie and Mairéad, encouraging them to give up their teaching jobs and go professional. Particularly influential were short trips to the United States in those years when they played concerts in New York, Minnesota, Madison, Portland and Seattle with Derry guitarist, Dáithí Sproule, a Minnesota resident and like Ciaran and Mark, an old friend. Dáithí had played a big part in an earlier wave of development in the music, being one of the very first people to adapt the guitar to old Gaelic songs (many of which he learnt in the Gaeltacht of Rannafast, just a few miles from Mairéad's home in Gweedore). These US concerts, played in clubs and sometimes in noisy Irish pubs, where people were expecting a very different sort of music, convinced Frankie and Mairéad that no-compromise traditional music played with heart and drive could win over any audience anywhere.

In succeeding years, the band recorded albums for Green Linnet, all of which won accolades and awards and appeared in the Billboard charts - their collaborators on these albums were of the highest caliber and it shows: Donál Lunny, Brian Masterson and Steve Cooney in particular made great contributions over the years. Another friend played with the band for several years, master fiddler, Paul O'Shaughnessey, a dazzling and fiery player with a deep knowledge of Donegal music. The two-fiddle sound stuck, so when, as Altan toured more and more widely, Paul had to leave due to pressure of work, his place was taken by another great young Donegal fiddler, Ciaran Tourish, a player with a special love for the weaving of spontaneous harmony and counterpoint round the melodies of the other lead players.

Through the years audiences are continually struck by the genuine camaraderie and mutual respect among the members of Altan, and this has been vitally important to the band themselves as well as producing a marked effect on live audiences. So when a final element was added to the sound in the early nineties it was another old friend, though not old in years, since the band had known him and his music since he was a boy. Accordion-player Dermot Byrne, another Donegal man was weaned on the music of an older generation of Donegal fiddlers, the Doherty's, the Byrne's and the Cassidy's. While Dermot's status as a complete virtuoso had been secure for many years before he joined the band, it is also part of his gift that he is able to blend seamlessly with other musicians, so Altan just seemed to get tighter and tighter as a performing unit.

Sadly, in the early nineties Altan was dealt a devastating blow, when band leader and manager, Frankie Kennedy, at the height of his powers as a brilliant and innovative flute-player and just when his and Mairéad's musical dreams were being realised, was diagnosed with cancer. Through a long illness, the band, at Frankie's insistence, continued to tour and perform with Frankie's participation whenever possible. No words can describe the effects of his illness and loss on the band, but he continues to be a presence and inspiration in Altan's life and music - more than anything else, Frankie was a lover of life and perhaps the deepest message of all music is that life goes on - no matter what.

Altan's international status and success found a very practical recognition when they were signed in 1996 to Virgin Records, the first Irish band of their kind to be signed by a major label. The band gained gold and platinum albums in Ireland and toured larger venues, literally throughout the world, with tours in Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Europe as well as regular successful U.S. tours.



## Line Up

**Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh** : vocals / fiddle

**Martin Tourish** : button accordion

**Ciaran Curran** : bouzouki

**Mark Kelly** : guitar

Guests : Bodhran



# Discography



The Gap of Dreams  
2018



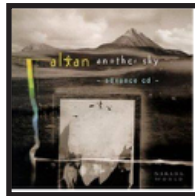
The Blue Idol  
2002



Island Angel  
1993



The Widening Gyre  
2015



Another Sky  
2000



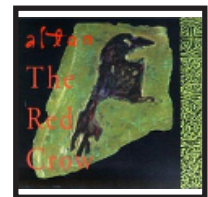
Harvest Storm  
1992



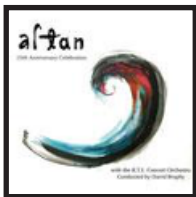
The Poison Glen  
2012



Runaway Sunday  
1997



The Red Crow  
1990



Altan & the RTE Orchestra  
2010



Blackwater  
1996



Horse with a Heart  
1989



Local Ground  
2005



The First Ten Years (1986-1995)  
1995



Altan  
Frankie Kennedy et Mairéad Ní  
Mhaonaigh – 1987

## Press

"The appeal of Altan centres on the fact that they see no differences or divisions in music. As such, they have managed to cross the all-important cultural barriers between folk and world and rock music"

The Sunday Tribune,  
Dublin

"Thought by many to be the finest traditional Irish combo working today, Altan seamlessly blend dazzling instrumental prowess and the gorgeously delicate vocals of Mairead Ni Mhaonaigh"

Chicago Weekly

"Altan's special strength is the clarity and coordination of its textures"

The New York Times

"The material (on Blackwater) is largely traditional... the final piece, is simply the most captivating, resonant and beautiful music Altan have played, and makes useless for three and a half minutes the history of rock 'n' roll"

Mojo (UK)

"Altan's tireless touring has won them a loyal following especially in America, and helped them make impressive inroads on world music charts"

Billboard (US):

**“I LOVE this next group [Altan] and Irish folk music... it’s really the foundation stone of bluegrass music. Bluegrass was built upon what these people laid. I really love the sound of (Altan’s) music and how they keep it traditional, but yet this group is really great about innovating as well. These folks are heavyweights all over the country but especially in Ireland where they’re respected so much.”**

**RICKY SKAGGS (GRAND OLE OPRY INTRO)**

*“It’s a credit to their perseverance that despite their hardy trajectory, they’re still keen to bend the boundaries and venture into new and as yet unconquered terrain... Altan has made the kind of album that defines them as distinctive.”*

**POPMATTERS WEIGHS IN ON THE WIDENING GYRE**

**The band continues to breathe freshness and vitality into tunes and songs that are the quintessential expression of its native place.**

**What a wonderful place.**





## 35 years on the road

With a career in Irish music for 35 years, Altan has achieved legendary status in a genre that has been equally shaped by the band's influence and genius. Audiences from Ireland to Japan to Australia to Europe have embraced their heartwarming, dynamic live performances and their exquisitely produced, award-winning recordings. Over a dozen releases to date, ranging from the most touching old Irish songs to hard-hitting reels and jigs. Altan's newest release, *The Gap Of Dreams* (2018 Compass Records), follows their acclaimed 2015 album on the same label, *The Widening Gyre*.

Adding to their long list of awards and honors, fiddler, singer and founding member Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh was the recipient of the Gradam Ceoil/Traditional Musician of the Year in 2017. Though the band received the same award for Band of the Year in 2001, Mairéad was glad to be recognized on her own in a genre that has been slow to recognize female musicians. She is only the third woman in twenty years to receive the main award.

Throughout their career, you'll find Altan's unwavering commitment to bringing the beauty of traditional music to contemporary audiences, particularly that of the fiddlers and singers of their hometown in Donegal. Their new book publication, *The Tunes* (@2017 Altan), marks the first-ever printed collection of this instrumental music. Spanning thirty years, twelve studio albums and comprising 222 tunes across its 206 pages, the book delves into the history, folklore and the composers and musical heroes from whom the music was collected.

The seeds of Altan lie in the music and spontaneity of sessions in kitchens and pubs in their hometown of Donegal, where their music was heard in an atmosphere of respect and intimacy. It is here that the band's heart still lies, whether they are performing on TV in Australia or jamming with Ricky Skaggs on the west coast of the United States. In spite of a hectic touring and recording schedule, Altan continue fresh in their vision of bringing the beauty and joy of traditional music to audiences everywhere, and have always promised themselves to continue as long as it's fun — fortunately, it still is!

# ALTAN LIVE IN BELFAST

20 JANUARY 2020

**The Duncairn, Belfast**

**18th January 2020**

There's a strongly held view that Altan are the finest traditional Irish band in the world, bar none. I imagine the people holding that opinion has grown in number, joined by a large contingent in the packed audience at The Duncairn, who witness a quite superb show by the Donegal quartet. For over thirty years, the band has curated, publicised and brought the Donegal airs and tunes to a world wide audience.

Tonight they delighted, and entertained the crowd with a onslaught of virtuoso musicianship and sheer sense of joy that was impossible not to be affected by.

Fronted as ever by the enchanting and affable Mairead Ni Mhaonaigh, and despite the disclaimer that much of the material was of a sad nature, the band lead the crowd on a merry dance, some slow, some quick, all exalting the emotions in differing directions. Impossible to sit still during the reels and jigs, difficult not to moved by the slow, graceful airs.

Physiotherapy for the soul!

Featuring selected tracks from their most recent album *'The Gap of Dreams'*, itself a thing of beauty, the gig showed a band at the top of their game, seemingly having as much fun, if not more as the audience. A mention, as always from Mairead, to her much missed partner Frankie Kennedy, and his suggestion that a tune based on wet seaweed, Dulaman is actually a Beatles song, "*Kelp*"! The camaraderie on stage is evident throughout and the good humour shared with the audience, as are stories behind the songs. Stories of fables and tales of long ago, of lost pipers, and mermaids bewitching sailors to their death, and of attempted bigamy. Perhaps not the best ad for Donegal tourism, but the craic is ninety!

Mairead is the focal point of the ensemble, and dressed in a black dress with silver reflecting pieces, at times it appears that sparks were flying from her fingertips as they flew over the strings of her fiddle.

*'The Piper in the Cave'* being a early warning of the musical dexterity that was to follow.

But this is a band of equals, if you would listen to Mairead. She was matched, and her liquid vocals were enhanced and enriched by her friends, and band mates on stage.

Mark Kelly, who was superb on Guitar, at times providing the bass on his upper strings, although his stand up comedy perhaps needs some work!

Martin Tourish, on Piano Accordion, who plugged his book on the Altan back catalogue at every opportune moment, and was the writer of one of the most affecting pieces on the night, in *'The Road Home'*. And on Bouzouki, the quiet man of the group, Mr Ciaran Curran, who let his instrument do the talking, and it was a right little chatterbox!

The band were added a number of tunes by guest Connor Caldwell on fiddle.

But the undoubted star of the night is Mairead. Her voice is as strong, and as soft as it has ever been, and continues to be a thing of great beauty.

Thanks also to Ray Giffen and the Staff at The Duncairn, for continuing to bring such world class talent to the North of the city and to one of the best music venues in Belfast.

New bands are flourishing on the Traditional scene, but Altan have set a high bar, and I think it will be a while before I see a band to match them.

Go raibh maith agat Altan!




## Live references

Fat Fry Music Festival, California (USA) - The Iron Horse, Northampton (USA) - Boston Folk Festival (USA) - Finnish - Folk Festival, Helsinki (FIN) - Oulu Festival (FIN) - Festival in Tokyo - Shibuya Kokaido (JAP) - Frifot (Swedish folk music trio) (SWE) - Stadsgehoorzaal, Vlaardingen (NL) - Amsterdam Melkveg Other Acts (NL) - Crossing Borders Festival (NL) - Brosella Festival Brussels (BE) - Glastonbury (Glastonbury Festival - The Acoustic Stage), England, (UK) - Tonder Festival (DK) - Cesky Krumlov (Cesky Krumlov Festival), Czech Republic - Viljandi Folk Music Festival - Wikiwand (ES) - Forde Folk Music Festival (NO) - Ferias de Bilbao (SP) - Bidasoa Folk Festival (SP) - Festival de Corbeyrier (CH) - Centre Culturel de Delémont (CH) - Paléo Festival, Nyon (CH) - Les Nuits de Fourvières, Lyon (FR) - Festival Interceltique de Lorient (FR) - Festival Les Traversées de Tatihou (FR) - Festival Interceltico, Milano (ITA) - Ulm Festival Sauga Festival (DE) - Festival des Musiques Sacrées Fès (MAROC)...

# Paléo Festival Nyon

40<sup>+</sup>1 19 AU 24 JUILLET 2016

Samedi 23 juillet LE DÔME ▲▲



**ALTAN**  
**INSPIRÉ** Geoth Dobhair, c'est où? Au cœur du pays de Donega, un comté situé le plus au nord de l'Irlande où la culture gaélique trouve parmi ses plus anciennes racines. Considéré depuis trois décennies comme LE meilleur groupe de musique traditionnelle irlandaise, Altan l'incroyable offre à présent à Paléo son savoir-faire majestueux, hanté, tellurique.



## CONTACT

naiade  
PRODUCTIONS

WORLD & TRADITIONAL MUSIC BOOKING AGENCY

3 rue de Lorraine - F-35000 Rennes  
Tel. +33 (0)2.99.85.44.04