

Traditional Music / By Daniel Neely

‘Tis What It Is’ has wild music of in-crowd

THE ALBUMS launched at this year’s Willie Clancy Week continue to arrive in, with *‘Tis What It Is,*” the new duet release from fiddler Mick Conneely and button accordionist David Munnelly, being the most recent. *‘Tis What It Is*” is a brilliant album, but not one for listeners looking for a quiet, introspective listening experience. Rather, it’s the wild music of the in-crowd, possessing all the sound and fury of a full pub, where all your friends are having too good a time, each one knowing that by sunrise they’ll be at a diner and it will be late morning until they reach their beds. Good stuff, indeed.

From County Mayo, Munnelly is a supremely talented box player. He was a member of Niamh Parsons’s band the Loose Connections and has toured with groups including the Chieftains, De Danann, Gerry O’Connor, Arty McGlynn and Sharon Shannon. Conneely, on the other hand, was born in England and is currently living in Galway. He plays both bouzouki and fiddle and has played and toured with the likes of Mary Bergin, Mairtin O’Connor, Noel Hill & Tony Linnane, Tony MacMahon & Micho Russel, Matt Molloy, Kevin Crawford and Michael McGoldrick (among others), but he is currently the full time fiddle player with De Danann (Alec Finn’s De Danann, that is; not Frankie Gavin’s De Dannan).

The album includes some high caliber guests, including Johnny “Ringo” McDonagh on bodhrán, Ryan Molloy on piano and Jonas Fromseier on tenor banjo.

The album opens with a couple of high intensity barn dances, “The High Caul Cap / Napoleon Crossing the Alps.” Conneely’s bowing on this (and really, every) track is both dynamic and musical, and is matched not only by Munnelly’s melodic virtuosity, but by his keen sense of harmony on the bass buttons.

The intensity remains high on tracks like “Maho Snaps/...” and P. Flanagan’s/...” until we reach “For Michael,” a haunting beautiful air Munnelly composed in memory of two friends. Here, better than anywhere else, Munnelly’s harmonic sense is most easily appreciated. This track flows directly into the next, a rake of tinker-themed reels, “The Jolly Tinker/The Yellow Tinker/The Longford Tinker.” It’s a great transition and despite the reel set’s intensity, there’s a sense of real intimacy between the box and the fiddle on the first of the three tunes (“Jolly Tinker”) that matches the air and also acts as a perfect bridge into the next tune (“Yellow Tinker”), where the bouzouki enters and adds a lightness that contrasts the set’s earlier gravity.

One of the album’s best tracks is the jig set “The Rakes of Kildare/Haley’s Favorite/ Flanagan’s.” Retrofuturistic in style and tone, it’s 1920s Irish dance band

music gone berserk. Comprising Munnelly on melodeon, Conneely on fiddle, Fromseier on banjo and Molloy on piano, the track starts fast out of the gate with an energy that gathers strength and intensity as it moves along. Conneely and Munnelly’s love for groups like the Flanagan Brothers (and Fromseier and Molloy’s, for that matter) is completely apparent here, and the hard swing they give these jigs would fit into that era perfectly. By the track’s last tune – a big four partner that moves through a few different key areas – everyone’s absolutely on fire. When the group breaks the flow to signal that the end is nigh, it’s a disappointment! (If you’re a fan of the opening set of jigs from Enda Scahill and Paul Brock’s album “Humdinger” – “Erin Go Bragh / Kimmel’s / The Black Rogue” – you’ll dig this one as well.)

The album’s other tracks are similarly excellent. The “Shoe the Donkey/...” waltzes and “Humours of Glenflesk/...” slides, for example, are played with power and have a life dancers will appreciate.

Released by Cló Iar-Chonnacht, the album itself is both superbly recorded and well presented. The liner notes are in English and Irish, and includes a foreword by Ben Lennon. Perhaps the most interesting facet is the back cover blurb from comedian Tommy Tiernan (which is appropriate, given how Conneely’s sense of humor puts him somewhere between Fred Finn and Dick Brennan on the Tansey Metric) who rightly called the album “a raucous encounter between chaos and melody.”

Ultimately, *‘Tis What It Is*” is a bundle of positive energy – and really, what more could you ask for?



Mick Conneely and David Munnelly in different moods.



Au revoir!

CONSUL General Noel Kilkenny and his wife Honora hosted a farewell party last week in Manhattan for his deputy Jacqueline O’Halloran Bernstein and her husband Dr. Gustavo Bernstein, who are returning to Dublin.

PHOTO BY PETER McDERMOTT

