

SHASKEEN, REVIVED!

Tom Cussen of Shaskeen in conversation with Anne Marie Kennedy for Irish Music Magazine.



COVID 19 eclipsed the year-long celebration of Shaskeen's 50th birthday in 2020. Being in lockdown meant the double CD the band made, (seventeenth to date), to celebrate their great milestone had to be shelved. Founding member Tom Cussen had booked twenty-two concerts in Ireland, England and a first-time trip to Norway. He spoke to me about changes in the band and how after fifty years on the road, he is as excited as ever about playing to live audiences.

TOM: "As well as the lockdowns, we had to deal with the sad passing of our band mates Pat Costello and Pat Broderick, two stalwarts, great musicians. Their loss is still felt, we were blessed to have them on so many tours and recordings. We're delighted to say that we've brought in two new members, two great women, Shaskeen addressing the gender balance in traditional Irish music in our sixth decade (!), but they are not replacing the two Pats because that would be an impossibility. We continue to include memories of them in our repertoire; *The Roseville Fair* will always be Pat Costello's song, *The Mist Covered Mountain Of Home* we'll forever associate with Pat Broderick."

AMK: "You've always had a sliding door policy in the band, inviting regular guests, and now you have two great females in the mix."

TOM: "Maybe because of all the guests we've had over the years, we are blessed with local talent, musicians I can call on without much notice to stand in, Alan Wallace and Conor McCarthy recently helped us out."

AMK: "The core group is a very solid one, with yourself as the anchor."

TOM: "We have Dave Sanders great fiddle and viola player, Patsy McDonagh on accordion, he hasn't missed a gig or rehearsal in years, Johnny Donnellan the bodhrán man and recent convert to a good song, Seán Conway on vocals, concert flute and whistles, Geraldine and

Eamonn Cotter high-calibre, serious reputations in the tradition, and myself on the banjo and the banter."

AMK: "Exciting news that you've just added two mighty females."

TOM: "We have Mary Liddy from Ennis, a well-known and respected concertina player, from the musical Liddy household, a very active and diligent member of Comhaltas, and Katie Theasby great musician and singer. Their freshness, great energy and serious talents are bringing new variety to the set list, very proud to have them on board because the songs and the singers have always been a vital ingredient in the Shaskeen sound, except in the years when set dancing took over and we had to cut the songs. Still they survive to this day, mixed in with the tunes has to be the best entertainment, because the essence of the céili band was always to have the right blend of songs and tunes, that's the formula for the survival of the music in my opinion."

AMK: "There's something really special, unique, in the Shaskeen live performance, there's a magic connection to the audience, are you conscious of achieving it?"

TOM: "Not really conscious of it but if that magic connection wasn't there we'd stop playing! I feel there's no other band doing what we're doing in terms of entertainment; the songs, the tunes and airs, melodies,

"The essence of the céili band was always to have the right blend of songs and tunes"

the banter, the bit of craic, knowing how to read an audience and sensing their appreciation, great synergy, also with the talent onstage, several band members do outstanding solos, showcasing their individual taste and skills, the songs of course bring great emotion and variety."

AMK: "You've been touring again since we came out of lockdowns?"

TOM: "We brought the 'new' band to the local hall in Ballinderreen, a fundraiser for Ukraine through the Irish Red Cross, then on to Corofin, North Clare, then onto Monnie McGovern's memorial concert in Omagh, Co. Tyrone, performing soon at the Coleman Cultural centre in Gurteen, Co. Sligo. We are really grateful for all the sold-out houses, off to Áras Chrónáin, Clondalkin in June and the All-Ireland Fleadh in Mullingar Arts Centre in August."

AMK: "Have you any plans for another record with Shaskeen Revived?"

TOM: "We're working on a new song, details to be revealed. We're being innovative with the instruments, a new and exciting departure for Shaskeen, and are hoping to record a few tracks later in the year, with an EP perhaps with the newly added talent mixed in with the old."

Keep an eye on our website www.shaskeen.net and on the facebook page."

