

MOLLY'S REVENGE

Tom Clancy in California is let into a few secrets of the recording process.



For any band, seven albums in eight years is pretty prolific. The California band, Molly's Revenge, now hold this distinction with the release of *The Western Shore*, another benchmark in their fine body of work. It is likely to greatly expand their regional reputation in the San Francisco Bay Area where they are big audience favourites at festivals and shows. Their live performances are marked by joyful energy and imaginative playing, qualities that appealed to John Doyle who produced this album.

The band is Pete Haworth (bouzouki, vocals); John Weed (fiddle, vocals); Stuart Mason (guitar, mandola, vocals); and, David Brewer (highland pipes, whistles, bodhráns & uilleann pipes). Joining them, to great effect, on the album are Moira Smiley on vocals and accordion and Fraser Stone (Old Blind Dogs) with perky percussion. I met with Haworth and Brewer during the Sebastopol Celtic Music Festival in September for a lively interview.

They have a richly hybrid sound, a kind of Scottish-Irish mash-up ...and California, they quickly pointed out. The album grabs you by the ears right from the title track, opening with a pipe anthem written by Brewer. How long did it take to develop that sound? "We've been together in this combination for almost five years," Haworth said. "We're pretty settled right now. We don't want to play the melodies straight because lots of players do that. We try to arrange things differently, swap in and out on different instruments. And you spend a lot of time on those things when you work on a CD."

Were they working on the album before John Doyle came along? "No, we had run into John at various concerts and events, and he was in town with Athena Tergis and Mick Moloney. I plucked up the courage to ask him if he'd produce a CD for us and to my surprise he said yes," Haworth said. Brewer could not say enough about Doyle's role. "John is like a flow of consciousness of great ideas for Celtic music arrangements. We had made good musical progress on each of our CDs but then to have John joining the team for this album, it was something else."

Haworth was equally effusive. "It was really a phenomenal experience. We'd send John MP3 recordings of our arrangements and he'd reply with suggestions and ideas. We took all his suggestions

and thought we were all ready to go. But then we went into the studio and I'll never forget that first day. We played all the tracks through and John was standing there with his mandola playing along. We get to the end and he'd say, 'Ok, Pete I want you to do this here. We're only doing that twice, not three times. Stu, you drop out here. David, how about a little counter-melody here.' And he'd play all the parts on his mandola. And we'd say, ok give us fifteen minutes but John would say, no let's do it right now. He was like a whirlwind. Some of the stuff he came up with was really simple and other things were a lot more complicated. He's just an incredible musician."

How did Moira Smiley become involved? "We'd known Moira for quite a while," Brewer said. "I was part of a Celtic Christmas tour about four years ago with storyteller Tomaisín Foley. Then later we ran into her at one of those booking conferences. She sings with a group called Voco." Haworth noted that her singing brings another dimension to the band and gives him a break from the singing duties. They recalled that one song, *I'll Weave my Love a Garland*, didn't appear until the night before they finished recording.

Brewer took up the story. "John decided we needed one more song. So we sat around until two in the morning, as Moira kept throwing out all these songs, and John kept saying no, that's not going to work. She dug way back into her past to come up with that one. But John's arrangement of it is lovely, especially those dreamy chords at the beginning." Smiley does a lovely job on *I am a Youth* that's inclined to *Ramble*, one of those twisty songs she learned from the singing of Paul Brady. John Weed's fiddle motif is memorable.

The album has some fine song selections. "I had come up with list of songs I wanted to do," Haworth said. "But I was not feeling strongly about any of them. *The Regular Army-O* was one that I definitely liked from Mick Moloney's album *O'Malley's Block of Flats*. The tune is one I remember the Dubliners doing as a song I loved called *The Hot Asphalt* (similar to the set dance *Napoleonic Crossing the Alps*). And Sean Doyle (John's father) does a version called *Let Mr. Maguire Sit Down*." This is one of three extra tracks available for

downloading from the Molly's Revenge website: mollysrevenge.com Haworth does a rousing turn on *The Mickey Dam*, from the song encyclopedia of the late Frank Harte. "John suggested listening to Frank's recordings which are jammed full of great songs. He did a lot of the arranging for that song and the tune at the end is one David came up with."

Air Tune is a completely infectious Liz Carroll classic. It opens with catchy alternating fiddle and whistle, and luscious layers of accordion and uilleann pipes fill out the arrangement. "That's a great tune. Liz's version is faster than the way we played it. It goes down really well, a kind of palette cleanser on the album."

The *Miss McGuinness* set is another nice change of pace. Haworth explained, "The first tune, *Paddy Taylor's*, is one we put together for an earlier album, *Raise the Rafters*. We were trying to get Cillian Vallely (Lunasa) to play on it. But it didn't work out, so we carried it forward for the next time. John Weed has been going over to Donegal

lot of pressure on Stu but he really rose to the challenge. "Brewer is a live-wire performer on stage and I asked if he had ever whacked Pete with the pipes? "Actually I have, and I've come close at other times," he confessed. "We're pretty much a full contact band. I live for the performance, so I really get into, rocking out. I get into a zone where I don't really know what is going on around me. I've stood on John's fiddle and knocked things over."

I've never heard a band where the Scottish pipes are so well integrated into the sound, especially in concert. How do you do it? "On the technical side, I use a pick-up on the pipes. It's a saxophone mic that clips onto the chanter. I don't mic the drones because they carry well anyhow. It's got a very smooth sound. Another factor, is a lot of pipers that come from the competitive side of piping use a really hard reed that make the pipes sound very loud. I don't like that much and I use a softer reed that gives a sweeter tone and helps it blend with the fiddle a little better."

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for the Frankie Kennedy School for a few years and bringing back all these Northern fiddle tunes. There's two on this track and more on Northern Shore."

Emmet's Hedgehog is a set sourced from Johnny Connolly, Niall Vallely and David Munnely, musicians who know a thing or two about melodies. Haworth agreed, "I'd love to get them all playing with us." *Three's a Crowd* is a rollicking set of hornpipes and slip jigs with pipes in front but the band not far behind. The last tune is another terrific Brewer composition.

Murphy's Greyhound starts with a slow, sweet interplay between guitar and whistle. Then it builds, propelled by Mason's rhythmic guitar work, into a phenomenal groove with the whole ensemble getting in on the act. Brewer said that Stu must have been anxious as a guitarist to have Doyle producing. "I know if a highland piper was producing, I'd have been sweating bricks. So there had to be a

Haworth noted that it can be challenging blending in the pipes. "But I've always thought of the bagpipes as being an extraordinary instrument from the emotional perspective.." Brewer laughed, "That's why we get along so well." I wondered if the pipe influence accounts for the Scottish fondness for beautiful and robust tunes. "I think it's the whiskey," Haworth commented.

They'll be sampling some of that whiskey or whisky in January when making their first appearance at the Celtic Connections festival in Glasgow. They are one of the bands invited to play at the great annual mid-winter musical extravaganza. Making new connections with a wider audience is an exciting prospect for a band that is passionate and deeply engaged with the music. *The Western Shore* is an impressive calling card. This bunch of out-of-the-closet musicologists are a great bet for a seriously joyous, masterly musical experience. Check out sample tracks at www.sonicbids.com

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