

GOITSE INSPIRED BY HOME

Seán Laffey attends Goitse's album launch of *Inspired by Chance* at the Dunamais Theatre, Portlaoise.



April 30th and Spring was giving way to Summer, Portlaoise was bathed in warm evening sunshine. I arrived early and decided to explore the town, architecturally complex, historically interesting, with a sense of pride in itself, the vibes were looking good for the launch of *Inspired by Chance* from Goitse.

In the green room of the Dunamais Theatre on Church Street, I met up with Goitse's piano accordion/piano player Tadhg Ó Meachair. He filled me in on the band's progress up to the launch of this their fourth album.

He told me they were just in from a tour of Germany with Petr Pandula's Magnetic Music, and after the launch gigs in Ireland they'd be off to Europe again and then to the USA. "We are working with Pat Garrett's Real Good Music in Arizona and he has a full programme of festival appearances for us during the summer. We have a P3 visa which means we can work for 6 months of the year in the States. For any band thinking of testing the market over there it is essential you get a good agent and that you have all the paperwork in order" he advises.

I wondered what it was like the first time they played in the USA "We were blown away by the scale of everything, not just the size of the place but the numbers attending the festivals. We were really lucky for our first tour, at the time we finished at the University of Limerick, AOIFE had arranged a showcase there of Irish music for visiting American promoters. We played a 20 minute set and got a 9 week tour of the States on the back of it."

His advice to artists trying to break into the business full time is to be persistent, plug away, be prepared to be rejected, it isn't a reflection on your ability, you might have applied too late or your music doesn't fit the festival's mix this year. Although once you are established, you have to give value for money, he thinks for a while and says that "there is huge difference between playing and performing, you have to get the right game head on you for a stage gig". He'd advise anyone with ambitions to watch acts at festivals and concerts, see how they approach performing. "How they interact with their audiences, how they bring the crowd into their world of music. That's the fun of playing festivals, we get time to watch other acts and we get time to join some of them on stage too."

Goitse are certainly embossing their mark on the international festival circuit, after a summer in the States they'll be back for some more

European gigs and a slot at the Gig in The Bann festival in September; followed by a tour of Austria, Belgium and Switzerland confirmed for November and December (with Deitmar 'Hassy' Haslinger's agency). Touring in 2017 will begin with January in Germany. They are really making a name for themselves in Europe with a TV appearance just weeks ago on their last Germany tour.

Talking of video, he tells me that Goitse has recently finished a film featuring the track *Serendipity*. "Brian Raftery has produced it and it takes a contemporary viewpoint, it isn't just a movie of the band sitting in a studio playing away, there's more to it than that. We believe if you are making a video it has to have an aesthetic that tells you something more about the group. The video will be released to YouTube and it will be on our Goitse channel on our website and on Facebook." He says it is important for bands to have an online presence these days, "to show fans and bookers that we are driving forward and not becoming stagnant."

As if that would ever happen, for example the band's fiddler Áine McGeeney had just finished a Laois County Council commissioned 1916 suite for folk Orchestra. "She composed, arranged and conducted the work; we are delighted with the support traditional music is getting from the local authority here" he says. Goitse are also giving back their time and expertise to the upcoming generation of Laois musicians. That afternoon Goitse had run a master class and workshop with three dozen young musicians ranging in age from seven to seventeen, they came from Comhaltas branches in the county and would perform as the opening act of the launch.

Another project Goitse are working on is a track for digital download (CD Baby and iTunes). "A collaboration with Peter Staunton of Super Céilí who is the creator of the Céilí Haus genre of electronic dance music" (it had its debut at the launch of Trad for Trocaire at Whelans in September 2013). "We are excited about this new collaboration, as Peter is doing something completely new with traditional music, he's bringing it to a modern dance floor."

Then Tadhg shared some news, taking me into his confidence, "there's something special on the horizon, a big gig, a really big gig, it will be somewhere abroad... on the 25th of June..." If you want to find out more then check the band's website for the official announcement. An hour later, there was a big gig to take care of in Portlaoise, with the

theatre full to capacity as the band walked on stage. They introduced students from their afternoon workshops as the opening act. And what an impressive young meitheal, there was some serious investment in hardware too, no shortage of high end instruments on view including top of the range banjos, pipes and concertinas. The inventive hand of Goitse was at the tiller as the young musicians hit into a swingy modal *High Caul Cap* which seagued into a banjo propelled *Trip to Dixie*. A thunderstorm of applause followed and then it was time for Goitse.

First some observations; bodhrán player Colm Phelan was shoeless, sporting a pair of blue–stripped socks. The stage had only two microphones, one for Colm the other for Áine. The string players, James Harvey (banjo) and Conal Keane (guitar) were free to roam the stage. Not tied down by the mic stands they used the space to weave and mingle, jostle and jive. When the band kicked into *Odds* from the new album, there was movement, energy, passing combinations of duo and



“There is huge difference between playing and performing, you have to get the right game head on you for a stage gig”

trio playing, the sound and the optics swirling around the stage. James Harvey, who is 25 but looks 10 years younger making Slash shapes with his banjo. The band obviously having a great time as they swapped jokes about themselves, trading anecdotes and nicknames, calling James Harvey *Banjoman Button* after the film *Benjamin Button*. “The more he plays the banjo the younger he gets” quipped Colm.

Conal broke not one but two strings on his guitar, he finished each tune with five strings and had the replacement fitted before the next set started, impressive. Colm gave us a mighty bodhrán solo which took me back the Wing’s glory days of Tommy Hayes. Darren Cahill on sound was masterful, especially the way he mixed the guitar to pull out sensitive flat picked tunes.

Then there was Áine. Think of the chops of Eileen Ivers, the rock crystal voice of a young Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh and the volcanic energy of fiddler Mairi Rankin, Áine has them all. She owned the centre

stage, whether it was on the high flying *First Class Bananas*, the song *An Bonnan Bui* or the gentle *Hills of Sweet Lislea*; the lady was in charge. The *Hills of Sweet Lislea* is a remarkable song, which they began simply with piano accompaniment. Written by Armagh songwriter Finbar McGee, it tells the love story of an Ulster soldier sending a letter home to his sweetheart, knowing he is most certainly doomed and damned in the trenches. There wasn’t a breath to be heard in the theatre as Áine delivered this masterpiece.

Colm on behalf of Goitse thanked all those who have helped them on the way, the local teachers, the musicians with whom they have shared sessions and stages, they thanked Laois their spiritual home town, and the audience thanked them in return for a special night of music.

If at the end of the year the BBC contact me (as they do) and ask me to name my gig of the year (as they do) Goitse at The Dunamais Theatre would be a country mile ahead of anything I’ve seen this past five years.