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## Chieftains take a new trip down the "Old Plank Road"

By Rick Bell, October 2002

The second time around for legendary Irish band The Chieftains to record in Nashville didn't prove to be so easy.



A decade ago, the group hit Music City to record "Another Country" with Chet Atkins, Willie Nelson, Emmylou Harris and Ricky Skaggs aboard.

The band was all set to return last year in what was slated to be a banner year - their 40th

anniversary. The Chieftains were ready to celebrate in grand fashion. In addition to Nashville, they made plans for a huge celebratory concert in Dublin.

Despite the planning by Chieftains front man Paddy Moloney and his mates Sean Keane, Kevin Conneff, Matt Molloy and Derek Bell, the album may have never come about without Moloney's persistence.

That all came to a screeching halt on Sept. 11.

"It was the concert that didn't take place," Moloney says. "Paul Simon, Emmylou Harris, Van (Morrison), Sinéad (O'Connor)...no one said they didn't want to do it. Van even called, saying 'Why are you canceling?' He didn't see it."

It was a year's worth of planning and preparation down the drain - postponed, Moloney rephrased it, though like anyone else, 40 never rolls around again.

But the "Down the Old Plank Road/The Nashville Sessions," had also been in the works in 2001, he says.

The Chieftains received commitments from folks like Vince Gill, Buddy and Julie Miller, Bžla Fleck, Martina McBride, Earl Scruggs, Alison Krauss, the Del McCoury Band, Lyle Lovett and Skaggs again. Despite Sept. 11, the sessions went on.

"I'd committed to this project last year," Moloney says. "A lot of the songs were songs from my youth. When I was in my teens back in the '40s I was in a band called the 3 Squares. It was a skiffle band. A great friend of mine, Charlie Tyndall, used to sing 'Dark as a Dungeon.' It was one of my favorites, and I was lucky to get Vince (Gill) to sing it on this album."

Logistics aside, Moloney says it all worked out beautifully with the music released in mid-September.

"It only took two weeks to record," Moloney says of the Nashville sessions that appear on "Old Plank Road," though there's plenty more music for a second album. "It was very much a live thing. This was an encounter with the greats of Nashville. It was natural, like we went to our cousin's house."

Banjo impresario Fleck didn't hesitate when asked to perform. Fleck, whose solo career has put him among the most innovative musicians on the planet, also performed with The Chieftains when they recorded "Another Country." Though he wanted to be a part of the new album, ultimately entitled the former New Grass Revival banjo player said it almost didn't happen.

He'd dropped by the studio a couple times, but wasn't needed just then. A trip out of town left his role with the project in doubt.

"They were still around when I got back to town," Fleck says in an interview shortly before performing in Las Vegas. "But I had an ulterior motive to being on their album. I wanted to get The Chieftains on my new Flecktones album too."

Not surprisingly, Moloney says logistics played a big part in getting all of the artists together for his record.

Moloney recalled the day Fleck spent time in studio with The Chieftains for "Nashville Sessions" turned out to be extremely productive. Once he arrived, there was no stopping him, Moloney says.

"I wanted him on different songs," says Moloney, who produces the band's albums and also plays whistles. "The day he was there he put down four tracks. I got him into the finale, 'Give the Fiddler a Dram.' I also needed a connection on (Krauss' song) 'Molly Ban.'"

Moloney got a bit wistful at the moment, as if it took him back not only to the sessions earlier this year, but to a spot a long time ago. Many of the songs, Moloney says, harkened to his childhood.

That was in contrast to their last recordings in Nashville where they did "Heartbreak Hotel," "Wabash Cannonball," "Cotton Eyed Joe" and "Goodnight Irene."

"You hear those lovely, distant notes," Moloney says of the childhood songs. "I got Bžla to start off slow, then it soars."

The guest artists seemed to feel right at home bridging the relatively short distance between Irish and country music. Smack dab in between is a healthy dose of bluegrass.

Ricky Skaggs & Kentucky Thunder doesn't miss a beat on "Cindy," the Del McCoury Band offers up the traditional "Rain and Snow" as Moloney's pipes intertwine with McCoury's vocals, and 78-year-old Scruggs picks right up with his banjo on the old time instrumental "Sally Goodin."

Gill's guitarist Jeff White, who Moloney credits with researching many of the songs - "He's the 6th Chieftain" Moloney boasts - reaches back for the Jimmy Driftwood song "Tennessee Stud," which Doc Watson popularized on the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's original "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" album.

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