

The Chieftains

Down the Old Plank Road: The Nashville Sessions

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"Give the Chieftains a Dram!"

"Now country music, that's *American* music!"

This kind of remark always makes me shake my head because what the speaker probably means is that country is politically and musically conservative, "family values" music, (a la Toby Keith's "The Angry American"). And on one level, it is.

But on another, this statement is profoundly true in ways the speaker probably doesn't realize: The banjo is African as are the drums and blues beats; the guitar comes from Spain; Italy is home to the mandolin; the dobro is from Czechoslovakia (and played Hawaiian style); and the fiddle hails from Britain. And, of course, many traditional country songs began as British ballads that received a bit of Americanization after crossing the pond. How these elements come together in the melting pot is truly American, but they are all reminders of roots, that America is a culture of immigrants.

Back in 1992, the Chieftains, a musical force known for establishing the international appeal of Irish music, came to Nashville to work with some of its finest (e.g., Emmylou Harris, Chet Atkins, Willie Nelson) in an exploration of the shared ground of traditional Irish music and American country music. The result: the Grammy-award winning *Another Country*, a significant album in country music.

Ten years later, the Chieftains have returned to Guitar Town to record their 40th album, a continuation of the journey that began with *Another Country*. The result: *Down the Old Plank Road: The Nashville Sessions*, another reminder of the wonderfully complicated history of American country music.

In the disc's liner notes, noted historian Robert K. Oermann writes, "This album 'connects the dots' between our cultures by digging for the shared roots of an Irish shamrock and a Tennessee mountain laurel. It reminds us that it is only a hop, skip and jump from jigs, reels and hornpipes to square dance melodies like 'Sally Goodin' and 'Cindy.'" Similarly Paddy Maloney, founder of the Chieftains and producer of *Down the Old Plank Road*, explains: "The similarities between the Irish version of a song and its American variation are most times plain as day. Even when the material is particular to one country or the other, the foundation is still there. We wanted to bring it all together again and make it new."



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DOWN THE OLD PLANK ROAD: THE NASHVILLE SESSIONS

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And so they have on an album that easily distinguishes itself among the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* clones released in the wake of the 6 million record success of that album.

Working with Maloney (Uilleann pipes, tin whistle) are Sean Keene (fiddle), Matt Molloy (flute), Dereck Bell (harp, tiompan, piano, oboe), and Kevin Conneff (bodhran and vocals). Providing additional support are Nashville players Stuart Duncan (fiddle), Jim Mills (banjo), Union Station's Barry Bales (bass), and Bryan Sutton (guitar) with Steve Buckingham working as Associate Producer.

From the opening track, "Down the Old Plank Road", a song Uncle Dave Macon recorded in 1926 that appeared on Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Music*, the album's musical and cultural themes are clear; the rest of the record, then, expands on those themes.

Joining the Chieftains for the title song are John Hiatt, Bela Fleck, Jeff White, and Tim O'Brien, a collaboration of musicians from a range of musical genres, here woven together by the Chieftains, a reminder of the shared roots of American music. These threads come together in the album's finale, "Give the Fiddler a Dram", a ten-minute jam that finds most of the album's musicians singing together, a kind of metaphoric dram-passing.

In between, *Down the Old Plank Road* leads the listener down a path that explores country, blues, and bluegrass, all with a Celtic melody tying things together.

On the bluegrass front, banjo maestro Earl Scruggs plays "Sally Goodin" and provides a fascinating contrast with another banjo maestro, Bela Fleck, who adds a medley of Irish reels on "Bella's Reels" ("Ladies Pantalettes", "Belles of Blackville", and "First House in Connaught"). Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder perform the classic "Cindy", Allison Kraus does a wonderful "Molly Bain", and there's "Rain and Snow" from the Del McCoury Band.

The Chieftains have included on the album country, too, both mainstream and alternative.

Vince Gill croons away on "Dark as a Dungeon", the 1947 Merle Travis classic song of despair, and Martina McBride adds the 1879 waltz "I'll Be All Smiles Tonight", one of the weaker tracks on the disc. That McBride has a big voice has never been in doubt, but here she just sounds like another diva belting out another power ballad—roots music is built on vocal performances that are considerably less generic.

The alt.country musicians, however, contribute some of the best material on *Down the Old Plank Road*. Buddy and Julie Miller bring their unique sound to "Country Blues", Jeff White does a fine "Tennessee Stud", and Lyle Lovett's "Don't Let Your Deal Go Down", a song made famous by Charlie Poole in the 1920s, works nicely.

Two tracks, though, especially stand out.

The first is Patty Griffin's "Whole Heap of Little Horses", a song sung by a parent to her child as she eases him to sleep with promises of dreams and pony rides. Griffin's unforgettable voice melds perfectly with the Chieftains' music, promising comfort in a world that the parent knows is far from secure.

The second is Gillian Welch and David Rawlings' "Katie Dear" (known in America as "Silver Dagger"). Welch's voice, with Rawlings providing a ghostly harmony, eerily foreshadows the song's bloody conclusion. It is the kind of murder ballad that has become a Welch signature—indeed, with songs like "Caleb Meyer", Welch shows just how influenced she has been by traditional music.

And in the end, that's the point of *Down the Old Plank Road*.

The good news is that the Nashville sessions yielded enough material for a second record to be released in March 2003. On that one, listen for Emmylou Harris, Allison Moorer, John Prine, Joe Ely, and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, among others. Also scheduled for 30 September is a *Down from the Mountain*-style concert at the Ryman Auditorium.

Down the Old Plank Road will, inevitably, draw comparisons with the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's *Will the Circle Be Unbroken III*, due for release in early October. While the Dirt Band has certainly created another fine album, there is a lack of focus throughout, especially when listening to that record in light of the previous two *Circle* albums.

With *Down the Old Plank Road*, the theme is much clearer: The circle of American music is large and inclusive, extending beyond the country to include the world, and therein lies much of its richness.

(Now, would someone please explain that to Toby Keith?)

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