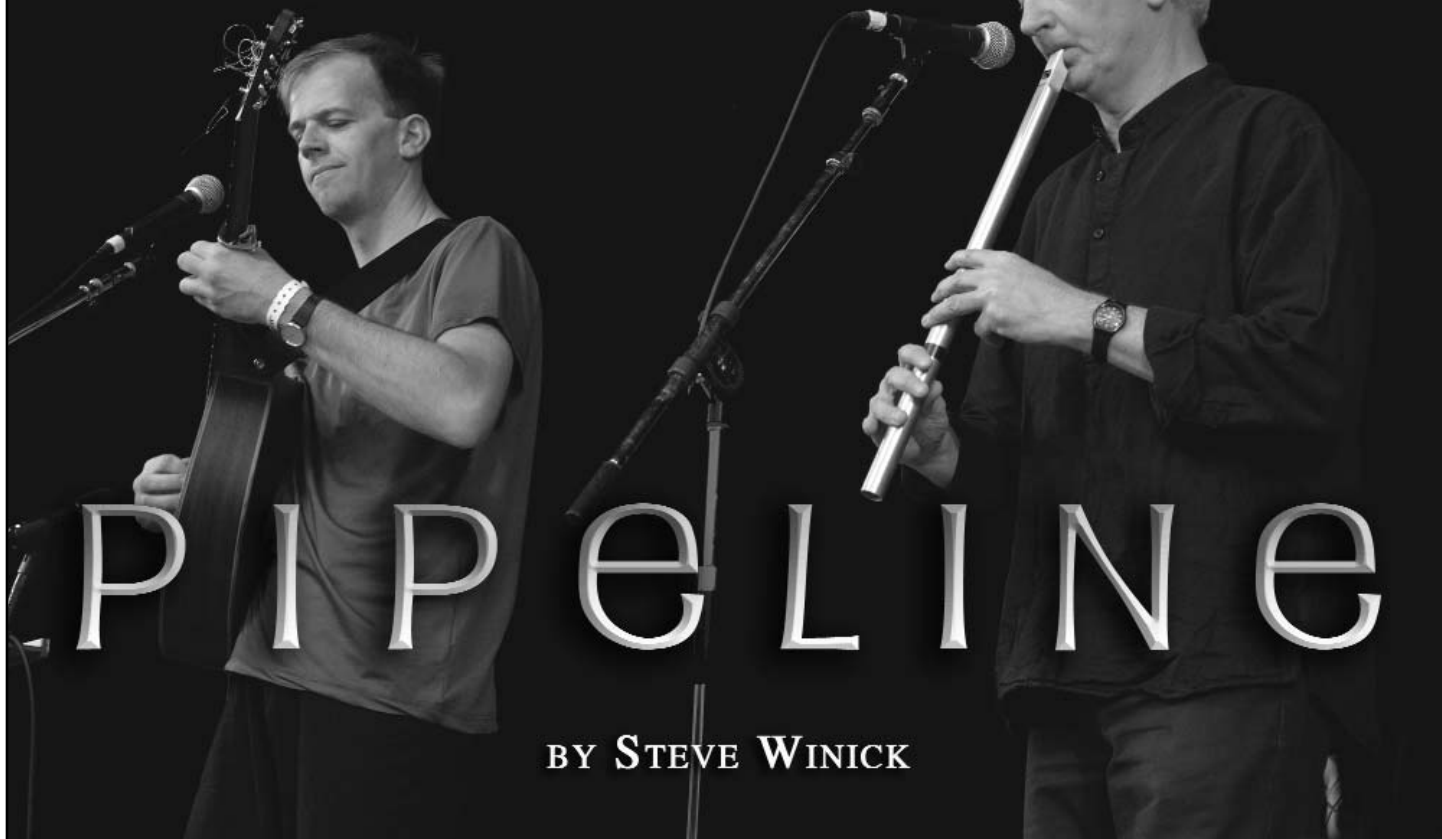


The Two Magicians

A CONVERSATION WITH CELTIC-MUSIC DUO



BY STEVE WINICK

About five years ago, Dermot Hyde and Tom Hake, the two musicians who make up Pipeline, had a decision to make. They had been playing music together casually for years, but they wanted to play more professionally. The received wisdom was, they should find two or three more people and form a band. The only problem was, they didn't want to. "There aren't many people playing just as a duo, anywhere," Hyde said. "But we found the idea of working as a duo suits us very well. We've got the same musical taste. There was no friction, really, and both of our ideas about how to present this music were very similar. It's exactly the kind of music we want to present. And it's economically much better for us as well. There's less problems financing two plane trips to wherever it is."

Working as a duo turned out to suit them for another reason: The two have a magical ability to give an audience the impression of a much larger band. "We don't actually need anybody else to play along with us," Hyde said. "That might sound arrogant, but it's not." Their U.S. agent, Robyn Boyd, agreed,

recalling her first experience with the pair: "I was told by a friend, 'You gotta go see these guys. It's a two-piece band that sounds like a five-piece band.' Well, it did!" What makes this possible is the sheer number of instruments the two members can play. Although in their official biographies they list three instruments for Hake and five for Hyde, there are in fact more, so that in each concert you are likely to hear several kinds of bagpipes (including Hyde's uilleann pipes, for which the band is named), whistles, guitar, bouzouki, mandolin, harp, and other surprises. Moreover, they are masters at playing them in unusual combinations, and at switching among instruments at lightning speed, so that what was uilleann pipes and bouzouki can become whistle and harp in a flash.

"That's our advantage," Hake noted, "because we can offer a lot more than the usual two-piece or duo. After a while, even a five- or six-piece group sounds the same. You've heard their sound after a couple of sets. Most people who aren't into Celtic music...like my mother would say, if she heard a normal Celtic group: 'Well, that's a nice sound, but it sounds all the

same to me after a while.' I think it's time to do something different. And, of course, the easiest way of doing something different has been to add drums and synthesizers. So that's been done. But I don't think most of that has been too successful; most of that also sounds the same." Pipeline, he explained, can avoid sounding the same, not by adding new sounds or electronics, but by switching instruments and trying new combinations, so that during the same set of tunes you go from hearing pipes and guitar to low whistle and harp, to two pennywhistles, to lilting with bouzouki, and back to pipes and guitar. "We can actually make it sound different. We have so many possibilities, and so many different combinations, that there's always something going on."

Being a duo also gives the band some challenges on the road. "When you get into most venues," Hake said, "most sound people will say, 'Oh, there's only two of you, and we expected you to bring one instrument each—one guitar and one set of pipes, or one bouzouki and one flute.' And we come in with a full load of guitars and bouzoukis and pipes and harps, and all of that, and they don't like it. The sound

check takes longer than it takes to check a four- or five-piece group.”

In conversation, Hyde and Hake are vague about time; everything seems to have happened “about 10, 15 years ago,” including their first meeting. Hake described it. “I live in Germany, in Munich. In fact, I’m from there. I met [Dermot] playing with his brother in a session in a pub near Munich. I was playing guitar with a sort of cabaret band, doing slightly folkish sort of music. I’d never seen this weird instrument, the uilleann pipes, before. I didn’t know anything about Celtic or Irish music before that. And we got to talking to each other. He was living in Munich, too.” It was through his new friend that Hake developed an interest in Irish music.

“Yes, it’s my fault,” Hyde admitted. He explained that his brothers Kevin and Brendan used to play in a now-defunct touring band called Malin Head. When they would come over to Germany from Scotland and Ireland, Hyde joined the lineup. It was after a Malin Head gig, at the post-concert session, that Hyde and Hake first met.

If Hake’s first exposure to Irish music was Hyde, how did Hyde get his start? More to the point, what’s with his odd Scottish-Irish accent? As he explained, he lived and grew up in both countries: His parents were from Donegal and Armagh in the north of Ireland, but even before he was born, his family had connections to Scotland. “My grandparents on my father’s side went over to Scotland,” he said. “My grandfather worked as a miner near Glasgow, which was an absolutely normal thing to do at that time. My brothers and sisters grew up and were born in Ireland. But I’m one of the children that were born in Edinburgh. I went to live in Ireland when I was nine, so I went to school in Ireland and grew up there. And all my relations are still there in Ireland.”

In his youth, Hyde started music lessons, playing guitar and piano. He also picked up the tin whistle, which stimulated his interest in the pipes. Unfortunately, he was back in Scotland, away from the majority of pipers and teachers, when he began to have a serious interest. “When I began to learn the uilleann pipes,” he remembered, “there was nobody in Scotland that I could really learn this instrument from. There was one guy in Glasgow, who wasn’t very forthcoming. So my father said to me, ‘It’s a great instrument, but if you want to learn it, well, there’s nobody here!’ So I used to go over to Ireland, on my semester holidays, and go over there as much as I could. I’d take a tape recorder with me, and recorded anything I could get. That’s how I learned.”

The first thing he found out was that his untutored whistle-playing would not help him learn the pipes. In his do-it-yourself fervor, he had learned to play the whistle the wrong way round, with his right hand on the top three

holes. This style of playing didn’t lend itself to the pipes. “I had to re-learn all the songs, ’cause my whistle was the wrong way round!” he said ruefully. Also, the adoption of the pipes briefly caused strife at home. “My brother was playing the flute, and he said ‘I’d like to have a try at those pipes as well.’ And I remember my father said, ‘I’m not having two of you guys playing that in the house at the same time, so one of you take the beast over there, and the other can play the flute.’” Luckily, Hyde’s brother Brendan kept playing his flute. He is still based in Edinburgh, and turned out to be an excellent flute-player; Pipeline has performed and recorded a number of his original tunes.



Pipes secured, Hyde went on to be an amateur musician and a trained architect, moving to Germany to pursue his profession. After some years, he met the German-born Hake, and some years after that, decided to give up architecture for music. Which brings us back to the decision to remain a duo.

Essentially, they explained, they share a musical philosophy that’s not common on the Celtic music scene, and certainly not in Germany, where they live. It involves presenting an audience with surprises: traditional material that is new to the folk scene, brand new songs and tunes, and new ways of arranging songs and melodies. “If you go into a session,” Hyde mused, “it’s mostly jigs and reels. The idea of sucking on that repertoire, and repeating it, and regurgitating it again...it’s not worth doing. There’s lots of other kinds of

music! You hardly ever hear polkas and step dances, and slow airs. We play a lot of slow tunes, for example. A lot of people don’t do that. They think maybe the audience doesn’t want it. We get a lot of nice comments about a lot of the slow stuff. We’re getting our own little sound, our own little niche.”

Their niche is not just playing Irish and Scottish music. As Hyde explained, they have also tried hard to find music from other Celtic countries to play. “Most bands 10 years ago, or even five years ago, they didn’t play a lot of Breton music or Galician music. In the last 10 years that’s become en vogue, you know? We’ve always liked that. I was going to Lorient Festival 25 years ago! So when I met Tom, I thought, all that wonderful stuff, Galician music, nice Welsh music, all this Celtic stuff that no one seems to be playing much, let’s get into that. And he loves it as well!”

As for brand-new material, Hyde advocates it loudly, and then puts his money where his mouth is, composing new tunes and writing new songs. “You’ve got to have a certain element of brand-new stuff,” he stated, “and where are you going to get it from? There’s guys looking in archives all over for melodies, or some Carolan tune that’s never been played. I like that. That’s a good idea. But sometimes you have to make some tunes and songs yourself.” The only disadvantage, he said, is that writing songs and music takes time. “It’s trying to get away from that same old adage: There’s only one thing you can write a song about, and that’s love. But you can write about nature, and about individual events in people’s lives. I like to get away from the love songs.

“I’ve had a song in my head for the last nine months,” he continued. “I’ve got some text written down, but I’m still filing away at it, humming it or singing it, and realizing ‘that bit’s not right.’ Like anything else, it’s a balance. It’s like, you have all the ingredients to cook, but the genuine ability and flair comes in how you put them together.”

The same analogy of cooking a meal, he said, applies just as well to arranging songs as to writing them. “The idea of just getting up and singing a song, from A to B, and it lasts three minutes and fifty-five seconds, I think is boring, as well. I honestly do. It would have to be a very powerful song, with a fantastic melody, for the audience to say, ‘That was outstanding.’ There’s not a lot of those around. I like the idea of putting a song together in a little package. A song should have a preamble to it, and you can build around it and make a small theme. Like a dinner, you have a soup before and maybe a dessert after. Getting the geometry of it right is important, and that’s what most people don’t do. Y’know, they take three reels and stick them together.” Hyde said the audience appreciates the duo’s efforts. “We’re packaging this nice product, and people

often comment on that, more than they do the actual song itself or the melody. They say, 'I loved that bit in the beginning with the harp,' but they didn't listen to the big bit in the middle with the words!"

All these trends and tastes are evident on the duo's first album, *Pipeline*, which was released in 2003 under their individual names. Slower tunes are represented by Hyde's own "Lament for Derryveagh" and by a beautiful Galician air known as "Maria Soliña," on which the timbre of Hyde's whistle-playing approaches the classical lushness of the Chieftains. More Galician music is here as well, including a set that features the stirring and beautiful voice of Uxia Sennle. Brand-new material abounds, including a tune by John Whelan, four melodies by Dermot's brother Brendan Hyde, and eight by Dermot. The title track, a brisk, bouncy, jazz-inflected reel played on the whistle by Hyde with unusual chords strummed on the bouzouki by Hake, was composed by both Pipeline members. The band's penchant for "packaging" songs is most obvious in two of Hyde's compositions: "Cities Far Away," a song about evicted Irish families forced to seek work in Australia, is sandwiched between a march, symbolizing the militarized force of the evicting landowner, and a slow air lamenting the destruction of the small Irish townland; and "Kisses and Kind Eyes," which incorporates several tempo changes, representing the anxiety of a young woman over the faithfulness of her distant lover.

Unless you're looking for it, though, you won't experience *Pipeline* as an exercise in finding unusual tunes and arranging them in unusual ways. Instead, what shines through is the quality of the performances. Every instrument is played with precision and feeling. Melodies flow with ease and grace, and chord changes are interesting without being outré. The vocals have a suitably rustic quality, but are also passionate and musically impeccable. Not surprising, then, that the CD earned almost unanimous critical acclaim from the folk press. Even Paddy Moloney of the Chieftains chimed in, saying *Pipeline* was "definitely one to have in your collection."

One aspect of *Pipeline*'s performance that is *not* captured on the CD is all the effort that goes into the entertaining between-song patter they keep up on stage. Hake and Hyde both try to engage the audience, asking questions and encouraging laughter and merriment. This banter is, by and large, unrehearsed, although choice bits are recycled from evening to evening when it seems appropriate. "We tried rehearsing that, believe me we tried," Hyde recalled. "We tried saying, 'Okay, Tom, you introduce the next one while I get my pipes.' And it never worked. We decided to do it unscripted." At first, he said, they were afraid

that the banter would degenerate into each of them rambling at random. But they made sure the task at hand directed their patter. "We've got certain information to be transferred," he said. "We are going to tell them about the next song. But we keep it all in a nice package. And that develops. It takes time and balance to get it done nicely, so you don't go overboard, you know?"

Hyde believes that his audiences genuinely appreciate the humor between selections. "People want to laugh," he said. "People have come out of their nice warm homes, they've spent money on you, right? They want to be entertained. They don't want



to just hear your latest CD start to finish, they want to have a happy time. It's like theater; it's like the circus. Most Celtic bands I know don't do enough of that. They're up there for themselves, and they're going to play well tonight, and that's that. If they say anything it's 'The next tune I had from the playing of a man named Johnny Carty. 'Tis a reel and we'll follow it by a slow air.'"

The reason for this, Hyde and Hake believe, is that there's been too much emphasis in Irish music on virtuosic playing and not enough on entertainment. "Some of the bands just came together through session playing, and they just transport that on stage, almost unchanged." Hake explained. "And you see that almost immediately with these bands. And, it might be great music, but I think it's a little bit staid. I never experienced the session

dynamic. And to be honest, it doesn't really interest me. Going to a pub and playing for yourself, it's not really my kind of thing."

Hyde agreed: Session musicians can afford to play for themselves and their peers, but headlining acts are there to perform for an audience. "You have a duty," he said. "The main thing is, you've got to entertain these guys. That's really paramount. You have to remember, the audience you're playing to, usually, they are not aficionados. I mean these men and women, they don't know what kind of bagpipe this is, or what kind of whistle he's got. And when you explain it, they're not that interested. They recognize the instrument, they've heard some of the music, and they say, 'My grandfather was from Ireland too, Dermot.' They can't often judge if you're a fantastic player or not. You've got to make it palatable for them, and that's what takes time and energy."

Not that Hyde and Hake don't like other bands. They are quick to mention a few that they do like, including Solas and Lúnasa — although they are surprised that Lúnasa can operate without a singer. "They're well put together; they're great players, so it's difficult to improve on that," Hyde said. "But I admire more individual players, like John Doyle playing the guitar. I'd rather go see that than any five-piece band."

As of this writing, the Pipeline members were hard at work on their next album. Like the first, it will feature a good helping of brand-new songs and tunes. They are reluctant to mention details, since anything might change before it's released. Still, they've hinted at some original songs: One will be about Australia, and others will be slightly dark reworkings of folktales. "I've got some strange folktales, and death is often involved in them," Hyde said. "I like darkish, fiendish songs about witchery. There's not enough of that, and those songs that there are don't have enough humor in them." There will also be brand-new dance music, and new arrangement ideas, which the duo continues to labor over. Hyde and Hake both believe that there is little point recording arrangements they can't approximate live, which often presents them with challenges. "There's one place where Tom's playing the guitar and then we go into two whistles. And Tom can't put his guitar up fast enough. It can't be done," Hyde lamented. "We don't want to put in one of those silly fillers, that's as old as the hills. We've got to find a more suave way of doing it."

So it goes for Celtic music's hardest-working duo. Working together day in and day out, Hake said, is "like being married."

"Actually," Hyde chimed in, "I put in for a divorce a long time ago, but it's taken a hell of a long time to come through!"

