

Colm Ó Snodaigh

Rossa Ó Snodaigh

Eoin Dillon

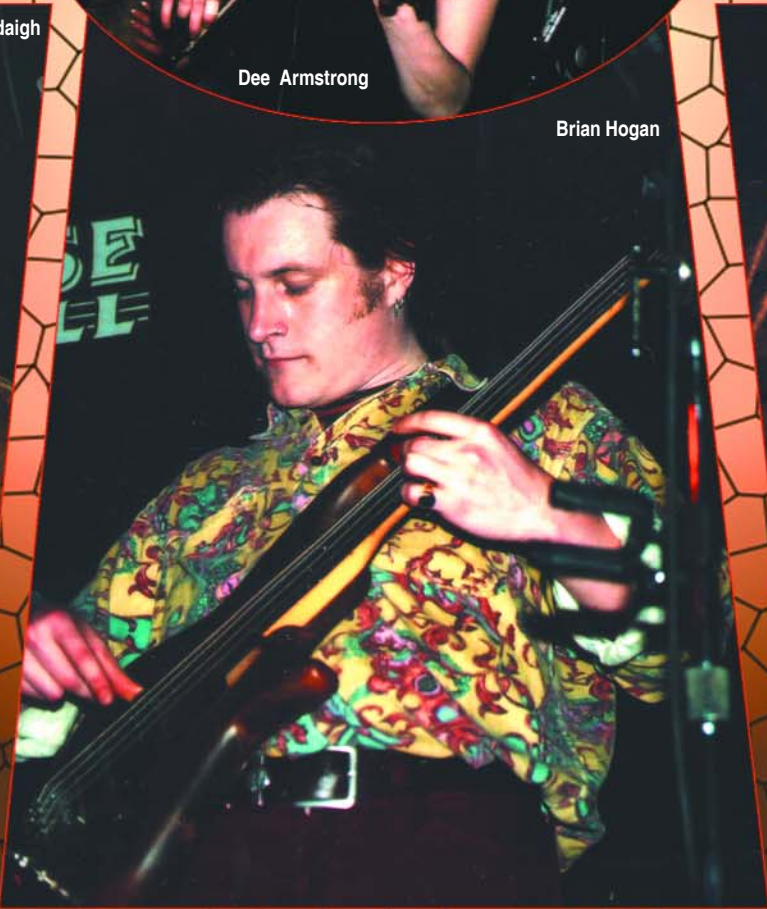


Dee Armstrong

Rónán Ó Snodaigh



Brian Hogan



Lance Hogan



This photo: Tom Nelligan, all others on this page: Lahiri Bond

If you want to know what “Kíla” means, ask the seven members of the band. You’ll get a different answer every time. Now that the band has toured the world, they’ve found plenty of meanings for the humble little word. According to Kíla’s piper, Eoin Dillon, “In Indian it means a fort, or something like it; and in Scots Gaelic it’s a girl’s name which means something like ‘whose beauty can’t even be described by poets.’” Other meanings they claim for Kíla: in Finnish it means “wedge,” in Hindi “banana,” in Japanese “twinkle,” and in Czech it means “hernia.”

It wasn’t always like this. “When we came up with the name,” Dillon told the *Irish Times*, “we didn’t have a meaning for it at all. We were just toying around with sounds.” (In fact, the name of the band had been “Rónán, Rossa, Eoin, Colm, and friends,” which is not quite as catchy as “Kíla.”) “Then after a gig at the Brazen Head,” Dillon continued, “this Frenchman asked us did we have a name, and Rónán came out with Kíla and it stuck.”

Whatever it means, in whatever language, the name Kíla is quickly becoming synonymous with one of the most innovative, unusual, energetic configurations of internationally influenced Irish music. For some, like *Billboard*, they are “the cutting edge of progressive Gaelic-language music...positioned to be the biggest thing on the world music scene.” For others, like Dublin’s *Hot Press*, they represent “the most vital incarnation of Irish traditional music around,” or even “the future of Irish music.” Many words have been used to describe Kíla’s music, too, from “acid céilí tribal groove” to “Celtic Caribbean.” But none is as popular as “tribal,” a label the band members don’t much like.

“That’s a very easy label,” Kíla member Colm Ó Snodaigh said in a March 2000 interview. “I don’t know what tribal is. Does that mean Native American powwow? But there’s no powwow in our music.” Offered the suggestion that it might have to do with all the international percussion instruments they play, Ó Snodaigh was still skeptical. “The djembe is an African instrument,” he explained, “and the darrabukka’s a

Turkish, or middle-eastern instrument. The bodhrán is essentially Irish, but there’s loads of different bodhráns all around the world. Shakers are just shakers. There was an old metal shaker 3,000 years ago in Ireland. So, tribal...I don’t know. I think it’s a bit easy, and it’s actually something I don’t understand.”

What Ó Snodaigh does understand are the various musical influences that contribute to Kíla’s energetic, world-music feel. None of them, he thinks, is “tribal.” For him and several other of the members, for example, it all starts with Irish rock bands and traditional groups. He first mentioned Moving Hearts, then the Dónal

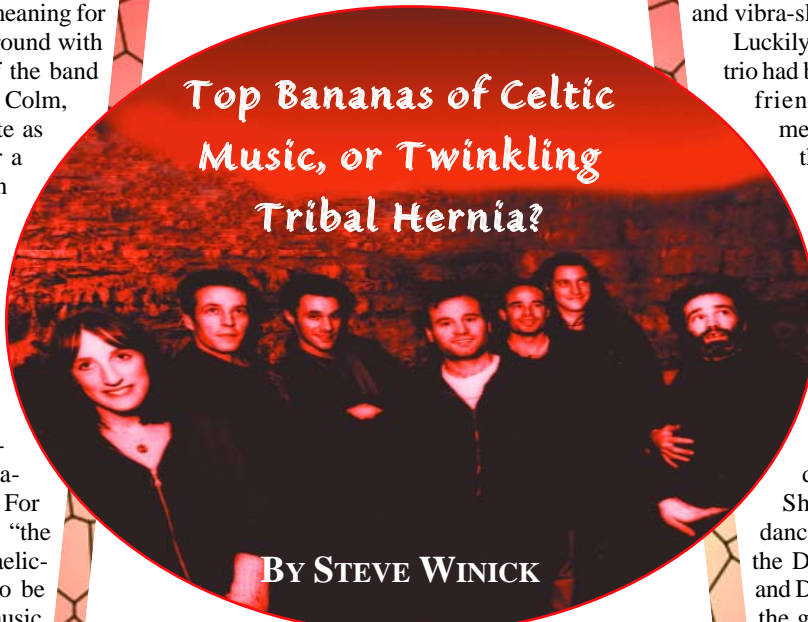
unnamed band — which today reckons 1987 as its official birthdate and Rossa Ó Snodaigh, Rónán Ó Snodaigh, and Eoin Dillon as its remaining founder-members — wasn’t discouraged by naysayers. While still in school, they began busking in public places, meeting and jamming with other musicians. When school ended and some members moved on to other things, they were down to three: Dillon on uilleann pipes and whistles, Rossa on whistle, percussion, and vocals, and Rónán on lead vocals and percussion; even then, they featured a wealth of percussion instruments including bodhrán, cowbells, congas, bones, bongos, tambourine, bell rack, cymbals, shakers, and vibra-slap.

Luckily, through birth and busking the trio had built a network of relatives and friends to replace the departed members. First on board was the third brother, flute and whistle player Colm Ó Snodaigh, who joined in 1988. Soon they were joined by friends Eoin O’Brien, Karl Odlum, and Dee Armstrong, who joined in 1991. Eventually O’Brien and Odlum left the band, but Armstrong remains today. In addition to fiddle, she plays hammered dulcimer, viola, and accordion.

She is trained in filmmaking, dance, and drama, having gone to the Dun Laoghaire College of Art and Design, and her contributions to the group include not only music, but stage and concept designing for live appearances, and photography and artwork for CD booklets.

Armstrong also had quite an influence on the current shape of the band. By introducing her bandmates to her schoolmates from Dun Laoghaire, Lance and Brian Hogan, Armstrong was the midwife that brought the current lineup into the world. In addition to being a filmmaker and an animator, respectively, the Hogan brothers have spent years playing in rock bands. Lance (guitar, percussion, vocals) has toured and recorded with the brilliant and eclectic band Dead Can Dance, while Brian (bass, double bass, guitar, mandolin, drums, vocals) has been in many groups on the Dublin rock scene, including

Top Bananas of Celtic Music, or Twinkling Tribal Hernia?



BY STEVE WINICK

Lunny band and its Sean Ó Riada retrospective album. “I mean, it’s 13 years on, and I still listen to it constantly,” he mused. “Later on,” he continued, “we discovered the Bothy Band.

“Similarly, we love bands like John McLaughlin and Ravi Shankar [with the Mahavishnu Orchestra]. So Moving Hearts are very obvious; you’re looking to them, but you’re looking to hordes of other people. Like I was a big U2 fan, Thin Lizzy fan, Undertones fan. Again, it’s the spirit of the music.” Groups mentioned by other band members include AC/DC, ABBA, and Queen; Colm’s brother Rossa Ó Snodaigh, who founded the band with Dillon, claims he learned to play the bodhrán by drumming along with Status Quo records!

This diversity of musical influence is a direct result of the group’s history. The band began in Dublin. The Ó Snodaigh brothers and Dillon all went to a school there, where traditional culture, including Irish-language poetry and traditional music, were encouraged. Colm explained: “Being in a traditional band was part of the school history, so it was expected that there would be a band per year. Eoin and Rossa and a couple of other people from their year formed a band, and Rónán [Ó Snodaigh] came in later, and others joined, and it became the start of Kíla.”

The school band began making some limited waves in Dublin, pleasing audiences and pissing off purists. At the end of one competition where they played, a critic commented that “the percussionist was far too enthusiastic,” a comment they still hear from some folks today. But the as-yet-

Pamf, the Galloping Hogans, Wild Cherrytonic, and Illywhacker.

How do all these influences combine into a single group? “Well, you don’t want to sound like [other bands],” Colm explained. “But you want to achieve the same kind of musicianship, perhaps. Or the same kind of spirit.” Listening to *Kíla*, you do get a sense of the same spirit that animated the Bothy Band, the Undertones, and Dead Can Dance, a spirit that says music is central to living, music is communication and love and life.

In keeping with that philosophy, the band members try to make every concert an event. When they’re playing in Galway or Dublin, they create quite literally a circus atmosphere, with elaborate sets, a massive and expensive lighting rig, and an eclectic mix of dance and visual elements. Often, they employ trapeze artists, and sometimes shadow dancers perform behind a screen. Other times, they employ stiltwalkers dressed as angels and devils; your average Irish folk music gig, this ain’t. Even when they tour, they try to import a bit of the energy of their big live shows. “There’s no point doing a gig otherwise,” Colm explained. “Even here [Philadelphia’s Tin Angel], we come in, we smell the place, if you know what I mean, we place it, we look at the walls...because it has to be an event, even though it’s the sixteenth gig in 20-odd days. It has to be like that, or there’s no point in playing.” In fact, money permitting, *Kíla* plans to bring some of their big stage show on tour someday — for now, though, we’ll have to wait.

Most discographies list *Mind the Gap* (1995) as *Kíla*’s first album. In fact, they released a self-produced, self-titled cassette in 1993. It was virtually ignored by the Irish music press, partly because it was low-budget and obscure, partly because it was avant-garde and unusual. Although the cassette was quite raw, it did manage to convey the band’s eclectic approach, incorporating jazz, classical, traditional, and world music sounds. It also showed off their musical, vocal, and lyrical talents, and above all the “energy, style and skill that gives them the potential to become really exciting.” For the curious, the collector and the *Kíla* completist, that cassette has just been reissued on CD, with the title *Handel’s Fantasy*. Like its more polished follow-up, *Mind the Gap*, it’s available in the U.S. only as an import.

Their last two albums, on the other hand, have been released domestically on Green Linnet records. *Tóg É Go Bog É*, their 1999 American debut, had already been a massive success in Ireland by the time it was released stateside. It had earned the band a gold record, and the single of “Ón Taobh Tuathail Amach” had cracked the top 20 in Ireland’s pop charts, settling down at number 18.

A symphony of percussion, including bodhrán, talking drums, slide bodhrán, timbales, bass drum, djembe, shaker, and “llama toe-nails” (!), “Ón Taobh Tuathail Amach” also features a horn section, jazzy bass playing, some African-style electric guitar strumming, and impassioned vocals from Rónán; it ends up sounding a little like Afro-pop, a little like XTC, and not much like Irish traditional music at all. The track that precedes it on the album, by contrast, is unmistakably Irish, though with clear Breton and American influences. The track that follows it sounds more Greek or Bulgarian for three-quarters of its length, but explodes into a reel in its fourth minute of life. The whole album is like that, moving from the clearly Celtic sounds of uilleann pipes and wooden flutes over to Central Europe, West Africa, Asia Minor, or wherever their fancy takes them. But it always comes back again to Irish music, a fact that fans of Celtic culture will appreciate.



One thing the Irish-speaking community did *not* always appreciate was the album’s title, which is bad Irish; it should actually be *Tóg Go Bog É*, which translates roughly as “take it easy.” But, as Rónán pointed out to the *Irish Times*, there’s a reason for the error: “I was living in a squat in London, and there was a big Jamaican guy living next door, a Rastafarian, and after about a year he invited us in for a smoke. So we were all there sitting on his living room floor, and his wife and kids came back from somewhere and started freaking out. And he just turned around and said, ‘Tóg é go bog é, mon’ in this brilliant Jamaican accent.” The song

inspired by this experience could be about the spiritual quest for a peaceful attitude, or about smoking weed; most likely it’s about both. A sampling of the lyrics translates to English as:

*Take it easy, steady on there now, take it easy, dig deep within
Take it easy, let the light into your life, it’ll come when it comes
I am looking for a place where the sea meets the sky
I am looking for the well of fire from which our lives are lit
I want to nurture growth of expansion in this life and
Encourage reasons for celebration around me.*

Kíla’s latest album, *Lemonade and Buns*, is likewise named for a humorous experience. “We had this driver called Gerry,” Dillon explained, “who did nothing but eat and drink tea all the time. And he wouldn’t drink beer ’cause he was driving all the time, so he used to drink lemonade. We started to call him ‘Lemonade and Buns.’ We christened him that: ‘Aye, here’s yer man again, Lemonade and Buns.’”

Well, that explained the lemonade. But what about the buns? “That’s what we call Fairy Cakes,” Dillon explained. “Or muffins. It’s something like that. Smaller than muffins...” he trailed off, apparently embarrassed by something. After a pause, he continued: “It means an arse over here, doesn’t it?”

“So I had this name on a tune. But we were stuck for a title for the album. That was the hardest thing about it, was coming up with the name. So we were gonna call it *Andy’s Bar*, but that wasn’t really nice, we didn’t like that. Then we were gonna call it *Cé Tú Féin*. Then Dee said, ‘What about *Lemonade and Buns*?’ And that was a bit of a laugh.”

In fact, according to Colm it was *Cé Tú Féin* until about a half hour before it went to press. That meant it was named after a song written for a displaced Bosnian family, with lyrics that say in Irish:

*In my pulse
In magical, golden company
In my footstep, in beds
In the great book of every month
I don’t arrive or ever come upon
What is essential for my needs*

The band changed the name to *Lemonade and Buns* because, as Colm explained, “There’s more humor in it. It’s a very full album, I think. There’s very little space in it. So if we filled the title with something serious, perhaps it would have been difficult.”

The album isn’t all serious pathos, however. Some of it is pure passion. In “Tine Lasta,” a song sung with the all the urgency of R.E.M.’s “The End of the World as We Know It,” Rónán intones:

*Put a root under the earth and suck up your fill, your lunch,
your meal, your life, your meal, your life*

*your blessed meal what you desire what you need
For the life ahead of you in the time to come,
Say your prayer and bring it on, bring it on, bring it on, bring it on,
bring it on,
Walk your road, write your story,
spread out your wings and open your mouth.*

There's also more humor in store. There's a tune named "The Listerine Waltz," which seemed merely whimsical until Dillon explained the title's origin. "We met this Indian guy out in Canada; in the parking lot out behind the pub we were playing in. And he was drinking Listerine to get drunk, because there's alcohol in it. So we went out and gave him some beers. He was surprised that anyone would give him anything. We were stuck for a name for those tunes as well, so they became 'The Listerine Waltz.'" [American readers take note: Fearing a possible lawsuit from the good people who make Listerine, Green Linnet changed to a faux-Irish spelling of the brand name, making the tune "The Liostrín Waltz." The track retains its original title on the group's Dublin-based label.]

All of the material on *Lemonade and Buns* holds together very well. It's got its moments of punchy abandon alongside more melancholy pieces. As Colm explained, one of the goals for this album was to represent in a recorded form what they try to convey in their live concerts. "We set up in the studio and recorded it *en masse*," he explained. "Previously we would have done it twos and threes, but this time we tried to get the feel of the tune as if we were playing it live. It's more us live than anything else."

For those who *really* want a live album, though, you'll have to wait a little while. Kíla is currently planning a "bootleg" live CD, compiled from 10 years' worth of gig tapes. "The gig that really convinced me that we were able for it," said Colm, "was 1990 in the Baggott Inn. I was listening to [the tape] recently, and some of it is hilarious, but it's great. There's one that's a fine, fine piece of music. And that was 10 years ago. So even back then, we were quite ragged at times, and we were having a laugh, and we were trying to..." he paused. "Well, we were just trying!"

Are there any other plans for the future, any changes in direction? "We never really think about that," Dillon answered. "We just do it. We hope that it gets better. For yourself, you're aiming to improve all the time, and strive for something, and reach something."

Then he smiled, and admitted, "I don't know what it is yet!"



Lahr Bond



Rónán Ó Snodaigh

Tom Nelligan



KÍLA

Johnny D's, Somerville, MA
March 15, 2000

The pre-St. Patrick's Day timing certainly didn't hurt the attendance for this Wednesday night gig, but it wasn't just once-a-year Irish music fans, searching in vain for green beer amid the microbrews, who filled Johnny D's. The standing-room crowd had the expectant buzz of people who knew what was coming. Kíla is the sort of band that makes an immediate impression, and while they may send a few traditional purists off screaming for cover, their wild, powerful, and thoroughly unique take on Irish music leaves most who hear them grinning and dancing.

They're a formidable-looking lot, seven people standing amid an arsenal of percussion devices along with uilleann pipes and numerous less intimidating instruments, fronted by a frantic, smiling, barefoot man with a demonic glint in his eyes, who as he gets caught up in the music often balances on one leg like Jethro Tull's Ian Anderson.

Rónán Ó Snodaigh is Kíla's lead singer, head percussionist, and visual focus as he choreographs the melodies and cacophonies that erupt when they start playing. All of the members of the band are multi-instrumentalists, with Dee Armstrong's fiddle and

Eoin Dillon's pipes taking most of the leads.

Their 90-minute nonstop set began with a fast tune medley organized around duels between fiddle and pipes to get everyone warmed up, after which Ó Snodaigh and his bodhran launched into the opening lines of "Tóg É Go Bog É" ("Take It Easy"), the Gaelic chant that was the title track of their first American release. One by one the other band members picked up the song until it pulsed from seven voices and seven sets of drums, sticks, and shakers. Like most of the songs in the set, all of which were sung in Irish Gaelic, it was rough and primevally potent, projecting an almost spiritual exuberance as the band whooped through the refrains. Several songs were backed only by massed percussion, while others had added accompaniment, like "An Tiománai", a rapid-fire, exultant

which a frame of percussion and thumping bass was joined by soaring pipes and whistle.

The instrumental called "Andy's Bar" featured slippery flute runs and blooping, popping percussion that led to the evening's first outbreak of wild dancing in the crowd. "The Liostírn Waltz" featured Wes Montgomery-style smooth, jazzy electric guitar from Lance Hogan and then klezmer-style clarinet from Colm Ó Snodaigh. Another set began with a very Greek-sounding tune on bouzouki and ouzo-soaked café fiddle that worked its way around into a fire alarm of a reel with whistles and pipes. But not all the instrumentals were played at blistering speed; "Jasmine" was a quiet, contemplative flute tune with a haunting melody.

Kíla's set-ending blast was the Latin-sounding instrumental "Epic," on which Colm's saxophone was backed by a triple-time bouzouki strum from brother Rossa. After that, the smiling but exhausted-looking band seemed ready to sit down, but the applause and shouts brought them back for one more. They encored with "Leanfaidh Mé" ("I'll Keep Going"), a harmonious song of blessing that brought a peaceful end to a memorable evening.

— Tom Nelligan (Waltham, MA)

KÍLA

Lemonade & Buns

Green Linnet GLCD 3132 (2000)

On their latest CD, *Lemonade and Buns*, the musical melting pot that is Kíla continues to stretch the boundaries of traditional Irish music. The seven-piece group walks a fine line between raw power and a delicate, almost new-agey sound, throwing in frequent surprises like "Ai Tiomanai," which blends African percussion and vocal stylings with the Gaelic lyrics that vocalist Rónán Ó Snodaigh belts out with a passion. One thing that is consistent about Kíla's diverse, mostly instrumental, musical stew is that the band has a knack for memorable melodies, whether it is the Ian Anderson-influenced lazy jazz of "The Compledgeationalist," the

uilleann

pipe shuffle

"Where Did You Hide That Train, Joe?" or the sprightly flute and pipe duel, "Turlough's." In a large, virtuosic band like Kíla, the temptation must be great to overwhelm the listener with notes, but they instead choose to generally emphasize one instrumentalist: Whether it be flute player Colm Ó Snodaigh, fiddler Dee Armstrong, or piper Eoin Dillon, the sound is usually rela-

tively spare, with the remaining musicians contributing to the groove rather than vying for solo space. The disc concludes with Colm Ó Snodaigh's delicate ballad "Cé Tú Féin," which describes (in Gaelic) his meeting with a young Bosnian refugee. All in all, *Lemonade and Buns* finds Kíla really coming into their own as a band of substance, subtlety, and style, with just enough eccentricity thrown in to keep things interesting.

— Michael Parrish (Downers Grove, IL)



Gloria M. Rosson