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Band to share joy of old Irish music

By **MARIE P. GRADY**

As a small boy, Séamus Egan was transplanted from the slate gray streets of Pennsylvania into another world.

It was a world of mist and myths, mountains and legends. It was a land of sadness and mirth, an ancient island outpost that had often been invaded but had never surrendered its soul.

The soul of Ireland is its song and the song is its soul. And it was in Foxford, County Mayo, in a house humming with the sound of his grandmother playing button accordion on reel to reel tapes, that Seamus Egan found his music.

Two decades later, the world would find Egan and his band Solas. Ever since it exploded onto the world music scene in 1996, Solas has become known as the best traditional Irish band ever to come out of the United States.

The band will return to the Iron Horse Music Hall in Northampton at 7 p.m., Sunday, March 18.

Solas means “comfort” and “light” in Irish. But it is also a derivative of the Latin word for sun, “Sol,” which conjures up images of intensity, energy and heat. To hear Solas is to witness a virtuosity that transcends time and the musical borders that too often define ethnic music.

“We’re not shy of allowing outside influences to come in,” said Egan. “It’s a music that fortunately doesn’t live behind glass in a museum. It’s open for interpretation.”

With four All Ireland musical championships on four different instruments – flute, tin whistle, banjo and mandolin – Egan has not limited his musical genius to the band. He has also received acclaim for writing the soundtrack to the film “The Brothers McMullen,” co-writing with Sarah McLachlan the song “I will remember you” and contributing to the soundtrack for the film “Dead Man Walking.”

Egan first learned the art of Irish music from button accordionist Martin Donaghue after the Egan brood moved back to Foxford, County Mayo, Ireland, when he was a young

boy. His grandmother on his father's side was a button accordion player and his sisters also are musicians.

Egan can remember the way music permeated the air in the home in Foxford, which is located on the banks of the River Moy and between the Ox and Nephin mountains in Ireland's wild and rugged West.

"There was always music around the house and even though my parents didn't play; it was always on the radio, stereo," he said.

Several years later the family moved back to Pennsylvania and the band is now based in Philadelphia, which has a vibrant traditional Irish music culture.

Before forming Solas, the Boston-College educated Egan formed a band called "The Chanting House" in New York City with violinist Eileen Ivers and artists Susan McKeown and John Doyle. He has also played with the African percussionist Kimati Dinizulu, among many others.

The name of the New York band may be apropos. In African music, the chant is often the music while in Irish music the music is the chant.

Listening to a great Irish reel or jig can be like getting into an argument with a good Irish woman or man. They will keep repeating their points in faster and more furious ways until you are lost in the rhythmic brilliance of it all.

Egan, whose solo releases also feature his guitar virtuosity, has trouble picking a favorite artist from the many he admires from around the world. Most recently he has been listening to a box set of the Spanish classical guitar legend Andrés Segovia.

Asked to name a favorite ballad, he does not choose from among the hauntingly beautiful Irish tunes written over the centuries. His favorite ballad is the traditional American song "The Lakes of Pontchartrain," which recounts a traveler's unrequited love for a Creole woman.

When it comes to love, Egan's passion for music leaves little time to settle down. There are times when he and the band are playing as many as four hours in a day, especially when they are recording and performing.

The band's musical breadth is deep and wide. It includes fiddler Winifred Horan, who has also played with "Cherish the Ladies;" Mick McAuley on accordion, Eamon McElholm on guitar and singer Deirdre Scanlon. Solas produced a 10-year reunion CD/DVD last year based on a 2005 Philadelphia concert that brought back original band members John Williams, John Doyle, Donal Clancy and vocalist Karan Casey.

Lately, the band has been at work in the recording studio on a new release.

On Sunday, the band will be sharing the joy with a faithful audience in Northampton.

“We’ve been playing up there since about the time the band’s started,” Egan said. “The audience up there is always fantastic; there’s a great energy.”

While some American audiences associate Irish music with parade-day songs such as “When Irish eyes are Smiling,” his band has opened up the world to an ancient art.

“I think (Irish music) certainly has an appeal that cuts across all sorts of ethnic and national sentiments,” Egan said. “I think there’s a universal joy to it.”