

Irvine and Brady, 30 years on

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Yin and yang: Paul Brady and Andy Irvine (left) during their set at the Celtic Connections festival in Glasgow.

Photograph: The Irish Times

Howling gales and blinding sleet aren't everybody's idea of ideal concert-going weather, but Glasgow's Celtic Connections festival, now in its 15th year, has managed to defy all things meteorological with a game plan that can lure diehard traditionalists, ravenous world music aficionados and avid roots music punters to its box office in the kind of numbers more usually be associated with big-budget summer productions elsewhere.

For this year's festival, which finished last weekend, 120,000 tickets were sold. Steve Earle, Michelle Shocked, KD Lang and Teenage Fanclub jostled for attention alongside Capercaillie, Altan, the Savoy-Doucet Cajun Band, Bill Wyman and the Nedyalko Nedyalkov Quartet. And somewhere in the melee, Paul Brady and Andy Irvine reprised their eponymous 1976 album in the Celtic Connections classic-album concert slot.

The festival's presence is tangible everywhere in Glasgow. Posters on shop windows, musicians lugging instruments through rain-soaked streets and the constant movement of players in and out of the festival hotel bear testament to the city's intricate relationship with Celtic Connections.

Donald Shaw, festival director, is someone who knows a thing or two about this business. A founder member of Capercaillie, multi-instrumentalist and record producer, he's quick to point out that although punters travel from across the UK, Europe and the US, 90 per cent of Celtic Connections punters are local Glaswegians, hungry for good music.

"We tend to concentrate on the word 'connections' rather than the word 'Celtic'," Shaw admits, with a typical Scottish mix of candour and pragmatism.

"We've broadened out the Americana, old-time music side of things, which is a huge pool of music to draw from. One of the ways we've grown is by building up audiences for certain acts, and bringing them back in subsequent years. A classic example of that would be [Galician piper] Carlos Nuñez, who came as a support act and within four years was selling out the concert hall himself. We try to go with our instincts musically, rather than fashionably."

Shaw's penchant for luring old collaborators back together was the impetus behind Andy Irvine and Paul Brady's reunion last week. Although the pair share a long and winding history, through their days with Planxty and as a duo, they hadn't performed together as a duo for years.

Their 1976 album, *Andy Irvine & Paul Brady*, spawned Brady's sublime version of what he calls "a deftly constructed drama", *Arthur McBride*, a beautifully crafted tale of military arrogance pitted against local wile, alongside Irvine's calculus-like *Autumn Gold*, a paean to his days travelling the highways and byways of eastern Europe. Produced by Donal Lunny, with Kevin Burke on fiddle, it was a masterpiece of restraint, a snapshot of two musicians in thrall to the music.

BRADY AND IRVINE make no secret of the fact that they embarked on this reunion with no small amount of trepidation and, at times, foreboding.

"We were, both of us, very apprehensive about this huge thing we took on," Brady admits, post-concert, after the pair had stilled a rapt audience. Amid the occasional stray chord and the intermittent sound glitches, they summoned a rare magic as they tiptoed lightly across the Plains of Kildare, Bonny Woodhall and a pristine take on Lough Erne's Shore.

After a first-half warm-up that included a visceral version of what Brady referred to as the politically incorrect *Wearing the Britches* and a blistering rendition of *The Connaught Man's Rambles*, they loped off stage, to let the temperature rise further before kicking off with a strapping airing of *Martinmas Time*.

Irvine and Brady reignited a spark that's been behind the conversion of more than its share of diehards to the intricate delights of folk music.

"We're very, very happy tonight that it came together in a way that made sense," Brady says, his relief at having survived the top billing of this reunion palpable. "I was very excited at the prospect of it, even though this is the first time I'm telling Andy that! We'd been asked to do it before, but we were never given enough notice. This time, when Donald Shaw approached us last September, we really couldn't come up with any excuses."

"Going back 32 years is never going to be perfect," Irvine adds, his face etched with a mix of relief and exhaustion in the aftermath of the gig.

Having returned from Australia, where he escapes from the northern hemisphere's winter darkness every year, Irvine had headlined the Temple Bar Trad Festival for four nights with Mozaik, then played two warm-up concerts with Brady in the Cherry Tree in Walkinstown, before sidling on stage in Glasgow's Royal Concert Hall with his customary modesty not just intact, but defining his every note and lyric.

Brady makes no bones about the challenges that such a reunion poses for two musicians who've taken vastly different paths in the intervening period.

"It's not just about music. It's about everything else," he declares. "It's about who we are and who we were and the 30 years in between. It's also about what your energy flow is like and what his is like. When I was working with Andy, I was still trying to find out who I was, so you have to go back to that younger person and relate to that. I don't think we see the music in a different light, but we see ourselves differently. Those arrangements are as valid now as they were then, and we didn't see the need to reinvent them.

"So it was a case of going back to that thing, which we lovingly made, and bring ourselves to it now, and see how we feel."

The pair are quick to scotch even the faintest impression that this concert marks a reunion on a bigger scale. "The truth is that we don't know how we feel [about this reunion], and we don't know what we're doing," says Brady. "We're quite different people, and we've become more different as we've grown older. The way we approach music is very different, but we had a meeting at a certain point in our lives when both our music sensibilities came together, and that created something really special. I was delighted to be able to revisit that part of ourselves, because it's harder to find that sweet spot as the years move on."

Having had the luxury of the contributions of Kevin Burke and Donal Lunny on the original recording, Irvine and Brady were faced with having to fill a blinding void with their own instruments: bouzouki, mandolin, mandola, guitar, harmonica and keyboards. As Brady pointed out on stage, it's a lot tougher to get "match fit" when you're revisiting a repertoire that's more than three decades old. It's tougher still when half the players are missing from the pitch, yet it was exactly that concentration of energy that propelled them into the belly of the music, Brady believes.

"That's what I had fun with," he laughs. "One minute I'm sitting, playing the guitar, and the next I'm twisting around to reach for the keyboards. That's what I thought was great about tonight."

Ignoring the Celtic Connections offer to provide them with an opening band, which would have absolved them of playing anything more than the 45-minute set that was the

album, Brady and Irvine chose the road less travelled, the one with the unpredictable bumps and potholes. Why would they go through the rigours of rehearsal for a reunion that was so fleeting, when this was an opportunity to revive so much more of their intricate repertoire? Irvine laughs as he recounts the process of readying themselves for the limelight again, as a duo.

"There were moments in rehearsal where we thought 'We've blown it'," he says. "We went through virtually our entire repertoire tonight. That was two and a half hours out there. I'm not very objective, but we balanced ourselves very well, on stage, I think, with Paul's energy and my romanticism."

BRADY AND IRVINE'S yin and yang is indisputable on stage. Irvine sits stock still; Brady is a fireball, zigzagging across the stage with the pent-up energy of a prize fighter. Still, whatever of the triumph of the night's performance, Brady is non-committal about his future plans.

"I've sort of retired, in a way, from struggling with all this forward motion stuff," he says. "I'm kind of happy with where I am, and I've more time to do things I want to do. I have a bunch of songs which I want to record but I've no release date planned, and I'm just doing things at my own pace, although sometimes you do your best work when you've got a gun to your head. I'm at a stage in my life when I don't have any deadlines - in fact I eschew them - and it's interesting to see what I come up with in that gentle period."

After the show, the pair jostle and jibe with one another, high on the relief that the show is over, that they'd met the challenge head on and enjoyed it so much. Despite their vast experience though, or perhaps because of it, they sweated long hours before bringing this music back into the daylight. Brady jokes that he cursed Irvine as he waded through the complexities of the chord structures on Autumn Gold. Andy did likewise as he struggled with Lough Erne's Shore on the hurdy-gurdy, all of which suggests that music was, and never will be, an autopilot pursuit for either of them.

"There were a number of songs which we'd never performed live before," Irvine recounts. "We were younger men last time we played together. Going back in time takes a lot more work than you'd expect or imagine, but it was great. It was more than worth all the worry."

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