

Ceili interview: Marc Gunn, the Celtfather

By Chuck Bloom
Ceili editor

Ex-Texan Marc Andrew Gunn calls himself the “Celtfather,” and for pretty good reason. He is a performer (on auto-harp), producer, broadcaster, entrepreneur and fundraiser – all in support and promotion of Celtic music.

During his tenure in Texas, the 42-year-old Gunn was one-half of the popular Austin-based group, the Brobdingnagian Bards (with partner Andrew McKee) were hugely popular through weekly performances on the University of Texas at Austin campus. The Bards were voted “Best Renaissance Men” in the *Austin Chronicle’s* 2003 Best of Austin poll.

In March 2005, The Bards collected an Austin Music Award as Best Novelty Band, the first time any Celtic band had won. Gunn’s solo CD, “Soul of a Harp-er” earned the Best Cover Art category that year. In 2007, they continued collecting honors by winning Best None of the Above Band, and in 2008, they won Best Folk Band.

In 2008, the group split amicably, and Gunn moved to New Orleans, trying to revive that city’s Celtic scene post-Katrina as a solo act. But love intervened and he went to Birmingham with his new wife and growing family (4-year-old daughter).

From the deep South, Gunn produces the weekly Irish & Celtic Music Podcast, showcasing many of the nation’s and world’s best Celtic groups and performers, offered to listeners for free, simply by accessing Gunn’s website (www.marc-gunn.com). The podcast has earned the Celtfather two awards for “Best Podsafe Music” in the annual Podcast Awards, and continues to be one of the most popular music podcasts on iTunes.

The show is not a simple undertaking nor is it cheap. Each episode costs Gunn some \$700 to produce and on a musician’s income, with a family to support, it is not easy. He started Song Henge, the fan club of the Irish & Celtic Music Podcast, to help pay those podcast bills.

In addition, Gunn has also raised money for Celtic non-profits. To date, he’s donated more than \$20,000 to various causes.

Here is the *Ceili* interview with The Celtfather:

1) When did you conceive the idea for an online Celtic music magazine that



The self-proclaimed “Celtfather,” Marc Gunn at Kylemore Abbey during a recent visit.

was different from the others? Did the podcast sprout from that?

The Celtic Music Magazine originally sprang from an eGroup on Yahoo (called the Celtic Muse); my original goal was to promote my own band, Brobdingnagian Bards. The newsletter highlighted Celtic bands with music on MP3.com.

But I realized that I was attracting a lot of Celtic music fans who wanted free Celtic music. So I decided to be curator for Celtic bands on MP3.com.

A few months later, I renamed it to the *Celtic MP3s Music Magazine*. At that point, my original goal was to connect Celtic music lovers with Celtic bands by giving away free Celtic MP3s.

I was one of the first Celtic musicians to realize that giving away music was the best way to build a fan base for Celtic bands. My band did this quite successfully, giving away literally millions of MP3s and attracting thousands of fans around the world.

In 2005, I started the Irish & Celtic Music Podcast, which was the second Celtic podcast online. But it became the most-popular by focusing on the music.

Most radio shows spend too much time talking. When I listened to music podcasts, or the radio for that matter, I wanted music. So I put myself secondary to the music. Each of my hour-long shows fea-

tures about 50-52 minutes of music.

From there, my goal became helping independent Celtic bands sell more CDs. The key of this is as much “independent” as anything. I listen to other Celtic radio shows and you hear some really smooth music out of Nashville or Compass Records or from a major label.

The music sounds fantastic, but those bands have a whole publicity team pushing their music; the bands I usually feature do not. They are 100 percent indie, and if I don’t play them, they may never be heard on the radio, on a podcast, anywhere. And that’s a shame because often times the music is just as good as those big named artists.

Nearly two years ago, I decided to change the name to the *Celtic Music Magazine* because I wasn’t focusing on sharing Celtic MP3s anymore. The magazine is now a means for me to distribute news from the Irish & Celtic Music Podcast.

2) Can groups/performers summarily submit CDs/tracks for inclusion, or do you directly solicit them? How DO you produce your playlist?

Any artist can submit to the podcast at <http://4celts.com/>. I give a lot of preference to instrumental tunes over songs because most bands who submit are vocal-focused.

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I usually don't solicit music; I let the artists come to me. Or I tell my listeners to contact the bands that they love to submit. I've had too many shady e-mails from online music companies soliciting me so I'd rather have a referral.

The show went weekly this past summer, so I've had to fine tune my methods of producing my playlists. I try to make the playlist on Mondays, but I may add other artists or songs I hear on my iPhone on random play. If I have a theme, I search my Celtic Podsafe playlist and try to pick songs and tunes that fit the theme.

If I don't, I often will just start with new submissions. I try to play everyone who submits and all styles of Celtic music. The first five songs are more traditional, switching between tunes and songs. The second set varies; sometimes I'll do a special feature. The last set is Celtic rock or contemporary Celtic.

Anything with electric instruments and full drum sets, or sometime synthesizers, are fair game, though Celtic New Age is probably my least favorite style of music (outside of Enya, but will never be played on the show due to the fact she's not indie).

3) Why the move from Austin to Birmingham? How is the Celtic music scene there?

In 2008, the Brobdingnagian Bards split up and I moved to New Orleans to find new directions for my music. While on tour in Virginia, I met my soon-to-be wife. We got married, had a beautiful baby girl, and then my wife was off to grad school in Birmingham.

I started out by playing Moonlight on the Mountain. There was a nice group here, but it boggles my mind.

There are a LOT of people of Irish and Scottish heritage in Birmingham, but I've had a lot of trouble reaching them. I joined the Alabama Celtic Association, but the organization quickly went defunct. So now I'm trying to find new ways to reach the locals.

Moonlight on the Mountain has thus far been the biggest supporter of Celtic music in town. But, sadly, there aren't many active bands.

4) What makes quality Celtic music, in your opinion? How can Celtic music break out of its spot as a niche music scene to become a nationally-recognized brand?



One of my goals is to better define the term "Celtic music." If you go to the British Isles, "Celtic music" refers to Irish music. But for me, it is SO much more. It's all the music of the Celtic nations AND their derivatives.

On my last Celtic Invasion Vacation I hosted, I met a Welsh musician, singing in his native tongue, and playing many traditional instruments. But he didn't consider his music "Celtic" per se; so that's one thing that needs fixing right here.

On the flip side, I'm not a fan of Celtic Thunder's music, yet I recognize and appreciate that they bring a lot of recognition for "Celtic music" to a greater scene.

As for quality Celtic music, I feel it's hard to describe because there are so many genres. I love folk singers, I love totally trad tunes and I love brilliant fusions of the new and the old. To me, it's about the music. I just try to listen and see what moves me.

I'm a bit torn on how to increase its popularity. On the one hand, pushing Celtic Thunder and Celtic Woman up the charts is a great way to offer exposure for Celtic music, in general. However, my goal is to help the indies. So I don't go out of my way to promote those artists, because, as I said before, they've got plenty of promotion behind them.

One thing I've done is Top the Charts events where I help indie Celtic bands to top the charts on iTunes or Amazon by getting all my podcast fans behind these artists and saying, "buy their music on this specific day." It helps on a short term.

I also started #CelticThursday. My

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goal is to have people share Celtic stuff – whether it be websites, pictures, businesses, products, stories, whatever, and use the hashtag #CelticThursday on their social media sites. Sharing is a great way to build a community.

However, the ideal way to push Celtic music to a national brand is for each and every fan who loves Celtic music to share and promote it as best as all of us can. Pick a favorite band. Pick a favorite festival. Talk it up. Share it on your social media. Get involved in organizations. We can accomplish a lot more as a group.

5) What suggestions would you provide for growing Celtic music in Texas? Does it differ from major Texas city to city?

I think it's a lot like as I said above. We need organizations like the SCMA to promote all the artists in Texas ... or new organizations in other cities to do the same. People just need to get involved, attend events, share the things they love about their culture, and work together.

For me, Celtic music is all about inclusion, not exclusion. If we work together, and support Celtic things, even if they are not our favorite, the group as a whole will grow. So work with, not against, folks, because none of us are competing. We are trying to work together to build our cultural community.

6) Who are your favorite groups/performers? Favorite all-time albums?

I'm a big fan of Ed Miller, The Tea Merchants, The Rogues, The Elders, Black 47, Jesse Ferguson, Poitin (a Celtic group from the Czech Republic), Bow Trip-lets, 'Round the House, Bedlam Bards, Cady Finlayson, Ceann, Emerald Rose, Vicki Swan & Jonny Dyer, Heather Dale, anything with EJ Jones in it, Flook, Jed Marum, Lothlorien, The Gothard Sisters, NUA, Pitch the Peat, Samantha Gillogly, Jimi McRae, The Makem and Spain Brothers. Those are my favorite indies.

I also like Altan, Clannad, Enya, Christy Moore, Dougie MacLean and The Corries. I'm sure I'm missing a zillion others...

Some of my favorite indie albums are "Almost Irish" by Ceann, "Tig" by Serious Kitchen, and Ed Miller's "Live at the Cactus Café." But I don't listen to albums much anymore since I'm usually picking singles for the podcast.

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7) What has been the reaction from your live audiences to the podcast?

The response to the podcast is amazing; I've been recognized around the world because of the podcast. Each show gets more than 15,000 downloads within a month. So the fans are there ... they love the music. And they love that it's free.

People who don't have any other access to Celtic music due to financial constraints can now listen and enjoy great Celtic music from around the world.

8) Finally, what is the future of the music magazine, podcast and Marc Gunn as a performer?

Right now, the podcast continues on a weekly schedule. The magazine may move in that direction as well in the future; or it may stay at twice a month.

But I've been thinking about new ways to promote new CDs. I started a feature a few months ago where I highlight new Celtic CDs on CD Baby. I'm thinking about trying to talk bands into offering short-term flash discounts; to try and push sales for those albums and perhaps make new fans for bands.

In December, I started the Celtic Christmas Podcast up again – a 30-minute show I've released each year featuring Celtic Christmas music, of course.

In February and March, I plan to re-launch the Internet St. Patrick's Day Festival. The goal is to get a bunch of Celtic musicians to offer concerts online and schedule dates for each as we build up towards the actual holiday.

I did four free concerts last year on Google Hangouts. But since I started working with Concert Window, this coming year I might do my shows through them instead. I'm hoping 3-5 Celtic artists (at least) will join me for this "festival."

The one thing I discuss was my music. And yes, I am a Celtic musician as well. I focus on songs, though I'd love to release an album of tunes someday.

However, most of my music fuses my love of traditional Celtic songs with science fiction and fantasy. I first started playing Celtic



music at renaissance festivals, and then at science fiction conventions. I realized that a lot of Celtic music fans also love faires and sci-fi.

So I merge that music into some of my albums. Yes, I have traditional albums like "Scottish Songs of Drinking & Rebellion" and "Not Every Day Is St. Patrick's Da."

But I also have folk albums inspired by geeky things, such as "Sci Fi Drinking Songs," "Don't Go Drinking With Hobbits," "Firefly Drinking Songs" and "Irish Drinking Songs for Cat Lovers."

I release 2-3 albums each year and expect I will continue to do so. I actually started a Patreon site for my music; I'm trying to get back into writing more music because that's why I started playing music in the first place.

Anyway, if anyone would like to find out more about my music and podcast and all, they can go to www.celticmusic.org.

In memoriam: Sonja Chiles

Sonja Mae Chiles, beloved wife and mother, passed away on Sunday, Sept. 28, 2014, in Granbury, Tex. at the age of 79.

Sonja was born on Sept. 5, 1942, in Okeene, Okla., the daughter of James Ivan Massey and Selma Mae Dout Massey.

She married James Wesley Chiles on June 17, 1960, in Panhandle, Texas.

The family moved to Granbury, in 1972, where Sonja was a member of the Eastridge Baptist Church.

She loved entertaining her family and taking care of her children and grandchildren.

Sonja was a wonderful wife, mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, who also enjoyed traveling and flying with her husband.

Her son, Jim, serves as the ATM/CCM coordinator for the North Texas Irish Festival.

She is survived by her husband, James Chiles; two sons, Jim Chiles and wife, Kathy, Randy Chiles and wife, LeeAnn; four grandchildren, Brian Harrison and wife, Amy, Nathan Chiles and wife, Laura, Ashley Chiles and Cody Mobley; great-grandchildren, Hayden Hitshe, Lindsey Harrison, Kayla Hitshe, Tryniti Chiles and Cooper Chiles; and an extended family and many friends.

Funeral services were held on Friday, Oct. 3, 2014, at Wiley Funeral Home in Granbury.

Burial was in Holly Hills Memorial Park.

