

ELEANOR SHANLEY

De Danann

E A M O N N D A L Y

FOR a few years, Eleanor Shanley from Keshcarrigan had been a regular participant at traditional/folk sessions in 'The Merchant' Pub, Lt. Bridge Street, Dublin. Like all those who heard her, Neil O'Shea, the proprietor of the pub, was very impressed by Eleanor's beautiful singing voice. In the summer of 1988, he contacted Frank Cooney and suggested that he should come to hear her. Frank came, listened and was impressed. He in turn contacted his friend, Frankie Gavin, a fiddler and founder member of the Galway based *De Danann* Group. A tape of Eleanor's songs was sent to Galway. A meeting was arranged. Eleanor travelled to Galway to meet Frankie Gavin and Alec Finn (another member of *De Danann*). She sang a few songs for them. Two weeks later, she was touring with *De Danann* in Finland and Sweden. The following month, she was recording a new album with

them. But Eleanor's rise to stardom was not as rapid as these lines might suggest. She had served a long apprenticeship. Her talent had been honed in competitions, sessions, concerts, etc. At the age of nine, she tasted her first success — a prize-winning performance at An Tostal, Drumshanbo. In later years, she represented Leitrim in the Connacht Junior Scor Finals. While doing a secretarial course in Drumshanbo V.S., she was greatly encouraged in her budding singing career by her teachers, particularly Tony McGowan and Padraic Noone. In fact, after leaving school, she sang for a while in an impromptu group with Tony McGowan and Tommy Guihen (All-Ireland Senior Concert Flute Champion).

She moved to work in Dublin. Here she became involved in Tops the Town competitions with the 'rim Wild Roses — a group organised by North Leitrim man



Seamus Fox. She also studied drama for three years in The Betty Ann Norton Drama School, Harcourt Street. A spell in Sligo followed as part of the Job-Search Programme there. There she sang at sessions in McLoughlin's and in 'The Thatch'. After returning to Dublin she became more involved in sessions, culminating in her

becoming a member of *De Danann* in summer 1988.

De Danann are a living legend, not only in Irish folk/Traditional circles, but also on the international music scene. Formed in 1974, they have produced a consistently high standard of vibrant, melodic tunes and songs in a variety of idioms — traditional, folk, music-hall, classical, Rumanian, Jewish, etc. They have taken such pop standards as 'Let it be' and 'Hey Jude', such classical standards as 'The Queen of Sheeba' and given them their own distinctive stamp. Highly acclaimed singers and musicians such as Dolores Keane, Mary Black, Maura O'Connell and Johnny Moynihan, Martin O'Connor and Jackie Daly (accordeon), Ringo McDonagh (bodhran) and Charlie Pigott (mandolin) have all performed with the group.

Stepping into the shoes of such illustrious predecessors would have been a daunting task for most performers. But not for Eleanor. Hers is no ordinary voice. Music

DE DANNAN: From left — Aidan Coffey, Eleanor Shanley, Colm Murphy, Frankie Gavin, Alec Finn.





Eleanor with her parents **Paddy** and **Eileen Shanley**.

lot of singers and musicians in the traditional and country spheres would not have received any exposure at all."

She loves her native county, but she does feel that we tend to convey a rather negative view of Leitrim ourselves. She says, "while we have little or no control over the final product whether it be a T.V. Programme or a newspaper article about the county, I think that we should shed our collective inferiority complex and be more aggressive in asserting the country's virtues — beautiful scenery, friendly people. We shouldn't leave this type of promotion to tourist organisations or politicians alone. We can all do our own bit in our contacts with people outside the county."

What does the future hold for her?

Before Christmas, *De Danann* will tour West Germany and Holland, and do a concert in The National Concert Hall, Dublin. In the New Year, they will return to the U.S.A. for another extensive tour, and record another album.

Eleanor is very happy with all aspects of her work; performing, recording, promoting her latest single 'Mary from Tipperary' and searching for new and old material for the group's forthcoming album. She is fulfilling a long held ambition. Developing her potential as an actress is another ambition, but she's quite content to leave that to another day.

critics in Ireland, Britain and the U.S.A. have been unanimous in their praise of a rich, original voice that has extraordinary range, tonal quality, strength and sensitivity.

While recording her first album (*A Jacket of Batteries*) with *De Danann* in September and October 1988, Eleanor was also holding down a day job with FÁS in Baggot Street. Recording in the Lansdowne Studios was slotted in at lunch periods and after work until three o'clock some mornings. Such a pace could not be maintained for long, so by Christmas, Eleanor had resigned her day job and become a full-time member of the group. The album, which included five beautiful songs from Eleanor, was in the shops and selling well. The choice of songs was a nicely balanced one: three songs from the pen of Phil Colclough and two in a more traditional vein — 'Táim mo Shuí' and the plaintive 'Carrickfergus'. Each of them was a showcase for different facets of Eleanor's talent.

In the past year, *De Danann* have toured the U.S.A. (twice), Spain, Holland, Denmark and London. They have also completed a few tours of Ireland. Their tours of the U.S.A. are usually coast-to-coast. In Milwaukee, *De Danann* performed in front of 70,000 people at an Irish Festival there. Everyone appeared to be dressed in green. At such a festival, there are many requests for songs such as 'Danny Boy' and 'Galway Bay'. While neither of these songs feature in her repertoire, Eleanor does sing some of these standards when the occasion demands. However, she feels strongly about the need for new songs to get an

airing. She says, "If an audience doesn't hear new material, it will never know that there is anything other than 'Danny Boy'".

She also has positive views on the foolishness of some promoters in organising concerts for venues that are only suitable for discos. "Why don't they give more thought to preparing the venue for live music?" she asks. "Anyway, live music is on the way back at the expense of the discos. It's ridiculous to see young people paying a £6 admission fee to watch someone spinning a record."

She also feels that R.T.E. does not give enough air-time to traditional or folk music, although she admits that it has improved in this respect in the last few years. "Yet, but for the pirate radio stations, a

Another Leitrim girl making a name for herself on the national and international scene athlete **Orla McGuinness** — with her coach **Michael O'Brien**.

