



- MEET A TOWNIE -



LIAM PONSONBY – LETTERKENNY'S MUSICAL THERAPIST

A jewel in the entertainment world (and a Diamond besides...!)

Ask anyone in the vicinity of Letterkenny to spell the name, Ponsonby, and the reply might conceivably be simply: "MUSIC."

For the well known musically acclaimed family is synonymous with providing entertainment and has cast its spell over many an audience over a long number of years. And not least, Liam Ponsonby, who on Monday of this week is busy putting the finishing touches to his song selection for the pending Memories event later in the evening.

On the kitchen table at his home in Lisnenan Court, he unveils a photograph from the past. It depicts a group of seven children, taken at a pantomime in the Devlin Hall. Most of the small group from the school band carry tambourines or triangles but the young Liam is armed with a button key accordion. "The first tune I ever played on it was 'Jingle Bells' and I was four years old.

"We were wearing red jackets and black hats. It was my first public performance and the pantomime went on for a full week."

Liam recalls being driven to the Devlin Hall each night by taxi. "Either one of the two taxi drivers, Tommy McConnell or a man called Carberry would drive me down from Ard O'Donnell where we lived and take me back home again at the end of the show. It was the only way I could get there because my father would be playing away at some function or other."

But proud, no doubt, that his young son was performing live with a musical instrument in his hands. When he wasn't on the road, William Ponsonby was working in McCauley's garage helping to ensure that other people were also able to get out on the road. "He worked there with Willie McElhinney – they were big buddies."

William and Annie (nee Harkin and a native of Gleneely) Ponsonby had five children in total, one of them, Joyce, sadly passing away at just three months. The others, in order of appearance were Sally, Charles, Liam and Michael.

Liam was born in a location which would, for any child, represent a piece of heaven – the vicinity of the former Toyland store at Lower Main Street. "My mum and dad had a flat above Boyce's tea shop where the Voodoo is now but they moved to Ard O'Donnell when I was six months old."

Like most of his peers, Liam attended the Christian brothers school. "They were great teachers but some of them were thick gulpins. You'd be hit with a wooden ruler on the side which would take the knuckles off you." But thankfully didn't destroy a guitarist's fingers before he had even started out.

He took a brief step into secondary education at the Tech. "I liked it but I left a bit early because my father needed me and my brother, Charles in the band."

A self-taught musician, Liam played a number of instruments. "I started playing guitar and am still not much good at it!" he laughs. Patrons of his shows,



Liam Ponsonby.

including last Monday night's Memories get-together in the Station House Hotel, would certainly know otherwise.

He was just twelve years of age when he performed with the Ponsonby band at a dance. "It was in Glencolmcille and the dance went on from 9.p.m. through to 2.a.m."

Was he nervous before he got on stage to mark his full debut as a musician? "I was and I still get nervous. You're always worried that something can go wrong – trouble with the microphone or the P.A. system breaking down."

But the music goes on and for Liam it continued with the Bobby Elliott managed Scripto in 1970 which also featured James Hanlon, Francie O'Donnell and Billy Robinson (and, for a brief spell, Malcolm Patton) – and some memorable nights. Not least when they performed support to one of the country's top acts of the time and the subsequent outcome from it.

"We played support to Horslips in the Golden Grill and as a result they asked us to do support for them in the Stadium in Dublin. And we did in front of two and a half thousand people.

"I remember walking from the changing rooms to the stage and the excitement of it all. It was just mind boggling and the amount of people from Donegal who were at the show was absolutely amazing."

Not quite two and a half thousand people at his wedding on July 13th, 1973, when he married his Donegal Town born wife, Liz – sister of Eamon Brogan from the Envoys – but a marriage that keeps music to the fore.

"Our daughter, Sharon, lectures in University in Belfast and plays quite a few instruments including guitar and drums and apart from that is a great singer. And our son, Keith, who is lives and works in Yorkshire, is also a brilliant guitarist and singer. I'd be ecstatic if I could play guitar like that. Keith has played in bands in Jersey where he worked as a chef."

Liam's solo performances include, of course, an unerring tribute to Neil Diamond – unerring in that you can easily believe that you are listening to the great American performer himself.

"That all came about when I was doing Beatles songs and people would come up to me and say you sound like Neil Diamond. That wasn't intentional but I decided to do a few covers and now I include it in my act. "In fact, my brother, Michael, at the time would have been big into Neil Diamond and certainly more than I was."

Liam has performed a couple of charity nights for the Friends of Letterkenny Hospital and the mental health services – full shows dedicated to Diamond's vast selection of hit material. "There was a lot of work involved in rehearsing for these shows but it was well worth it.

"I remember the great guitarist Albert Lee, who has played with the likes of Eric Clapton, the Everly Brothers and Emmylou Harris, performed in the An Grianan Theatre a short time before that and there was only sixty people in the audience. And we had over 300 at our shows," Liam reflects with a shaking of the head.

Along with brother Michael and Shaun Deehan, Liam was a member of the original Kopy Kats band – "a great experience and one I enjoyed thoroughly".

And enjoyed too the one-off reunion when the band got together for the wedding reception of Michael's son, Lee, in the Silver Tassie Hotel on August 11th. "We all loved it."

But it's unlikely to lead to a return to the band road for Liam and he also rules out any reforming of Scripto. "I'm getting too old for all that Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin stuff now!"

Liam also performed as a two piece with Jerry McGonagle from Drumkeen. "I worked as a porter at St. Conal's Hospital and Jerry worked there and we did some charity stuff.

"We'd play for the patients and there'd be singsongs with them and the nurses and dancing. It was wonderful to see the joy on their faces."

Recollections, too, of performing in the old Grill on the Port Road. "My father would have played in the Grill when it was situated across the road where the China Tower restaurant is now."

Liam remembers when William purchased a Volkswagen mini-bus from Andy Hegarty for the princely sum of 1,260 punts. "He raised the money from playing for two years in the Grill after which he could afford to buy it. The registration was KIH 211." And it helped transport the Ponsonbys from venue to venue and gig to gig.

Those included shows in Scotland in those early days when the family outfit performed in Glasgow and other locations. "And my mother would shave my sidelocks and make it appear that I was at a shaving stage. I was only 13 and legally was too young to be performing!"

Liam would go on to play at venues all over Britain and remembers those days of touring with affection. "Through there was a lot of travelling involved."

He cites the Beatles and the Eagles as among his favourite bands and has no hesitation in naming his all-time favourite singer as – no, not Neil Diamond – the legendary Roy Orbison.

Last year both Liam and Liz retired from their respective jobs with the H.S.E. and are savouring a more relaxing approach to life. And holidaying together though never quite getting away from home.

They were heading to immigration at Newark Airport in New Jersey when they overheard a familiar voice. "And it was the son of George Boal who had just a month before put up our garden shed!"

And the time in Jersey in the Channel Islands when one morning at their hotel a young couple walked by. "And they were looking at me and I didn't know what it was all about until the man turned and said: "We saw you performing in Sligo last week!"

A small world and one, thankfully, that has music at its heart.

"It's great therapy, the greatest therapy as far as I'm concerned," says a man who has, and continues to, provide remedial treatment for endless audiences.



WHERE IT ALL STARTED! This young group preparing for the pantomime in the Devlin Hall back in the late fifties include from left, Eugene O'Donnell, Mark Dawson, Liam Ponsonby, Seamus Diver, Jim Ferry and Dessie Shiels. In front is Jacinta McGlynn.

 **connecthearing.ie**
connecting you to life...

Unit 10 Courtyard Shopping Centre, Letterkenny | Tel: 074 911 3296

Offering Full Examinations By Qualified Audiologists using the Latest Technology

