

# FROM NOW ON INTRODUCING WILLOS'

Seán Laffey talks to Stephanie Martin, the fiddler with Siena's Irish band Willos'.



**W**ell the apostrophe police are going to be going ballistic with the band's name. Is it something about Italian grammar that we should clear up at the outset?

Stephanie laughs. "Blame it on our flute player. I told him we don't use the apostrophe like that in Ireland. He said it would mark us out as being different, it would get people wondering and talking about us." Success then!

Willos' are Stephanie Martin from Belfast on fiddle, Fiona King from Vancouver on vocals, flute player Lorenzo Del Grande from Altopascio, Luca Mercurio (folk guitar & bouzouki) and Giulio Putti (bodhrán) both from Siena. And their newest member Massimo Giuntini from Arezzo on uilleann pipes, Irish bouzouki and flutes.

Stephanie's own journey into the world of the Willos' began with romance. "Twenty-odd years ago I moved from Belfast to Italy, got engaged and we ran a farm and food business, exporting produce to London and Dublin." Her relationship didn't work out but the music did, as she explains. "Music was a great way to form friendships and become part of a community, it also helped me learn Italian. I'm pretty fluent, but you never really get the accent or the idioms. You also lose some of your personality along the way; the slagging culture and the sense of irony we have in Ireland doesn't always translate into Italian." She laughs at the thought.

Isn't being an Irish band in Italy something of a folk outlier? "Yes I suppose that's true, there are Irish bands here but many do just pub songs, and the kind of music we play puts us outside that covers-orbit, as we write our own material as well as playing and arranging traditional tunes together with modern-style folk songs. We also perform in our everyday clothes; we don't dress up in imagined peasant clothing which can often be a feature of heritage folk music for some big Celtic festivals here. We keep the Irish tradition alive and authentic and think that is what makes us stand out."

Is there a vibrant session scene in Siena? "Absolutely not, in fact there's almost no interest in music in the city. The people here are obsessed with the Palio, they live for it, music takes on a very minor role in their cultural lives." The Palio is a horse race and nothing like you'd see in the Curragh. Held in July and August, in the cobbled medieval city centre, 10 horses compete, with each one representing a city ward, the jockeys ride bare back and the race is brutal.

The band have three previous albums to their credit; their new one is called *From Now On*, marking their post-Covid re-immersion and new line up. "We recruited Massimo in 2020, he's a fantastic uilleann piper, and has performed with Loreena McKennitt, The Chieftains, Vinicio Capossela, Modena City Ramblers, Lou Dalfin and many others. His music appears in many soundtracks, the most famous being *Gangs of New York* by Martin Scorsese. *From Now On* has been received with great interest. Recently we signed a distribution deal with a Canadian label and there are festivals around Northern Europe already contacting us for 2023 and we are getting airplay on radio in the US, Canada and Ireland."

I wondered how Willos' connect with the wider world of Celtic music? "We've run small festivals ourselves in the past and brought over world class players for workshops. In the early days I was nervous about playing on stage. I'd been immersed in Irish dancing

*"From Now On marks their post-Covid re-immersion."*

since I was 5 and had played classical violin. When I moved to Italy I played more and more traditional music, but was daunted by not having the sheet music in front of me. Then we had Liz Carroll and John Doyle over for concerts and tuition. Liz is such an inspiration, and it was through her mentorship that I became comfortable with performing traditional music. It's more stressful than sitting in a session, on stage you are exposed and a microphone exaggerates imperfections, it's a real test of confidence.

"Playing with the folks in Willos' is a joy and along with the sunshine it's the reason why I'm still here in Tuscany, oh and romance too, naturally!" More laughter and why not?

**Willos' new album *From Now On* is available on many streaming and download platforms. Find out more about Willos' and their music at [www.willos.it](http://www.willos.it)**