

## Remastered CD sounds spectacular

### Traditional Music /

By Daniel Neely

One day in early 1997, James Keane rang up his longtime friend, the legendary uilleann piper Liam O'Flynn, with a question. O'Flynn picked up, obviously on a mobile phone: "James, I'm out here in Kildare, sitting on a horse. It's pouring rain on me. What can I do for you?"

"Ah, but what about an album, Liam?" Keane asked.

"And why not?" was O'Flynn's enthusiastic answer.

Keane made several such call in those months, did some recording in an Irish studio, and before long he had "With Friends Like These," an album of hard-core traditional music featuring a star-studded group of his oldest friends, including Garry O'Briain (strings, keyboards), Tommy Peoples (fiddle), Paddy Glackin (fiddle), Matt Molloy (flute), Liam O'Flynn (pipes, whistle), Kevin Conniff (vocals, bodhrán), James Blennerhassett (bass) and

Liam Bradley (percussion).

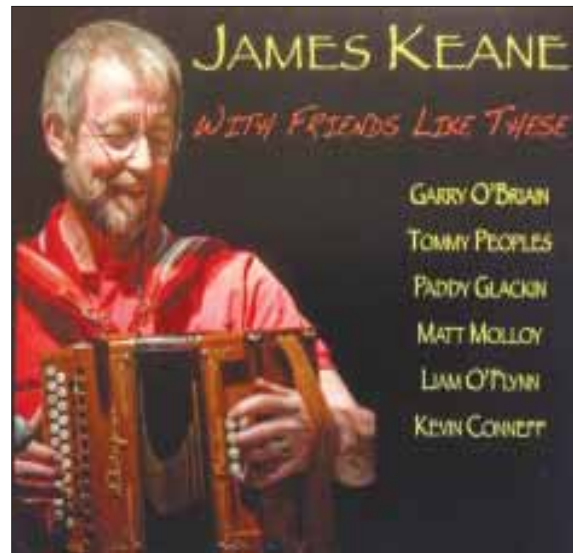
It was a brilliant album, but really, with a crew of musicians so great, all playing to the height of their powers, how could you go wrong? Unfortunately – and for no good reason – the album did not receive the attention it deserved. However, it made some small impression among a cognoscenti, who, over the years, talked it up whenever they saw Keane, if only to remind him that he'd made the thing in the first place.

Emboldened by his supporters' good words, Keane went back last year and had another listen. Time, he feared, might not be kind to his earlier effort, but as he listened he found the strength of the music was still there. The whole project represented so much to him personally and said so much about his connectedness to Ireland, to his family and to his friends, that once he realized how well produced and well executed the album was, it struck him that maybe the whole project perhaps needed another airing. So, he ap-

proached Shanachie (the label that originally released the album), bought back the rights, and resolved to put it back out there.

Keane went it alone at first, but before long he teamed up with New Folk Records, who gave the whole plan a real boost. The result is a completely re-mastered version of "With Friends Like These" and it sounds spectacular. This new take carries a sweetness, warmth and balance that enhances the beauty of the already top shelf playing, and a completely revamped graphic design that recommends the album's contents well.

So, what of the music? It's outstanding stuff. As one might imagine, there are several really standout tracks, including "Mary McMahon's / ..." (which as a set is known as "The Old Sheiling Reels" because they were used on a radio program for the Old Sheiling hotel), and the jig sets "Strike the Gay Harp / ..." and "Trip to Killavil / ..." The reel track, "Paddy Taylor's / ..." with its



upright bass and brush-led drumming, has a fairly exotic jazzy feel that gives the album a fascinating and delightful wrinkle.

Then there are Keane's own compositions, which must be counted among the album's highlights. "Morning Mist," for example, is a lovely, hopeful sounding piece taken at a relaxed tempo that expresses the sense of nostalgia Keane has for the visuality of Ireland. "Lavalla" is another of Keane's compositions, which he wrote in remembrance of the sum-

mers he spent growing up in Lavalla, Ballynacally, in Clare. It's a slow, inspiring piece taken in jig time with an arrangement for the bass and drum that gives it a most stately cut.

This reissued version "With Friends Like These" is a real winner and will delight anyone who loves traditional music. It simply sounds better than ever, making the great music it contains even easier to enjoy.

Visit Keane's website at [www.jameskeane.com](http://www.jameskeane.com) and New Folk Records at [www.newfolkrecords.com](http://www.newfolkrecords.com).