

# Ceili Rain mixes Irish music, rock 'n' roll

BY JEFFREY HAHNE  
Staff Writer

Most people hear the phrase "band from Nashville" and immediately think of country music. But Ceili (pronounced KAY-lee) Rain is anything but country.

Helmed by singer/songwriter Bob Halligan Jr., Ceili Rain is most often described as a Celtic Christian rock group because the band's sound incorporates bagpipes, tin whistle and fiddle.

The Christian label comes from the band's spirituality, Halligan says: "While it's informed from a Christian perspective, it doesn't preach or exclude in any way shape or form." But he doesn't see his band as a Christian group.

"It's really a message of love for one and all regardless of religious persuasion," Halligan says. "If we are a church, then all are welcome in this place, to quote my favorite song."

Ceili Rain performs tonight at the Carolina Theatre in Greensboro. The seven-member band represents one of the most eclectic offerings in the theater's new music series. The group marries rock 'n' roll with a traditional Irish sound you would expect to hear only at heritage festivals and on public radio.

This odd musical concoction came from his wife, Halligan says.

"My wife was playing (Celtic) stuff around the house," he says. "She suggested I combine it with the rock 'n' roll. I told her she was nuts, but I tried it, and now I've been doing it for 11 years."

Those years have brought Halligan a variety of customers for his work. He wrote "Some Heads Are Gonna Roll" for Judas Priest, and



Ceili Rain, often described as a Celtic Christian rock group, uses bagpipes, the tin whistle and the fiddle in its music. The group will play at 8 tonight at the Carolina Theatre in Greensboro.

other performers ranging from KISS and Joan Jett on the heavier side to pop singers Cher and Michael Bolton have recorded his work.

Halligan says it's easier to write for other artists because he is more critical of his performances of his own work.

"In some ways it's easier to write for somebody else because I care less from a personal standpoint," Halligan said. "Which isn't to say that I don't care as a professional, but you can just leave it where it is

and not bring it home with you."

Rarely do his songs sound as he intended them to, he says.

"Sometimes, the versions are better than you thought possible, and the song is raised to a higher plane," he says.

Although he wrote some songs and sent them to bands, he has worked directly with artists on writing others.

"In the case of KISS, I worked with Paul Stanley. I showed him what I had, and we finished it together," he said. "Similar case

with Joan Jett. I had (the lyrics) started, and we finished it off. Michael Bolton and I would write things from scratch. Cher — those were tapes that were sent to her."

Halligan would love his band to work with other artists, as well, particularly the Chieftains, perhaps the group best known in this country for performing Irish folk. But the Fab Four are on the top of his personal list.

"Anything with The Beatles would top my list," he says. "Then I could die a happy man."

## WANT TO GO?

### Ceili Rain

When: 8 p.m. today

Where: Carolina Theatre, 310 S. Greene St., Greensboro

Admission: \$16 adults, \$14

students and seniors

Information: 333-2605



Halligan, front bottom right

Few songwriters have their work recorded by such diverse artists as Michael Bolton, Kiss, Kathy Mattea and Rebecca St. James. But Bob Halligan, Jr. isn't your average songwriter.

Halligan has broadened his horizons even further with Celtic-rock group Ceili (KAY-lee) Rain. The seven piece group mixes American rock 'n' roll instruments—electric guitar and bass—with traditional Irish whistles, button accordion and uilleann pipes (Irish bagpipes). Their self-titled debut has received extraordinary mainstream press, drawing accolades from industry magazines like *Music Row* and *Billboard*.

While Halligan's previous claim to fame may have been the people who recorded his songs, he hopes Ceili Rain will change that. "I hope to sell millions and millions of records," Halligan says with characteristic wry humor. "I hope to reach people of all faiths. If we find people on other planets, I hope to sell some records to them, too."

His goals are not greedy; he simply thinks Ceili Rain's message is one everybody needs to hear. He writes about selflessness ("You Then Me") and fitting in ("I Wanna Be Different"). "This is not music with an expiration date," Halligan says. "These songs are conversations with God and I invite the world

to listen in. We've been so blessed with the response and the way we've been able to connect with audiences."

The songs burst with energy, propelled by the lineup of fiddle, pipes and whistles, drums, bass, electric guitar, button accordion and Halligan's own acoustic guitar, harmonica and piano. The energy and danceability give ska bands a run for their money. While the band plays gigs targeted at Christians, they increasingly find themselves in more mainstream settings. Halligan feels Ceili Rain fits in all environments. "Ceili Rain is many things," Halligan says. "It's Celtic and rock and secular and Christian. At the end of the day, it's Ceili Rain music."

Starting Ceili Rain has meant Halligan has cut down on the amount of material he writes and co-writes for others. But he hasn't stopped completely. "Michael Bolton has his choice of collaborators: Bob Dylan or Bob Halligan," he says. "You can see which Bob he'd pick."

The unique style of Ceili Rain differs dramatically from previous Halligan work. "Judas Priest did a song of mine called 'Take These Chains.' There's a tin whistle on the beginning of the song, drenched in reverb. I promise you," he jokes, "it had no influence on me starting Ceili Rain."

—Matt Simon



## Music Preview: You can't spell GOOD without G-O-D

By Bryan E. Hurst

May 23, 2001

Several things will hit you when listening to the Celtic rock band **Ceili Rain**. If you're like me, and your first exposure to the group was the hooky, exuberant song "That's All the Lumber You Sent," then you were probably snagged by their hooky exuberance. Like most of their music, the song is chock full of catchy, melodic, rhythmic energy — reminiscent of some of the best elements of bands like Dexy's Midnight Runners, Black 47, the Waterboys and early Poi Dog Pondering.

There's the great musicianship of a seven-piece band that breaks out all the Celtic bells and whistles (make that tin whistles) and the relentlessly upbeat vocals of Ceili frontman Bob Halligan Jr.

Then, there's the one thing that will eventually hit you upon closer examination of Ceili Rain, the one thing that can make a great band a little problematic for listeners and radio programmers alike (as if Celtic Rock wasn't problematic enough for most radio programmers). It's the one thing that frankly got past me until I started looking at the literature and listening a little more closely to the lyrics.

Let's call it the God thing—Yes, not only are Ceili Rain a Celtic rock band, they're a Christian Celtic rock band.

It's not that the obviously biblically inspired parable of "That's All the Lumber You Sent" blew over my head or anything. It's hard to miss the song's story of a person being greeted at heaven's gate by St. Peter and forced to reflect upon his past life. But many secular artists have included similar sentiments in their music without being lumped into the Contemporary Christian music field.

And the Ceilis seem to have managed to slip their message under the radar of those pagan-lovin' folks who program the AAA format radio stations around the country.

But, truth be told, Halligan's take on Christian music hardly beats you over the head with its message. Inspiring, yes, but "inspirational"? Well, it ain't Amy Grant, thank God (pun somewhat intended). The happy songs on Ceili Rain's latest album, *Erasers on Pencils* (Cross Driven) should warm all but the hardest of heathen hearts.

As a songwriter, Halligan has long straddled the line between the sacred and secular. While Halligan has scored Contemporary Christian hits with artists like Rick Cua, Bob Carlisle and Rebecca St. James, he's also led a double life of sorts, penning hit songs for such unlikely acts as Cher, KISS, Blue Oyster Cult and Michael Bolton (uh, we'll try to forgive you for that last one, Bob).

Halligan even contributed two classics to the unlikely canon of hellbound metalheads Judas Priest, "Take These Chains" and "Some Heads Are Gonna Roll." This awkward collaboration was discomfiting to him. As he told the Philadelphia Daily News, "There were records, one in particular, that had a song of mine on it, and the song preceding mine was horrifying to me. My wife would say, 'You've got to look on the bright side — at least your song replaced one of those awful ones.'"

All the while Halligan was dealing with the mixed emotions his songwriting success had brought, he was cultivating a musical formula in his mind's ear of what he wanted to do as an artist. Though he'd been "thinking conceptually about this band since 1989," Ceili Rain formed for real after Halligan moved to Nashville in 1995, with their eponymous debut coming out in 1997. This was followed by 1998's *Say Kay-Lee* (featuring the aforementioned "Lumber"), and a 1999 live release, *We're Making a Party*.

Ceili Rain's talented lineup includes a local connection: former Louisvillian (and J-Town High grad) Skip Cleavinger, who has replaced Burt Mitchell on bagpipes and tin whistle (Cleavinger appears on *Erasers on Pencils* playing "low whistle," whatever that is).

Since I don't really keep up with the Contemporary Christian Music charts in *Billboard*, I'd be curious to see whether Ceili Rain is making any inroads in that morass of a musical world.

But don't let the "Christian Celtic" moniker scare you off. Though Halligan sincerely tries to channel the inspirational in the music of Ceili Rain, as he puts it, "We have no interest in serving traditional preconceptions about how that's done, we're only interested in serving hearts and spirits."

Ceili Rain performs on WFPK's "Live Lunch" broadcast Friday at noon, and makes an in-store appearance at ear X-tacy the same day. Call ear X-tacy at 452-1799 for more information.

# CAREER SPANS MULTIPLE GENRES

## Metal, Christian, Country... Halligan Has Been There

By Deborah Evans Price

**J**ust how difficult is it to transition from writing for Judas Priest and Cher to contemporary Christian artist Rebecca St. James or country songstress Kathy Mattea? For Bob Halligan, Jr. his love of music and passion for crafting songs are the tools that helped him translate success in several musical genres.

A native of Syracuse, N.Y., Halligan carved a successful niche writing hard rock and pop songs for numerous acts including Cher, Michael Bolton, Judas Priest and Joan Jett before moving to Nashville in 1995 and establishing a presence in both country and contemporary Christian circles. Since relocating to Music City, he's also launched Ceili Rain, a Celtic-flavored pop/rock ensemble that has provided an outlet for the positive message songs he writes. The band has rapidly become one of the most popular bands on the Nashville club scene and is currently anticipating the release of their self-titled debut in April on Punch Records, a division of Power Entertainment Group, a nationally distributed rock label based in Nashville.

Halligan's love of songwriting began in his teens and he was fortunate enough to have family that encouraged his ambitions. His cousin, Dick Halligan, was in Blood, Sweat & Tears during the band's heyday and urged his young cousin to pursue the music business; therefore, Halligan began fronting a local band and writing tunes. Dedication to his craft paid off and he got a deal with United Artists publishing, aided greatly by the support of manager Barry Bergman. Though Halligan's band didn't land a record contract, he found another ally in songplugger May Pang (known for her liaison with John Lennon). She believed in his tunes and helped Halligan land a song called "Take These Chains," on a Judas Priest album.

"It was on their biggest album ever, *Screaming For Vengeance* and it was the only outside song," Halligan recalls. "My wife Linda said, 'They recorded one of your songs. You should at least write another one.' I wrote another song called 'Some Heads Are Gonna Roll.' They recorded it on their second biggest album, *Defenders Of The Faith*. Again I had the only outside song, written solely by me. So people viewed me as the genius of heavy metal songwriting. It was a little bit of talent and a little bit of luck. So then all the labels were flying me all over writing with and for all these different hard rock acts. Some came to bear fruit: some didn't, but it led to cuts with Kiss, Blue Oyster Cult, Joan Jett, Night Ranger, Kix and a bunch of others."

Halligan admits the role of heavy metal genius was not a comfortable title for him for many reasons, among them the fact that he didn't want his lyrics to contain the negative messages conveyed in other songs on the albums, and because he was being typecast. "I realized I was being pigeon-holed as 'Halligan, the hard rock writer.' Since I grew up on The Beatles, Stevie Wonder and things other than rock, I never really listened to Led Zeppelin when I was in high school; I was frightened by it. I wanted to switch to more mainstream pop but luckily ran into Michael Bolton at a co-writers' house and we wrote nine songs together, seven of which were recorded and six ended up on major records."

Halligan's first foray into a label deal and a chance to record his own songs came in 1991 when Atco released his album, *Window In The Wall*. Though political upheaval at the label kept the critically acclaimed album from finding chart success, it didn't dim Halligan's enthusiasm for the creative process. If anything, it shifted his focus to another musical mecca.

He made the decision to move to Nashville in large part because of the changes in the New York songwriting market. "In New York I had some great co-writers, but the scene kind of dried up and the



Bob Halligan, Jr.

styles of music that New York writers could write and hope to make a living from had narrowed to the point that it no longer satisfied my creative urges," Halligan says. "It was kind of dance and hip-hop and that was it. I've always been basically a rock 'n roll guy. So there was nothing to do. But I can't say there was no scene at all and no great writers because I still treasure my co-writers up there like Phil Galdston, Arnie Roman, Martin Briley and Michael Bolton... I miss all those people, but down here it's easier; you go into a bank and they don't laugh you right

out the door (most Nashville banks have Music Row divisions)."

The business community's acceptance of songwriters is not the only appeal Nashville had for Halligan. "There are a lot of us (songwriters) and it's competitive, but not obnoxious," he says of the songwriting community.

"People like each other and clap for each other. The business is here and it's just easier... I love it down here because there are great folks, songwriters and otherwise." The way Halligan writes has changed somewhat since his move to Nashville. "I'm less of a co-writer than I used to be; I'm more of a solo guy. I will still co-write, but the last couple of years I got back in touch with my writing voice and Ceili Rain was really born out of that because I had to rediscover my confidence in writing on my own."

When he first moved to Nashville, Halligan signed a publishing deal with BMG and credits them with easing his transition into a new city. Soon he found himself getting cuts by both Christian and country acts, among them Sierra, Rebecca St. James, Billy T. Midnight and Kathy Mattea. (He co-wrote the title cut of Kathy Mattea's current album, *Love Travels*, with his wife, Linda.)

# ARTS & LEISURE

INSIDE-LINE 255-1212

☐ To hear "Love Travels," from Ceili Rain's self-titled debut CD Touch 7295



CEILI RAIN

## The band Ceili Rain to take its 'two-sided' music to Gullifty's

BY KIRA L. SCHLECHTER  
OF THE PATRIOT-NEWS

The band Ceili Rain is many things but fits comfortably and neatly into nothing.

They're from Nashville. So they're a country act, right? No.

"There is still a prevailing sentiment that 615 [Nashville's area code] means either green-toothed mountain folk music or Jesus-freak music," singer/songwriter/guitarist Bob Halligan Jr., said in a phone interview from his Nashville home. "It's a terrible nuisance."

They're a seven-piece band

that boasts a tin-whistle player, a bagpiper, an accordionist, and a fiddler among their staff of guitarists, bassist and drummer. Their name in Gaelic (pronounced "KAY-lee") means "heavenly party."

So they're a Celtic band, right? Not really.

"We're a pop group at our core," Halligan said. "We do Celtic festivals, they don't always have us back. It's a pretty rocking show — it's not Irish music per se. You've got a guy who sings more like the Beatles

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DETAILS: Ceili Rain plays Gullifty's Downstairs, 1104 Carlisle Pike, Lower Allen Twp., at 9 p.m. Thursday. Tickets are \$7. For reservations, call Gullifty's at 761-6692. Look in Thursday's Patriot-News for a review of Ceili Rain's self-titled CD. And for more information on the band, check out its Web site at [www.punchrecords.com](http://www.punchrecords.com).

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than (Irish singing legend) Christy Moore. I'm a pop-rock singer, so it's a true hybrid."

The band's live set, which midstaters can check out at Gullifty's Downstairs in Lower Allen Twp. Thursday night, reflects that duality.

"We have two sides to the stage, the Celtic side and the rock 'n' roll side," Halligan said. "And I inhabit

And Halligan's version of Celtic music is purely his own, influenced as little as possible by the rest of the genre.

"I don't want to know too much about it and end up really imitating it," he explained. "Many of the Celtic tunes go at too high a rate of speed for the average pop listener to ingest. I believe in giving people something that they can hum on

point of view, and that's just the way I enjoy it best."

Halligan laces his songs with a liberal dose of spirituality, turning them into parables that encourage listeners to love themselves and one another and continually re-examine their lives. So that would make them a Christian band, right?

Well, not exactly. Halligan's faith, rooted in his Catholic upbringing,

NOVEMBER 6, 1998

# music

## A writer as right as Ceili Rain

by Jonathan Takiff

Daily News Staff Writer

Ceili Rain sprinkles their music with the Celtic seasonings of fiddle, accordion, penny whistle and bagpipe and pumps out some merry jigs indeed.

Yet they're as smooth, tuneful and easy going down as the brightest pop-rock. (Imagine the Chieftains and the Beatles collaborating, with Paul and John leading the band.)

Pronounced "kay-lee rain," this fresh-sounding ensemble is actually spiritual at heart and in lyrical intent. But they're bravely ecumenical and light in touch, welcoming all good souls into their fold and intent on lifting you up.

Clearly, this septet is not one to typecast easily, as admirers of their self-titled debut album (on Nashville-based Punch Records) or drop-ins at their Tin Angel show tomorrow will surely testify. Their sprightly, unpeppable, feel-good nature is exactly what makes them special—one of the more refreshing arrivals of 1998 and most inspiring stories of any annum.

At the heart of the creation is Bob Halligan Jr., a stubbornly eclectic tunesmith, fine singer and musical missionary whose flexible nature has taken him to some mighty odd places. "From Jesus to Judas and back again. An interesting journey," he ruminates.

As a songwriter, Halligan scored his first recorded cut in 1981 with a contemporary Christian artist, Rick Cua (and he's recently had more in that vein with Bob Carlisle and Rebecca St. James).

But his next round at bat, Halligan hit to the absolute opposite end of the musical ballpark—heavy metal! And he scored big, with clenched-fist (but ultimately positive)

anthems recorded by Judas Priest ("Take These Chains" and "Some Heads Are Gonna Roll," a warning about nuclear holocaust) and Blue Oyster Cult ("Make Rock Not War," and "Beat 'Em Up," the latter a "battle cry" to kids to do their own thing.)

"Metal bands tend to be stronger in cheekbone than songwriting," Halligan said. "There were always people in those bands who resisted my intrusion, my hidden melodies, but certainly the labels wanted my kind of presence."

Despite his success in that arena, Halligan considers his head-banger successes "a hollow victory. Truth is, I was always

scared by that kind of music when I was a kid, by groups like Led Zeppelin. I was always more of a Beatles and Stones kind of guy."

"I'll also tell you honestly, there were records, one in particular, that had a song of mine on it, and the song preceding mine was horrifying to me," he added. "My wife would say 'You've got to look on the bright side. At least your song replaced one of those awful ones.'"

"I got through that period relatively unscathed on a karmic level," Halligan said. No, no one tried to commit suicide on his account—though other Ju-



Bob Halligan (lower right) has penned hits for metal bands like Judas Priest, but he's more comfortable in his current project, the eclectic, Irish-influenced Ceili Rain

das Priest songs were blamed for some serious freak-outs. "But I was not untarnished," Halligan said. "I didn't pull the trigger, but I didn't stop the guy from firing."

After a bleak period of typecasting and lying low, Halligan struck up a friendship with Michael Bolton, "shortly before he broke out big." The pair collaborated on a bunch of songs that were ultimately recorded by Bolton, Cher and Night Ranger. "That kind of pried me out of the heavy-metal cubbyhole."

Then Halligan hit it big with the corporate rock group Kix, writing their popular power ballad "Don't Close Your Eyes." Out of that, the songwriter got his own Atco record deal, an album that came out in 1991 but was immediately "tossed in the dumper. I got caught in a corporate shift at the label, and my album had to die for an executive to be knocked out. It was a very bitter year and a half."

While songwriting acquaintances have intimated that Ceili Rain is cashing in on the current craze for Celtic music, Halligan says he's been "thinking conceptually about this band since 1989." Philadelphia's own accordion- and penny-whistle-

flavored pop-rockin' Hooters were one influence, he acknowledges. Still stronger inspirations were "an album that the Chieftains put out with Van Morrison, and especially Mark Knopfler's instrumental theme for the film 'Local Hero.' There's such soul to be drawn from Irish music and you can get such a wallop if you put in rock 'n' roll."

"The essential thing for us will always be the pop, the tunefulness of these songs."

It's the sweet lilt of the music that grabs you first with Ceili Rain. Then the words start to sink in—deeply. "A guy told me he was singing along with 'Long Black Cadillac' for months before he realized it was about a guy in a hearse, on the way to his own funeral," Halligan said.

The hook-happy "That's All The Lumber You Sent," a favorite on adult alternative stations like WXPB, talks about meeting St. Peter at Heaven's gate. "To me, it's about that ultimate balance sheet at the end of one's life," Halligan said, "but it's actually about accountability in any situation."

Similarly open-ended is the haunting "I Don't Need A Picture (To See Your

Face.)" You could take it as an homage to seeing God everywhere, or apply it to "any significant personal relationship," Halligan noted.

Clearly, Ceili Rain goes in a lot of different directions, often simultaneously. Because of their Celtic airs and ethnic makeup of the players, the group gets invited to play at Irish ceilis (song swaps) and cultural festivals, "though we tend to confuse the older people when we rock out." Because they're modern folk-rockers at heart, the group is mostly working in clubs and getting alternative radio play.

Ceili Rain is definitely part of the contemporary Christian music scene, too, happily performing in churches or for Catholic youth groups with only slight changes in set list. The group even employs a separate publicist to work that market, "but because we are ecumenical, and not exclusive, we tend to not be treated with the same respect as groups that are totally devoted to the Christian audience," Halligan said. "There's a snobbery in that field, like any other."

# Ceili Rain entertains enthusiastic audience

BY JOYA WESLEY  
*Special to the News & Record*

## CONCERT REVIEW

The drumming started from the back of the house at the Carolina Theatre as the Ceili Rain concert began. Drummer Chris Eddy, strapped like Yankee Doodle, started down the aisle with Burt Mitchell close on his heels playing the highland pipes.

The rest of the Nashville-based band met Eddy and Mitchell on-stage and got the party started. Ceili (pronounced Kay-lee) is a Gaelic word that means "a party with live music and dancing" and Rain "symbolizes that all of this good stuff comes down to us from the Heavens above," according to the group's Web site.

It was a party Thursday night and a few people in the somewhat small but enthusiastic crowd even got up and danced a little to the unique Celtic-flavored rock sounds.

With his talented band of musicians, leader Bob Halligan Jr. performed more than two hours of his spiritually oriented songs.

After Eddy and Mitchell, the rest of the band is made up of bassist Bob "Buff" Harmon, violinist Gretchen Priest, guitarist Raymond Arias and accordionist Buddy Connolly. Mitchell, complete with kilt, made contributions on the tin whistle, flute and the uilleann pipes, in addition to the highland pipes.

The concert gave each musician an opportunity to "go crazy," in Halligan's words. Most impressive was Arias' solo moment. After

breaking out with the opening guitar riff from Free's rock classic "All Right Now," he displayed his vocal talent with a full-length performance of the song.

A family audience that included everyone from children to teens to parents to grandparents gave a warm reception to this group, which has a fast-growing fan base in both secular and contemporary Christian music. With his slightly spastic performance style reminiscent of Supertramp, Halligan told positive stories through his catchy compositions.

In addition to the song "Love Travels," which was a hit for Kathy Mattea, the group played songs it has recorded including "God Done Good," "The Big Snow," "Peace Has Broken Out" and "The Fighting Chair."

The group got the audience involved on the title track from its new CD, "Erasers on Pencils," an anti-guilt tune during which Halligan invited people to come on stage and confess sins in exchange for a free Ceili Rain promotional pencil.

It was a cute segment. One guy confessed that he forgot to tell his wife he loved her before he left for work that morning, and a little girl — one of two who danced through most of the evening — confessed that she didn't clean her plate.

More bagpipes were playing on Greene Street as the show let out. Members of Deep River Pipes and Drums passed out fliers and gave a free sample to promote their upcoming concert, Feb. 10 at the High Point Theatre.

## B-SIDES

# Halligan Lamp

## Ceili Rain Frontman Shines Celtic Light

**A**SK LOCALS WHO ARE "IN THE KNOW" about Nashville's entertainment community and they will tell you that there isn't a single genre missing from our musical landscape. Whether you are a fan of country, blues, rock, heavy metal, gospel, rap, techno or just about any other kind of music, somebody in town is a practitioner of your favorite style of tunes.

When local singer-songwriter Bob Halligan Jr. put together his band Ceili Rain a few years back, he had it in mind to create a musical hybrid that would be a new sound in Nashville. Determined, he set out to be the first guy in town to combine classic pop music with a strong Celtic influence. The results have been interesting.

"I've always viewed the sound of our band as being The Beatles and The Chieftains collaborating in a room together, but with John and Paul in charge," Halligan told me recently.

To my way of thinking, that's not a bad description. On record and during their high-energy live shows, Ceili Rain perform songs crafted in the classic pop style. Catchy musical riffs build songs up to a chorus that is usually quite memorable after only one or two listens. But along the way, Halligan and his bandmates fill the gaps with the button accordion, tin whistle, bagpipes and fiddle, all of which are quite traditional elements in Celtic music. This sound has garnered the band attention and lots of positive press. Last year alone, they received very favorable write-ups in *The Gavin Report* and *Alban Network*, while two critics in *Billboard's* "1998 Year in Music" column picked the band's self-titled album on Nashville's Punch Records as one of the top 10 releases of the year.

Critical praise for Celtic pop was probably the last thing Halligan expected growing up in Syracuse, New York. His first exposure to big-time music came thanks to his cousin, who was a founding member of Blood, Sweat & Tears.

"I started writing songs in high school, and my cousin's presence in that band [B.S. & T.] encouraged me to believe that it was possible to do it on a grander scale than just for the kids in my home room," Halligan said.

After high school, Halligan moved on to Hamilton College in upstate New York where he started his first band. That group continued playing after the members had graduated, and a few trips to New York City led to a publishing deal. The publishing company thought that a lucrative record deal might be in the works for Halligan's band as well. Though such a deal never came about, other artists began recording Halligan's songs.

"I was starting to get cuts. At first, it was by accident. But pretty soon, it was on purpose," Halligan said.

In markets outside the U.S., a South African act called Clout had a hit with the first song Halligan ever sold to another artist.

"They were sort of a Sears & Roebuck version of ABBA," Halligan said.

This early success put Halligan's name on the map. He was soon writing songs for a very diverse roster of artists. Heavy metal acts Judas Priest, KIX and Helix recorded Halligan's songs, as did Kiss, Cher, Joan Jett, Michael Bolton and Blue Oyster Cult. Halligan also had a number of cuts in the Contemporary Christian market and continued to sell songs to international artists.

During this period in his life, Halligan became friends with Nashville artist Rick Cua. He visited Cua a number of times and got a feel for Music City and its players. In February of 1996, he moved here for good. Unlike many of the out-of-towners who profess to be here for "creative reasons," Halligan is quite candid about his relocation.

"New York ran out of usefulness to me, and I to it. So, I decided to come to the music business town with the lowest mortgages," Halligan said.

Thanks to his trips to see his friend Cua, Halligan already knew the town and a number of locals quite well.

"By the time I moved here, I had been visiting for 12 years. I had a home-away-from-home feel for me right away," Halligan said.

Initially, like most songwriters, Halligan tried his hand at country music.

"I came here intending to do country songwriting, but along the way I discovered it just wasn't me," Halligan said.

He did, however, manage to get the title cut on Kathy Mattea's *Love Travels* album.

"Kathy is a horse of a different color. She is very non-traditional, and



Ceili Rain

the song of mine that she did is anything but a country song. She just happened to put a pedal steel in there and make it work," Halligan said.

In addition to writing songs, Halligan began the groundwork for Ceili Rain shortly after his move to Nashville. He came up with the idea to combine his love of both pop and Celtic music after a conversation he and his wife had several years earlier. But when he first discussed the idea with musicians in Nashville, people were not at all receptive.

"People looked at me like I was insane. They seemed to think I was mental," Halligan said.

So Halligan simply hired musicians and began playing shows within a few months of his relocation. This went on for a while until the band began to achieve a higher profile in Nashville. Eventually, all of the hired players were replaced with permanent members, and Halligan has seen his band increase steadily in popularity in the four years since he first brought his unique sound to Nashville stages.

"Contrary to what we hear from a lot of Nashville musicians, we don't get that sort of jaded, golf-trout handicap from local crowds, and I think it's because we're not out to impress anybody. We're just really trying to make them happy," Halligan said.

If you haven't caught a Ceili Rain show yet, it is well worth your while. The live performances are quite stirring, with tremendous energy coming from the stage. Perhaps the only act their sound can be compared to in contemporary music would be Irish rockers The Waterboys, though Ceili

Rain has much smoother edges. Among their 75 live shows in 25 states last year were a handful of local dates. The next Nashville show will be April 10 at Searachie and an all-ages show on April 29 at Saint Philip Church in Franklin.

### Compass Points

One of the great musical treasures in Nashville is the catalogue of Compass Records. The little indie label has a musical diversity that major label conglomerations can't even begin to touch. When I open a package from Compass, I never know whether I am about to hear world music, folk, Celtic, jazz, funk or pop. This kind of mystery is nice when you consider what kind of excitement you know will come out of a package from a Music row address.

The latest gem from Compass is Chris Webster's album *Drive*. Known to some as the lead singer for the eclectic act Mumbo Gumbo, Webster is a very soulful female vocalist who at times sounds like a younger Bonnie Raitt with a slightly less husky voice. She is a fine songwriter, as evidenced on cuts like "Circles in the Wind" and "Candybars and Freedom," and she knows how to choose perfect cover songs for her pipes. When she soars through Van Morrison's "Ball and Chain" or shows the emotional depth of her voice in Randy Newman's "Real Emotional Girl," you know this woman has good taste.

The players on this California girls album are a Who's Who of Nashville. Dave Pomeroy, Matt Rollings, Bill Lloyd and Jonell Mosser are among the many impressive guests on this rootsy, pop-rock recording. Check out Chris Webster and always keep an eye on where the Compass is pointing.

### Shania Says 'Ouch'

If you liked the Grammy review in this column last week, you'll be pleased to know that Shania Twain was called the "Loser of the Week" in *Entertainment Weekly* following her Grammy performance. The magazine points out that Twain was shut out in all major categories, and that she "made matters worse by affecting a ridiculous S & M Audrey Hepburn look for a robotic rendition of 'Man, I Feel Like a Woman.'"

*EW* didn't even bother to acknowledge the silly outfits worn by The Dixie Chicks, a look that Nashvilleans are still laughing about. Guess our local threesome needs "Full Length Mirrors" instead of "Wide Open Spaces." □



Chris Webster



# Fest de Ville

## NASHVILLE

October 10, 2000

Dear Bob,

Thank you so much for joining us at Fest de Ville to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Tennessee Performing Arts Center and for supporting TPAC's ongoing commitment to present the very best of artistry to the Nashville community.

Despite the rain, Fest de Ville Nashville was a success. It was wonderful to see people asking questions of the demonstrating artists, applauding performances, dancing, making puppets, playing the tuba...becoming discoverers of art in all its many forms. Our goal was to get people in Nashville excited about the creativity that lives and thrives in our city, and it worked! It worked- because people like you shared in our goal and together we made an event that truly celebrated our artistic community.

We truly appreciate your contribution to this event and its success.

The goals and intentions behind Fest de Ville live on, although the streets are now quiet. The halls of TPAC continue to feature offerings by the visiting groups and resident companies throughout the year; performances designed to educate, entertain and challenge arts lovers in the city. We hope that Fest de Ville inspired people to try new things and to continue to explore the many faces of art in Nashville and we look forward to next year!

Many, many thanks for being a part of this inaugural event - please know how much we mean it when we say, "we couldn't have done it without you".

Warm regards,

Steven Greil

Erika Wollam Nichols

Robert Frye



# Christian Musician

Celtic/Pop/Rock group Ceili Rain (pronounced "KAY-lee") has a brilliant album for the taking and is fronted by long-time songwriter Bob Halligan, Jr. Bob has written tunes for tons of big name secular artists (Cher, Judas Priest, Kathy Mattea and Kiss) and a handful of Christian artists as well. Ceili Rain's sound and lyrics are both extremely unique. Big rock guitar mixed with Celtic instruments like tin whistles, pipes, accordions, and fiddles – definitely unique for the Christian market, or any market. The album starts with a wonderful song about heaven's reward called "That's All The Lumber You Sent." The album has a number of great pop tunes including "I Don't Need A Picture," "Do It Anyway," and "Love Travels." From "Love Travels": "The shadows, the miles...love finds you...I can love you from here." The band's anthem and mission statement, "Ceili Rain," is a rocking song about heavenly parties, and the band delivers it whole heartedly at their live shows. The seven piece ensemble is stacked tall and wide with musical talent (we'll do a more in depth interview with Ceili Rain in a future issue) and the band's message is about bringing all kinds of people together to party in Christ. "I want to make music that brings myself and anyone else with earshot a step closer to God," says Bob Halligan, Jr. We believe he has achieved it with Ceili Rain...let the party begin. Look for it on Punch Records.



July/August '98



August 19–26, 1999

**six pick**

## **Ceili Rain**

The seven-headed musical joy-monster known as Ceili Rain doesn't just put on concerts, it creates high-energy Celtic hoedowns that occasionally include band members in kilts snaking through the crowd.

Led by Nashville singer-songwriter Bob Halligan, Ceili Rain blends Irish folk and American rock with instrumentation ranging from electric guitars to bagpipes and tin whistle. Primarily known for many years as a songwriter, Halligan has penned songs for everyone from Cher to Judas Priest.

The suggestion to combine Celtic music with rock came from his wife. His initial response? "That's the stupidest idea I ever heard," Halligan recalls. He soon changed his mind. Celtic music strikes a deep chord in people, explains Halligan, because it derives from "a collective yearning people have for God, for spirituality, for home, for togetherness."

—Nicole Pensiero

*Sat., Aug. 21, 7:30 p.m. and 10:30 p.m., Tin Angel, 20 S. Second St., 215-928-0978.*



December 30, 1999–January 6, 2000

critic pick|world music

## Ceili Rain

In the press kit for his band Ceili Rain, Bob Halligan Jr. includes two pages of customer comments from Amazon.com. Some of the amateur reviewers/fans characterize the band as Christian; others, as Celtic rock. None mention the elements of grandiose, '80s-style pop metal, but they're there as well.

The truth is, the band's music is all of these, a hodgepodge of styles that invites listeners to take from it what they want. "It's pop music, first and foremost," says Halligan, a longtime songwriter whose tunes have been recorded by the likes of Judas Priest, Joan Jett, Michael Bolton and Cher. "It's rock, second. Celtic, third.... There's nothing purist about what we do. It's very much an amalgam."

And spiritual, he adds, is a more accurate descriptive than Christian. Despite using clearly Christian imagery in some songs ("That's All The Lumber You Sent," from the album *Say-KAY-lee* [Punch], is a parable about heaven, and "666 Degrees" is about hell), Halligan hopes his music "pokes little windows" through the walls that separate religions. "We're careful to do it in a way that people don't get the holy-roller heebie-jeebies," he explains. "I wouldn't want the fact that I'm a Catholic to turn off a Hindu. I take a bright view on any sincere seeker."

—Frank Lewis

*Ceili Rain, Sun., Jan. 2, 7 p.m., \$12, The Tin Angel, 20 S. Second St., 215-928-0978.*

# Artists & Music

## HIGHER GROUND



by Deborah Evans Price

**C**ELTIC PRIDE: Both ASCAP director of writer relations Dan Keen and Warner Resound VP/GM Barry Landis had "I told you so" gleams in their eyes as I stood wildly cheering Ceili (pronounced Kay-lee) Rain following the band's showcase at Warner Bros.' Music Row offices. Though not officially signed to a label yet, the band is being courted by Warner, BMG, and Interscope, among others. Keen had been urging me to go see these guys for more than a year, and Landis was kind enough to get me a tape, but nothing could prepare me for the magic Ceili Rain creates live. It was one of the best showcases I've

seen on Music Row during my 12 years here. And it was certainly the only Nashville showcase I've been to that featured bagpipes and a guy doing an Irish jig in a kilt.

Ceili Rain consists of Chris Carmichael on fiddle, Cactus Moser on drums (which explains why he is the only original member who didn't rejoin Highway 101's current reunion), Hunter Lee on bagpipes, newest member Buddy Connolly on accordion, Rick Cua on bass, Tony Hooper on guitar, and lead vocalist Bob Halligan Jr., who modestly says that the whole band is made up of front men and that he is just the one standing in the middle. It's true. The entire band is incredibly accomplished, but Halligan should never sell himself short. He's a great front man. The combination of his engaging vocals and quick wit were the catalyst for the spirited set.

The showcase began with Moser and Lee walking through the crowd to the stage while playing drums and bagpipes, respectively. When the whole band was onstage together, they exploded into the lively pop anthem "Love Travels," and the audience was mesmerized.

*(Continued on next page)*

# Billboard®

MAY 25, 1996

## HIGHER GROUND

*(Continued from preceding page)*

It's hard to define the Ceili Rain sound, since they are unlike anything else out there. I almost feel guilty for writing about them in this, the Christian music column, because their music is so much more expansive. And though the bright pop melodies and positive lyrics are perfect for the Christian market, these guys deserve to be heard by the entire world. Their potential is limitless, because they have an appeal that knows no boundaries.

# Radio hour is international stage for independent musicians

The Associated Press

LEXINGTON, Ky. — In the genre-obsessed world of modern popular music there is no obvious pigeonhole for a band like Ceili Rain, a septet that blends elements of Celtic, folk, pop and Christian music.

That was exactly why singer Bob

Halligan Jr. and the rest of his band were right at home when they showed up to play selections from their self-titled album at a recent taping of the Woodsongs Old-Time Radio Hour.

"This is a powerful Celtic record," Woodsongs host Michael Johnathon told an audience of about 30 crammed

into the Planet III Recording Studio. "This is 'arena Celtic.'"

Genre bending and blending may be anathema to major record labels, but it's exactly what Johnathon, a folk singer himself, wants on his seven-month-old show, which he likes to describe as a "global living room con-

cert."

Distributed by Johnathon's Lexington-based PoetMan Records USA label and the World Radio public network, Woodsongs currently is heard on 31 radio stations in the United States, as well as in Canada, France, Poland, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Australia.

"The goal is to get the audience out of the star system and into where real music comes from," Johnathon said. "Real music is not pristine and it isn't clean, perfect. It is raw and gritty and the best music is made by unknown people."

Woodsongs is taped each Monday evening at Planet III, a ramshackle private studio built in the middle of an herb garden, just off a busy avenue about a mile from downtown Lexington.

Audience members line up at the door for free admission 15 minutes before the taping; they sit on plastic garden chairs and are welcome to help themselves to apple cider and homemade cookies.

Johnathon's other guest on the show that featured Ceili Rain was singer-songwriter Scott Robinson. Johnathon's introduction of Robinson prompted one audience member to break into loud applause and cheering.

"He brought his fan with him," Johnathon cracked.

The show moves quickly and Johnathon makes an affable master of ceremonies, mixing songs from the performers, plugs for their albums and the Woodsongs website — "the only

folk-American-bluegrass newscast in public radio" — and friendly banter.

Introducing Robinson, an acoustic balladeer who had to follow the fast-paced music of Ceili Rain, Johnathon recalled going to a Judds concert where Garth Brooks was the opening act.

"You've got the same look in your eye as Wynonna did after Garth Brooks opened up," Johnathon told Robinson, who cradled a guitar as he sat in a chair in front of a microphone.

Robinson then played a haunting song titled "A Chance To Dream" — with the memorable refrain, "If it weren't for the chance to dream of you, I'd never go to sleep" — and instructed listeners on how to get a copy of his self-produced compact disc, "Mellow Drama."

"If you see a '92 Prizm with the driver's side door bashed in, make the international sign for CD and I'll pull over and sell you one," he joked.

"I'm sure our listeners in Holland will appreciate that," Johnathon responded.

Robinson, 41, played his first gig on the night of his high school graduation but didn't become a full-time musician until about a year ago.

"I've run a Japanese restaurant, driven a garbage truck," he said after the taping. "I hit 40 and I decided to give it a shot."

The chance to play on Woodsongs "means everything" to him, Robinson said. "It's sharing music," he said. "Hopefully, people will find some-

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## Radio

Continued from Page C1

thing to like about your music."

Halligan, the front man for Ceili Rain, has long been a part of mainstream American pop, writing songs for acts as diverse as KISS, Judas Priest, Joan Jett and Cher. And Ceili Rain's songs have been recorded and made hits by other artists, including country singer Kathy Mattea and Christian artists Rebecca St. James and Eli. Halligan said Ceili Rain simply needs to bypass what he calls the "gatekeepers" at the major record labels to find acceptance from a wide audience.

"I think we'll be in the mainstream eventually; it's just going to take some time to crack through. The songs are proving themselves," he said.

Like previous appearances on Public Radio International's Mountain Stage and World Cafe programs, playing Woodsongs is an important opportunity for a band like Ceili Rain, Halligan said.

"This is very exciting. Any musician likes to work smart, not hard, and this is a great opportunity to do that," he said. "You can reach thousands of people in one shot, vs. 120 in a club."

Johnathon said he wants Woodsongs to show listeners that music is not only a spectator sport.

"Hopefully, by having a show that is geared around so many wonderful, hard-working, reaching-out artists, more people feel like they can do it," he said. "Music is not star-system dependent. It is dependent only on your willingness to make music."

"This is sort of a global lesson in how to turn the TV off," he added. "Not to sound pretentious, but really that's what it is. We want people to feel like they can do it."



The Associated Press  
Celtic rock band Ceili Rain, of Nashville, Tenn., performs during taping of the Woodsongs Old-Time Radio Hour at PLANET III studio in Lexington, Ky. Woodsongs, which provides an international stage for independent musicians, currently is heard on 31 radio stations in the United States, as well as in Canada, France, Poland, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Australia.