

Switchback: Fusing Cultures

by [Kristi Kates](#), Groupee.com Writer September 11, 2009

Americana-Celtic duo [Switchback](#) have been doing the DIY band thing from their earliest beginnings 23 years ago in Illinois. Mandolin student Brian FitzGerald - the "elder statesman" of the band, as he'd already been on the road touring - met Marty McCormack, a voice student at the American Conservatory of Chicago (and a member of



of Star Search band Beyond Blue) through fortuitous circumstances. They were both chosen by legendary master composer Terrence Teahan to join his traditional Irish music group.

It was via Teahan that both musicians learned the old-country techniques of Irish music - and it would be those sounds that would later infuse into their Americana-folk-rock sound when they became a duo in 1993, setting Switchback apart from the pack. "We knew that we wished to make music a full-time venture," Marty McCormack says.

They also began their career totally DIY, without working in a "real" recording studio or having proper management; instead, they simply focused and did everything on their own.

"We started out as grass roots as you could get, recording and making cassettes at Brian's apartment," McCormack says, "we'd sell them at shows for \$5." In keeping with their Irish musical training, they kept McCormack's bass sound more percussive in tone, and had FitzGerald craft a style on the mandolin and guitar in which he'd carry both the melody line and chords while the duo sang over the mix.

"We are both able to sing and harmonize with each other easily; so the result is very much a full band sound," McCormack continues, "that doesn't mean that we don't enjoy having other musicians play with us, though; when we do bring together our full band, it's an extremely rich sounding experience."

One of those collaborators would soon be Lloyd Maines - both father to [Dixie Chicks](#) singer Natalie Maines and an acclaimed multi-instrumentalist and producer in his own right. ("Our first brush with greatness was Maines," FitzGerald says.) Maines tapped Switchback for a studio project, and helped them learn how to add more elements to their music. "I think our latest album is more radio ready album than our previous albums," FitzGerald says.

McCormack and FitzGerald both say that they're "always" working on new recordings, their latest being their *Ghosts of the River Folk* album, set for a January 2010 release.

"When we started work on *Ghosts*, we cut about 22 tracks and decided to move some of them to our next album called *Kanoka* which we intend to bring Lloyd in on," McCormack explains, "we also have several live albums of concerts we have given in Ireland, Holland and Canada that we are planning to release as well."

In addition to all of this album work, Switchback is stacking up a pretty good list of honors too, from opening spots for [Leon Russell](#) and the [Moody Blues](#), to the poignant inclusion of their song, "The Death of William Henry," in a portion of the Illinois Lincoln

"That song is from our last album," McCormack explains, "and it's a song-cycle that centers around a soldier who goes to war, is killed and returned to his family. The emotions of Henry, his wife, his comrades, his community are of course what we were examining, putting a face to the countless people who have died not only in Iraq and Afghanistan, but in all wars. The melody itself is Midwestern folk, with a bit of a bluegrass feel to it; we wanted to create musically the moment of William Henry's death and so, wrote this slow waltz that is his daydreaming about dancing with his wife," he continues.

"The title tells you that he is dying at the same time. It was the simplicity that we were after, that a regular man was having thoughts of love at the moment that an act of violence ends his life. That fits well with the Lincoln site, especially when one ponders the suffering that Lincoln went through with sending men off to death; I like the fact that the organizers of the Lincoln event felt that this song would put a face on those men who sacrificed, and ultimately on the leader that reluctantly committed them to battle."

Switchback are set for another round of touring, too, on which they'll be bringing along their new songs plus their reliable roster of fan favorites, among them "Apple of My Eye," "Bamboozled," and "Connemara Man." But it'll be where you are in the world that'll determine that night's Switchback setlist.

"Different regions bring out a whole another round of songs - if we're playing a Celtic festival in Iowa or a concert in France for example," FitzGerald says, "the Irish and Dutch fans have more of an interest in our Americana sound, while at our Canadian concerts, the fans there seem to delve a bit deeper into some of our other material, which allows us to play material we don't normally play. We always want to keep bringing all our songs to our fans."

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