



MARTIN WAUGH

Audiences can hear plaintive ballads as well as rollicking rhythms when the Celtic and folk band Talisman takes the stage. Members of the band, three of whom are from Vancouver, are, from left, Carl Thor, Jeff Kerssen-Griep, Ian Clemons of Portland and Sara Martin.

Celtic connection

Local band Talisman thinks beyond St. Paddy's Day

By **TRICIA JONES**
Columbian staff writer

It started when two young students met in a ballroom dance class at an Illinois university.

Carl Thor recalls that they first noticed each other while dancing the polka. Sara Martin says she's forgotten that detail.

"Well, one of us noticed," Thor amends.

Nearly 30 years after that historic polka, the Vancouver husband and wife are still in tune together as half of the Celtic and folk band Talisman.

The quartet will help Clark County celebrate St. Patrick's Day with a Friday night performance at Ridgefield's Old Liberty Theater.

Thor and Martin founded Talisman about a dozen years ago in Lawrence, Kan. The native Midwesterners transplanted the group's core — themselves — to Vancouver upon moving here eight years ago. A few personnel changes later, Talisman is rounded out by guitarist Jeff Kerksen-Griep of Vancouver and fiddler Ian Clemons of Portland.

Hammered dulcimer, flutes, autoharp and vocals also are featured. Anywhere from a quarter to a third of the band's music is original.

Mid-March is when Americans are most likely to get an earful of Celtic

If you go

- **What:** Celtic and folk music by Talisman.
- **When:** 7:30 p.m. Friday.
- **Where:** Old Liberty Theater, 115 N. Main St., Ridgefield.
- **Cost:** \$10.
- **Information:** Call 360-887-7260 or visit www.oldlibertytheater.com.

music, as pubs, restaurants and concert halls book acts with Irish songs in their repertoires. But Martin says it's a musical genre that's suitable year-round.

"If (Celtic music) makes you feel joyful and energizes you and intrigues you, why limit yourself to this one time of year?" she said.

Broadly defined, Celtic music has a musical heritage spanning parts of Europe and North America, Thor said. He added that much of today's music has Celtic roots.

Talisman members enjoy showing audiences that the centuries-old musical style has more to offer than jigs and Riverdance tunes, although they have nothing against those types of

compositions.

"I think it's worth noting that we're an American Celtic band, meaning that we let more of those contradance (in which dancers form two lines opposite each other), Appalachian and U.S. folk influences color our Celtic playing than a purist Irish band would," said Kerksen-Griep. "We play some beautiful music, but this band also sweats, and not from nerves."

The sweat comes from producing what Martin refers to as driving, rhythmic, energetic music powered largely by Kerksen-Griep's guitar. Talisman members like to say they stretch the genre, and that's evident on 2004's "Just Up the Hill," the group's most recent recording.

Among the opening tracks are sprightly pieces that conjure up images of milkmaids and shepherders gamboling in a spring meadow. Another tune nudges a listener into regret for the lad — or lass — left behind in one's careless youth. Yet another has a medieval Yuletide

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Talisman:

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feel evoking wassail cups and holly-festooned fireplaces with revolving boars on spits.

The music's variety and adaptability may be what has kept it alive across countries, cultures and centuries.

"Celtic music, Irish music, are living traditions. You can't really say, 'This is how it was, so it has to be this way forever,'" Thor said.

Still, much of the music's appeal lies in the way it hits a chord of familiarity, even with first-time listeners. Thor said he can't count the number of times people have been drawn to the sound of the hammered dulcimer at a farmers or Saturday market.

"It looks like a whole field of strings ... and has a very interesting sound combination of percussive and ringing string sound," Thor said.

Martin plays several types of flutes for Talisman, including what's commonly called the pennywhistle, or tin whistle. Its piping shrillness is a merry accompaniment to many Irish tunes.

"I'm very conscious of the sound of breath as it moves through those instruments. To me, it's kind of like an extension of singing," she said.

With the addition of Clemons last year as fiddler, Talisman has been reflecting some of its special interests in Irish, Breton and Galician music. Another Talisman recording is probably at least a year away, but Thor said the group's goal is to perform at least a couple of times a month and to develop more of a regional following.

That's a challenge, given that all four Talisman musicians have day jobs. But the others probably would agree with Martin's conviction that people need to create more of a communal culture.



ON THE WEB

Talisman:
www.talismanmusic.com

“It bothers me to see so many people relying on popping in a CD, although that can be a wonderful way to share music widely,” said Martin, director of advising and counseling at Clark College. “For me, this is one of the most accessible forms of music ... and we need to get together and make more music, more arts, for each other.”

Kerssen-Griep sees hopeful signs that the Vancouver area is doing just that. He said the city burnishes its arts status each time it hires an original band to play a public event in town.

“We love being part of the strong Celtic and old-time music scene that’s taken root around here,” he said, referring to Clark County-based acts such as Misty River and the Pangur Ban Ceili Band, and others in Portland.

“It all points to this area as a fertile regional home for authentic, fiddle-driven folk music.”