

The live Bill Whelan

By JOHN O'SHAUGHNESSY

EVERYONE is familiar with the Guinness surfing commercial on television and the man who wrote the brilliantly evocative music jingle is smiling Limerickman Bill Whelan, who from next month on will once again be standing up from his piano and introducing the guest host each week on Saturday Live.

When Bill Whelan left Limerick less than two decades ago to study law at Trinity College, little could he have thought that the career he had in mind would take second place to his second love, music.

Educated at Crescent College, Billy wasn't one to engage himself in sports. It was never his ambition to captain the college team, or to excel in athletics.

From an early age he developed an aptitude for music and while everybody else was out kicking a football, he was perfecting the piano and organ.

Ever before the advent of the night club craze, Billy dabbled in the disc jockey scene, providing the music at what were then known as school hops.

He often relates how Michael McNamara and himself entered a disc jockey competition at Greenpark Racecourse during a festival. Whelan went on to win, with Mickey Mac, as he is now affectionately known, in second place.

As Musical Director of Saturday Live, Bill Whelan is vastly experienced as conductor, composer and performer; but Saturday Live was the first time he was called upon to talk to camera and like many a man and woman before him, he found television to be the ultimate terror machine.

"I was petrified. Nothing that anyone tells you or says to you can possibly prepare you for that first moment of 'Live' television. You think you are never going to survive it."

Survive it he did and now that the show is about to enter its second year, Billy has a clear view of his role.

"My job is to bring on the guests, instead of discovering them sitting on the set. Hopefully, they come on to a bit of warmth and the introduction is to make them relax.

Fellow Limerickman, Richard Harris, was responsible for Bill getting hooked on a musical career, while still just a schoolboy.

Ovation

"A friend in London had a tape of songs and brought it into Richard Harris's office. At that time, Harris was

working with Jimmy Webb, the songwriter, and Webb was ill, so within a week I was writing the music for Bloomfield one of Harris's major movies. I was still only a schoolboy and I thought after that it would be a Rolls Royce all the way".

When the film was shown at the Savoy, Billy sat with the many distinguished guests and was given an ovation for his work.

Commonsense prevailed when the Rolls failed to materialise and he went to Dublin where he took his law degree.

With a solid credential under his belt, he abandoned the law books and dived head first into music, starting as a session musician. In a short space of time, he was part of a busy core of musicians, constantly in demand both for playing and producing.

In 1980 all of Billy's previous exploits were eclipsed by his superb arrangement and production of Johnny Logan's Eurovision winner, "What's Another Year", which went on to become No. 1 in eleven countries in Europe. Who can forget the haunting saxophone solo and the deftness of touch, which made this one of the biggest selling Irish singles of all time. It is now history that Logan went on to repeat his feat in 1987 with "Hold Me Now" — and again Whelan had an input.

Limerick musician who has gone a long way

Following the Eurovision of '80, Billy's diary filled up rather dramatically and he has since become our most eminent producer, composer and musician with a string of credits to his name.

Planxty

In 1981, along with Donal Lunny, Bill wrote the stunning "Time Dance", which was used as the centrepiece of RTE's Eurovision production in Dublin in 1981. The association with Lunny continued with Bill joining Planxty on keyboards.

He also produced a couple of tracks for U2 on the "War" album and his more recent successes involved Those Nervous Animals, Freddie White, Kate Bush, Van Morrison and the flashy Radio 2 jingles.

Bill Whelan's daily routine is like a train timetable run wild.

His services as composer and writer are very much in demand, and it is not

unusual for him to be in recording studios in London and Los Angeles in the same week.

The Saturday Live slot put him before the cameras for the first time, and he admits to enjoying the experience. Initially he came in for some flak from the media but now that the show has settled down, the Limerickman is seen as very much part and parcel of it.

He has no real ambition to pursue his TV career any further. There is nothing he likes better than sitting down and penning a piece of music.

Some of the world's leading recording artistes have invited him to do backing tracks on their albums, and he has also advised on musical content.

Bill, son of the late David and Irene Whelan of William Street, hasn't allowed success to go to his head. He is too busy to sit back and clap himself on the back. Always willing to lend a hand to aspiring young musicians, he remembers his own school days in Limerick when he was glad to be given assistance.

Music is his life. Time does not permit him to return to Limerick too often, but when he does, he makes a point of calling on his former friends.

Now he is getting ready for another season of Saturday Live, with rehearsals due to get under way shortly.



Pictured at the launch of the 5-year Mackey Stand ticket scheme were Dan Hickey, Noel Drumgoole, Jim Hickey and Tom Boland. Purchasers are entitled to free admission to all games at the Gaelic Grounds for a five-year period. The £1.3m Mackey Stand is due to open next spring.

Castletroy View

'The Crucible', still relevant

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