

## Bill Frisell, the veteran American jazzman dubbed the Clark Kent of the electric guitar, is preparing a rare treat for the music lovers of Cork, writes Philip Watson

To post-punk singer-songwriter Gavin Friday, his music “has this great eclectic ambience, an essence almost, that merges into anything from blues to jazz to country to acoustic”. To traditional Irish fiddle player Martin

been inspired by a diverse range of forms, from bluegrass to pop, blues to West African, roots to classical. This time last year he released *All We Are Saying*, an album of imaginative interpretations of the songs of John Lennon.

“I’m actually fine with being

day concert at New York’s Carnegie Hall, at the end of which Shane MacGowan grabbed Frisell’s guitar and played it loudly, upside down.

“On that night, we went from Lou Reed to Courtney Love to Rufus Wainwright to Antony Hegarty to U2,” says Friday.

big part of whatever there is of American music, and Irish music seems extraordinarily beautiful and emotional, and heavy and happy — it’s got everything you need in there,” he says, by phone from Seattle.

“And I’ve played with Bono and U2 — I mean, that’s Irish,

# The best things in life

Hayes, “he’s beyond genre — he’s created his own music, an elemental area where mood and feeling always happen”. For the great English-born jazz pianist Marian McPartland, “it’s easy to understand why everyone loves him — his music is all very tuneful, and a lot of fun to listen to”.

Unless you’re a dedicated jazz-head, Bill Frisell may be the greatest musician you’ve never heard of. Over a period of 35 years and more than 250 recordings, the 61-year-old American guitarist and composer has established himself as one of the most pioneering and panoramic musicians at work today.

Frisell was lauded by *The Wall Street Journal* as “one of the most innovative and influential jazz guitarists of the past 25 years”. He is certainly a sensitive and consummate improviser, who has worked with many jazz greats. However, his reach and dedicated following goes far beyond the freeform yet sometimes introspective borders of jazz. Adopting an admirably ambitious approach to music, Frisell’s projects have

described as ‘a jazz guitarist’, and I respect that, and there’s certainly plenty to do within that form,” says Frisell, who will perform a live original film soundtrack with his band on the opening night of the Corona Cork Film Festival.

“It’s just that when I think about some of the people who’ve inspired me — Thelonious Monk, Sonny Rollins and Miles Davis — for me jazz is not so much a style as a way of thinking, a process of transforming what’s around you. What bothers me is when the word used to describe some music excludes something else; it’s like there are rules that keep people apart. I’m trying not to shut anything out.”

It’s a conviction shared by many of the multi-directional musicians with whom Frisell has played. Friday has explored a wide variety of music, from alt-rock to film soundtracks to cabaret, as well as acting and painting. Frisell played on Friday’s debut solo album in 1989, and was a member of the house band for the epic Gavin Friday and Friends 50th birth-

“There are few musicians who could handle that — and my brain was on the floor the next day — but Bill didn’t even blink.”

Hayes also has a broad range of perspectives, from jazz to early music to contemporary classical, as well as a dislike of “any rigidity of thought”. Frisell was his automatic choice when it was suggested that Hayes collaborate with a musician from another genre for a short tour; Frisell, Hayes and guitarist Dennis Cahill played three dates in Ireland in 2007.

“I was nervous at first, but I found him to be humble, good-humoured and courageous, and I savoured every minute of playing with him,” says Hayes. “Not only was it fascinating to experience some of the freedom he certainly has on stage, but Bill’s very interested in the American folk and country traditions, and he likes melody. There were conscious and unconscious intersections with Irish music.”

Frisell admits to not being “any kind of expert or scholar”, and to having only a few Irish albums. “Yet I know that Irish-American music is certainly a

right?” Indeed Frisell played on and composed tracks for the soundtrack produced by U2 for Wim Wenders’s film *The Million Dollar Hotel*.

“You can hear in those guys some kind of core or soul of the music,” he says. “When I hear U2 there’s [a] sound that goes all the way back to the early fiddle tunes I’ve heard.”

Frisell has forged other music connections with a dizzying range of similarly shape-shifting musicians. For his 1997 acoustic country-bluegrass album, *Nashville*, he played with members of Alison Krauss’s Union Station band. Two years later he worked with Elvis Costello and Burt Bacharach on *The Sweetest Punch*, which features Frisell’s ensemble arrangements for new songs written by the duo. For his “world-fusion” album *The Intercontinentals*, he formed a band made up of a Malian percussionist, a Brazilian singer and guitarist, and a Greek oud and bouzouki player. “All the people I’ve had success playing with have an openness and a sense of joy in the music itself,” he says. “There’s no competition





Guitar man: Frisell has been at the top for years

going on; nobody's trying to show the other what they know. I'm trying to get a conversation going in the music."

Frisell is a shy, modest, polite, hesitant, gentle giant of a man.

can photographer Mike Dis-farmer and German painter Gerhard Richter, created slap-stick scores for the silent films of Buster Keaton, and crafted soundtracks for films by Gus van Sant and television specials by cartoonist Gary Larson. Yet this is the first time he has

unique experience and a great spectacle," says Mick Hannigan, the festival director. "Bill Morrison's work is terrifically artistic and innovative; he works with the texture of film, with decaying footage that often has its own visual beauty. And Frisell is a great and prolific composer

## are freeform

His 6ft 1in frame and round bespectacled face led Spin magazine to dub him "the Clark Kent of the electric guitar". He is soft-spoken and self-effacing — though rather more extrovert and expressive on stage. His finely honed music often seems to achieve the impossible: it is at once accessible and avant-garde. Frisell uses all manner of pedals and effects to produce echoes, extensions, loops, reverbs and distortions. His music can be tender, haunting, fluid, warm, violent and heart-breaking. It is like a journey through the American landscape: mythic, wide-open, cinematic, dream-like. "I'm just trying to use what I know and put my own experience into what I'm doing without limiting anything," Frisell once told *Guitar Player* magazine. "For me, music has always been this world where anything is possible."

It is a musical language and sensibility well suited to the project he is bringing to Cork. Frisell has been drawn to the visual arts on many occasions before — he has written music in response to the work of Ameri-

*'Just as it's the nature of a river to dry up or flood, I want the music to be alive and evolving all the time'*



worked with a film-maker "from the ground up".

The *Great Flood* is a 75-minute suite in which Frisell's quartet plays shimmering blues and oozy roots music accompanying archival images of the devastating Mississippi River flood of 1927, reworked by renowned film-maker and artist Bill Morrison. The film, which is divided into titled chronological chapters, attempts to provide a feel for a flood that displaced 1m people, and to explore "the ensuing transformation of American society and music".

"We think it's going to be a

whose music is generous to musicians and audiences alike. There is also some wry amusement here that Cork has been subject to flooding itself."

Frisell stresses that the film and music are not all about "death and destruction"; there is resilience, rebirth, even moments of black humour. "There are set pieces and melodies but, just as it's the nature of a river to dry up or flood, or to change its course, I want the music to be alive and evolving all the time," he says.

"I can't really put the power of this flood and the magnitude of this event and its effects into words. It is just so gigantic. Composing and playing music is a way of getting something out, of saying what I need to say. Music is how I express myself, how I communicate with people, much more than verbally. It's where my real voice is, where I really say something, where everything makes sense." □

*The Great Flood is at the Cork Opera House on November 11 as part of the Corona Cork Film Festival ([corkfilmfest.org](http://corkfilmfest.org))*