

THE MYTH AND MYSTERY OF TRADITIONAL IRISH MUSIC

By Daniel B. England

(published March 17, 2005 in for the Westport Minuteman and Fairfield Minuteman)

I was in Ireland a few years ago, traveling there with my friend Bud McDonald (with a name like mine, it's advisable to take along an Irish-leaning McDonald when in Ireland). In the course of our journey, we found ourselves in a country pub late at night. At some point as 11 p.m. came and went, the shades were pulled, the door was quietly closed and Guinness kept flowing. We were locked in, I realized, but the pints were tasting as they do only in Ireland, so what was not to like?

Suddenly, there was a flurry of shushing and the room grew quiet as an empty church. I glanced at Bud and he shrugged. Then, from somewhere deep in the pub, a woman began to sing with a voice as pure and sweet as a child's thought. She sang a tune I'd never heard for about five minutes and in that time, evoked glimpses and shades of emotions and images like a half-remembered dream. It was stirring and magical and the silence that followed her last echoing note was as appreciative as any applause. And that was it. Soon after the Garda Síochána showed up and we were all turned out into the night air, a little worse for drink, but restored in soul by a woman who sang.

I didn't know it at the time, but I had just experienced perhaps the only genuine expression of traditional Irish music. Saying that, however, I realize full well that I could have a fight on my hands for there is nothing so elusive as the definition of traditional Irish music and practically nothing else, save perhaps how to properly pour a pint of Guinness, that is more passionately held.

The oddest part of the expression "traditional Irish music" is just how malleable it is. A list of modern "Irish" artists will reveal some of the fault lines: Sinéad O'Connor Van Morrison, The Pogues, The Chieftains, the Cranberries, Enya, Rory Gallagher and the Afro-Celt Sound System are just some of the expressions of this ancient folk music. To make matters worse, there's not even much agreement about what instruments are allowed (some would say none but the human voice).

Guitars are now quite common as is are bouzoukis (a kind of long-necked lute) but both entered the world of Irish music in the 1960s. On the other hand, a bodhran (a kind of Irish tambourine) is mentioned in the 1800s. Fiddles show up all the time as do uilleann (pronounced ill-yun) pipes, Irish bagpipes, which found their way into the repertoire in the 1890s. These pipes are complicated instruments with a double reed, three single reed drones a tow-octave range and an optional set of three pipes with double reeds and keys. Improbable as it sounds, there are people who are able to play the things including Paddy Moloney of the Chieftains who reintroduced the instrument after it almost died out. Accordians and concertinas are often present as is the four-string tenor banjo that is tuned an octave below the fiddle. Harps turn up too, and not just on Guinness glasses.

Perhaps one of the reasons the word “traditional” persists despite the uncertain definition of it is because so many of the cultural arts of Ireland were all but eradicated through political and military upheavals, not to mention the Great Famine that took its toll. For those of Irish descent, traditional Irish music is a statement that despite all that has happened, they are proud of their heritage.

The real revival of Irish music happened in the 1960s and 70s with Sean O Riada’s The Chieftains, The Clancy Brothers, The Dubliners and Planxty. The Bothy Band came along in the 70s with their wildly successful album released in 1975. But inevitably, perhaps, the renewal of Irish music meant that it would also be transformed and soon American and British Rock and Roll put its own spin on the traditional sound (witness Van Morrison, for example). Even the heavy metal band Thin Lizzy got into the act with their rendition of “Whiskey in the Jar.”

These days people like Sinéad O’Connor weave traditional music into popular hits. New-Age singer Enya has more than a taste of Ireland in her songs and the Pogues managed to marry Irish tunes to punk rock. Even West African musical influences have gotten into the act with the Afro-Celt Sound System. And more keeps coming with the likes of Exile Eye, the Corrs and the Cranberries. There’s even some unlikely sounding variations that go by such names as Celtic battle metal, Celtic doom metal and Celtic pagan metal.

Here in Southern Connecticut, there is no shortage of Irish Music to be heard, and not just on Saint Patrick’s day. In Fairfield, the Gaelic Club not only presents regular concerts but members get together to play and significantly, to teach their musical skills and traditions to young people. One of the concerts held this winter at the handsome club on Beach road was a group called Grada from Dublin whose five members reeled and gighed to the delight of club members. To the untrained ear, all the music sounded as traditional as the Rose of Tralee, but it turns out that Grada composes about 70% of it (www.gradamusic.com). As one Grada player put it, “Our music is strongly rooted in the tradition but we’re not afraid to break new ground.” One of the distinguishing marks of the band is that they use a double base, which is about as traditional as chrome.

But if the prospect of St. Patrick’s Day is putting you in an Irish mood, there are a few treats in store. One notable concert will be held as part of the Westport Arts Center “Third Thursday” series of events, featuring Lisa Gutkin and her fiddle and Susan Mckeown, a Dublin-born singer, who the Irish Examiner described as “a singer of passion, grace and striking presence.”

Lisa Gutkin, who is of Jewish heritage and sees many parallels between the traditional music of Ireland and Israel, recently tried to define what was at the heart of Irish music. “It’s not easy to define,” she said. “There’s something melancholy about it even though it is essentially happy music. It really kicks with energy, but the part I like best is the subtlety of the really good players.”

She went on, “If you listen very closely, you’ll pick up ornaments, grace notes that make each great Irish musician distinctive. And that’s what I’m trying to do – to find my own voice, my own expression of this very complex art form. I just love it.” She confesses to using the Amazing Slow Downer, a downloadable program that allows the listener to slow down music without changing the pitch and thus hear all the fine points of any given performance.

When asked what she and Susan McKeown will do together on St. Paddy’s day, Lisa said she wasn’t sure. “We’ve performed together before. We’ll figure something out.” You can find a list of concerts in Connecticut as long as your arm at www.dirtylinen.com. You can also find information about traditional Irish tunes at www.irishtune.info .

One of the most captivating of Irish groups, Cherish the Ladies, is named after an Irish jig. They played in Fairfield last November and will once again come nearby our orbit when they perform in New York in April. The five-woman group is frequently featured on NPR radio’s Thistle and Shamrock and later this year will take part in the Cleveland Irish Festival, the Milwaukee Irish Festival and the Dublin (that’s Ohio) Irish Festival indicating that there’s a lot of interest in Irish culture and music in America.

Closer to home, back at the Gaelic Club, the Shamroques Irish Musical group meets to practice regularly for concerts all over the area. They perform 8-10 concerts a year. There’s also a Glee Club and a regular Irish Instrument Session on Mondays.

Sessions, as they are called, are a peculiar Irish event, often held in urban pubs in Ireland, and are now frequent happenings in this country as well. The first one was held in 1947 in London’s Camden Town bar called the Devonshire Arms. Players show up on a given evening and join in, and people in the establishment can pay attention or not (but not with a singer. In Ireland, at least, there’s not a sound apart from a few encouraging murmurs). There’s a certain etiquette associated with these sessions – players usually self-select if they feel they are up to the standard of the group and often the leader, sometimes the oldest player, will decide with a wink or a scowl who gets to play next or not at all. Fiddles and flutes abound in Irish sessions, but only one accordion is generally welcomed. (For a list of sessions in New York and for a list of Irish music events all during March, visit www.murphguide.com on the Web).

On St. Patrick’s Day, March 17, there will be entertainment at the Gaelic Club from noon on including performances from Liz McNicholl, Camac, Once Removed and John Gould. It’s free for members and \$5 for anyone else. Later in the year, there will be the 18th Annual Fairfield County Irish Festival in Trumbull.