

A Special Series of Music Concerts devoted to **THE MASTERS OF HEARTLAND TRADITIONS**

Friday, February 3

Missouri Fiddle Champion

TAYLOR McBAINE

with Cathy Barton & Dave Para

Friday, March 3

Slovenian and Armenian Music

CHICAGO SLOVENE BUTTON BOX CLUB

TAKSIM WEST

Saturday, March 18

Irish Music Masters

JOE SHANNON & JOHNNY McGREEVY

KEVIN CARROLL & LIZ CARROLL

Friday, April 7

Illinois & Indiana Ballads & Fiddle Tunes

LOTUS DICKEY

REVEREND JIM HOWIE

Friday, May 5

Scandinavian American Music

K. WENDELL WHITFORD

with Bob & Becky Wernerehl



Friday, June 2

Country & Urban Blues Masters

DAVID "Honeyboy" EDWARDS

ALBERT LUANDREW aka. "Sunnyland Slim"

All concerts will take place at 8:00 P.M. at the Libertyville High School Studio Theatre, 708 W. Park (Route 176), Libertyville, IL. For tickets or other information call: The David Adler Cultural Center at 367-0707.

This series is sponsored in part by funds from the Libertyville Rotary Club, The National Endowment for the Arts and the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.

**DAVID ADLER
CULTURAL CENTER**

1700 N. Milwaukee Ave. • Libertyville, IL 60048

MASTERS OF THE CHICAGO IRISH TRADITION

JOHN MCGREEVY, PAT CLOONAN, KEVIN CARROL AND LIZ CARROLL

American folk music, both vocal and instrumental, exhibits strong evidence of Irish influence. This circumstance can be traced to the mid-1800s when many Irish immigrants fanned out across the continent to build canals and railroads, work in lumber camps in the north and textile mills in the south, and mine coal in the Appalachians and lead in the Rockies.

A separate Irish musical tradition developed around the turn of the century in the major industrial cities of the Midwest and Northeast. This strain of Irish music maintained its independence from the larger world of American popular music and Anglo-American folk music. In fact, the first important collection of traditional Irish instrumental music was made, not in Ireland, but in Chicago. Francis O'Neill, a captain (and later Chief) in the Chicago police force-- with the help of a Sargeant James O'Neill who could write music-- notated the great stock of tunes possessed by the Windy City's substantial population of Irish musicians. O'Neill augmented the collection by gathering transcriptions from ancient manuscripts and by taking down tunes from professional, itinerant musicians, such as the famous piper Patsy Tuohey who travelled the vaudeville circuits.

The work of the O'Neills documented a music tradition in its hey-day, a music scene that was purely Irish even though situated an ocean away from its Emerald Isle homeland. By the 1930s traditional Irish music in Chicago was a shadow of what it had been when O'Neill's collection first appeared in 1903. There was, however, a handful of points of light. One, a young man born in Chicago in 1919 to a couple who had immigrated from the west of Ireland, became an accomplished fiddler who would later contribute greatly to a revival of traditional Irish music both here and abroad.

John McGreevy's parents were from County Connemara and County Mayo; neither was particularly musical. Hearing an uncle who played the accordion gave John the initial spark to learn an instrument. After a few violin lessons from the nuns at school, he began to play by ear, picking up Irish tunes and figuring out a distinctive Irish style of ornamenting melodies with the left hand and working the bow with the right. A major influence was the playing of his friend, Jimmy Neary, a fiddler and native of County Mayo, whose home in Chicago was the scene of many sessions of traditional music.

With Jimmy Neary, John McGreevy spent many hours studying and recreating the classic 78 rpm recordings of the great Sligo fiddlers, Michael Coleman, James Morrison, and Paddy Killoran. As a result, John's style of playing is essentially the same as that characteristic of County Sligo. But geographical regions have little influence in a community of immigrants thousands of miles away from their homeland, and stylistic dialects are easily transcended when a musician can learn from recordings and personal contacts with a large number of

musicians. Because John McGreevy has soaked up a huge repertoire from a wide variety of sources, and because he is such a strong player in his own right, you can only nod in agreement when he says "I've got a kind of a style of my own."

Though he has always played only semi-professionally, John's role as an important musician in Chicago's Irish community was established while he was still a teenager. In 1938, he recorded for Decca with Pat Roche's Harp and Shamrock Orchestra, a group that had been featured at the Irish Village at the World's Fair held in Chicago in 1934. At this session he was featured in a duet with pianist Eleanor Kane-- a unique stylist herself-- who later became Mrs. Jimmy Neary. Through the 1940s and '50s, he appeared regularly at ceilis or social dances, feisanna or Irish dance competitions, benefit concerts for Ireland, and other community events. Most of his playing, however, was at informal sessions at the Neary home, or with other lifelong musician friends, like piper Joe Shannon and fiddler Jimmy Giblin from Cleveland.

When the traditional Irish music scene in Chicago began to revitalize, John McGreevy was at the forefront. He was prominent in the creation of the Irish Musicians Association of America, founded in Chicago in 1956. He still faithfully travels to the Association's annual conventions. In 1959, he made his first trip to Ireland as part of a tour of sixteen Chicago-born musicians, singers, and dancers. Tour organizer, Frank Thornton, recalled that "Johnny McGreevy played like a house a-fire" in the twenty-three concerts given to demonstrate the strength of Irish traditions in Chicago. When the Irish Musicians Association began to hold an annual Chicago Fledh Ceoil, a music competition that sends its winners on to the All-Ireland championship, John won the Senior Fiddle Division three times before retiring from that arena.

In 1974 John recorded McGreevy and Cooley, an LP made with Chicago flute-player Seamus Cooley; and in 1980, a second LP was released, The Noonday Feast, featuring solos and duets with his old friend, Joe Shannon. John's playing with Eleanor Neary can also be heard on the anthology, Irish Traditional Instrumental Music from Chicago. In his seventieth year, he is still an active session player: always willing to share tunes with any musician, no matter how proficient; and always one of the last to stop, no matter how late the hour.

An important factor in the revival of Irish music in Chicago in the 1950s was the arrival of a new wave of immigrants, many of whom were musicians. Among these was accordionist Pat Cloonan, who today plays regularly with John McGreevy. Born in Connemara in 1931, Pat began to learn the button accordion at age seven, and brought his skills and instrument with him when he moved to Chicago while in his twenties. Pat and John usually enter the duet division at the Chicago Fledh Ceoil. Though John McGreevy has never competed in Ireland, Pat Cloonan regularly returns to his native land for the All-Ireland competition.

Another accordion player who immigrated to Chicago was Kevin Carroll, who was born in County Offaly in 1923 and came to the States in 1951. Besides his button-accordion playing, Kevin's major contribution to the Irish music scene in Chicago came about from marrying a woman from Limerick who gave birth to their daughter Liz in 1956. Liz grew up with Irish music

all around her. Her father started her on accordion at age five. By the time she was nine, she was following in the tradition of her maternal grandfather, fiddler Tom Cahill of County Limerick.

Like John McGreevy a generation or so before her, Liz Carroll was first introduced to the violin by nuns at school. But she chose to immerse herself in the aural tradition of Irish instrumental music. While still in her teens, she learned a large stock of tunes, picked up traditional techniques and began to experiment with different styles of Irish fiddling. And like John McGreevy, Liz developed her own style; she describes her playing as having found "its own way." However, it is difficult to characterize her style as essentially Sligo or anything else. In her own words, "I've heard every thing under the sun...but I've never centered [on any one style]." In fact, if you listen close you can hear bits of all that she has heard. But Liz's playing is more than a catalog of regional styles and technical wizardry learned from the great masters. She weaves it all together into an artistic whole.

Liz Carroll made her mark in Irish music early in her career. In 1974 she took first in the division for 16 to 18 year-olds at the All-Ireland competition. The very next year she won first place in the Senior Division. That same year, she and James Keane, Jr. took first place in the duet competition. Samples of their duet playing can be heard on the anthology album, Irish Traditional Instrumental Music from Chicago. Liz also has two LPs of her own: Kiss Me Kate with accordionist Tommy Maguire and A Friend Indeed with pianist Marty Fahey. In addition, a new album entitled Liz Carroll, with guitarist Daithi Sproule, will soon be released.

During her formative years in the 1960s, Liz's parents took her to many sessions and meetings of the Irish Musicians Association. At the time it was unusual for first-generation American-born children to be learning Irish music at all, let alone to be so closely involved in adult music sessions. Jimmy Keane and Marty Fahey are a few of the handful of Liz's peers in Chicago. But by the 1970s, with a Irish music revival in full swing, scores of children in the Irish-American community are being immersed in the sounds of traditional Irish music.

Because of the immense increase in accessible media-- such as LPs, cassette tapes, and tune books-- the need for a Francis O'Neill to compile comprehensive documentation of a living musical tradition is not as great today as it was ninety years ago. Still, for those in the Irish community who wish to protect their traditions, it is helpful to recognize the personal contributions of the masters of who conserved traditional music while the majority forsook it for a higher degree of assimilation into the mainstream of American popular culture.

--by Paul L. Tyler

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