

IN THE TRADITION:

THE CELTIC REVIVAL

**AN EVENING OF MUSIC
DANCE, AND STORIES
FROM IRELAND**

**FEATURING
KEVIN AND MAGGIE
HENRY
& PAULINE CONNEELY**

**PRESENTED BY THE DAVID ADLER
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Irish Music in Northern Illinois: A Continuing Community Tradition

The fortunes of traditional Irish music in the midwestern U.S. have always been closely linked with the forces of immigration and assimilation. In the nineteenth century, countless Irish pulled up roots, partly in response to a series of blights that spelled disaster to the potato crop, and headed for North America, where prospects seemed more promising. For those immigrants who made their way to the west or who settled in the rural districts and small cities, assimilation into the American mainstream was an easy and attractive alternative. The large cities, conversely, afforded immigrants an opportunity to develop tight neighborhood-based communities, ethnic enclaves where assimilation could be held at bay and loyalty to the old ways encouraged and nurtured, albeit in greatly changed circumstances.

It was in such a situation in Chicago in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that traditional Irish music and dance thrived. When new immigrants reached Chicago, most made their way to the Irish neighborhoods along the South Branch of the Chicago River. There they found many of the old familiar ways striving to take root in a strange and unfamiliar environment. The home, the church, and the pub all combined to nourish the adaptation of old-world traditional culture to a modern, urban American setting. Within the neighborhood, music and dance regularly served as important ingredients in small homey festive gatherings, such as weddings, christenings, wakes, and house parties. Music making and dancing often took place within the friendly walls of the neighborhood saloon as well. Irish music from this era is well-documented in Francis O'Neill's *Music of Ireland*, the so-called bible of Irish music assembled in 1903 by the then head of Chicago's police force.

As the twentieth century rolled on, and the impetus for assimilation increased largely due to the strong ideology of America as a melting pot Chicago's Irish made a strong case for maintaining a separate cultural identity. It was in the grand public gatherings of social dances that the newest immigrants could feel themselves most at home. At the same time, these events helped the established Irish-American community preserve and demonstrate their ties to the old sod. Traditional music and dance were key emblems of Irish identity and important instruments for solidifying a community in the midst of a stunning array of cultural and social diversity.

As evidence of this trend, Chicago saw a great increase in the number of commercial dance halls that catered to an Irish crowd. In the 1890s, there were a few venues like Finucane's Hall on South Archer where Irish dances were held. By the 1930s, there were many such halls on the south and west sides of the city, some specializing in one regional style--such as, the Kerry, Clare, or Mayo sets--or a peculiarly American style of ceili (or group) dancing. One outdoor venue in particular, Gaelic Park at 47th and California, had separate platforms for each different style of group dancing. Ceili dancing still takes place today in Chicago's Irish community, but not on nearly as many occasions or in nearly as many locations.

After World War II, the public performance of traditional Irish music went into decline, and the music became once again more of a domestic tradition centered around informal sessions in the home or in one of several important saloons. When Kevin Henry first came to Chicago in 1955 (after a brief stay in New York), he found that only a few musicians were playing out in public. The local Irish music scene at the time centered around piper Joe Shannon, who had come to this country at quite a young age, and two key individuals who were born in America to immigrant parents, fiddler John McGreevy and pianist Eleanor Kane Neary. The artistry of the latter two proved that the American-born could be just as Irish in their playing as a musician born and raised on the other side of the Atlantic. Other influential local musicians such as Terence "Cuz" Teahan, Madia Sugrue, and Frank Thornton had all come to America as young adults.

A new stream of immigrants in the late '50s, representing many different regional Irish traditions, leavened the musical mix and gave a boost to Irish culture in Chicago. Besides Kevin Henry from County Sligo, this group included Galway accordionist Kevin Keegan, Kerry fiddlers Paddy and Johnny Cronin, Connemara accordionist, Pat Cloonan, and flutist Noel Rice from County Tipperary. Also, Joe and Seamus Cooley, from County Galway, decided to settle in Chicago after visiting here with the Tulla Ceili Band in the 1950s. In 1956, Chicago's Irish community once again assumed national leadership in musical affairs when the Irish Musicians' Association of America was founded at a meeting in Chicago. Frank Thornton, a local flutist and whistle player, was the first president. The Chicago branch later became associated with the Dublin based *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Eireann*, an organization that promotes interest in traditional Irish music mainly through an annual series of competitions.

Still, by the 1960s, the future of traditional Irish music did not look very promising, for the Irish young in Chicago were more attracted to American popular music. What involvement there was of the young in Irish cultural activities was largely limited to competitive step-dancing, an activity that mostly attracted young girls and ended for most of them when they reached adulthood. A shining exception to this state of affairs was the early mastery of traditional music shown by a few American-born future stars: Liz Carroll, James Keane, Jr., and Marty Fahey.

They initially learned the music by sitting in on adult jam-sessions, and by their teens, both Liz and Jimmy were All-Ireland Senior Champions.

With a long history of community-based music making, Chicago's Irish were well-prepared for the Irish music boom that exploded on both sides of the Atlantic in the mid-'70s. The number of young people who have avidly embraced traditional Irish music today including a greatly increased percentage of young women dwarfs the relatively meager participation of the previous generation. Times have changed, nevertheless, and there is currently a divide between the Irish music and dance traditions. Ceili dancing is not nearly as prevalent as it was fifty years ago, and the competitive step-dance scene requires a slightly altered set of tempos. Rather than playing for social dancing, the current crop of musicians are more frequently found at regular tune sessions or in concert performances at a variety of venues around Chicago that cater to both Irish and non-Irish clientele.

As the end of the century approaches, the future for traditional Irish music in Chicago looks bright. Kevin Henry's daughter Maggie is ready to follow in her father's footsteps on the flute, and has taken up the fiddle as well. Also, new young musicians from Ireland continue to come to Chicago as well to be a part of the thriving local scene. Banjoist Pauline Coneely, who came to Chicago just a few years ago, is an estimable representative of the continuing musical trade between Chicago and Ireland that has contributed abundantly to richness of cultural life in this corner of Illinois.

@ by Paul L. Tyler

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