



An Irish Session: The Musical Vistas of John Meehan and John Williams

Two claims may confidently be advanced about Irish music in Chicago: first, that it was a thriving tradition in the first half of this century, and second, that the tradition has experienced an astounding resurgence in the last twenty years. Previous program notes for the "In the Tradition" series—for the John McGreevy, Liz Carrol, Jimmie Keane, and Kevin Henry concerts—examined the lasting impact of O'Neill's *Music of Ireland* collected and published in Chicago at the turn of the century, while also exploring the effects of immigration and the competing pulls of acculturation and cultural conservation. The refusal to give in totally to the forces of assimilation is symbolized by the strength of the Irish music revival in Chicago. (Copies of these earlier program notes are available on request.) The stories of two of the performer's featured in this "In the Tradition" concert flesh out this skeletal sketch of music history.

Born in 1925 after O'Neill and well before the revival in Kilcar, County Donegal, John Meehan started playing the fiddle at an early age. His father and his brothers all played fiddle, but John now feels he didn't learn right, for he never learned to read music. Thus, compared to the younger

players in Chicago today, he "lost out," and later gave up playing, altogether. Then when he came to America and Chicago in 1950, there were no regular ceillis (that is, dances or sessions) happening. The opportunities or encouragement for playing that had been omnipresent among the Chicago Irish were in decline.

Then came the Irish music revival fifteen or twenty years ago, "when it kind of blossomed out here," and John started playing again. Now there are ceillis at the "Heritage" (the Irish American Heritage Center) twice a month, and other informal opportunities for sessions there through the week. There are also regular pub sessions on the south side (at the 6511 Club) and on the north side (at the Abbey Pub). From the older players who attend these events, John puts together an orchestra to compete in the ceili band division at the Midwest *Fleogh Ceol*.

Plus, John always seems to be around and ever-ready to help out the young or starting-out musicians who come to study with John Williams on Mondays and Wednesdays at the Heritage Center.

John Williams was born on Halloween in 1967 to parents who, in the late 1950s, emigrated, met, married, and raised a family on Chicago's south side. John grew up in Chicago Lawn, a neighborhood that was equal parts Irish and Polish. He received an early, informal introduction to traditional Irish music at home: "I heard it around the house, right from the cradle." His father, who came from County Clare, played both concertina and button accordion. His mother, from County Mayo, could also play a little on the melodeon (a one-row button box), and will still play a tune or two every couple once in a while.

His parents' desire was for their children to receive more thorough music training and learn how to read notes. When John was eight, and continuing for five years, one Evelyn Sarna came to their house every week and gave John piano accordion lessons. Soon, he was able to pick up tunes by ear, and eagerly strove to earn the gummed foil stars awarded for each piece mastered. In fact, John entered into an unannounced competition to win more stars with another of Ms. Sarna's students, who he never actually met.

In 1975, John started attending Irish Musicians Association sessions at Callahan's Pub at 63rd and California. At that time only small handful of kids were playing Irish music, and most weren't sitting in with the older

players. Those who were included Kevin Henry's daughter Maggie (two years older than John) and especially Liz Carroll (then a teenager). John remembers being encouraged by flutist Seamus Cooley and fiddler Johnny McGreevy to play the tunes he knew in the adult sessions. Terence "Cuz" Teahan, another musical pillar of the south side Irish community, liked the fact John could read notation, and would each week give him a notebook page full of tunes. Then for his tenth or eleventh birthday, John got a highly prized copy of O'Neill's Music of Ireland. His mother had had to send to New York for it, for the 'bible' of Irish instrumental music could not be obtained locally.

Another key event occurred when John's dad got a tape recorder. The first use of the tape recorder was at a concert held at Bogan High School sponsored by Northern Aid, an Irish community organization. John remembers dressing up in a suit to go see Bothy Band, "and life has never been the same." The Bothies, one of the hot young Irish bands leading the traditional music revival in Ireland, were more representative in dress of the counter-culture than of the white-shirted crowd (mostly blue-collar workers through the week) at a Chicago Irish session. This was one of the first experiences that gave John a glimmer that the music that was such a part of his life was as much in the realm of art as in a world of ethnic solidarity.

At that time, flutist, piper and dancer Kevin Henry was a big hero on the south side. He performed weekly at Flanagan's Pub with Sligo Jack, an equally colorful community hero who was equal parts bartender, sociologist, and banjo-playing balladeer. John started to play with them at age sixteen or seventeen, earning \$75 a night (a much better take than what he made stocking shelves at Shop and Save). This gig gave him an invaluable training in musical flexibility: in learning to back up a singer, in performing for an energetic crowd with their own strong tastes.

Yet at this point, John did not think of himself as a professional musician. Instead he went off to the University of Illinois at Chicago to study art and design. But the big gigs on St. Patrick's Day, the constant opportunities to play for Irish dancing schools, and the chance to take on students began to show him the possibilities for becoming a musical entrepreneur. The awareness that as a musician, he was an artist began to grow as John received a different kind of attention from an intellectual crowd of Irish music lovers at the University of Chicago, and from his experiences with the musicians at the forefront of the revival in Ireland.

An important element of John's artistic growth has come from his annual pilgrimages to County Clare, the concertina capital of Ireland. Starting at the age of nineteen, he would work on his aunt and uncle's farm during the summer days and play at the village pubs at night: "This is a huge part of the picture, being in touch with the environment this music came out of." During these trips he has gained his own musical notoriety in Ireland. In 1989, '90, and '91 he won second place on button accordion in the All-Ireland Championships, and in 1989 he won first place (the ultimate foil star) on concertina. Then, like many champions, he quit competing.

Now John is poised to make his own substantial mark in the music world. He has worked with a variety of well-respected players on the American Irish scene, including Mick Moloney and piper Gerry O'Sullivan. He is perhaps most noted for his work with two of the most talented and creative Irish fiddlers active today, Chicago-native Liz Carroll and Irish-born Martin Hayes, who spent the last decade in Chicago before moving on to the West Coast. Yet because of his own unique gifts as a solo artist, John has recently been given a contract for a solo album with Green Linnet, an East Coast label. Locally, he is still stretching the envelope with the group Stone's Throw, that performs a kaleidoscopic brew of traditional and not-so-traditional music.

Still, John is deeply involved with the ethnic community that nurtured his art form and his own expressive abilities. For the last few years he has been teaching Irish music on Monday nights at the Irish American Heritage Center on the north side of Chicago, claiming "That became an important part of what I do." The Great Lakes Ceili Band is the aggregate name for John Williams adult students and alumni, who gather for sessions on Wednesday nights at the Heritage Center.

Members and friends of the Great Lakes Ceili Band who will join John tonight include accordionist Jack Murray, banjoist Gary Ticus, fiddler Karen Reskin, and the only Irish-born of the bunch accordionist Tom O'Malley. Amy Shoemaker, a member of Stone's Throw, will be guest vocalist. And John's frequent touring partner Dean McGraw has come down from the Twin Cities of Minnesota to join in John's eclectic, traditional mix.