

MY LIFE AND MUSIC

By
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Even though my mother and father played the concertina I hadn't any great interest in it. As a garsoon, I spent a lot of time in Eileen Spillane's house. She was my next-door-neighbour and, as far as I am concerned, she was the best concertina player in the whole country. She was also a great woman to play the fiddle and for some reason or other I was far more interested in it than the concertina. Maybe 'twas because my mother and father played the concertina and you know the old saying "Too much of anything.....".

Eileen, R.I.P., showed me how to play some tunes and I wasn't bad at picking them up. She

advised me if I could get a few bob together I should buy a fiddle. When I finished school at fourteen and a half (I went to school first in Knockeenahone and I spent the last year and a half in Gneeveguilla), I got two pounds from my mother to buy my first fiddle in Paddy Nolan's (now Tommy Fleming's) of Scart. That was a lot of money that time. I suppose the poor old woman was saving it for a long time. As I headed for my home in Knockrour that evening I wouldn't call the Queen my aunt.

I now had my fiddle and my next job was to contact the master himself, Padraig O'Keefe, for some lessons. My first lesson was on Small Christmas evening, and he would call then on

a regular basis once a week or at least once a fortnight. 'Twas very easy to pay the poor man – usually a half – a – crown or I suppose I should say twelve and a half new pence for the younger people who never heard of a half a crown.

Padraig was one of the very few men in the area able to write music and I'll never forget that very first Small Christmas evening he came. He asked my mother for a piece of paper. He drew five lines on the paper and wrote the numbers in between the lines. I thought the lines, instead of the spaces, stood for the strings in the fiddle and I said to Padraig "Where did you get the fifth string?" He knew my mistake and he said "How many ditches would it take to make four roads?", I said "Four". "You're wrong", he said, "It takes five", and it was then I caught on.

Another time he gave me half a tune to learn for the next lesson. It took me three weeks to learn it. Padraig got cross to me and said: "I heard you were a great scholar going to school, but you're the most stupid young fellow I ever met". His anger didn't last long and I am glad to say I picked up the second half quicker than the first. What I learned from Padraig, I practised with Eileen Spillane. Everytime I met him, right up until he died, I learned something new from Padraig.

At that time, Spillane's was a great roving house and on certain occasions a night's story-telling would end with a half set. Eileen and myself would supply the music. I suppose the first people to dance to my music were: Donal Riordan, Paddy Spillane, Jack Mahoney, Jack Connell, the Spillane girls and my own four sisters. I can tell you that times were much different then. We would all be at home for 10.30 or 11.00 p.m. Nowadays they don't start going out until that time. I don't know what is the world coming to!

I played in public the first time around 1945 for a feis which was held in Donal Kearney's field in Scart. Charlie Moriarty, who organised the feis, came to my house and asked me to play for the step dancers the following Sunday. There is no need to say I was fairly nervous heading for Scart with my fiddle. I wouldn't have gone on the stage at all but for Padraig (O'Keefe) putting me at my ease. As well as that, he covered up for the

mistakes I made. After that, I was asked to play for Stations and house weddings. For the most part, I would be playing on my own as most of the other musicians lived fairly far away from me and the only means of transport was the bike. Comminabuho was a great townland for house dances. Many's the night I played at Nell Collins's, Maurice Walsh's, Brian Connor's and John Jerry Connor's. Such house dances often went on to the late hours of the morning – until the half tierse was gone. Of course, these were special occasions.

I started playing in Taylor's hall in Scart in the late forties. John Brosnan (the tailor) was the drummer and Con Fleming, from Currow, (now in the States) played the accordeon. Later, I played in Daly's hall with Diarmuid Daly, Sean Reidy (R.I.P.) and Con Fleming. The payment that time was ten shillings a night for a dance that finished at midnight and a pound for the extension-dance which lasted until one in the morning. It cost a shilling to get in to the dance and six old pence extra for an extension dance.

In the early fifties, I teamed up with Johnny Leary and Denis Murphy playing for their step dancers at Fleadhanna and Feiseanna. Later, the three of us and Jimmy Doyle joined Michael O'Callaghan and we formed the Desmond Dance Band. We spent eleven years together playing all over Kerry and parts of Cork and Limerick. We rarely missed a Sunday night and we played on many Friday nights also. I'll never forget one Sunday night that we were booked to play in Sneem. That evening it was announced on the radio that no one should go on the roads except for a priest or a doctor, because of frost and snow. Michael O'Callaghan collected me and we struck off for Sneem. During the whole journey going and coming we only met one car.

When Denis Murphy went to America the "Desmond", as it was, broke up. Johnny and myself played together on occasions. When Denis returned from America, the three of us joined up again and played together every Friday and Sunday nights at Dan O'Connell's in Knocknagree. Even though I never took a drink, I think there is a great atmosphere in the pub – that is, of course, if people don't

overdo it with the drink. It is the nearest of all to the house dance.

I think it's great to see the young people once again dancing the sets and learning to play the traditional instruments. I thought it was lost in the '60s but, thanks to the good work of Comhaltas Ceoltoirí Eireann and the music scheme of the Vocational Education Committees, our music seems to be stronger than ever. The dancing style of the young people to-day is different from long ago. They seem to do a step dance and it is very pleasant to look at. Ciaran Mac Mathúna and Seamus Mac Mathúna are doing great work to preserve and encourage our traditional music and dancing but what can they do when the bosses in R.T.E. won't let them put on more programmes on television. It is a shame with all the talent we have in this country that more programmes in Irish Music, Song and Dance aren't produced. I guarantee you they would be much better than some of those useless programmes that are on at present.

In my early days, I took part in competitions and was the first to win the Padraig O'Keeffe Perpetual Trophy at Scart Fleadh Cheoil. When I was with the Desmond Band we won the Munster Championship but we were beaten in the All-Ireland final in Roscommon. I believe competition is very good for young people but I never met anyone who played his best in a competition. A person on a stage is very conscious of everybody looking at him and spotting his mistakes.

This side of the country must be the richest of all having so many fine musicians and each is better than the next. There are so many I could never mention them all. I mention Johnny and Dennis very often because it was with those two men I played most of my music. We all missed Dennis Murphy a lot when he died. He was always so jolly and was a great man to tell a story. He told me one about Padraig O'Keeffe, just before he died. A neighbour of Dennis was emigrating so they decided to give him an American wake. Dennis was asked to bring Padraig. That evening Padraig arrived at three o'clock so the "two boys" decided they'd go to Perto's to warm the fiddles. As usual, the company was good and some hours later Dennis said. "We'd better be going or they'll be looking for us". "You can go", says Padraig, "I'll be up later". "Indeed, I'd rather stay too", said Dennis. "Well", said

Padraig, "That proves there is no real happiness in this world".

Another night, Dennis and I were cycling home with our fiddles on the carriers. Near the Quarry Cross, Dennis's light went out, he hit a big stone and fell off. Picking himself up, he said, "Thank God, 'twas myself that fell and not the fiddle".

I really enjoy playing with Johnny Leary. Not taking from any of the others, I think he is the nearest to Padraig O'Keeffe's style and I really know his style. As well as being a master musician, he is a powerful man to tell a yarn. Like the music, he has a distinct style of telling them and I wouldn't dare even attempt to repeat one of them here, as no one can tell them like himself.

Before I ever played in a hall, I travelled to lots of them. Thady Willies, in Gneeveguilla, Vaughan's in Williamstown, and Barraduff not to mention Denny Mahoney's of Knockeenahoan and the halls in Scart. One Sunday in June, John Cahill, Timmie O'Brien and myself met after Mass and arranged to go to Barraduff that night. We met at Cahill's, of Lodge, we struck off as proud as punch with about three bob a man in our pockets. I had to take Timmie on the bar as we had only two bikes. When the dance was over we had to wait a bit for Timmie - I don't know what he was doing! But he arrived eventually and we headed homewards.

When we reached Tureenamult Cross, I said to Timmie, "You have to go four miles and I have only a mile and a half. You can take the bike and bring it to the creamery in the morning" (which at that time was at the stand house). I had just gone a few yards from the cross, when I heard a tyre bursting. Timmie shouted at me to come back but I kept going. Timmie was fairly cross the following morning when he arrived at the creamery with the bike in the pony and car. He knew well I heard the tyre bursting and he was'nt too happy shoving the bike home the four miles.

Life has changed a lot since my young days, but as I mentioned previously, it gives me great pleasure to see so many of our young people playing Irish music and dancing sets. Long may it continue and with God's holy help, I will do my part for our great tradition, while I'm able.