

TSDL1504

**JOHN KELLY - Fiddle and
Concertina Player**



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Player

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03

One of the warmest features of Irish traditional music is the kind of regard in which musicians, past and present are held. It's not just a matter of admiring accomplishment but also of respecting the personalities behind the music. Thus, the names of such musicians as Michael Coleman and William Clancy live on in the hearts of their friends and younger compatriots.

John Kelly, alive and well, is no exception. And the adjectives that immediately spring to mind are ones like 'colourful', not used in any flippant way but with real delight and affection. For John Kelly is a passionate man who will tolerate nothing false or pretentious in music or in anything else, and who will defend his commitments fiercely; yet who, in passing on music when he sees genuine interest, is gentle, quick to encourage, and always anxious to place before you the best.

He has a fine rich store of knowledge, pithy and humorous, and wherever you meet him, at a crowded Fleadh or in his own shop in Capel Street, Dublin - where you can buy anything from a one-inch length of bicycle chain to fiddles that John repairs himself - the lasting impression is of the same kind character he is at pains to emphasise in his music. Whether it's in the recollection of some past event such as the occasion

on which he received his first fiddle, or the retailing of some musical source or piece of history, there is a profound sense of what the music, lore and language of Ireland means to him.

John Kelly was born in the district of Rehy West, County Clare, one of the last outposts of the native language in the county. Irish was still spoken by the older people when he was a youth and the winter nights, when not passed in music-making and dancing, were spent in storytelling, in recounting the evil exploits of Cailleach Bheal Atha, the hag of Belsha, abductions by fairies, and other world lore. From this source comes John's gift as a storyteller and, while Irish had ceased to be the language of the home by the time he arrived at manhood, the older language has richly coloured his speech and he can still point a moral or clinch an argument with the apt word or phrase from that tongue. *Is dual athar du an ceol is an seanchas a theith aige* ('tis kind father to him to have the music and the lore).

For thirty years now John has been a force in Irish music and is still going strong - a member of Sean O' Riada's Ceoltoiri Cualainn, of the Castle Ceilidh Band, now of Ceoltoiri Laighean, a regular visitor at Fleadhanna, latterly teaching at the Willie Clancy Scoil Eigse, a great source of strength to the Tradition

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Club held on Wednesdays at Slattery's just a few doors away from his shop, and, together with Joe Ryan, another Clare fiddler now resident in Drogheda at O' Donoghue's in Merrion Row, Dublin, on Fridays; and yet again at countless sessions all over Ireland.

It's as if he recognised himself as part of a huge family, and that's the pleasant impression Irish musicians do give, so it's appropriate that John has three fine fiddling sons - John junior, James and Michael - who, especially when playing together, convey a strong sense of family atmosphere.

John's fiddling is in that seemingly relaxed Clare style, characterised by dotted rhythms and by rolls rather than trebling, and with a pacey, off-beat life that comes not simply from a firm bowing technique but through long experience of living with tunes. He has also captured the essence of other regional styles that are now tending to disappear, and you may find in his music tunes that pay tribute to, say, John and Michael Doherty of Donegal or the late Dennis Murphy from Kerry; also he has a fondness for some of the settings that Michael Coleman, the great Sligo fiddler, made popular. In all this there is a strength and excitement that turns even the most hackneyed tune into something vibrant, something - in John's own word - 'noble'.

Much the same can be said of his concertina playing. The sound is more spiky, of course, but there is the same urgency, though it never loses tempo or shape. Listeners may notice the subtle variations of notes, the occasional harmonic effect, and again that off-beat emphasis. One cannot fail to be engrossed in the tunes, and then later to reflect on the lifetime of involvement behind the ease with which they flow.

Finally, it is typical of John that he is a good listener to all forms of music-making including singing.

I think the mental picture I like best is of John obviously rapt in his playing, with that slight, concentrated turning down of the mouth that you notice in many musicians, and the quick flash of eyes that show that the player is nonetheless taking in his surroundings and drawing his audience to the very heart of himself and his music.

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The nucleus of the following brief notes on the tunes comes from John Kelly

Paddy on the Turnpike

As played by Charlie Simmonds of Kilrush, Co. Clare. This piece is made up from two tunes, *The Bunch of Keys* and *The Merry Blacksmith*, both of which are often called *Paddy on the Turnpike*. The first tune is also sometimes known as *The Flowers of Limerick*, *The Wellington Reel* (in the northern counties) and *The Golden* in Kerry. In various slightly differing forms and under many titles this reel has been published over and over again, eg. in Petrie's *Complete Collection of Irish Music* (No. 918), O'Neill's *Music of Ireland* Nos. 1196, 1555, Cole's *One Thousand Fiddle Tunes* pp 2, 23, 31, 38 etc.

The Bunch of Rushes

First heard from Joe Gallagher, a fiddle player of County Leitrim, in 1946. The concertina setting is John Kelly's own. The tune is a simplified and regularised version of the air of a Gaelic song about a young man who meets a girl gathering rushes, which countryfolk once used for beds. It's a tale of seduction ending with regret. Some say the proper title is *The Bench of Rushes*.

John Kelly's Slide / Tom Keane's Reel

The slide is usually played for the fourth figure in a Kerry set and this one is also known as *Tim Griffin's* (a concertina player from the 1930s). The reel is as played by John's uncle, Tom Keane, on the concertina.

Blackberry Blossoms / The Spike Island Lasses

The first comes from Tim Griffin again and the second is a variant of it, a local reel played by Charlie Simmonds and Mrs Crotty, among others. Here John plays it on an old double-reed German concertina. Spike Island is situated in Cork Harbour. The tune called *Blackberry Blossom(s)* in O'Neill's *Music of Ireland* (No.1295) and *Petrie's Complete Collection* (No. 475) is different from these sets.

The Heathery Breeze

This again comes from Tim Griffin. Scots origin has been suggested for this tune, which is sometimes known as *Copper and Brass*.

Delia Keane's Jig

John learnt this very early in his concertina days, about 1925.

The Blacksmith's Charm

A rare hornpipe first heard from Seamus Ennis.

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We were drinking and kissing the Ladies/ Old Tipperary

The Gaelic name for the first tune is *Bimid ag ol is ag pogadh na mban*. The air was used by the Killarney farmworker, soldier, sailor and poet Eoghan Rua O Suilleabhán (1748-84) for one of his poems.

Rocking the Baby to Sleep

A great piece among fiddlers of the last century, met with in all the old manuscripts from Munster. Not to be confused with the celebrated Rocking the Cradle (O'Neill's *Music of Ireland* No. 547) which gave rise to the cowboy song *Git along, little dogies*.

Eddie Dunn's Reel

As played by Charlie Simmonds. John suggests that it is a setting for *The Bag of Potatoes* as we know it today.

The Fisherman's Hornpipe

John had this from an old concertina player of West Clare, but plays it with his own arrangement. O'Neill prints two closely-related sets in his *Music of Ireland* (Nos. 1575-76). The tune is also known as *The Egg, Lord Howe's, Blanchard's, The College*, and *The Blacksmith's Hornpipe*.

The Sister Reels - Carney's / Gilbert Clancy's Favourite / The Ravelled Hank of Yarn

These closely-related tunes came from Garrett Barry, a blind itinerant piper of Co. Clare. John learnt them from Willie Clancy, whose home was often visited by Garrett Barry when Willie was an impressionable (but already very musical) boy. Carney was a piper, Gilbert Clancy - Willie's father - a flute player, and the arrangement for *The Ravelled Hank of Yarn* comes from Willie Clancy.

The Crooked Road to Dublin / The Duke of Leinster's Wife

The latter is also called *The Ladies Pantalettes* (O'Neill's *Dance Music of Ireland* No. 509) and it is interesting to note that Petrie got a version in 1856 from Frank Keane, a noted fiddler from John Kelly's parish.

The West Cork Reel

Familiarised by Sean O Riada, founder of the famous 'improved ceili band' Ceoltoiri Cualann, numbering some of the best players in Ireland, including John Kelly. O Riada obtained this reel from an old musician in West Cork.

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The Ivy Leaf

Played on both concertina and fiddle. The concertina setting comes from the Kilrush player, Charlie Simmonds, and the fiddle setting from Patsy Geary of Floss, County Clare. Patsy was a travelling fiddler usually found in the West Clare peninsula in the 1920s. O' Neill has two versions of the tune in his *Music of Ireland* (Nos. 1370-71) and it is sometimes known as either *The Clonmel Lassies* or *The New Steam Packet*.

The Flogging Reel

This favourite reel, borrowed from Scotland some 200 years ago, is on the old double-reed German concertina in the style of Charlie Simmonds.

Scattery Island Slide

Another tune on the old double-reed concertina, which John got from his mother. Scattery Island is at the mouth of the River Shannon, just opposite Kilrush.

The Ebb Tide

Also known as *The Neap Tide*. John learnt it from Joe O' Down, the Sligo fiddle player, but plays it in his own arrangement.

The Blackbird

Played first as an air, then a hornpipe, and then as a long dance or set dance. The air and the hornpipe were learnt from the Donegal fiddler John Doherty, and John Kelly recognises shades of Michael Coleman in the set dance. The tune is among the most popular in the Irish instrumental repertory, and among printed versions we find it in Petrie's *Complete Collection* (Nos. 292, 519, 672, 1379), in Joyce's *Old Irish Folk Music and Song* (Nos. 249, 250, 376, 762, 768), O'Neill's *Music of Ireland* (Nos. 199, 200, 201, 488, 1594, 1793). Though it is best known in its instrumental forms, it also exists as a song tune, with sad, handsome words relating to James II, the 'Royal Blackbird', who fled to the Continent in 1688, after William of Orange had landed with an army at Torbay.

The Bunch of Keys

O'Neill called this reel *The Fairy Hunters* or *Walsh's Favourite* and it has also been known as *The Galway Rambler* and *Paddy Finlay's Favourite*.

Lord Wellington's Reel

John plays this in his own setting, influenced by Michael Coleman.

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