



The Russell Family of Doolin County Clare

Miko - flute, whistle & songs, Pakie - anglo concertina, Gussie - whistle

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|---|--|--|
| 1 Campbell's Reel | 9 Garret Barry's Reel | 16 Fair Haired Boy / The Black Haired Lass |
| 2 The Heather Breeze / The Traveller | 10 Tommy Glenney's Reel | 17 Off to California |
| 3 St Kevin of Glendalough | 11 The Connemara Stockings /
The Westmeath Hunt | 18 Give the Girl her Fourpence |
| 4 The Potlick / The Peeler's Jacket | 12 When Musheen Went to Bunnan | 19 Nora Daly |
| 5 The Five Mile Chase | 13 Tatter Jack Walsh | |
| 6 Russell's Hornpipe / Fisher's Hornpipe | 14 The De'il Among the Tailors | |
| 7 The Poor Little Fisher Boy | 15 The Roscrea Cows | |
| 8 The Walls of Liscarroll / The Battering Ram | | |

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The County of Clare has long been noted for its traditional music and song. George Petrie the great music collector of the last century remarked that Clare possessed distinctive qualities in its music not shared with any other county in Ireland. Within Clare itself some areas are much richer in traditional music than others, but undoubtedly one of the most productive districts is Doolin, and within Doolin, best known for music is the Russell family, Pakie, Miko and Gussie. To appreciate the Russells one should really understand the background from which their music and song originated. Doolin is set between the limestone of the Burren and the shale of the Moher district. It combines cultural and geographic influences linking both areas. In temper the district summarises the north Clare character, deep rooted in tradition, flexible and warm in expression. In the person of the Russell brothers one gets an immediate impression of the subtle shades of Doolin.

Rooted in the locality is a great tradition of folklore and song. The Doolin area was totally Gaelic speaking until recently. The Russells' father and mother were both native Gaelic speakers from Lough, Doolin. The sons remember very well the nights on 'cuaird' (a local term meaning a social gathering in a neighbour's house at night) listening to such famous storytellers as Stiofan O Helaoire, the Dillon brothers, Austin Carty, Patrick Flanagan, Patrick Davoren and Johnny Carey, all neighbours from Doolin. Also house dancing was very much on the go while the Russells were growing up. These house dances were held when people came from abroad or more often than not just for a night's entertainment among the neighbours.

Such occasions were very important to the young musicians, giving opportunity for exchanging ideas and learning new techniques. The country houses were their courts of music and dancing. In the Doolin area all this contributed to a flourishing musical life for the Russell brothers. Here they learned from the older musicians in the area, and when we hear them perform we are listening to genuine traditional music rendered in an authentic manner. The music and song on this record reflect the variety, depth and excellence of Clare music and song.

To the present day, music making is an essential part of life in the Doolin area. The Russells speak very affectionately of the many local musicians to whom they are indebted. Their mother played the concertina and melodeon, and their father could also knock a few tunes out of the concertina. The concertina is a much favoured instrument in Clare. It developed in the last century with the decline of the pipers and fiddle players who were professional in that they played at dances for their livelihood. In Clare, the concertina was originally a great instrument among women, as the menfolk played pipes and fiddle. A number of concertina players in the Doolin area influenced the Russell brothers, particularly Pakie. Pakie remembers great nights of music with Martin Killoughry and Patrick Flanagan, both excellent concertina players. These in turn were influenced by local people such as a fiddle player named Hardy, Sean Darcy (tin whistle), and the flute player Sean McCarty.

As the Doolin area is rich in folklore it was no surprise to find musicians with a large repertoire of traditional songs, such as Miko Russell possesses. His style of singing, similar to his playing on the whistle and flute, is unique and inimitable. He has a great feeling for his songs and a deep understanding. He sings in a true folk style, using his own authentic embellishments. His singing deviates in no respects from his native Doolin tradition. Miko's whistle and flute playing is also very much his own. His bare haunting style grows on listeners each time they hear him play. Perhaps this record will inspire interested people to explore more of the Russells' vast repertoire of music and song. Any visitor to Doolin is likely to find them either at home or on the premises of Gussie O'Connor, a local publican who has always been a great host to enthusiasts of traditional music.

Campbell's Reel played by Miko and Gussie Russell (whistles). This piece is played in pure traditional style. Miko and Gussie do not go in for elaborate or florid embellishments; they depend more on the excellence of the settings and the purity and correctness of their phrasing. The style is closely related to that of the old pipers. They heard this reel first played by Pat Flanagan of Doonogore, Doolin. A common title for the piece is *Patsy Campbell's Reel*.

The Heather Breeze and **The Traveller** (reels) played by Pakie (concertina) and Miko Russell (flute). The leisurely well-marked tempo of the Russells' playing is obvious in these reels. They are old but enduring favourites among traditional musicians. In O'Neill's 'Dance Music of Ireland' the second reel is called *Miss Thornton's Reel* or *Coming Through the Fields*. These tunes were much used for the set dances around Doolin. In times and places where musicians were in short supply and repertoires sadly limited, simple fundamental tunes such as *The Heather Breeze* kept the dancing alive.

St Kevin of Glendalough, sung by Miko Russell. Miko learned this song from his mother. She in turn learned it from her sister who heard a priest sing it in Ennistymon over sixty years ago. As sung by Miko, the song tells how St Kevin of Glendalough tricked the King O'Toole in obtaining thirty square miles of land to build his monasteries. Many folk songs in Ireland tell how the weaker but more intelligent person outwits the stronger but more stupid one.

The Potlick and The Peeler's Jacket (reels) played by Miko Russell (whistle). The first reel is particular to Doolin. The second, sometimes called *The Flannel Jacket*, is well known from O'Neill's collection. Both are typical of the pure, solid, well constructed reels of West Clare. These tunes are old and are a continual delight to musicians. The austere unembellished setting of these reels is very characteristic of Miko's playing. The first reel is an excellent variant of *Trim the Velvet* and *Kiss the Maid Behind the Barrel*.

The Five Mile Chase (reel) played by Gussie Russell (whistle). Here Gussie plays his own individual, smooth and racy setting of a well-known reel that O'Neill calls 'The Four Hand Reel'.

Russell's Hornpipe and **Fisher's Hornpipe** played by Pakie Russell (concertina). Two interesting local settings of well known hornpipes. O'Neill's 'Music of Ireland' offers two settings of *Fisher's Hornpipe*, neither quite as good as Pakie's. This hornpipe has at least half a dozen titles, including *The Egg*, *Lora Howe's*, *Blanchard's*, *The College* and *The Blacksmith's Hornpipe*.

The Poor little Fisher Boy sung by Miko Russell. Miko learned this song from a neighbour. Thomas Canole. Miko's air is slightly different. As Miko's home in Lough overlooks the sea, facing the Aran Islands, it is no surprise to find that many of his songs concern the sea. The melody of this song is better known in association with the words of *All Round My Hat I Will Wear the Green Willow*.

The Walls of Liscarroll and **The Battering Ram** (jigs) played by Miko and Gussie Russell (whistles). Here is an example of jig playing in the flowing Munster style. The settings are excellent, if standard. versions of jigs popular all over Munster. The latter piece gained popularity through the old Ballinakill Ceili Band. The first jig is often called *An Banabhin Dubh* in Clare.

Garret Barry's Jig played by Miko Russell (flute). Miko learned this jig from Willie Clancy who rechristened it to perpetuate the memory of his idol, Garret Barry. Much of the best music in West Clare seems to have derived from Garret, the blind piper of Inagh. He was born at the height of the famine in Ireland, and travelled throughout West Clare, playing in one house after another. He specialised in jigs and slow airs. He died in 1899, when he was only fifty-two years old. Willie Clancy made a speciality of tracking down and memorising tunes which could be attributed to Garret Barry. Here Miko plays one of his jigs in typical Clare style.

Tommy Glenny's Reel played by Miko (flute) and Pakie Russell (concertina). Outside Clare this reel is probably better known as Tear the Calico. It is played in fine and lively style that allows us to visualize the feet 'battering' or dancing a Caledonian set.

The Connemara Stockings and **The Westmeath Hunt** (reels) played by Miko (flute), Gussie (whistle) and Pakie Russell (concertina). Two rousing popular reels. They recall nostalgic memories of lively sets danced in a crowded country kitchen.

When Musheen Went to Bunnan sung by Miko Russell. This version originated from a great sean nos singer of Coolea, Padraig O' Tuama, better known as Peati Thaidhg Pheig. Seamus MacMathuna passed it on to Miko who made the song over into a version of his own.

Tatter Jack Walsh (jig) played by Miko and Gussie Russell (whistles). Many people regard this as one of the finest of Irish jigs. At one time it must have been the favourite tune of a priest, for its proper name is *An tAthair Jack Walsh* (Reverend Father Jack Walsh). As in all these pieces, little distinctive and beautiful local touches are evident, fully in keeping with the character of the tunes.

The De'il Among the Tailors (reel) played by Pakie Russell (concertina). This is a Scotch reel, but under Pakie's nimble fingers it assumes a distinctive Russell flavour. Scotch dance tunes were no strangers in the repertoire of the old Clare tradition as witness the popularity of Neil Gow's *Farewell to Whiskey*.

The Roscrea Cows sung by Miko Russell. Miko learned this song from Joe Leary, a well known fiddler from Ardahan in County Galway. It tells of the fate of old cows in the Scarriff area. From all over Clare, cows are sent to the factory in Roscrea to be killed for calf meal. This song indicates the changing times. The cows are no longer walked by road to Roscrea. They are carried by lorry and train. The drovers who walked the cows are all dead. Things are becoming more sophisticated even for the killing of old cows. Fortunately there is no sophistication in Miko's singing and he sings the song in his own inimitable way, very true to his traditional style.

Fair Haired Boy and The Black Haired Lass (reels) played by Miko Russell (whistle). The first reel is not generally known outside Doolin and Miko has done a notable service to traditional musicians by putting it into wider circulation.

Off to California (hornpipe) played by Miko (flute) and Gussie Russell (whistle). This obviously local version is a pleasant change from the usual setting of this well-known hornpipe. It is very popular wherever Irish music is played. In Clare it is played in particular for the final part of the set. *The Sweet Flowers of Miltown*, a schottische, is another version of this tune.

Give the Girl her Fourpence (reel) played by Pakie Russell (concertina). Here Pakie plays one of his favourite reels and demonstrates the capacity of his concertina to give adequate expression to Irish dance music. This tune, an excellent example of a reel, deserves wider popularity.

Nora Daly sung by Miko Russell. Miko learned this from his father Austin, over forty years ago. It was first published by Tomas O hAodha, an Irish scholar from Miltown Malbay, around the beginning of this century.

Muiris O Rochain

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