

Drops of Brandy

Traditional Irish Music

played by Sean McAloon *Uilleann Pipes & Fiddle*, John Rea *Dulcimer*

- 1 Jigs: **The Maid in the Meadow** (*dulcimer*) / **The Castlebar Races** / **Trip to the Cottage** (*dulcimer and concert pipes*)
- 2 Reels: **The Mountain Lark** / **Crooked Road to Dublin** (*concert pipes*)
- 3 Jigs: **Jackson's Drum** / **Jackson's Mistake** / **Jackson's Coagy** (*dulcimer*)
- 4 Air: **Blind Mary** (*flat pipes*)
- 5 Hornpipes: **Madame Bonaparte** / **O'Dwyer's Hornpipe** (*dulcimer*)
- 6 Reels: **Crowley's No. 1** / **Crowley's No. 2** (*fiddle*)
- 7 Jigs: **Moloney's** / **Paddy O'Brien's** (*concert pipes*)
- 8 Reels: **First House in Connaught** (*concert pipes*) / **The Copperplate** (*dulcimer and concert pipes*)
- 9 Air: **An Buachaill Caol Dubh (The Dark Slender Boy)** / Slip Jig: **Drops of Brandy** (*flat pipes*)
- 10 Reels: **Coil the Hawser** / **Lord McDonald's** (*dulcimer*)
- 11 Hornpipes: **Alexandria's** / **Higgin's** (*flat pipes*)
- 12 Reels: **The Sligo Maid** (*fiddle*) / **Sheehan's** (*fiddle and dulcimer*)
- 13 Jigs: **Wandering Minstrel** / **Katy is Waiting** / **The Basket of Shamrocks** (*dulcimer*)
- 14 Hornpipes: **Tim the Turncoat** / **The Quarrelsome Piper** (*concert pipes and dulcimer*)
- 15 Jigs: **The Old Siege of Valencia** (*dulcimer*) / **The Lark in the Morning** (*dulcimer, fiddle and bodhran*)

First published by Topic 1976

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Sleeve Design by Tony Engle

Notes by Robin Morton

Recorded - November 1970, Tommy Ellis Studios, Dublin



For a number of years now I have been telling people, throughout these islands, about the music of Sean McAloon and John Rea. So plenty know of them, at least by repute, but only a few have had the privilege of actually hearing them. Each man could carry a whole LP on his own, but then the listener would not have the experience of hearing the pipes and dulcimer played in duet. Both Sean and John talk in glowing terms of each other and evidently enjoy playing together. John will tell you how he enjoys “the clear tone of the pipes above the dulcimer. It just cures the music - it gives it a great sharp edge.” Sean talks with pleasure about “the jangly notes of the dulcimer. I’ve never seen a tool like it for giving weight to the tunes.” Now when two good musicians have this kind of respect for each other’s music then that is the basis of a good session. That is just what making this record involved - it wasn’t so much a matter of making a record but more a case of sitting in on “session”. The problem was to decide what to leave off the finished record. I hope you enjoy the choice.

THE MUSICIANS

When Sean McAloon left school he worked on the ‘home farm’, near Roslea, Co. Fermanagh. In 1964 he finally decided that he wasn’t cut out for farming. He headed for the States in search of a pot of gold but he knew he wasn’t going to stay. After a music-less year of working nights in a New York factory, he came back to Ireland. He stayed in Dublin for about eight months, where he worked as a builder’s labourer. There was plenty of music during this time but life became too hectic for Sean who, although he enjoys the music, also likes a bit of peace and quiet now and again. Anyway he was still too far from his family, up North. So in 1966 he came to live in Belfast, a decision for which many of us in that city give constant thanks. Sean now looks on Belfast as his home. He has a job with the Corporation Parks Department and is more than happy with the enthusiastic reception he gets whenever he plays at concerts or clubs. He is now forty six years of age and his first instrument was a whistle, bought for him by his father. The father had played an accordion in his young days (and his father before him played the flute). However, Sean barely remembers his father playing the accordion but does remember that he was a good singer. Anyway he stuck at the whistle for a year or so and then he took an interest in the fiddle. A neighbour gave him one, and soon the whistle was forgotten. Sean has played the fiddle ever since, and as you can hear he certainly knows what he is about. A self-confessed disciple of the late Michael Coleman, most of the tunes he plays on that instrument he got from the records of the great Sligo fiddler. However, the first time Sean heard the uilleann pipes he was ‘pulled up short’. In his own words - “After that I was gone daft on pipe music.” He had heard pipe bands and liked them but once he heard the Irish pipes, “I decided that they were a long ways the best!”

He saw a piper called Phil Martin playing at a Feis in Roslea - he had heard him many times on radio - and resolved to go and see him about getting a set of pipes. Martin, who lived at Ballagh in Co. Fermanagh, gave him the address of Crowley the Cork pipe-maker and musician. Sean sent for his practice-set - bag, bellows and chanter - by post; they cost him £7.50. He battled away at them and about a year later he was ready to fit the drones. When he had done this he went to see Phil Martin again in the hope of getting some further hints. Unfortunately, he found him on his death bed.

Sean played on at the Crowley pipes for two or three years and then sold them to the late Leo Rowsome, buying a full set of Rowsome pipes in exchange. He has had eight or nine different sets through his hands since then, but thinks that Rowsome's are in many ways the best he has played. As a musician Leo Rowsome has had a great effect on Sean as well. Sean sees him as "the greatest piper of them all", which coming from such a fine musician as McAloon, is praise indeed. The concert-pitch pipes that he plays on this disc were made by Rowsome. The flat-set were by O'Mealy of Belfast, another one of the great pipe makers. Sean explained to me that the flat-set has a sixteen inch long chanter, whereas that of the concert-set is only fourteen and a quarter inches long. This leaves the former with a lower pitch and, as a result, a more mellow and even more seductive tone. Most of the pipe-makers we have discussed above played the instrument as well - indeed most seemed to have started as players. It's as if the fact of playing the pipes makes them want to create the instrument as well. McAloon is no exception. He has refurbished derelict sets and has undertaken small repair jobs, but as soon as he gets the tools gathered together he intends to turn his hand to making a set of pipes. So perhaps in years to come Sean McAloon will be known as a great pipe-maker. He is already a great player and musician.

John Rea is fifty four years old and is married with five children. None of them seem to carry on the musical tradition, which John inherited from his father. The Rea family come from the Glens of Antrim and John was born in the townland of Carnalba near the coastal village of Glenarm. There were ten in the family (though there are only four left now) and all were musicians, being taught the fiddle by their father. Although the mother didn't play any music she loved to hear it - which, with all those fiddlers around, was just as well. It seems, however, that when John came along a small-sized fiddle could not be bought for love nor money. Anyway, with all that fiddle music around the house father probably thought it best to bring a new sound into the house. At that time there were a number of dulcimers being played around the area. John's father borrowed one from a local "butter and egg man" and gave it to his other son Alec, a carpenter, who used it as a pattern to build one for John. John is still playing this dulcimer and indeed plays it on this record. John does not know how or when the dulcimer came to the Glens, though there does seem to have been quite a nest of players in the area in those days. He thinks that Sammy Moore (the butter and egg man) bought his instrument in a Belfast scrapyards, when he was up in the city selling his farm produce. (But this was by no means the first dulcimer in the area).

There is one possibility that springs to my mind. The population of the Glens is a sea-going one, and many of the men still leave to sail with the merchant and Royal navies. It is not beyond the limits of probability, that one of these sailors brought home the strange instrument after a visit to some of the Baltic countries. Perhaps then the people found that it gave the 'ould tunes' a new brilliance and many orders were placed with the deep-sea sailors. This of course does not explain how the man from Tipperary, whom I heard playing the dulcimer at a Fleadh Ceol a couple of years back, got his instrument. He is the only other man I have heard playing the instrument, though John tells me there are still a few people playing at it a bit in Co. Antrim.

When he was in his late twenties, John gave up labouring in the home area and like many of his friends, went to sea. He spent over fifteen years on coal coasters though he never did go deep-sea. For this past thirteen years he has worked as a deckhand on the tugs serving Belfast harbour. John lives on the tug during the normal working week. Sometimes I have called down to collect him for a session and he has been doing a bit of practice when I arrived, perhaps in the Wheelhouse. At the risk of seeming to be a romantic I can honestly say that there is nothing more beautiful than the sound of the dulcimer drifting over the water. It takes on a whole new quality. Because of the nature of the job he does, John works very erratic hours. This means that he does not have the opportunity to play in public as much as would be liked. But that just makes this disc so much more valuable. John also plays a bit at the fiddle but prefers, and feels more happy wielding the hammers.

For those interested I suppose I had better describe the dulcimer. John's instrument has two octaves though he thinks that the professionally made model has three. The strings are piano wire stretched across and tuned in threes - this gives the instrument its characteristic jangle. In John's case he strikes the strings with a piece of wire (bent rather like a side elevation of an elongated baby's feeding spoon). The striking end is bound with darning wool. The lighter the hammer is held, the more effective are the triplets, so important in Irish music.

So listen to Sean McAloon and John Rea.

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