

# Jimmy Power

## Irish Fiddle Player

- 1 Jigs: **Tommy Potts' Rambling Pitchfork/**  
**The Strayaway Child**
- 2 Reels: **The Chorus/McKenna's**
- 3 Set Dances: **Jockey to the Fair/Miss Brown's Fancy**
- 4 Hop Jigs: **Coleman's Favourite/The Promenade**
- 5 Hornpipes: **Dwyer's/The Harvest Home**
- 6 Reels: **Jackie Coleman's/The Castle**
- 7 Reels: **The Nine Points of Roguery/The Crib of**  
**Perches**
- 8 Jigs: **Whelan's/The Old Lark in the Morning**
- 9 Reel: **The Mountain Road**
- 10 Slip Jigs: **Follow Me Down to Limerick/Hardiman**  
**the Fiddler**
- 11 Set Dance: **Youghal Harbour**
- 12 Jig: **The Walls of Liscarrol**
- 13 Reels: **The Jug of Punch/The Moving Bogs of**  
**Powelsborough**
- 14 Waltz & Jig: **Statia Donnelly's**

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Produced by Reg Hall and Tony Engle

Back cover photographs by John Harrison

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Reg Hall plays piano on all tracks. Gerry Wright from Abbeyfeale, Co. Limerick, who has had a long association with Jimmy at The Favourite, plays tambourine on track 6. Jimmy plays a fiddle with a clay pipe inserted behind the bridge as a kind of mute on track 12.



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Jimmy Power was born in 1918, a month after the Armistice was signed, in the country just outside Waterford at Ballyduff. His father, a fiddle-player himself, had died a few weeks earlier leaving Jimmy a musical reputation to live up to and a stringless fiddle hanging by the fireplace.

‘I think I was just about ten when an Italian professor, O’Diorna, came along from Italy to all the schools near us in Waterford. Our school would be on a Saturday morning. My having my own fiddle, it only cost me a shilling a week for the lesson. The others had to buy a fiddle off him; it cost them half-a-crown a week - one-and-six for the fiddle till it was paid for. And he had a Dublin bloke, I think his name was Byrnes, kind of assisting him. This professor, he could see that the music was in me; he could see I was advancing more quickly than some of the others. I know the first tune he started off with was *The Rakes of Mallow*. It was all Irish music and he used to draw on the board, writing the music, and he would teach us by note. One Saturday I went up as usual and I played it for some of the others before he came, and they said to the professor, “He can play the thing like you do it!” He was really pleased about it. “You’re coming on fine,” he said, “I’ll give you *The Blackbird*.” And the first hornpipe I ever learned was *The Rights of Man*. Then, after six months, he got a car - a big Ford car. In them days there was a shop in Waterford where he got his fiddles - about one hundred and fifty fiddles altogether. He put so much deposit on the car and then, when he got all the fiddle money in, he sold the car and went back to Italy. He died about five years ago, I remember reading about it in the paper.’

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Stacia Donnelly, Jimmy’s grandmother, knew a large number of tunes and used to lilt them around the house all the time. “Humour the bow,” she’d say, urging him to slip the trebles in with his right hand, and his uncle, Paddy - better than average on the melodeon and uilleann pipes - used to keep him at it. ‘Really he was the one that pushed me and when he would see that I was losing interest he’d invite some fellow - maybe five or six miles away - along to the house one evening. Course, the fiddle was there and he’d say, “Play a few tunes while you’re here, Mick” or whatever the case may be. So that bloke would play the fiddle then that evening. He would play for me maybe an hour or an hour and a half, and listening to him I would think he was great, although they were really no bloody good at all. Well, I wouldn’t call them players nowadays. Anyhow, that used to give me fresh interest for a couple of months and then he’d see that I was losing interest again. He could read me! And then he used to get another bloke to the house to play the fiddle and that’s how it was, and so eventually it came to a stage when he didn’t have to ask anyone. There used to be an Irish teacher who came one night a week to the school teaching Gaelic and he used to teach dancing as well. He knew I played the fiddle and he asked me to take the fiddle up to the school and I’d be playing for the dancers. I mean set dances - four hand reels and two hands - stuff like that. Then he used to run a ceilidhe every now and then. There was an old boy at home who used to play the button key accordeon and he and I would play together. He didn’t have many tunes but he used to say to me “We’ll play that other one again”. If we were lucky enough to be up in the pub then and the Irish dance man who ran the ceilidhe came into the pub, we’d get a couple of bottles of Guinness as well as our money which was good money in them days. Six bob each we used to get and two bottles of Guinness each; so that was our night made.

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Then I went over to Glasgow in 1942 and worked in this place and there was a Scotch dance teacher, a fellow called John MacLean, working there too. I had the feeling that there was something Irish in Glasgow, so I asked him and he told me where the hall was. It was an old church hall they got every Sunday night and so the first night I ever went in there the musicians were good. There were two from Co. Tyrone - Dennis and Joe McGoldrick. And this Joe Leonard; he was born in Glasgow of Enniskillen parents. He was a really good fiddle player in them days. I was chatting to him the first night; he was the youngest in the group and I told him that I played the fiddle as well. Anyway, there was a priest in Glasgow at the time who used to come to these ceilidhes on a Sunday night. He got talking to me one night and I said "I suppose I could play with them but I've got no fiddle because when I came over I was a bit short of everything." He said, "I've got a fiddle I'll give you." So the following Sunday he brought this lovely fiddle along and gave it me. Joe Leonard got me into the band then. I used to get paid like the rest of them for playing on the Sunday night. There were seven of us in the band - four fiddles, accordeon, piano and drums. It sounded something similar to the Ballinakill band from Galway. There was no heavy music; the accordeon was the loudest and he was a soft player and you could hear more fiddle than anything else. He was a first class drummer and Joe's wife was a brilliant pianist. It was a lovely session and I used to look forward to it every week. Then, once a month, on Friday nights, they used to have what they called a late night - twelve o'clock. We got ten bob for that and, before the pubs closed - nine thirty in them days - we had our ten bob already drank. We enjoyed the night you know. It was a lovely little band - we used to play at an odd wedding as well. Then this Joe McGoldrick said to me one night, "I'll take you along to hear a good fiddle player one night up in Maryhill, a chap called Frank McLaughlin." He came from Athlone and he was the nearest one I heard to Coleman in my life - really

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Coleman's double as regards playing - a brilliant player, and the first time I ever heard him play I said, "I won't press the fiddle in my hand anymore". "You keep at the fiddle," he said, and that gave me encouragement, but the way he played I thought I'd never play the fiddle like him!

Jimmy's job then took him to Leeds and on to Sheffield where he shared digs with another Irishman who by chance he found out played the accordeon and they played together in the local dance hall, until he finally found his way to London.

"The first time I ever spoke to Michael Gorman would be about 1950 or '51. There used to be music in *The Black Cap*, Camden Town at that time. There was about ten musicians in there one Sunday morning including Andy Boyle and they were all playing away - everyone bar Michael Gorman and he had the fiddle beside him, so I said to him "Could you lend me the fiddle?". "Do you play the fiddle?" he said, "I do", I said, "Why didn't you bring your own fiddle along, then?" he said. I said, "Because I didn't know there was any music here." So he said, "Well, sit beside me here and I'll give you the fiddle." So I sat beside him and he gave me the fiddle. And, of course, I didn't know but he was listening to me to hear what I sounded like. "I think you're listening to too many of Coleman's records," he said. That's the first thing he ever said to me. 'Course I always had a great respect for Coleman, Hughie Gillespie and Paddy Killoran and heard an awful lot of their records at home. The music was in *The Laurel Tree* for a bit then. Willy Clancy started playing there, and Andy Boyle; they started playing together and Michael Gorman and Maggie Barry came down from *The Bedford* on a Sunday morning. I knew that Michael had composed *The Mountain Road*, so I said to him, "I like that reel you played." "Which one is that?" he said, and I told him the one. "You play yourself! Why don't you come up to *The Bedford*

tonight?" I went up *The Bedford* that night and he played the reel for me and he took a liking to me there and then and after that he'd play anything enough for me to learn it. He'd keep on and eventually I'd get it off him. He used to think that we played well together - same kind of style. I used to see him regularly at his place in the evening and we would go down to *The Bedford* on a Sunday morning. Then the three of us, that's Michael, Maggie and me, went on to play in Kilburn every Wednesday in *The Black Lion*. That was about 1956 or '57, Patsy Goulding used to play the piano; Willie Clancy would come as well and then Reg Hall and Michael Plunkett would come in every Wednesday night. Michael Gorman would play something that they knew so that we could all play together. So that's when I first met Reg.'

Jimmy was playing at most of the *feisanna* held in London. These were harrowing, ten-hour stints, with little or no break and even less appreciation, accompanying youngsters competing for dancing Championships and medals. It was then he developed his rare skill of playing for the benefit of dancers. There was no knowing in advance what set dances would be called for and each set dance requires its own tune, often idiosyncratic in phrase and structure. Some of the older *feis* musicians relied on reading from O'Neill, but Jimmy had to get them all by ear, mainly from the piano playing of Bill Rollinson and Patsy Goulding.

In 1959 Michael Gorman and Margaret Barry returned to Ireland leaving the *Bedford* job to Jimmy and two accordion players, Eddie Pearce and Tommy Maguire. Reg Hall, Michael Plunkett and Paul Gross continued to call in for a session each week, and out of this group of musicians developed *The Four Courts Ceilidhe* Band, which over the next three or four years toured the Irish dance halls in London and the Midlands, played regularly at *The Irish Centre*, Camden Town, appeared on a major television show

and made a couple of records. Discussion rages fiercely among some Irish music lovers about who is the best fiddle player; pondering such intangibles clouds the real issues and is largely irrelevant to the course and development of Irish music. Jimmy Power possesses qualities that are related to his long and varied experience and his innate ability to perform as a functional musician. Like so many musicians of a similar background, his memory for tunes is vast and he can call on what is appropriate for any given occasion. He is quite forthright about his influences and still picks up tunes from other musicians, and admires the prowess of others. Yet he emerges as an individual with a unique style embracing short, sharp bowing and plenty of trebling. Rarely does he play contrived, conscious variations, but he always manages to achieve the sort of spontaneity that makes each performance different from the next. For many years now he has played four or five sessions a week in *The Favourite* together with the accordion player Paddy Malynn. Jimmy has appeared on several records, notably *Paddy in the Smoke*, (Topic 12T176) recorded at several Sunday lunchtime sessions in *The Favourite*, and Bob Davenport's *Down the Long Road* (Topic 12TS274) where he is joined by some of his old associates from *The Bedford*. *Irish Music from The Favourite* (Leader LED2051) features him with Tony Ledwith on the accordion and includes comprehensive sleeve notes covering his early days in Waterford.

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