



DARBY'S FAREWELL

Josie McDermott with Robin Morton *bodhran*

Traditional music played on flute & whistle, and songs from Sligo

- 1 Reels: **The Kerry Man/The Pigeon on the Gate** *flute*
- 2 Jigs: **Sixpenny Money/Garrett Barry's Jig** *whistle*
- 3 Hornpipes: **The Bush Hornpipe/Dunphy's Hornpipe** *flute*
- 4 Song: **Moorlough Mary**
- 5 Slow air: **An Cailin Rua** *flute*
- 6 Reels: **The Tap Room/Toss the Feathers** *whistle, bodhran*
- 7 Jigs: **Dominic's Farewell to Cashel/Trip to the Cottage** *flute*
- 8 Liltng: **The Collier's Reel/The Bank of Ireland**
- 9 Reels: **Micko Russell's Reel/Trip to Birmingham** *flute, bodhran*
- 10 Polkas: **Murphy's Polka/The Keadue Polka** *whistle*
- 11 Reels: **Peg McGrath's Reel/Ganley's Reel** *flute, bodhran*
- 12 Song: **Ballad of the O'Carolan Country**
- 13 Reels: **The Flowers of Ballymote/Colemen's Cross** *whistle*
- 14 Song: **Úna Wen**
- 15 Slow air: **Úna Bhán** *flute*
- 16 Jigs: **Boys of the Town/Dwyer's Jig** *flute, bodhran*
- 17 Reels: **Father O'Grady's Visit to Bocca/Darby's Farewell to London** *whistle, bodhran*

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The McDermotts are an ancient family of Connaught. Josie McDermott lives where three great music counties of Ireland meet. The house in which he has lived all of his 52 years is just outside the small Roscommon town of Ballyfarnan, in the townland of Coolmeen. It is actually in Co. Sligo, one mile from the Roscommon border and about six miles from that of Co. Leitrim. As Josie says, 'All over the years back, there were good musicians in this area.' To mention only the well known ones will make the point - Michael Coleman, James Morrison, Paddy Killoran, that generation of renowned fiddlers all came from Co. Sligo. Another Sligo man (or was it Galway?) was flute player John Morrison, then John McKenna the great flute stylist came from Tents, near Arigna, Co. Leitrim. All these men lived during the first half of this century. In an earlier century, O'Carolan had close connections with Leitrim and Roscommon. Indeed you can find his tomb in the ruins of Kilronan Church near Ballyfarnan. Then of course we could make a long list of great living traditional musicians, Tansey, Hanly, Reagan, Blessing, Horan, Duignan and on and on.

There was not, however, a great deal of music in Josie's family. His mother sang and 'could take a tune out of the concertina.' There was also an uncle who sang and played a bit on the fife, but Josie never knew him. But there was no lack of inspiration. A family called Butler lived about a hundred yards from him, and theirs was a well known ceili house. They were all fond of music, and the mother, Josie remembers, was a great lilter 'That's where I heard music, as soon as I could crawl out the door ... you could hear the tap of the feet, so it's not too far

away'. Then about half a mile away there lives yet James Flynn who was a fine fiddler in his day. He taught Josie most of his music. In another direction, a mile away, lives John Donagher, who in Josie's opinion 'was as good as any of them.'

It is hardly surprising then, that by the time he reached five or six Josie had already begun to play the Trump (Jew's Harp) and the Clarke tin-whistle. This was the beginning of an almost total involvement in music, which has continued, if anything even more vigorously, to this day. While traditional Irish music was the first music he heard and played, and it's still his first love, Josie's musical horizon is much broader. This of course is something he has in common with many other Irish musicians. Often the 'experts' tend to invest their favourites with a monk-like dedication to 'Irish music', ignoring completely evidence that they like other kinds of good music as well. However, most of the musicians I know, with wide musical interests, still put Irish music far above any of their other listening. Not so Josie. He heard all different kinds of music on the radio and gramophone, liked it, and concludes, 'If you put a good ceili band, a good traditional jazz band, a good country and western band and a small orchestra, in four halls, I'd find it very hard to know which of them I'd go to hear. I'd want to hear the four of them!'

At 14 he became the singer in a local 'modern' band. Since then he has played in various kinds of combinations, and on various instruments. He tried the trumpet, failed at first, but later was more successful, and played in a band for a year. Then he took up the sax, both tenor and alto. In the meantime he was playing traditional Irish music on the whistle, the fife, and later the concert flute. In all he he's played with about ten 'modern' bands, refusing offers from several major Irish bands, preferring to stay at home.

Over these years his music making was subsidised by various labouring jobs. Just enough to keep body and soul together as he could go on playing with the bands. On a free night he would go off on 'the ramble' with his whistle and flute, round various ceili-houses in the district. Another night he would maybe cycle sixty miles to hear the Jimmy Compton Band, one of the stars of the Irish trad jazz scene in the Sixties. In 1962 tragedy struck. Josie's eyesight had never been good, but in that year he contracted severe eczema from working with wood. His eyes were affected and soon he lost his sight completely. Blind maybe, but by no means beaten! In 1964 he began a two year association with Sonny Flynn's Ceili Band. At the same time he was playing with another 'modern' band, though he left when it began to use heavy electric guitars. In 1967 Flynn's Men were formed and are still going, though there have been personnel changes over the years. At the minute the lineup is fiddle, guitar, drums and Josie singing and playing sax, flute and whistle. They play all kinds of music, country and western, old-time, ceili, and are in great demand in their area. Nearly every night, somewhere in the locality, Josie McDermott and Flynn's Men can be heard.

While all this has been going on, Josie has continued to play and sing traditional Irish music. He has become well-known and highly respected in the field. In 1964 he won the All-Ireland championship on the whistle, and in the miscellaneous instruments section, on the alto-sax. In 1967 he became champion lilter and in 1974 he won the flute crown. He has been placed on all these instruments at various times. He also has been runner-up three times in the ballad-singing competition. Typically the only regret he mentioned over the days I was with him, was that he had not won this competition.

The Kerry Man/The Pigeon on the Gate (Reels)

The combination of these two well-known reels is a very popular set in this area. The Kerry Man is simply called *The Kerry Reel* in Breathnech's collection 'Ceol Rince na hEireann'; where the other names *The Witch of the Glen* and *The Green Banks of Rossbeigh* are given. The Pigeon on the Gate is in O'Neill's 'Dance Music of Ireland' (O'Neill 1). The third time through Josie plays variations that he learned from a flute player called Sean McHugh, who lived in Geevagh, Co. Sligo. 'He put them kind of twists in it'.

Sixpenny Money/Garrett Barry's Jig (Jigs)

Here he plays two more well-known tunes. The first he picked up from a radio session by Willie Clancy. The second he learned from the son of Sean McHugh (see previous note) who lilted the tune for him. He uses the common title, given to it by Willie Clancy, whose father learned a lot of music from Garrett Barry, the blind piper, who lived in West Clare in the second half of the 19th century. Listen to Josie's 'tonguing' style of whistle playing. He developed this because he had a 'lazy' left hand when he was young, which meant he couldn't roll the A and B notes to his own satisfaction. So he learned to make triplets with his tongue. Over the years his left hand improved, and now he can

The Bush Hornpipe/Dunphy's Hornpipe (Hornpipes)

Josie learned the first tune from Micheal O hAlmhain, the flute player and piper. He had no name for it so he called it after the hotel in Carrick-on-Shannon where we were recording. A fine hornpipe by any name Dunphy's is well-known and a setting can be found in O'Neill 1.

Moorlough Mary (Song)

Learned from the singing of Paddy Tunney. Moorlough is near Strabane. According to Sean O'Boyle ('The Irish Song Tradition,' 1976) the song was written by a local poet called Devine. He reports the tradition that though the poet never consummated his love in marriage, he remained in love with Mary for most of his life.

An Cailin Rua (The Red-haired Girl) (Slow Air)

A beautiful tune about which I can find out nothing. On the negative side it would seem to have no relationship to the song by the same title in O'Boyle's book.

The Tap Room/Toss The Feathers (Reels)

The titles of these two reels are fairly well-known. Josie's version of The Tap Room however, does not seem to have anything to do with either of the two reels under that title in Breathnach. The second reel is to be found in O'Neill 1. Here again however, there is a complication. Josie's first part is not that given in O'Neill. Rather it seems to belong to another tune altogether, perhaps that known as Cooley's?

Dominic's Farewell to Cashel/Trip to the Cottage (Jigs)

Josie has written a number of fine tunes. He has kept six or seven as worth remembering. Most of these have received the compliment of being taken up by other musicians. Dominic's Farewell was composed while returning from the All-Ireland Fleadh in Cashel, in 1969. He was in the company of Dominic Cosgrove from Boyle, and Peg McGrath the flute player. During the 'crack' someone suggested that 'a window be broken or something, to let them know that we were there'. Josie made the tune in twenty minutes. Trip to the Cottage was made popular by Michael Coleman and has become part of the general Irish repertoire.

The Collier's Reel/The Bank of Ireland (Lilted reels)

Very attractive musical lilted of two reels, both in O'Neill's 1. It would be nice to think that The Collier's Reel referred to the coal mines at Arigna, Co. Leitrim, a few miles away from Josie's home. I should add that there is no evidence at all to support this conjecture.

Micko Russells Reel/Trip to Birmingham (Reels)

The first he learned from a broadcast by Micko Russell of Co. Clare. 'I doctored it up myself to play in the competition at the Fleadh in 1964'. Josie won the competition that year. He composed the second reel after he and Peg McGrath returned from a trip to that city. They went to adjudicate at the All-English Fleadh.

Murphy's Polka/The Keadue Polka (Po|kas)

Josie's whistle style is shown off to great effect here. The first piece he heard played by the late Dennis Murphy, the Kerry fiddler. He cannot remember where the second came from. Perhaps again from Murphy. He has given it the name of the nearby village of Keadue.

Peg McGrath's Reel/Ganley's Reel (Reels)

Josie composed the first tune. He calls it an 'instant' reel because it just came off the top of his head. One afternoon he had been playing a few tunes with Peg McGrath. Peg had been preparing a collection for a radio broadcast. That evening someone asked him to play 'that reel of Peg's', meaning a standard tune she had been working on that afternoon. Before he played a note someone else asked if she had made it herself. He said she had, but he knew he could not play the well-known tune she had been playing. He put the whistle to his lips and this tune came out. An 'instant' reel! Ganley's he learned from John Ganley, a fiddler from Castlerea, Co. Roscommon.

Ballad of the O'Carolan Country (Song)

As well as tunes, Josie has written some songs. One 'The Pride of the West' has been recorded by Larry Cunningham, who fronts a very popular Irish showband. He composed this song in 1963 in response to a songwriting competition organised by the Ballyfarnan Fleadh committee. The local people are justly proud of the area's connection with O'Carolan and the song is just an expression of that pride.

The Flowers of Ballymote/Coleman's Cross (Reels)

He first heard 'The Flowers of Ballymote' played as a schottische by the Castle Ceili Band. The second reel he learned from Felix Kearney the fiddler from Co. Tyrone.

Úna Wan (Song)

This is a translation of the Gaelic song 'Una Bhan'. Who made the translation is not known but Josie learned it from an old neighbour of his, Matt Sweeney. The original poem is attributed to Thomas Costello of Connaught, who in the 17th century fell in love with fair Una McDermott of Co. Leitrim. The match was not to the liking of her father and she died of love. Tradition has it that Costello grieved heavily, and once a week went out to sing this song, and sleep on her grave. When they took his boat he swam to the island only to be drowned in a storm. (For a fuller version of the fascinating story see 'Woodbrook' by David Thompson, Penguin Books, pp. 142/144.) The air is different from that used with the Gaelic words. However, it carries the English words well.

Úna Bhán (Slow Air)

This is the air as used for the Gaelic poem of this title (see previous note).

Boys of the Town/Dwyer's Jig (Jigs)

The first again came from James Flynn and can be found in O'Neill 1. Josie told me that Flynn used books, especially O'Neill, as a source. He also stuck very closely to the music as written. 'If O'Neill put a triplet in, James put it in!' He had no name for the second, so he called it after the fiddler he learned it from - John Dwyer, a civic guard (policeman) stationed in the area.

**Father O'Grady's Visit to Bocca/Darby's/
Farewell to London (Reels)**

Another two of Josie's own tunes here. The first named after a missionary priest from the townland of Bocca, near Ballydreen, Co. Roscommon. On a visit home he gave Josie a flute and in return asked that 'You'll make a tune to me?' This is the tune. The second, which is used as the title track, has a more complicated story behind it. Josie, as well as composing tunes and songs has written some musical plays, which were performed by the local Comhaltas, for charity. One of the recurring characters is a man called Darby. This part was always acted by Tom Hart, a good friend of Josie's. As a result many people in the area call Tom Hart, Darby. Indeed some of his more recent acquaintances know him only by that name. One time Darby, Josie and another fine Roscommon flute player, Pat Hanly, were invited to the Comhaltas dinner in Birmingham. Luck was not with them. First they missed the plane to Birmingham. Then they flew to London, but missed the train connection and had to take a taxi to the 'second city'. On the way up Tom Hart said that there would have to be a tune made. Josie obliged there and then. Of such stuff tune titles are made.

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