



Memories of Sligo
Irish Traditional Music Sligo Style

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Tommy Healy and Johnny Duffy



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Tommy Healy *flute*
Johnny Duffy *fiddle*
Reg Hall *piano*

1	Reels:	Tarbolton/The Longford Collector/ The Sailor's Bonnet	8		The First Part of The Lancers
2	Jigs:	The Wandering Minstrel/ Fasten the Legging/The Smash	9	Jigs:	The Gold Ring/ Richard Brennan's Favourite
3	Hornpipes:	The Rights of Man/ The Honeysuckle	10	Reels:	Miss McLeod/The Wild Irishman
4	Reels:	The Boys at the Lough/The Merry Blacksmith (fiddle/piano)	11	Jig:	The Grey Goose (fiddle/piano)*
5	Jigs:	The Scotsman Over the Border/ Tell Her I Am	12	Reels:	The Humours of Lissadel/ Sweeney's Dream
6	Reels:	The Montua/ The Happy Days of Youth	13	Jigs:	Cavan Lasses/Rose of the Heather
7	Reel:	Fred Finn's Reel (flute/piano)	14	Reels:	The Enchanted Lady/ The Holy Land
			14	Waltz:	Mrs Kenney (fiddle/piano)*
			15	Reels:	Martin Wynne's Nos 1 and 2

*legging

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All quotations in the notes are taken from
a recorded interview with Tommy Healy.

Tommy Healy and Johnny Duffy are Irish musicians of the old school and play what they proudly call *Sligo style*, a term coined by Irish musicians themselves to describe the great music tradition that grew up in the southern part of Co. Sligo around Ballymote. It seems likely that it actually forms part of a broader-based *Connaught style* embracing the neighbouring counties of Mayo, Roscommon and Leitrim and the north of Galway, but nevertheless the people of Coleman Country, as some people choose to call it, have a special way with their music and are possessors of a repertoire they consider their own. The music was nurtured among a network of small farmers and tradesmen in a remote, sparsely populated rural locality where the main social outlet during the long winter nights was house visiting and kitchen dances. Every night of the week there was music and dancing in somebody's house and all the musicians did the rounds. No wonder then that a unified, cohesive style emerged, percussive and rhythmic enough on the one hand to satisfy the needs of those on the floor, while being developed and sometimes inventive and ornate, thereby keeping the musicians happy. Alas, the heyday of the country house dances has passed, but even now the music flourishes, and while many no longer play regularly for dancing the dance quality still remains, especially in the music of those who lived through those days.

Tommy Healy comes from Montua, a tiny cluster of houses in the parish of Curry near the Mayo border, and was born into a musical family. His father, a fiddle player himself, no doubt encouraged him to get into the thick of it and he picked up the flute and the tunes just by looking and listening and by being motivated to make some sort of success of it.

“Well, my favourite flute player was Pat Walters. I picked up a lot from him. He was the principal one.”

Many times Tommy went out with the Wren Boys collecting round the houses on the day after Christmas, disguised ‘with a bit of a mask on’ and playing just over the threshold inside the kitchen doorways. Fiddles, flutes and tambourines were what they usually had, as there weren't many accordions about in the ‘thirties. Many of the flute players in the area also played the war pipes and there were several organised pipe bands the youngsters used to follow, especially the Marren and Tansey Gurteen Pipers’ Band, who were very highly regarded, and in the parish of Curry alone there were three fife and drum bands.

“In Charlestown there were two dance halls and I bet they weren't 150 yards apart. Charlestown's divided; there's a part of it in Sligo County and part in Mayo, so the man in Sligo applied to Tubbercurry for his licence and the priest ran the Town Hall, but they got their licence from Castlebar. And less than a mile up the road there was another dance hall and those three dance halls would be packed on the same night. There was a big population there in those days, but there's nobody there now.”

In the 1930s Michael Gorman was one of the most gifted fiddle players around Tubbercurry and he organised the Mayside Ceilidhe Band with himself and Packie Cook, fiddles, his nephew, young Mick Gorman, and Gerry Wimsey, flutes, and either his own brother Martin or Gerry Wimsey's brother Paddy on the drums. Throughout the summer there was a *feis* held in each parish in turn and this was a great time for all the musicians from neighbouring communities to get together. Michael Gorman and Gerry Wimsey used to enter all the duet competitions 'and always got whatever was going. Gorman and Gerry Wirnsey were the first or best of the day.' Tommy Healy restricted his own competition playing, however, to joining in with the Killasser Ceilidhe Band.

"They were lacking in that village for flute players and they used to always get them from our place."

During the early 'forties large numbers of Irishmen, mostly from the West of Ireland, came to England to fill the jobs created by the war effort and the cream of the South Sligo musicians eventually made their way to London. Martin Wynne and Joe Dowd had already established themselves as dance band musicians in the Irish dance halls and clubs and Michael Gorman - not yet 50 - was regarded as the grand old man and gathered around him neighbours from home like John Vesey, young Mick Gorman, Gerry Wimsey, Mick and Paddy Flynn and Danny McNiff. There was the occasional parish church concert or spot at an Irish dance hall but mostly they played at house parties in their bedsitters. There was no pub playing at that time and Tommy Healy's introduction to London was a great disappointment.

"We came to London in 1946 - a whole gang in from Northampton and Leicester -

all musicians. Oh, we were going to have a great time in London - and we didn't get one tune on a Christmas Eve in any pub in London. That includes the Dublin Castle, the Oxford, the Black Cap - we tried the lot. In fact, in the Dublin Castle they threatened to send for the police if we started playing."

The first pub sessions in London were around 1951 in the Camden Stores, the Devonshire Arms and the Black Cap in Camden Town. Andy O'Boyle, fiddle, and Jack McCarthy, accordeon, played on a regular basis at the Stores but the other sessions were informal. By a curious coincidence the headquarters of the English Folk Dance and Song Society was situated only a quarter of a mile away and at the height of the square dance craze, Michael Gorman was contacted to organise a band to play Irish music for an English crowd dancing traditional country dances, quadrilles and couple dances. For about two and a half years they played regularly at Cecil Sharp House, Wembley Town Hall and at Alperton with Tommy Healy and Paddy Flynn, flutes, Paddy Breen from Clare, flageolet, Sheila Geer, piano, and later on Eddie Pearce from Co. Dublin, accordeon. An English reading musician and her husband sometimes used to join in on the fiddle and drums:

"Mrs Mason was very keen on the Irish stuff. Always at 9.20 we went for a cup of coffee downstairs, and different reels now that we'd play, she'd get Paddy Flynn or I to play it and she'd have any piece of paper she could get and she'd be there on the spot on the following Friday night and she'd have it written out on a sheet in front of her and she'd play it."

Their other drummer was Douglas Kennedy, Director of the Society and Michael Gorman was always full of admiration for his musicianship.

In 1954 Michael Gorman's band appeared on BBC television in Alan Lomax's *Ballad Hunter* series with Jimmy Dunleavy, fiddle, Tom Fitzpatrick, accordeon, and Tommy Healy, Danny McNiff and Sonny McDonagh, flutes. It was a show that sent shivers up the spine of a young English National Serviceman glued to the screen in the corporals' mess. I'd heard some of Michael Coleman's records by then, but these were real people and this was the immediate stimulus to my seeking out Michael Gorman and playing with him later in the Bedford and elsewhere. Strangely I wasn't to meet Tommy Healy until many years later as he gave music a rest for fifteen years or so after he married.

Johnny Duffy's grandmother and Tommy Healy's grandfather were sister and brother. Johnny's father played the flute and Johnny was self-taught at a very early age, although later on he learnt a little from Martin McIntyre of Charlestown, who was a schooled musician as well as being a traditional fiddle player, and Johnny still has great time for him, both as a man and as a musician.

“The first time I heard John, he'd be about nine. That was at a party in their own house. The first reel I heard him play was *The Mullingar Races* and I thought then, in the name of God, a child of his age to play as he did. He can't play it like that now! I thought it was great.”

Johnny is a very modest man and isn't likely to tell anyone about his achievements as a child, but his cousin proudly tells of all the *feis* medals he won and all the village concerts where he caused a sensation. At the age of 14 or 15 at a *feis* in Ballina, Co. Mayo, he won the junior fiddle competition in the morning and, after great pressure from his friends, went up for the senior championship in the afternoon and won that too. While still in short trousers he was playing regularly with John Vesey, fiddle, and Mick Flynn, flute - outstanding musicians by any standard - and one of their engagements was to play in the cinema in Charlestown before the picture show started. By the mid-fifties he was in London playing up around Archway with a well-known accordeon player, Kit O'Connor, but then he too drifted away from music for about ten years. He used to call in the Favourite to listen to Jimmy Power and me but only rarely could he be persuaded to play a reel or two on Jimmy's fiddle, and it seemed unbelievable that a man could produce such music so casually. Tommy Healy's comeback put heart into both of them and their partnership grows in stature from week to week.

Collectors of records by the New York-based Sligo fiddle players Michael Coleman and Paddy Killoran will be familiar with many tunes and medleys in this collection. It is an undisputed fact that these recordings were a great inspiration to younger musicians coming up back home, but it should be remembered that the music they circulated on record was already the common property of generations of their forebears and countless contemporary musicians in South Sligo. Like everybody else, Johnny and Tommy listened and learned but the important thing is that they absorbed the material as their own. Two pieces here were actually introduced into the Sligo repertoire by way of Coleman's records (**Tarbolton Lodge**, a Scottish reel he picked up in America from a Canadian fiddler, and **Mrs Kenney**, named after a Dublin fiddle player briefly written up in O'Neill), while a typographical error on the original Decca label listed *O'Rourke's* and **The Wild Irishman** in the wrong order, so the reel now known widely as **The Wild Irishman** was actually called *O'Rourke's* by Coleman.

The First Part of The Lancers, an untitled piece, was readily recalled when Johnny and Tommy were asked to play something old-fashioned and out of the ordinary and it is one of the very few Irish traditional dance tunes that can be pinned down to a non-traditional, composed origin. It derives from the first two parts of *La Dorset*, written around 1817 by Spagnoletti, leader of the orchestra at The King's Theatre, London and published as Figure 1 of *The Original Lancers' Quadrille*. Johnny and Tommy have reversed the order of the first part and the turn.

Reg Hall



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