

The Branch Line

Jack and Charlie Coen

Irish traditional music from Galway to New York





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1	Jigs	Scatter the Mud / Larry Redican's Jig	Jack and Charlie
2	Reels	The Sailor's Cravat / Repeal of the union	Jack and Charlie
3	Jigs	John Conroy's Jig / Jim Conroy's Jig	Jack
4	Hornpipes	The Peach Blossom / The Fiddler's Contest	Charlie
5	Reels	Jim Conroy's Reel / The Pullet	Jack and Charlie
6	Slip Jigs	Redican's Mother / The humours of Kilkenny	Jack
7	Polkas	Mike Coen's Polka / The Branch Line	Jack and Charlie
8	Jigs	Have a Drink With Me / Blarney Pilgrim	Jack and Charlie
9	Flings	Two Woodford Flings	Jack and Charlie
10	Jigs	The Waddling Gander / O'Connell's Jig on Top of Mount Everest	Charlie
11	Reels	Lads of Laois / Green Groves of Erin	Jack
12	Jigs	The Tongs by the Fire / The Spinning Wheel	Jack and Charlie
13	Reels	Whelan's Reel / Jenny Dang the Weaver	Jack and Charlie
14	Jigs	Jack Coen's Jig / Paddy O'Brien's Jig	Jack and Charlie

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Jack and Father Charlie Coen live in New York City Jack plays the flute and brother Fr Charlie plays concertina, flute and tin whistle, he concentrates in general though on the concertina. They were both born and raised in Woodford Co. Galway.

Jack, born in 1928, is the older of the two. His father Mike Coen was a fine concertina player. He played music at local dances for the Galway sets old time waltzes and barn dances which were very popular in Woodford at that time. He also played at parties, get togethers at neighbours houses, but most of all he played at home. By the time Jack was eight years old he could lilt up to 100 lines I never learned them he says I just knew them. He started to play himself when eleven years of age. He began on an old 'C' tin whistle and graduated to the wooden flute. It was the usual procedure for children to begin on the tin whistle and continue playing it until their fingers were big enough to cover the holes on the flute. Jack remembers that the tin whistle was not really a respected instrument in his part of the country but was considered a mere toy.

Jack got his first flute from Tommy Gaffey who was a flute player himself. It wasn't in very good condition but Jack managed to put it together with the aid of a penknife. It lasted him only six months but shortly afterwards his brother picked up another one for him for five shillings in a hock shop in Dublin. Jack learned many tunes from his father and also from three local flute players, Jim and John Conroy, and Tom Gaffey. He would also go to the four-penny ceilis at the Parish Hall in Ballinakill and hear two of the great Ballinakill flute players, Eddie Moloney and Jack Coughlin. However, the biggest influence of all on his playing, he feels, came from Jim Conroy.

In 1949 Jack emigrated to America. He settled in the New York area and apart from one and a half years spent in New Jersey, has lived there ever since. He now lives in the Bronx with his wife, Julia, and family of six children He didn't play much when he came out first because he found it very difficult to find other Irish musicians to play with. In fact, during his time in New Jersey he didn't play at all. Though there were a lot of Irish musicians in New York in the early 1950s there weren't too many organized public gatherings of musicians nor were there any bars where traditional Irish music could be regularly heard if one didn't belong to a network of musicians who would meet and play at each others homes, opportunities for social playing were limited In the mid 1950s Comhaltas started to organize clubs in the New York area and Jack attended the local club in the Bronx regularly. There in 1956 he met Paddy O'Brien the accordion player who had just arrived in New York and he started a musical relationship with Paddy which was to last until Paddy returned to Ireland six years later. At this time also he struck up a close friendship with Larry Redican a fine fiddle and tenor banjo player well known in Irish music circles in the New York area. Jack would go to Larry's house and play music once a week up to the time Larry died a couple of years ago. Jack feels his loss very deeply as Larry was not only a fine musician but a good friend. Among other musicians Jack has played with were Joe Madden of the Bronx, John Joe Callanan now living in Albany, NY, the late Joe Cooley, Kevin Keegan and Sean McGlynn.

Jack was a member of The New York Ceilidhe Band in the early 1960s. The line-up featured Larry Redican, Andy McGann and Paddy Reynolds on fiddles. Paddy O'Brien on accordion, Mike Dorney and himself on flutes, Gerry Wallace on piccolo, and Felix Dolan on piano. His brother, Charlie, would also occasionally play with the band. They played for a few ceilis in New York, but Jack says that "there wasn't an Irish organization in New York City that would hire a ceili band and they wouldn't get a crowd if they did." At the present time Jack plays fairly regularly. He was one of the musicians chosen to represent Ireland at the 1976 Festival of American Folklife in Washington D C. He has a reputation as a fine teacher and has several pupils who take flute lessons from him. In the past few years he has also tried his hand at making wooden flutes with two carpenter friends of his. He continues to play the wooden flute rather than the silver flute, which is becoming increasingly popular among Irish players. In fact it was the lack of availability of good wooden flutes which led him to attempt flute making himself

Father Charlie Coen was born in 1934. He started the tin whistle when nine years old. Like Jack he later turned to the flute. When about 15 or 16 he tried his hand at the concertina for a while. However the lack of an available concertina led to his abandoning the instrument until he was 21. Then he finally was able to buy a good concertina. Around that time he went to England for three months and found a good wooden flute there. His earlier playing and repertoire was, like Jack's, heavily influenced by the Conroys and Mike Gaffey. The major influences as far as the concertina was concerned came from a local player called Connie Hogan (who died in 1974) and of course his father. He came to America in 1955 and found a job as a bellhop in the Catskills. In 1959 he decided to study for the priesthood. In 1968 he was ordained, left the seminary and moved to a parish in Staten Island where he has lived ever since. While

In the seminary he lost both his instruments in a fire. As a result he stopped playing for some time. He managed to acquire another concertina however and started to play regularly after moving to Staten Island. He started again on the flute two years ago - this time the silver flute because he couldn't find a good wooden one. Like Jack, Charlie has played a lot with Paddy O'Brien and Larry Redican. His concertina playing, he feels, has been heavily influenced by O'Brien's style of accordion playing. He has played on occasions with Andy McGann, Paddy Reynolds, and Sean McGlynn. Mostly, he plays with Jack during his frequent visits to the Bronx. For the past five years he has visited Ireland during National Fleadh Cheoil time and picked up a lot of music during his trips. He won the All Ireland Senior Concertina Competition in 1974 and in 1976 accomplished the unprecedented feat of winning three senior All Ireland Competitions on the concertina, tin whistle, and flute (slow airs division). He was also among those chosen to represent Ireland in the 1976 Festival of American Folklife. He is a fine teacher of music and has for some years been instructing children of many ethnic groups in different aspects of Irish culture. In 1975, a black pupil of his won the Sean Nos Gaelic Singing competition in the New York Fleadh!

As can be seen from the selections on this record, both Jack and Charlie have drawn on numerous sources for their repertoires. First of all there is the material learned from their father and the other local musicians back in Woodford; secondly there is the material learned in America from players such as Larry Redican and Paddy O'Brien; and thirdly the material picked up from various other players, from written tune collections such as O'Neill's *Music of Ireland* and *Cole's One Thousand Fiddle Tunes*, and from cassettes and records. The Coens' style of playing is extremely distinctive. It tends to be more measured and less flamboyant than many styles currently in vogue. Both

Jack and Charlie describe their style as “steady”. The tempo tends to be deliberate, the phrasing tends to be even and ornamentation is used economically. Their music, as a result, is extremely expressive with a wide range of delicate nuances of phrasing and variation. This is particularly a feature of their jig playing. Note the relatively high proportion of jigs on this record compared to most records of Irish music currently being produced.

The Coens are extremely accomplished reel players and possess a massive repertoire of reels, yet their total repertoire is very well balanced, featuring a great store of hornpipes, polkas, jigs, flings, and set pieces. This reflects the strong influence from their home area and from their father, in particular, who liked to play all sorts of dance tunes. Several of these tunes, learned from their father, appear on this record. In addition to matters musical, it remains to be said that both Jack and Father Charlie are two of the most delightful and personable people one could ever hope to meet. They enjoy playing their music and they enjoy sharing it with others, offering generous assistance at all times to prospective players of Irish music, and, indeed, to any musicians who might want to learn some of their tunes. With Irish traditional music experiencing a major revival among young Irish-Americans right now, the availability of the music of first-class musicians, such as Jack and Fr. Charlie is absolutely necessary in order to give this revival direction and depth. To this end, this record represents a contribution of major significance.

1 Scatter the Mud / Larry Redican’s Jig - Both Jack and Charlie learned Scatter the Mud (O’Neill 967 *) from their father. The second tune Jack got from Larry Redican and in turn passed it on to Charlie.

2 The Sailor’s Cravat / Repeal of the Union - Jack learned *The Sailor’s Cravat* (O’Neill 1146) from Paddy O’Brien and Charlie learned it from Jack. They first heard *Repeal of the Union* (O’Neill 1179) played by Jim Conroy at home in Woodford.

3 John Conroy’s Jig / Jim Conroy’s Jig - Jack Coen Flute Solo. Jack learned both of these at home from Jim and Johnny Conroy.

4 The Peach Blossom / The Fiddler’s Contest - Fr. Charlie Coen Concertina Solo. Charlie learned the first from Cole’s *One Thousand Fiddle Tunes*, and the second, (O’Neill 1711) from the playing of Paddy O’Brien.

5 Jim Conroy’s Reel / The Pullet - Both Jack and Charlie learned the first reel from Jim Conroy and the second from Larry Redican. Charlie also remembers Jim Conroy’s Reel played at home by Connie Hogan.

6 Redican’s Mother / The Humours of Kilkenny - Jack Coen Flute Solo. Jack got the first tune from Larry Redican who had originally learned it from his mother. Jack met Larry’s mother once in Dublin in 1960. She was 104 years old at the time and played the tin whistle up to the day she died. The second he picked up at home.

7 Mike Coen's Polka / The Branch Line - Both of these were played a lot by their father, Mike Coen. They never heard them played by anybody else. "*The Branch Line*" is the name given to an intersection on the road from Woodford to Whitegate.

8 Have a Drink With Me / The Blarney Pilgrim - The first they learned from their father. His version is somewhat different than the one found in O'Neill's (No. 720). *The Blarney Pilgrim* (O'Neill 1099) they learned from Larry Redican.

9 Two Woodford Flings - Both these tunes were very popular in the Woodford area. They learned the first one from Jim Conroy and the second from their father, who had a lot of flings in his repertoire.

10 The Waddling Gander / O'Connell's Jig On Top of Mount Everest - Concertina Solo - Fr. Charlie. *The Waddling Gander* Charlie got from his father and the second was widely played around Woodford. Charlie has no idea how the tune gained its picturesque title.

11 Lads of Laois / Green Groves of Erin - Jack Coen, Flute Solo. Jack learned both *The Lads of Laois* and *The Green Groves of Erin* (O'Neill 1429) from the playing of the older musicians such as Jim and John Conroy and Tom Gaffey.

12 The Tongs by the Fire / The Spinning Wheel - Both *The Tongs by the Fire* and *The Spinning Wheel* were widely played back in Woodford. Jack and Charlie have played them together for years.

13 Whelan's Reel / Jenny Dang the Weaver - The first, named after a noted Ballinakill musician, they learned at home. The second came from the playing of Larry Redican.

14 Jack Coen's Jig / Paddy O'Brien's Jig - The first, Jack learned at home. Paddy O'Brien got the tune from Jack and subsequently broadcast it over Radio Eireann giving it the title "*Jack Coen's Jig*". The second they learned from Paddy.

* Francis O'Neill: *O'Neill's Music of Ireland* (Chicago 1903, reissued New York, 1963).

The tapes for this record were recorded on location in February and July 1976 at Jack Coen's house in the Bronx, New York City. The recording was carried out by Mick Moloney with technical assistance provided by Phil Moloney. Scotch 208 tape was provided by the Archive of Traditional music in Bloomington, Indiana and the recording was carried out under a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (Grant No R50 54-126B) to record Irish traditional music in America. The original recordings were carried out on a Sony TC 770 kindly lent for the project by Dr Kenneth S Goldstein. The microphones used (also lent by Dr Goldstein) were Beyer M67 N (C). Mastering was carried out at The Mixing Lab Studio, in Boston, by John Nagy and Mick Moloney.

Many thanks to Jack and Julia Coen for their hospitality and forbearance.

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