

Vincent Griffin

Traditional Fiddle Music from County Clare

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On tracks marked * Vincent is accompanied on piano and ** on harp by Geraldine Carrig.

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A Gilderoy Production



THE MAN

Vincent Griffin, from County Clare, is first and foremost a fine traditional fiddler. We met, however, not in Ireland but in California. He was out there visiting friends and playing at some clubs and concerts. On a night off he came to a concert we (that is, The Boys of the Lough) were playing in Santa Barbara. At the inevitable party Vincent and Cathal McConnell played for three solid hours together. It was exciting, and in the middle of a long tour, invigorating to meet this superb Irish musician, especially in such unexpected circumstances.

Behind the fiddler, however, is a family man with wide interests and seemingly endless energy. He was born in 1932 in the townland of Ayle, near Feakle, County Clare. Married with six children, he now lives at his home-place, a farm of some sixty acres. Already there you have enough commitment for one man's lifetime, but Vincent still finds time for other activities. He is a joiner to trade and kept a job going, while at the same time working the farm. Then he took a job offered to him by the Shannon Development Board. They asked him to teach traditional music to children in the "cottage areas" of the county. He committed himself fully to the task and soon he had organised private classes as well. The joinery was pushed aside, and he now works the farm by day and teaches in the evening.

Although the fiddle is his instrument, Vincent has pupils who play the accordeon, whistle, flute, banjo and mandolin. He makes the reasonable point that knowing the music and how the instruments should sound "I can give them a good start." In all he has about three hundred pupils. Mostly they are young people, but some, in their thirties, are taking an opportunity they never had when younger.

Teaching obviously gives Vincent pleasure, especially as some of his pupils show great promise. One group of young people from Tulla, under his tuition, won five or six classes at the 1976 All-Ireland Fleadh Ceol. Of his own children, four play the fiddle and are showing promise. This pleases him, but at the same time he is well aware of the problems. The children could very easily be turned against music by his being over zealous and too ambitious for them. On the other hand, you have to offer some encouragement. As Vincent puts it: "It's a balance between pushing them and not pushing them. If you can make music part of their daily routine they will thank you for it in later years."

Vincent comes from a family of musicians. They are related to the late Johnny Paterson who wrote such songs as *Goodbye Johnny* and *The Stone Outside Dan Murphy's Door*. His mother had some fine traditional songs and she played a bit at the concertina. His father was a "pretty good" melodeon player, but encouraged his family to take up the fiddle. He was always keen on that instrument and bought one for the children. "We started on the fiddle when we were young, and we stuck to it." When Vincent was about seven years old he had three lessons from a fiddler in Tulla called Paddy Powell (a man mentioned by Francis O'Neill, the great compiler of Irish instrumental music). He learned a lot from Powell, even in three lessons, and from there on he taught himself. Vincent says, "I had a good ear for a tune", and his older brother, Patrick, who was a good player by then coaxed him along.

In general County Clare is a good area for music, especially around where Vincent was reared. He remembers with great affection a concertina player who lived just across the fields from him. Known all over Munster simply as "Rue", his name was Jim McNamara.

As well as being a good musician, “Rue” was a very witty man. Vincent says, “People thought he was very hard on the instrument, but he wasn’t, he just played very strong, very like the modern-day accordeon players do, chords and everything. He had some great music.” There were two other good fiddle players in Feakle that he remembers.

One, Johnny Allen, was known to O’Neill, and the other was Patrick Moloney. Vincent heard all these men but never actually learned a lot of music from them. Hearing them, however, did fire him on to improve his own playing. Most of the music he learned in those days came from country house sessions, and of course from records, especially those of Michael Coleman. Vincent puts it this way: “I enjoy all musicians, especially fiddle players, but if I had to choose I’d listen to Coleman. I liked his style. He played lovely soft music and great variations.” Certainly you can hear the influence of Coleman on Vincent’s music and repertoire, but unlike so many, he was not content to merely copy the great man. He listened, learned, and moved on to develop his own music.

At about twenty Vincent played with the Shamrock Ceili Band. It was a good band, and playing for all those dances he feels helped to strengthen his playing and widen his repertoire. He also played on occasions with the famous Kilfenora Band. In 1958 he played in London with the Shamrock. He enjoyed the experience, so naturally when in 1959 he decided to go to England to see “If I could earn a few pound”, he headed for that same city. Soon he was playing with the residents at the Hibernian Club in Fulham Broadway. He enjoyed this a great deal simply because of the musicians he played with. He has a great word to say for them all. Roger Sherlock, Raymond Roland, Brendan McGlinchey, Liam Farrell, Frank Skeffington, P.J. Hynes and even Sean Maguire played with them occasionally.

In the winter of 1965 he went home to Clare for a short-while. His mother died that year and “I had been long enough away anyway.” He was soon to return for good and that is where we took up the story. Music has always been at the centre of Vincent Griffin’s life.

Even when, with some success, he and his wife began to rear greyhounds, music played its part. He named one of his most successful dogs after a reel *The Pinch of Snuff*. Over the years he has won various prizes for his playing. In 1956 he was second in the All-Ireland, and although he entered and won the County and Province competitions over the intervening years, it wasn’t until 1973 that he had another go at the All-Ireland. Again he came second, but in 1974 he became All-Ireland Champion, and was presented with the Michael Coleman Cup, a very proud moment. Here then is a fiddle player who has learned much from many people. He made it serve him and at the same time helps others with his knowledge. Listen to a musician that can be numbered among Ireland’s best.

THE MUSIC

It is worth making the point that Vincent Griffin plays tunes that particularly suit the fiddle. That may seem a fairly obvious statement to make, but it is by no means always the case that a fiddler will choose to play “fiddle tunes”. For instance, they may take pleasure in adapting, say, flute tunes. On the other hand they may have little ability to discriminate between what is and what is not a good fiddle tune. Vincent has no such problem - he plays fiddle tunes.

Reels: **Fahey’s 1 & 2**

These two tunes are a case in point. Good fiddle tunes these, by anybody’s standards. They were written by Paddy Fahey, the legendary fiddle player from Loughrea, County Galway. Vincent says about him, “I admire his music and his style very much.”

Jigs: **Paddy Fahey’s/The Cliffs of Moher**

The first of these jigs was also written by Fahey. Hearing it immediately after the reels gives support to the point often made about a Fahey composition, the “All his tunes have the same flavour about them.” There is never any criticism implied in this - rather it is always coupled with high regard for the man’s skill and technique. *The Cliffs of Moher* Vincent learned from Raymond Roland while in London. O’Neill has a setting in “Dance Music of Ireland” (O’Neill 1) but it should be noted that there it is written with an F sharp whereas it is usually played, as Vincent does, in the minor key.

Reels: **Paddy Ryan’s Dream/Mammy’s Pet**

Two well known fiddle tunes. You’ll find the first in O’Neill’s “Music of Ireland” (O’Neill 2) where two settings are given. *Mammy’s Pet* is called *Mamma’s Pet* in Vol. 1 of “Ceol Rince Na hEireann” (Breathnach 1). In O’Neill 1 a fairly similar setting has the title *Downing’s Reel*, presumably after the man he got it from, Timothy Downing of Cork.

Reels: **Martin Rocheford’s/The Sligo Maid**

Martin is a musician neighbour of Vincent’s. His first instrument is the pipes but he also plays whistle and fiddle. They play a lot together whenever they get the chance, and this tune came from him. The second reel is a very well known one. Recorded by Coleman, settings are to be found in Breathnach 1 and Pat Mitchell’s admirable memorial volume “The Dance Music of Willie Clancy”.

Hornpipes: **The New Century/The Cuckoo**

Vincent says these two hornpipes are common in Clare. The first was certainly recorded by Coleman and is to be found in O’Neill 1. Once again, however, he completely changes the nature of the tune by presenting it with an F sharp rather than F natural as played here.

Jigs: Coleman's

Vincent learned these three jigs from Hugh Gillespie, the County Donegal fiddler. The selection was recorded by Coleman so that is the name we gave it. However, I remember Tommy Gunn, the fiddler from County Fermanagh, played the first giving it the title of *The Wandering Minstrel* (see also Breathnach 1). For the second I can find no other name. I have heard the third called *Coleman's Cross*, though I think that name belongs more correctly to a reel. Coleman gives the selection the name *Jackson's*, though none seem to have any relation to any of Jackson's jigs.

Reels: Lord McDonald's/Ballinasloe Fair

Another Coleman set and both reels are in O'Neill 1 & 2. *Lord McDonald's* is a very popular reel throughout the world. Originally a Scottish tune it travelled not only to Ireland but is known as *Slanty Gart* in Shetland. Versions can also be heard all over the American continent under various titles.

Reels: The Reefs/McFadden's Favourite

Vincent had no name for the first reel nor could he remember where he got it. However, I have used the title given to me by Cathal McConnell. *McFadden's Favourite* was learned from Michael Doyle, a fiddler from Bodyke, a townland between Tulla and Scarriff. A setting of it is given in O'Neill 1 & 2. It was presumably given that name in honour of John McFadden, the Mayo fiddler, one of O'Neill's sources.

Reels: The New Year's In/Youghal Quay

The first reel is in the key of F, not a key that is common in Irish music. Vincent learned it either from his father or "Rue" many years ago and has forgotten the name. As it was recorded just as 1976 became 1977 we fitted the above title to it. The second reel he learned from Seamus Connolly. He thinks that perhaps Paddy O'Brien the accordion player wrote it. It seems to be a version of a tune called *The Castlebar Races*.

Air: Se Bhfath Mo Bhfuartha

This Mayo air is a great favourite with pipers. Vincent changes the key and Geraldine Carrigg accompanies him on the harp. Translated, the title is "The Cause of My Sorrow".

Reel: Lord Gordon's

This tune is another one that became popular as a result of Coleman recording it. Vincent adds his own fine variations to make it a virtuoso piece. Settings are to be found in O'Neill 1 & 2 and Breathnach 1.

Reels: Dr. Gilbert/The Queen of May

Two more "Coleman tunes" and naturally great favourites with fiddlers. Both are in Breathnach 1.

Jigs: The Trip to Sligo/Garrett Barry's

The first jig Vincent learned from the great Paddy Canny. The title of the second tune is the one given to it by the late Willie Clancy. Clancy's father learned it from Garrett Barry, a blind piper who lived in Clare in the second half of the 19th century.

Reels: The Night in Ennis/The Maid Behind the Bar

Another reel for which Vincent has no name, so we attached one to it. The second is a well known tune but here Vincent transposes it into C (not its usual key), something I have heard only one or two other fiddlers attempt. A setting is to be found in Breathnach 1.

Reels: Crowley's

Two more of the tunes recorded by Coleman - again great favourites, especially with fiddlers.

**Reels: Lady Anne Montgomery/
Down the Broom/The Gatehouse Maid**

Lady Anne Montgomery has become a very popular tune in Ireland over these past few years. Probably originally a Scottish reel it was carried by Tommy Gunn from Fermanagh. He gave it to Cathal McConnell and from there it spread like wildfire and is quickly becoming part of the general repertoire of Irish musicians. The next two tunes Vincent got from Hugh Gillespie of Donegal. *Down the Broom* will be found in Mitchell's volume mentioned above.

Robin Morton, June 1977

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Dear Mr Engle,
please note
address AYLE. FEAKLE. Co.
CARE. I would like to add
a few details to the slave
before its published.

Sincerely yours.
Vincent Griffin