

The Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann Archive of Traditional Irish Music

BY TED MCGRAW

Do you remember the time in Mina's kitchen when Frank sang that song about Bridgie's cat and the eel? Yes, in fact he sang that song often in a session when the company was right. He'll be sorely missed! I've asked several people about that song and no one outside of those sessions has ever heard it. Wouldn't it have been great if 'someone' had recorded Frank, or published the words of that song – he must have made it up himself. Substitute Frank's hilarious song for Marty's reel, or Tom's dance, and the stories are endless. The ending is always the same – if 'someone' had only recorded that song, or tune, or story, or dance.

Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann is an international organization for the promotion of Irish music, song, dance, and language. There are over 400 branches worldwide and 50 branches in North America and five here in NY State. The purpose of the Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann North American Archive is to document traditional Irish music in North America. The plan is to have the Comhaltas branches perform the collection and documentation functions, and then to store the archivable materials in a professionally managed archive. The North Am. Archive Committee is a staff function of the North American Province of Comhaltas and is actively working with several branches to define projects. Since many talents and equipment are required to make an archival project happen, the committee is working with technical advisors and librarians to answer questions for the branches.

An archive is a repository for the collection and retention of traditional Irish music and related items, such as the unique song

mentioned above. In general, anything that helps to tell the story of traditional Irish music would be of interest to the archive. Music can be retained in many forms, including early 78 rpm records, CD's, field recordings of music and interviews on magnetic tape, etc. Pictures, articles, newspaper clippings, flyers, and books pertaining to the music and musicians are also collected. The archive must store this material properly for long term preservation and still have the capability to make the materials available to users. The educational benefits for musicians, researchers, teachers, broadcasters, etc. are extensive.

At this time the Archive Committee has an agreement with the Irish Music Center (IMC) at Boston College to store Comhaltas materials. Donations become the property of the IMC and are listed in their catalog as part of the CCE collection. The Irish Music Center is a professionally staffed archive dedicated to preserving Irish music and is located at the John J. Burns Library on the Chestnut Hill campus of Boston College. We have already stored several projects at the IMC and these are listed in their catalog. The URL is: www.bc.edu/imc

Some Examples of Archival Projects

Archive donations can be as simple as the following:

1. A box of old 78's found in the attic of an uncle or grandfather. These are becoming more and more difficult to find, and they are the only media that doesn't require electronics as the sound can be mechanically reproduced.

2. A manuscript book written by Rochester fiddler George Walker's teacher when he

learned his music in Ireland back in the 1940's in Co. Limerick.

3. A tune book used in the 1930's by a music teacher in the National School in Ireland donated by another emigrant.

4. A picture of a group of Irish and Irish-American musicians playing for a party in Rochester back in the 1940's. This picture is rare in that it is dated and annotated with the names of the players.

Other more substantial donations include:

1. All the publications from the Ed Reavy Foundation in Philadelphia, including the videos, cd's and music books. Ed was a well known fiddler and composer originally from Co. Cavan.

2. The Sampler Records files on William Sullivan, Co. Galway melodeon player, including all correspondence, original master tapes from his recordings, pictures, cd's and accompanying tune book, concert video, and the cassette. These came from Sampler Records president Mitzie Collins of Rochester.

3. Newspaper clippings, pictures, awards, and a box of tapes from the grand nephew of Co. Sligo fiddler Martin Wynne, who spent his last years in Buffalo. Much of this material is in the archive although we are still working on sorting and cataloging the tapes. We have uncovered some unique and unexpected material such as one whole tape of Martin's sister Bridget playing the uilleann pipes. No one outside of her immediate family knew she played the pipes. Duplicates of these materials are being sent to the regional Comhaltas archive in Gurteen, Co. Sligo, Ireland, near Martin's place of birth.



Some archive projects can become more complex and time consuming, and require a great deal of planning to make them happen. We have solicited help from the Arts and Cultural Council of Greater Rochester to help document the Irish musicians in Rochester. This project started two years ago and most of the interviewing has been completed but the time consuming tape transcription is still in progress. We are planning a local exhibit as well as a package for the archive.

Comhaltas Branch Projects

An example of a branch project that we are trying to encourage is for each branch to document itself. This could include any or all of the following:

1. List of the founding members

2. Reasons why and how the branch was formed
3. Membership and officer lists
4. Branch reports
5. Hall of Fame honorees
6. Pictures
7. Video and/or audio documentation
8. Other member activities such as performances, teaching, awards received, etc.

Most of the above material is readily available; it's usually just a matter of pulling it together in one place. The archive committee can make copies of any original material that a branch, or donor, may wish to keep.

Other branch archival activities include documenting the musicians, singers, dancers who have been community leaders in passing on the tradition. These people may or may not be active members of Comhal-

tas. In some areas, financial assistance in the form of various government grants may be available to get professional help with interviews, recordings and transcriptions.

Comhaltas is actively engaged in preserving traditional Irish music in all its forms. If you have material you could donate, originals or copies, we would like to hear from you! Consider a donation in memory of your parents or a loved one, of a branch, or your favorite musician, living or deceased. The North American contact is:

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