

## No Yankee Doodling: Notable Trends and Traditional Recordings from Irish America

EARLE HITCHNER

### **Abstract**

*The emergence of the compact disc in 1979 was regarded as the likely sales salvation of recorded music, and for many years the CD reigned supreme, generating steady, often substantial, company profits. More recently, however, the music industry has painfully slipped a disc. The CD has been in sharp decline, propelled mainly by young consumer ire over price and format inflexibility and by Internet technology available to skirt or subvert both. Irish American traditional music has not been impervious to this downward trend in sales and to other challenging trends and paradigm shifts in recording and performing. Amid the tumult, Irish American traditional music has nevertheless shown a new resilience and fresh vitality through a greater do-it-yourself, do-more-with-less spirit of recording, even for established small labels. The five recent albums of Irish American traditional music reviewed here—three of which were released by the artists themselves—exemplify a trend of their own, preserving the best of the past without slavishly replicating it. If the new mantra of music making is adapt or disappear, then Irish American traditional music, in adapting to change free of any impulse to dumb down, is assured of robustly enduring.*

To use the analogy of painting for the current business of music: The self-satisfied smile of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* has yielded to the desperate grimaces in Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*. The recording industry, once relatively complacent, struck a reef of bold, new technology for acquiring music, initially leaving it adrift, bewildered, and fatefully—some would say fatally—defiant.

The impact of online music, legally or illegally obtained, is unassailable. "Album sales are almost half of what they were in 2000," John Seabrook points out in "The Price of the Ticket," his *New Yorker* article about the increasing dependence of musicians on touring to offset eroding album sales.<sup>1</sup> According to "Tanking CD Sales Shutter Stores," a *Rolling Stone* article by Steve Knopper, the demise of Tower Records, Circuit City, and Virgin Megastore in the United States, coupled with a severe reduction in shelf space for music in Borders, Best Buy, and Walmart, has spawned speculation about the shelf life of the compact disc as a recording format.<sup>2</sup>

The anxiety does not end there. "The speed at which this [music] industry is coming undone is utterly breathtaking," Charles M. Blow observed in his *New York Times* op-ed essay "Swan Songs?"<sup>3</sup> Among the reasons cited by Blow is the shift from "an acquisition model to an access model" of music for young people. They are listening more to music streaming on the Internet for free (to them, not to the providers), which is beginning to blunt the desire to buy music in any form. As an anecdotal test, I asked the freshmen in a college course I taught in the fall of 2007

<sup>1</sup> John Seabrook, "The Price of the Ticket," *New Yorker*, 10 and 17 August 2009, 34.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Knopper, "Tanking CD Sales Shutter Stores," *Rolling Stone*, 19 March 2009, 15, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Charles M. Blow, "Swan Songs?" *New York Times* (1 August 2009), A17.

how many of them paid for any of the music on their iPods. Not one hand went up. Furthermore, the recent decision by the Universal Music Group to experiment with new compact discs priced at ten dollars or less to attract buyers back to stores seems a case of too little, too late.<sup>4</sup>

This vertigo-inducing volatility has upended the old paradigm of earning a living from music by performers. Quoted in Seabrook's *New Yorker* article, former rock impresario and current chairman of Live Nation Entertainment Irving Azoff described what "the order used to be: first, records; second, live; third, merchandise. Now it's: first, live; second, third-party sponsorship; third, merchandise; fourth, publishing; fifth, records."<sup>5</sup>

The recording of Irish traditional music in the United States, long considered a niche by mainstream music analysts even during the high tide of *Riverdance*, has not been immune to the ongoing churn in the marketplace. Shelf space for Irish traditional music recordings in retail chains and independent shops was among the first to shrink, and online replacement models have yet to catch up to the revenue formerly generated by those bricks-and-mortar outlets.

Advances from record labels to Irish traditional musicians for future recordings have tended to become rarer and smaller, whereas licensing deals between labels and artists, many of whom absorb the actual cost of recording, have become more common. The need for seed money or grants, whether from arts organizations, private donors, or governmental agencies, to defray upfront recording costs is likewise on the rise for Irish traditional musicians. The purchase in 2006 by Digital Music Group of Connecticut-based Green Linnet Records (later revitalized as an imprint of the Nashville-based Compass Records Group, which includes Ireland's esteemed traditional label Mulligan), a discernible retrenchment in Irish traditional music albums at New Jersey-based Shanachie Entertainment, and a sharp decline in recording contracts offered by other labels to Irish traditional artists who cannot or will not tour widely have persuaded a number of musicians to release albums on their own. Consequently, the number of self-issued Irish traditional music albums in recent years has overtaken the number of releases by small, established, usually independent record companies, and this cycle is not likely to reverse.

Even the perdurably popular Chieftains, who just fifteen years ago issued the multi-million-selling album *The Long Black Veil* on the RCA Victor/BMG label, have licensed their latest album, *San Patricio*, to the Concord Music Group, an independent company based in California and still best known for its flagship Concord Jazz imprint. For the first time in more than two decades, no Irish traditional music act is featured on a major commercial label in the United States.

Touring to bolster album sales has switched to selling albums to bolster tours. (Recall Irving Azoff's order of priorities: "first, live . . . fifth, records.") The necessity

<sup>4</sup> See Joseph Flambeck, "Universal's Strategy Tests Lower Price on New CDs," *New York Times* (19 March 2010), B4. Flambeck also quotes Jim Urie, who oversees Universal Music Group's distribution, on price resistance: "The casual fan isn't willing to pay fifteen dollars for a regular CD." Full albums downloaded online today frequently range from \$7.99 to \$11.99 and have the advantage of immediacy and convenience.

<sup>5</sup> Seabrook, "The Price of the Ticket," 42.

to tour more extensively has grown complicated, however, for many Irish traditional performers. For several years now, and especially since the Great Recession gripped the United States in 2008, musicians have often added house concerts to their tour itineraries to avoid those dreaded days of no performance, no pay, and greater financial outlay. In some ways these house concerts reflect the salon atmosphere of early-twentieth-century Paris. Friends gather in living rooms or basements to hear live music in an intimate, informal setting, and afterwards the performers and patrons chat amiably and join frequently in impromptu music-making sessions (the Irish version of jams). The advantages of house concerts are obvious: no money wrangling (most, if not all, of the dollars collected at the door go to the performers), a somewhat screened turnout (usually a phone number has to be called to find out about location), and congenial audiences in congenial surroundings. The disadvantages of house concerts are also obvious: By design they appeal to smaller coteries of fans, and because of various legal, insurance, and vetting issues, few, if any, major newspapers will carry announcements for concerts in private homes of initially undisclosed address or assign someone to review them, thus making it more difficult for musicians to raise their professional profiles through the media.

Making it even harder for Irish traditional music and its performers to survive and thrive in the United States today is the PBS-TV trend of broadcasting such hermetically prepackaged, highly sanitized, overly slick productions as *Celtic Woman* and *Celtic Thunder*, especially during pledge drives. Catering, and perhaps kowtowing, to the broadest possible audience (Paul Anka's 1960 hit "Puppy Love" is part of the *Celtic Thunder* repertoire), these shows have become financial freshets, and so their albums and videos tend to flood whatever Irish music sections still exist in major retail outlets. More treacle, less traditional: It is the lamentable norm in filling shelf space and public-television coffers.

Within this overall paradigm shift, however, has emerged an adaptive, resourceful aesthetic for recording Irish traditional music. The stigma attached to so-called vanity recordings has virtually disappeared as the sound and performance quality of self-issued albums has improved and their packaging grown less austere. Financial exigency may have forced many musicians to simplify or scale down the recording process, but much of this more humbly recorded music is hardly humble in beauty or effect. As an emergent recording trend, it is not a case of less is more but of doing more with less. The palette of musical colors may have contracted, but the colors that remain often shine brighter. No finer example of this latter development is Willie Kelly and Mike Rafferty's *The New Broom*, self-released by the duo in 2009 with Dónal Clancy accompanying on guitar and bouzouki. With the perimeter intentionally faded, the front-cover photograph of Kelly and Rafferty conveys a daguerreotype impression of age. The choice of music is certainly steeped in tradition, but the playing itself is ageless.

Born in 1926 in the Ballinakill, East Galway, parish of Larraga, flutist Mike Rafferty draws his music proportionately from the first twenty-two years of his life in Galway, where his father, Tom "Barrel" Rafferty, had a profound early influence on him, and from his playing partnerships with musicians, both immigrant and native-born, in the greater New York and New Jersey region since his 1949 arrival there. Beginning at age 68, a time when many other musicians might slow down and

bask in their *éminence grise* status, Mike Rafferty has been on a tear of productivity. He has issued three duet recordings—*The Dangerous Reel* (1995), *The Old Fireside Music* (1998), and *The Road from Ballinakill* (2001)—with his U.S.-born daughter, Mary, a talented button accordion, flute, and whistle player who spent seven years as a member of Cherish the Ladies. He also released his formal solo debut, *Speed 78* (2004), fittingly enough, at age 78. From his vast repertoire, six hundred tunes have been compiled and transcribed by his flute student Lesl Harker in two books, *300 Tunes from Mike Rafferty* (2005) and *Second Wind: 300 More Tunes from Mike Rafferty* (2008).

On *The New Broom*, Mike Rafferty, now age 84; his good friend, Bronx-born fiddler Willie Kelly, who is thirty-nine years younger; and Mike's son-in-law, guitar and bouzouki player Dónal Clancy (son of the late Liam Clancy), who now resides in Ring, Waterford, make music exploring transplanted styles from East Galway (Mike's birthplace, known more for a melodically than a rhythmically driven style of playing), East Clare (Willie's principal technique, unhurried, lyrical, and radiating a so-called lonesome touch), and South Roscommon (Willie's paternal heritage, where a brisker attack holds sway). The album, recorded in just two separate four-hour sessions in New Jersey, placed an emphasis on spontaneity and spirit rather than on digitally spliced flawlessness. "Mike and I split the cost," Kelly pointed out in my interview with him. "It was about the price of a family vacation to the Jersey shore for a week."<sup>6</sup>

Of the thirty-four tunes they recorded, twenty-six are traditional with no composer credited. The remaining eight tunes were composed by Tipperary's Paddy O'Brien and Seán Ryan, Offaly's John Brady, Sligo's Martin Wynne, Cavan's Ed Reavy, and Galway's Vincent Broderick, all known for creating melodies in the Irish traditional idiom. Kelly and Rafferty's approach to these thirty-four tunes is by no means straitlaced or unimaginative, but at the same time their playing reflects what Donegal fiddler-scholar Elizabeth Doherty and a few other ethnomusicologists have described as a "paradox of the periphery," where traditional music far removed from its homeland source is embraced with fierce loyalty and conservation bordering on conservatism.<sup>7</sup> This reaction is not surprising from immigrant and Irish American musicians who may feel the need to protect a transplanted tradition in the diaspora from careless co-optation, marginalization, or devaluation within a larger, hegemonic culture.

An Irish saying that appears as a kind of epigraph inside the CD package, "A new broom sweeps clean, but an old one knows the corners," applies to the performance of these three instrumentalists. They play cleanly and thoroughly throughout, and know how to reach into the corners. The trio performs at an unfrenetic, graceful tempo, with an exemplary temperament, touch, and what can only be called telepathy. That impression begins with the opening medley of jigs, "The Maid on the Green/Anthony Frawley's," where fiddle, flute, and bouzouki mesh effortlessly.

<sup>6</sup> Willie Kelly, phone interview, 7 September 2009. Quoted by permission.

<sup>7</sup> The title of Doherty's Ph.D. dissertation confirms the currency of the phrase: "The Paradox of the Periphery: Evolution of the Cape Breton Fiddle Tradition 1928–95," University of Limerick, 1996.

Kelly, Rafferty, and Clancy let listeners come to the music as if they entered a quiet pub on a cold, damp day and found, instead of a hearth, this music burning quietly in a snug, swept-out corner.

The trio's performance of such medleys as "Dash to Portobello/The Ladies' Pantalettes" reels (Michael Coleman memorably recorded that last reel in May 1927), "The Green Fields of Woodford/The Fly in the Porter" jigs, and "Reilly of the White Hill/Martin Wynne's" reels (the latter is one of four extant reels composed by Wynne) is even more captivating. Mike Rafferty plays "The Green Fields of Woodford" solo on flute with Clancy shading on guitar and dedicates the tune to the memory of button accordionist Joe Madden, his longtime friend from Portumna, Galway, who taught it to him and who died at age 70 on 14 November 2008. Pairing that jig with one composed by Newtown, Tipperary, button accordionist Paddy O'Brien (1922–91), who lived in New York from 1954 to 1962, testifies to how important the contributions of Rafferty, Madden, and O'Brien were (and are) to Irish traditional music in the United States. Moreover, Willie Kelly's seamless entrance on "The Fly in the Porter" suggests that a younger generation will not let those past bonds fray.

Because Irish hornpipes dictate mid-tempo playing, they are often sped up by musicians impatient with the neither fast nor slow pace. The challenge is to maintain the mid-tempo without slipping into metronomic or slyly accelerated playing, and in two medleys of hornpipes, "Kilcooley Wood/An Buchall Droite" (The Withered Boy) and "The Honeysuckle/Pound Hill," Rafferty and Kelly perform with faultless pace and élan.

Accompanied only by Clancy on guitar, Rafferty's flute playing of "The White Leaf/Larkin's Beehive" reels and "Barrel Rafferty's/Cregg" jigs is articulate, unhasty, and rounded in phrasing. Kelly plays the slow air "An Caisideach Ban" (The Fair-Haired Cassidy) and the jig paired with it, "The Cook in the Kitchen," as well as the reels "Bonnie Anne/The Weeshie Bag of Potatoes," as strictly unaccompanied fiddle solos, setting into pristine relief his lithe, subtly ornamented bowing.

Despite the spare, anecdotal descriptions of tunes and no descriptions or sourcing whatsoever for six of its seventeen medleys, *The New Broom* is what Kilnadeema, Galway, button accordionist Joe Burke, in his back-cover blurb, calls "the old genuine music of Ireland." It is music, it is genuine, it is Irish, but it is not old. Nothing this unobtrusively vital and vibrant can ever be deemed old.

Willie Kelly and Dónal Clancy represent a younger generation extending respect and appreciation to the generation represented by Mike Rafferty, who in 2010 received the highest honor bestowed by the United States Government on traditional or folk artists: a National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship.<sup>8</sup> Together the three have made an album full of appealing melodies and

<sup>8</sup> Founded in 1982, the NEA National Heritage Fellowships are awarded annually to nine to twelve resident traditional or folk artists of surpassing achievement, significance, and influence. Previous honorees for Irish traditional music or dance are *sean-nós* (old-style) singer Joe Heaney, uilleann piper Joe Shannon, fiddler and teacher Martin Mulvihill, stepdancer Michael Flatley, flutist Jack Coen, fiddler Liz Carroll, stepdancer and instructor Donny Golden, singer and multi-instrumentalist Mick Moloney, fiddler Kevin Burke, and button accordionist Joe Derrane.

skilled, supple, ego-free playing that captures Irish American traditional music at its unalloyed, unfussy best.

Mike Rafferty was a flute mentor to Bronx-born Joanie Madden, daughter of Joe Madden and leader of the all-women's ensemble Cherish the Ladies. She and three other New Yorkers, fellow Bronx natives Brian Conway on fiddle and Brendan Dolan on piano, along with Brooklyn-born Billy McComiskey on button accordion, represent a generation or two behind Rafferty; yet their respect and admiration for his music and that of his contemporaries suffuse their 2009 debut album, *Pride of New York*.

Both the album title and the band's name are an abridgement of the Pride of New York Céilí Band, coined in 2005 by Catskills Irish Arts Week Artistic Director Paul Keating. These four musicians have convened at the top of their seasoned individual talents. Madden has reached a quarter century as the leader of Cherish the Ladies. Conway has issued two solo albums and one trio CD over the past eight years. McComiskey released his second solo recording in 2008 and appeared on an album by the Green Fields of America ensemble in 2009. A much-in-demand accompanist, Dolan has performed on the latest Conway and McComiskey solo albums as well as on the 2009 CD by the Green Fields of America.

Nicknamed PONY, the quartet shares a mostly Big Apple repertoire learned from, or linked to, such established masters as flute and whistle players Mike Rafferty, Charlie Coen, and Jack Coen (Joanie's teacher), pianist Felix Dolan (Brendan's father), fiddlers Larry Redican, Martin Wynne, Martin Mulvihill, James "Lad" O'Beirne, Paddy Reynolds, and Andy McGann (Brian's mentor), and button accordionists or melodeonists Martin Mulhaire, Paddy O'Brien, Tom Doherty, Joe Madden, and Seán McGlynn (Billy's mentor). Apart from the fiddle riding slightly low in the sound mix for the ensemble tracks, each tune recorded by PONY displays the players' ability to freshen the familiar and invigorate the ingrained. In the process they have carved out their own distinctive sonic identity, the musical equivalent of New York City steel and cement mixed with loamy rural Irish turf, especially from South Sligo and East Galway.

The jigs "Happy Days/The Boys of Lough Gowna/The Knights of Saint Patrick" and the reels "Maud Millar/The Morning Mist/Lady Gordon" typify the album's relaxed brilliance. Flute, fiddle, accordion, and piano propel those tunes with precision and lift, qualities prized by set dancers, and above the melody and rhythm is a saccharine-free frosting of elegance and grace. Other medleys of reels played with comparable fervor and finesse by the quartet are "Redican's/The Gatehouse Maid/The Road to Garrison," "King of the Clans/Dan Breen's/The Steeplechase," and "Considine's Grove/Trip to Durrow/Martin Wynne's/Bere Island."

Composed by Eyrecourt, Galway-born, and Pearl River, New York, resident button accordionist Martin Mulhaire, the reels "Mulhaire's #9/Grandpa Tommy's Céilí Band" constitute a standout solo from McComiskey. On the hornpipes "The Stage/The Fiddler's Contest/The High Level," Conway delivers nimble detail, tempo, and ornamentation in his own solo. The album's sole air, "Slán Le Maigh" (Farewell to the Maigue, a river in Limerick), is played as a whistle solo by Madden with evocative soulfulness. As a quartet, PONY plays "Seán McGlynn's Waltz" with lighthearted swing and joyful embellishments to keep the memory bright of McComiskey's

mentor from Tynagh, Galway. Further textural variety surfaces in the marches “The Old Cross/The Clans,” and echoing the buoyancy heard by the quartet from elder players in New York City are the slip jigs “Redican’s Mother/The Bridal/The Humors of Whiskey” and the hornpipes “Taylor’s/Chief O’Neill’s Favorite/The First Light of Day” and “Sliabh na mBan (Mountain of the Women)/The Liverpool/The Quilty.”

In harmony with the music is the album’s impressive package. It encompasses Paul Keating’s perceptive essay on PONY as a vital extension of a rich musical inheritance; Myron Bretholz’s thorough tune notes; Peter Brice’s informative note about crucial underwriting received from the Fund for Folk Culture in Austin, Texas, the Shamrock Traditional Irish Music Society in Fairfield, Connecticut, and the Catskills Irish Arts Week in East Durham, New York; Robert Hakalski’s appealing design that uses photos of the quartet taken in the 155-year-old McSorley’s Ale House in lower Manhattan and snapshots of several musical heroes from preceding generations in and around New York; and my own essay about how geography, biography, and music converged to create PONY.

It is the music, however, that towers above everything else. “The Pride of New York is really all of these people who contributed all of this music in New York,” McComiskey explained in my interview with him. “That’s what we’re so proud about.”<sup>9</sup> PONY, as its acronym suggests, gallops with the pulse of memory and the passion of mastery. The “paradox of the periphery” is readily apparent in this homage to the families, friends, and mentors who shared their musical lives and legacies with these four exemplars of Gotham-grounded Irish traditional music.

Among the teachers, mentors, and sources of inspiration for the talented octet Girsá (Irish for “young girls”) are the four “elder” members of PONY as well as fiddler Rose Flanagan (Brian Conway’s sister), flute and whistle player Margie Mulvihill, and button accordionist Patty Furlong. The last three instructors all reside in New York’s Pearl River, a town where most of Girsá’s members, who are now college age, gained their first foothold in the Irish tradition.

An admonishment by Irish-born playwright George Bernard Shaw, “Youth is wasted on the young,” does not apply to Girsá and the mature music of their eponymous, self-issued album in 2009. Half of Girsá’s sixteen-track recording is composed of songs, and even some mild overfamiliarity in the choices (“I Live Not Where I Love,” made popular by Mary Black, and Guy Clark’s “Immigrant Eyes”) cannot dampen the appeal of Girsá’s own versions. Deirdre Brennan and Margaret Dudasik share vocals on those songs, with Pamela Geraghty and Emily McShane joining them on “Immigrant Eyes.” It is rare for any Irish traditional band to have two good singers. Girsá has four, giving them a vocal versatility that strengthens both lead melodic and harmonic lines.

Other album songs include John Joe Reidy’s “This Story I Tell You Is True,” sung by Geraghty; “Mary and the Soldier,” sung by Dudasik; “I Courted a Wee Girl,” sung by Brennan; “Fare Thee Well, Lovely Mary,” sung by Geraghty; and “The Home I Left Behind,” sung by Emily McShane and featuring guests Lindsay and Sarah

<sup>9</sup> Billy McComiskey, phone interview, 8 May 2009. Quoted by permission.

Buteux on concertina and fiddle, respectively. Those last four songs are traditional, and all five are performed with passion and precision.

How well Girsá distances itself from prior classic renditions of these songs can be gauged by listening to “Mary and the Soldier,” made famous by Paul Brady on the album he recorded with Andy Irvine in 1976. Girsá’s blend of vocal, fiddle, accordion, and piano, plus album producer Gabriel Donohue’s bouzouki and guitar, provides its own distinctive flair independent of the version on *Andy Irvine/Paul Brady*.

Probably none of Girsá’s eight members was old enough to remember the initial release of the song “Rhythm of My Heart.” Written by Marc Jordan and John Capek, it was a hit single for Rod Stewart in 1991 and appeared on his album *Vagabond Heart*. In their own rendition Girsá inventively frames the song with the jig “Calliope House,” composed by Dave Richardson of the Boys of the Lough (the title refers to piper George Balderose’s home in Pittsburgh). Emily McShane sings the song with conviction, accompanied deftly by Dudasik on fiddle, Brennan on mandolin, Geraghty and Bláithín Loughran on accordions, Maeve Flanagan on whistle, and Emily herself doubling on bodhrán, with Donohue adding guitar. In a bit of alchemy Girsá turns this FM-lite song into a ballad of much greater weight through the force of their combined musicality, and the bookends of Richardson’s sprightly jig provide additional depth.

Tunes on the album bear the stamp of Girsá’s exacting but nurturing teachers; yet the band is smart enough not to emulate them slavishly. A measure of any accomplished recording is the difficulty of touting one instrumental medley over another. It would be folly to place into some order of preference “The Box Set,” led by Loughran and Geraghty on accordions; “The Swedish Jig,” delicately enclosed by Maeve Flanagan on fiddle and Emily McShane on piano and vigorously filled out by those two with Loughran and Geraghty on accordions, Brennan on mandolin, and Bernadette Flanagan and Emily McShane on bodhráns; “Paddy Ryan’s Dream/Blue Britches/Gan Ainm (Without Name),” reels that open with Loughran’s blistering box playing and tuck in an interlude of drum-circle percussion with some hard-shoe stepdancing by Dudasik and Bernadette Flanagan; or Maeve Flanagan’s outstanding fiddle solo on “The Lads of Laois/The First Month of Summer.” That last pairing of reels was recorded by Joe Burke, Andy McGann, and Felix Dolan on their *A Tribute to Michael Coleman* masterpiece in 1966 and was also recorded by Maeve’s mother, fiddler Rose (née Conway) Flanagan, with guitarist Mick Moloney on the 1985 album *Cherish the Ladies*.

The fiddling of Kristen McShane bolsters three instrumental tracks: “St. Patrick’s Night/The Ashplant,” “Eleanor Plunkett/Polkas” with its well-executed tempo changes (even in the polkas), and “Ian’s Return to Ireland/Cuil Aodha.” That last medley comprises a jig composed by button accordionist John Whelan (not “trad” as indicated on the CD; Whelan named his tune for Ian Carney, a student who won an All-Ireland junior button accordion title in 1987) and a bona fide “trad” jig named for an Irish-speaking townland in West Cork.

The slow air “Bruach Na Carraige Bann” (The Edge of the White Rock), played as a whistle solo by Maeve Flanagan, is paired with the reel “The Longford Tinker,” again played by Flanagan on whistle but with Emily McShane on bodhrán and Donohue on guitar. It is another lustrous track.



Youth may be its own excuse for Girsá's choice of such nontraditional, nonidiomatic songs as "Rhythm of My Heart" and "Immigrant Eyes," each bucking the "paradox of the periphery," but the band's interpretations still hew to a traditional model of performance—respectful but not rigid. The octet displays the ability, poise, taste, and fire to go as far as their commitment to staying together can take them. Girsá's joy in performance is almost palpable and is certainly contagious.

The proximity and ubiquity of Irish traditional music in their own backyards have emboldened bands in Ireland to venture farther afield in repertoire, and it is no small irony that several are confidently assaying more American music, vintage or modern, in their recordings than Irish Americans themselves. In 2007 both Dervish and Gráda covered an antiwar song composed by Suzanne Vega, "The Queen and the Soldier," although lead vocalist Nicola Joyce's interpretation on Gráda's album *Cloudy Day Navigation* conveys more of the queen's overall detachment than lead vocalist Cathy Jordan's rendition does on Dervish's album *Travelling Show*.<sup>10</sup> Also in 2007 Beoga nimbly covered "Dirty Work," a rock-pop ballad from Steely Dan in 1972, and in 2009 Beoga freshened up "Strange Things Happening Every Day," a song written by gospel-soul pioneer Sister Rosetta Tharpe, who made a hit with it in 1944 with boogie-woogie pianist Sammy Price.

In the United States, Girsá is not the only Irish traditional band occasionally venturing into nontraditional territory. Founded in 1995, Solas has likewise reinterpreted modern rock and folk songs, and on its latest recording, *The Turning Tide*, the band, featuring founding members Seamus Egan from Philadelphia and Winifred Horan from New York, covered Josh Ritter's "A Girl in the War" and Bruce Springsteen's "The Ghost of Tom Joad." Still, the relative infrequency of these exceptions tends to prove the "paradox of the periphery."

New York City, a primary point of disembarkation for Irish immigrants, holds no monopoly on accomplished Irish traditional music in the United States. Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Boston, along with their purlieus, are some of the other notable hubs for traditional Hibernian sounds. Boston, for example, can claim button accordionist Joe Derrane and fiddlers Séamus Connolly, Larry Reynolds, and Brendan Tonra among its established masters, and younger musicians have diligently followed their lead. Perhaps the musical attitude of these younger players in Boston can best be summed up in the title of the 2006 album by an ensemble called Magic Square: *Isn't Anyone Going to Stop Them?* The answer, happily, is no. That recording and the same group's *Traditional Irish Music from Boston* (2003) showcased the energetic, tight-knit performance developed in Boston pubs among such musicians as guitarist Ted Davis, banjoist Dave Cory, and flute and whistle player Dan Isaacson.

Residing in the Boston suburb of Somerville, Matt and Shannon Heaton showcase their own tight-knit performance of Irish traditional music in *Lovers' Well*, their fourth self-issued album as a husband-and-wife duo. Each studied music at Northwestern University (Matt on classical guitar, Shannon on flute) and steeped

<sup>10</sup> Joyce's sole stumble in the song comes at the end, substituting "The battle raged on" for "The battle continued on," Vega's original words that more subtly and effectively indicate how inured the queen is to ordering death.

themselves in the Irish traditional music of Chicago before eventually settling in and augmenting the Irish traditional music scene of Boston. On *Lovers' Well*, released in 2009, Shannon links her own reel, "Brad's Honeybees," with an Irish traditional reel, "Hare's Paw," a medley in which the melodic appeal of the new tune matches that of the old tune. The blend of Shannon's flute and Matt's guitar, along with Dan Gurney's button accordion and Keith Murphy's piano, conveys a pub-seasoned spirit within a carefully crafted arrangement.

Also aware of the infinite pleasure to be derived from the sparsest setting, the married couple stick primarily to flute and guitar on the traditional reels "The Mountain Road" (played in G rather than the customary D) and "The Galway Rambler" (played in D rather than the wonted G), as well as the slip jigs "First Date," written by Shannon, and "Pick the Lock," composed by pianist and piano accordionist Anthony Davis in E but played here in C. The hard-shoe stepdancing of Kieran Jordan in the reels and the added bodhrán playing of Matt Heaton in the slip jigs enhance the percussive dance rhythm of all four tunes. Reflected in their instrumental playing is the Heaton's understanding that jigs and reels are rooted in dancing. Part of the oft-cited sociability of Irish traditional music today stems from household, crossroads, and other communal dancing in the past.

Eight of the album's fourteen tracks are traditional songs, including two in which Matt Heaton sings lead: "Lover's Lament" (found in Carl Sandburg's *American Songbag*) and "Lady Fair" (found in Colm O'Lochlainn's *Irish Street Ballads*). Unfortunately, they become pallid impressions through Matt's thin, limited voice, although his self-accompaniment on guitar and chiming bouzouki is meticulous and crisp.

Shannon Heaton fares far better vocally, bringing a depth of insight to "The Bay of Biscay," taught to her by John Doyle, a guitarist-singer from Dublin, Ireland, who now resides in Asheville, North Carolina. It is a haunting tale about a lover's apparition in a dream dispelled by the advent of dawn. Shannon turns this familiar folkloric trope into fresh compassion through the hushed delicacy of her voice.

"Lily of the West" is another song on the album from Colm O'Lochlainn's *Irish Street Ballads* and was originally an English broadside that found its way to the United States in the nineteenth century. Shannon brings delectable liveliness to her interpretation of this ballad containing a blazon-like list of an Irish woman's physical charms: "rosy cheeks," "sparkling eyes," and "hair in golden ringlets," as well as "she far exceeds Diana bright," a reference to the goddess of the forest. The Diana of this song, however, is called "Molly-o, the Lily of the West," who dallies with "a lord of high degree" and sings a song to him, much to the distress of her would-be suitor, who slays him. Shannon ably distills the insouciance of Molly-o in this doomed love triangle, and the two Heaton's seamlessly insert the traditional reel "The Earl's Chair" at the center of the song. In addition, a touch of exotica surfaces on the album with "Lao Dueng Duen" (Thai for "By the Light of the Full Moon"), a serenade sung by Shannon, who spent her first year of college in central Thailand. The song leads smoothly into an Irish traditional jig, "The Stone Step."

When Matt and Shannon Heaton started to soak up the Irish traditional music of Chicago, they encountered firsthand the virtuosity of fiddler and composer Liz Carroll, winner of the All-Ireland senior fiddle title in 1975 and a National

Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship recipient in 1994. Born in 1956 to a father from Offaly and a mother from Limerick, Carroll played informally with fellow Chicagoans Johnny McGreevy on fiddle and Eleanor (née Kane) Neary on piano. A truism of the “paradox of the periphery” for precocious musicians such as Carroll is that they wholly absorbed and were inspired by the styles of elder masters but did not try to clone them.

In her note for the medley “Rushin’ Dressing/The Quitter/Remove the Rug” on *Double Play*, her 2009 recording with guitarist-singer John Doyle, Carroll explains that she received the nickname of “the quitter” in Ireland where, as a visiting small girl, she tended to start a task but not finish it. No audible sign of quit can be heard anywhere in her sparkling performance of that tune, one of fourteen Carroll compositions on this album. All fourteen are also transcribed in Liz Carroll’s *Collected*, her book of 185 original tunes that was published in 2010.

In playing partner Doyle, she has a guitarist of equally impressive skill who is a fine composer himself and has grown into a seasoned, compelling singer. Although *Double Play* was their second formal duet album (the all-instrumental *In Play* from 2005 was the first), Doyle performed on and coproduced Carroll’s *Lake Effect* in 2002 and also played on Carroll’s *Lost in the Loop*, produced by former Solas colleague Seamus Egan in 2000. Tracing the tightening musical partnership between Carroll and Doyle over those four recordings is its own reward, and their evolution crests on this new album. It bolsters Carroll and Doyle’s reputation as one of the world’s most accomplished fiddle-guitar duos. Carroll’s concert tours with Doyle have created a deep-seated trust and confidence in what each can do for the other; so their tandem playing is both more individualistic and more connected.

The opening medley of “The Chandelier/Anne Lacey’s” consists of two Carroll tunes bristling with high energy and swing, as the fiddler revels in detailed embellishments while Doyle eggs her on with chords complementary in texture. In “Before the Storm/The Black Rogue,” Doyle picks the melody of the initial tune, his own, as Carroll drones on fiddle behind him. Then the two resume their familiar roles on melody and rhythm, especially during the traditional second tune.

Carroll’s unaccompanied solo on “Castle Kelly/Galway Rambler” moves from contemplative to pulsating, a journey of often nuanced tempo and sly ornamentation that sound deceptively effortless. Concealing effort with ease is the hard-won result of great art, and Liz Carroll is a great artist. Her airs are no less inviting, wrapped in sentiment expressed not gushily but honestly. “Lament for Tommy Makem,” her tribute to the Keady, Armagh, singer who died in August 2007, shimmers with emotion in equipoise, and her track note acknowledges that he was “a great friend to us ‘trad’ musicians.” (Not all Irish ballad singers were or are.) Carroll’s other air, “Nearby, Long Ago,” is a lovely meditation on the deathless appeal of Irish music.

To *Double Play* Doyle contributes six savory tunes, and his expert guitar picking adds appreciably to their impact. He also lends unmistakable conviction to the three songs he sings: the traditional “Down at the Wakehouse” and “The Hare’s Lament,” and Ed Pickford’s “A Pound a Week Rise.” That last song comes from the repertoire of Scotland’s Dick Gaughan, whose inflamed singing about political injustice and economic predation, particularly pertaining to the poor and the working class, is

admired by Doyle. “They’ll tell you to work hard / To make the output rise / You’ll get pie in the sky / Instead of a one-pound rise”: Those concluding lines in Pickford’s song apply far beyond coal mining.

*Double Play* captures Liz Carroll and John Doyle at their studio peak, and Grammy voters doubtless agreed when they nominated it in the “best traditional world music album” category. It is the first time either musician received a Grammy nomination. Whatever scholarly skepticism or scorn greets the commercial compromise of the Grammys, they still represent a touchstone for the general public and sometimes prompt listeners to check out unfamiliar music. Of course, the risk perceived by the uninitiated is no risk at all to longtime admirers of Carroll and Doyle’s music.

The same can be said for the other four recordings reviewed here. In an economy of often unnerving change, Irish traditional music in major U.S. urban centers remains resilient and resourceful. It is able to withstand the most troublesome trends because its purpose has not changed: to perform without pandering.

## References

- Blow, Charles M. “Swan Songs?” *New York Times* (1 August 2009), A17.
- Carroll, Liz. *Collected*. Self-published. 2010. [www.lizcarroll.com](http://www.lizcarroll.com).
- Doherty, Elizabeth. “The Paradox of the Periphery: Evolution of the Cape Breton Fiddle Tradition 1928–95.” Ph.D. diss., University of Limerick, 1996.
- Harker, Lesl. *Second Wind: 300 More Tunes from Mike Rafferty*. Self-published. 2008.
- Harker, Lesl. *300 Tunes from Mike Rafferty*. Self-published. 2005.
- Kelly, Willie. Phone interview by author. 7 September 2009.
- Knopper, Steve. “Tanking CD Sales Shutter Stores.” *Rolling Stone*, 19 March 2009, 15, 17.
- McComiskey, Billy. Phone interview by author. 8 May 2009.
- Seabrook, John. “The Price of the Ticket.” *New Yorker*, 10 and 17 August 2009, 34–43.

## Discography

- Carroll, Liz, and John Doyle. *Double Play*. Compass 7–4502–2, 2009. [www.compassrecords.com](http://www.compassrecords.com).
- Girsa. *River Rollick*, 2009. [www.girsamusic.com](http://www.girsamusic.com).
- Heaton, Matt and Shannon. *Lovers’ Well*. Eats Records 008, 2009. [www.mattandshannonheaton.com](http://www.mattandshannonheaton.com).
- Kelly, Willie, and Mike Rafferty. *The New Broom*. Larraga, 2009. [www.raffertymusic.com](http://www.raffertymusic.com).
- Madden, Joanie, Brian Conway, Billy McComiskey, and Brendan Dolan. *Pride of New York*. Compass 7–4522–2, 2009. [www.compassrecords.com](http://www.compassrecords.com).