AROUND THE WORLD WITH THE MIGHTY MAN OF IRISH FOLK MUSIC

IRISH TUNES

BY JOSEPH MCLAUGHLIN • Photography by Lisa Godfrey

Bangkok’s most notorious slum is probably the last place you would expect to find a renowned scholar of Irish music. But on this bright October morning, Mick Moloney, Gr’92, is navigating the narrow streets and ramshackle huts of Klong Toey ghetto in search of a rebel priest.

“Father Joe Maier is the Mother Teresa of Southeast Asia,” Moloney says in a soft brogue that hints at his Limerick roots. For more than 30 years, Maier has fought to save souls in the face of rampant drug dealing, gang violence and prostitution. Moloney calls him a “mighty man” – the title he affixes to anyone who assists na bochtáin – the Irish Gaelic phrase for those who are most destitute. At the end of their visit, Moloney offers to stage a concert in Klong Toey to benefit Maier’s Mercy Center.

“Irish folk music was never the music of the upper classes; it was always the music of the wretched of the society,” Moloney explains. “The Irish immigrant experience in 19th-century America was a very troubled one. We were the first ghetto dwellers, the first huge influx of Catholic immigrants at a time when the separation of church and state was a big issue for nativists, and we were largely unprepared for urban life.

“It’s a very complex history, and the music is very much bound up with that. To have music that comes out of that context being used in the service of disadvantaged communities just seems right to me.”

A slender man with unlimited reserves of energy, Moloney can fire off jigs and reels as easily as you can tie your shoes. He is often found playing the tenor banjo with celebrated folk musicians and teaching ethnomusicology at New York University. He also is a folklorist, record producer, arts advocate and occasional tour guide for groups of Americans wanting to experience the cultural side of his homeland.

He credits the global makeup of the Irish music community for allowing him to organize a concert in Thailand’s superslum. “Irish musicians are everywhere: they’re in Tokyo, they’re in Malaysia, they’re in Vietnam and they’re in Australia as well,” he says before rattling off the names of pipers and fiddlers who will play the Thailand gig. “Everyone knows everyone else – I suppose more so now because of the Internet – but everyone knew each other before the Internet because it’s one big extended family.”

He does not mention that his unparalleled reputation among folk musicians is why they flock to play his shows at a moment’s notice, regardless of the location. “It seems that everybody on this side of the Atlantic owes their early gigs to Mick,” says Stephen Winick, G’92, Gr’98, Moloney’s friend and a folklorist at the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress.

Moloney’s musical journey began in Ireland, where he had a successful career in the 1960s with fellow musician Donal Lunny and the Johnstons, a popular folk group. He probably would have continued along that path except for the intervention of Professor Kenneth Goldstein, whom he credits with changing his life forever.

Goldstein was the head of folklore studies at Penn and a great lover of folk music. He and his wife, Rochelle, would open their home to traveling musicians who needed a place to stay after playing in Philadelphia. “It just meant putting a couple of extra dishes on the table because we were already a large family,” says Rochelle Goldstein, whose husband has since passed away. “That’s just the way we ran our lives in those days.” Moloney was a houseguest on many occasions.

The basement, office and several other rooms in the Goldstein home held the professor’s folklore library. Regarded as the largest and most complete assortment of
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There’s more to a Mick Moloney concert than breakneck jigs, reels and tuneful airs. Drawing from a deep well of knowledge about Irish musical history, he delivers a cultural education that connects his audience to the songs. “Being a good performer means you have to create a relationship between yourself and the people for whom you’re performing,” he says. “The more context and history you can bring to a song or tune, the more people will leave the show feeling both entertained and informed.”

To illustrate his point, Moloney tells the story of Ed Reavy, Philadelphia’s “Plumber of Hornpipes.”

Reavy was an Irish immigrant who lived for many years just north of Penn’s campus in what is now Powelton Village. A master plumber by trade and an excellent fiddle player, he started inventing new Irish melodies in the 1930s. Although he never learned to read or write music, Reavy became the most prolific Irish traditional music composer of the 20th century. He saw his music spread across the globe through regular contact with other musicians, who learned it and brought it back to their own villages, towns and cities.

“I was in Irish-music sessions in Australia about three weeks ago, and there wasn’t one where Ed Reavy’s tunes weren’t being played,” Moloney says. “We’d sit in the pub and we’d talk about Ed and I’d tell them my stories. Before I knew it, we were playing Ed’s tunes for half an hour.”

It wasn’t until 1969 that Reavy’s son Joe began notating his father’s compositions, many of which had been captured on 78-rpm home recordings. He helped his father name many of the tunes and publish them in a volume called *Where the Shannon Rises*. More than 15 years after his death, about 130 of Reavy’s compositions are part of the canon of Irish folk music. His sons estimate that he had written more than 500.

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cultural contexts. In Burma last October for the national music competitions, he saw people from many tribes and subcultures representing their regional traditions at the highest level. “On the one hand, that’s an affirmation of both the diversity and the unity of the country,” he says. “On the other, behind its organization is a very repressive regime at work that likes to use art for its own purposes — as all totalitarian regimes will do.”

Using people that he’d met there as contacts, Moloney traveled to villages in Central Burma after leaving the music competitions. It was a great coming together under the noses of the authorities, who might have been suspicious of foreign travelers under different circumstances.

Risking imprisonment to further musical and cultural knowledge may hardly seem worth it, but only to those who don’t know what motivates this globe-trotting, musical scholar. “He originally went just for his own pleasure, and he fell in love,” Rochelle Goldstein says. “That’s the way he is: he falls in love. He gets very passionate, and then he has to research everything. That’s why he’s so fascinating to talk to.”

Moloney’s current projects include a compact disc featuring the songs of Ed Harrigan, a late 19th-century songwriter who chronicled the Irish immigrant experience in New York. Credited with inventing musical comedy, Harrigan’s compositions were performed mostly by pit orchestras during his lifetime.

“On the CD, I try to reconstruct the idea of a pit orchestra of the era, but at the same time have modern traditional instruments in there too,” Moloney explains. “Ed Harrigan was a very modern man; he wanted to be in his time and space. I wanted to get a sense of who he was but at the same time project what he would have done had he been alive today.” A scholarly book about the history of Irish music in America, a concert in March at Penn’s Annenberg Center and a speaking tour are also on his plate.

“People not only recognize his musical talent, but his knowledge and the fact that he can back up what he says with years and years of research,” Stephen Winick says. “They come to him for answers to all sorts of questions about Irish music.”

It’s 4 p.m. on a Sunday in November and the setting sun is resting its rays on the crowds streaming into St. Malachy’s Church in Philadelphia. Moloney is on hand to perform another benefit concert in the service of another mighty man — Father John McNamee — and to raise money for his independent parish school. This is the 15th year Moloney has played the church and, as always, musicians have come from as far away as Tuscany to donate time and talent.

Built by the influx of Irish immigrants who came to America in the 1840s and 1850s, St. Malachy’s church and school now serve North Philly’s mostly poor African-American population. Tonight the church is packed with more than 800 patrons who believe is minic duine bocht fiúntach — a poor person is often worthy. The performance is their chance to help a neighborhood they wouldn’t normally visit.

Feeding off the palpable excitement that permeates the pews, Moloney and company send tidal waves of sound crashing off the altar, throwing the melody from one player to the next and back again as effortlessly as you might toss a beach ball. The crowd responds with cheers and applause that reverberate through the marble floors. It’s just another night in the life of Mick Moloney, musical ambassador.

“Mick is very special,” Goldstein says. “He is an intelligent man who knows how to hold on to information and teach it to others. It’s a natural gift he has. He’s also a musician for musicians. He has a way of gathering other musicians around him wherever he goes, and he’s loved that way in Ireland and in the United States and all over the world.”

Irish translations courtesy of Roslyn Blyn-LaDrew, Gr’95, teacher of Irish Gaelic at the Penn Language Center.

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