

History of the Eagle Tavern and Blarney Star Concert Series

In the mid-1970s, the now luxe and trendy “Meat Market” district in the northwest corner of Greenwich Village was still home to two kinds of genuine meat markets. Late at night, beef, pork, veal and lamb butchers worked inside at their trade, while the sidewalks near the corner of Ninth Avenue and 14th Street were a stroll for of a cadre of transvestite hookers. The sex workers and their clients, as well as the denizens of several nearby semi-underground gay nightspots and sex clubs, dodged numerous over-fed rats scurrying along the gutters.

Set amidst the ambient squalor at 355 West 14th Street was the Eagle Tavern, a neighborhood fixture with a long history as a working man’s bar in what had been a heavily Irish district adjacent to the Hudson River docks. In addition to a long, narrow front barroom, the Eagle had a back room that provided restaurant seating for what was mostly a lunchtime trade for meatpackers and truckers. In the mid-70s, however, that room began a long run as a venue for Irish and other folk music sessions and performances.

A Monday night music session got started at the Eagle as an alternative to Monday night sessions run by the Irish Arts Center. These sessions had been hosted in 1973 by two West Village bars, the Mushroom and the Bells of Hell (where actor Malachy McCourt was part owner), before moving to Monks Park, a bar at the corner of Park Avenue and 26th Street. After a dispute in 1975 with the Monks Park management about a St. Patrick’s Day cover charge, the sessions relocated to the Irish Arts Center’s own “Irish Rebel Theater” on 51st Street near Eleventh Avenue. By this time, some of the Center’s musicians and other arts enthusiasts had developed differences with the IAC’s founding leader Brian Heron and with uilleann piper Bill Ochs, who played a leading role in the Center’s music program. Among the differences was some dissatisfaction with the IAC’s Republican Stalinist ethos, which included the expectation that any money paid to traditional musicians should be turned over the collective.

The dissidents, who included John Dillon, Paul Keating, Peter Dolan, Renee Lawless, Mike Lynch and Kevin Whitty, organized themselves as the American Irish Cultural Project. The literary enthusiasts among them sporadically published a journal for a few years while the musical wing went on the lookout for a new session venue. John Casey, a traditional music lover from West Cork, told them about the Eagle Tavern. Operated by Irish-American owner Jimmy Noone, the Eagle did good business in the evening in the front bar, where the imposingly sizeable Larry Hooper slung shots and beers to the employees of the Hanly Moving and Storage company while discreetly operating a sports book on the side. But the back room, which could hold up to 100 people, was generally empty at night,

John Dillon, accompanied by Paul Keating and Renee Lawless, met with Jimmy Noone, who agreed to make the back room available on Monday nights. Dillon, a singer, guitarist and concertina player, along with banjo and bouzouki player Bill Black and singer/flute player Gina Dunlap, committed to showing up on Mondays and the first Eagle session took place on June 10, 1975. Noone provided free pitchers of tap beer to the musicians and modest financial support to the American Irish Cultural Project. By 1982, when I started attending, Dillon and Black had moved on to start another Monday night session at Brannigan’s (the former Monks Park) and the session “starter” each week (a role often played by fiddlers Paddy Reynolds and Jim McIntyre or melodeon player Tom Doherty) was being paid directly.

The Eagle sessions were free-for-alls in which dozens of singers and instrumentalists vied to perform or to engage in collective music making. Among the Monday regulars when I arrived in 1982 were Leo “Pat” Hardiman, an irrepressible singer whose favorite number was “Clancy

Lowered the Boom,” concertina player/singer Jim Lucas and singer/banjoist/flute player Greg Ryan. There weren’t many Irish sessions in New York in those years, so many visiting performers turned up. Fiddle greats Julia Clifford and Sean Keane, and button accordion legend Tony McMahon were among the many celebrity Irish visitors who dropped in.

The concerts at the Eagle developed from a residency by a group called The Flying Cloud, which consisted of singer Dan Milner, guitarist Caesar Pacifici, multi-instrumentalist Brian Brooks and a succession of fiddle players who included Paddy Reynolds, John Caulfield, Kathleen Collins, Dan Collins and Tony DeMarco. The band started playing at the Bells of Hell before following the session players to the Eagle. Their Wednesday night shows featured the band, billed as a “British Isles Folk group,” along with a variety of musical guests. Dan described the scene in the liner notes to his 2008 Smithsonian Folkways CD *Irish Pirate Ballads and Other Songs of the Sea*:

“[In Ireland]...ballad groups like The Clancy Brothers and The Dubliners were gradually ceding ground to neo-traditional bands like The Chieftains and Planxty. But the next wave from Ireland had not yet crashed upon the American shore when Brian Brooks and I formed The Flying Cloud in 1975 along with Paddy Reynolds, a Sligo-style fiddler from County Longford. We made an LP and sang for a few thousand people at the Philadelphia Folk Festival, but five fiddle players went through the group within two years, and coping with those changes while trying to carve out a new artistic niche made life in the airline business seem like heaven on earth.

At the same time and for the best part of 10 years with the help of a number of dedicated people, I ran a folk club at Malachy McCourt’s Bells of Hell and Jimmy Noone’s Eagle Tavern. Very simply, ‘everyone’ played there, from The Battlefield Band to members of The Chieftains, Planxty, DeDannan, and The Bothy Band. Mick Moloney, Robbie O’Connell, and James Keane did their first concert together at the Eagle, and Joanie Madden and Eileen Ivers played their first real gigs as teenagers in ceili bands formed by their teachers -- Maureen Glynn and Martin Mulvihill. The Irish Tradition (Billy McComiskey, Brendan Mulvihill, and Andy O’Brien) were there regularly. Joe Heaney, Margaret Barry, Ray Fisher, Frank Harte, Tony McMahon, Martin Carthy, Joe Burke, Peter Bellamy, Sean Keane, Andy McGann, Johnny Cronin, Brian Conway, Stan Rogers, Vin Garbutt, Triona Ní Dhomhnaill, Andy Irvine, Cyril Tawney, Liz Carroll, Johnny Cunningham, Louis Killen, Dolores Keane & John Faulkner, Matt Cranitch, Alec Finn, Frankie Gavin, the entire Black Family, and Liam O’Flynn all performed at the Eagle. It was a great club and an important part of New York’s musical history.”

The Flying Cloud broke up in 1978 but Dan kept the Eagle shows going until 1982 with a new trio, The Derby Ram, which included singer/songwriter/guitarist/cittern player Paul Kaplan and Larry Cole on Northumbrian and Scottish bagpipes. Dan was assisted in running the shows by Frank Woerner, with whom he also performed in the sea shanty group New York Packet. As with The Flying Cloud, The Derby Ram would open for featured performers who included some of the luminaries he named above.

The Eagle also hosted American old-timey or bluegrass concerts on Thursday, Saturday and Sunday nights, run by a crew called the Old-Time Music Project. In the early ‘80s, there was also Friday night ceili dancing with music provided by fiddler Brian Conway and multi-instrumentalist Greg Ryan.

By 1982, The Derby Ram had broken up but Dan Milner continued to run Wednesday concerts where he would perform as an opening act with Brooklyn fiddler Paul Friedman. Another Eagle session and concert habitué of that time was Mike McQuaid, an uilleann piper who lived near me on East 12th Street in the East Village. In January 1983, Dan felt he had to choose between keeping his day job and running the concerts, so turned the gigs over to Mike.

Mike continued Dan's habit of making himself and friends a weekly opening act but converted the series into a more hard-core Irish traditional music showcase. He had a small collapsible stage constructed and on occasion laid out his own money to attract big-name performers who, if already in New York, might be enticed to play at the Eagle on a Wednesday. These stars included Frankie Gavin; Matt Molloy (three times); Dolores Keane with Tony McMahon and James Kelly; Sean and James Keane with Mick Moloney; Mary Bergin with Ringo McDonagh and Tony O'Halloran; and Paddy Glackin with Liam O'Flynn.

I assisted Mike by helping move his over-sized sound gear (purchased with funds loaned by WBAI radio host Ed Haber) back and forth from his walk-up apartment to the Eagle. I was working as a typesetter at the time, so also gave Mike assistance with printed publicity. My first time running a show myself was for the debut New York performance by Mairéad Ní Mhaonaigh and Frankie Kennedy with guitarist Mark Kelly (before they formed the group Altan), a gig that Mike had set up but couldn't run because he was out of town. I connected the amp, mixer and monitors incorrectly, blew a fuse and had to run the show without amplification. In October 1986, Mike, who was planning a move away from NYC, turned the concerts over to a partnership consisting of myself and Trudy Callaghan, a County Meath-born singer then living with her husband Nigel Barber in Hell's Kitchen.

Trudy did the booking and handled the finances while I took charge of the sound and the publicity, with some assistance from fiddler Barbara Rubinstein. Trudy borrowed \$600 from Eagle owner Jimmy Noone to buy sound gear, and we gradually paid him off from concert receipts. We inherited a Wednesday night series, but things began to shift when Mayor Ed Koch's administration began a strict enforcement of the city's antique Cabaret Law. The rules, which had been unenforced for decades, dictated that without a cabaret license there could be no dancing, no wind instruments, and no more than three musicians on stage at a time.

The Eagle couldn't get a cabaret license because there was no rear exit or sprinklers, so the Friday ceili dancing was nixed. The bluegrass folks initially took over Fridays while Trudy and I moved the Irish concerts from Wednesdays to Saturdays. Not long after, we swapped nights and started running the Irish concerts on Fridays. The bluegrassers eventually gave up, as the trio limitation made it pretty much impossible for them to mount their shows. The Cabaret Law was later revised to eliminate restrictions on types of instruments and the number of players, but the dancing ban remained in place until 2017.

When Nigel got his PhD and an academic job in Bemidji, Minnesota, he and Trudy left town in June 1989. I took over sole management of the Friday night concerts with help from my then-wife, Anina Karmen. The shows were interrupted for while in 1990 when the Happy Land Social Club fire in the Bronx prompted strict city enforcement of fire regulations in all music venues. The Eagle had to close while new walls were installed to reduce the size of the backroom, which thereafter only held 60 people.

In December 1993 the Eagle Tavern's lease was up and the landlord was poised to jack up the rent in what had become a hot real estate market. Jimmy Noone's response was to shut down without notice to the public or even some of his employees. This came as a shock to me, as I

had been discussing arrangements for St. Patrick's Day with Jimmy the night before he arrived with a demolition crew, gutted the fixtures and locked the doors.

What I didn't know was that Jimmy had already arranged with his brother-in-law Tony Brady, a County Louth native, to move the Eagle's concerts to Brady's own bar, the Blarney Star, located downtown in the Tribeca district at 43 Murray Street between Church Street and West Broadway. I accepted the *fait accompli* and within a few weeks had the concert series up and running in the Blarney Star's downstairs room, where there was a separate bar staffed by Tom and Aileen Shannon, who had worked as bartender and waitress at the Eagle. The upstairs bar, tended by traditional music lover Jack Tiernan, was the occasional site of informal post-concert sessions.

The Eagle's Monday night sessions moved east on 14th Street to Flannery's Bar near Seventh Avenue under the direction of bodhrán player and singer Kevin Brooks. For several years, Flannery's also became a venue for Wednesday night set dancing in open but unpunished violation of Cabaret Law restrictions.

It took about a year for attendance at the Blarney Star's Friday concerts to match the crowds that had come to the Eagle, but after that the audience was generally large enough to make it a worthwhile night for both the performers and the bar. Initially, I ran concerts year-round but in 1997 started to take an annual summer break in the month of August.

With very few exceptions, the Eagle Tavern/Blarney Star concerts I organized featured purely Irish traditional music. I took advantage of trips to New York by visiting musicians to book folks who included Micho Russell, Johnny O'Leary, Liz Carroll, Brendan Tonra, Fintan Vallely, Andy Irvine, Sharon Shannon, Noel Hill, Johnny Moynihan, Mary Bergin, John Bowe, Joe Burke, Kevin Burke, Antóin Mac Gabhann, Kevin Taylor, Catherine McEvoy, John Carty, Brian Rooney, Mary Staunton, Maurice Lennon, Tommy Peoples and Tony Linnane. The few non-Irish performers included Scottish singer Dick Gaughan and Cape Breton Island fiddler Natalie MacMaster (in her first U.S. concert appearance).

I always tried to include the top local musicians in the rotation, including Mike Rafferty, Joe Madden, Johnny "Accordion" Cronin, Joe "Banjo" Burke, Andy McGann, Mike Preston, Brian Conway, Eileen Ivers, Kathleen and Dan Collins, Tom Dunne, Brian Conway, Tony DeMarco, Felix and Brendan Dolan, Dermot Grogan, Siobhán and Willie Kelly, James Keane, John Nolan, Jerry O'Sullivan and Jack and Fr. Charlie Coen. Singer Karan Casey performed at the Blarney Star with a local group that included fiddler Fiona Doherty and accordionist Patty Furlong, a concert that attracted the attention of Séamus Egan, who recruited her to join his new group Sólas.

After the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, the Blarney Star, which was only a couple of blocks from "Ground Zero," was in the area sealed off to the general public for months, and the shows briefly shifted to the Irish Arts Center. In the fall of 2003, Tony Brady sold the Blarney Star to two young partners who renamed it "Biddy Early's." I carried on with them for a couple of months, but they were not supportive so, in January 2004, I moved the concerts (now on a once-a-month schedule) to the Washington Square United Methodist Church, a marvelous acoustic venue that had presented folk music concerts for decades.

The move to the WSUMC was possible because Glucksman Ireland House at New York University agreed to pay the rent for the space, a subsidy arranged by Mick Moloney, Global Distinguished Professor of Irish Studies and Music at NYU. After only six months of concerts,

however, the Methodists sold the church to a real estate developer who gutted the interior to install condo apartments. Concerts were thereafter staged during the school year in the smaller confines of Glucksman Ireland House starting in September 2004. The monthly shows, still billed as "Blarney Star" Concerts, continued at GIH until March 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic forced a shutdown of all public programming at NYU. Two years later, GIH head Kevin Kenny informed me that the concerts could not be resumed. He cited budgetary austerity and a requirement that all space use would now be subject to payment of rent and insurance. The concerts GIH had always subsidized, and advertised as part of their own public programming, were now regarded as unpaid use by an external vendor.

Thus ended a concert series that continued for over forty years at the Eagle Tavern, Blarney Star, Washington Square Methodist Church and Glucksman Ireland House. The good news is that the New York Irish Center in Long Island City, Queens will begin presenting monthly Irish traditional music concerts in September of this year.

Don Meade
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