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Mining Irish Music's Many Roots

Concert explores connections between Irish, African and American music

By **TAD HENDRICKSON**

It has been 20 years since Mick Moloney began working on his second major book about Irish-American music—but it is unclear if he will ever finish it.

The author-folklorist-musician—whose concert Saturday at Symphony Space will trace connections between Irish, African and American roots music—travels abroad regularly. He has a ghostwriting gig. And he teaches popular classes in music and Irish studies at New York University—where he has been designated one of the school's two dozen Global Distinguished Professors.

But what really keeps him from that manuscript is his passion for playing. The 70-year-old Mr. Moloney has produced or performed on more than 40 albums of traditional Irish music.

"I love to teach, but I'm an artist first and foremost," said Mr. Moloney, who was born in Limerick but is now a U.S. citizen. "The thread is that I'm able to use art to do all this."

"All this," for the last four decades, has been his tireless organizing of concerts, festivals and other gatherings that champion Irish music, particularly for American audiences. Based on the incessant ringing of his cellphone and the landline in his faculty-housing apartment in Greenwich Village, Mr. Moloney is still hard at it.

"Mick's a mover and a shaker wherever he goes," said Bronx-born flute and tin-whistle player Joanie Madden. Her Celtic folk group Cherish the Ladies was started using a National Endowment for the Arts grant Mr. Moloney won in 1985 to support women in the genre.

"Here I am 30 years later, playing Irish music instead of being an accountant somewhere, which was my original plan," said Ms. Madden. "When you talk about the great names in today's Irish music, Mick was an influence to us all."

Mr. Moloney's newest musical and organizational handiwork is the Celtic Appalachia celebration Saturday at Symphony Space. Featuring his long-running ensemble Green Fields of America and others, the concert mines the connection between Celtic and other folk traditions through music, dance and story. Mr. Moloney estimates he has explored this theme for 25 years, with the Irish Arts Center presenting the last four in New York.

"With Mick we found a musical and cultural collaborator who shares outward-oriented values," said IAC's Executive Director Aidan Connolly, who said his group presents work exploring the often-surprising connections between Irish and other cultures—"especially during St. Patrick's season when sometimes the trivial or stereotypical can prevail."



Mick Moloney, the Irish-American musician, author and professor, talks Irish music and his beloved tenor banjo during a rehearsal with musician Athena Tergis at his Greenwich Village apartment.
Photo: Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal

One way Mr. Moloney demonstrates the connection between African, American and Irish folk music is through the banjo. The instrument's African roots will be highlighted by Malian musician Cheick Hamala Diabaté, who plays ngoni and plantation-gourd banjo, both West African precursors to the instrument.

The banjo's subsequent appropriation by European immigrants in the Appalachian Mountains for early country and bluegrass will be explored in the concert by the Bing Brothers Band.

Mr. Moloney himself handles the banjo chores for Green Fields, his long-running band of Irish-American players that early on featured dancer Michael Flatley of "Riverdance" fame as well as such notable musicians as Karan Casey, Seamus Egan and Eileen Ivers.

Ironically, Irish musicians historically adopted the banjo after it arrived with minstrel-show string bands of the 1800s, featuring performers in blackface.

On March 27 and 28 at the Irish Arts Center's own theater, Mr. Moloney will offer a more traditional concert, reuniting with musicians Jimmy Keane and Robbie O'Connell, with whom he released two critically acclaimed albums in the 1980s.

Mr. Moloney first came to the U.S. in the 1960s with a contemporary folk band called the Johnstons, which toured the folk-revival circuit.

While on tour he met noted American folklorist Kenneth Goldstein of the University of Pennsylvania, who offered Mr. Moloney a scholarship after noticing him constantly paging through his archives.

While pursuing a Ph.D. in folklore and folklife in Philadelphia, Mr. Moloney had an epiphany: "There were all these [Irish] musicians who were very good, but there were no recordings of them."

Thus began decades of archival and advocacy work. The Smithsonian Institution hired him to curate a roots festival. Public television has drawn on his expertise for various Irish-immigration-themed projects. In 2002, he published "Far From the Shamrock Shore: The Story of Irish-American History Through Song."

And in 1999 the NEA awarded him Heritage Fellowship, the highest honor in folk and traditional arts.

"He's a brilliant musician with an unparalleled depth of historical knowledge," said fellow tenor banjo player and ethnomusicologist Dan Neely, who studied under Mr. Moloney at NYU. "However, what's most impressive is his ability to use these qualities—both on stage and in the classroom—to get people thinking and talking about what it means to be Irish and Irish-American. There really isn't anyone else like him."



Mick Moloney's instruments.
Photo: Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal