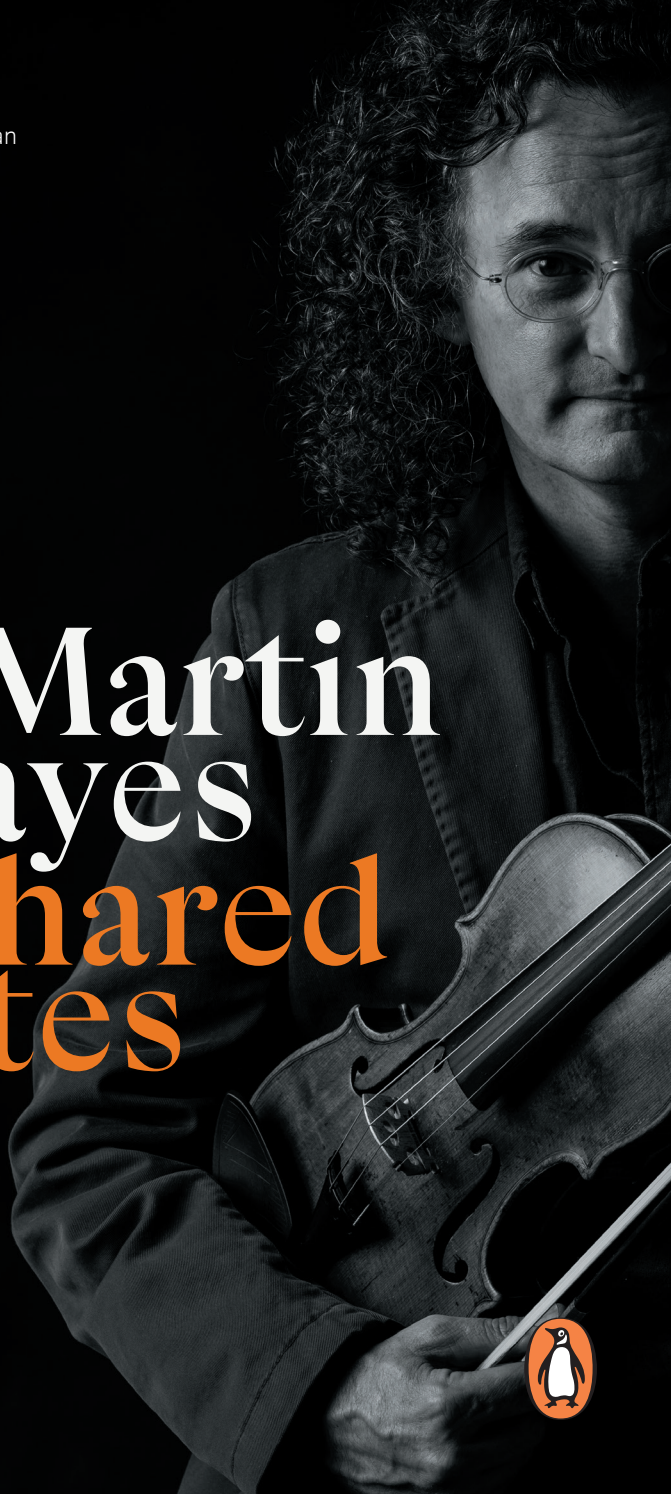
'We'll surely talk of having seen this man the way others talk of Miles Davis or Jimi Hendrix or John Coltrane.'

IRISH TIMES



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Shared Notes

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To Lina

Description of a traditional folk melody

'In their small way, they are perfect as the grandest masterpieces of musical art. They are, indeed, classical models of the way in which a musical idea can be expressed in all its freshness and shapeliness – in short, in the very best possible way, in the briefest possible form and with the simplest of means.'

Béla Bartók, *The Hungarian Folk Song*

PREFACE

When, during the early stage of my relationship with my wife, Lina, I started to talk about marriage, she said to me, 'But I don't know who you are!' Knowing she was a big fan of my music, I said to her, 'Do you like my music?' She said she loved it, to which I replied, 'Well, that's all I am: music.'

Traditional Irish music has been my life. I am deeply passionate about it and am always happy to talk about it. I enjoy conveying musical ideas in master classes and media interviews. Some musicians prefer not to talk about music at all, which is entirely understandable – the music itself can surely do the talking. I, however, love to think and talk about music, and though I've spent my life playing it, there is still much of it that remains a mystery to me. I never tire of trying to understand more deeply the act of making music or the very nature of the creative process itself.

When invited to write this book, I willingly embraced the idea, thinking that I might be able to convey my thoughts on music in greater and more precise detail. My initial efforts at documenting my thoughts, purely on music alone, proved difficult without context. My musical understanding and reasoning

are inextricably interwoven with my personal story and journey. I had initially resisted the idea of writing a memoir, believing that maybe my life story wasn't in itself very interesting. My personal life, with all its twists and turns, however, has always been a musical story, so I eventually agreed with my publisher that a memoir was the best way to take you inside my world of music.

When I started this book, I had no real writing experience, having written little more than emails or set lists since my school days. While I was trying to figure out what shape this book might take, Lina happened to be taking an online course on autobiographical writing. She shared her insights with me, making me aware that there is an obligation towards the reader in terms of trust and honesty. I have always strived to honestly express my thoughts on music and my artistic journey. Accepting the necessity of a memoir format to convey musical ideas, however, pushed me towards telling stories of my life that are not necessarily secret but aren't widely known either. Some of these stories are a bit embarrassing to me, but without them the picture is incomplete.

There was a period of my life where I was more lost, foolish and silly than I ever thought I'd admit. My current public persona, as a professional musician in mid-career, reflects a more thoughtful and insightful person than the one I was during my years in the wilderness. Nonetheless, my career success, though modest by many standards, has still been highly improbable.

I was born into a rich music culture and a rural way of life that was about to change massively. Through the early sixties and seventies, my little part of East Clare went through massive cultural

and social change. However, the musical ethos of another time still prevailed and is the foundation of my musical understanding. The environment into which I was born provided me with a cultural context rich enough in source material and inspiration to last me a lifetime. This book traces a musical thread and a life story that goes all the way from my beginnings, on a small farm with horse-drawn machinery, with a father who played the fiddle and a one-room schoolhouse, to a life of musical performance and collaboration on stages all over the world.

Traditional Irish music – which I will refer to simply as traditional music for the rest of this book – is an earthy music of deceptive simplicity that has a grounded beauty within its very DNA. Irish music is a treasury of melodic richness, and this is the story of how I've experienced this music, whether by the rustic, open-hearth fireplace of my early childhood or, later, in the sacred space of the concert stage. Through all these times, there has been an abundance of support and help from people who have shared their wisdom and thoughts with me – musicians who have lifted me to newer and higher levels, people who have believed in me, who have seen things in me I couldn't fully see myself and whose love and support has sustained me. I hope that this story can be an encouragement to those starting out in life to follow your bliss and know that even unlikely success and happiness can come to you if you are willing to follow the guidance of your heart.

INTRODUCTION

In the hay shed, my father and I laid a doubled-up rope on the ground and started evenly piling some of last summer's hay on top of it. When there was enough hay, we took the loose ends of the rope and pulled them over the pile of hay, running them through the loop at the other end. We pulled the rope tight to make a compact bunch of hay that could be swung over my father's back. We then made a smaller one for me. Once the beart of hay was on his back, I pulled off the loose sops of hay that were hanging from his beart before he took off across the meadow to feed the cattle. I then swung my smaller beart over my back and went along with him. As we were walking towards the middle hill, where the cattle were, my father asked me to whistle for him. He wanted to know if I knew the tune we had worked on a few nights before. Was the tune inside me? Was it now part of me? If it wasn't in me, it didn't matter whether I could technically play it on the fiddle or not.

Tunes live in my memory as remembered patterns; they live in my body also, as if they've become part of my physical being. When playing, they move through me, manifesting themselves

through the instrument as the final act of music-making. All the experiences of nature, the farm, the landscape, the folklore, my imagination and the memories of great moments of music have become entwined in the tunes. The deeper from within the tune comes, the more powerful it is.

1

I AM SEVEN years old and I am sitting to the side of an open-air stage in the square in Miltown Malbay, listening to my father and the Tulla Céilí Band play to a large crowd of dancers and listeners. It's the early hours of 20 July 1969, the night of the first moon-landing. Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin are on the moon; we're playing at the Darlin' Girl from Clare festival. I say 'we' but really I'm just taking it all in while my father, PJ, is sitting in the middle of the band playing his fiddle. They probably didn't know where else to put me, so the side of the stage has become my perch for the night. My attention is divided between the crowd, the music and the night sky. Every now and then I strain my eyes to stare up at the moon, captivated by the fact that people are landing on this illuminated orb for the very first time. I look out at the crowd and there are hundreds of people in front of me. Most are dancing and enjoying the music, some are busy eating pig's crubeens. (These were pig's feet, the fish-and-chips of that time.) Like myself, there's a few glancing up at the moon every now and then, almost as if expecting to see a couple of tiny figures strolling across it.

Up in the sky, the world's futuristic dreams were being brought to fruition, with the Lunar Module making global history. The

modern age was coming in to view, and the stable ways of life that had sustained my father's world were about to change. The music on the stage that night was in complete harmony with that old world, but how would this music stay relevant in the new times ahead? I was sitting on the cusp of a changing society, but there in Miltown Malbay revellers were simply going about their night, immersed in their own fun, making memories while the band made music.

When I cast my mind back over the first ten years of my life on our farm on Maghera mountain in Killanena, north-east County Clare, it's as if my memories place me within an older, sepia-toned era. I have attempted to hold on to as many memories as possible from my first ten years of life, but of course, with every passing year and every new step forward into the virtual world in which we now spend so much of our time, these memories and experiences seem as though they're from another world entirely.

Growing up on a farm in 1960s West of Ireland afforded me a unique type of life-education. Traditional music served as a beautiful addition to this rustic way of life. I loved the sounds of the céilí bands and the sounds of fiddles and flutes. Pop music never quite managed to infiltrate the musical realm of our house, nor did it pique my interest long enough for me to be lured in by it. I suppose as a child I was drawn to the same music my father liked. Even today, no matter what music I play or listen to, nothing resonates as deep within my soul as traditional music. When I play those tunes, there's a kind of 'coming home' experience I never have with anything else. Don't get me wrong, there are lots of musical genres that I love, but traditional music was there

from the start and is entwined with me as if it has always been a deep, natural part of who I am.

I arrived into this world on Independence Day, 4 July 1962. A year and ten days after me, my brother Pat followed suit – on Bastille Day, no less! I was the eldest child, born into a household of five people: my paternal grandparents, Maggie and Martin Hayes, my parents, Peggy and PJ, and my uncle Liam, who was my father's youngest sibling. I was named Martin after my grandfather, who was also known locally as Quillan, but sadly, when I was nearly a year old, he and my grandmother passed away within six weeks of each other. I'm told I spent most of that first year either on my grandfather's knee or in my cot beside him in the kitchen. I don't remember him, but apparently he was a witty, sociable person, a bit of a character. Anyone who walked a fox on a leash through the streets of Ennis and rode a bullock to a fair must have been a character. My father always said that Quillan loved it when people visited the house, and he always kept a big roasting fire as a welcome. People who knew him would start smiling straight away when I'd ask to know more about him. I've somehow always felt a deep connection to this man.

For the seven years that followed the passing of my grandparents, the family structure remained the same. My uncle Liam continued living with us, which, growing up, meant I felt as though I had two fathers. I also felt like I had a twin, because as children my brother and I were pretty much the same size. With only a year between us, we were close friends, always playing together and even sharing a bed. Our personalities, however, were very different. Pat was easy-going and more compliant by nature, whereas I spent a lot of time

battling with my parents, resisting every request, questioning everything and getting into long fights with them. These were the kind of fights that always ended up with me in tears, followed by the aggravating admonishment, *'Why can't you be more like your brother, Pat?'* He sailed right through those formative years without much trouble. When Pat did do something wrong, it was usually said to be the result of my bad example. I somehow couldn't be like him; I perceived injustice and coercion everywhere. I might be told to *'Bring a bucket of milk to the calves, now!'* Typically, I would answer, *'I will in a minute!'*, to which would come the usual reply, *'What's the minute for?'* I was willing to do almost anything for anyone if asked, but when forced or commanded I would stubbornly resist. It was hard to win, and with all the trouble that I seemed to make, I began to believe that I was fundamentally bad, that I was somehow unlovable and unworthy. I was left with the impression that no child in the history of the Hayes family had ever behaved this badly and that probably no other child in the whole of County Clare ever acted like this either. Obviously, nobody tried to make me feel unlovable or wayward, but looking at the situation through a child-like lens, I simply didn't see myself as a good and lovable child. I somehow couldn't break the dynamic, couldn't just keep my mouth closed and do what I was told.

During my first seven years, my mother suffered a number of miscarriages and two stillbirths before my sister, Anna Marie, was born. My mother had a very difficult pregnancy with Anna Marie, who was very premature, weighing just 1lb 13oz at birth, and the expectation for her survival was so low that she was both baptized and confirmed on the day she was born; she was christened Anna

Marie Catherine and confirmed as Anna Marie Catherine Carmel, the names of the four nurses who took care of her and my mother, who had ended up spending six weeks bed-bound in St John's Hospital in Limerick. I have this memory of my father asking myself and Pat to get on our knees with him in the kitchen and pray for Anna Marie to survive. She was believed to have been the smallest premature baby to have survived in Ireland at that time. When she first came home, I remember my uncle Liam ominously saying that we'd all have to be much quieter, that all the running, jumping and shouting would have to stop. It didn't, but Anna Marie didn't seem to mind at all. She was a quiet baby who spent most of the time in her little cot in the kitchen. She was no trouble whatsoever. My youngest sister, Helen, would arrive into the world a couple of years later, in April 1971, with no fuss at all.

In those early years, I remember my mother being ill a lot. Along with all the agony of the miscarriages and stillbirths, she had to undergo surgery to have cysts removed from her ovaries, surgery on her gall bladder and to have growths removed from her larynx. During my mother's hospital stays, my father and uncle Liam would be responsible for cooking dinner. This was all well and good except for the fact that they were terrible cooks. It also didn't help matters that there was no refrigerator in the house. This meant that the sausages purchased earlier in the week would start to go off fast. I still associate those times with the sour sausages and potatoes my father and uncle Liam would conjure up and present on a plate before us. In my house it was considered a sin not to eat everything on your plate; you had to eat it, all of it. To overcome the sour taste of the sausages, I would cover them

with the potatoes and then swallow the lot in a gulp, pretending the sausages weren't there at all. The other dreaded dinner option was boiled fatty bacon and cabbage. Bread and butter quickly became my salvation during these desperate culinary times.

Despite the lack of amenities such as a refrigerator, life felt abundant and prosperous for our family at that time, although, it goes without saying, prosperity is relative. By today's standards, and maybe even standards in other parts of Ireland at the time, we might have been considered poor, but we felt abundant. We had a garden filled with potatoes, cabbages, carrots, turnips, parsnips and lettuce, and no shortage of apple trees, plum trees and gooseberry bushes either. From the farm, we had the everyday staples such as milk, potatoes, eggs, bacon, vegetables and chicken. My mother loved flowers, so we had lots of shrubs, clipped hedges, and a kaleidoscope of flora everywhere. The sheds of the farmyard were stone-built, and always brightly whitewashed with red-painted doors and slate roofs. My father placed great pride in 'doing things right'; the aesthetics were just as important as the functionality. He liked the potato drills to be very straight, and even the dung heap near the cow house had to be shapely. It needed to look tidy even if it was just dung. The stone yard that led from the cow house had to be brushed clean every day. The flowers, the whitewashed sheds and the clean yard created a sense of harmony around the farm that gave me a reassuring feeling of well-being. You didn't need to have money to have those things.

Our house, a small cottage, sat at the confluence of two mountain streams. There was the constant sound of water gurgling over stones and the breeze blowing through the many trees that lined

the avenue and yard that led up to our front door. We lived on the side of the mountain and my grandfather had been very diligent about providing shelter, which back then was seemingly much more important than a view or even access to more light. The front of our small cottage had the typical three windows and a door. Inside, to the left of the front door was the parlour, a room that was, and still is, an anomaly of the Irish house layout. There wasn't much room in any of the houses back then, but somehow there was this unused parlour where there was a cupboard with fine glassware, a few pieces of ornate furniture, a nice coffee table and a fancy fireplace. This was traditionally the room where a visiting priest or relatives from America would be taken. It was as if they might not be able to handle the more elemental life that existed, should they be taken through the door into the kitchen. The parlour stood in stark contrast to the more rudimentary nature of the farm and the rest of the house itself. It was a little haven of refinement where sherry glasses, silverware and china cups resided. It was a homage to the inner refinement of all these people.

The main room in the house was known as the kitchen. It had the open-hearth fireplace with a crane that swung in and out for hanging pots over the open fire. That was still in use when I was a young child. This kitchen/main room was a communal space where traditionally everything happened. Food was eaten and cooked there, but we played music, danced and listened to the radio there too.

There was an extension to the back of our house that was built just before my father married my mother. Prior to becoming engaged, my father had lived in the house with his parents, his sister, and brother. Until the new extension had gone up, they

had all spent their entire lives in a house without indoor plumbing. My father was unsure of how to bring my mother – who was then living a much more modern life in London – into this very modest home. There was not enough money for my father to buy or build another property, and my aunt and uncle didn't have any means of moving on either, so he made the best of what he had and built an extension with two bedrooms, a bathroom and another kitchen, which we called the 'back kitchen' and which had running water and a gas cooker.

Even with these modern amenities installed, my mother was nonetheless surrendering a tremendous amount of comfort and freedom when she forfeited her life in London in favour of an abode on the side of a mountain in Clare. She was an independent-minded, free-thinking spirit, and I feel she probably struggled a lot in those early years as she tried to adapt to her new role as the 'woman of the house', where as soon as she moved in she was washing everyone's clothes by hand, baking, and preparing food for the entire household. My mother was quite a resilient woman by nature, but I still don't know how she did it.

Before going to England, and long before she met my father, my mother worked as a nurse in the psychiatric hospital in Ennis. That environment and the suffering she saw there impacted her a lot. Her next move was to join a convent in Limerick and train to become a nun. Thankfully for me, she only lasted there one year. She left after she was punished for riding a bicycle without permission. My mother concluded that the whole thing was hypocritical and not for her. She remained sceptical of all authoritarian institutions after that. I only learned of this divergence in

her 'career' a few days after my father passed away, in 2001. I was sitting at the kitchen table when she passed me a photograph of herself in a nun's habit. Even the notion of her having an interest in convent life surprised me, particularly as it had always been my father who was the devout Catholic in our house, not my mother. My mother had her own mind and was very resistant towards authority and being controlled by others. The idea of her training to become a nun just seemed completely at odds with her personality. Personally, I think she joined the convent in a moment of confusion. It seems she had been very quiet, shy and withdrawn at that early stage in her life. It was only after she left the nuns, when she went to England, that she started to blossom and open up.

She liked people who spoke their minds. She had no time for people she thought might be duplicitous or phoney in some way. She was very upfront about things. If she didn't like something you said or did, she would say it. Sometimes people would be shocked, but she would just say it. She wasn't afraid to disagree with anyone and she wasn't ever going to be silenced. My mother was not your normal, everyday, run-of-the-mill farmer's wife. I remember, as a young child, picking up a book of hers with a title that mentioned something about the third eye, a book dealing with esoteric, mystical thoughts. That's a pretty common type of topic these days, but not back then. While going through her books, I recall also stumbling upon *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, a book that was banned back then.

After my mother left the convent, she travelled to London to meet up with her sisters Mary and Kate, who were already living there. She worked in a shop, initially, before securing a waitressing

job at what was then a very exclusive restaurant. It was a world away from where she had come from. My mother grew up in a thatched cottage in the parish of Crusheen and had walked to school each day in her bare feet. Here she was now serving as a waitress to British aristocrats and members of the political class. The restaurant was in the centre of London, and owned and operated by BOAC (British Overseas Airways Corporation), which was the predecessor to British Airways. Back in the fifties, you could check in your luggage there, enjoy a very nice meal and then be transported directly by bus from the restaurant to your plane at Heathrow. This was during an era when flying was considered a very exclusive luxury.

My mother enjoyed the job and it really helped her integrate into British life. Her time there left her with a love for the English people; she found them to be decent and kind, and she developed many strong friendships while she was there. An advantage of working for BOAC was that she could avail herself of cheap flights to Shannon Airport, which meant she could return to Clare without the huge train and ferry journeys that most people would have to endure. During one of those visits, she went to Ennis to go to a dance. Previously, she would have gone to the modern dance hall, where the latest dance bands performed, but life in London had probably left her yearning for this deeper connection to her cultural roots, so she now felt more inclined to go to the céilí at the Queens Hotel, where my father's band was playing. She was already more than familiar with the band as her sister Biddy was in a relationship with the Tulla Céilí Band accordionist, Joe McNamara. That night was the first time she met my father. They were by all accounts enamoured with

each other, but over the seven years that followed, their romance and relationship existed primarily through an exchange of letters. They would occasionally see each other when she'd return for holidays and when my father travelled with the Tulla Céilí Band to England to play the Galtymore ballroom in London and many of the other great London ballrooms where the Irish gathered.

The long, drawn-out courtship eventually began to take its toll on my mother. She wondered if they'd ever get married at all. I think my father was dragging his feet due to his home situation – how was he going to bring this modern woman into a small, crowded cottage? He was at a loss as to how he could make things work. In the end, my father broke off the relationship, reasoning that he didn't have the means to give her the kind of life to which she would have become accustomed. I have no doubt that his decision to break up was as heartbreaking for him as it was for my mother. My father's friend and Tulla Céilí Band fiddle-playing colleague Dr Bill Loughnane persisted in encouraging him to make another go of it. Meanwhile, my mother's sister Biddy wrote to my father telling him how upset my mother was about the break-up. An upcoming tour to England meant he would at least have one other opportunity to see my mother. Whatever was said must have worked because, once they'd finally met, not only were they back together by the following day, they were engaged.

The issue with the small, crowded house was resolved quite easily in the end. My aunt Philomena, who was still living there, had just become engaged to my father's musical partner and friend, Paddy Canny. After my mother and father became engaged, the

idea of a joint wedding with my aunt and Paddy was proposed. Both couples were married in one big joint wedding in September 1961. Once my aunt moved out of the house, my mother moved in, and between that and the new extension, the issue of the lack of space no longer posed as much of a problem.

Paddy Canny, who was now married to my aunt Philomena, was by any definition an extraordinary musician, and one who was recognized as among the best in the country back in the fifties. In the current times of ubiquitous polished recorded perfection, our modern ears can be poorly equipped, and our patience lacking, to properly hear and fully appreciate the music of someone like Paddy Canny. His playing had an intimacy that was filled with detailed subtleties. There was an innate contentment in how he played that seemed directed inwards towards a private silence that required no listener to witness its beauty. A music of comfort and warmth that would flow effortlessly when he was in the humour for it and when the moment had been found. In County Clare, Paddy was the hero of those who knew and loved the music. *'The best of them all'* was probably the most common response to a mention of his name. Paddy had a very personal sound that was unlike that of any other fiddler. They used to say he had a 'sweep' to his music; his playing rose and fell in swells of volume, and he spoke a local musical vernacular that contained great depth for those who were familiar with that language.

Paddy's father, Pat, was the one who actually taught him. My father, at the age of eleven, then started to learn from Paddy. There was just a couple of years between Paddy and my father,

and when they were young men, in the early 1940s, they would have played together as a duet around the local area for house dances. They'd strap their fiddles to their backs and cycle around our part of north-east Clare. There are stories of them getting off their bicycles on their way home in the middle of the night to play a tune that they'd heard earlier at a gathering, just to make sure they wouldn't forget it. What started out as two young men on their bicycles with fiddles strapped to their backs eventually led to them both being in the Tulla Céilí Band and travelling the world, going from the wild but humble house dance to the stage of Carnegie Hall. Paddy wasn't that interested in playing for dancers, whereas my father loved it and had developed his own rhythmic style to suit the dancers. It worked well when they played together; they had two different approaches, Paddy's long-bowed sweeping lyricism and my father's pulsing rhythm complementing each other to create a combined sweetness and drive.

Though my father had embraced the more raw, rhythmic elements of the East Clare sound, he also had a great emotional and intuitive understanding of the music. He had one particular way of describing music that covered a multitude. He would describe a piece of music played by someone as either 'having' tradition or 'not having' tradition. He might say there was no tradition in something, or that something was full of tradition. If he said something was lacking tradition, it was a euphemism for music that didn't mean anything. If it had tradition, it meant it had soul; it was music that spoke from a place of feeling. If it could bring a tear to your eye or give you goosebumps, you could be

sure it was filled with tradition. This tradition is like threads of emotion and feeling handed down to us in the form of melody; a tune is nothing more than a musically encoded feeling waiting to be unlocked. In this way, the music provides a visceral-feeling connection to our past.

Many years later, as a teenager, I would take great pride when I'd hear the older fellows remark that they could hear a lot of Paddy Canny and my father in my music. I spent a lot of time trying to create a unified lyricism and pulse in my playing, trying to achieve in my own music the balance that occurred when my father and Paddy played together. I didn't want to choose one approach over the other. The music they made has woven itself into my playing in much the same way that the accent of the area is woven into the sounds and patterns of my speech. I now carry their combined styles as one. They are constantly and unconsciously with me.

My father was a farmer by profession, but he was better known as a musician and I believe he considered himself a musician first and foremost. The world of traditional music was largely filled with people who approached it from this perspective, similar to the way in which amateur sports figures or athletes might do, except as musicians they could in theory keep pursuing their passion throughout their whole life, if they wished. On one occasion, as an adult, I remember my father standing backstage after one of my concerts. He seemed to be looking at and examining my fiddle, which was sitting on a table. He turned to me and said, 'I'd love to have done what you're doing.' I'd never heard him ever say that before. I found it so moving, both in terms of his unrealized

dream and his implicit endorsement of the path I had chosen. Of course, I wouldn't ever have been propelled along this path, or even taken up the fiddle in the first place, had it not been for my father's world of music and his influence on me.

When I was growing up, our house was often filled with musicians. I was by nature a night owl and never really wanted to go to bed; I still struggle with this – I have a hard time leaving the day behind. On the nights we would have musicians over, I'd make sure not to draw any attention to myself, in the hope that my mother wouldn't notice my presence. I was always afraid she'd suddenly turn and say, *'Time for bed!'* I just wanted to be in the middle of the action, be surrounded by the sounds of musical instruments. Sooner or later, of course, I would be spotted and the command to go to bed would be issued. I would agree but somehow, fifteen minutes later, I'd still be there until I was yet again told to go to bed. For many years I slept in the attic room just up the stairs from the main kitchen. My journey to bed on these occasions involved a begrudging and slow ascent to the little landing in front of my room, which overlooked the kitchen. Sometimes I'd just perch there for another while longer in my own private world, observing the scene through the bannisters until I was spotted again and told to go all the way into my bedroom. I would then leave the door cracked open while I listened to the conversation, music, and laughter down below. These were some of the most nurturing moments of my life, when I had the feeling of everything being right with the world.

Ours was very much an open house, and sometimes people we didn't even know would turn up unannounced. One of the lines

you'd often hear in our kitchen was, *'I think I heard a car!'* As kids, those moments of hearing a car arrive were moments of excitement and possibility, a break in the mountainside isolation and always welcomed by us as children. We would peek out from behind the window lace to see if we could identify the car coming around the turn in the avenue leading up to our house. They'd pull up to the front wall and gate and step out of the car, by which time we'd know if we could identify them or not. No matter who it was, be they a stranger or a friend, we would go out to greet them and welcome them inside. The timing might be inconvenient but if they were coming for music, there was at least a tacit understanding that they were there because they valued traditional music, and on some level that made them friends already. It could be a musician friend from a nearby county, a folklorist from Dublin or an enthusiast from the United States or England. Either way, their arrival usually signalled the start of a big night of music in the kitchen.

Our kitchen was the place where musicians and friends from all over would congregate to play. People such as broadcaster Ciarán Mac Mathúna and lots of prominent traditional musicians, such as flute-player Peadar O'Loughlin and fiddler Tommy Potts, would all have been in our kitchen at different times throughout my childhood. My mother would be scrambling to get food ready as soon as she saw the guests strolling up the path with their instruments in tow. She wouldn't have had the easiest job, putting together a big offering of food at a moment's notice, but she always managed to make it look effortless. If there wasn't a good supply of food in the house, someone would be quietly

dispatched to Kelly's Shop or to Tony McNamara's or Naughton's pubs, both of which had a grocery section as part of the bar. While musicians were being welcomed in through our front door, one of us would be darting out the back door to go pick up the ham for the sandwiches. In truth, we weren't really ever short of anything for visitors. We always had our own milk and eggs, and my mother was also a great baker, so the kitchen always had a ready-made supply of tarts, cakes and the freshest of breads.

Musicians would be playing away in our kitchen – a mixture of stories, conversation and tunes – while my mother casually put food together in the back kitchen. There always came a point in the evening where my mother would ask the visitors if they would like a cup of tea and maybe 'something small' to eat. The 'something small' was always a big spread, usually consisting of things like ham or roast beef, potato salad, fresh tomatoes and lettuce, hard-boiled eggs, beetroot and brown bread followed by one of her famous apple or rhubarb tarts. This feast was a regular occurrence in our house whenever we had guests over. In fact, all the great nights of music and family gatherings in our kitchen had some version of this delicious spread as a centrepiece.

My mother always kept the house very clean and tidy, and was comfortable with anyone walking in at any time. If my mother hadn't been as kindhearted and generous as she was, those evenings might not have occurred as frequently as they did. I always had the feeling that people liked visiting our house. She always gave a big welcome to the continuous stream of musicians that came in and out our door. Music was my father's passion, and she always encouraged this. She fully supported my father's playing and his

participation in the Tulla Céilí Band. He seemed to want very little else beyond that, but she knew it was central to his happiness.

People from around the world would arrive at our house purely to get some sense of the music, to hear it played, or just to meet my father. I remember the first time the fiddler and folklorist Barry Taylor and his wife, Jacqueline, from England visited us. In the course of conversation we discovered they were camping in West Clare and that their tent had been blown down the night before, so my mother offered them a room for the night, insisting they stay. They became family friends and regular visitors to the house after that. My father and mother were very open and generous in that way and seemed to delight in these chance encounters. I remember two American musicians, fiddler Armin Barnett and whistle-player Larry McCullough, showing up for music one evening. They, too, ended up staying the night. The next morning, Armin worked on my fiddle, adjusting the bridge and doing some other bits of maintenance work on it. There would have been absolutely no way to predict that one day he would be my local fiddle-repair man when I'd live in Seattle.

Among the regular visitors in those early days was an anthropologist from Holland by the name of Jos Koning. He was secretly carrying out an anthropological study of the music culture of East Clare and in order to blend in he had learned to play Irish music on the fiddle. He convincingly passed himself off as an enthusiast who just wanted to learn this music. Other regular visitors to our house included fiddler Antóin Mac Gabhann and his wife Bernie, flute-player Jimmy Brody and his wife, Ita, concertina-player John Naughton and his wife, Rosaleen, the

great set-dancer Paddy King and his wife, Rita, and accordion-player Brendan McMahon.

We also enjoyed lots of musical gatherings with just our own extended family. My mother's sister Biddy would arrive with her husband, Joe McNamara, and his accordion. My cousin, their son Christy McNamara, who also played accordion, would often be there, or maybe my aunt Julia, who was married to flute-player Willie Conroy. My musician cousins, accordion- and flute-players John and Seamus McMahon, would often come too. There were many, many nights when that small house was packed to the brim, full of people and music. We danced and played in the kitchen, and any breaks from the music were filled with storytelling. We would listen to my father telling his favourite funny stories. He might sing 'The Jolly Frog', and often a ghost story was thrown in for good measure.

There were some very special musical moments during those nights when we might just sit and listen to a visiting musician play. One thing I learned was that moments of real music were unpredictable. Much of the time a player might just be plodding along, but then there were other, special, times when the music would suddenly be transformed into a kind of powerful expression of feeling. It was these captivating experiences that became the moments by which I would define and remember these players. I could ignore hours of faltering efforts in favour of that one moment. This was when the heart of the tune was laid bare for all to enjoy, when the soul of the musician was revealed, and when the true potential had been realized. It was often a fleeting moment but for me it was the definitive one. I remember listening to John

Naughton play his concertina one night. John was an elderly local man but was affectionately always known as 'Young John'. He had moved to Dublin in his youth and had let the music slip away. He hadn't played the concertina in decades but picked it up again after his friend Jimmy Brody bought him a concertina in an attempt to encourage him back into music. He started playing as though he had never stopped all those years earlier. For me, here was someone giving a glimpse into how the local music was played in the earlier part of the century. Young John was recapturing his musical youth when he played the concertina, and his versions of the tunes were unique and fascinating to me.

One of the moments from John's playing that night is stamped on my memory. He was playing his lovely setting of the melody 'The Ships in Full Sail' when there was this transcendent moment in the second part of the melody, often referred to as the turn of the tune, where he played a series of long notes in place of a busier, more complicated section, as if distilling the phrase to its most innocent beauty. My father and I looked at each other, knowing something beautiful had just happened. Such moments didn't come as a result of technical skill – technique alone couldn't create that experience. It's difficult to explain but it required a kind of forgetting of oneself while at the same time being totally present in the act. I would end up spending a lot of my life attempting to understand the architecture of those special moments, how to get inside the tune, how to be present, how to allow the music to flow. In the end, it was mostly all about letting go.

2

Throughout my childhood, I listened with great interest to stories involving my ancestors being herdsmen on the slopes of Maghera mountain. My grandfather Quillan, and his father before him, were herdsmen for the Butlers of Bunnahow, the landlords of the area before Irish independence. During those times, people would send cattle to the mountain to graze the 1,100 acres that were mostly mountain bogland. Their job was to check on every herd, which meant an incredible amount of mountain walking every day. Quillan also had to feed the fish in the two mountain lakes for Lord Lingenfield, who was a regular guest of the Butlers. The house where we lived was historically the herdsman cottage. This I would later discover was evidence of our place on the lowest rung of the social ladder. It seems the family had been evicted some generations before from the more fertile lands closer to the local village of Feakle.

After Irish independence, my grandfather was given the whole mountain by the Land Commission, perhaps because he was already the person working the mountain, so he could maintain things with some continuity and because it was the easiest solution at the time. The mountain bogland couldn't be farmed in any

normal way so it couldn't be given to anybody as actual farmland. So, he carried on as a herdsman, taking in cattle to graze, in addition to running the sixty-acre farm that surrounded our homestead, but it still wasn't enough to keep up with the increasing rates due on the land, and eventually he found himself in financial trouble. My father often recounted the story of walking home from school one evening and seeing all the cattle from the farm running towards him. The local sheriff was removing the animals to impound them at Flagmount on the other side of Lough Graney – a tactic to force my grandfather to pay the rates. Apparently, the evening the livestock were taken, a group of neighbours, including the local priest, banded together to go and break the cattle out of the pound. They got the cattle back, but Quillan had to appear in court in Ennis to try to resolve the situation with the rates. They were too high for land of this low quality – it was impossible to make enough money with the cattle-grazing to keep up with the payments. In the court case, Quillan got no relief. Instead, the judge gave half the mountain to the forestry department, paid Quillan ten pounds, then doubled the rates on the remaining land, which meant that the rest of the mountain would soon belong to the forestry department also. It looks like the forestry department wanted the mountain and had a plan to get it. Quillan was being forced out. The mountain was gradually sold off, bit by bit, to the forestry department. By the end, we were left just with the farm around the house.

During my childhood, my father stayed on as an overseer of the mountain for the forestry department, who now owned Maghera mountain in its entirety. This whole experience of the

sheriff and the cattle left a big wound in my father's psyche. He mentioned it many times, and I think it left him a bit fearful for the rest of his life. Unfortunately the mountain is now covered in Sitka spruce trees, which always look and feel so out of place. At the top of the mountain there is now a telecommunications mast that transmits television and radio signals to most of the Mid-West region of Ireland. My father and Quillan would have helped the mast surveyors find the best path to access the top of the mountain, which my grandfather had always believed was called Maghera. It turned out that the tip of the mountain, where the mast was to be located, was actually in another townland. However, the surveyors could see that my grandfather, who loved and and identified with this mountain, was very proud of the fact that this beacon of modernity would be broadcasting to a considerable segment of the country from what he believed was his townland of Maghera, so they set about having the name of the tip of the mountain officially changed. This meant the mast would actually be located in Maghera after all. At the official opening of the transmitter, on 10 September 1963, a PR photographer for the launch shot the only photograph of me as a baby, sitting on my mother's lap. Later in life I would go on to write a tune called 'The Maghera Mountain'.

Life on the farm had a kind of rustic warmth to it in those days. We knew all the farm animals individually and each had their own name. The names usually related to their ancestry and who we bought them from originally, so we would have cows called 'Bolands' cow' or 'Brodys' cow', though others had more obvious names, like 'the spotted cow'. We would keep track of

each of them, so much so that we would know their offspring for several generations. There were eight cows on the farm and my father, along with my mother and my uncle Liam, would hand-milk them all each day. Once the milking was finished, the milk was kept cool by placing the churns in the stream that ran by the house. Then, mid-morning, we'd load the milk churns onto a donkey cart, or an 'ass car' as it was better known, then transport them down to the main road along a very beautiful, winding, tree-lined avenue. On the side of the road, there was a concrete pier built especially for the milk churns, and it was here they would be left for collection. A local man was in charge of collecting the churns with his tractor and transporting them a further six miles to the creamery. There, all the cream would be extracted from the milk, after which the skimmed milk would be sent back to us later that morning. We would then fill buckets with it and use it to feed the calves.

During winter, most of these animals were housed in sheds. The cows had a combination of rushes and poor-quality hay to lie on, and a stall-full of good hay at their heads to eat. That shed was cleaned every day with a four-pronged dung fork, a barrow, a brush and a few buckets of water. New litter was spread, the stalls refilled with hay, the dung transported by barrow to the symmetrically shaped dung hill and the cow-house yard brushed clean – all this while the cows were drinking at the stream. Work that kept the place clean and tidy was just as important as work purely related to the commercial output of the farm. It wasn't commerce, it was a way of life. It was a series of ritualistic work practices that rotated with the seasons. There was a time for

sowing potatoes, a time for cutting and turning the turf, saving hay, bringing home the turf, milking cows, digging spuds, picking stones and spreading dung on the fields, and a time for blessing the land with Easter holy water on 1 May to ward off bad luck. All the work of the farm was done manually or with the help of horses or a donkey. Our two horses, Bob and Fanny, had an array of different pieces of equipment that could be attached to them: a horse car for moving things, a mowing machine for cutting hay, a swath turner for tossing and turning hay to dry, a slide rake for gathering it into heaps, a hay car for bringing the hay back to the hay shed, a plough, and a harrow for the garden.

Along with cows, our farm consisted of chickens, hens, pigs and sheep, as well as gardens of potatoes, carrots, parsnips, onions, cabbage, lettuce and turnips for our own use. We had a rhubarb garden, apple and plum trees, and gooseberry bushes that flourished every spring. Back then, children always worked the farm. It was normal and expected. You did what manual labour you were capable of. My brother, Pat, and I worked on the farm from the age of seven or eight. We worked in the fields in the summer, saving hay, helped with the picking of potatoes, cleaned out the cow house and filled the cows' stalls with hay. We also helped with the cows during calving time, and then later let those same calves out for the first time in spring. They would run and leap as if born into a completely new world. I remember having to follow one that ran for miles one day. He managed to run through briars and across fields and streams before I could eventually catch him.

Even though the Irish language had died out in my area a long time before I was born, we still used a lot of old Irish words as part