

# In Step

Promoting traditional Celtic dance, music and culture

Newsletter of the Greater Washington Ceili Club

[www.gwcc-online.org](http://www.gwcc-online.org)



A p r i l 2 0 0 7



**Last month, our beloved Baltimore accordion legend, Billy McComiskey, was featured in an article in the Wall Street Journal, reprinted below. You can catch Billy's dance tunes every month at J. Pat's Sunday ceili, next on May 20, 2007, in Baltimore's Historic Locust Point. See Upcoming Events.**



## **THIS IRISH-AMERICAN MUSICIAN ISN'T BOXED IN BY HIS ACCORDION**

**by Earle Hitchner**

Back when he was mayor of Baltimore, Maryland's current governor, Martin O'Malley, fired Billy McComiskey, the 1986 All-Ireland senior champion of the button accordion (as opposed to the piano-key accordion) and one of America's most accomplished Irish traditional performers.

Lead singer, guitarist and songwriter for O'Malley's March, his own Irish fusion band, Mr. O'Malley asked Mr. McComiskey at a get-together five years ago if he could substitute for an ailing member of O'Malley's March at three performances.

"I told him I could do only one and that he'd have to get someone else for the other two," recalled the 55-year-old button accordionist from his home in Parkville, a Baltimore suburb. "Then a session [an Irish music jam] started downstairs, and my son Sean got out his button accordion and played. Later, as Martin was leaving, he turned to me and said, 'By the way, you're fired.' I asked, 'What do you mean?' And he said, 'If it's OK with you, I decided to hire your son for all three gigs.'"

Reached in Annapolis, Gov. O'Malley said of the father: "Billy has been a great force for passing

traditional Irish music on to the next generation and is a continuing source of pride to all traditional players in Baltimore and Maryland."

Maryland is Mr. McComiskey's adoptive state. Born in Brooklyn to a father from Armagh and an American mother whose own parents hailed from Tipperary and Limerick, he was surrounded by Irish traditional music at home and began teaching himself the button accordion at age nine. "The great thing about accordions is that they're the people's instrument," he said. "You don't have to be some kind of genius to play it."

During a weekend in New York's Catskill Mountains, however, 12-year-old Billy discovered he was shortchanging the instrument's capabilities after watching two Irish virtuosos perform in the same session: Joe Cooley and Bobby Gardiner. "Irish accordion players are always dealing with the limitations of their instruments and trying to make them fit Irish music," Mr. McComiskey explained. "It's part of the illusion created by great playing: how to seem to do something at times you couldn't really do. And that takes exceptional skill and imagination. So when I saw Cooley play the accordion that weekend, I recognized how great his music was. Then, at one o'clock in the morning, Gardiner walked in and tore the house down. His box playing has never left me.

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"When I finally got up the courage to play for them, I was mortified that I couldn't because of a hole in my bellows. But Cooley told me, 'I know you can play.' Then he placed his hand on my shoulder. It was just the support I needed."

More crucial support came from Sean McGlynn, a button accordionist from Galway who was 14 years older than McComiskey and lived in Queens and later in Long Island. "When I was a high-school sophomore, I completely messed up this arpeggio in a tune called 'The Pride of Lisdoonvarna,'" Mr. McComiskey said. "Sean played a tune or two to show me how, and then he played for another half hour. I was so confused that I actually went upstairs to do homework. He popped up to my room and said, 'Don't worry. You're going to be a great player.' We became the best of friends after that."

In remembering McGlynn's tragic death on Jan. 15, 1983, Mr. McComiskey grows quiet. On that bitterly cold day, McGlynn had driven his minivan to Jamaica, Queens, so he could take the subway into Manhattan. He was found slumped on the minivan's steering wheel, shot through the right hand and heart.

This unsolved murder devastated McComiskey. "Sean never once denied me anything musical," he said. "His approach to Irish accordion music was perfect. He was selfless." In honor of his late friend, Mr. McComiskey plays the gray, two-row, Paolo Soprani button accordion owned by McGlynn. Proof of McGlynn's accordion brilliance can be heard in the "O'Donnell's/Spellan the Fiddler" hornpipes and "Johnny Allen's/Sporting Nell" reels that he recorded with Mr. McComiskey on "Makin' the Rounds," the latter's superb solo debut in 1981. By then, Mr. McComiskey had been living in the Washington-Baltimore region for six years. He had left New York for the nation's capital to form a trio called the Irish Tradition with singer-guitarist Andy O'Brien and fiddler Brendan Mulvihill.

Wearing jeans, flannel shirts and long hair, the trio were the sartorial and attitudinal antithesis of matching-blazer Irish showbands and Aran-sweater clones of the Clancy Brothers. On stage the Irish Tradition eschewed jokes and other banter to concentrate on the music, and audiences reveled in it. Staunchly Irish traditional jigs, reels, and hornpipes were played with power, snap, and invention, and woven among them was Mr. O'Brien's expressive singing of Irish traditional and other folk songs.

"The D.C. bars we played in weren't like the New

York bars I played in," Mr. McComiskey said. "We were getting attention from the Washington Post and other newspapers, and people from the Smithsonian would drop in to listen. Where Irish traditional music started to reach out into America, I think, was in D.C. more than in New York."

The Irish Tradition released three albums: "Catchin' the Tune" (1975); "The Corner House" (1978), their finest recording and an overlooked Irish-American classic; and "The Times We've Had" (1985).

After a decade-long run, the trio called it quits. "We didn't know how to take the next step into doing concerts and tours," Mr. McComiskey said. "I was also getting tired of the wild nights of music in D.C."

Mr. McComiskey went to trade school to learn air conditioning repair and maintenance. "I entered the exciting world of climate control," he said with a chuckle. "I've been a maintenance mechanic for 20 years in nearby Towson. A friend of my wife calls me a musician with a full-time job on the side."

Married since 1982, Billy and Annie McComiskey have three sons: Patrick, 25; Sean, 23; and Michael, 12. All can play Irish music, and Sean performs with Maryland's governor on the next CD by O'Malley's

"I never felt I was receding or retreating from the Irish music scene," Mr. McComiskey said of the years following the Irish Tradition. "I just started to play more in sessions in Baltimore, which had this exquisite Irish music all its own." In 1986, he also competed in and won the All-Ireland senior button accordion championship. "Standing by the door of the hall and smiling encouragement at me was Bobby Gardiner," he said.

In 1991 Liz Carroll, the 1975 All-Ireland senior fiddle champion, asked Mr. McComiskey to record with her and singer-guitarist Daithi Sproule. Calling themselves Trian (Irish for "third"), they released a self-titled album in 1992 and "Trian II" in 1995.

More recent collaborations for McComiskey include the Pride of New York, a band featuring Cherish the Ladies' flute and whistle player Joanie Madden, fiddler Brian Conway and keyboardist Brendan Dolan, and singer and multi-instrumentalist Mick Moloney's monumental "McNally's Row of Flats" CD, where Mr. McComiskey guested on five tracks.

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Most significantly, after a hiatus of 26 years, Mr. McComiskey entered a Nashville studio this past weekend to begin recording his second solo album. Coming up are guest appearances on new releases by fiddler Athena O'Lochlainn and by Mick Moloney's Green Fields of America ensemble, as well as participation in a Lincoln Center concert.

"This is looking like an interesting year for me," Mr. McComiskey said. "As far as I'm concerned, the St. Patrick's Day season now runs from late February until the end of October."

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## DANCE NOTES

by Edie O'Donnell, Ceili Committee

March proved, once again, to be our busiest month of the year.

### Community Performance

We began our St. Patrick's Day "season" on Monday, March 12, with a performance at an independent living community, Willow Grove, in Olney, where our longtime friend and supporter, Jeanette Schuder, is the activities coordinator. The hour-long performance included a couple of audience participation dances, and we had a few brave souls who gave the Walls of Limerick a try. Additionally, we had a request from the audience for a Siege of Ennis, which also had a couple of residents up and dancing. The dancers showed off our performance version of the Mazurka set, as well as figures of the Dublin and Connemara sets, and the Sweets of May. The Outreach Ceili Band was in fine tune. With Dick deFreyre on whistle, Paul O'Rourke on the box, Jan McVey on the boudhran and Tom Scullen strumming the guitar, we treated the residents to some "live" tunes, and the band played for a figure of the Kerry Set, too. The residents here are very welcoming, and I'm happy to report that they had as much fun as we did! This may have been enhanced by Jeanette's surprise at the end of the performance....Bailey's coffee and brown sugar shortbread, enjoyed by audience and performers alike. Reluctant to let the evening end, most of the dancers adjourned to a nearby Mama Lucia's for a late dinner.

### Timmy "the Brit" McCarthy Workshop

On March 15, we held a special event at the Frost Center. Timmy "the Brit" McCarthy was passing through Washington, and we were able to bring him in for a wonderful evening. Timmy began with a boudhran workshop. After a quick break, Timmy taught the Set of Erin to 5 sets of dancers. In his own inimitable style, Timmy taught, played the box, and peppered his lesson with stories about dancing style, and the history of set dancing and dance instructors. The workshop was followed by our traditional "mini-ceili" with music provided by The Frosties.

### March GWCC ceili

On Sunday, March 18, the GWCC monthly ceili was held at Cherry Hill Park. Having missed our February ceili due to snow, we were ready for some great dancing, and we were not disappointed.

The workshop dance was the Kildownet Half Set, taught by Paul O'Donnell. The band was the incomparable Bog Wanderers, who always give their best for our very appreciative dancers.

The first set of dances included the Siege of Ennis, the North Kerry Set and the Clare Plain Set. The pot luck tables were crammed with goodies, which were enjoyed during the first break. The second set of dances started with the Connemara Reel Set, which was followed by a waltz, the Kildownet Half Set and the Haymaker's Jig. Corey Clark was the winner of the 50/50 drawing during the second break. We ended the evening with the Dublin Set, the Ballyvourney Jig set, a waltz, and the Clare Lancers Set.

### April 22, 2007 next GWCC ceili

Get ready for our next ceili at Cherry Hill on April 22; see the flyer in this newsletter for details.

### May 20, 2007 Matt Cunningham ceili

Finally, remember that our ceili on May 20 will be Matt Cunningham and his band from Ireland, an event not to be missed by dedicated (addicted?) set dancers.



## TRAVEL TALES The Chieftains at Carnegie Hall, NYC

by Joan O'Connor

St. Patrick's Day is always a special day and seeing the Chieftains perform traditional Irish Music at Carnegie Hall makes it a perfect day. The Chieftains have been performing their music for the past four decades and the show is always fresh and lively with many new faces and surprise guests.

On this tour the main members of the Chieftains are Sean Keane, Matt Molloy, Kevin Conneff and of course Patty Moloney. They are joined by the young sensational Canadian dancing team of brothers' Jon and Nathan Pilatzke who with Cara Butler and Donny Golden dazzled the audience with their combined wicked step dancing and Jon's fiddling. As one who has an interest in set dancing I was awed by the new dance style that was profiled by Cara Butler and group it was performed sitting in a chair. I am sure we will see more on this new style of dancing and it might be something Paul O'Donnell could look into for his dancers. There is a new DVD in the offering that will feature; I guess it would be safe to call, "seat dancing".

The second half of the concert included a musical program with selections from the Chieftains latest album, *Live from Dublin: A tribute to Derek Bell*. Derek was a member of the Chieftains who passed away. Harp purists lauded the performance of another special guest Triona Marshall who left the RTF Orchestra to come on the road with The Chieftains.

Mike Moloney is a master at including new and surprise guests. The St Patrick's Day 2007 Concert ended with a group of French performers who joined The Chieftains on stage playing pipes and drums with about 35 dancers in costume who went through the audience and got nearly the whole hall on their feet doing a line dance through Carnegie Hall. It was a rousing end to a wonderful and lively concert.



## MEMBER BULLETIN BOARD

### New pub

Sarah Kelly nee Leitner, a GWCC member until she moved away to the Culpeper Virginia area, has opened a new pub there. This Irish pub, named Brandon's Place, opened in March 2007. Their website is [www.brandonsplace.com](http://www.brandonsplace.com). Brandon's Place is located in historic old town Culpeper.

110 East Cameron Street Culpeper, VA 22701  
(540) 829-1025

Below is a photo of Sarah, with partner Maire Flanagan, during the construction, and a photo of Timmy "the Brit" McCarthy performing during their grand opening on March 16, 2007.





## FOLKLORE SOCIETY OF GREATER WASHINGTON

from Jim Cole, President

### Concert

The Folklore Society of Greater Washington will feature Irish fiddling legend, Kevin Burke and multi-instrumentalist, Cal Scott in concert on May 13, 2007 at 7:30 pm at St. Mark Presbyterian Church, 10701 Old Georgetown Road, Rockville, Md.

The concert is free to members of the Folklore Society of Greater Washington. It is \$17 to the general public. Anyone may join the Society at the door if they wish to attend the concert for free. Membership is \$31 per year for an individual and \$43 for a family.

This duo met while Cal was working a score for a documentary on Northern Ireland. Their new CD, *Across the Black River*, is a collaboration incorporating their new compositions, traditional Irish music and even a bluegrass classic. Kevin Burke's website is [http://www.kevinburke.com/html\\_home.html](http://www.kevinburke.com/html_home.html)

Jordan Dudney and dancers from the Dudney School of Irish Dance will join the players for a few tunes. Jordan has performed with the Eileen Ivers Band, Mick Moloney, and Cherish the Ladies.



### Fiddle Workshop

There will also be a fiddle workshop with Kevin Burke on Sunday, May 13 at 3:00 pm. Topics to be covered will be ( amongst others) 1) repertoire building, 2) nuances of the Sligo style 3) bowing 4) ornamentation, 5) how to take your playing to the next level. The fee is \$30. Reservations on the workshop are a must. They can be made by calling 301-754-3611. (Dave Eisner is organizing the workshop.)



### SOME SUGGESTED READINGS

submitted by Brenda Sullivan-Miller

**Poem:** High Island by Richard Murphy  
Harper Row 1974

**Novel:** The Last Prince of Ireland by Morgan Llewelyn  
Tor Books 2001

**Play:** Dubliners by James Joyce



## MEMBER BULLETIN BOARD

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### Ride needed

Brian Madigan is interested in traveling to and from the GWCC Ceili events and the Southern Maryland Celtic Festival & Highland Gathering in Southern Maryland. He doesn't drive - could transportation be provided? He lives on Wisconsin Ave in Bethesda near Metro. You could pick him up at home or a metro station. Please contact him at 301-657-2272 to make arrangements.

### GWCC Officers and Board

Tom Scullen – President  
Dixie Baker - Vice-President  
Ed O'Connor – Treasurer  
Paul O'Donnell - Secretary

#### Board Members:

Susan Boon, Linda Fitzpatrick, Dick De Freyre, Don Kaliher, Betty McCarthy, Frank McCarthy, Emmett Murphy, Joan O'Connor, Edie O'Donnell, Bev Ricks, Anne Marie Russell, Jane Twomey, Pat Twomey

#### Committees (Chair):

Ceili (Dixie Baker and Dick DeFreyre)  
Membership (Frank and Betty McCarthy)  
Outreach (Edie O'Donnell and Dixie Baker)  
Newsletter (Anne Marie Russell)  
Scholarship (Linda Fitzpatrick)  
Cape May (Linda Fitzpatrick)  
Spring Fling (Joan O'Connor)

**DANCE CLASSES**

**Mondays**  
Waterloo Elementary School, Columbia, MD  
set dancing 7-8:30 beginners, starting April 16<sup>th</sup>  
Instructors: Jan McVey and Don Kaliher  
Info: 410 313-7275. www.howardcountymd.gov/RAP

**Tuesdays**  
Ring of Kerry, Gaithersburg, MD  
ceili & set dancing 7:00 beginners, 8:00 advanced  
info: KBWall@comcast.net

**Wednesdays**  
J Patrick's Pub  
ceili & set dancing 7PM  
1371 Andre St Locust Point Baltimore, MD  
Instructor: Dan Stanton info: 410-276-2766

**Thursdays**  
GWCC Frost Center, Rockville, MD  
set dancing 7:30 beginners, 8:00 advanced  
Instructor: the Paul O'Donnell IrishGWCC@aol.com

**Saturdays**  
Green Acres Center, 4401 Sideburn Rd Fairfax, VA  
ceili & set dancing 10:30 beginner friendly  
Instructor: Marilyn Moore  
info: Larry 703-281-0910 lfrank2@earthlink.net

Join the club! Get our monthly newsletter and save on monthly ceilis, all for just \$15. To sign up or renew today, send this membership form and your check to Frank McCarthy 78 Milshire Ct Silver Spring, MD 20905

Name \_\_\_\_\_.

Address \_\_\_\_\_.

Email \_\_\_\_\_.

**UPCOMING EVENTS**

**April 22**, GWCC Ceili at Cherry Hill 5PM  
Set Workshop starts at 4:00 PM  
Cherry Hill Park Convention Center  
College Park, MD  
Information 301-294-3568 rdefreyre@aol.com

**April 28**, CCE Spotlight on the Arts 7:30PM  
Old Town Hall, Fairfax, VA  
info: KendraR179@aol.com

**April 28**, Southern Maryland Celtic Festival  
info: <http://cssm.org/festival/>

**May 8** Paddy Keenan and John Walsh  
Workshop and Concert  
Blue Ridge Irish Music School  
Community Arts Center 214 Rugby Road  
Charlottesville, VA 434-244-4011

**May 10** Paddy Keenan and John Walsh  
McGinty's Public House  
911 Ellsworth Drive  
Silver Spring, MD 301-587-1270

**May 11** Paddy Keenan and John Walsh  
Special guest Jim Eagan  
Creative Arts Alliance at the Patterson  
3134 Eastern Avenue Baltimore, MD  
410-276-1651

**May 12**, CCE's End of Season Ceili  
Green Acres School, Fairfax, VA  
info: KendraR179@aol.com

**May 13** Folklore Society Concert, Kevin Burke and Cal Scott 7:30PM St. Mark Presbyterian Church , 10701 Old Georgetown Road, Rockville, Md.

**May 20**, GWCC Ceili at Cherry Hill 5PM  
Set Workshop starts at 4:00 PM  
Matt Cunningham Band  
Cherry Hill Park Convention Center  
College Park, MD  
Information 301-294-3568\_rdefreyre@aol.com

**May 20**, ceili J Patrick's Pub, 4:30-8:30  
1371 Andre St Locust Point, Baltimore, MD  
info: 410-244-8613

**Sept 18-27**, Irish Charter Cruise Rome, Italy  
Info: byrne\_g@yahoo.com

**Sept 28-30**, Cape May Dance Weekend Cape May, NJ  
Info: sousane@comcast.net

## LOCAL SEISIUNS

J Patrick's Pub, Locust Point, MD  
Monday – Beginners Seisiun  
Tuesday w/Laura Byrne & Jim Eagan  
Thursday w/Peter Fitzgerald  
Kids Sesiun w/Donna Long  
info: 410-244-8613

Royal Mile Pub, Wheaton, MD  
Kids' seisiun, 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday, 5-6:30  
info: jmitchellf@yahoo.com  
Adults' seisiun, 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday, 7-10:30  
info: 301-946-4511

McGinty's Publick House, Silver Spring, MD  
Kids' 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday info: jmitchellf@yahoo.com  
Adults' Tuesdays, 8:00 info: Doc Botzer

RiRa Pub, Bethesda, MD  
Wednesdays, 7-11 and Sundays, 3-7 p.m.  
info: philvar@erols.com

Auld Shebeen, Fairfax, VA  
Saturdays, 12-2:00, kids once a month 11:00  
info: 703-293-9600  
Kids' info: <http://www.novasession.org/kids>

O'Faolain's Irish Pub, Sterling, VA  
Sundays, 6-9:30 info: 703-444-9796

Ri-Ra, on Wilson Boulevard, Arlington  
Sundays, 2-5 p.m.

## CEILIS

First Saturday,  
Emerald Isle Club Ceili 7-11 p.m. Sept – May  
ceili dances, some set dances, all called  
American Legion #22, York Road, Towson, MD,  
info: 410-263-5544

Second Saturday,  
CCE Ceili, 7:30 Sept-May  
ceili dances, some set dances, all called  
Green Acres Center, 4401 Sideburn Rd Fairfax, VA  
7:00 workshop  
info: KendraR179@aol.com

Second Sunday,  
J Patrick's Pub, 4:30-8:30 all year  
set dances, some ceili dances, all called  
1371 Andre St Locust Point, Baltimore, MD  
info: 410-244-8613

Fourth Sunday,  
GWCC Ceili 5-9:00PM Sept – May  
set dances, some ceili dances, some called  
Cherry Hill Park Convention Center  
College Park, MD  
4:00 workshop  
info: rdefreyre@aol.com

# April Ceili

**dance, live music and potluck supper**



**Sunday, April 22, 2007**

**Cherry Hill Park Conference Center**

**College Park, MD**

(entrance code 76000)

**Set dance workshop 4PM**

(Skirdagh Set)

**Ceili 5-9PM**

## **Dance Program**

**tosach (beginning)**

Clare Mazurka Set

North Kerry Set

Sixteen-Hand Reel

(break for supper)

**lár (middle)**

Corofin Plain Set

Cashel Set

Kildownet Half Set

(break)

**ceann (end)**

Ballyvourney Jig

Skirdagh Set

Waltz

Clare Lancers

## **Rambling House Band**

with

Tina Eck on flute

Matt Shortridge on fiddle, banjo, guitar

Danny Noveck on fiddle, banjo, guitar

Marc Glickman on keyboard

Jesse Winch on drums

Admission: \$15 (\$12 members; \$8 students 11 to 20; free under 11)

For information: 301-294-3568 or [www.gwcc-online.org](http://www.gwcc-online.org)

greater washington c é i l i club