

Fleadh People

Home is where the heart is: Eimear Arkins

At the tender age of 24 years old, Ruan's Eimear Arkins has 20 years of experience playing traditional music. Now plying her trade in St Louis, Missouri, she spoke to Stuart Holly about her excitement ahead of the Ennis Fleadh this August.

WITH every visitor to Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann this summer in Ennis comes a story.

Some 400,000 people will make the journey to Clare for the cultural extravaganza and for Ruan native Eimear Arkins, her yearly Fleadh pilgrimage takes on extra meaning this year as she returns from Missouri, USA, with 79 American-based musicians and dancers in tow.

For 24-year-old Clare girl Eimear, the Fleadh has always had a hugely significant role to play. The singer and multi-instrumentalist lives and breathes Irish music and dance. Eimear was very involved in trad groups growing up under the direction of Gary Shannon and Padraic O'Reilly and won a number of All-Ireland titles with both. She also currently holds 10 solo titles across six categories — English and Irish singing, lilting, comhra Gaeilge, miscellaneous and fiddle slow airs.

This August when she comes home to Clare, Eimear will be competing on behalf of St Louis Irish Arts. She says it's always the big event on her music calendar — the hustle of

the street music scene, competing and meeting up with young people and making new friends — and with Ennis playing host for the first time since '77, it brings another level of excitement. However Eimear's story began 20 years ago in Ruan.

"I started music when I was five years old with Frank Custy," she tells *The Clare People*. "I started off on tin whistle and from there then I took up the fiddle and after that I tried my hand at a few other things like the harp and flute. I always sang, I started singing when I was in primary school."

Just three years later and Eimear had her first taste of Fleadh regional competition in Clare. Her progress to the Munsters was cut short due to a pre-planned family holiday to Malta — something which Eimear laughs about now, saying that no holiday would stop her from competing in a Fleadh these days.

"The next year I entered the Fleadh a bit more seriously and went all the way to the All-Ireland and won my first All-Ireland when I was nine in Listowel."

"It was only after I had won it when it hit me what a big deal it was — every year there's always pictures in *The Clare People* and *Clare Champion* and there's always a huge celebration after with the concert."

Every year after her first win, Eimear continued to enter the Fleadh across Ireland in Letterkenny, Cavan, Sligo, Clonmel and Tullamore and she still enters the Fleadh today — despite the 6,000km trip.

Eimear is currently studying for a Masters in Communications in Missouri and the UCC graduate didn't take long to immerse herself in the traditional music and dance scene in the States, where she is a member of the St Louis Irish Arts school. Now she's ready to come home with her new-found trad family.

Eimear, a former pupil at the Ennis Gaelscoil, explains, "There's not very many first-generation Irish in St Louis — there are a lot of people of Irish descent alright. But St Louis has the biggest Irish Music and dance school in North America. It is one of the few Irish dancing schools that also teaches music

— to be honest music is almost bigger than the dancing part of it.

"There are 79 of them going to Ennis from St Louis Irish Arts to compete. They'll be over for two weeks, they're twinned with a branch in Skibbereen so they'll spend three or four days down there, they'll go around the Burren, trips like that, and then they'll spend the week at Scoil Éigse and doing competitions before going home."

Speaking about the added excitement of attending her first Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in Clare, Eimear says, "I am way more excited about it. It's always good going to the Fleadh no matter where it is, it's a great opportunity to meet up with people, to play music, to be honest I probably do more talking than playing when I go to the Fleadh, but I'm just so excited to have it on my doorstep and also that so many people are coming over from my new home in Missouri. You know, having them around Ennis and experiencing the Fleadh in Ennis, especially people over for the first time, I'm just so excited."

 COMHALTAS



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