

## Fleadh People

# Dennis Liddy: Nostalgia Man

Newmarket native Denis Liddy first went to the Fleadh as a youngster in 1977, when the festival came to Ennis for a second time. He tells Stuart Holly about the 'hooley' that ensued and how he can't wait for this August.

FLEADH Cheoil Na hÉireann 2016 is just over four weeks away and by the time the first accordion button is pushed and the first banjo string is plucked, more than €1 million will have been injected into the world-famous festival to get the show on the road.

Rewind 39 years, to the last time the Fleadh was hosted in Ennis, the budget was IR£10,000 — oh how things have changed.

One fixture which will remain the same, however, is the presence of Newmarket-on-Fergus native Denis Liddy.

When Denis spoke to *The Clare People* yesterday, he had just returned to Ennis after a week at the Willie Clancy Festival — his 34th out of the 35 that have been staged — and was speaking about his excitement about being involved in the 2016 Fleadh.

For Denis, like many other musicians in the area, things have come full circle as his first experience of the Fleadh was when it came to Ennis for a second time in 1977.

Denis — a primary school teacher in Barfield who was also a leading member of the famed Turloughmore Céilí Band from Ennis — said that things have changed a whole lot since '77 when the town had to be boarded up, such was the hooley that ensued on the town's

streets.

He recounts, "My first Fleadh was in Ennis in 1977, my dad was treasurer of the Fleadh Committee on a budget of £10,000.

"Myself and Mary my sister, who's also a teacher in Tulla, the two of us were basically conscripted into selling stickers at the door and running into the competitions, back out to the door and into the next competition, that kind of thing. That was my first experience of an All-Ireland Fleadh, and I've been to every one since.

"The first difference between then and now is the clientele in that time. It was more of a hooley at that time, there was more drinking going on. I remember the main street was boarded up due to the amount of sheer lunacy that was going on."

Fiddle player Denis, the eldest of a family of eight, reveals that there's much more of a family atmosphere at the Fleadh these days, with gig rigs and fringe events going on alongside the competitions in the Dome at the Fair Green and sessions in the streets.

"It's much more of a festival than just Irish music and that certainly brings in its own crowd, but not what I would call a traditional music crowd, it adds an awful lot of interest of

the culture for sure," he adds.

Denis comes from a family steeped in traditional music with a huge involvement in Comhaltas. His mother and father were both teachers and Denis reveals that he and his siblings were introduced to music through the school system.

"We got involved in a Comhaltas branch in Cratloe and we started playing music with our friends in primary school and then it evolved into a sesiún group in Cois Na hAibheanna which opened in '82 or '83 and we started going to things like the Willie Clancy week very early on.

"And next thing I ended up on a fiddle, trying to learn from older people in the area, like Fergus McTaggart in particular and we started doing little trips here and there like to Scotland and Germany which was a big deal for us in the mid 80s. So it was a really nice outlet and meeting friends continuously year after year and having people staying over for Fleadh Nua certainly had a huge social effect on our lives."

And Denis has taken this musical legacy forward with his own family, who often crack out the instruments to have a session in the living room at home. Denis's wife, a US native, along

with their two older children are all heavily immersed in the music scene.

Denis says that the younger people in competition are now playing at 'a far higher standard than I was at that stage' and two such competitors are his teenagers, Heidi (18) and Brenn (15), who are entering the Fleadh in groups.

His other two children — two-year-old twins named Dearbhla and Muireann — are almost ready to pick up their instruments too, he laughs. A highlight of the Fleadh is sure to be the show '1916- A Terrible Beauty', of which Denis is the musical director. The two-hour show, taking place in glór on Thursday, August 18, depicts the 1916 Rising through musical depiction, narration and archival footage of the Rising.

"It involves people like Sean Ó Sé, Edel Vaughan and Tadhg Maher singing, and then we have the commentators, Pat Costelloe and Ciana Cambell and the director Ray Conway. It's a very unique, very beautiful show."

Looking forward to this August when 400,000 people come to Clare, Denis laughs, "It'll be interesting to see how Ennis copes with the sheer volume of people — I'm expecting the town to drop by about an inch."

 COMHALTAS



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