

Fleadh People

Music beating in the blood

East Clare concertina and fiddle player Mary Mac Namara has been attending Fleadhs around the country for as long as she can remember. From piling into the back of her dad's van as a youngster, to working for Cultúrlann na hÉireann, to teaching the next generation of musicians, Mary has the Fleadh in her blood.

BORN AND RAISED in Tulla, Mary Mac-Namara's confident concertina reels are the epitome of the East Clare style.

She picked it up at the age of nine when her grandaunt, well-known Kilmaley musician Minnie Murphy, could no longer play due to arthritis.

"My mother's family were all very musical, my uncles played, she played herself and she was a step dancer. My father was very interested in music and he played little bit on concertina himself but he wouldn't have played out publically," she says.

She grew up in the 1960s listening to and learning from local icons such as Bill O'Malley, Joe Bane, Martin Rochford, John Naughton, Mikie O'Donoghue and PJ Hayes.

"We always learned by ear. We would go to the sessions with these musicians, pick up the tunes, bring them home in our head, go back again and check have we got it right. It could take three weeks to get a tune right. It was the long and slow way of doing it, but we got it done," Mary says.

Mary believes the East Clare style was at its strongest in those days due to a lack of outside influence, as she and her fellow trainee musi-

cians rarely left the parish for musical outings.

"It wasn't a question of going off for a weekend and playing with someone else, we played with our own local musicians," she says.

Nowadays things have changed, as hardly any corner of the earth is devoid of the influence of radio, CDs and the internet, as well as travelling to different areas.

Keeping the East Clare tradition alive has become more difficult, but Mary is doing her bit to keep the simpler, less ornamented style that focuses on rhythm and swing going.

She teaches concertina and fiddle to students at her music school in Tulla, an institution that has been running for over 20 years.

In the early 1990s, she started to return home from Dublin to Tulla at weekends as her father had encouraged her to train some of the younger musicians.

From there she started training bands and groups for the Fleadh, eventually opening up her own music school.

Having won numerous awards at Fleadhs down through the years herself, Mary is currently preparing her students to take to the stage in August and she will be proud of their hard work no matter what the outcome.

"I encourage my students to go there, do the best they can but take what you get. What is best to get from the Fleadh is you do really improve as a musician and there is the fun side of it as well.

"If you win, you win, if you don't, it's not the end of the world. There is so much more to the Fleadh besides winning and I would encourage that in my students.

"It's good to enjoy what's happening at the Fleadh, listening to the other bands, groups, duets, soloists, listening to the musicianship that other there and listening to the different styles, you're learning all the time from that," she says.

Going to the county, Munster and All-Ireland Fleadhs as a young musician was the highlight of her year. One of her fondest memories of the Fleadh was the excitement and anticipation of preparing to go the Munster Fleadh with her mother, father and a group of about 10 other young musicians.

Her father had a travelling shop, so on Friday night before travelling to the Fleadh, they would remove all of the groceries, take out the shelves and wash the van.

Mary's father had a self-made couch and two

arm chairs for to accommodate the youngsters in the back of the van, while the adults sat in the front.

"The packing of the sandwiches and the lunches and the instruments and ourselves into the van early on the Saturday morning is a memory that's in my head. When I think of the Fleadh I think back to that and it was just a very exciting part of the Fleadh for us.

"Coming home then in the small hours of the morning in the back of that van and people still very excited, trying to see were there any sandwiches left in the box and the odd row breaking out between us, but they were lovely experiences," she adds.

Having worked for Cultúrlann na hÉireann in Dublin for five years in the 1980s and therefore travelled to Fleadhs around the country on a regular basis, Mary says she can't wait for this year's Fleadh to come home to Clare.

"I look forward to every aspect of the Fleadh, but the most important thing is meeting the people. When you go to the Fleadh you meet so many different people from so many different places. I think that young people are getting to know so many other young musicians at these events," she says.

COMHALTAS



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Mary MacNamara, centre, with her daughter Sorcha Costello, and her brother Andrew MacNamara.