

Caoimhin O Raghallaigh:

Music at a Local Level

By Brendan Taaffe



Photo: Peter Laban

Mick O'Brien and Caoimhin O Raghallaigh

As for many others, Caoimhin O Raghallaigh first came to my attention when he recorded an album with Mick O'Brien. Released in 2003, *Kitty Lie Over* is, for my money, easily one of the best Irish recordings of the last decade. I had been looking forward to a new recording from Mick, the Dublin-based piper, but was stunned by the quality of the fiddling from this young lad. With the fiddle tuned low to match Mick's flat set of pipes, his music has that combination of sweetness and wildness that I find so compelling in older players like Denis Murphy, Patrick Kelly, and Bobby Casey. Reared in Dublin, it was recordings of those older players that fueled Caoimhin's playing, and he's taken up their torch with great conviction. We met at Trinity College in Dublin, where Caoimhin is currently doing research.

Tell me how you got started on the fiddle.

Apparently, Mam says I always wanted to play the fiddle. We went out to Comhaltas in Monkstown when I was only about eight years old and the teacher said, "No, bring him back when he's ten." And I was furious, of course, because I wanted to start immediately. So they tried sending me to classical violin lessons and I hated it, and I ended up being thrown out of that. When I was ten, we went to a festival, I think it was down in Gormanstown, and met some kids there my own age who were great players. Meeting them made me think I should put in a bit of practice and it would be great fun. So it's kind of due to them, and they recommended Phelim O Raghallaigh as a fiddle teacher: he generally plays the flute but he's a lovely fiddle player. His brother Macdara is a fantastic fiddle player and his brother Michael is a great concertina player. Phelim taught me the fiddle and I got an awful lot of music from Phelim. There was a few great people about: Paddy Ryan, Kathleen Nesbit and Tony Smith, and they'd really encourage young children to join in sessions with them. It was great, because the way we used to play was very, very quietly. You'd be absolutely mortified to play out loud at all, but you'd just sit in there and put your ear

down to the fiddle and make as small a sound as you possibly could but try and fit into the rhythm. You'd just be very humble, and very quietly join in with good musicians. So it was great that they let us do that, and I'm sure they still do. It's a great service.

So that brings me up to fifteen or sixteen. Another major influence would have been Michael Tubridy, who was teaching me the flute and the whistle right from the beginning. Very lucky with that. He gave us a great appreciation for old music — he'd bring in tapes he'd recorded of Josie McDermott and play bits of different things for us and ask us what we thought. We'd have to write essays about it; it was amazing. We used to learn a tune in the whistle class and then in the flute class we'd transfer the tunes we'd done on the whistle, and we'd listen to old recordings.

He was making you think about the music.

There's a thing here in school called transition year, which is a time out from study to explore what you might want to do when you grow up. You had to do work experience, and Michael got me a position in the Irish Traditional Music Archives. I did a week in there, and loved it. The work was the kind of stuff that they don't want to do because it's boring, but for a young student it was fantastic. And it led, then, to extensive part-time work for me over a period of years: full-time in the summers, and while I was in college here in Trinity, half a day a week or something like that. I got to listen to an incredible amount of music, and that was all due to Michael [Tubridy].

That would have been your first exposure to Denis Murphy and Patrick Kelly?

The first thing I remember about Denis Murphy is hearing him play "The Humours of Lisheen." There was a bit in the beginning of it that I couldn't figure out: the rhythm seemed as if it was three

groups of two notes rather than two groups of three notes. Michael introduced me to Denis Murphy and recommended I get *The Star Above the Garter*.

And that was obviously a pivotal album.

When I listened to that music it had a great attraction for me. It felt like, I guess, what people describe as “going home.” It made a lot of sense. The other introduction to Kerry music was Phelim teaching me about the way you’d bow polkas and slides.

And where did you first come across Patrick Kelly?

There’s an LP called *Ceol an Chlair*, and I would have heard that in the Archives. It would have been much later than the Denis Murphy stuff anyway. So I listened to that an awful lot, and it must be a long time I’ve had it now, but every time I listen to it I always think that you could have a good twenty years work just listening to that bit of Patrick Kelly. It’s pretty much a lifetime study; you listen to it and you get a certain level of appreciation for it, you come back a month later and you hear a whole new side of things, and you come back a year later and you realize you haven’t heard it at all. It’s music of infinite depth. That’s the quality of old music: a lot of modern music doesn’t have that. But that real old music of great quality, you keep going back to it.

The standard model that’s out there is someone learning from their father who learned from their father, but for you it’s been exposure to these old recordings that’s shaped your style.

It has, certainly. The way I see it, I came through the standard system of Comhaltas, which after you reach sixteen has nothing else to offer you. Once you reach a certain level, that’s it. That’s as good as you get and now it’s your turn to start teaching. And I certainly didn’t feel that was adequate and so I started looking elsewhere for a path.

I looked to music that had something different in it, and something greater than the usual. That was Tony MacMahon and Noel Hill, *In Knocknagree*, and Tony MacMahon’s solo album on Gael Linn. Tony was the person that I thought had the most to offer young people in terms of the level he was at in music, and I bumped into him down in Miltown Malbay in 1996, so I would have been sixteen at the time. He was making a series for television called *The Blackbird and the Bell*, which was to do with philosophy. They were incredible programs... When I met him we talked about that and we talked about music. I ended up doing some work in the RTE archives on the Pure Drop programs, and some camera work for an archive project that he was doing, going around and recording old musicians and singer and storytellers who were old and had never been recorded and a lot of them have died since. It was amazing to spend time with someone who is so creative like that and see the workings of their mind and see how they look at the world and how it contributes to their music. That for me was the next level. That was coupled with listening to old recordings, and Tony would have given me old recordings of people like Tommy Potts and Mrs. Galvin and talked about them. Rather than instruction and this is a fiddle and here’s how you do this, it was a feeling for the heart of the music and for where creativity comes from. It’s a much bigger question.

With any system, with any music, I think that feeling around in the dark is a waste of time. And what it feels like in traditional music is that you’re left to feel around in the dark. What you really need is somebody to guide you; somebody who’s very creative to say yes, I know what you need is this tape and this book here.

In the way that Michael Tubridy played those old tapes for you.

Yeah, and in the way that Tony would say, when you’re looking through the lens on a camera, “Do you see the light on that person’s face there?” It all contributes, creativity in any form. Or saying here’s a tape of Mrs. Galvin, and I’d never heard anything like it before. You do need a guide. I don’t think a course is the way to go, because a course teaches everybody the same thing. I think university is the wrong place for it as well, because the atmosphere is too sterile. The music needs intimacy: it needs to be on a very small, local kind of a scale. You can show off, you can perform, but the real value of Irish music is the transforming property at a local level, like in Connemara when somebody sings a *sean nos* song to a very small group of people. That, I feel, is the role of folk music, and trying to pull that folk music onto a concert stage that was made for classical music or jazz changes the fundamental aim of your music.

By hauling it into an academic institution, you’d be taking it away from that pub in Connemara.

And I don’t think pubs are the place for music at all. It’s a very bad setup that we have at the moment where most people play in pubs. I mean, fair enough, you can have fun and you can socialize, but for the heart of the music, it’s just crucifying.

Outside of playing with Mick, where would you play?

I’d play in people’s houses, I guess. In Miltown Malbay, it’s different maybe — some of the pubs there are very much like going into somebody’s house. But even down there you get an awful lot of people shouting. It’s just not intimate. What I see the traditional role of music in Ireland to be is this: at the time before television and radio it was the sole means of transporting people out of everyday life. They’d listen to the music and get taken away, like a dream. They’d get lost in the music: it would whirl them up. And that’s a pretty special role in a community. In a pub that can’t happen because of the atmosphere. People go to a pub to talk, not to listen to music, so there again the fundamental role of the music has changed.

But in a concert hall the stage is too removed.

Yes, it’s too removed, because I believe the role of a musician and the listener is equal. If you don’t have somebody who listens at the same level that you’re playing, it doesn’t work. That intimacy is required so that the listener doesn’t feel like they’re a listener. They feel like they’re involved in the creative experience. Sometimes when you play to a room of people it feels, an awful lot of people get this, and it sounds crazy, but it feels like you’re being raped if you don’t get a connection with the audience. And then when you do it’s incredible. I usen’t be allowed to play music in the rooms in college because people were studying and trying to get sleep, so I used to go down to the maths department where I was studying

and play late at night in a little room there. There was one girl, a friend of mine, who used to come down and listen, and I'd play a tune and she'd close her eyes and listen. After I had played the tune she would tell me what had gone through her head, and it was an amazing experience to have a listener who was as much involved in the music as you were. I'm sure a lot of people do get that, but are afraid to talk about it. There's a whole set of preconceptions about how you go about listening to traditional music in Ireland and what do you do, and how much you submit.

What would you say those preconceptions are?

I guess that you tap your feet and you shout woo-hoo and you're looking for excitement and stuff like that. Something along those lines: certainly to the front of your mind, too much awake, with your eyes too open. Maybe that's the result of competitions and playing in pubs, rather than sitting by a fire in a dark room, late in the night of a winter's evening.

How did you and Mick come together?

Well, I would have been learning pipes from Mick now and again, so I knew Mick. I was in the Pipers Club about December 2000, buying some reed-making stuff or some cane, and Mick was there in the office. He mentioned that he was going down to the Johnny Doran weekend in Glendalough, and I said, "God that sounds great, I might take a trip down." So Mick gave me a lift. That was in January 2001. We took a great drive through the mountains, got down there and he was to play the concert that night. He was tuning up the pipes, and I had the fiddle tuned down, and we played a few tunes when he was tuning up the pipes and both of us just thought, "this is fantastic." So I went up at the concert and played a tune with him, and it just took off. That's how it started, just pure chance. It's great when you're playing with somebody who's — we've listened to the same music, we've listened to Ennis and Clancy and Bobby Casey. It makes it a lot easier: you don't have to work things out.

How long had you been playing together before you did the recording?

About two years. We started in January 2001 and recorded in the summer of 2002. Then it's released in 2003, and now we're well into 2004. So the album is over two years old, and we're still playing those tunes. But we play an awful lot of new stuff as well. What I really love is surprising Mick, or else we decide not to write out a set list at all, and you just introduce tunes and you just have to go with it. That's the thing, I don't think I agree with performance — you need spontaneity and you need creativity. To be at the point of creativity — like a pick axe, when it hits a stone and the sparks just come out, and the place to be isn't back on the handle or in the head, it's at that point where the sparks are flying. And that for me is music, and if that doesn't happen you're not playing music, and most of the time it's not happening.

If you're playing the same set in the same way you were two years ago, it's harder to be creative.

That's why I really enjoy not knowing what's coming next, because you might get that spark, where if you have your list and you

play through the tunes you'll probably won't. That's the problem with a musician: if you do get that spark and you try a new tune, you think that's a great way to play that tune. So the next time you pick up that tune you'll probably try and play it in the same way, and suddenly it gets frozen. Instead of being something that's dynamic and new and creative, it's just a copy of something that was creative. So that's something that I'm quite wary about. Some people can do that and still be quite creative. I think Martin Hayes is incredible in that he is creative any time he picks up the fiddle. At least most times that he picks up the fiddle he is at that point of creativity. But I certainly find it quite difficult.

The recording studio would be one of the least creative spaces I can imagine. How did you preserve that spark?

Well, you see, I don't know that we did. I'm not sure, but I certainly found it difficult. I wanted to do a series of little recitals to people we knew really well and get that atmosphere. That's what I would have done.

But how did you do it?

Well, we just went into a studio — a friend of Mick's, late at night and played away. A few sessions, because it had to be when the office was closed late at night, and we were restricted by time. I found it hard to be creative without somebody listening, without that connection back. That's something that is forgotten in traditional music at the moment, the importance of somebody who listens, just for the reason that they complete the creative loop. Creativity is coming from somewhere; it's coming through you, through your music. That music goes back through somebody else and links their head with the creative space. When you listen to music, something happens in your head, so that completion of the loop seems important to me. A good listener is essential.

But you didn't have someone standing there listening, just someone pressing the buttons.

Yeah, but he was great. He was a very good fellow — a guy called Terence Bonar from Donegal. He'd listen to every single note and he'd know exactly whether it had worked or whether you needed to go back. He was excellent.

Could you talk a bit about your choice of intonation?

People don't realize that those in-between notes are such an important part of our music. The in-between notes that you get in *sean nos* singing contain an awful lot of power and history and that ancientness of our music, and if you take them out you just have a pile of notes. Certainly in fiddle playing if you play every note bang on, equal temperament, it doesn't have much appeal. If you listen to all the old fiddle players, they had all sorts of things going on with strange notes and strange sounds, and a lot of that hasn't really been taken up by modern fiddle players, probably in the quest for acceptability to a larger audience.

The whole idea of polishing up music to make it acceptable isn't in line with the spirit of the music. That whole thing of making something acceptable and taking off all the corners, rounding them all off so that it's palatable. You end up with something that doesn't

have an awful lot to offer something deeper than the mind.

I think that's a huge pressure. Certainly in the States, if you play your third low people think you're out of tune.

Well, for instance, a perfect third is about 15 cents flat of equal temperament. If you were to play a third on a piano, it sounds awful. A third is about 15 cents flat, a fourth is close enough, a fifth is close enough, a sixth is about 11 cents flat again—but you can do all that [play perfect intervals, rather than equal temperament] on a fiddle, and you can't do it on a fixed pitch instrument. You look at O'Keefe, or you look at Bobby Casey, or any of them, they all have a whole load of different positions, especially for C natural and for F: all sorts of different sounds that they get from those notes. You listen to O'Keefe's air playing and the things that he does with those notes are just incredible. All sorts of different positions of tuning.

When you're doing a setting of a tune, what are you conscious of?

Nothing, really. My aim in music is to cut out the mind, altogether, and let music flow from wherever it's coming from, with as few filters as possible, or as few conscious filters. Obviously there are filters in there, but I try not to impose them. Each tune seems to take on its own filters of its own accord. So those things are there, you have them laid out on a table and a tune will come along and pick up a set of clothes and put them on, but you're not saying, right, you all have to fit into this strait jacket.

I guess it is a bit like stepping into someone else's shoes. It does a feel a bit like that. With Casey it just seems to happen. If it was Patrick Kelly, I'd be more conscious that it was his setting of a tune.

One of the things that distinguishes Kitty Lie Over is that it has great rhythm and swing, but the tempo isn't very fast. How did you get that lift?

That's something that's an elusive thing for me. It's happened a few times, but I would consciously pinpoint that as something that I'd love to do, which is play very slowly but with lovely lift. Mick Mulcahy, from the few recordings of him playing on his own, is incredible at that. I had a tune this year with Ronan Browne in Miltown, we were playing the slowest I've ever played and the lift was just gorgeous.


You play pipes and flute and whistle as well.

Well, I guess. But I wouldn't claim to have ever crossed the boundary of creativity. I play them kind of mechanically, I guess. It's funny, I don't know why. I do really enjoy playing the whistle, and I love the in-between notes you can get out of a whistle.

Playing multiple instruments, do you take something from the whistle onto the fiddle?

Definitely. For instance, listening to Clancy playing and hearing the notes he's getting, the C's he gets, sheds an awful lot of light on what Bobby Casey does, and vice versa. And I often thought that Bobby Casey is Clancy on the fiddle, and Clancy is Bobby

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Casey on the pipes, sometimes they're so close. And I think it helps playing with pipers. You're doing the same things, and you know what the pipes are going to do. Tommy Keane lifts that finger for the C, so you'd know that because of that his C is going to be slightly sharp of C natural rather than slightly flat, which is what that finger would be. Just that awareness of tone and tuning, certainly between the pipes and the fiddle, helps.

You're doing some teaching now?

Well, no, just workshops. What I like doing is workshops, because then you've got people for a few days and you can inspire them rather than try and pull them through the whole thing. I think this thing of teaching somebody and having to give them a tune every week wouldn't correspond to my idea of how to go about it. What you need is inspiration, a few ideas thrown at you that might open up a few little doors in your head. And if you succeed in opening up one door, and that person steps through and finds a whole new world of music, that's far more important than a whole year of giving somebody a new reel every week. It's just to let another little chink of light in — that's how I'd view teaching.

And you've been doing the Willie Clancy week and those kinds of summer things?

And whatever else — I had two or three students down in Miltown Malbay, and some of them were fantastic. They just soaked up music, so I'd give them CDs of John Kelly and Bobby Casey and Patrick Kelly and like that, and tell them to go and listen and come back with a tune. And we'd go through it and look at different things like bowing or tuning, all the different things that you could take out of it. I enjoyed that, but what I don't enjoy is teaching people who don't really want to learn, which is what you would get if you set up as a teacher, in Dublin or anywhere else. You get people who their mum wants to have their little boy play fiddle. That's how I started off, so I did need people to teach me, but I don't think I'm a teacher. I just try to inspire people: maybe there's a role for that as well.

[The Irish Tradition Music Archive is located at 63 Merrion Square, Dublin 2, Ireland.]

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