

# THE NORTHERN FIDDLER

Irish Traditional Fiddle Playing in Donegal and Tyrone 1977-79

An audiovisual exhibition of the Irish Traditional Music Archive based on an ethnographic study and book *The Northern Fiddler* by Allen Feldman and Eamonn O'Doherty

Ceol, the Irish traditional music centre at Smithfield Village, Dublin 7

19 April – 30 September 1999

PR/Reserve box 6

The Northern Fiddler exhibition is based on a 1970s ethnographic project by Allen Feldman, Eamonn O'Doherty and Natalie Connolly to document the older fiddle-playing traditions of the musical region spanning south Donegal and south Tyrone.

The project resulted in a valuable collection of sound recordings of music and interviews, and of drawings and photographs, made in the course of a field-recording trip in the two counties during June and July 1977, and other drawings made in 1978 and 1979. All three collectors were responsible for the sound recordings, while O'Doherty created the images. The trip, financially supported by a collecting grant from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, was the culmination of three years of visits to the fiddle players by Feldman and Connolly. Twenty-five musicians were recorded, all men: thirteen in Donegal and twelve in Tyrone. Most had been born at the end of the 19th century, and most have since died.

A study of the music and musicians entitled The Northern Fiddler, edited by Allen Feldman (general text, music) and Eamonn O'Doherty (introduction, drawings, photographs, design), which included a selection of music, speech and images was published by Blackstaff Press of Belfast in 1979 and republished by Oak Publications of New York in 1985. Music transcriptions were by Andrew Robinson assisted by Jack Schroevers, and music consultancy was provided by Andrew Dickson, Natalie Connolly and Sandi Miller. A selection of the music recorded by the project from John Doherty was issued on the LP *Bundle and Go* by Topic Records of London in 1984, and has since been reissued on cassette by Ossian Publications of Cork and on CD by Ossian and Green Linnet of Connecticut.

The original field recordings and copies of the drawings and photographs have been lodged by the collectors in the Irish Traditional Music Archive, Dublin, through the good offices of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, for listening, viewing and study by the general public.

#### MUSIC OF THE PRIVATE SPHERE

Dr Allen Feldman

The audio and visual materials that comprise this exhibition capture a unique historical turn in the performance culture of Irish instrumental

music. The musicians depicted here were poised at an historical precipice which most did not cross. The sound and images of this exhibit capture a performance culture that was nurtured, from the middle of this century onward, as an intensely private space of intimate

craft and in reaction to the attrition of public communal performance

spaces. Most were unable to return to public performance with the resurgence of Irish traditional music in the 1970s. Only a few were to subsequently bridge this chasm, in part due to the publication of the book The Northern Fiddler and through other concerted interventions by younger local and visiting musicians. Thus it is important to locate these fiddlers and the Northern Fiddler project in their respective times

and spaces. The signature of the private historical margin, inhabited by these fiddlers with dignity and self-sufficiency, pervades Eamonn O'Doherty's photographs and more subtly inflects their field recordings. The fiddlers are shown playing in the resonant, often half-lit, recesses of their kitchens and living rooms; they are self-posed, house-proud, at doorway thresholds, standing in front of their homes, or as they depart to visit another fiddler — thus connoting a fragile

web of such private spaces in which cultural memory was nourished and exchanged. Two of these fiddlers, John Doherty and his nephew Simon Doherty, who were frequently unhoused, appear in these photographs as edifices unto themselves and as even more isolated in the self-fashioned shelter of their consummate musicmaking. And in all of these photographs the musicians are shown holding that carved, dark, wooden, rosin-stained artifact — the fiddle. The fiddle here is more than just a utensil for making pleasing sound. As they cradle their instrument it is apparent that the fiddle harbors the layered stratigraphy of an archaeological site, and each time these men picked up the instrument to play they were excavating hidden and personalized cultural material, bringing up depth-memory into the The performance settings of these images were not accidental nor

acoustic clearing of the present. were they the result of arbitrary aesthetic choice by the photographer. By the late 1970s the musicians depicted by the Northern Fiddler project had retreated to private musical recesses due to historical forces beyond their control. Many of these players had originated as musicians in the first decades of this century and were the direct beneficiaries of previous fiddlers whose music went back uninterrupted to at least the mid-19th century and in some cases to the 18th century. Most of the fiddlers shown here were born into a world when Irish dance music was still a public and non-commodified performance practice associated with house, barn, pier,

and parish-hall dances. Their music was once the highest aesthetic expression of archaic settlement patterns and pre-modern economies such as the kinshipinflected clachan and its land-sharing system of rundale. It was also a later sheep from lowlands or coastal margins to highland or island commons in summer and the subsequent return to lowland household in-fields with the coming of winter (winter, in turn, marked another season of intensive local music- making that served as the model for the exclusively house-bound music we encountered in the 1970s). Francie and Mickey Byrne in Donegal and John Loughran and Peter Turbit in Tyrone associated fiddling, singing and dancing with this summer movement to the upland commons and with the musical bonding that occurred between young men from diverse townships as they herded sheep, songs and tunes in remote mountain interiors. Thus the regional migrations of Doherty family artisans were not the aimless roving of the itinerant, but instead replicated and up-dated a centuries-old pattern of seasonal pastoral transhumance from mountains to lowlands. The artisanal expertise of the Dohertys and their kin was both typical and preeminent in its synthesis of musical

and economic practice. The local performance culture, in its oral,

music marked by the restless pastoral economy of transhumance in Tyrone and Donegal — the seasonal movement of herds of cattle and

musical and choreographic forms, was the anchoring symbolization of economic infrastructure, kin and kith reciprocities, and the labor practices of an increasingly unstable agrarian society. In southwest Donegal musicmaking, field cultivation, stone walls and thatched roofs were meant to exhibit craiceann, an aesthetically pleasing 'skin' or finish that was the seal of craft, pride, emotional investment and memory. The most profound model for this interdependency of musical and economic aesthetics was the genealogical oral poetry of chanted land-holding histories on Tory Island that was still extant in the 1960s. The fiddle itself was introduced into Ireland as a colonial artifact, as part of the British cultural penetration of Ireland in the 17th and 18th century, and at the very moment when rural Ireland staggered under the dismantling of the bardic culture, social fragmentation, agricultural

rationalization and land enclosure, and linguistic stigmatization. The fiddle appeared in rural Ireland as a foreign object, and yet in the 18th century it was appropriated, rescripted and recodifed into an eloquent conduit of social memory and cultural resistance. The Celticization of the Baroque violin established the fiddle as the performative archive of older endangered musical genres such as the mouth music of rural women, the piob mór playing of Donegal, the virtuoso ethos of bardic harpers, and the continuum of expressive culture that linked the north of Ireland with Scottish highlands and islands. Northern fiddling was ecumenical, by-passing geo-political cultural borders and ethnic or nationalist ideologies. The fiddle in Donegal and Tyrone became an historiographic instrument by which the unwritten history and experience of the colonized was inscribed into folk consciousness, much in the same way that landscape and place names had been used as a repository of historical recuperation and recollection.

By the mid-20th century economic depression and cultural attrition took its toll on the chain of public and semi-public performance spaces that positioned Donegal and Tyrone fiddling as a communal art. With the loss of communal performance sites, rural cultural life became increasingly atomized. However, the fiddlers shown here were not passive victims of the modernization and suburbanization of rural Irish life. Rather they cultivated a solo art, periodically enriched by interchanges within a tight network of other local musicians-neighbors. With some notable exceptions, such as John Doherty, John Comac and John Loughran, they mainly remained aloof from playing in pubs, and generally did not gravitate to regional fleadh cheoils that began to emerge in the 1950s.

The social transformations they were responding to introduced profound ironies into the musical consciousness of these fiddlers. For in the 1960s and 1970s, with the renaissance of indigenous Irish music, the electronic media and nationalist cultural movements elevated the performance genres of Clare and Sligo into canonical and authenticating archives of Irish musical identity. This nationalization and commodification of particular regional genres homogenized much of Irish music wherein the now 'idiosyncratic' music played by these fiddlers was further denuded of local cultural cachet.

The Northern Fiddler project was conceived in 1977, and was realized with funds provided through the initiative of poet and musician Ciaran Carson, then Traditional Arts Officer of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. This institutional support formalized a collecting process that Natalie Connolly and Allen Feldman had embarked upon in southwest Donegal, beginning in 1974. In the 1970s the performance practices of many these fiddlers stood in a delicate balance with the more public session and fleadh scene, and the commercial concert and

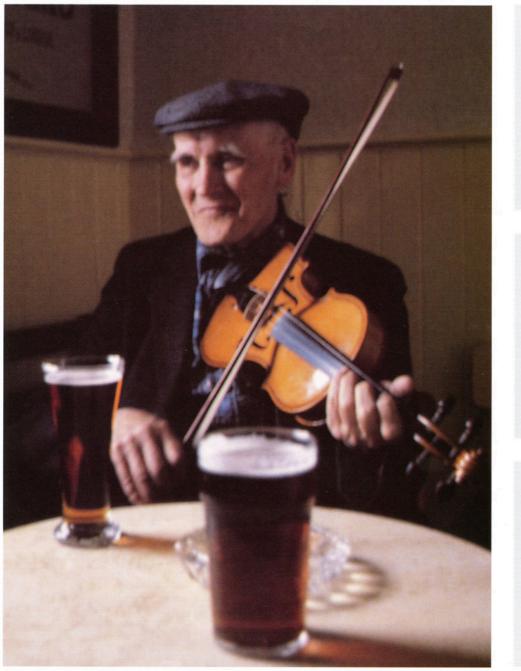
recording industry. During the 1970s and 1980s regional instrumental traditions from Donegal, the Cork-Kerry border, East Clare, the Leitrim-Roscommon border, and the Glens of Antrim and other locales provisionally served as valued cultural resources through deliberate interventions by a generation of historically aware urbanized musicians. The Northern Fiddler project was a contribution to this interchange as much as it was a gesture of gratitude to the local traditions of Donegal and Tyrone. But this historically contingent balance of regional performance culture, the semi-public session, the fleadh cheoil, and mass market dissemination could not last. The older generation of musicians depicted in this exhibit passed on, creating a profound rupture and, with few exceptions, they did not serve as an ongoing point of aesthetic reference. Excellent session and concert music still typify the Irish music scene. However, the recent mechanized and 'digital' spectacles of 'river-trance', with music and stage settings that literally celebrate the erasure of cultural context, have only the most tenuous connection to the musicians and music depicted here. Thus, as in the 1970s, the Northern Fiddler project is a message in a bottle, an evocative fragment now thrown into the cultural currents of the Celtic Tiger. This exhibit is a communique from totemic grandfathers to their descendants and heirs for whom they had always modestly played but would never meet over the flash and rosined mist of the moving bow.

New York City April 1999



Left to right: Eamonn O'Doherty, Francie and Mickey Byrne, Allen Feldman, Kilcar, Co Donegal

Photo: Christine Bond

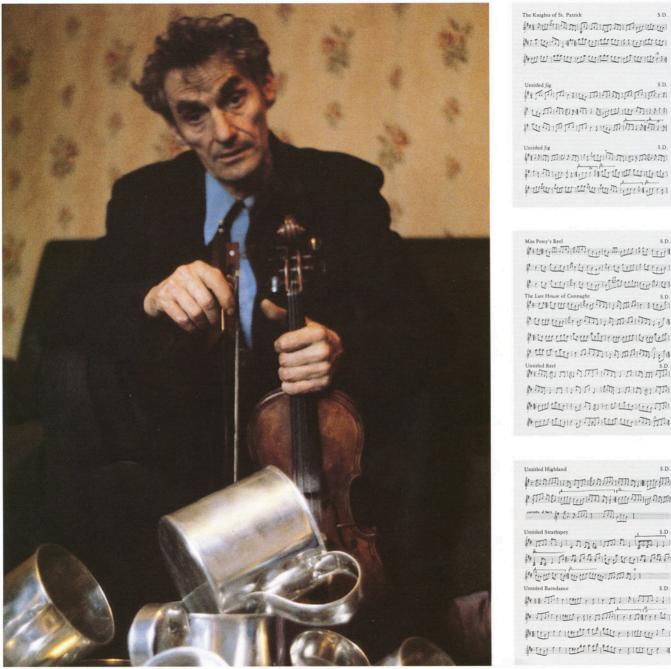


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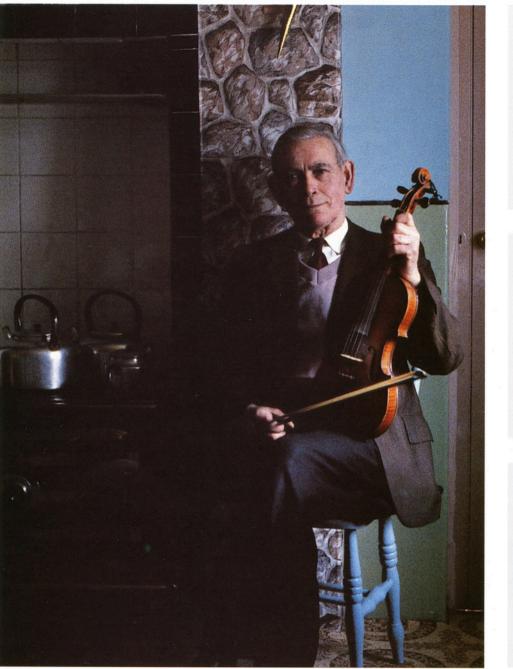


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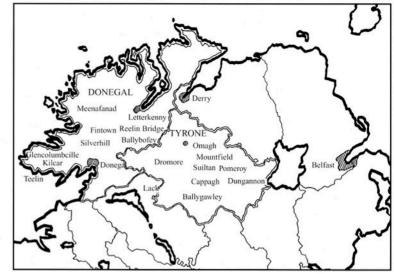
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# A WHOLE COMPLETE CHANGE

Oh, welcome, welcome, every one, For the night of the wedding, the night of the fun, The doctor was sent for, she had a young son, She done it before, she'll do it again, The women can do it far better than men. [lilts on]

And then they'd go into a bit of a lilt after that, they'd go into that sort of a thing after it, ye know. Ay, and then maybe they'd come in on another bar of it again, some other saying again. That's the way they went on now. Oh, I mind a woman round here, and she had a whole tear of that, a whole list of it... They're all dead and tossed away...

I have it always on the tip of my tongue whenever anybody like you comes round, that this thing all happened fifty or so years too late. Well, there's a lot of it collected and catched up with right enough. If there hadn't a been somebody come out, it would have been all lost, but there's heaps of it away. I'm only talking from a certain length back like, but way back then there was far more time for music that what's in it now, ye know. You go in to play music now in some house as I have done different nights here lately, and a colour television going in the corner. Jesus, what reels or jigs are you going to play with them boys doing something funny on thon thing? Ye can't play, don't youse tell me, boys, you'll play no music, don't tell me yez can play, ye couldn't play and looking into thon boy in the corner. It doesn't annoy me for I don't see what's going on. Ach, it's changed and it's all different altogether. No, it's not the tunes nor the playing, the whole thing as a whole... it's like the world yez are living in, boys. It's just a whole complete change.



Francie Quinn, Dromore, Co Tyrone



Sean and Mary McAloon, Silverhill. Co Donegal



Willie Johnson, Lack, Co Tyrone

### MUSIC FROM ANYTHING

The old musicians in them days, they would take music from anything. They would take music from the sound of the sea, or they would go alongside of the river at the time of the flood and they would take music from that. They would take music from the chase of the hound and the hare. They would take music from several things...

It must be a long, long time ago; Fiddler Doyle it appears was a good fiddle player and a good man managing a horse. He used to go on horseback to play at a party - maybe he was asked to go fifteen or twenty miles away to play at a party. He would bring his fiddle and case with him, and he would step on the mare, and he would ride on to the house where the entertainment was taking place.

Once he was coming home at a very late hour, he was coming past a crossroads that was there at the time, where there was a vision appearing. You know a horse is very sensitive to a thing, before you and I could see it. Just as Doyle and the mare were coming forward to this crossroads there was this vision standing at the crossroads. The mare halted and Doyle knew what was wrong - he knew the mare saw whatever was in it. He got down off the mare's back, then he got up on her back again and it was Sally they called the mare. 'Come on, Sally', says he now, 'and I'll guide ye all the way through' - and he patted her on the side of the neck. The mare walked nice and easy up till she come to the crossroads and just with that the mare bolted, and Doyle was a good enough horse rider and he stayed on her back anyway, but he was going at an awful rate and the vision kept alongside of the mare, maybe the creature was going sixty miles an hour, She kept at the rate on and on till she came to the gable of that house where they lived. Doyle got down off the mare's back, he stabled the horse and walked into the house. He took something to eat and later he went to bed. And when he was in bed he got the impression by listening to the animal's hooves on the road during this terrible race, of a reel, and he took down his fiddle and played this reel over and he put the mare's name on it. He called it 'The Black Mare of Fanad'. I'd hear the old people telling it a thousand times...

John Doherty, Fintown, Co Donegal



Mickey and Francie Byrne, Kilcar, Co Donegal



## Francie and Mary Quinn, Dromore, Co Tyrone

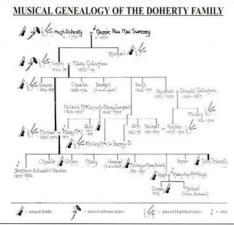


Chart drawn by Natalie Connolly

#### PLAYING FOR HOBBY

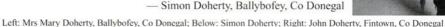
I was just taught a couple of tunes by my father when I was young. From less to more, then, we used to go out to ceilidh and rake, and a bit of sport and fun, we'd play a turn about, and we'd play sets, lancers, highlands and germans. At that time I was only a boy and the fun would start around about Hallows Eve, from then on through Christmas till it was Spring Day again. Playing for hobby, that was for way of doing ...

My uncles were travelling around at the time, the Dohertys and the McConnells. They used to have all classes of musical instruments on them and tools for making tin. They would spend away for a full fortnight before they came back to where their destination was. They might spend a

week there at home and the next thing you would find some morning two donkeys and two floats and them

loaded and headed away for the mountain again. And when they landed up in different townlands they would enjoy themselves. They'd all gather in when my uncles arrived and have their own conversation — who tells the best story — who could sing the best song — who could play the best reel — or where was the best river for fishing — or what kind of article they would want made ...

My grand-uncles Mickey and Alec McConnell were the first to make tin fiddles. They were at a big dance and the fiddle got broke. They had nothing left but the bow and the peg head and the strings. Well, fiddles were scarce at them times so they didn't know what to do. Well, my grand-uncle was sitting looking at the broken fiddle. 'Oh', he says, 'I'm thinking of some remedy', and he just reached for a sheet of tin, and he split the sheet of tin in two. He marked it round and round, and cut out the identical same shape as the ordinary fiddle, he raised her [the tin], put the head on her and played time about in the morning.













John, Michael and Mickey Doherty





#### A GREAT TIME OF MUSIC

In my house then of course there were bagpipes and fiddles. But they never liked the accordion. My father when he played the pipes would go outside and play a few marches and he would step up and down and him playing... If you heard him play on the Scotch pipes, it would bring your heart back. On the fiddle he would play a piece of music arranged on the pipes and would play in the same style as the chanter. In a way of playing a reel, that's when he was in good humour, he could make the point of the bow whistle. Oh Lord, he could strike great power into it! Once when he would leave down the pipes, some of the boys would take two fiddles and begin to play. Ah, gracious hour, it was a great time of music...

If I were to hear a lot of street musicians coming into town here, I would leave whatever I could be at, and I wouldn't care, I'd come the whole way to hear what they were able to play. I would indeed! They were travelling fiddle players and they were very good indeed. They'd hail somehow from those counties Antrim and Derry. When they would come into town to play the fiddle you might ask me to do anything else but to come into town and to listen to them...

I was beginning to try the fiddle when I was sixteen —but I had no success that time. If I went wrong, my father would chastise me there and then. He would give me a middlin' sharp condown for not doin' the thing right. That would make me a little more keen, you know... I would listen to a tune... I would get the impression of it in my mind, and maybe at three o'clock in the morning I'd wake up and I could go into it a good bit. I just only wanted to get the symptoms of the tune and I had it.

- John Doherty, Fintown, Co Donegal













#### CONTINUALLY MUSIC

In those days these travelling people were around quite often playing for dances and often stopped for months in Teelin... They had dances every night, and when they weren't playing at night they were playing in the house they were stopping in during the daytime. There was continually music. I never really heard any good fiddlers in Teelin before that crowd who learned from the Dohertys and the McConnells. They were nearly the one age, Frank Cassidy, Mick McShane, Jimmy Lyons. They were the first Teelin men to play good fiddle that I heard of...

I remember an old man being put up at our house, where I was brought up, towards Bunglass. My fiddle was hung up on the wall. 'Oh', I says, 'will you play a tune?' 'Indeed', he says, 'I will.' So he took down the fiddle and rosined up the bow. I thought he'd make two shares out of the bow. He took the hair away out about nine inches on the rod. He broke the rosin with his fingers and then he drew it on the bow. I couldn't see him behind a cloud of rosin. He started and he played 'Drowsy Maggie', and when he finished, he says: 'My good lad, two more of them would finish her'. You see the fiddle would go to pieces after two more tunes like that. They were good rough players.

- Con Cassidy, Teelin, Co Donegal

When the fiddle first came to Donegal, it wasn't the flat ones that's in it now, you know. In that time, there were fiddles that had a stoop to the neck, you see, the neck was sort of bent. They used to call them the crooked-neck fiddle. They called it in Irish *an fhideal cham*, there was a turn in the neck. They kept at those till these [violins] come across the water from Scotland. These were a different make then... And then there came another crowd around and they made different fiddles, they were travelling people called the tinsmiths. They made the tin fiddles. There was terrible nice music in them.

The town ones weren't making enough money with all the dancing going through the houses. So they put up the halls and later they brought in the jazz music. That finished it. Then the fiddlers wouldn't play the jazz tunes — wouldn't content the mind — it was no music at all! They liked the hard reel, with a bit of birl into the bow - and playing double time.



Left: Mickey and Francie Byrne, Kilcar, Co Donegal; Below: Francie Byrne; Right: Con Cassidy, Teelin, Co Donegal



Francie Byrne, Kilcar, Co Donegal











### A VERY MUSICAL PEOPLE

They were a very musical people. There was something about the fiddle that appealed to the Rosses people, and at the same time many of them went out to Scotland where they heard the music of Scott Skinner and William Mackenzie Murdoch. All that combined to give the Rosses people a different outlook on fiddling. I noticed a vast difference between the Rosses and the Kilcar-Glencolumbcille area. That part was more isolated from the rest of the county. There they developed a style of fiddling and played tunes that up to recently hadn't been heard outside that area. But in the Rosses the Irish tunes were fairly commonplace and the more unusual ones they played were picked up in Scotland.

I remember when I started to go out to dances... the common thing at that time in our part of the Rosses wasn't even two fiddlers. Only one fiddler would play if there was a dance in the school-house, which would only be a few times a year... In my case it was my uncle Jimmy Doherty, from the island of Cruit, who taught me. He had spent all his life since the age of sixteen across the water in Scotland. He was a gifted man on the violin but not in the traditional Irish style. He was strictly reared in the Scottish style of playing, and this had an influence on us young ones learning. There was also a tutor out that was the bible of most of the young players in Scotland and for those of us who went out from the Rosses to Scotland who took up the violin. It was called *The Young Violinist's Tutor and Duet Book* by William C. Honeyman. It was a marvellous book - you could almost teach yourself from it.

The common dances at that time were the quadrilles, the sets and the lancers... They were called group dances. The other dances, like the highlands and the mazurkas, were called round dances, just because one couple danced them round the floor... the highlands... go back a very long time. There's two forms, the highland fling and the highland schottische. The Donegal people preferred the highland fling style. As the jazz music came in they lost the old steps... It was originally a very graceful dance, but as the generations passed by, the old steps were gone by the board... Kilcar and Glencolumbcille are the only places in Donegal where they dance the old form of the highland in good style... There are more highlands in that district I never heard before, not even in Scotland. You never seem to be able to get to the end of them. I could never trace them back to Scottish tunes, so they must have been in that district a good while.

— Danny O'Donnell, Meenafanad, Co Donegal





Eddie Doherty, Reelin Bridge, Co Donegal



Paddy McEnespie, Peter Turbit, and John Loughran, Ballygawley, Co Tyrone

John Loughran, Pomeroy, Co Tyrone

#### A RIGHT LOCK OF FIDDLERS

Sitting and listening to the rest of them. That's how I got onto the music. I kept it up over the years there, listening to people playing and I could lift up tunes there and I could mind them in my head fairly well. With minor alterations I'd nearly have them all; I could play the most of them the next day...

I was playing for dances when I was ten years old. I think if I had waited till I was seventeen and had a mad craze for music I'd be a far better player than I am. A man of seventeen gets a mad craze for music and he'd definitely flourish, he'll bog into it and he'll improve...

Then there was plenty of fiddlers in the country that time but they're all dead now... There was a right lock of fiddlers. But, as the man says, there were more fiddlers than fiddle players, if you know what I mean. There were about a dozen men trying to play the fiddle but in my opinion they could play none... Ned Turbit came to live nearly beside me and he'd be down regular and he was a great old fiddler altogether... He was an old farmer - worked on the farm and done the most of it with spade and scythe. That's what started me off for he was the best fiddler I knowed at the time... I heard stories that he was around the country and was away playing weeks at a time, and they didn't know where he went... Well, he played away till he died.

- Peter Turbit, Ballygawley, Co Tyrone



John McKeown, Cappagh, Co Tyrone



Peter Turbit, Ballygawley, Co Tyrone



Willie Johnston, Lack, Co Tyrone



Michael Donaghy, Suiltan, Co Tyrone



Sean Nugent, Lack, Co Tyrone



Johnny Comac, Dungannon, Co Tyrone

#### THE WAY IT WOULD GO

I played at dances... another fellow and me... on two bicycles with two old fiddles tied on our backs with a rope. Coming in every morning you'd be meeting the milkman and postman... Just the old country dance, you know, in barns – it might be houses. Then in that time, you see, if there was one running the party the night, or a wee bit of a country dance, well it'd be sure that there'd be another house maybe up the road a lock of hundred yards, or maybe a hundred yards the morrow night, they would say, 'You can come to our house the morrow night'. It wasn't to say there was anybody home from America or that it was a very big do, you know. But the other thing was only a sort of a ceilidh. If there was a house with three girls in it, well it only took three more to make a dance. There were always boys coming in, they might be on their ceilidh for a night's crack, like... This is the way it would go.

— John Loughran, Pomeroy, Co Tyrone



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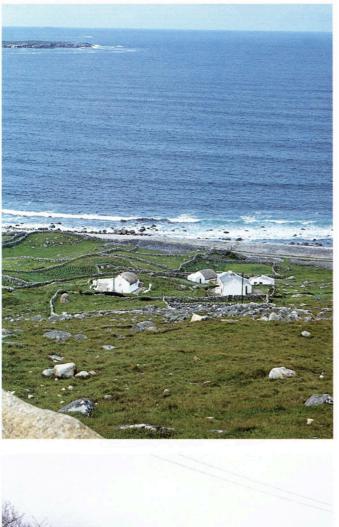
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John Doherty

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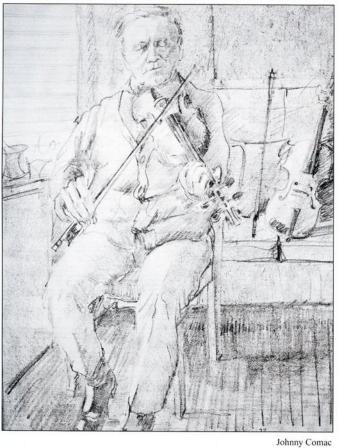
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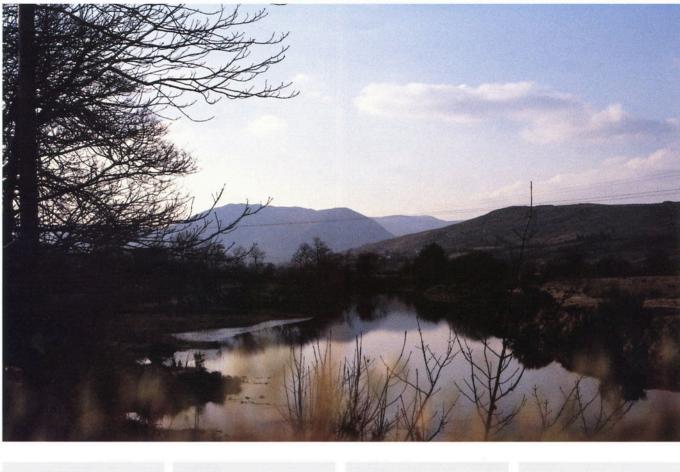




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Hudson Killeen Ltd, Dublin

Sound editing

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Special thanks also to Terry Devey and Gerry Fagan of Devey Leisure Ltd for sponsorship of the programme, and to Harry Bradshaw, Christin Bond, Mick Brown, Maeve Carolan, Ciaran Carson, Natalie Connolly, Martin Dowling, Paddy Glackin, Ted Hickey, Dermot McLaughlin, Dant O'Donnell and Fintan Vallely, and Maeve Gebruers, Joan McDermott, Róisín Ní Bhriain, Sadhbh Nic Ionnraic and Kate O'Dwyer of the Iris









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