

Music galore at CCE convention in N.J.

Saturday night ceili band and Girsa stood out

The band who played for the ceili mor on Saturday night, April 10, in the Grand Ballroom of the Hilton Hotel in Parsippany, N.J., ranks with the best I have ever heard at a Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann North American Provincial Convention. The Pride of New York quartet of flutist Joanie Madden, fiddler Brian Conway, button accordionist Billy McComiskey, and keyboardist Brendan Dolan was joined on stage by Teada fiddler Oisín Mac Diarmada, Cherish the Ladies piano accordionist Mirella Murray, uilleann piper Jerry O'Sullivan, piano accordionist Jimmy Keane, drummer Jimmy Kelly, and fiddlers Dylan Foley, Sean Cleland, and John Sweeney. Their music was sensational, and the set dancers who crowded onto the large, sprung, wooden floor could not get enough of it.



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Running from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., this ceili mor followed an impressive performance at the convention banquet by six members of the Pearl River, N.Y.-based octet Girsa: Pamela Geraghty on vocals, guitar, and button accordion, Emily McShane on keyboards, bodhran, and vocals, Deirdre Brennan on fiddle and vocals, Bernadette Flanagan on keyboards and bodhran, Margaret Dudasik on vocals and fiddle, and Bláithín Loughran on button accordion. Guesting with the band was Bláithín's fiddle-playing sister, Erin, who flew in from the University of Limerick.

Those seven musicians performed a crisp set of five tune medleys alternating with four songs and demonstrated how far they've progressed in poise, repertoire, and execution as a band. Reels, the jigs "Cul Aodh / The Boat to Boffin," a Beoga polka, and a medley featuring a march and the band's signature "Box Set" were played with precision and power. Very effective in their singing for Girsa were Dudasik

in an uptempo rendition of "Go, Lassie, Go," Geraghty in "The Blacksmith," and McShane in "The King's Shilling," a song previously popularized by Karan Casey on her 2001 album, "The Winds Begin to Sing."

Diverging from the traditional in Girsa's set was the song "Irish Heartbeat," composed by Van Morrison and sung by him with the Chieftains on their 1988 album of the same title. It was no small irony for me to hear Girsa perform that song after I just read Greil Marcus's new book, "Listening to Van Morrison: When That Rough God Goes Riding." In it Marcus lists 16 Van Morrison albums between 1980 and 1996 that he dismisses as disappointing and forgettable, including "Irish Heartbeat." But Marcus's harsh judgment about that recording may reflect his own flimsy familiarity with Irish music. I grant that the song "Irish Heartbeat" is repetitive, but it's intentionally so, with an incantatory rhythm akin to, well, a heartbeat. Deirdre Brennan sang the song with singular style, giving it fresh relevance. This CCE convention, after all, was partially a celebration of Morrison's lines "Don't ever stray, stray so far / From your own ones." It was a joy to witness Girsa's advancing musical strength.

An added treat during Girsa's playing was the guest step-dancing of brothers Jonathan and Joshua Srouer and especially the stepdancing of 13-year-old Catriona Furlong, a member of the Verlin School of Irish Dancing and the daughter of button accordionist Patty Furlong.

I also took in several Saturday afternoon music workshops: accordion taught by Martin Donohue, bodhran taught by Jesse Winch (with Linda Hickman playing melodies on flute), whistle taught by Joanie Madden, uilleann pipes taught by Ivan Goff, fiddle taught by John Daly, and singing taught by Mattie Connolly.

"Play the tune in a way that's natural to you," Donohue told his students. He elicited a laugh from me with this remark: "Joe Burke makes a living out of 'The Bucks of Oranmore.'" Goff stressed the sweet spots of the notes to his pupils. Winch had sections of his students play eight bars each. Madden used humor in coax-



The monumental ceili band in action at the CCE convention.

PHOTO: WILLIAM C. SMITH

ing her pupils to play "I Buried My Wife and Danced on Top of Her Grave" and the waltz "Gentle Maid." Daly patiently demonstrated technical aspects to his students. Connolly sang "The Queen of Connemara," in which his pupils soon joined, and "A Rolling Stone Gathers No Moss," learned from his late mother. He also graciously yielded the floor to a student who sang "The Banks of the Lee" and a student who sang "She Is Like the Swallow," another song associated with Karan Casey, who learned it from the late Frank Harte and recorded it on her 1997 solo debut, "Songlines."

During Saturday afternoon in the open hotel lobby were showcase performances by various music and dance schools, comprising youngsters of obvious promise.

One of several late Saturday night sessions I dropped in on featured button accordionist John Whelan, fiddler John Daly, and whistle player L. E. McCullough in a small room. Other sessions occupied a corner of the main hotel lobby and nooks and crannies elsewhere.

More than 2,000 people attended Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann's North American Provincial Convention, an annual cynosure for trad musicians, dancers, and fans. Kudos to Tom Vesey, Paul Keating, Frankie McCormick, and other organizers for a memorable event in Parsippany.

Rounder Records sold

In a startling bit of news, California-based Concord Music Group announced on April 14 that it had acquired Rounder Records, an indepen-

dent label co-founded in 1970 by Ken Irwin, Bill Nowlin, and Marian Leighton Levy in Massachusetts. Financial details of the deal were not disclosed.

Still probably best known for its Concord Jazz imprint, the Concord Music Group has become one of the world's largest independent record and music publishing companies. Its stable of labels includes Stax, Fantasy, Milestone, Riverside, Telarc, and, in partnership with Starbucks, Hear Music, the imprint on which the Chieftains' album "San Patricio" was issued this year.

The indisputable diamond in the Rounder crown of artists is Alison Krauss, who has sold millions of records for the label and won more Grammys than any other female artist in history. Other musicians who have recorded for Rounder include Bela Fleck, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Madeleine Peyroux, Rhonda Vincent, Rory Block, Steve Martin, Natalie MacMaster, Jean Redpath, and Cherish the Ladies. Concord Music Group's catalog of more than 10,000 master recordings will rise by at least another 3,000 from Rounder.

It will be interesting to monitor the aftermath of this acquisition. I suspect most industry eyes will be on Rounder rain-

maker Alison Krauss, who last year collaborated with Led Zeppelin singer Robert Plant on the highly successful "Raising Sand" CD for the label.

Just four years ago the assets of another New England indie label founded in the early 1970s, Green Linnet Records, were initially acquired by Digital Music Group Inc. Along with Ireland's Mulligan Records (yet another indie label launched in the 1970s), Green Linnet Records is now part of the independent, Nashville-based Compass Records Group, co-founded by Alison Brown and Garry West in 1994.

Straight from the harp

Mayo-born Grainne Hambly and Glaswegian William Jackson (a founding member of the great Scottish band Ossian), two master players of the harp, will be in concert at 8 p.m. on April 24 at the Irish American Association of Northwest Jersey, 352 Richard Mine Rd., Rockaway Township, N.J. Call Iris Nevins at 908-813-8617 for details. The same duo will also perform on April 25 at a time and location to be determined in southern Connecticut. For specifics, e-mail Tim Quinn at tmquinn@optonline.net or visit www.shamrockirishmusic.org.

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