



Eamon Ward

# Fleadh Cheoil

As Ireland's main musical festival returns to Ennis in County Clare, **Chris Moss** looks at the Fleadh Cheoil's roots and considers its enduring relevance

**T**ry to stay sober for at least a few hours if you can make it to the Fleadh Cheoil this year. Otherwise, there's a good chance your experience of Ireland's annual folk jamboree will fast dwindle into a beery blur of foot-tapping singalongs, impromptu street performances and dazed wanderings – great fun, for sure, but not the full-blown exposure to the cultural vitality and musical virtuosity that the nine-day gathering offers.

I speak from experience. Last August, one Friday afternoon, as I turn on to O'Connell Street in Ennis, County Clare, I get a pleasant sense of *déjà vu*. Before me is a mighty swarm of bodies: men, women, children, locals, foreigners, musicians, listeners, dogs and drunks. Every second doorway is occupied by a dancer, a duo of fiddlers, a trio of accordionists, a storyteller and his pal. Bars are bursting at the seams, every publican in town giving up a snug to a gig. It is familiar to me because I'd been at the *fleadhs* in Cavan (2011) and at Sligo (2014).

Ennis, hosting the event for the first time in 2016 since 1977, is not letting any of its expected 400,000 visitors down. When I arrive the festival has already been running for five days. Though the weather is increasingly turning west-coast wet, this is going to be a great Fleadh final weekend.

But the Fleadh is far more than the sum of its boozy improv sessions. "It's a festival that's organised around a competition," says Mícheál Ó Riabhaigh, chairman of Ennis' Fleadh executive committee and an accomplished player of the fiddle and *uilleann* pipes. "The competition is still the core – and it's actually 180 separate competitions, covering all kinds of music as well as traditional dancing." There's also a four-day summer school, the Scoil Éigse, for around 800 students from all over the world. It exposes skilled young musicians to first-class tuition. The standard of musicianship among 15-18 year olds, in particular, is very high. "Then there's the street

party, which is informal and where there's a lot of drinking – but it's not the main thing."

The Fleadh, he says, has played, and still plays, an important role in preserving Irish music. "By the 40s, traditional music, as an art form, was in danger of becoming extinct. It was very much a minority thing. The standard at the time wasn't great. The factors behind this were many, including the Great Depression, the arrival of rock'n'roll, and we'd had mass emigration, with half a million Irish people leaving the country between 1946 and 1961."

But the diaspora kept the music alive abroad, especially in the US. Observing the success of Irish music on the American east coast, political and cultural leaders back home decided that they could tap this talent and revive the home scene. The first Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann (Music Festival of Ireland) – which everyone calls Fleadh (pronounced 'flah') – took place in Mullingar, County Westmeath in 1951. It attracted only a few hundred enthusiastic



patrons but established a nonprofit organising body, the Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, dedicated to preserving and promoting Irish traditional music – and an annual event that just grew and grew in size and variety.

Armed with my festival brochure – as thick as a Joyce novel – I visit the competition venues. In a large marquee, schoolkids step forward to sing, dance, play *bodhráns*, do duets with fiddle and whistle. In Ennis' handsome Glór Theatre, I catch a lunchtime concert by celebrated fiddler Siobhán Peoples, alongside accordionist Murty Ryan and *bouzouki* player Brian Mooney. It is a formal setting and the performance was considered; there's a quality in Peoples' and Murty's relationship that some call 'telepathic.' But, somehow, the trio retain an off-the-cuff naturalness. Afterwards, I pop into a couple of pubs. In one, a local woman is showing off her gorgeous voice to friends. In the second, a band as numerous as Earth, Wind and Fire are powering through fast reels, adult musicians taking their cues from the kids.

But one trend among the youngest performers is very obvious. On the streets, some play whistle or squeezebox, beat a drum or, daringly, sing *a capella*, and they are almost all accompanied by a teen or pre-teen step dancer. In the marquees, every mother seems to have at least one young dancer in her brood.

"Michael Flatley has played a decisive role," cultural historian Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin tells me over coffee. "He created a global package and generated a tidal surge of interest in Irish dance. But it's just part of the heteroglossic



experience, the palimpsest. The Fleadh provokes multiple states of consciousness depending how much you've consumed."

Ó hAllmhuráin, born in Ennis but a long-term expat – he currently teaches Irish studies at Concordia University, Montréal – is joking, but he's also being serious. "The Fleadh is a cultural crossroads and a homecoming, a regional festival and a competition," he continues. "It's been this ever since 1956 and that's the significance of its return to Ennis – it was the first Ennis Fleadh that established the template for future events."

But, Ó hAllmhuráin says, the Ennis Fleadh also has special musical value. "This county, Clare, is a truly global world music centre. We have a whole load of people who are Clare music-makers who were not born here and have never lived here. There are Argentinians and Japanese. They play together on the internet. It's like *mariachi* music played by Croatians, which exists!"



Eamon Ward, Brian Daughton

Roots and regions. Global and local. Music and history. The necessary order of a festival schedule; the chaos of thousands of people competing with tunes, queuing for drinks, cramming themselves into narrow lanes.

On the Saturday night, I attend a concert that helps me make sense of the Fleadh, and expresses – in music – some of the ideas Ó Riabhaigh and Ó hAllmhuráin have shared with me. Back at the Glór, I listen to a lecture on the Flanagan Brothers, who played a key role in New York's Irish music scene of the 20s and 30s. Afterwards, the bluegrass-influenced Brock McGuire Band, then critically acclaimed American ensemble Green Fields of America and later the free-style, fun-loving At the Racket pay tribute to the brothers. The show is stunning, provocative, intelligent, multifarious, educational and full of energy – a summation of all that the Fleadh best represents.

"Irish traditional music has both a popular following and an aficionados' following," Mícheál Ó Riabhaigh tells me. "The Fleadh is a good time, it's *craic* and it's a family affair. But we have a high standard of musical performance all around Ireland. When you come here you hear great music – that's the most important thing, and that's why people come back year after year." ♦

**+ DATES** The 2017 edition of the Fleadh Cheoil will be in Ennis, County Clare, August 13-21  
**+ ONLINE** [www.fleadhcheoil.ie](http://www.fleadhcheoil.ie)