

Spreading the Musical Gospel

Tommy Moran

GOOD MUSIC doesn't have an expiration date. So says a simple fridge magnet. And how true a statement it is. Countless thousands of songs and instrumental pieces that may have held Number 1 spots in their heyday are now long forgotten, un-heard and un-played, cobwebbed away in attics or recycling plants. Not so the sounds of music that emanated from the Sweeney home in Drumnamore, on the Aughoo to Cloone Road, or the R204, as it would be called now.

Willie Sweeney, the second youngest of sixteen children, was a well-known accordion player and a prominent member of *The Hughie Dooner Band*, featuring banjo player Eamonn Canning as vocalist, though many dance hall ads referred to it in their promo as *The Hughie Dooner Orchestra*. That sounded better and might pull in a few more punters. Hughie and Willie were close friends and in true show-business fashion, Hughie asked Willie to be god-father to his daughter Teresa, now Teresa McCormack, wife of Ballinamore GAA legend, Tommy "Spike". Willie's wife, Katie, joined her husband in the regular traditional sessions in their comfy kitchen, playing the fiddle or the Jews' harp, while her sister Bridie Scollan also took down the fiddle, as did Willie's sister Bea Doherty, whose husband Sonnie ran the dance hall in Cloone village—their son Patsy would later set up the *Greencastle Ceilí Band*.

The Sweeneys had nine children, Eddie, Noel, Breege, Mary, Martin, Pauric, Ann, Sean and Raymond. Birthday and Christmas presents for the boys were usually tin whistles, all except Raymond, who had little interest in playing, though he has a lovely singing voice and does a mean version of Red Red Wine as his party piece. His wife Aileen comes from a musical family also, many of whom sing in the famed *Ballina Cathedral Choir*, while Raymond and Aileen's eldest son Blaine is already making a name as show-business as a camera-man on RTE's *Gogglebox*. For some reason Willie and Katie felt that girls should concentrate on singing rather than being

musicians, so Breege, Mary or Ann did not learn to play. However, singing had its perks too and Breege remembers getting ten bob from her cousin Patsy for singing with the Greencastle, even though the venues could be in Leitrim or Galway. Same fee, ten bob, home or away. As the music sessions continued in Sweeneys the boys learned not only the tin whistle, but also a multiplicity of instruments, with Sean being the most prolific, skilled on the whistle, banjo, guitar, mandolin and accordion. Like many of his brothers he would embark on a showband career, playing with Connie Lee; with fellow Leitrim man Gerry Reynolds in the Hi Lows and with the ever-popular Margo O'Donnell. Indeed he has the unique memory of loaning his guitar to Margo's brother Daniel for his first stint on stage.

It wasn't always easy to find a corner to practice in, with sessions on the go in every room, so Eddie and Noel often commandeered the turf-shed at the side of the house and there they prepared for Leitrim, Connacht and All-Ireland Fleadhanna together with Paddy Kelly on the accordion. The humble surroundings mattered little, because their music was top-class and they have the provincial and national titles to prove it. Martin always loved drumming, so he would take to the hills above Kavanagh's Hall, gaze down on Gubbs Bog and rap out the beats to his heart's content. Later he would drum in more salubrious neon-lit surroundings, performing for no less than 15 years in the clubs and casinos along the famous Las Vegas Strip, with Brendan Bowyer and the Big Eight. His son Darin is now a solo artist operating from Longford.

Anne Sweeney decided to follow a career in journalism and worked with *The Longford News*, *Longford Leader*, *The Irish News* and *The Irish Press*. Her work brought her into contact with Ballinamore man, Paul Williams, the award winning journalist, crime writer, author, script-writer, film-maker, TV personality and radio presenter, who was named *Leitrim Guardian Person of the Year* in 2009.



■ Centre of the photo is Brendan Bowyer and in front of him the left is Martin Sweeney

Anne and Paul became husband and wife and have a son and daughter Jake and Irena. Mary Sweeney married Dublin man Tommy Donnelly, a post office supervisor who played guitar and loved to sing the Beatle songs. Their daughter Sharon and her husband Lee Gartland moved from the city to Drumnamore and renovated and restored the original Sweeney family homestead, and again the music began. Lee formed *The Dapplezimmers* with Sharon's Uncle Pauric Sweeney. Sharon's and Lee's three sons, Cian on lead guitar, Colum on drums and Seán on bass have their own group, *The Paperboys*. The old house lives again! Mary and Tommy Donnelly's youngest son Paul is also a talented guitarist and singer-songwriter. Together with his cousin Niall Megahey in *Crunchy Little Biscuit* they rocked Ballinamore festival in the nineties.

Noel was another of the Sweeneys to have a stellar musical career that began with the Greencastle before going on to the *Hi Lows* and later the *Declan Nerney Band*. A brilliant musician on the whistle, concert flute and saxophone, Noel has recorded several CDs of traditional music and is a renowned music teacher. The Joe Mooney Summer School committee received glowing comments about Noel from a musician who had attended classes given by Noel during the Summer School—I was lucky enough to have as a guest teacher Noel Sweeney (All Ireland flute champion 1982)—I'm not sure when I have been so inspired by any player—Since then



■ Noel Sweeney, Bryan Megahey, Mick Foster, Tony Allen & Harry Megahey

I have practiced far more than previously and my playing is coming on by leaps and bounds as a result—I will never forget Noel's gentle, yet insistent teaching, nor the way he seemed to grab my playing, twist it about and show me what it could be. High praise indeed. In 2016, Noel and his daughter Amanda both played with *The Green River Céili Band* at the All Ireland Fleadh.

"*The Sweeney Brothers and Kevin Fox*" was one of the best known Irish groups in England over many years, based in Manchester but playing all the major venues in the big cities. Pivotal to this group was guitarist Pauric Sweeney, who had also played with the Noel Cassidy and Brendan Kearney showbands. Pauric married Margaret Loughlin, whose father John was a long-serving member of Leitrim County Council for the Ballinaglera area. Their daughter, Lorraine, married to Thomas Kelly of Dromahair, has cut out a special niche for herself in traditional music circles in Leitrim and far beyond, as a musician, music teacher, adjudicator and in administration with various levels of Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann. Her sister Laura is a keen music lover and her brothers Paul and Andrew also share the Sweeney musical talents on their guitars and bass guitars, rocking around the world. There is scarcely a gig ever held in the Ballinamore area at which Pauric Sweeney is not asked to perform. This holds true for all the Sweeneys in a much broader Leitrim/Longford area and it is doubtful if the generosity and good-will of the family and indeed countless other performers, in sharing

their talents for countless causes, is fully appreciated by the general public.

The eldest of the Sweeney girls, Breege, married to Harry Megahey of Belfast, spent some years in England also, where she was vocalist with the Limits Showband and the Royal Safari. Fortunately, the Megaheys decided to return to Ireland and settle in Ballinamore and the family, one of the most popular in the area, has contributed

enormously to every aspect of life in Leitrim. Ballinamore Musical Society, charity functions, parties, sessions, gigs, Scor competitions, hoo-leys, sing-songs, concerts, birthday celebrations, festivals, removals and funerals have all reaped the benefit of having Breege as a committed member of the community, willing to add her beautiful singing voice to grace so many occasions. Breege released her own CD '*Beautiful Journey*', for bone-marrow for Leukaemia Trust. She is the founder and Musical Director of the Anna Martin Memorial Choir in St Patrick's Church, Ballinamore, of which her niece Sharon and sister in law Aileen are both members. The church is fortunate to have two choirs, the other directed by local music teacher Gerarda Burns. A family connection between both is the fact that Marian Burns, whose father Eamonn Canning played with Willie Sweeney in the Hughie Dooner Band, is lead vocalist with Gerarda's choir. History repeating itself, as they say.

Trumpet and saxophone player Harry Megahey is a joy on stage. He can play, sing and knows how to hold and milk an audience. For many years he performed with Van the Man—Van Morrisson—alongside Henry McCullough of Enniskillen, who later joined hit group, Wings. Van Morrisson retains close friendship with Harry and Breege. Famous show-business faces are nothing unusual around the Megahey household. Bryan, a guitar player with the professional touch, tours the world with Foster and Allen and has made numerous concert tours of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and everywhere in between. He is also a well-known



Breege & The Royal Safari Showb

■ (Bottom Right) is Keith Owen, father of Mark Owen, singer with 'Take That'

solo recording artist. His older brother Mark runs RYME Films making Corporate content and bespoke wedding films. Younger brother Niall, who could out-play and out-William Robbie Williams has branched into wedding videography and his company "Complete Weddings" is acknowledged as the leaders in this particular field. On the corporate front, Niall is making giant strides with his other company, "Tully Films". Not to be out-done, their sister Claire, is a series producer at BBC and has worked on various programmes including '*The One Show*', '*Rouge Traders*', '*Stargazing Live*', '*Volcano Live*' and '*Songs of Praise*'. She is currently working as a commissioning editor for '*The One Show*'.

The ground-work set by Willie and Katie Sweeney in their home on the Cloone Road, their love of music, their high principles and respect for neighbours, their example in developing and encouraging talent, their camaraderie and community spirit, their hard-working lives, have all been influential on the very-extended Sweeney families and has spread far beyond Drumnamore, to the furthest reaches of the world.

Good music doesn't have an expiration date. Neither do the people who play it.