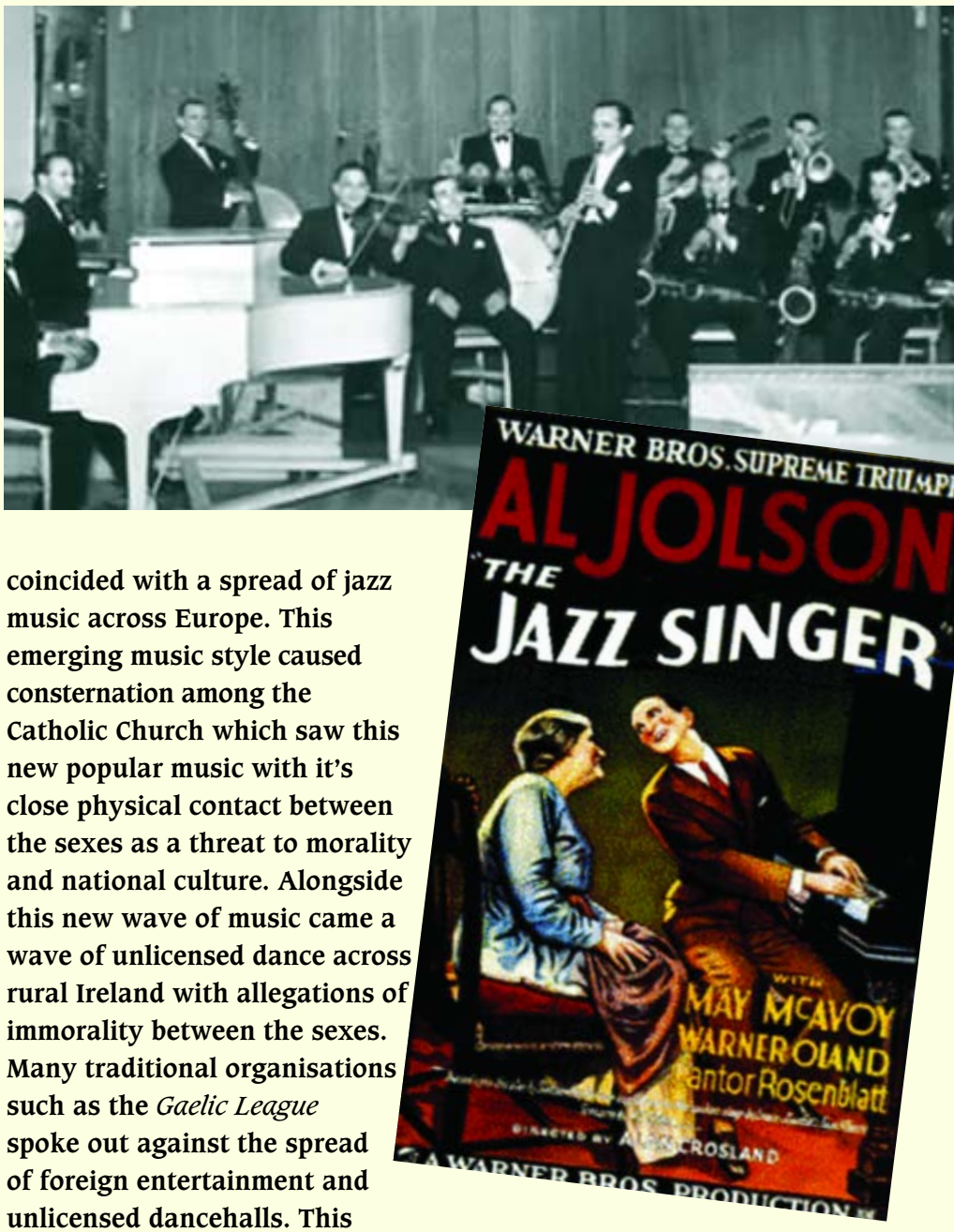
# LEITRIM LEAD THE ANTI-JAZZ MOVEMENT

*Pat McGarty*

LEITRIM IN THE 1920's and 1930's, like many other areas across Ireland were suffering from the scourges of unemployment, poverty and emigration. Despite the emergence of the *Irish Free State* in 1922 following the *War of Independence*, the lives of many of it's citizens did not change in any way. Like many newly independent states, a major element of Irish society in these years was an emphasis on traditional values. In Leitrim and across Ireland, one way that this was manifested was in the power of the Catholic Church, whose efforts to assert social control over the population was generally supported by the state. The influence of the Catholic Church was strong, and it's power was reflected in many aspects of Irish life including health, education and all elements of family life. Aside from religion, a range of organisations including the *GAA* and the *Gaelic League,* promoted various elements of Irish culture.

Despite this focus on all things Irish, international trends in fashion and entertainment were reaching Ireland's shores through new technology. In 1926 *Radio Éireann* was founded, and new technologies such as radio and gramophones ensured that young people had a range of new entertainment outlets. These new technologies coincided with a spread of jazz music across Europe. This emerging music style caused consternation among the Catholic Church which saw this new popular music with it's close physical contact between the sexes as a threat to morality and national culture. Alongside this new wave of music came a wave of unlicensed dance across rural Ireland with allegations of immorality between the sexes. Many traditional organisations such as the *Gaelic League* spoke out against the spread of foreign entertainment and unlicensed dancehalls. This criticism was reinforced by condemnation from the pulpit by many clergy.

One of the most prominent clergy behind these condemnations was Cloone priest Fr Peter Conefrey, who established the *Anti-Jazz League* in late 1933.




*Typical Jazz Band of the thirties. The poster shows the first Talkie film of the age—the celebrated 'Jazz Singer' which was a very popular film in the Ireland of the 'thirties*

With Fr Conefrey as it's leader, Leitrim was to become the centre of the Anti-Jazz campaign. Conefrey was an ardent cultural nationalist and was heavily involved in the promotion of Irish music and dancing and the Irish language. He devoted his life to Irish culture and the development of local traditional industry.

On New Year's Day 1934, Conefrey organised a rally which saw over three thousand people from South Leitrim and surrounding areas march through Mohill to launch the Anti-Jazz campaign. The march from Mohill railway station to the Canon Donohoe Hall was accompanied by five bands and the demonstrators carried banners inscribed with slogans such as *'Down with Jazz'* and *'Out with Paganism'.* A meeting was then held in the hall organised by Fr Conefrey and Canon Masterson, the parish priest of Mohill.

Messages were read out from prominent personalities who had given their support to the campaign, including Cardinal MacRory, and Ireland's future first President, Dr Douglas Hyde.

The Taoiseach, Éamon de Valera, sent his regrets that neither he, nor any of his ministers, could attend but sincerely hoped that the efforts of the Gaelic League to restore 'the national forms of dancing' would be successful. De Valera was represented at the meeting by local T D, Ben Maguire, who took exception to the meeting accusing the Minister of Finance Sean McEntee of promoting jazz music through lucrative sponsorship programmes on *Radio Eireann*.

Canon Masterson, who chaired the meeting, told the assembled crowd that he considered jazz a menace to their very civilisation as well as their religion. He said that after the *Treaty of Limerick* all vestiges of national life were swept away apart from, 'the Irish faith and the Irish music'. He warned the audience that, 'the man who would try to defile these two noble heritages was the worst from of traitor and the greatest enemy of the Irish nation'.

Fr Conefrey declared that jazz was a greater danger to the Irish people than drunkenness and landlordism and concerted action by church and state was required. He called on the government to circularise Garda barracks to forbid the organisation of jazz dances and to compel dance halls to shut at 11 pm. He also called for the training of young teachers in Irish music and dancing.

Reporting on the event, a strongly supportive article, in the *Leitrim Observer* declared that 'the West will not now slumber but rush forth again to expel the last and worst invader-the jazz of Johnny Bull and the niggers and cannibals'.

Despite the strong support in early 1934, the *Anti-Jazz campaign* fizzled out because many young people did not follow the lead of the church with regard to their choice of entertainment. Young people were more mobile and travelled by bicycle to dances across the parish and sometimes county bounds. These developments ensured that the young no longer socialised in their parishes, and were away from the watchful eyes of the clergy.

In response to the *Anti-Jazz campaign,* while the state obviously declared their support for Irish music and culture, they never condemned new popular music. However, under pressure from the Catholic hierarchy, the Fianna Fail government passed the *Dancehall Act* in 1935 which outlawed unlicensed dancehalls.

This new legislation resulted in a large increase in the building of parochial halls throughout Leitrim and across the country. The local clergy applied successfully for dancing licenses and the money raised became an important source of revenue for parishes and for the government, who took a 25% tax on each ticket sold. One of the legacies of Leitrim's Anti-Jazz campaign was therefore to bring dancing under the control of church and state, but the tide of popular music that was performed in the dancehalls could not be stopped in rural Ireland.

Back in Cloone, Fr Conefrey continued his pursuit in the promotion of all things Irish. He proved himself to be an able administrator, and a pioneer of community development. Ironically, nearly eighty years later, his vision of local community based industry is a major plank of Irish government policy.