JOE LACKY GALLAGHER

MUSIC BRIGHT & UNDIMINISHED

Vincent Woods

THE PHOTOS tell a story: a man of devilment and fun, eager for life and living it to the full. Upstanding on horseback, laughing and relaxed, hard-working, constantly on the move. The music tells its own story and conveys something of the heart of the player: honesty, clarity, sweet sureness, a small hint of melancholy at the knotted core of the dance and gaiety. Joe Lacky Gallagher was one of the great musicians, a natural-born player. He came out of a great landscape of music and added to it. Joe was a master fiddler (Séamus Ennis, who made many recordings with him, used to say that any visit to Leitrim was worthwhile to hear him play): his style is swift and sure, studded with elegant and unexpected minor notes, blending the gaiety of a house dance with a small twist of sadness. He drew on the local traditions of music but made the music new and fresh and composed many new tunes.

To listen to those remarkable recordings is to travel in time and place. Back to Cloonamurgal, the townland near Drumkeeran where he was born in 1918. Back to the old way of naming, where a son was given his father's or his grandfather's (or maybe grandmother's) first name as a kind of distinguishing mark: in a landscape of many Gallagher families Joe became Joe Lacky, the 'Lacky' derived from a shortened form of his father Malachy's name. But even that had an older root: Joe's great-grandfather had also been Malachy or Lacky—"Auld Lacky". So Joe became Joe Lacky to distinguish him from other Gallaghers' around, from his cousins and extended kin.

Listen to the playing and imagine the early days of radio and a crowd gathering on the street in Drumkeeran, outside Master Séamus Duignan's house on the main street to listen to this local man playing live from Dublin through the new, mysterious box-machine. His father is there in the crowd with Joe's young wife, Beatrice., originally Beatrice McMorrow from Lonaugh, Tawnylea. The crowd may be a bit loud, the radio a little low. So his father speaks up "A little louder boy," he says, and someone inside turns up the volume and Malachy Gallagher is happy and proud.

And has every right to be so.

Where does music come from—the gift of music? No telling, sometimes no remembering. It seems the music came down through both sides to Joe, through his mother's family, the Bartons' and the Gallaghers'. We know that Joe bought his first fiddle in Tommy McGivney's shop near Wynne's in Drumkeeran. Beatrice reckons he started playing at about the age of 15 and he's likely to have learned some of the music and style of playing from Jimmy Horan from Creevelea, father of the late Seamus Horan, another master of music. Dan Phildy McGowan was another teacher and he was also influenced by the playing of Dan Murphy of Lisacoghil, brother of Denis Murphy. We know that he learned to read music, taking lessons from Mrs Wamsley, the wife of a Protestant Minister in Bundoran in 1948 or '49. The first tune he mastered by sight was The Coolin. He loved playing, drew music and musicians in around him and travelled out to make his mark. There's a telling detail of him driving to Arigna to pick up a load of coal, delivering it to Mullagh in Cavan, leaving it with a local man to deliver, hitching to Dublin to record with 2RN in the GPO, hitching back to Cavan and driving home by nightfall or a little after. All in a day. Another story—maybe true, maybe not, but telling in its real or imagined insight: Joe sitting on a trailer load of coal in Drumshanbo, playing with coal-blackened hands, the music bright and sparkling for the tape recorder.

His friends in music were many. John James Doherty, Hugh Daly, Michael O'Brien, Séamus Horan, Paddy and Dan Phildy McGowan, The Carroll brothers—Michael Patrick and John, Michael Shanley, Richie Fitzgerald, Hugh Scanlon, Dan McNiffe, Dan Murphy, Packie Duignan, Tommy Guihen, Mary Gallagher, Séamus Connolly, Carmel O'Grady, Joe Clancy, the Clare fiddler Seamus Connolly, Joe Burke, the Leddy brothers. Tommy Gilmartin, Michael John McTiernan, Kevin McTiernan, Kevin O'Brien, Tommy Gallagher, Tommy Guihen, Vincent Harrison, Pat Sweeney, John Hamilton and Mary Gilhooley. Joe Harrison and Larry O'Dowd played with him in life and at his funeral. The great Bornacoola-born fiddle player Tom Mulligan was a good friend a close musical companion. His son, Néillidh Mulligan, himself one of the finest pipers in Ireland (he learned his trade and art from the master, Séamus Ennis) also played music with Joe Gallagher and remembers that Joe would always say "Let the Piper lead" at the start of any session of music where a piper was present. It was a daunting challenge or invitation for a lad of fifteen or sixteen, but the use of the phrase speaks volumes for the openness and generosity of the man who said it.

There were several bands over the years: The Black Diamond Céilí Band, The Joe Gallagher Céilí Band, the Leitrim Céilí Band, the Belhavel Céilí Group. Trips to Kanturk in Co Cork, five musicians travelling the six hours from Drumkeeran in a Ford Prefect, playing from 10 at night till 3 in the morning, then home again. A wonderful story of a soda cake commandeered on a hungry trip home from Galway, a half crown left on the table by way of recompense and a tune composed, The Galway Cake. The mystery tune played once on radio, never heard of before or since.

The music of Joe's life could be described as The Leitrim Cake: in it the particular tang and taste of home, crusted on the hearth of vanished fires; cure for deep hunger; hope and consolation. The sound is timeless, and as universal as it is specific and local.

Like so many men of his generation and place Joe worked hard and varied. With the help of Beatrice he ran the farm, worked for years as a carpenter in the construction of the ESB power station in Ballyshannon, learned some of the craft of blacksmith from Jim Flynn ("Jim the Gabh," from the Irish "Jim the Smith or Blacksmith"), started a quarry business with his son Padraig, drawing stones for road construction work with Leitrim County Council, delivered coal around Drumkeeran and Tarmon and to creameries in Co Cavan. He reconstructed the old family house and there you might find a lorry engine out for repair on the kitchen floor or a session of music in full swing on a winter's evening. Called upon to play at concerts in Kelly's Hall, Crown's Hall, Creevelea Hall; before and during the interval at plays like Sive or The Year of the Hiker. Playing in Flynn's of Arigna and McRann's of Mount Allen; with local musicians in Leddy's loft, known locally as "The Dancing Mecca of Killargue". In the early days his young wife Beatrice danced a four-hand reel to his music in Kelly's Hall in Drumkeeran. "He was a treasure," she says now, "I never knew what it was to want for a penny."

The fiddle was his instrument but he tried his hand at a few others. The banjo for a while and in that fine Leitrim tradition that saw Mick and Shane Woods mix traditional music and jazz, he gave the saxophone a whirl. He'd sometimes sing The Rocks of Bawn. Michael Coleman was his favourite. He brought Felix Doran to play at the old ironworks in Creevelea, that moment captured in a fine photograph.

In the quiet of night, alone, he'd rehearse his music. Playing when all the family, Beatrice, Pádraig, Patsy and Marian were asleep (or at least in bed, hearing the low drift of fiddle from the room). Sometimes he'd wake up whistling a tune.

Listening to the CD, The Leitrim Cake and tunes like The Musical Priest, Down the Meadow and The Cuckoo Hornpipe brings me back to teenage days listening to musicians like Packie Duignan and Tom Mulligan in Paddy Mac's pub in Drumshanbo. I think I knew, almost instinctively, that I was privileged to hear this music; and witnessing the playing of it I began to understand what it meant and represented. Something more than the workaday life of farm and coal mine, a hope, an aspiration, a small light from the past offered into the future. I saw that these makers of music shared something with me, the intent listener unable to play a note: they shared a belief in the possibility of, and need for, transcendence; not escape found in pint or whiskey but an elevation of life and living powered on the invisible air and offered to a small Sunday morning gathering and into infinite time.

Since the CD was released I've discovered that Joe Gallagher, who delivered coal from Arigna around north Leitrim and into Cavan, used to play music for my grandmother, B Guihen, in the small, thatched house in Cartronbeg where my mother's family grew up. The house is gone, most of the people gone too, but there's a huge potency and power in the image of a man with coal-blackened hands playing bright, sparkling music for a woman with coal-black hair and flashing eyes. Maybe he played The Collier's Reel or The Gold Ring, maybe she danced a few steps on the flag floor...part of a landscape of extraordinary music and spirit.

Joe's wit, good humour and hospitality are evoked still. At a local cattle mart, admonished for buying a cow with bad feet, he says, "It's for milkin I bought her, not for dancing." But many is the dance he propelled, including a young Michael Flatley, long before the days of Riverdance, in Higgins' pub in Coolfada. A young Irish-American rehearsing the future to the best of old music made new.

And he died too young. In a cold winter, February 1979. Only sixty years old. He should have lived longer—but how fully he lived and what a gift of music and life he left to us.

So much music is lost, so much story and memory. We are so fortunate that Joe Gallagher's music was recorded. By Séamus Ennis, Ciarán MacMathúna, and Mick Daly from Arigna, the man who became Tory Mayor of Worthing but who had the foresight to recognise and value the musical heritage of his home place. Joe was at the first meeting of committee to form the John McKenna Society in 1979; now his own music is honoured and made available through the work of that fine group. The vision of people like Master Duignan, who brought Séamus Ennis to Cloonamurgal is matched today by those who bring us these recordings. "Music carries us on," as Peter Flanagan in Ballymenone, Fermanagh said to Henry Glassie. In this music, Joe Lacky Gallagher and the spirit of a place and people are carried on, bright and undiminished. His grand daughters, Emer and Alma Colwell play his fiddles. Damien O'Brien plays the grace notes. The music lives. Too much music has been lost down the generations; here's a player whose gift shines out again as good as new. You'd stand in snow to listen to him.

This article is based on Vincent Woods' sleeve note for the CD The Leitrim Cake and an article he wrote about the CD and the music and life of Joe Lacky Gallagher in 'An Irishman's Diary' in the Irish Times.