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Maeve Flanagan

BY EILEEN CONDON

At nineteen, Maeve Flanagan is one of the finest young Irish fiddlers in New York and the world. Daughter of fiddler and multi-instrumentalist Mike Flanagan—“My dad knows every tune imaginable,” says Maeve—and fiddle player and teacher Rose Conway Flanagan, Maeve is well aware of the Irish American musical and cultural legacy she has inherited:

My mom was in the original Cherish the Ladies. So I grew up, knowing, listening to WFUV on the radio, hearing them play. My mom would tell me about them, and I would just be in awe, because they were so amazing, like Joanie [Madden] on the tin whistle. I started the tin whistle when I was like eleven or twelve, and I remember I was just, like, in awe of her . . . and I was privileged to grow up around a lot of the members in Cherish the Ladies. . . . I'm honored to be following in their footsteps, because they're just such a talented group of people, and hopefully I can live up to what they're passing down.



Photo: Megan Cross

Still the best-known all-female Irish traditional musicians' ensemble in the United States, Cherish the Ladies came into existence when Irish musician and folklorist Mick Moloney, working with Ethel Raim and Martin Koenig at the Ethnic Folk Arts Center (now known as the Center for Traditional Music and Dance), phoned tin whistle-flute champion Joanie Madden in 1983 to invite her to participate in a concert series that was going to feature some of New York's finest Irish women musicians, including Rose Conway. Joanie asked jokingly if Moloney was going to call the group “Cherish the Ladies” (the title of a well-known Irish jig), and Moloney agreed that name could work. It did—through the new group's early sell-out concert series, an NEA-funded national tour, and two 1985 albums on the Shanachie label.

Maeve's experience as a birthright New York Irish musician is part of the continuing CTL saga. Like the *virtuosas* before her, Maeve has already won several All-Ireland international competitions in fiddle and duet playing in the decade since she began “taking the music seriously” at age ten. Maeve describes her mother, Rose, and her uncle, fiddler Brian Conway, as her first teachers and—along with her father—her greatest influences. Maeve picked the instrument up at five, gave it up briefly, then confessed to her mother she missed it and would like to try again. Try again she did, working with her mother for two years, then studying with her Uncle Brian for eight years more. Maeve was not only surrounded socially by All-Ireland champions, but also grew up attending sessions, church concerts, parades, festivals, and the regional *fleadhs* (music competitions, pronounced “flahs”) sponsored by the Irish musicians' association in the United States, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann.

At twelve, Maeve had been practicing the Sligo reel “Bonnie Kate,” the jig “Keys to the Convent,” and other tunes daily, but was nevertheless astonished to win an All-Ireland first place in fiddle in her age category. Now

a sophomore studying history at Stonehill College in Easton, Massachusetts, and hoping to attend law school, Maeve still finds time to play gigs with pals in Girsha (Irish for “girls”), a nine-member all-girl band of Irish musicians, singers, and dancers. Many are the students of former Cherish the Ladies members. The lineup includes Maeve's sister Bernadette, a brilliant piano player and award-winning Irish stepdancer. The group came together spontaneously at Irish Arts Week in the Catskills five years ago. Some of their mothers realized the potential for a working band and encouraged the teenagers to make it happen. Maeve also serves as an instructor at Irish music programs in the Catskills and on Cape Cod and is in demand as a tutor for up-and-coming younger students across the country.

Irish music has been Maeve Flanagan's matrix for musical friendships. She has contributed violin tracks to a recording by her friend singer-songwriter and guitarist Martin Earley and looks forward to the possibility of collaborating on a release with Virginia-based fiddler Cleek Schrey. Maeve has composed a few tunes herself, as well—within the Irish tradition. Her reel “The Sligo Princesses,” in the “eccentric” key of B-flat, commemorates the phrase some of the older women used to refer to a trio of friends—Maeve, Erin, and Deirdre—who took great delight in their own company and music making, going from session to session together at Irish Arts Week in East Durham in the summertime. May it long remain so for women in Irish music in New York, and everywhere. ▼

Eileen Condon is project director at the Center for Traditional Music and Dance in New York City. To nominate a colleague for In Praise of Women, contact her at econdon@ctmd.org.



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