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UPSTATE NEW YORK'S IRISH MUSIC ARCHIVE

BY TED MCGRAW

I started collecting records in 1952, when I was 15. In those years, I listened to several programs featuring Irish, Scottish, and old-time country dance music, including Don Messer from Prince Edward Island, Jim Magill from Toronto, Abby Andrews from St. Catherine's, The Shamrock Show from Niagara Falls, Jerry's Hayshakers from Boston, Irish Melodies from Rochester, and "Ontario Roundup," a country and western show from Toronto, which featured country dance music at the beginning and end.

I had always been interested in radio and even built a little Heathkit radio along the way, which actually worked. So, in 1974, when the collection had built to a level of vocals and instrumentals that could sustain a radio show, I found that Greece Athens High School had just gone on the air with the radio station WGMC and was looking for volunteers who could contribute culturally to the community. It was then, on October 16, 1974, that the "Irish Party House" show was born. Starting out, it was a fun time on the radio, because in addition to our own requests, Irish events calendar, and news from Ireland, we had to prepare general public service announcements and local news of the day. When the station installed a significant power increase in 1980, it cost a few dollars, and that caught the attention of the school board, who thought that it would be a good idea to charge us volunteers for air time. It turned out to be a wonderful rallying point for the Irish community in Rochester, and our fundraisers were a great success.

The successful establishment of the radio show allowed us to be included on the



In their short three-year existence, Gaelic issued at least 34 78-rpm records in the 1920s, which included some top-level musicians. P. J. Conlon was the "Michael Coleman" of box players, and all his records have been reissued by Old Time records on a double cd with an extensive biography of Conlon. *Photos courtesy of the author.*

distribution lists of the latest releases from all the major labels of Irish music. This worked even in Ireland, when on our several trips over to visit my wife's parents, I used to visit the major distributors and music stores in Ireland.

In the first decade of the 21st century, I added an extra hour to broadcast some

Scottish music and the Celtic-related music of Canada. This was called the "Ol' Fiddler Show." All the time, the collection was building to a level of 10,000 pieces of media, evenly split between old 78s, vinyl albums and cassettes, and cds. The collection became known as one of the largest private collections of Irish music in the world, and



These two labels were used by O'Byrne DeWitt and Copley Records of New York City and then Boston, a music store that provided mail order service and a travel agency. They issued dozens of 78s, 45s, and albums, but they were gone before the cd era.

I was constantly answering questions on recordings and artists, and sharing information with collectors and researchers worldwide. It had turned into a busy and satisfying hobby, but it was becoming difficult to manage the collection, the radio shows, and my web site (www.tedmcgram.com).

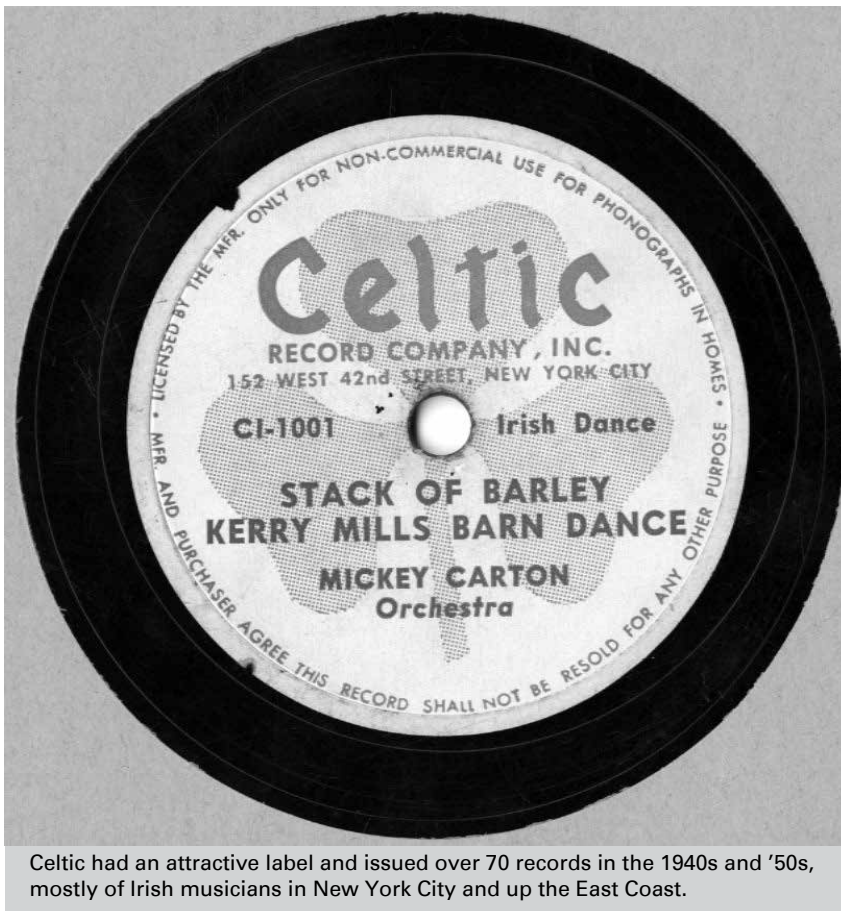
Now in my 80s, I realized that I had to make a decision about the future of all this material, so I set some goals that a future caretaker should meet:

1. Keep the collection together.
2. Store it properly.

3. Catalog the collection, using one of the library standards.
4. Make the material available to researchers and others who are interested in the material.

Much discussion and careful planning led to the selection of the Ward Irish Music Archive in Milwaukee as the future caretaker of this important collection. Ward met my goals and was interested not only in the Irish material but also the Scottish music and the Celtic-influenced music of Canada. They also have an active sharing program with other archives.

After a good run of 43 years, I retired the "Irish Party House" and "O' Fiddler" radio shows in June 2017. I'm still consulting on Irish music and playing the button accordion. And there are enough copies and duplicates of the collection here to last a lifetime! ▼



Celtic had an attractive label and issued over 70 records in the 1940s and '50s, mostly of Irish musicians in New York City and up the East Coast.

Ted McGraw is a physicist, engineer, Irish musician who plays button accordion, radio broadcaster, Irish music researcher and collector, chair of the North American Archive Committee of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, and member of the New York State Folk Arts Roundtable. Photo by Trish Minty.



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