

Ep 7: Irish Music w/ Chas Moore

[Chas singing and playing guitar]

Well, in comes the captain's daughter,
The captain of the Yeos,
Saying: Brave United Irishman,
We'll ne'er again be foes.
A thousand pounds I'll bring you...
...And dress myself in man's attire
And fight for liberty.
From "The Boys of Wexford"



[Lisa] Dia dhuit! (Hello!) This is episode 7 of Podcrawl Podchroal, the podcast from the McClelland Irish Library. I'm your host, Lisa, the Assistant Librarian, with Chas Moore, the former executive library director. Today we'll talk all about Irish music. Can you tell listeners a brief history of traditional Irish music?

[Chas] Well, thanks for asking me here, Lisa. It's, um, I've been associated with the library for 10 years and with the Irish Cultural Center for 15 years. And, uh, to ask what is Irish traditional music is really a tough question. I used to teach, um, an Irish music class for the Maricopa Community College is a three credit class.

[Lisa] Oh yeah.

[Chas] And so unless you want to spend about 25 hours here today, that'll take a while. But briefly, um, one thing I would always start the course off with is, well, what is Irish music? And go around the room and ask everybody what they think it is. And so I'll ask you, if you go to St. Patrick's Day, what, and you expect to hear Irish music, what are you going to want to hear?

[Lisa] Bagpipes

[Chas] Bagpipes. Okay, good. The uilleann pipes are the Irish version of the bagpipes. Okay. So that would typically be traditional Irish music. But then if you ask people what do they wanna see at St. Patrick's Day, you'll probably, depending on who you ask, you may get, oh, I wanna see Flogging Molly, or the Drop Kick Murphys. Or I wanna see a U2 cover band. So is U2 Irish traditional music? And most people would say, no, that's rock and roll, it's Irish rock and roll. And I would say, yeah, that is Irish music. Because without Irish traditional music and the tradition of music in Ireland, there'd be no U2. And that's a subject for a whole lecture later, which we'll get to later.

[Lisa] Okay.

[Chas] And so the history of Irish music really has to start with what is Irish music. And there's so many different versions of Irish music. There's Irish classical music, there's Irish Jazz, uh, there's vocal music, there's instrumental music.

It is a very, very broad sweep and Irish music. You know, the interesting thing about it is goes back hundreds and hundreds, if not thousands of years too. Um, so I think people tend to say, well, what is Irish music? And a lot of people will, will say, well, what's that music that I see people dancing to? Or I hear it in the pubs when I go to Ireland, or if you go to Irish pubs here. And that is probably more the type of Irish music that you would call Irish traditional music. Okay. And that really is a folk music. And folk music, of course being kind of defined by music that it's for, for the everyday folks.

And it's synonymous with, uh, you know, instruments that are fairly easy to get to learn to play. It's passed down through oral transmission. Um, a lot of time it's not learning through the written notes, but just learning by ear and the instruments tend to be accessible instruments. But the interesting thing about Irish music, Irish traditional music, and it's very much like some other folk musics of the world, which, uh, there's kind of a fine line between whether it's folk music or it's really classical music.

[Lisa] Oh.

[Chas] If you look at Indian music and South Indian music, It's incredibly sophisticated, as sophisticated as any Western music, yet it's considered a folk music. Oh, and the same thing could be said for even types of African music. So that, that's an interesting thing for, for music history course.

[Lisa] Yeah.

[Chas] But as far as Irish traditional music goes, it's, it is kind of centered around a certain form of music that's been handed down and kept alive. It's a living, music, 'cause it's still very much alive today and that's the neat thing about it.

[Lisa] Yeah, very interesting. What instruments are most popular?

[Chas] Well, the instruments that are the most popular, um, really varies from, I would say from decade to decade. And over the course of time. That's really evolved as the music's evolved. And the interesting thing is that there are a number of anthropologists and archeologists that are uncovering and reconstructing ancient Irish instruments that would've been used in neolithic times in in Ancient Ireland. And that consists of different types of horns and percussion instruments and, and it is just fascinating and there's information that's available academically and on web about that.

But I think traditionally over the years, you'll see in Irish music, what you'll see in most world musics around the world, you'll see instruments that are percussive. Uh, you'll see woodwinds

or, or instruments that you blow into. You'll have string instruments and then of course you've got the voice. And when you're talking about the voice, you're talking about a huge repertoire of music that not only is in the Irish language, but it's also in the English language. So it's fascinating. Now, going back in history, I think a couple of the instruments that kind of got established as Irish instruments during the Gaelic Times, which could be, uh, during the Gaelic, uh, Renaissance before, uh, the Vikings arrived in Ireland and a lot of the colonization started. And of course, the most prominent instrument is cláirseach or what is considered the Irish harp.

And that has different versions of it. And, um, that was considered the main instrument of the Bard, who was the ancient, uh, storyteller, musician who kept the oral history and sang songs about, uh, the genealogy of the different, uh, uh, kingdoms that were in Ireland and the different clan chiefs and also were prominent members of any, uh, any family that existed in, in Gaelic Ireland. And like I said, they're considered the Bards, they were the storytellers, the, the ones that kept oral history, played the music. And it is kind of speculative, but there is a historical record of some of the tunes and the songs being very ancient.

That, that could possibly go back hundreds and hundreds, if not a thousand years. So both the and there's, there's a material that, in fact, we have some of the materials here in the library that I'll talk about later that actually talk about the [?] uh, of the Bards. And there's books about the, that have collected some of the ancient songs that the Bards would've sung and some musicians over the years have speculated what those, um, tunes would be. And of course, it's a fascinating subject in itself that could go back a long time. But the Irish harp was considered the, the prominent instrument of Ireland to the effect that after Ireland was colonized, it was then given as the symbol of the emblem of the Irish state, and that's why you'll see Ireland has the harp as its national emblem, which is unique. There's only a few countries in the world that have that. And that lends itself to just the love of the Irish for all things that are related to the arts, whether it's Irish music, dance, um, the spoken word, and so that would be one of the main instruments, and so that's probably the most ancient.

Of course, all the woodwinds and whistles and simple whistles that you could make in ancient times and horns and things like that would've survived through, through the ages, and then eventually evolved into a penny whistle, which is a very, very inexpensive instrument that just about anybody could learn to play. And then the wooden flute, which is more sophisticated. And so, so there's the, the woodwind instruments. And then of course, in Ireland, there would've been, um, you know, especially due to the influences of the European continent, there were all sorts of lyre or, uh, lute string instruments that eventually made its way and became more prominent as classical music became more prominent in Ireland.

Evolved into lutes and guitars and, uh, other types of string instruments. And of course the voice, the voice singing in either Irish or in English language. Uh, the other type of instruments are, are the reed instruments which would be a concertina or an accordion, are very popular and like I said, almost every decade that changes. As the banjo became popular in the United States and some of the minstrel shows went over to Ireland and England in the late 1800s, the banjo became used in Ireland.

[Lisa] Oh yeah.

[Chas] And became part of the tradition. And so that doesn't make any sense because the band who were originally from Africa, so yeah. Uh, but that's just the changing nature of folk music in general. That folk music is constantly evolving. And even though before I was talking about Irish traditional music may actually be considered a classical music, and the definition of a classical music is where it's very structured, it's very sophisticated. There's usually training, mentorship involved in it. And in Irish music, that same thing exists.

You know, some of the melodies are considered very, very simple. But the, the, the really uniqueness of Irish music makes it like classical music is the fact that it is very sophisticated and it's very much like Irish, like Irish art, Irish literature, Irish dance. The devil is into details. It seems very, very simple.

Like why do they dance Irish dance with your hands down on your, on your side, and you're not using your hips or your upper body. Well look at the intricate foot patterns and dance patterns of when you're doing group dances. Same thing with Irish art: you look at the Book of Kells or Irish Celtic art from afar, you see kind of a general design of maybe a letter or something. Then you get in close and you see that detail. That's the uniqueness of, of Irish music. The melody may be simple. [singing] Well, that's the simple melody. The folk music is that about anybody can learn to pick up penny whistle any instrument and play that melody. The art of Irish music, and what makes it so endearing and so unique is the syncopation and the ornamentation of that melody.

[Singing...I'll do another session where I replace 'em with music, you know, and demonstrate that.]

Uh, but the instruments then kind of are along those, uh, lines of what the different types of instruments are that you'll see pretty much in all world music. And then it varies from decade to decade. And of course today you can't have Irish music without maybe a regular drum.

Uh, I didn't talk about the Boron, which is the Irish drum, which is very, very similar to a drum you'll see all across the world. It's just a round piece of wood that has a goat skin or a skin tacked over it and you play it with a beat. [makes a beat with paper slapping leg to imitate the sound of a Boron drum]

And you'll see that in Native American music, African music, Indian music, and the way they play that Boron in Irish music, it's incredible. And so you'll see all that. But today it is gonna, there's a big debate about whether you're gonna see a guitar and you're gonna see probably maybe a synthesizer or you might even see a drum set.

So every decade it's gonna change, but there is traditional music that's considered. The, the mainstream and that would be what the Irish classical music would define as Irish traditional

music. And that's typically what you'll see at a Ceili dance or in the bars in Ireland. And that would consist of probably a fiddle. Well, I didn't even talk about the fiddle, the fiddles, a main instrument since the 1700s.

[Lisa] Yeah.

[Chas] Uh, when violin became prominent in European music. And so, um, as far as the instrumentation goes, that is gonna vary from decade to decade. And when I speak a little bit more about the history of Irish music, I think we need to talk about, uh, the collecting of Irish songs, the passing of the music along Uh, documenting the songs and then the revivals that typically will happen because an interesting thing about the history of Irish music is that it does mirror the social economic conditions of the country. And there's been ebbs and flows of Irish music and even points back in history where the Irish, uh, harp and pipes were discouraged and actually illegal to play.

[Lisa] Oh, I didn't know that.

[Chas] And so that's something that we can talk about more later. But, uh, for today, you'll see the, the basic ensemble is going to be, you know, if you have an uilleann piper, which is the Irish pipes uh, you'll have a fiddle, you'll have maybe a banjo or a guitar or some string instrument playing the company. Of course, you'll have the bodhran drum and you'll have either a pan whistle or wooden flute. And you may or may not have an accordion or concertina. And, and that's the basic ensemble of Irish traditional music, which is the mainstay of Irish music and it's fondly referred to, uh, as the, the, well, it's the water in the well.

It's what creates the tradition in Ireland. And the Chieftains are a very, very popular Irish band over the last 50 years recorded a video called The Water From the Mouth. And that's something you'll see that'll come up is that traditional musicians will learn the tradition and then a lot of people will go off and vary, and they may get into punk Irish rock, they may play jazz, they may play blues, you know, all sorts of variations.

But the, the tradition itself is the water in the well, and everybody has their own individual take on it. But that's what keeps the tradition going and we'll have to talk sometime about how it's passed along.

[Lisa] Yeah. And who are some famous Irish musicians?

[Chas] Well, again, that is kind of, sort of depend on what decade you're talking about. I have an interesting record that I picked up and I'm not even sure where I got it from. I might have gotten it from my parents or my grandparents. And it's John McCormick and he was a very famous opera singer, tenor who at the time in the early 1900s was considered the number one, uh, singer. And, and he was active about the time when early recordings were made in the early 1900s.

So he was very well known that he was from Athlone Ireland, and I've got some of his records. And the interesting thing about John McCormick is that he would, he would record a record that on one side was opera, was arias from operas. On the other side would be Irish traditional music, Irish traditional songs.

[Lisa] Oh.

[Chas] So going back in history, you'll see that there were were famous musicians throughout Irish history. You know, there's people who were documented as famous Bards, uh, famous Harpists, Pipers, uh, so you can go back throughout history and pick up just about from any decade, uh, who the musicians were at the time.

Uh, when, when I grew up, I was listening to the music and the people that were popular in the fifties and sixties. While I'm dating myself here. And then I noticed that, you know, these days, you know, there's certain bands and musicians that are popular. So at any given moment, you're gonna see uh, people who are kind of the, the most active musicians right now are the ones who are recorded, have a presence on the web, or they're touring.

Uh, Chloe Agnew's gonna be here, was one of the Celtic women. And uh, of course we had some interaction with Nick Maloney, who just passed away recently, but he was very instrumental over the last 50 years as somebody who was from Ireland but then, was an musicologist and was at N Y U, uh, performed here several years ago. And so he would be very well known.

And then some of my influences growing up when I started playing Irish music would be the Clancy Brothers and, and The Dubliners, and Mary Bergin, and just the people who were active in the fifties and sixties. So, uh, the list is kind of very extensive. Yeah. And it sort of depends on what kind of music. If you're interested in traditional music, instrumental singers, um, you know, the number of singers is incredible. You have a number of ensemble groups.

[Lisa] Yeah. And you mentioned the, the Chieftains earlier.

[Chas] The Chieftains were very, very instrumental. They just toured so much and they were just, So, such really messengers for Irish music around the world. And, but the same can be, can be said about lots, lots of other musicians as well, so. Uh, that that will be covered in the Irish music history class. In the meantime, there, there's a lot of information available on the web right now, and people are touring through all the time. Probably at least one touring band once a month coming through Phoenix.

[Lisa] Oh wow. Okay, cool. You were the library's executive director for 10 years. How long have you been a musician, Chas?

[Chas] Well, I've been a musician, well, I, I should say I would be a musician, um, as a folk musician. I've never considered myself an official musician, but I've certainly been a music lover my whole life.

And, um, I, I was, uh, the founding director of the head librarian and director for the library in 2012. When the library opened. But before that, I was involved in, in the Academy of Irish Studies here as, um, music as a musician, uh, taking classes with, uh, with Pat McCrossan, who ran a very active Irish music program through our academy. So that goes back in additional, uh, five years.

I also taught Irish music in Ireland. Oh, for a study abroad program for Mesa Community College where I was working. And then, uh, I came here to start the library and be the head librarian. And, and the library really exists because of the vision of Norman McClelland, who was, uh, the CEO of Shamrock Foods who wanted to have a library where we could share the, the heritage of Ireland and his love of the arts.

And, and, and I think this is an amazing enterprise that we have here, and it's, it's taken 10 years to get it up and running, but during that time, I also served as the executive director for the Irish Cultural Learning Foundation for about three years. And then I went back and being the library director before I just recently retired.

And um, I've been playing music and exposed to Irish music my whole life. I can remember listening to my parents' records when I was a kid, and I always loved books and records. Growing up in Chicago and Wisconsin, you spent a lot of time indoors because it was too cold to go outside. And I remember what the kind of music I would hear around my house was a lot of musicals, but then I would hear things like [singing] "Too-Ra-Loo-Ra-Loo-Ral" That's an Irish lullaby and [Bing Crosby](#), and that's the kind of stuff that my parents listened to. So I would hear that around the house. And then when we'd go over to my grandmother, Laura's house in Chicago, she had a piano and she played piano and organ for the local Catholic church. And my dad also played piano and supposedly played organ at the church too.

And then on my mom's side, I had, um, our, our who we called Gramps. My, my crazy zany grandfather on my mom's side, who was a self-taught musician who played piano. He, he, he was the life of the party. And whenever we got together and all of our family vacations every year were around the family from Chicago, you know, the Irish family down in Chicago. And my grandfather taught me to play guitar just how to sight and by ear, and he'd go, Uh, put your finger here and then I would like play with him and we'd have family gatherings and he would play at the local church, and he was like the, the life of the party and he was one of these piano players that could play anything, so I would play things like [singing] "who put the old overall and Mrs. Murphy's chowder", you know, all these, these crazy, what I would call goofy stereotypical Irish dance hall songs, which is what some people would call Irish music-Irish American music [singing] "when Irish eyes are smiling". So that's what I played with my, with my crazy fun Gramps.

And it's like growing up that way. Well, that was just the way it was: You learned by ear, you played for your family. It was fun. And that's just the way you acted. And so, um, it wasn't until later that I realized, well, that's really Irish music. And that's just kind of growing up with the tradition of how it had changed once people came and were in this country.

You know, in the fifties, folk music was the big thing, whether it was Burl Ives or it was, you know, the music of Woody Guthrie, the Weavers. And I remember being infatuated with the Smothers Brothers and Hootenanny on tv. And all this kind of folk music. And so as I learned to play guitar, that's kind of what I was exposed to. And it wasn't necessarily Irish traditional, it was kind of more American music. But then a funny thing happened when I was in junior high, uh, the Beach Boys were popular at that point in time. I wanted to be a Beach Boy. So I bugged my dad and bugged my dad until he finally got me a still Sears silvertone guitar 'cause he worked at Sears. And I started learning surfing music 'cause I wanted to move to California and be a Beach Boy. But at that point in time, the Beatles came on board and there and music and the whole world just changed. I got interested in Blues, Rock and Roll. I played in a Rock and Roll band, a very bad Rock and Roll band in high school.

But I was always interested in classical music, musicals, and jazz. And later when I was in college, I was in arts administration and I was stage managing. So I stage managed musicals and opera 'cause I could sort of follow a musical score. Um, and even though I grew up in an Irish Catholic family in Chicago where my parents grandparents, And their great-grandparents all were Irish immigrants right during the famine or after the famine. My parents didn't wear any of this Irishness on their sleeves, but you know, I realized later, after I got the bug and I really got into my Irish background. Well, everything my mom said and offered cooking was Irish and my dad had two, you know, Irish ties with a harp on it. One, one was green and one was blue, but, but the Irish government colors on it that I would wear on St. Patrick's Day, and that's about all he talked up being Irish. Uh, in the sixties when I would come home, my dad would watch Walter Cronkite every night on the news. And he would come home and he was like clockwork. We'd watch Walter Cronkite on the news and it was all Vietnam. Vietnam, Vietnam, oh Martin Luther King, civil Rights Movement, another bombing today in Northern Ireland, and then go on the next day, the same scene. And I started to think of myself, well, what is going on? You know, we're Irish and why are they killing each other in Ireland?

And then the bug hit me. We always have a saying down here at the library that something is your gateway into the passion for your, your tradition. And whether it's your parents' cooking or it's literature, or it's music, something just grabs you and you just get the bug. And so for me it was music. And it really kind of got set off during the troubles, the sixties when I was interested in Bob Dylan because Peter Paul and Mary and The Weavers and all that were the big thing. And I liked Bob Dylan 'cause he was from the Midwest. And, but he would, and he talks about the number one in, one of the major influences on him were the Clancy brothers when he went to New York and how they could sing with such passion and where did they get that from. And that's what, what grabbed me at that point in time.

And then I kind of got infatuated and I spent the rest of my life trying to learn more about Irish music. And because the Irish music and just the fact of the Irish music that reflects history, And the times and the social condition of the people. I mean, that was kind of my thing. And I don't know how else to explain it, but that's kind of what gets you hooked on it.

Mm-hmm. You know, I, I've just been infatuated. I play guitar, I play a tenor banjo, and I play the zouki, which is an octave mandolin. And I try to sing. And that's kind of what I'm interested in. And over the years I've been interested in just the history of music and everything, learning as much as I can about the music.

[Lisa] Yeah. Well, it sounds like you know a lot about it. Thank you so much, Chas, for all that info.

[Chas] Thank you, Lisa.

[Lisa] Um, and we'll, uh, we'll have to talk soon again about, um, Irish music with our collection. Um, and you'll have to play for us.

[Chas] That'd be great. We have so many great materials here. I think that's, that's a subject for another day. But thanks for having me.

[Lisa] Yes. Thank you so much for listening. We'll see you soon at McClelland Library. Slan!
[Bye!]

[Chas singing and playing guitar] Well, in comes the captain's daughter, The captain of the Yeos,
From "The Boys of Wexford"

