

O'Rourke Debuts Famine CD



Declan O'Rourke
Band in full flight.

FROM THE HOB

Paul Keating



SIX years ago on a cold and windy January night in Dublin, I caught the last concert of the 2013 Temple Bar Trad Fest in St. Werburgh's Church, a much smaller Church of Ireland house of worship diagonally across from the much larger Christ Church Cathedral which hosted many of the premier shows at the prestigious winter festival, stirring a bit of business and culture for Dublin's touristy Temple Bar area out of season.

For the show that night featuring Dublin singer/songwriter Declan O'Rourke, centuries old St. Werburgh's was an inspired choice for the more intimate performance we were treated to that night. While the church was cold, those velvety pew cushions added some comfort and O'Rourke provided the warmth of original music that even then was making a big name for himself all over Ireland.

Having caught O'Rourke's original appearance at one of the Irish Arts Center's SongLives series gigs the year previous, I was intrigued to see him in his "native habitat" and the timing was right for me that year.

As anticipated, he held the crowd in the palm of his hand with some of his more familiar popular work early on, and in the latter half of the concert he grew more serious as he introduced several songs he had written that were inspired by the Great Irish Famine of 1845-'48, a risky thing to do perhaps for other performers but not for O'Rourke this night and in this hallowed hall.

O'Rourke's set up was that he had discovered that his own grandfather was born in a workhouse in Gort, the kind that got their start in Famine times, and unearthing of a link back to one of the darkest periods in Irish history. It set his mind wandering back for material for new songs and revelations for his generation where not much attention had been paid to it.

As he sang two or three songs from the potential canon of work he projected for the future, I looked through the audience on both sides of the church aisle and was impressed with their attention to the newly minted lyrics spun by a master storyteller and troubadour. It was clear that he had found a vein to mine in that special way that a visionary folk singer can.

Balancing the demands of a popular performer in Ireland and Europe and occasional forays to the U.S. and the Irish Arts Center, O'Rourke still kept working at his mission to bring the tales of the Famine years to light for today's audience so he continued doing extensive reading and research on the period and the historical reflections that derived from it in the works of John O'Connor and Christine Kinealy and others.

Towards the end of 2017 he released a CD, *Chronicles of the Great Irish Famine*, with 12 original compositions, and had the opportunity to workshop it at the Abbey Theatre and ready it for performances with a hand-picked band. And thanks to one of his most fervent sponsors, the Irish Arts Center, he is going to have the opportunity to perform it with his band for nine shows on a two-week tour in early February with the assis-

tance of Culture Ireland.

Most of the band touring the U.S. have appeared on the CD and performed in over 20 performances in Ireland and the U.K. -- including Celtic Connections last year around this time -- and the show has gotten a marvelous reception among audiences and critics.

Appearing with O'Rourke are fiddlers John Sheahan, the last of the original Dubliners still alive, and Chris Herzberger who has recorded with O'Rourke before, Dermot Byrne on the accordion, Floriane Blancke on the harp and vocals, Jack Maher, Rob Calder, Caitriona Frost on percussion, and joining this tour, American, Cillian Vallely on the uilleann pipes.

One of the songs from the ambitious recording garnered first place as the best original folk track at the inaugural RTE Folk Awards in Dublin at the end of last year when "Along the Western Seaboard" won that distinction.

The tour begins in Chicago on February 2 at the Old Town School of Music; the 3rd in Kansas City, Missouri at the KC Irish Center before a four-day residence at the Irish Arts Center in New York City (www.irishartscenter.org) from the 7th to the 10th.

O'Rourke will fit in a public interview and chat with historian Kinealy at 6 p.m. at Ireland's Great Hunger Museum at Quinnipiac University to talk about the Famine and its impact on Irish culture. On February 14 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania the troop will perform at Tellus360 theater before finishing up with two shows in Elkin and Asheville, North Carolina.

In marking the centennial of the 1916 Rising a couple of years ago in Ireland and all over the realm of the Irish diaspora, we learned many new lessons about who we are as the Irish of home and away. O'Rourke's aim in his *Chronicles of the Great Irish Famine* through his songs and creative perspective is to honor the past in our remembrance but also in the celebration of our common humanity in our own time and place. Could there ever be a time that is more relevant than now throughout the world?

Weekend Fiddles and Quill

UP in the Northwest Bronx there is a lovely little café that most closely approximates the cozy confines of an Irish kitchen house party atmosphere while also paying homage to the rich cultural assets nearby and all around New York City at times.

Whether it is local theater, poetry or music, this multi-faceted hostelry provides sustenance for artists who prefer smaller, more intimate spaces to share their artistry.

And for the punters who partake of those crafts, they are well catered for with a fine service of pub grub and reasonably priced grog in the colorful Riverdale locale known as An Beal Bocht on West 238th Street on a bluff overlooking Gaelic Park and steps away from Manhattan College.

Trad music fans in the neighborhood currently enjoy regular appearances by the Kerry singer Mary Courtney on a Friday night and Sunday night sessions led by the Wexford Box player John Redmond and flute player Sean Tierney from Yonkers.

There are ad-hoc concerts there occasionally, and such venerable musicians like Andy McGann and Kevin Burke have made return engagements there when touring the Big Apple.

There is a new initiative brewing called the "NYC Celtic Fiddle Feile" which is hoping to take root at An Beal Bocht with the theme being a gathering of fiddle players to share tunes periodically.

It is a worthy gambit with no shortage of really fine Celtic fiddle players available to draw from locally who might enjoy a Saturday night of tunes and crossing paths with musicians who don't always have such an opportunity to play in such a comfortable format.

The inaugural event takes place Saturday, January 26 from 8:30 to 11:30 p.m., and there is no question that it will get off to a rousing start.

Three of New York's top fiddlers well known to session denizens around town, Denny McCarthy, Mattie Mancuso and Colum Michael Pasqua, are joining forces with accompaniment by Matt Stapleton. For more info, visit www.anbealbocht.com

Earlier that day, the Kerry-men's P & B Association is hosting a "Commemoration of the Great Trade Union Leader Mike Quill" from 1-6 p.m. at their hall at 305 McLean Avenue in Yonkers which will have lots of information about the legendary labor leader from Kilgarvan. Call 914-964-2100 for more info or visit www.kerrymen.org.

