

The Lasting Influence Of Ireland's First Fiddle

BY STEVE DOLLAR

Adventurous duo Martin Hayes and Dennis Cahill have been pushing the boundaries of traditional Irish music for decades, but the Irish fiddler and American guitarist don't go it alone.

The pair comes to the Irish Arts Center in Hell's Kitchen Thursday for an eight-show residency that features cross-genre collaborations with leading performers from the worlds of jazz, contemporary chamber music, Indian and indie pop, among others.

The Wall Street Journal spoke with Mr. Hayes, as well as several of the collaborators on this show—including two who have been fans of the headliners since childhood—about the coming concerts.

Martin Hayes

What I'm actually good at is playing Irish music on the fiddle. I continue to do what I'm good at. But I flex it, I bend it, I twist it. I make space for other things to happen in it, and around it and beside it.

If there's a different mood and feeling being created by the experience of other musicians around that, then I mold and adapt how I'm playing it. I'm still speaking the same language, but it's forcing me to adjust. I improvise in my own way. Jazz improvisation isn't the only improvisation. I'm trying to develop some language around that for myself.

Colin Jacobsen

*Violinist, contemporary string quartet
Brooklyn Rider*

Martin was my antidote to get me out of Western classical music. What he does is so natural and has such an amazing touch to it. When we formed Brooklyn Rider, he was one of the people we reached out to, to try and figure out ways to reimagine some of these beautiful, traditional tunes that Martin played.

One thing he talked about is that sometimes the most simple and traditional tune that everyone knows is a great point of departure. People can really take it out of context, or by playing it very simply can be true to yourself and the tune. What the quartet can do is provide a different context for those tunes.

Utsav Lal

Boston-based raga and jazz pianist

I've always been a huge fan of both Martin and Dennis. I heard them when I was 12, and I used to live in Dublin. One of my old teachers put me onto a lot of music. There's a huge amount of communication that they have. I want to figure out how they're doing that, because it's so different from the way jazz musicians converse or Indian classical musicians converse. Very simple in nature, but extremely deep and intense.



Martin Hayes and Dennis Cahill, above, will start an eight-show run Thursday at the Irish Arts Center. PHOTO: ERIN BAIANO

The way people play slow airs in Irish music is very similar to the way people play *alap* [improvised melody that precedes a *raga*] in Indian music. One of the things that interested me is how people like Martin play a tune, but they don't play it the same way each time.

Cassandra Wilson

Jazz vocalist

I had done a DNA test in 2014. I got the results back and realized that I have Irish ancestry. There's always been a connection. Coming from Mississippi, there's a very strong Irish and Scots-Irish cultural base. It's everywhere in the South, until you get down to New Orleans where it becomes more of a French thing.

There's a lot of syncopation, anticipation in the music that's close to what we do in jazz. Martin explained this to me.

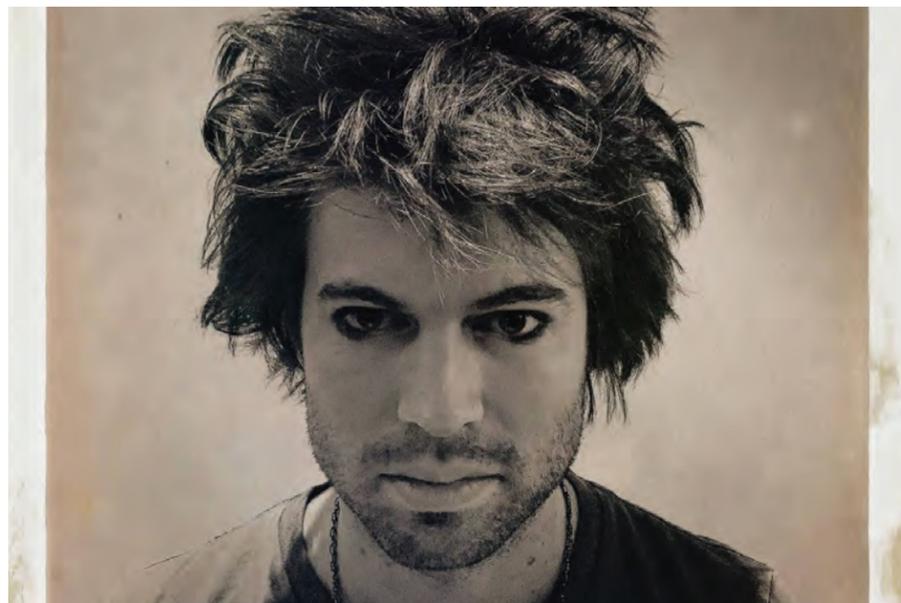
There's a type of dancing they do in Ireland. He said it really did have those kinds of rhythms. This is something I didn't know—that tap dancing actually originated in Ireland.

Thomas Bartlett

New York pianist, singer and producer—and member of Irish contemporary music group the Gloaming, with Messrs. Hayes and Cahill

Martin's first solo recording came out when I was 10. I became obsessed with it. The next year, my family was in Dublin. I saw Martin was playing a concert and had my parents take me. It was a life-changing experience. My parents just drove me around the country following him. By the second or third night, he was noticing this strange little blond kid sitting in the front row screaming all the time.

I find Martin to be uniquely transcendent in the way that he approaches the melody and teases out the phrases that feel to me separate from the tradition. Had he been born in a different place, he'd be doing it with a different set of material. The essence of what he does is pouring so much love and so much intensity into these very simple melodies.



Thomas Bartlett PHOTO: GLEN HANSARD