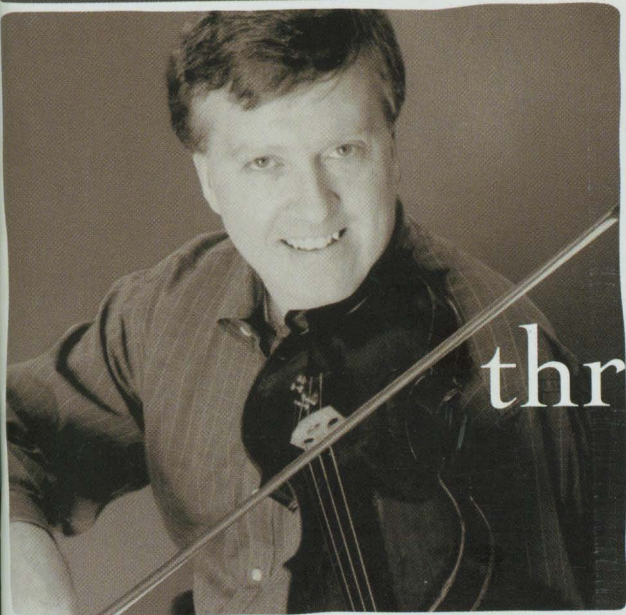


brian conway



first  
through  
the  
gate



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

SFW CD 40481 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

brian conway  
**first** through the gate

- 1 **Reels:** The Liffey Banks / The Concert Reel / The Donegal Traveler 3:46
- 2 **Slip Jigs:** The Foxhunters / Barney Brallaghan / Comb Your Hair and Curl It 2:23
- 3 **Reels:** The Mullingar Lea / Dowd's No. 9 / The Lass of Carracastle 3:46
- 4 **Jigs:** Up Sligo No. 2 / Contentment Is Wealth / The Scotsman over the Border 3:07
- 5 **Reels:** The Blackberry Blossom / The Silver Spire / The Dawn 3:58
- 6 **Hornpipes:** The Cuckoo / Flowers of Spring / Dunphy's 4:18
- 7 **Reels:** The Dairy Maid's Reel / The Reel of Bogie / Langton's Favorite 3:41
- 8 **Highlands:** O'Flynn's Fancy / Casey's Pig / Jimmy Lyons' 3:17
- 9 **Reels:** Paddy Ryan's Dream / Never Was Piping So Gay / John McGrath's 3:51
- 10 **Reels:** Jenny's Welcome to Charlie / Tom Steele 4:14
- 11 **Slow Air:** *An raibh tú ag an gCarraig?* (Were You at the Rock?) 4:25
- 12 **Reels:** Martin Wynne's Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 4 4:42
- 13 **Hornpipes:** Minnie Foster's Clog / The Newcastle Hornpipe / Fly by Night No. 2 4:54
- 14 **Jigs:** Jerry's Beaver Hat / Scatter the Mud / Kitty's Wedding 3:45
- 15 **Reels:** The Spike Island Lasses / Tom Moylan's Frolics 2:27

Extensive notes, photos, 55 minutes.

In his long-awaited, stunning solo debut, premier Irish-American fiddler Brian Conway performs with a skill, grace, and force that are steeped in tradition but distinctively his own. Well known in the New York Irish/Celtic community, Conway has won numerous All-Ireland fiddling competitions, and has been called one of the best fiddlers of his generation. Nothing is missed or missing in Brian Conway's Sligo-style fiddling. From hop jigs to hornpipes, and highlands to slow airs, Conway preserves and passes along the best of the past while melding it with the talent and imagination of the present.

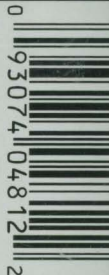


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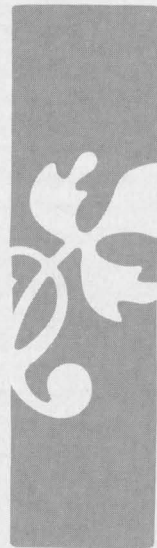
Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

brian conway

# first through the gate

SFW CD 40481 © © 2002 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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- 4 Jigs:** Up Sligo No. 2 / Contentment Is Wealth / The Scotsman over the Border 3:07
- 5 Reels:** The Blackberry Blossom / The Silver Spire / The Dawn 3:38
- 6 Hornpipes:** The Cuckoo / Flowers of Spring / Dunphy's 4:18
- 7 Reels:** The Dairy Maid's Reel / The Reel of Bogie / Langton's Favorite 3:41
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- 9 Reels:** Paddy Ryan's Dream / Never Was Piping So Gay (Ed Reavy / The Ed Reavy Foundation, BMI) / John McGrath's (John McGrath) 3:51
- 10 Reels:** Jenny's Welcome to Charlie / Tom Steele 4:14
- 11 Slow Air:** *An raibh tú ag an gCarraig?* (Were You at the Rock?) 4:25
- 12 Reels:** Martin Wynne's Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 4 (Martin Wynne) 4:42
- 13 Hornpipes:** Minnie Foster's Clog / The Newcastle Hornpipe / Fly by Night No. 2 4:34
- 14 Jigs:** Jerry's Beaver Hat / Scatter the Mud / Kitty's Wedding 3:45
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## SLIGO FIDDLELING

by Mick Moloney

County Sligo is situated in the far northwest of Ireland, in the province of Connaught. It is a wondrously beautiful area, with seascapes and picturesque mountains and valleys in the north, and hundreds of beautiful lakes dotting the interior. It has a profusion of small towns and villages. The biggest urban area is the town of Sligo, but historically most of the people have made their living in the rural areas. In the 1990s, the good times that the whole of Ireland enjoyed transformed the local economy. Jobs became plentiful and wages soared. The county now bustles with newfound prosperity, and tourism is flourishing, as visitors flock to the area in huge numbers to view a matchless variety of megalithic monuments and enjoy the native culture.

It's a far cry from the Sligo of the late 1840s when local young men and women began an exodus that was to last for decades. Small subsistence farming was the staple life of most people at that time. The ravages of famine were keenly felt throughout rural Ireland, and the memory of poor tenant farmers of north Sligo—evicted and forced to emigrate to North America by big landowners like Lord Palmerston, the owner of Mullaghmore Castle—was still alive in the area, in an oral tradition filled with stories of history,

myth, and legend, which captivated the young William Butler Yeats and inspired much of his early poetry. The mysterious world of traditional Irish music largely eluded Yeats. His time was spent in the big houses of the landed gentry, and he didn't have a ready entrée to the world of the poor farmers who nurtured and sustained this tradition. From a distance, he admired what he could make out of it and wrote eloquently of it in his famous poem "The Fiddler of Dooney."

Poverty and unemployment drove most emigrants to seek a better life in America. More than 85,000 left for good between the end of the famine in 1849 and the early decades of the 20th century. Among them were some of the finest traditional fiddlers in the history of Irish music. The two main instruments in Sligo music of the late 19th and early 20th century were the flute and the fiddle, with the latter predominating.

The major names associated with Sligo-style fiddling in the United States in the early 1900s are Michael Coleman (1891–1945), James Morrison (1893–1947), Paddy Sweeney (1894–1974), and Paddy Killoran (1904–1965). All were born and raised in south Sligo and emigrated to the United States between 1915 and 1925. They inherited a virtuoso fiddling tradition that was well established by the time they were children. Regional styles and repertoires of Irish traditional music are generally associated with gifted individuals who leave an indelible imprint on their community, and indeed, several fiddle-masters' names are still well known among Sligo traditional music performers and aficionados—names such as blind Tom Healy and his pupils Jamesy Gannon, Thomas Gilmartin, Pat Mannion, and Kipeen Scanlon. They had a major impact on the musical development of the next generation of fiddlers.

Coleman, Killoran, and Morrison ended up becoming the most famous of this generation. Though they all became brilliant and prolific recording artists, they had very different careers. Killoran and Morrison formed orchestras that played on radio and in Irish-American dance halls. Both played and recorded traditional tunes, but with their orchestras they performed a mixture of traditional and more modern material for diverse immigrant and native-born dance hall audiences. Coleman flirted briefly with the vaudeville stage, where he developed an act that had him dancing to his own fiddling, foreshadowing by more than 40 years the dancing Cape Breton fiddlers Natalie MacMaster and Ashley MacIsaac and the late Nashville multi-instrumentalist John Hartford! But Coleman didn't like the drudgery of playing for dances, so he became a semi-reclusive figure, legendary more for recordings than live performances. He made more than 80 commercial recordings, 10 transcription discs made for radio, and a small number of private discs. They were filled with memorable virtuoso playing, famous for the embellishments, ornamentations, and variations that with apparent effortlessness he introduced into almost every rendering. Nobody will ever know for sure if these variations arose spontaneously in the studio or whether he had them "mapped out" beforehand. Either way, they've served ever since as an exemplary stylistic reference point for countless fiddlers.

James Morrison too recorded over 80 sides, many solo and others with his orchestra. He was a master dance teacher and music teacher and practiced both trades in New York, where he arrived in 1915. He called himself and was known as "The Professor." He recorded for a variety of labels, including Columbia, Gennet, New Republic, Okeh, and Vocalion. His virtuosity enabled him to play in difficult and unusual keys for Irish music.

Paddy Killoran, one of Morrison's pupils, arrived from Ballymote in south Sligo in the early 1920s and went on to form several orchestras that played for dancing. The most prominent, The Pride of Erin Orchestra, played on ships going back and forth between Ireland and America in the 1930s. Killoran recorded traditional music and more commercial material with orchestras that he organized over the years. He left a memorable legacy of solo and duet recordings, some of the latter performed with his south Sligo friend and fellow-fiddler Paddy Sweeney and some with flute player Mike Flynn.

The impact of all these recordings on traditional music in the home country was profound. Not only did they serve as classic exemplars of style—particularly among fiddlers—but they also helped create a national repertoire of tunes many of which are still played in sessions, often in the same order as they were recorded. Session playing, as it is known today in Irish traditional music, is probably only of mid-20th-century origin, and the common stock of tunes played by all Irish musicians has been markedly influenced by commercial recordings.

Michael Gorman (1885–1970), another great Sligo fiddler of the same era as Coleman, Morrison, and Killoran, emigrated to England rather than America and made wonderful recordings there between the 1950s and the 1970s. More than 60 of these are reissued on a Topic CD, *Michael Gorman: The Sligo Champion*. He performed extensively in the London area for years with the great and colorful singer and 5-string-banjo traveling woman Margaret Barry. He was a music teacher before he left Sligo, and among his pupils was another brilliant Sligo fiddler, John Vesey, who emigrated to Philadelphia in 1949. Vesey often played with another great immigrant Sligo musician in the

Philadelphia area, flute player Eddie Cahill, who recorded one LP for Shanachie which is unfortunately no longer available. Eddie was one of several great Sligo-style flute players who emigrated to the United States; the others were Tom Morrison and the incomparable, Leitrim-born John McKenna in New York in the 1920s, Mike Flynn in New York in the late 1940s, Kevin Henry, who came over to Chicago in the 1950s, and Mayo's Dermot Grogan, who arrived in New York in the late 1990s.

The Sligo style was carried into the next generation by New York fiddlers, including Andy McGann, who'd known and played with Coleman as a youth; Paddy Reynolds; Martin Wynne; and James "Lad" O'Beirne. Other prominent fiddlers were John Vesey in Philadelphia and Johnny McGreevy in Chicago. Musicologist Miles Krassen, in the introduction to his 1976 edited reissue of Capt. Francis O'Neill's *Music of Ireland*, maintained that McGreevy and Vesey "probably best represent the Old Sligo style of fiddling" in the United States. This raises the question of what exactly the Sligo style is, but surprisingly, musicians disagree little about who is a Sligo-style player and who isn't.

Each great Sligo-style player has a unique voice, but certain general features are associated with the style, and they operate at rhythmic and melodic levels. Ornamentation of melodic lines usually involves complex and often unpredictable mixtures of triplets, single and double grace notes, and short and long rolls. Fiddlers make liberal use of double stopping and freely alternate between short and long bowing, emphasizing the latter. Variation is a striking feature, with all the top players introducing in almost every performance subtle innovations that go beyond ornamentation. Sligo-style music usually has a distinctively pulsating lift and swing, evident in the flute playing,

perhaps even more than in fiddling. And of course there's the repertoire of regional tunes handed down from generation to generation of musicians from Sligo and the Leitrim and Roscommon border areas, close to south Sligo. All this constitutes the foundation of great art and historical connections that today's traditional musicians, such as Brian Conway, his longtime friend and fellow-fiddler Tony DeMarco, and Brian's protégé Patrick Mangan, build upon to form a unique mode of musical expression.

Back in Ireland, after a period of postcolonial funk, when almost every aspect of the native heritage was held in low esteem, traditional music is more than ever a major part of Sligo's cultural expression. It's right up there with literature in the popular imagination: literary aficionados refer to the area as "Yeats country," while music devotees invariably call it "Coleman country." The

world-famous group Dervish is based in Sligo, and brilliant musicians such as John Carty, Seamus O'Donnell, and Gregory Daly play nationwide with a strong Sligo flavor. As long as there are legendary musicians like Peter Horan,



**Andy McGann in 1991**

the McGowans in Gurteen, and the irrepressible Seamus Tansey, the local tradition will flourish.

Brian Conway's recording is an important contribution to this musical culture, in part because of its artistic excellence, but also because, as local musical scholar Gregory Daly has noted over and over, in recent times in Sligo music the fiddle has taken a back seat to the flute. All lovers of Sligo music would agree that it's imperative to maintain the balance between these two instruments, and Brian's recording is very timely.

—New York City, April 2002

*Thanks from Mick Moloney to Reg Hall and Philippe Varlet for information published in various sets of liner notes of reissued 78-RPM material. And particular thanks to Harry Bradshaw, who has researched the lives of Coleman and Morrison in meticulous fashion and reissued their recordings on his own label, Viva Voce. And to Don Meade for his help and generosity.*

## BRIAN CONWAY

by Earle Hitchner

In *From Shore to Shore*, a widely praised 1993 film documentary focusing on Irish traditional music in New York City, fiddler Brian Conway acknowledged that some have labeled him a musical conservative. But as *First Through the Gate* brilliantly demonstrates, he's really a musical conservationist,

preserving and passing along the best of the past while melding it with the talent and imagination of the present.

"You need change and variety and growth in Irish traditional music, but not at the expense of abandoning its roots," Brian explains. "To be your own player while staying within certain boundaries is more of a challenge than to erase all boundaries. Those boundaries can be hard to define, but when you're brought up with them, they become second nature, and you can also recognize when they're being broken or set aside."

From James "Lad" O'Beirne (1911–1980), an exceptional, underappreciated Sligo fiddler who moved to New York City in 1928 and later visited the Conway home on two occasions, Brian directly absorbed "the idea of not forgetting what the tune should sound like. You can embellish, but not to the point where the melody becomes subordinate to style. Otherwise, the tune will morph in every generation of players to the point where it may be significantly different from what the composer intended." That's not rigidity. That's respect. It permeates Brian's long-awaited, stunning solo debut here, and has been ingrained in him from the moment he expressed interest in playing Irish traditional music.

Born in the Bronx, New York, on June 16, 1961, Brian was encouraged early on in music by his parents, both from County Tyrone. His father, Jim, emigrated from Plumbridge; his mother, Rose, came from Newtownstewart, and together they raised five children: Sean, Brian, Rose, Paul, and James. "My mother played the classical violin when she was younger, and my father played the violin around the house and was a good Ulster player," Brian says.



"He didn't play in a real strong traditional style, so he was aware of his shortcomings in that regard and had wanted his sons to play in a traditional style. I was 10, my brother Sean was 11, and we both went to fiddle lessons." (Younger sister Rose would also pursue fiddling, and in 1985 she appeared on *Cherish the Ladies* for Shanachie Records.)

The instructor to whom Brian and Sean went initially was another Bronx resident, Martin Mulvihill (1923–1987), a fiddler from Ballygoughlin, County Limerick, and one of the most renowned teachers of Irish traditional music in America. Brian's tutelage, however, started shakily in early 1972. "My first lesson was an outright disaster," he says. "My brother Sean had a clue. I didn't. I couldn't even play one string at a time. The first three months, I was overwhelmed and discouraged, but still making some progress. Sean was doing really well. My father took me aside and told me he'd thought that I'd be the one who would be advancing. I was motivated by the disappointment I heard in his voice to not let him down, and I just lit a fire under myself to do better. Within weeks, the fiddling took hold for me."

Another teacher-student relationship, the kind forever altering the course and outlook of any impressionable child's life, developed shortly thereafter. Brian's father reconnected with an old friend in the South Bronx, Martin Wynne (1913–1998), a fiddler from Bunnanaddan, County Sligo, who had been taught by Philip O'Beirne, father of Lad O'Beirne and instructor of Sligo legend Michael Coleman. A great admirer of the Sligo fiddling style, Jim Conway persuaded Martin to tutor his son.

"I started to have lessons with Martin through the mail," Brian says. "He was a very shy, reclusive person back then, and he sent me the crossbowing on the second part of 'The Mason's Apron,' and right after that, he allowed us to visit his house in the Bronx. We befriended him, and he basically became a member of the family."

For a time, Brian had two exceptional teachers: Martin Mulvihill and Martin Wynne. "Both had no ego," Brian says. "Neither one minded that I was going to the other for lessons. In fact, Martin Mulvihill was ecstatic when he found out that my father was a friend of Martin Wynne. It was the best of both worlds."

In 1973, just a year and a half after he took up the fiddle, Brian won his first All-Ireland title at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in Listowel, County Kerry. He was 12 years old, and the adjudicator, Chieftains' fiddler Seán Keane, praised his approach to playing. The next year, Brian won his second All-Ireland championship, and in 1986 he won the All-Ireland senior fiddle title, becoming only the fourth American to achieve this feat.

From his high-school to his early college years, Brian soaked up the informal musicmaking at his parents' home on Friday nights, when button accordionist Dave Collins, flutist Gus Collins (no relation), and fiddlers Martin Wynne, Andy McGann, Paddy Reynolds, Louis Quinn, Tom Connolly, and Vincent Harrison would drop by. They all influenced his fiddling. "I had more older friends than most kids my age," he admits. Other traditional musicians who shaped his style and repertoire included fiddlers Paddy Glackin, James Kelly, and Seán Maguire, who "adds a playfulness and sense of humor to his music," Brian points out.



What he received from Martin Wynne was much more than mere tunes and tutelage. "He gave me a deep love for the music and a sense of humility, something you can't get from a teacher in a sterile setting," Brian remembers. "He also told these wonderful stories of musicians he knew and places he'd been. I'd hear how other fiddlers played certain tunes, going all the way back to the 1930s, giving me insight early on that you can approach a tune in many different ways. I'm lucky in that as an American, I had as good an environment to learn in as anybody living in Ireland. I had Martin Wynne almost every Friday night, plus Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas."

What Brian received from Andy McGann, who was born in Harlem and had gotten tips in fiddling from Michael Coleman himself, was a keen appreciation of pace and musicality. "Andy is one of my idols," Brian says. "My father first took me to see him play at a *feis*, where I fell in love with his playing. Later, still under age, I'd sip a Coke at a pub where Andy was playing and just watch him. When he took a break, I'd ask him about something he did in his fiddling, and we became friends. It was by watching and listening to Andy that I began to understand the challenge of making music sound lively at a moderate tempo. I think he's better than anyone else on this planet at doing that."

The combination of his father's encouragement and unerring ear for Irish music, his mother's selflessness in transporting him to lessons and hosting the Friday night house sessions, Martin Wynne's attention to detail and formal instruction that deepened into friendship, Dave Collins's support and inspiration, and Andy McGann's example and mentorship provided Brian with the strongest of musical foundations on which to build. And build he did.

At age 16, he was invited by Limerick-born singer and multi-instrumentalist Mick Moloney to appear on *Irish Traditional Instrumental Music From the East Coast of America, Volume 1* (Rounder, 1977; reissued on CD as *Traditional Irish Music in America: The East Coast* in 2001). Brian recorded a pair of reels as a solo and joined fellow New York fiddler Tony DeMarco for another pair of reels, where "the tightness of the playing is comparable to Andy McGann and Paddy Reynolds at their best," Moloney notes.

That latter track was a foretaste of a full album by the two fiddlers, *The Apple in Winter* (Green Linnet, 1981; reissued on CD in 2000), capturing New York City's Sligo fiddling sound at its most impressive. "I was 15 when I started playing with Tony," Brian recalls. "He was one of the people who started coming regularly to the house on Friday nights. One of those Friday nights, [Green Linnet's] Wendy Newton visited and liked what she heard, and we wound up recording the album over a weekend in Connecticut. We were ready, too. Most of the tunes we had learned from each other and from Martin Wynne."



The respect Brian and Tony had for the musicians who inspired them was plainly visible in the two vintage black-and-white photos they included on the LP's back cover and in the CD booklet. One was of the Paddy Killoran

Traditional Irish Music Club in 1958, with Martin Wynne standing in the back, and the other shot was of fiddlers Andy McGann, Lad O'Beirne, Louis Quinn, and Ed Reavy sitting with other performers.

In 1983, Brian was invited by famed Galway button accordionist Joe Burke to play with him on a pair of hornpipes for *The Tailor's Choice* (Green Linnet). On that album, Burke referred to Brian as "one of the best fiddlers of his generation," a reputation he strengthened eight years later on another album, *My Love Is in America* (Green Linnet), featuring 16 U.S.-resident Irish fiddlers who convened for a historic 1990 concert at Boston College. Aside from their solos, Brian and Tony DeMarco joined 76-year-old Martin Wynne on a pair of reels, the first of which, fittingly enough, was called "Lad O'Beirne's."

Among other recordings on which Brian appears are the Garryowen Ceili Band's *From the Shores of America* (Ceile, 1976), *The Rights of Man: The Concert for Joseph Doberty* (Green Linnet, 1991), Dan Milner and Bob Conroy's *Irish in America* (Folk-Legacy, 2001), Julee Glaub's *Fields Faraway* (2001), and the solo debut scheduled for 2002 by young Brooklyn-born fiddler Patrick Mangan.

Winner of All-Ireland junior titles in 1994 and 1999, Mangan is proof positive of another formidable Conway talent, teaching. (Maeve Flanagan, Rose's daughter, is also a prize pupil of his, winning an All-Ireland junior fiddle title in 2001.) Brian and Patrick collaborate on three tracks here, including, with Andy McGann, two that underscore the remarkable mentoring chain linking Coleman, McGann, Conway, and Mangan, all Sligo-style fiddlers in New York City. But "you're not listening to Michael Coleman in the 1920s on this CD, nor Andy McGann in the 1970s," Brian insists. "You're hearing some-

thing that's a logical musical progression from that. My playing is not a copycat of Andy's, and Pat's is not a copycat of mine."

Begun in 1997, *First Through the Gate* was recorded piecemeal—an approach that Brian, who works as a lawyer in the Westchester County district attorney's office in White Plains, N.Y., found comfortable and fruitful. "It's better than just bashing it out all in one short period," he says. "This way, I get to reconsider what I've done so that it passes muster. I have to say I'm very happy with how it turned out and with the contributions of all the other musicians. Andy, for example, was a rock in the studio and just nailed the three tracks he's on."

Besides McGann and Mangan, those other musicians—pianist Felix Dolan, guitarists Mark Simos and John Doyle, *bodhrán* and bones player Myron Bretholz, *cittern* player Pat Kilbride—wisely keep Brian's own fiddling front and center on the remaining tracks. Typical of the album is his playing of the reels "The Spike Island Lasses / Tom Moylan's Frolics," an exemplary blend of technique and passion, done at a tempo reflecting the truism that if you drive too fast, you'll miss a lot of the scenery along the way.

Nothing is missed or missing in Brian Conway's fiddling. From hop jigs, hornpipes, and highlands to the slow air "Were You at the Rock?" he performs with a skill, grace, and force that are steeped in tradition but distinctively his own. "My father was my first and most important audience," Brian says, and the crucial motivation Jim Conway (1916–1991) gave his son back in the early 1970s has blossomed into the extraordinary musicianship heard on *First Through the Gate*. That title comes from a line in William Butler

Yeats's popular poem of 1899, "The Fiddler of Dooney." In it, the fiddler (appropriately from County Sligo) expresses the hope that after he dies, St. Peter, heaven's gatekeeper, will "call me first through the gate."

If he played as well as Brian does here, he'd be a shoo-in.

—*New York, January 2002*

## ABOUT THE TUNES

by Don Meade

### 1. Reels: The Liffey Banks / The Concert Reel / The Donegal Traveler

Mark Simos, guitar; Myron Bretholz, *bodhrán* and bones

Brian here links three tunes first recorded during the 78-RPM era by three famous Sligo-style fiddlers in New York. Sligoman Michael Coleman, arguably the greatest of them all, recorded "The Liffey Banks" (named for Dublin's famed river) in 1936, and Brian employs a typical Coleman device by starting the tune on what is usually the "turn," or second part. Paddy Killoran, a younger New York Sligo fiddle legend, recorded it as "The Colleen Bawn" with his Pride of Erin Orchestra.

A Killoran recording helped make "The Concert Reel" a session staple, and the popularity of "The Donegal Traveler" can be traced to a disc by Hughie Gillespie. An east Donegal native, Gillespie was befriended in New York by Coleman, who tutored him in the Sligo style. Gillespie set his "Traveler" in the key of C, but Brian prefers this version in the brighter-sounding key of

A, a setting he learned from New York button accordionists Billy McComiskey and John Nolan.

### 2. Slip Jigs: The Foxhunters / Barney Brallaghan / Comb Your Hair and Curl It

Brian Conway, fiddle; Felix Dolan, piano

Slip (or "hop") jigs are now often heard at a dead-slow tempo, suited to the fancy footwork of modern competitive step dancers. Brian plays these tunes at the quicker pace once favored by musicians and dancers in Sligo. "The Foxhunters" and "Comb Your Hair and Curl It" were recorded together by Michael Coleman. Brian's up-tempo setting of "Barney Brallaghan" (or "Branigan"), which he learned from Martin Wynne, makes an interesting contrast to the slower version recorded by New York fiddle greats Andy McGann and Paddy Reynolds.

### 3. Reels: The Mullingar Lea / Dowd's No. 9 / The Lass of Carracastle

Brian Conway, fiddle; Felix Dolan, piano

Brian picked up the first reel on this track from a 78-RPM disc recorded by Hughie Gillespie. Gillespie's records featured many Sligo tunes previously recorded by Coleman, usually under different titles; he did, however, record a few tunes from the Scottish-tinged repertoire of fiddlers in his native Donegal. "The Mullingar Lea" was Gillespie's name for the Scottish reel "The Nine-Pint Coggie" (a coggie being a large container). Gillespie was the first to record "Dowd's No. 9," named for John O'Dowd, a renowned early-20th-century Sligo fiddler who strongly influenced the young Michael Coleman. Brian learned the tune from Andy McGann.

"The Lass of Carracastle" was first recorded in 1934 by Paddy Sweeney, a Sligo fiddler who often served as Paddy Killoran's duet partner. A few months later, it appeared on a disc by James Morrison, a fiddler whose fame as a soloist rivaled that of Michael Coleman, but who, unlike Coleman, often recorded with his own band. Morrison called it "Miss Langford," so perhaps she was the lass from Carracastle, a Mayo town near the border of Sligo and Roscommon. These days the tune is often played in D, but Brian prefers the original, softer-sounding, and more difficult key of C—a setting he learned from Martin Wynne.

**4. Jigs: Up Sligo No. 2 / Contentment Is Wealth / The Scotsman over the Border** Brian Conway, fiddle; Pat Kilbride, *cittern*

The first jig, the second of two on a Coleman 78-RPM side titled "Up Sligo," is a cousin of the better-known multipart jig "The Geese in the Bog." "Contentment Is Wealth" may have been the title of a song attached to the second jig, a longtime New York session staple, recorded by Hughie Gillespie in the 1930s. Brian learned it from a cassette made at an informal house session at which Andy McGann played on his own for about 30 minutes. "I got the tape from Dave Collins in 1973," Brian says, "and it probably was the single most influential recording I ever received." "The Scotsman over the Border," derived from the Scottish air "The Blue Bonnets over the Border," was popularized by a Paddy Killoran 78.

**5. Reels: The Blackberry Blossom / The Silver Spire / The Dawn** Brian Conway, fiddle; Andy McGann, additional fiddle; Pat Mangan, additional fiddle; John Doyle, guitar

The Irish "Blackberry Blossom," which appeared on a James Morrison 78, is entirely different from an old-time American fiddle tune of the same name. Brian learned it from Andy McGann. "The Silver Spire," recorded by Paddy Killoran in the 1930s, is another tune Brian picked up from Andy. "The Dawn," known to old-time American traditional musicians as "Miller's Reel," is a fiddlers' showpiece that calls for a difficult shift up the neck to reach the high notes in the second part. This elegant setting was crafted by James "Lad" O'Beirne, a Sligo-born New York fiddle great, who hugely influenced the young Andy McGann. Andy, Brian, and Pat set a measured pace on this track, which shows off the remarkably similar bowing and fingering of three generations of New York-born Sligo-style fiddlers.

**6. Hornpipes: The Cuckoo / Flowers of Spring / Dunphy's** Brian Conway, fiddle; Felix Dolan, piano

Michael Coleman recorded a version of "The Cuckoo" under the name "Murray's Fancy" in 1921. Brian's setting substitutes high Cs for Coleman's C-sharps. Either way, it's a tough tune, requiring a quick shift up the neck to reach the highest notes. James Morrison recorded "The Flowers of Spring" and "Dunphy's," but Brian picked up these tunes from Andy McGann and button accordionist Joe Burke, respectively. Brian greatly admires Joe's playing and considers him "one of my biggest influences."

**7. Reels: The Dairy Maid's Reel / The Reel of Bogie / Langton's Favorite** Brian Conway, fiddle; Andy McGann, additional fiddle; Felix Dolan, piano



James Morrison included "The Dairy Maid's" on a 1926 selection of three reels. This Sligo setting of "The Reel of Bogie" (also known as "The Tramps") was recorded by Paddy Killoran and by Michael Coleman, who called it "Maun's Fancy" on a never-released disc from the master's final recording session in 1944. Killoran is also the source for the third reel, often mistakenly called "Dillon Brown," the name of a different tune in the O'Neill collection. This setting, in which the first part is played twice and the "turn" only once, comes from Lad O'Beirne.

#### **8. Highlands: O'Flynn's Fancy / Casey's Pig / Jimmy Lyons'**

Brian Conway, fiddle; Mark Simos, guitar

The highland, also known as the fling or schottische, was once a popular couples dance in the north of Ireland, where Scottish influence is strong. The great tune collector Breandán Breathnach published the first fling as "O'Flynn's Fancy" in a setting recorded from the late Sligo tin whistle player Jimmy McGettrick. Numerous comic songs have been set to this air, including one by Robert Burns, with the chorus:

*I'm o'er young, I'm o'er young, I'm o'er young to marry yet,  
I'm o'er young, twad be a sin to tak' me frae my mammie yet.*

The second tune, which Brian learned from his father, Jim, was composed in the 18th century by Scottish fiddler William Marshall, who called it "The Duke of Gordon's Birthday." Having a lesser regard for British nobility, Irish fiddlers prefer the name "Casey's Pig." The late Jimmy Lyons, a fiddler from Teelin in southwest Donegal, is credited as the source of the third highland in this selection.

#### **9. Reels: Paddy Ryan's Dream / Never Was Piping So Gay / John McGrath's** Brian Conway, fiddle; Felix Dolan, piano

The name "Paddy Ryan's Dream" was attached to the first reel by Chicago police chief Francis O'Neill in his influential early 20th-century tune collection. A reel-time setting of the Scottish strathspey "Miss Lyall," it was recorded in 1921 by Michael Coleman. Brian's setting is from Andy McGann, who added a few of his own touches to the version played by the late button accordion great Paddy O'Brien. The title of "Never Was Piping So Gay," a composition of the late Cavan and Philadelphia fiddler Ed Reavy, is taken from W. B. Yeats's poem "The Host of the Air." The third reel was composed by the late John McGrath, a County Mayo fiddler, who for many years was a leading Irish music teacher in the Bronx. Brian learned both tunes from Andy McGann.

#### **10. Reels: Jenny's Welcome to Charlie / Tom Steele**

Brian Conway, fiddle; Mark Simos, guitar; Myron Bretholz, *bodhrán*

"Jenny's Welcome," a demanding four-part tune recorded in the 1930s by Hughie Gillespie, has often been played by fiddlers vying for the All-Ireland championship at Fleadh Cheoil competitions. "Tom Steele," also known as "Hand Me Down the Tackle," was on the B side of Michael Coleman's first disc, a 1921 78-RPM side, titled "Reidy Johnston's" after a female Irish-American accordionist.

#### **11. Slow Air: An raibh tú ag an gCarraig? (Were You at the Rock?)**

Brian Conway, fiddle; John Doyle, guitar

The rock referred to in the title of this air was an open-air altar used by priests celebrating clandestine masses during the years when the British government's repressive Penal Laws forbade the open practice of the Catholic religion in Ireland. Brian learned this beautiful piece from a recording by Cork City fiddler Matt Cranitch.

### **12. Reels: Martin Wynne's Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 4**

Brian Conway, fiddle; Pat Mangan, additional fiddle; Felix Dolan, piano

The late Martin Wynne, Brian's main musical mentor, was a fiddling composer from the same south Sligo parish as Michael Coleman. Martin spent several years in London immediately before and after World War II, and in 1948 emigrated to New York. All four of these reels were composed in the 1930s. The first two have long since become session standards and were previously recorded by Brian on *The Apple in Winter*, his 1981 LP with fellow New York fiddler Tony DeMarco. "No. 3" entered the local tradition in Sligo and was collected there from the late fiddler Willie Coleman by Breandán Breathnach, who published it (without a name or composer credit) in *Ceol Rince na hÉireann*, Vol. 2. "No. 4" was nearly lost entirely. Brian first heard Martin play it at a Philadelphia festival in 1976, but says it took him ten years to coax the older fiddler into playing it again! In addition to these reels, Martin composed as many as ten other tunes that he felt were unworthy of publication.

### **13. Hornpipes: Minnie Foster's Clog / The Newcastle Hornpipe / Fly by Night No. 2**

Brian Conway, fiddle; Felix Dolan, piano

These three hornpipes, in the "flat keys" of F and B-flat, are of a type devel-

oped by fiddlers in northern England to accompany hard-shoe clog dancers. Cloggers, including the now forgotten Minnie Foster, were also extremely popular on the 19th-century American variety stage. The challenging tune that bears Minnie's name was preserved in the pages of *Ryan's Mammoth Collection*, originally published in 1882 and later kept in print as Cole's *1000 Fiddle Tunes*. Brian first heard it from Andy McGann at a 1974 session in Dave Collins's house. "It was a memorable event for me," Brian says, "because I had a chance for the first time to sit in a session and play with Andy, and I was struck by how much feeling he put into a tune that was so technically demanding."

"The Newcastle," also known as "Prince Albert's," became familiar to Irish music lovers when Michael Coleman recorded it under the name "McCormack's." With Tony DeMarco, Brian recorded a tune called "Fly by Night" on *The Apple in Winter*. This entirely different "Fly" was popularized by the great Belfast fiddler Seán McGuire. Brian picked it up from Andy McGann.

### **14. Jigs: Jerry's Beaver Hat / Scatter the Mud / Kitty's Wedding**

Brian Conway, fiddle; Andy McGann, additional fiddle; Pat Mangan, additional fiddle; John Doyle, guitar

The first two jigs are New York versions of well-known session favorites published in the O'Neill collection. The third is James Morrison's setting of a tune better known as "The Ship in Full Sail." Morrison's three-part version in A major calls for some tricky up-the-neck fingerwork. All three tunes are from the repertoire of Andy McGann.

## 15. Reels: The Spike Island Lasses / Tom Moylan's Frolics

Brian Conway, fiddle; Mark Simos, guitar; Myron Bretholz, *bodhrán*

The first tune, a harmonically complex reel, was named for the lasses who once frequented an island in Cobh Harbor that served as the site of a British military base and a prison from which Irish convicts (including Fenian leader John Mitchel) were dispatched to Australian exile. The second reel remained nameless until button accordion great Joe Burke called it after a musical pub owner in Loughrea, County Galway. Brian picked up both tunes from Joe's *Galway's Own*, a classic LP recorded in Belfast in 1971.

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Contains field recordings from the 1970s, including Sligo musicians such as Mike Flynn (flute), John Vesey (fiddle), and Eddie Cahill (flute). Brian Conway also appears on this recording.

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### Other Resources

**Coleman Heritage Center:** (ph: 353-71-82599, [www.colemanirishmusic.com](http://www.colemanirishmusic.com))

Located in Gurteen, Ireland, the center sponsors concerts and a music school, and has exhibits and a gift shop with an excellent selection of historic and contemporary traditional music recordings in the Sligo style. It is open for visitors year-round.

**Earle Hitchner** is one of the most influential journalists covering Irish and other Celtic music today. He's a regular contributor to *The Wall Street Journal* and *Irish Echo* newspapers in New York City, and his writing has also appeared in *Billboard*, *The Oxford American*, MTV's *Sonicnet*, and *The Companion to Irish Traditional Music*, copublished by Cork University Press and New York University Press in 1999.

**Don Meade**, an Irish American who resides in New York City, plays harmonica (on which he won the All-Ireland championship in 1987), fiddle, and tenor banjo. A well-known authority on Irish traditional music, he is the producer of the long-running weekly concert series at New York's Blarney Star and has written about Irish music for the *Irish Voice*, *Irish America*, *New York Irish History*, and other publications.

**Mick Moloney** teaches musicology and popular culture at New York University. He has recorded and produced over 40 albums of traditional music, acted as adviser for scores of festivals and concerts all over America, and served as the artistic director for several major arts tours, including The Green Fields of America, an ensemble of Irish and Irish American instrumentalists, singers, and dancers that has toured the United States.



## CREDITS

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**From Brian Conway:** special thanks to my parents, Rose and Jim Conway; my teachers, Martin Wynne, Martin Mulvihill, and Dave Collins; to the other tremendous influences in shaping my music: Andy McGann, Paddy Reynolds, Lad O'Beirne, Louis Quinn, Martin Mulhaire, Vincent Harrison; the other musicians on this CD (Myron Bretholz, Felix Dolan, John Doyle, Pat Kilbride, Pat Mangan, Andy McGann, and Mark Simos); also to Eugene Bender, Hughie Gillespie, Bernie Conway, Brendan Dolan, Christopher McCormick, Nancy Groce, Don Meade, Earle Hitchner, and Ed Haber, without whose support this CD would not be a reality.

**For bookings or more information,** call 917-836-1990 or e-mail [conwaybrian@netscape.net](mailto:conwaybrian@netscape.net)

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When we come at the end of time,  
To Peter sitting in state,  
He will smile on the three old spirits,  
But call me first through the gate.

*W. B. Yeats "The Fiddler of Dooney"*



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