

For some people, music is in the blood. Andrew Hamilton chats to North Clare concertina legend Chris Droney about his early meetings with Willie Clancy and traces his style of play back to the humble mouth organ and the house dances of the mid-19th century.



## Born to play

DRAW a circle a mile wide around the post office in Bellharbour. Within that small section of farmland and coastline, you will probably find the highest concentration of musical talent on the island of Ireland. Something special happens between Dooneen and Muchinish, something that stirs creativity in people and makes musicians out of men. This special something has had an effect on four generations of the Droney family.

"I have to go back a long way now. My grandfather [Michael Droney], he was born in 1829 and he died in 1927, that's 98 years. He used to play the mouth organ before concertinas ever came on the scene. In the mid-1800s, he used to play at house dances. It was house dances in those days - there were no halls, no pubs, no Fleadh Ceoils, nothing," remembers Chris.

"Then concertinas came on the scene, and he bought his first concertina for two and six pence - it was a Hohner, from Germany. My father [James Droney] picked it up from him and he passed it on to me. And now Francis and Ann, my two children, play the concertina as well and there are grandchildren playing too. It's in the family a long time.

"I think he [Michael Droney] would have taken some of the style from the mouth organ and brought that to the concertina, but there would have been other people playing the concertina at that time too. There were always a lot of concertinas in the parish. I know of a person who emigrated to the States from down the road and she had a concertina with her. She was out in America for 40 or 50 years and then she retired back to Ireland. When she came back, she had a big trunk with her and at the bottom of the trunk was the same concertina that she brought out with her 50 years before. So it's always been an important thing for the people of this area.

"We had a Eucharist Congress in Dublin last week and the last time we had one of those in

Ireland was back in 1932; it was in that year that I learned my first few tunes on the concertina. I was only eight years old. I can still remember the tunes I learned, 'The Wearing of the Green' and 'Clare's Dragons'. They were the first two tunes that I ever learned.

"I think I got a lot of my own style from my father but that style of play changed a lot as the years went on, especially now, since the Fleadh Cheoil came and lots of people started to play music. They started putting in all of this ornamentation. It's different now to what it used to be. I think it is probably different in a good way. The one thing that I don't like is people playing fast. That's what people want now, especially dancers, they always look for fast music. I don't like it. It's not the right type of music to play too fast."

Chris was also a contemporary of the great Willie Clancy and remembers inviting him to his kitchen in Bellharbour for some memorable sets.

"I think it was 1962 and I was down at the Fleadh Cheoil. We were both adjudicating together - I was adjudicating the concertina and the tin whistle that time, I think, and Willie was adjudicating the pipes and concert flutes. It was a great Fleadh Cheoil.

"I knew him a bit before that. Ciarán Mac Mathúna used to come here and have sessions in the house. The kitchen was big so it was a great place for sessions. But Ciarán had a programme from the house and he asked me to invite up a few musician and singers and set dancers and that so I just thought of Willie. I asked Willie and Jimmy Ward, who was originally from Kilfenora but was living in Miltown that time, and they came over and were recorded right in there in the kitchen.

"It was a great evening. We had some great music and set dancers and the programme was broadcast several times on RTÉ. We had great sessions in those days. There was some great musician in Ballyvaughan at that time - the likes

of Patrick Vaughan, Jim O'Keane and Martin Rabbit. But that was years and years ago. They're all gone now, like Willie. I'm the only survivor."

And at 88 years of age, Chris shows no signs of taking a break from playing.

"Thank God my fingers are okay, but I suppose a time comes when you have to say enough is enough. I'm a long time playing. I'm 80 years playing the concertina and that's a long time to keep playing music. I never got sick of it. It was always very interesting, like being on these Comhaltas tours to America and Germany and all over the world," remembers Chris.

"There was something in the news just today about the Irish Embassy in Washington and I was thinking, it's a long time since I played music at the Irish Embassy in Washington. It was a very exciting time, back in the '70s, when we were helping to bring the Irish music to the world. They were great times. There was one thing I remember from America, back in 1952. My brother was out there and he knew the famous Sligo fiddle-player Paddy Killoran. He invited me out to his house and as soon as the dinner was over the music started. We played for about two hours. When the session was over and before we left, he brought me into his room and he opened up a wardrobe. There were about 100 ties hanging in the wardrobe. He said, 'pick out a tie and every time you wear it, think of me'. We were just leaving then and he said, 'every time you wear that tie, think of me', and he asked me to say a prayer for him because he knew he wouldn't be around too much longer. That was something I will never forget. There is something about traditional music that connects people. It's like what Joe Cooney used to say, Irish traditional music is the only music that brings people to their senses."

Above: Chris Droney at home in Bellharbour.

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