

Willie Clancy Week, Miltown Malbay, County Clare

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MATTHEW ALLEN

The west coast of Ireland, home to most of Ireland's Irish-speaking areas, is a region particularly rich in traditional music and dance. Since 1973, the small coastal town of Miltown Malbay in County Clare has celebrated an eminent native son, beloved *uilleann* piper Willie Clancy, in a unique fashion. Upon his death, several close friends decided to remember him by staging an annual weeklong summer school. "Willie Week" has grown over the years to incorporate a full schedule of music and dance classes, lectures, music concerts, late-night *ceili* dances and dozens of informal music-making *seisuns* (sessions) at the town's many pubs. Prominent in the school's mission is instruction in the *uilleann* (elbow) pipes, the country's most distinctive—and labor-intensive—instrument.

Having secured at the last moment and against all odds a rental house for the week (accommodation is fully booked many months in advance), we packed up the '92 Volvo with instruments, food and rain gear, as lashing gales can grace the Clare coast at any time. We arrived in Miltown Malbay on Saturday evening and went straight to the community hall to register for classes. I signed up for lessons on tin whistle, a deceptively unassuming tube of metal with a few holes bored in it, garnished with a plastic mouthpiece on top. How tough could this be? Pretty tough—my clumsy guitar-playing fingers had been awkwardly fumbling their way over those little holes all winter and spring, trying to approximate the delicate traces of ornament that my teacher in Cork spun so effortlessly, and I was determined to make further strides. My wife, Julie, who also teaches on the Wheaton music faculty, enrolled for *sean nos* (old style) dance, while our nine-year-old, Kayla, continued her fiddle studies begun with Wheaton's professor of violin Sheila Falls-Keohane, a former all-Ireland fiddle champion. Five-year-old Emma had her own program for the week, childcare at an organic farm a hundred yards from the ocean with daily walks to pick wild strawberries, feed the goats, and see the ancient burial mounds dotting the hillsides.

Monday morning we went our separate ways. My path took me down Main Street to the local elementary school, where the hundred-plus tin whistlers and would-be tooters were asked to self-select themselves into beginner, intermediate and advanced categories. After an existential moment in which my



Sean Ryan (above, in cap) leads a class. An impromptu concert fills a pub with music (below).

four months of lessons in Cork flashed before my eyes, I decided I was an intermediate and went to bond with a group of peers. To my secret delight, this group turned out to be too slow for me and at the morning coffee break I was transferred to the advanced class taught by Sean Ryan, consummate musician and patient mentor.

In Sean's class, we students split evenly into two groups. On an old lumpy couch by the window sat several young Irish children who looked no older than eight but sounded as if they'd been playing twice that long. This shy group uttered not a voluntary word during the entire week. They could not have contrasted more with the motley group of 1960s-vintage Irish music aficionados perched on folding chairs across from the couch, representing England, Australia, Germany, Montreal, Buffalo and Norton. We took each break from whistling as an opportunity to pepper Sean with questions on everything from who taught him that tune to fingering techniques to where he got the distinctive cap that, in our presence, never left his head. (His cap had a way of moving uncannily in consort with his eye gestures or other head movements.) He graciously and capably managed to cater to the needs and styles of these dramatically divergent student populations throughout the week.

On the final day, our class joined the dozen or so other tin whistle classes in the courtyard outside the house for a joyous whistle *feis* (party). We all played the tunes we had learned for each other before piling into vehicles and heading off to the next music festival or—as in our case—back to Cork for some rest.

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