

# My Life and Music

BY CHRISTIE CRONIN

I always had a keen interest in singing, even when I was very young. I well remember the first time I went to Mass in Gneeveguilla, at the age of five or six years, and what struck me most was the beautiful singing which came from the gallery at the back of the church. In those days, Holy Hours used to be held once a month and Latin hymns were sung in the Gregorian Chant. The singers were Kitty Johnson O'Connor, Nora McCarthy O'Rourke, Lizzie Linehan, Hannah Mary Lucey O'Connor, John Joe O'Leary and Jim Donnelly while Mrs. Minnie O'Leary played the organ. I used to turn round in my seat and would look towards the rear of the Church, wondering where the sound was coming from. From listening carefully, I learned most of the hymns, notably "Tantum Ergo" and "O Salutaris".

There was always a strong tradition of singing in our house and area - it goes with polka set dancing and traditional music. The earliest recollection I have of my late father (Pat Thade Mick) singing was at a party in Knocknagree for

Christie Cronin, of Maughantourig, Gneeveguilla, is one of Sliabh Luachra's best known traditional singers and the winner of several Kerry County Championship medals for sean-nós singing. Steeped in the traditions of Sliabh Luachra, he is often heard on radio and has made television appearances. Christie is also a collector of songs and has amassed a very broad repertoire, beginning with verses got from his late father many years ago. The songs are based on historical events, famous sporting occasions, emigration and local tragedies and are full of sentiment for the area. Songs like "The Charming Quarry Cross", "The Morning Bog" and "Padraig Og me Chroí" come naturally to him. Here, he tells his story.

my uncle, Jack Duggan, who was home from America and was returning on the following morning. It was an "American Wake" if you like. Everybody contributed a party piece; sets were danced, my mother played the fiddle and gave a song. She always had the same song: "There came into this village green a soldier from the



Christie Cronin in typical pose while singing a favourite song for friends by the fireside.





*A special friend and inspiration, Frank Cronin, of Clonkeen, who died unexpectedly in 1972.*

war." That night, my father appropriately sang: "In the morning I'm leaving my own native home", a song which I learned and often rendered later.

Songs were often sung in Moynihan's (Petero's) Bar, Gneeveguilla, and on fair days in Knocknagree. Some fine singers who come to mind from those times include Timmy Cahill, D.D. Cronin, Nellie Mahoney Keane, Mike Cronin (Reaboy), Patie Buckley and the Cronin twins, Mikey and Dan, from Raheen, who always performed together. The twins used to call to our house and they were the best I ever heard singing together.

Other singers I remember were the brothers Andy and Paddy Sheehan, from Mausrou. They used to work at our house and we always had songs when we finished in the evenings. Paddy was a great traditional singer and one of his favourites was "The Headford Ambush". I remember another night at stations in Den Falvey's, Scrahanaville, when Julia, Tim and Con sang "A dhriotháirín óg mo chroí" together providing the highlight of the night.

I was born on January 3rd, 1943, and am the only boy in the family. For some reason, I'm the one to really maintain the singing tradition. Of my five sisters, Joan is the only one who sings a few songs.

My introduction to singing on stage was in the late 1960's. I took part with Gneeveguilla GAA in the "Tops of the Clubs" talent competition. We did a show called "The Emigrant", which won in Killarney, and I sang a lovely song: "There's a dear little isle on the western ocean". I then went on to compete in my first Fleadh Cheoil at Kilgarvan and it was there that I really became interested in sean-nós singing.

Twelve or fourteen singers were in the competition and I was fascinated by their different styles and with the attention they received - the doors of the hall were closed as they sang. Danno Kelleher, of Kilgarvan, won the competition with "The Nun of Sweet Kenmare". I was delighted to be part of the occasion, even though I didn't win.



*The author dancing a polka set with his sister Mrs. Mary Hennigan, while on holidays in the USA in 1972. Well-known Sliabh Luachra musician, Johnny Cronin, is providing the music.*

What first attracts me to a song is the air and I then try to ornament it. The hallmark of a good sean-nós singer is that he, or she, will never sing a song in the same way twice. I like songs like "Mary she went to Bonane" and "My old home far away" because I feel I can ornament them easier than other songs.

Ornamentation is a big part of the art of singing, either a singer has the gift or has not. A singer can work on it and improve but cannot acquire it. Silence is also very important - a singer has to be able to hear himself and to create an atmosphere. What I enjoy greatly is a session with four or five people, each giving a song in their turn. That's what it's all about.

Also in the late 1960's, I joined Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCE) and a branch was formed in Gneeveguilla with Sonny Riordan as Chairman; the late Diarmuid Murphy, of Knocknagreeha, as Treasurer and mé féin as Hon. Secretary. We went to lots of Fleadhanna Cheoil, competed regularly and won many competitions.

In that way, we met some grand singers from many parts of the country. We shared songs and I learned some new ones which I later sang in competition. It was around that time that I met the late Frank Cronin, of Clonkeen, who became a close friend. He was both poet and singer and many's the wonderful night we had in his house



*An early photograph with his mother, Mai, father, Pat and sisters, Sheila and Mary Agnes.*

with his wife, Tina, and their children.

Frank had a major influence on me and he composed one of the finest songs I know: "An áit úd Claodagh ina rugadh mé". We did a programme on TV, enjoying marvellous sessions on the journey to and from Dublin. We took enough dancers for a half set - Hannah Mary Daly Moynihan, Eileen McGillicuddy O'Connor and Eamon Lawlor. Later, Frank introduced me to the O'Sullivans of Coolea - Diarmuid, Danny and Eoin - some of the best singers I know.

Unfortunately, I have only a few of the songs that Frank composed. A tape we made got mislaid. We were hoping to do a second tape but never got the chance as he died suddenly in 1972. Go ndéana Dia trócaire ar a anam.

It was around that time also that I first heard the Coolea Choir. I thought the music of Seán O Riada was out of this world: we couldn't wait to learn it. With the help of Tim Gleeson, we soon did. On special occasions, we sung the O'Riada Mass and were joined by the Coolea Choir on the anniversary of Denis Murphy's death.

In the summer of 1971, a group of singers came together in the home of the late Mike Leahy, at Mausrou, where we arranged harmonies and generally enjoyed ourselves. Our tastes ranged from modern to country and traditional. The group included people like Tim Gleeson, Mike Sweeney, Margaret and Hannah Mary Daly, Joan and Kathleen Cronin.

Jimmy O'Brien, of Killarney, is one singer of many that I'd love to have a session with. He has

a wide selection of local ballads which deserve to be preserved. He and his daughter, Siobhán, are first class traditional singers. Jimmy is also a well-known collector of Sliabh Luachra songs.

As somebody who has spent a fair bit of time singing in pubs, some people find it hard to credit that I'm a lifelong pioneer. I enjoy the sessions and the craic as much as anybody else. But, some folk find it hard to believe that a person can sing without ever touching a drink.

This can lead to amusing situations and I remember an incident which occurred when I was in New York in 1972. The bar owner called for order and I sang my song for the crowd. Before I knew it, ten or twelve bottles of beer were on the counter in front of me. I suppose they thought I needed the beer to sing but I gave it all away! I had a good laugh at that.

I've given a good deal of time to collecting songs and am most grateful to the following, some of whom are sadly no longer with us, from whom I got many of my favourites: Arthur O'Keeffe ("Green Brooms" and "Nora McGee"), John Rahilly ("The Maid of Sweet Rathmore" and "Maurice O'Neill"), Mike Cronin ("It must be you're Irish" and "Tureengarriffe Glen"), Dan Cronin ("Nellie Malone"), Abbie Kelleher ("When the fields are white with daisies"), Michael Lawlor ("Rathmore Ambush"), Patie Buckley ("Headford Ambush"), Dan Cronin ("Helen O'Neill") and Nellie O'Mahoney Keane ("Someone thinks of you tonight").