

MY LIFE AND MUSIC

BY JULIA CLIFFORD



Julia Clifford (right) pictured with her sister Bridgie Kelleher, a lively 92-year-old who still plays music, at Bridgie's home, Lisheen Cross, between Gneeveguilla and Knocknagree.

Champion fiddle player, Julia Clifford, a member of the famous Murphy family, is one of Sliabh Luachra's most notable traditional musicians. She hails from Lisheen, Gneeveguilla, where there was music in every house in her youth and her late brother, Denis, was amongst the greatest ever. She won the senior fiddle competition at the 1963 All-Ireland Fleadh Cheoil and her son, Billy, won the All-Ireland title for concert flute in 1970. With her husband John Clifford, and others, she has made several records including 'The Star of Munster Trio' and 'The Humours of Lisheen', and is now aged 72. Here she tells her own story.

One of the questions that people often ask me is why we are still known as the 'waivers', especially since such a description seems to have nothing whatever to do with music. So before I start talking about music, I'd better explain.

My grandfather was a linen-weaver at Lisheen, and my father, Bill Murphy, though he did not really take up the trade, was better known as 'Bill the Waiver'. In accordance with tradition, we were nicknamed 'weavers' (pronounced locally 'waivers') and this distinguished us from other Murphys in the locality.

In the last century, flax was grown and harvested around Gneeveguilla, but the

custom died out in the late 1800s. I can vaguely remember seeing old looms at home and a sheet woven by my father could be seen in a neighbour's house.

My father, a grand man standing at over six feet, should have been more aptly called 'Bill the Musician' because he was stone mad for music. He had a Fife and Drum Band and they used to play at Lisheen Cross, marching back and over the road, and at local events like Knocknagree Races. He could play a number of instruments, including flute, fife and fiddle, and was one of the principal musicians in the district. My mother, Mary (Mainie) Corbett, was a beautiful singer.

There was music in the house morning, noon and night. All eight of us: Bridgie, Nell (R.I.P.), Mary (R.I.P.), Hannie, Dan (R.I.P.), Thady (R.I.P.), Denis (R.I.P.) and I learned the fiddle.

Even when I was very small I was mad to play. My father, Thady, Dan and Mary, used to play together and I'd listen very carefully. They'd have two or three fiddles and would eventually put them aside, nice and tuned, after playing for a few hours. They might go rambling to another house. Then, I'd catch one of the fiddles and my mother would go mad. "Put that away from you and don't break it," she'd say.

I used to be craving Thady to teach me and it was he, in fact, who taught me my first tune. It was a jig belonging to Johnny Darby Moynihan, called, I think, 'The Ducks in the Oats'. Anyway, Thady gave me about half of it and I managed the rest myself.

One of my big advantages always was that I had a great ear for music and found it much easier to pick up a tune by listening rather than by reading notes. I learned an awful lot from Pdraig O'Keeffe, as did my brother, Denis, and the three of us often performed together in later life.

My father kept a close watch on our progress. I was the youngest and I learned from the others. I had a habit of going down to the room, closing the door and playing away to my heart's content. In the kitchen, my father would be listening carefully and, if I made a mistake, I'd hear him shouting: "That's wrong."

He was a very easy-going, gramhar man and it was my mother who often kept us under control.



An early picture of Julia with her sons, Billy and John and dog, Jess.

I must have been around the age of fifteen when I took part in a competition for the first time. It was organised in Knocknagree by a travelling showman, known as Gordy, but I had to be persuaded to take part as my parents did not know I was in Knocknagree. Anyway, I entered and, much to my surprise, won first prize of 10 shillings, a mighty sum in those days.

Gordy advised me to learn how to read music and I went to Pdraig Keffe, who showed me how. The win in Knocknagree gave me a lot of confidence and nothing in the world would keep me at home after that, if there was a dance or amusement in the district.

Mary, my sister, had a house dance and, of course, I had to be there. My father and mother were not supposed to know. However, at about 10 o'clock, when the dance was in full swing, didn't I see the donkey's two ears outside the window. My father and mother had pulled up outside: like me, they could never say no to a dance.

In my youth, dances were held mainly in houses and the crossroad and village dancehalls did not really get going until the mid-1920s. Denis and I used to play at an amount of house dances and we were often out two or three nights in succession until clear day in the morning.

But, this didn't knock a shake out of us. We'd play away all night for polka-sets. With Denis there was never a dull moment. He had a lovely sense of humour and an easy-going way, very much like my father.

When the dancehalls got popular, we were kept very busy. There used to be a dance in Thady Willie's Hall, Gneeveguilla, on Sunday evenings. When that was over, we'd hire a car, Timmy Hickey, the Gneeveguilla hackney man, was the chauffeur at a shilling (5p) a head

and we could end up playing in Lacca, Ballydesmond or John Richard's Cross that night.

Padraig (Keeffe) was the leading fiddle-master at the time. As well as being an absolutely gifted musician, he was a character and a man of marvellous, quick wit.

Much of Padraig's life was spent in pubs: he had fair mind for the 'drop' and many of the stories about him relate in some way to drink. My favourite yarn is about the man who gave him a loan of a bicycle. Padraig, usually broke, got thirsty and sold the 'iron-horse' to get a few bob for booze. When the man came back looking for his bike, Padraig just opened his mouth wide and said: "Take a good look down there and see if you can see the handlebars."

My youthful days were very happy and carefree. I practised hard and I learned my music well. Around 1933, I went to Falkirk, Scotland, to my aunt and got a job as trainee nurse. There was no music there. I was lonesome for home and returned to Lisheen. But sooner or later, I had to go to earn a living and went to London in 1935.

I worked in hotels and made off the Irish dancehalls, places like Johnny Muldoon's and The Pride of Erin, in Tottenham Court Road. John Clifford, a neighbour in Lisheen who was

later to become my husband, came over to London in 1938. Around the beginning of the War, he made his first broadcast on Irish radio. He played the accordeon. Also by this time, I was playing regularly in Irish halls in London. John and I got married in 1941 and we lived in Cricklewood for the next 12 years during which our sons, John and Billy, were born. We formed the resident band for many years in a hall over Burton's, Cricklewood Broadway, and after that at the All-Ireland Social Club, in the Stadium, Oaklands Road, Cricklewood.

I should point out that it wasn't all traditional music we played then. There was a great mix of music and the bands had instruments like sax, piccolo and piano. We had to be very adaptable.

We never lost touch with Lisheen and made frequent visits. We decided to return more or less permanently in 1953 and went to live in Newcastle West, Co. Limerick. We formed our own band, 'The Star of Munster', and it was rated as one of the best in Ireland, playing regularly in Limerick, Kerry, Clare and Galway and on Radio Eireann. However, things were bad economically in the 1950s and it was not easy to make a living so we returned to London in 1958.



Members of Julia's family and friends pictured at Bridgie's home around 1970. Back (from left): Julia, Nellie Walsh, Paddy O'Riordan, Art O'Keeffe, Hannah O'Riordan, Julia Mary Murphy. Front row: two of Bridgie's grandchildren, Denis Murphy and Billy Clifford.

We played away in London and, with the decline of the old dancehalls, began to concentrate on Irish pubs, which were popular haunts for lovers of traditional music in the 1960s. Musicians like Martin Byrnes, Bobby Casey and Willie Clancy were in their element while our son, Billy, on the concert flute, joined John and I to form The Star of Munster Trio.

We made several records and I'm playing today as well as ever, thanks be to God. Most of my time is spent in Norfolk, England, and I'm teaching some English youngsters how to play the real Irish music.

I come home twice a year and enjoy a holiday with my sister, Bridgie (Kelleher), at Lisheen Cross. She is now 92, but my word, is in tremendous shape for her age. She played a tune on the fiddle in Dan Connell's pub one night lately (1987) and it was lovely. If the two of us were to walk from Lisheen to Knocknagree, about two miles, she'd get there before me, despite the fact that she's the eldest in the family and I'm the youngest.

The love of music has never left me and, just like my beloved brother, Denis, I intend to play until the moment the Master says: "Julia, your next tune will be in Heaven."



GORDIE

No man ever enticed greater crowds into Gneeveguilla village than Gordon Taylor, popularly known as 'Gordie'. Many of his sayings and doings still live on in the local folklore. They came in pony-cars, donkey-cars and on bicycles, sometimes as early as 5 p.m. travelling many miles by short-cuts and highways, to gamble and to be entertained by this small, personable, little man of Scottish ancestry and Protestant faith. Only a mission could draw comparative crowds.

His entertainment was free. His four-man band of Billy Ainsworth, Freddie Williams, Billy Doyle and himself, rendered rousing Scottish airs and appropriate songs. They could as easily turn their talents to acting, storytelling and miming.

His revenue came from the many raffles he held, and many of the items won then, teapots, crockery, buckets and other household utensils, are still treasured in the area. Among them a three hundred and sixty five day clock, still going strong. Tickets cost twopence or

fourpence, depending on the prize.

Often, crowds were so great that tickets had to be sold through the Hall windows, at the back as well as the front, to the waiting throngs outside who could not gain admittance. His biggest ever raffle was for a bonham bought locally for six shillings.

Television had not then come, radio was a rarity, as was motor transport, and the community efforts that later blossomed into carnivals, fleadhanna cheoil, etc., had not then taken root. Travelling showmen were the successors of the wandering bards and craftsmen. They brought a breath of the outside world into a restricted rural existence.

The last appearance of Gordie in Gneeveguilla was in 1944. In the post-war years, he settled in London. It is an interesting coincidence that of the eight million people in London, Andy Sheehan, of Mausrour, happened in 1949 to seek lodgings from a Mrs. Taylor, a widow, a cockney who to his surprise and delight, knew Gneeveguilla as well as he did.

S. Ó M.