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A grandmother's first album

POP : JAZZ : FOLK
by
Joe Kennedy

THE PART of Ireland where three rich folk cultures have met and intermingled is the most abundant in music, song and the joie de vevre of its people of the market towns and the apple orchards than anywhere else in this musically conscious country—with the possible exception of Clare perhaps with its wild music on wild Atlantic winds.

South Armagh and The Moy of Tyrone had produced some of the finest traditional musicians and singers to be heard at fleadhanna cheoil and Comhaltas Ceoiltoiri Eireann sessions. Many have gigantic reputations within their own spheres, though perhaps entirely unknown to a wider audience — even one with more than a passing interest in traditional music.

In the North of Ireland there seems to be more skill and expressiveness in all shades of popular music than in other parts of the country. One of the reasons for this is the great traditions of 'bands' —everything from fife and drum, pipe, flute to brass and reed and accordeon. Bands from both sides of the religio-political dividing line. Band of little boys from junior charge Lodges. Accordeon bands from the local de la Salle Brothers school.

In the South Armagh town of Keady where one of the country's most renowned traditional singers, Mrs. Sarah Makem, comes from the folk singing tradition is inextricably mixed. Three streams of traditional song converge — native Irish, Scottish and English. As Sean O'Boyle, the Northern folk musicologist, has pointed out, these streams form an interwoven tapestry of unusual interest and charm.

Mrs. Makem was born in Keady at the turn of the century. She still lives there with her husband Peter. They reared a family of five children and now have 27 grandchildren.

She is still singing the songs she learned from her mother, and this week sees the release of her first long playing album, though down through the years she has been heard on many recordings of folk song collections and on many radio programmes.

Sarah Makem's mother worked at the linen and was one of the Singing Greenes of Keady, a family famous for its music for generations. Mrs. Makem's reasons for learning the songs are an echo from history in these days of mass media: "When I was young we used to have dances in the street to the music of a mouth organ, or if the mouth organ wasn't available, then someone had to lilt. Well, at these street dances anyone was likely to be asked for a song so I always tried to have one or two ready and I kept learning as many as I could from my mother singing around the house. Aye, and a good few away out in Derrynoose . . ."

It was in Derrynoose she met her husband, a great man, Sean O'Boyle says, for the music of the fiddle. When their children were growing up "our kitchen was full of music," says Mrs. Makem. "They learned songs from my singing . . . what with some of them learning the fiddle and bag-pipes and drums and tin whistles and being involved in ceili bands the place was always jumping."

One of these children, her youngest son Tommy, was to go out to America and become internationally known as a folk singer and tin whistle player.

Mrs. Makem songs on this LP (TOPIC 12T182) are all of exceptional interest to folksong collectors, particularly "It Was in the Month of January" and "The Banks of Red Roses," a song much in contrast with the light and airy theme of the more widely known "The Banks of the Roses."

I once experienced that particular pleasure than song collectors find difficult to define in hearing "Red Roses" from a North American Indian girl who had learned it from an old Irish woman in Boston: I had never heard it again in Ireland until I played Mrs. Makem's record. The tune—doh mode hexatonic— is quite fascinating as are indeed singers of the calibre of Sarah Makem.

