

Irish musician, composer Paddy Moloney (1938-2021): “Once a Chieftain, always a Chieftain!”

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26 October 2021

Paddy Moloney, who has died aged 83, was one of the most important figures in the revival and popularisation of Irish folk music. A gifted musician, composer and arranger, Moloney led the Chieftains for six decades. Over 44 albums, and innumerable live and filmed appearances, the band became an international watchword for Irish folk music.

Moloney was born in north Dublin in 1938, and the music he heard at home quickly became all-consuming for him. Naturally musical, he developed an inventiveness in ornamenting tunes, which was later given some structure by singing classes at school, where he was taught the sol-fa system of musical transcription (using do, re, mi etc instead of dot notation). One of his classmates there was John Sheehan, later of the Dubliners.

Moloney was around six when his mother bought him a tin whistle. A couple of years later he persuaded his parents to buy him a practice set of uilleann (“elbow”) pipes, the Irish bagpipes. Air is driven through the pipes by a set of bellows strapped around the waist and one arm (and hence elbow-operated), meaning they are usually played seated. Sweet-toned, they are quieter than the Great Highland [Scottish] bagpipe and are better suited to being played indoors.

Irish folk music was not then the universally recognised traditional art form that Moloney would contribute so much to its becoming. Its embrace by the nationalist movement had created a preservation of the music within narrow and orthodox circles of enthusiasts—national competitions, with their highly regulated approach to performance and repertoire, continue to dominate Irish traditional music—while numbers of pipers were dwindling.

Moloney took lessons from Leo Rowsome (1903-1970), whose dedication to the construction and playing of the pipes throughout his life, as well as the training and encouragement of younger players, was significant in ensuring the instrument’s survival. In 1991, Moloney said there were “only a handful” of pipers when he started, but he was encouraged by the proliferation of talented young players. “There’s no fears of the art of piper dying.”

He was soon entered into competitions, and recalled with pride being hoist on Rowsome’s shoulder when he won four All-Ireland medals for his piping. He was a widely accomplished musician, who experimented with many other instruments, but there was no career in traditional music. Leaving school at 16, he worked his way up through the offices of a builders’ supplier, playing music

as a hobby among informal groupings of musicians around Dublin.

His breakthrough came through the composer Seán Ó Riada, who became musical director at the Abbey Theatre in 1955. Ó Riada was interested in classical composition based on traditional musics, comparable to the work of Bartók and Dvořák. In 1959, he scored a film about the founding of the Irish Republic, *Mise Éire*, which launched a series of radio programmes about Irish musical heritage.

Ó Riada established the group Ceoltóiri Chualann in 1961, with the aim of presenting harmonic arrangements, rather than unison ensemble playing of folk songs, dance tunes and slow airs, and of reviving interest in the great 18th century harpist/composer Turlough O’Carolan. Moloney, on tin whistle and pipes, was accompanied by his friend Sean Potts on whistle. They were also joined by Peadar Mercier, playing percussion on bodhrán and bones, fiddler Sean Keane and flautist Michael Tubridy.

Ó Riada’s classical conception of the music gave his sparse arrangements an antiquarian sound. In the absence of the wire-strung harp he wanted, Ó Riada played harpsichord instead.

As well as assembling musicians, Ó Riada laid out the framework for what Moloney would subsequently accomplish. The ambitious and creative Moloney launched the Chieftains in 1962 following an invitation from Guinness heir Garech Browne to arrange and record an album for his new label, Claddagh. The band was Moloney, Potts, Tubridy, Martin Fay (fiddle) and David Fallon (bodhrán). Keane joined shortly afterwards and Mercier took over from Fallon.

Moloney applied his fertile invention to the arrangements and production, pushing farther in the direction Ó Riada had outlined. The project was initially for recording only. The group did not perform publicly together until 1964, although they all continued playing locally.

Browne was an aristocratic playboy, whose lavish showbiz lifestyle introduced Moloney to many visiting celebrities. Claddagh took off, and Browne recruited Moloney to work for him. All the band had full-time jobs, and performances or recordings had to be scheduled around these. Only in 1975, after an outstandingly successful gig at London’s Royal Albert Hall, did their new manager persuade them to turn fully professional.

Moloney subsequently decided this manager was surplus to requirements, as Moloney was already managing the group.

Gabriel Donohue, a later touring member of the group, paid tribute to Moloney's "kindness and respect for your fellow musicians" and to the "business acumen that kept paychecks coming in for everybody."

Those early albums show Moloney's rapidly developing arrangement skills as well as his talent as a player. He was expanding and fulfilling Ó Riada's vision and sound. A turning point came with *Chieftains 4* (1973), which marked the band debut of Belfast-born Derek Bell.

The classically trained Bell had been oboist and harpist for the BBC Northern Ireland Orchestra. He brought the harp sound Ó Riada had yearned for, and his debut was marked by a performance of Ó Riada's composition "Women of Ireland" ("Mná na hÉireann").

This track appeared on the soundtrack of Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975), opening another door to Moloney and the band. Their music has appeared in numerous films, and its inclusion in *Rob Roy* (1995) may have promoted the frequent use of Irish pipes in films set in Scotland.

Bell's arrival afforded Moloney greater scope with his arrangements. Donohue called Bell the group's "secret weapon," able to take Moloney's skeletal sol-fa arrangement, harmonize, arrange and notate it. His knowledge of the harp also allowed deeper investigation of O'Carolan's music. This, with his use of the hammered dulcimer to recreate the ancient timpán, completed what Donohue called the band's "medieval consort sound." It consolidated an unstated romantic nationalism.

This unshackling of creativity also saw Moloney's own compositions appearing in the repertoire. The panoramic "Bonaparte's Retreat," on *The Chieftains 6: Bonaparte's Retreat* (1975)—their first album as a professional group—included Moloney's "The March to Victory" in its assemblage of pieces from or about the Napoleonic campaigns and the Irish exiles involved in them. (The album also featured "The Rights of Man," a traditional hornpipe named after Thomas Paine's treatise defending the French Revolution). The band returned to this theme with "The Year of the French" (1982), Moloney's orchestral suite written to accompany an Irish television series about the 1798 uprising.

Although informed by a romantic nationalism, this was no antiquarian or sedate exercise. Among the guests on *Chieftains 6* were Dolores Keane, the singer of young traditional group De Danann, and a roomful of dancers. When Potts and Tubridy decided professional life on the road was not for them, Moloney recruited the brilliant flautist Matt Molloy, recently departed from another rock-influenced young group, the Bothy Band.

Chieftains 6 also introduced Kevin Conneff, initially replacing Mercier on bodhrán. Conneff's love of traditional song would see him becoming the band's featured singer in the years to come.

Their global success saw further expansion of their interests, with forays into American and Mexican roots music. Their regular incorporation of tunes from other Celtic traditions resulted in albums like *Celtic Wedding* (1987), an album of Breton music, and collaborations with the Galician piper Carlos Nuñez.

These albums are more enduring than the more determinedly popularising material. Albums like those with concert flautist

James Galway and Van Morrison mostly trod extremely well-worn ground.

Musical curiosity sometimes took them far from their roots. Some projects were fascinating—in 1984 they played in China—but others were too far astray. Molloy said he had to be dragged "kicking and screaming" to some of them.

The most extreme was *The Long Black Veil* (1995), a pop album, with Moloney's arrangements supporting an unlikely array of guest singers. The tracks vary wildly in quality. At times the band are all but relegated to anonymous session musicians, but occasionally they burst out in full glory, as in Molloy and Keane's composition "Ferny Hill."

The popularity of Irish music globally has been driven by a handful of significant and high-profile acts, with the Dubliners and the Pogues seeming to stand at a wilder pole than the Chieftains' carefully studied arrangements, so it is fun to find them leading the Rolling Stones in a dance with "The Rocky Road to Dublin." The Stones were clearly not naturally comfortable with the slip jig's 9/8 time signature. A decade earlier Belfast-born hard rock guitarist Gary Moore had been much more at home in their company playing in 12/8 on "Over the Hills and Far Away."

They returned to more interesting musical experimentation, but by now they were enjoying the fruits of their earlier labours in popularising and promoting Irish music of the highest quality around the world.

A 2008 BBC documentary on the band made clear that Moloney remained and would remain its driving force. "It's really all in Paddy's hands," said Conneff, while Molloy commented "It will continue, I've no doubt about that, but at an acceptable level—if Paddy's listening!" It did continue, right up to the end, and Moloney summed up his own achievements and contribution: "I have no fears now that this folk music, this great folk art, is dying at all."



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