

AN IRISH TROUBADOUR

In preparation for this article, I called Seamus Kennedy on his cell phone and spoke to him while he was travelling to work the weekend at the Shannon Pub in Buffalo New York. I always enjoy a chat with Seamus. Even though he is deadly serious about his music business, he has a light hearted, humorous manner that makes conversation with him delightful.

Seamus is originally from Belfast, Northern Ireland and currently calls Maryland home, but I am certain he lives pretty much out of a suitcase! Playing a remarkable 250-260 shows each year, he is one of the hardest working, full-time travelling musicians on the planet. I asked him if he knows anyone else who works that much. He told me that he and Bill Staines were about the only ones he knew of, working the pub, festival and concert circuit to that number of shows each year – and all over the continent! Though he's based in the mid-Atlantic seaboard, a quick look at his calendar will show you that Seamus Kennedy is as "at home" in Alaska and California as he is in New York, Pennsylvania and Maryland. What's missing? "I'd like to get back to Texas more often," he told me.

Seamus is a gifted and skilled entertainer with a genuine love for performance. He has refined the delivery of his music and humor to a high art – a level that very few attain – and his audiences instantly recognize the distinction. A friend once told me that if you look up the "world's funniest man" in the dictionary, they have a picture of Seamus Kennedy! Well that may be true but there's more than humor to a Seamus Kennedy show. There is a deep respect for heritage and culture, even when it is often delivered through irreverent humor. His stories and his songs all have an underlying thread of love and respect for Irish and American culture and for life's lessons. That underlying thread and his "honed to perfection" music and humor skills have made Seamus Kennedy a maestro among Irish troubadours.

Party Pieces

His newest CD release is called, Party Pieces and is on the Gransha Records label. It includes 15 tracks totaling 54 minutes 36 seconds. You can find the album on-line at CDBaby and there is always up-to-date information for Seamus and his recorded music at his website www.seamus-kennedy.com


The album comes in a sturdy, cardboard, fold-out sleeve, decorated by a fine pub scene painting by Kevin McKrell (of the McKrells). Inside the two cardboard sleeves is the CD itself on one side, and a 16 page booklet on the other. Unlike the typical plastic CD jewel case, this handsome package will not break easily and fits in to any CD case holder. It is a useful and well designed package.

Party Pieces is a collection of favorite songs from Seamus' family and friends. He introduces the album with these comments:

In Ireland when we have a party or gathering of family and friends, we like to entertain one another by singing, story telling, recitations, or even an ould step dance or two.

Nearly everyone has a song, a story, a poem or a bit-of-business for which they are known – their "party piece" – and when the hooley breaks out, he or she will be called upon to perform said piece for the group. None of your standing around sipping cocktails, nibbling canapes, schmoozing and passing out business cards.





No we sing our heads off, drink beer or stout and Hoover up little sandwiches with the crusts cut off.

Each track on the album is a favorite “party piece” from someone among Seamus’ family and friends. The liner notes provide background on each party piece song, in addition to lyrics and credits.

The Music

In choosing favorite songs or party pieces from his mother, father, uncles, relatives and friends – Seamus has created an album of rich variety. There are lovely old standards like *Carrickfergus*, *She Moved Thro' the Fair*, and *The Water is Wide*. There are some hilarious songs; old and new - one of my favorites being a song my father used to sing called *Abdul Abulbul Ameer* by Percy French. And Seamus includes a lovely version of the Johnny Cash song, *Forty Shades of Green*. It is a great collection of songs!

The album is well produced and engineered. A mix of traditional and modern instruments are used. Seamus plays guitar, tenor banjo, mandolin, castanets (really), bodhran and of course provides lead vocals. He gives Brad Hayford multiple instrument credits (Brad also gets engineering and production credits). Significant musical contributions on the album are made by EJ Jones on flutes, whistle and pipes. Tad Marks plays fiddle and Billy McComiskey accordion.

One of my favorite tracks is the opening song, *Arkle*. It tells the story of an Irish race horse, who beats the English champion thoroughbred, of course much to the chagrin of the English race track bettors. Another of my favorites is *Forty Shades of Green*, a lovely sentimental that shows a good mix of Irish and Country Music styles.

I spoke with Seamus in our telephone conversation about that very cozy relationship between Irish folk and American Country or Bluegrass music. Seamus said that there is a *reinfluence* of Country back into Irish music – to a great degree. It is commonly recognized that Irish music had a great influence on what as to become Country and Bluegrass music – but that influence has found its way back into modern Irish music and is reflected in what is popular in Ireland’s pub and parlor singing sessions. That blend is comfortable and obvious in Seamus Kennedy’s music.

What’s Next?

Party Pieces is, by my count, Seamus’s 13th album. I asked if he might run out of songs one day, after recording so many albums. He said, “Funny you should ask. I was snowed in last winter at a show in Colorado and so I sat down and listed all the songs I knew. I counted over 700. And since I’ve decided I’ll keep making CDs until I’ve recorded them all; I’ll guess I be at it for a while!”

I am sure that Ceili readers will enjoy Party Pieces as much as I did and we’ll all look forward to seeing a live Seamus Kennedy show again soon – hopefully in Texas!

Jed Marum
The Ceili