

Interview with Paddy Moloney of The Chieftains; Playing Woodruff Arts Center, March 11 & 12

March 1, 2011

By [Al Kaufman](#)

Paddy Moloney is musical institution. From the time he put together his band and released what was supposed to be a one-off album, The Chieftains I, in 1962, until now, (some 49 albums later) The [Chieftains](#) have served as musical ambassadors to the world, mixing their traditional Irish music with rock (The Long Black Veil), bluegrass and country (Down the Old Plank Road), Spanish music (Santiago), and, most recently, the music of Mexico (San Patricio, about a mistreated American battalion of Irish immigrants, led by Captain John Riley, who decided to fight with Mexico during the Mexican-American War of 1846-48). They have played with some of the greatest musicians and dancers in the world.

Two of Moloney's legendary tin whistles have been in space. One went on the Discovery 10 years ago (and now sits in the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles) while the other is currently on the International Space Station.

But Paddy Moloney is also a talker and a salesman. During our recent phone interview, he talked at length about The Chieftains' upcoming Atlanta shows before I even got a question out, dropping famous names and awards won as if he were still in a struggling band trying to make a name for itself. Yet he does it all with a wink and smile, and a gracious, avuncular tone. He is a man who deeply loves what he does, and could talk about it all day. And if I wasn't confined to a 20-minute interview by his publicist, I'm sure he would have.

Hi Paddy.

Hi. We're looking forward to Atlanta. It's been a while since we played there. This is going to be a really big show with the [Atlanta] Symphony, and the Uilleann Pipe Band will be joining us because of the march that we did for the album, *San Patricio*, "March to Battle." And of course they had a pipe band down in Mexico City, called the San Patricio Pipe Band, and every Sunday morning they march in and out of the museum – there's a museum there like the Alamo, you know – and they play. They're never playing this particular march that I composed for them [laughs]. It's a very lively piece. It sounds great with the full orchestra and it will be fantastic.

And we have a choir; one of your local choirs will be taking part, particularly for the anthem that Elvis Costello wrote the words to, from *The Long Journey Home*, and other pieces. And in addition to all of that, we have some of your local dancers, which is the norm for us to do with every concert that we do all over the world. It's going to be a big show, and of course we have our own guests with us. [Triona Marshall](#) is the harper. She's a wonderful harper, and she's been

with us now for over 10 years since old Derek passed away, [Derek Bell](#), or Ol' Ding Dong Bell as I used to call him. He was great, but she is unbelievable.

And we have another beautiful singer lady, and she is called Alyth McCormack, and she comes to us from the island of Lewis on the west coast of Scotland, and it's a Gaelic speaking island, and she just has amazing mouth music and songs from there. Also she sings in English. She'll be singing on and off throughout the show.

And then of course our star show stoppers are [Jon and Nathan Pilatzke](#). P-i-l-a-t-z-k-e. I don't want you to spell it wrong [laughs]. It drives me mad. They're from the Ottawa Valley up in Canada, and they do that style of dancing that is totally amazing. And Jon is a master fiddle player and he plays with us now all of the time for the last 12 years. And so they do this great dancing, and joining them of course is Jon's lovely bride of six months now – and dancer with the Chieftains for 17 years – that's [Cara Butler](#). That's Jean Butler's sister –you know, Jean of *Riverdance* fame – that's her sister and she, of course, was dancing with The Chieftains for five years, too. So with all of that mixture, and not leaving out, because we will touch on the music of Nashville – you know, the *Down the Old Plank Road* series — we have [Jeff White](#). Jeff is a great singer, guitar player, he is just unbelievable, blues, everything. He was like the seventh Chieftain when we made *Down the Old Plank Road* series. Jeff is from Nashville and he plays on and off with Vince Gill, Lyle Lovett and people like that. He's an all-rounder.

And last but not least [laughs], the lovely Deanie Richardson, who last year was nominated for the best bluegrass player. Deanie has toured with us now for three years on and off. She also is just amazing, but she also plays all our stuff. So she's on stage right from the word go. So that's the kind of round up we have. There won't be any room for the audience at all [laughs]. We need a big stage, particularly at the end, when we do this amazing piece called "[An Dro](#)," it's a Breton, music of Brittany, which is a Celtic region, of course, and we recorded it way back in '86. But it encourages the audience and invites them to join in in this kind of a snake dance that goes bum-bah-dum-ba-da-dum bum, and it goes all around the hall, and the dancers join with the audience. It will be a right good Irish hooley as I would call it, a hooley. It's quite fun. The pieces that we play with the symphony will be the "Galician Overture," which is the great music of Galicia in the northwest of Spain. We do a suite from *The Long Journey Home*, which won us one of our six Grammys. And we have a fun piece called "Planxty Mozart," because a great friend of Mozart was a Dubliner called Michael Kelly, and they used to go out together, like young men used to do, spending time playing cards and snooker and whatever was going on. But Michael was the tenor in *The Marriage of Figaro*, the first performance. So there's a piece called "[Planxty Mozart](#)," and it's so like the horn concerto, ba-pa-ba-dee-da-ba-dee-da-ba-bay, in E minor. And it's almost the same tune as this Irish jig called "The Piper's Chair." So I have a fusion of the two and we have fun with the horn player and we invite him to come up front and perform for his penance. It's a show we've been doing on and off with different pieces we've been performing for some time, and in the finale we give the orchestra an opportunity to perform some solo pieces, as we do at the beginning. What the Chieftains do is we usually do the first 30 minutes of our own repertoire, just to give them a taste of the band, and then for the second have the orchestra will come on and do an overture and then we'll join them for another hour.

It sounds like about a five hour concert from what you've been telling me.

Believe it or not I can manage it into about two hours and 20 minutes, with a break. It's pretty fast and there's no blinking [laughs]. There's no time to. It just goes from one item to the other and it's terrific fun.

Well, you've been talking now for about 10 minutes and I haven't even asked you a question yet. So, I'm very impressed, and you've already answered about three of the questions I planned to ask. One of the things I wanted to ask you, and it sounds like it's coming out in this concert, The Chieftains have dealt with so many different styles of music besides the traditional Irish music. You've covered rock, reggae, country, bluegrass, and with the last CD, *San Patricio* a Mexican/Irish mix. What leads you in all these directions? Is it a song you hear? With *San Patricio* it may have been the story. Is it a chance to work with some of the people you've worked with? What makes this happen for you?

Just to take the *San Patricio* CD. It was a friend of mine from Trinity College [Dublin], which, incidentally, gave me an honorary doctorate in music, and he was doing these pieces on the American Civil War, and the music and songs; he was flabbergasted by all these songs that really came from Ireland. So he was feeding me a lot of material, but I also came across the story of the San Patricio and the great story of John Riley who put together a battalion and fought with the Mexicans. I just loved that whole thing. In fact I was going to write a whole new symphony for our orchestra bringing in some of the elements from some of the songs from Mexico, but then I got so much wonderful material I could have made four albums out of it. Everybody who came to the table, once they're in the studio they would say, "What about this? What about that?" So I ended up with four or five pieces from each artist. It could have been a much longer project. We got it down to what it was and I invited Ry Cooder in near the end for the mariachi style. And then Ry wanted to do a whole song. He was blown away by the whole thing, very impressed. He's a very talented man. By the way, Jeff White will actually be singing that song, "The Sands of Mexico," [the Cooder-written track] during the show.

So, to get back to your question as to why, that's how that came about. *The Long Journey Home* was a TV series and you go searching and you come across things that are terrific and you adapt your own music to it, and you sometimes compose your own music for it. And so it is with the *Santiago* album which has the music of Galecia in it, which, of course, has a huge Irish connection to it going back to the 4th century and times like that. So you research and then you start to mix that fusion of different styles, including Irish music, and sort of conjure up in your mind the whole meaning of the whole thing, which is so romantic and so interesting. And you can pursue all of these different angles. I usually see into these things as if I was there when it happened. You might say, "What about China? Chieftains in China? It's going back 3,000 years." But I found their music had similar themes about the four seasons, and love and battles and pretty much like our own. And when you hear some of the more traditional Chinese pieces, they're on the same style as Connemara traditional singing, what they call the sean-nos singing. So I'm looking at that all the time, and in the last year I've just gone wild again doing research into all the music that will take us from Africa to South America to all over the place. The world has become such a small place. I just love that it's a great calling card. You don't need to know the language. You meet up with people and I just love it.

In the middle of last year I did a piece with Herbie Hancock, the jazz musician. He was doing of project of worlds, [[The Imagine Project](#)] and their connections as well. And he did a version of “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” the Bob Dylan song. I put in a little flare of Irish traditional music into that as well. Before I came out there I was dragged into the studio because a friend of mine in Dublin was doing a Mandela suite. He’s been at it for 10 years and just wanted to have something from me. So I composed this dance music, and Mandela loves Irish music because you can dance to it. That will be coming out in February in fact. That’s just a short piece. But, again, to go back to your question, I just love the challenges, I just love these things to happen. And they seem to happen for me, and I still have a ways to go yet.

You can see that love in your music. You are always talking about how you see the similarities between traditional Irish music and this, or traditional Irish music and that. It shows in what you are playing. I only have a few minutes left with you, which I can’t believe. I have only asked one question [both laugh]. I’m kind of afraid to ask this one because I think you could go on for an hour, but you’ve worked with so many big names; Mick Jagger, Van Morrison, Roger Daltry, Tom Jones, Elvis Costello, Madonna. Give me your favorite rock star story.

Oh God [laughs]. You know there have been some great ones. Sting, for instance. We went down to Sting’s house and he invited us to have lunch down in the garden. We had to go across a lily pond. Derek [Bell] thought some leaves were stones and he stepped into the lily pond and was up to his knees in water. There’s a photograph of his socks hanging on the lovely entrance to Sting’s mansion. We ended up doing a Leonard Cohen song afterwards. We did “Sisters of Mercy.” Sting was doing a cover of it and so we worked with him for that. We had a great time.

But then the other one was The Rolling Stones. We had been waiting for them to come since 2 o’clock, and 7 o’clock they arrive in a bus with their entourage and their beer and their drinks and everything. And at 1 o’clock in the morning, Keith [Richards] was saying, “Alright, mate, who gave you this idea to drop ‘Satisfaction’ into ‘Rocky Road to Dublin’?” [for *The Long Black Veil*] and I was like, “It was my idea.” But they were all having a party, and Gene Walker was dancing, and nothing was going and I said, “Lads, do you mind if I press the button, and put this down?” This went on for about an hour and then we retired to a lovely old pub on the corner that stayed open, down to the basement. Totally illegal, of course, if you drink, but we had a few pints of Guinness down there.

I mean there are lovely stories of everybody. Tom Jones missed the Letterman show because we were in Frank Zappa’s house, which is where we recorded “The Tennessee Waltz,” [for *The Long Black Veil*] and Frank was saying to me, “I’m not going to be able to help you out on this,” and then in about 10 minutes he drifts into the studio and says, “Watch that timing on the piano,” little fatherly advice like that. So for everybody there’s a story. I could go on. I could write a full book about them.

I’m surprised you haven’t already.

Yes, they’re after me. I’ve got to press a little tape machine. They even bought me a tape machine to do it, so one of these days [laughs].

I know you like to say it's been 40 years with the Chieftains, but since that one off album, you've been doing this almost 50 years now.

That's right, next year is the big 50. At Carnegie they're going to present us. We have played Carnegie many times, of course, in New York, and next year they're also presenting us at the Disney Center in Los Angeles, celebrating the 50 years. God knows who, and what [laughs], I haven't put together a program yet.

When you started all this, did you ever believe that you would become the world ambassadors of traditional Irish music, and have you ever stopped and just asked, "Gee, why us? How did this happen?"

You know, it's just drifting, just from going day to day and enjoying the journey, a big musical journey. It never stops, you know. It just keeps going. There are a few dropping off, like Sean [Keane, fiddle player] doesn't do any long tours anymore. But needless to say he's still very involved with The Chieftains. Once a Chieftain, always a Chieftain. But I never did understand how it worked, you know what I mean? We were lucky. We came in at the right time, we were doing it our way, as the song goes. We had many invitations from record companies to go have drums and guitars in that early stage in the '70s, but I refused, and so we did what we did best. We did about 25 good traditional Irish albums, and now we're up to about 48 or 49 albums all together, almost one for every year of the band, and more to come. I'm envisioning many, many great things ahead and I'm just hoping that the good Lord will give me the strength to just keep going.

I have another album coming out, incidentally, with the poet who gave us our name, [John Montague](#). He gave us the name The Chieftains. He's 83, and I got him into the studio to read his own poetry, and, this is the closest thing to a solo album, I put down 35 minutes of pipes and whistles. And I even have a track with Jimmy Galway playing the flute on it. So that will be out sometime this year.

Since I've still have a minute left, I have one more question for you. How come your tin whistles keep ending up in space?

[Laughs] Did you see that? You know what the new thing is though? [Cady Coleman](#) [from NASA, who is up in the International Space Station], she's the flute player. She's got a flute from [Chieftain] Matt Malloy and a flute from Ian Anderson [of Jethro Tull] and my tin whistle. I sent her some music and the idea is to try to link up and have a duet from space. What I would love to do, and I have been invited to go to Haiti, and do it for the kids down there. We did a concert for them in Kentucky last October, a choir of these 40 lovely little kids came and we did a great version of "Amazing Grace," just so sweet.

The Chieftains and their myriad of friends play [Woodruff Arts Center](#) March 11 and 12.