

Upgrade Your Social Status at the Englert

In an ongoing effort to enhance my social status, I attend as many snooty cultural events as possible. If I'm seen at classy venues, I figure I must be accumulating points somewhere with people even snootier than I.

Toward this end, last week LuAnn and I attended two performances at the Englert Theatre on consecutive nights. I'm not sure how many Snooty Points we received on the official Social Elite Tally Sheet because we didn't go to see the ballet, opera or symphony orchestra. They were the Del McCoury Band - a really good bluegrass group, and Danu - a really good Irish group.

In loftier social circles, bands like these are considered lowbrow entertainment for the masses, God bless us. We saw many of the same faces at both concerts – the styles of music were different yet oddly alike.

In between tunes at the Danu event, LuAnn was theorizing that Celtic and bluegrass probably stemmed from the same local folk music roots, but in two different regions of the world. After one lively tune she noted, "That sounded like a Celtic version of 'Turkey in the Straw.'"

Opening for the Del McCoury Band (one of the best bluegrass groups on the planet) was Iowa City's own Burlington Street Bluegrass Band, which received loud and deserved ovations. BSBB has several world-class musicians (no kidding) and is more than good enough to be a headliner at any event not including the likes of McCoury.

We suffer from an embarrassment of musical riches in this area which probably numbs us somewhat to the really good groups that reside here. For example, you can catch BSBB for \$5 every 2nd and 4th Wednesday evening at the Mill. On the Irish side, you can attend free jams at the Hilltop Tavern every Tuesday night starting around 8:30. Music ranges from Irish to bluegrass to folk, depending on who shows up. Many startlingly good musicians regularly attend.

One of them – Brad – plays the Uilleann pipes (something akin to bagpipes) among other instruments. He's really good, and I once asked him if he might be the best Uilleann player in Johnson County (you can never be sure in a college town). He blinked and said, "I'm probably the *only* one."

The Del McCoury Band was co-sponsored by the Englert Theatre and the Iowa Friends of Old Time Music. IFOTM also sponsors the Tuesday night jams at the Hilltop, which are open to anyone.

I can play a half-dozen brass instruments fairly well, but after attending my first Irish/Bluegrass session with a trombone years ago it was obvious that wasn't going to work. So, I learned to play upright bass instead, and the other players are kind enough to tolerate my random plunking.

If you missed either of the Englert events last week, don't despair – the Carolina Chocolate Drops will be in town on April 7. It's another Hancher/Englert event featuring a black string band generally classified as a folk group. With any luck they'll stop by the Hilltop jam the Tuesday night beforehand.

As long as you have your calendar out you may as well pencil in September 15th, the date of this year's 41st annual IFOTM Fiddler's Picnic at the 4H Fairgrounds. It's billed as featuring Eastern Iowa's finest old-time, bluegrass, Celtic, country, and folk musicians, with free instrument workshops, food vendors, a vintage instrument dealer showcase and parking lot jam sessions.

To find a live music option a little sooner than that (like tonight), the back page of section B has *On the Go* listings that are a handy summary. Look it over if you value your social status – you're not collecting any Snooty Points sitting there on your sofa.

Dave Parsons is a board member of the Iowa Friends of Old Time Music, co-owns a business on the Coralville strip and is a member of the Press Citizen's Writer's Group.

