

## **Md. Traditions grant paves way for McComiskey's new, long-awaited CD**

**A**s the four members of The Hedge Band began to play, one of them – Billy McComiskey, the celebrated Irish-American button-accordion player whom one national journalist called “the finest and most influential B/C box player ever to emerge from the U.S.” – asserted himself. He would look at the others, offer an occasional nod or silently mouth a few words of direction.

Whether he played in full swing or provided a soft background for a tune that featured a solo by one of the other artists – flutist Laura Byrne Egan, vocalist and guitar player Pat Egan, or keyboard player and fiddler Donna Long – McComiskey was a guiding force. With his thick grey hair and the dark suit jacket that he wore to start the concert (it was gone within 20 minutes), he presented an air of authority. He was also quick to smile and engage both the band members and the audience.

Just prior to the performance, McComiskey said of his fellow band members: “They’re all such great musicians.” The challenge, he said, would be for everyone to forge together as a single unit. Once they accelerated into a jig or reel, they collectively became a surging locomotive roaring down the tracks.

Midway through the concert, McComiskey told the crowd: “We’d really be good if we played two nights in a row.” Because of their various commitments, he said, members of the band assemble only a handful of times each year. The fall concert for the Allegany County Art Council’s Root Music Series, held at the Palace Theatre in Frostburg, was one of those occasions.

McComiskey, 56, has certainly been busy. Early in September, the Creative Alliance in Baltimore hosted a coming-out party for the release of his new CD, “Outside the Box” from Compass Records in Nashville. It’s his first solo CD in 27 years. McComiskey had received a grant from Maryland Traditions, a partnership of the Maryland Historical Trust and the Maryland State Arts Council with support from the National Endowment for the Arts. “It wouldn’t have been possible without them,” he says.

"The party was a huge success," he added. "It was way over-attended." A host of luminaries from the world of Irish traditional music were there, John Doyle and Mick Moloney among them.

Doyle, McComiskey recalled, is "one of the world's pre-eminent Irish musicians." He had approached McComiskey two years ago about putting together the new CD. "Only if you produce it," McComiskey told him. In addition to producing the album, Doyle plays guitar, bouzouki and mandola on it.

### **Epicenter of the tradition**

In the 1970s, during his quest to research and document Irish traditional music in the U.S., Moloney, a musician with a doctorate in folklore, met McComiskey, whom he called "one of the musicians at the epicenter of the tradition."

McComiskey said he "escaped the gravitational pull" of his hometown – Brooklyn, N.Y., – to come to Washington, D.C., where he teamed with two other musicians to form the Irish Tradition. The group became the house band at The Dubliner, a bar in the Commodore Hotel near Union Station.

Irish Tradition released three albums during its run of nearly 10 years.

Later, McComiskey became part of another prominent band, Trian. In the aftermath of Irish Tradition, McComiskey began playing at sessions in Baltimore. He cemented his link to the city when he married Annie Caskey, a Baltimorean, in 1982. They have three sons: Patrick, 26; Sean, 24; and Michael, 13, – they can all play Irish music.

Within days of arriving in Baltimore, McComiskey met the city's only known Irish traditional player, Paul Levin – he was "the Pikesville Piper," McComiskey said. The two became friends and kick-started the Irish traditional music scene in Baltimore. It was Levin who helped a youthful Martin O'Malley launch the band O'Malley's March.

Years later, in 2002, Levin fell seriously ill. O'Malley, who was then Baltimore's mayor, asked McComiskey at a house party if he could fill in for Levin for several gigs with O'Malley's March. McComiskey said he could do one of the performances. Then, while McComiskey was chatting with friends upstairs, the mayor was downstairs where McComiskey's son Sean was playing his button accordion in a session with some of the other younger guests. As O'Malley came back upstairs to leave and say his good-byes, he told McComiskey: "By the way, you're fired." The mayor said

he wanted to hire Sean for all three dates. The younger McComiskey became a regular with O'Malley's March.

### **Irish roots**

McComiskey's roots as an Irish musician are evident in his family background. His father, an Irish immigrant from Armagh who came to Brooklyn shortly after World War II, taught the younger McComiskey a few tunes on the melodeon, a type of accordion. His mother, whose parents had come from Tipperary and Limerick, could sing and dance. And, his uncle (his mother's brother) was an Irish music enthusiast who played the accordion. When he was 9, McComiskey started to play around with the button accordion. Several prominent accordion players who performed at Irish music venues in the Catskill Mountains spurred on McComiskey's interest in playing the instrument.

McComiskey's prime mentor was Sean McGlynn, an accomplished musician from Galway who lived on Long Island. McGlynn, 14 years older than McComiskey, first visited with the budding accordion player in Brooklyn. McComiskey was 12 at the time. A close relationship ensued. McGlynn, who toured with Green Fields of

America, was murdered in 1983. McGlynn's widow presented McComiskey with her husband's button accordion, the grey Paolo Soprani that he still plays today.

In 1986, McComiskey won the All-Ireland senior button-accordion title. Moloney, in an essay packaged with McComiskey's new CD, wrote: "The success of American-born musicians in competitions back in Ireland has been crucial in legitimizing the music in the United States." Seven years earlier, McComiskey had also won the duet category in the All-Ireland competition, playing with one of his Irish Tradition partners, Brendan Mulvihill.

McComiskey's son, Sean, has continued the family tradition of competing in Ireland. In August, the Old Bay Ceili Band – which includes Sean and nine other young Maryland Irish musicians – became the first ceili (dance) band from the region to enter Ireland's annual "Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann," the world Irish traditional music competition. Sean plays the button accordion that his father used on his first solo CD, "Makin' the Rounds," initially released in 1981.

###

**Story by Gerald H. Levin**  
*Maryland State Arts Council*