



Marie Donnelly plays the fiddle in Roisin Mo Chroi, which was formed in 2004. DREW DONNELLY

'Each song has a story'

Marie Donnelly fires up her fiddle for St. Patrick's Day

Amanda Sieradzki
Council on Culture & Arts

Listen closely to a track of old-time American music from the hills of Kentucky, and you might uncover traces of jigs, reels, and hornpipes from another world. Musician Marie Donnelly's great-grandfather traveled from Ireland to Canada before settling in the state where many Irish immigrants made an imprint on both the landscape and culture.

She's making similar waves with her band Roisin Mo Chroi in Tallahassee — whose sister city is Sligo, Ireland — as they will perform once more at this year's St. Patrick's Day Festival on Saturday, March 17.

"As a group, we've really dug into the culture," says Donnelly. "I think that makes it all a wonderful journey to be able to link the culture and the place."

While Donnelly's family didn't stay as attuned to Ireland's music during her childhood, she can vividly recall receiving her first record player. Seated in her rocking chair after dinnertime, she would place a needle on her mother's vinyl compilation of classical symphonies, turn off the lights, and be carried away by the music. However, her family did maintain the Irish storytelling tradition, which wound its way around her imagination, and served as the inspiration for the band's name.

"Some of those stories are like novels because they could go on for days," says Donnelly, who loved the story of Mother Mo Chroi. "Mo Chroi means 'of my heart' or 'my love,' and roisin is 'little rose,' so the band's



The name of the band Roisin Mo Chroi translates to Rosebud of My Heart. They'll perform at the St. Patricks Day festival on Saturday. DREW DONNELLY

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name translates to ‘rosebud of my heart.’”

Roisin Mo Chroi was formed in 2004. Donnelly jests that the players were all band kids at some point — many took piano lessons, sang in church, or performed at weddings — learning on acoustic instruments before delving into Celtic music. Their repertoire spans across Irish and Scottish traditions, and they have traveled to those regions for years to study the language, culture, and history behind the music.

Though the flute was her first instrument, Donnelly primarily plays the fiddle in addition to the concertina and tin whistles. Member Rusty Pfof plays the Uilleann pipes, which are considered traditional Irish bagpipes, the Great Highland bagpipes and sings. Ernie Brock also sings and plays the pipes, as well as the flute, whistle, and concertina. Judy Johnson is another singer who plays guitar and Mandola, and Charles Johnson plays mandolin and the Bodhran, the Irish drum.

“In the Irish tradition all the melody players play in unison so it’s kind of one voice,” says Donnelly.

Another trademark of Celtic music is the oral history, which Donnelly has experienced firsthand on her travels. The 100-year-old music is passed from generation to generation through playing instead of written compositions. She says many musicians don’t remember the names of songs, but rather who taught them the piece of music.

Donnelly and her bandmates have felt fortunate to learn from many masters, and she names Martin Hayes, Kevin Burke, and Liz Carol as some of her most influential teachers. Summers are full of traveling to programs like the Swannanoa Gathering in North Carolina where national and international Irish musicians congregate to share in the music.

Tallahassee’s local scene also boasts more Irish music and “sessions” than most major U.S. cities, states Donnelly. Sessions could be likened to improv jams in jazz music, where Irish musicians gather and play tunes together. Roisin Mo Chroi helps to host one such occasion at Finnegan’s Wake in Midtown on the second Sunday of alternating months.

“In the pubs, the musicians will crowd around one table and play together even if they’ve never met,” describes Donnelly. “It’s really exciting to be able to do that anywhere you go.”

Traditional Irish and Celtic music aren’t the stereotypical drinking songs that Donnelly thinks most people associate with the culture.

There are “sad songs of love and happy songs of war and fighting,” with many great ballads, seafaring songs, and slow airs, which are considered to be open-ended melodies. Even in playing instrumental songs, Donnelly will take the time to learn the lyrics to unlock the meaning. One of her favorites is the dramatic tune “The Cliffs of Moher,” with a fiddle melody that arcs from low to high notes, mimicking the landscape.

“Each song has a story in it, and that’s why I like to go as close as I can to where that tune came from,” says



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If you go

What: Roisin Mo Chroi at the St. Patrick’s Day Festival

When: 12-8 p.m., Saturday, March 17

Where: Shannon Lakes Park in Killlearn Estates

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information, call 850-339-2617 or visit www.tallahasseeirish.org.

Donnelly. “When you see the high hills or walk along the river, it really influences how you approach that song from then on. It fascinates me to know about that place because it’s like a little secret in that tune.”

Rehearsing together for three hours a week, Donnelly says Roisin Mo Chroi does their best to honor all traditions of Scottish and Irish music, and are sure to distinguish between the two depending on the venue and audience. She looks forward to Tallahassee’s St. Patrick’s Day Festival every year as it not only reunites many Irish musicians in town but also reminds her of the reason she pursues playing music in the first place.

“When you hit the groove it’s almost like flying or floating,” says Donnelly. “I love to play anywhere where little kids just spontaneously get up and dance. To see anyone get up really, because most of the tunes were meant for dancing, is just pure joy.”

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).

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Parking is available for study participants.
Study approved by FSU’s Institutional Review Board.

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