Remembering an Extraordinary Music Man - Mike Kirkpatrick . . . pg 9

Remembering an Extraordinary Music Man - Mike Kirkpatrick

Contributers: ***Rachel Kahsen, David Callahan, Mark Howard, Katherine Iannitelli***

Pick up this glass, we'll down a round.
This night won't always be.
If hard times fall upon us all, I say it will not last.
For we shall see our good friends free.
Their love will tell the tale.
And all vain pride be left aside
when fortune turns her wheel.

These lines, written by Irish music composer and producer Mike Kirkpatrick nearly 30 years ago, read with terrible poignancy this week as the Chicago music community mourns the passing of the man who first came to prominence as leader of **The Drovers**. After a four-year battle with cancer, Mike finally raised his own parting glass on August 27.

Mike's family originated from Asheville, North Carolina. His father Jesse was in the Air Force, which sent the family to places like Mountain Home, Idaho where Mike was born, then to Germany, Great Falls Montana, and finally Tucson Arizona.

He was surrounded by music from an early age. His mother Ann studied music at Furman University and was a vocalist in the Great Falls Symphony Choir. She taught Mike how to play the piano and read music. One of the earliest songs his brother Rick remembers his mother teaching Mike was Steppenwolf's "Magic Carpet Ride." "It was interesting to see her and my brother at the piano learning a Steppenwolf song," Rick said.

Mike's father had a bit of music in him too, with a sweet rendition of Red River Valley he would play on the harmonica. On a trip back to North Carolina to reconnect with family, Mike's fondest memories were of time spent with his cousin **David Fullam**, a Bluegrass guitar player and singer, who inspired him to pursue playing guitar.

I asked him which song he remembered cousin David playing that had initially moved him so much, and it was **Tecumseh Valley by Townes Van Zandt**. Mike became a music major at University of Arizona, and immersed himself in theory and composition. He and his peers were not only into the classical greats like Bach, Beethoven, Stravinsky, but also the jazz greats- Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, Duke Ellington, and also the fringes Mahavishnu Orchestra, Soft Machine, Frank Zappa. A dear friend of his at this time was renowned Tucson singer, song writer, and guitarist **Rainer Ptacek** (Giant Sand).

While working at the Record Bar in Tucson in the late 70's a friend happened to play him one of the earliest **Chieftans** recordings, and he was stunned, he had not heard anything like it, "never heard Irish pipes, never heard wood flute played like that, the fiddle player was great, everything about it had this kind of really raw element to it, I knew it was the music for me," he said.

Mike was intrigued and tried to find more traditional Irish music, not such an easy task in those days, and in that town. He was initially only able at first to find a Boys of the Lough record. But shortly after, at the record store, a new box of promo records came in, he opened it up, "and it was this providential kind of thing" in his words. At the very top of the stack were the first two **Bothy Band** records. He had no idea who they were but saw they had jigs and reels, and were on **Mulligan Records**, telling him he had found some new Irish music. Mike chose to play the most recent record first, "Old Hag You Have Killed Me" and in his words "that was that", he was hooked.

He went out and found a tin whistle in D, and was able to teach himself a couple of tunes. He estimated that when he arrived in Chicago, he had worked out about 5 traditional tunes on guitar and whistle.

Mike reunited with his former girlfriend, **Mary Ward**, who had invited him to move to Chicago with her. Mary was a part of the modern dance scene in Chicago at the time. Mike very soon began writing original music for her dance company, and many others. A culmination of their collaboration was a piece that was performed at the Civic Opera House, entitled ***Ballydesmond***, with Mike's original music, a result of a trip they had taken to that town in Ireland.

Within a few weeks of arriving in Chicago, he had his first professional engagements as an Irish musician. After sitting in on some sessions at the now famous **Heartland Café**.

He was invited to play with **Barry Foy**, **Kevin O'Dwyer**, **Billy Brown** and **Tommy Keane** from Dublin. They got a few gigs in Milwaukee, and some places around town, but then Billy and Tommy went back to Dublin.

Mike soon met **Ross Thompson**, and formed **Far Darrig**. He was starting to write his own compositions in strict attention to the Irish Folk tradition. A bit later, he joined **Samradh Music**, founded by his dear friend the late **Michael Donaghy**, with **Martin Dowling, Richard Pettingill**, and **Mary McFadden**.

A few videos of them performing back in the day:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffJe7ZBRsEA
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0l1XNZW46E
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G543AtTtRj8

Mike really dove deep into the tradition and history, learning more and more tunes from the many excellent musicians around him. He was especially fond and honored of the time he was able to spend with **Cuz Teahan**. **Johnny McGreevy** was also an inspiration to him. **Liz Carroll** was another that he was a fan of from the beginning, and he was grateful for any opportunity to work with her over the years, including on his last recordings. Liz shared the following thoughts for the ***Sun-times*** article, *"Often his pieces were tricky, and I think he took great pleasure in my befuddlement over some of the melodies. Always when the arrangements came into place, of course, everything made sense."*

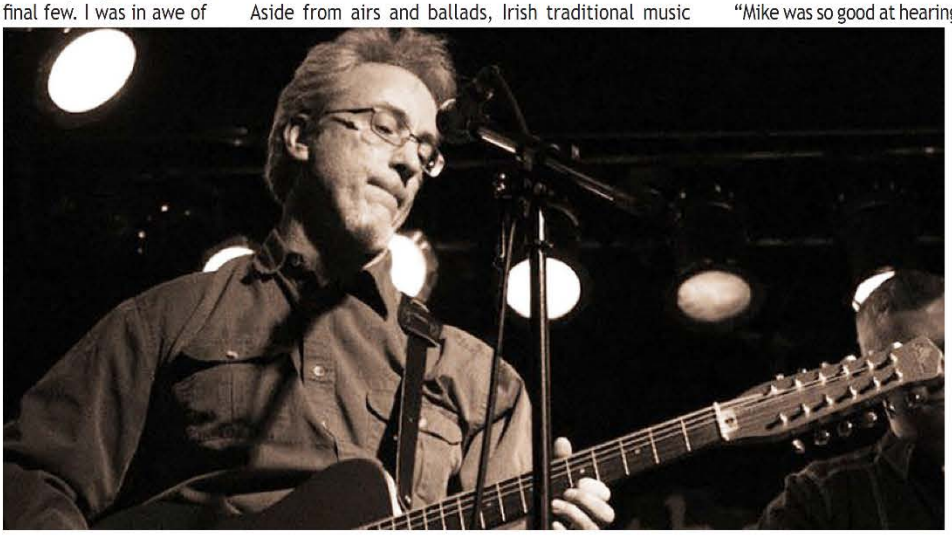
Mike once shared, "I'd learn pipes tune after pipes tune, after pipes tune. Fiddle tunes are nice, but there is something about the pipes, and the drone of the low D on pipes that is similar on guitar. It is one of the reasons that I opted for this tuning (dadgad), because it is three D's, two A's, and a G. Then the 12 string guitar made more of a jangle, there was something about it that made it uncontrollable, allowing the strings to ring."

Another Mike quote, "I always considered myself a student of the music. That's why I'm always the accompanist, not the featured performer."

Mike met **Mark Howard** in the lobby of Lakeview's Century Mall where both his band Far Darrig, and Mark's Trinity Academy of Irish Dance were performing. An upcoming Irish festival had sent Irish bands and dance schools out to shopping malls to advertise the event. Mike and Mark's collaborations yielded early and fruitful success. Mike composed the music that helped Trinity become the first American team to win the gold medal at the Irish Dancing World Championship in Galway, Ireland. These successes led them to partner up again for appearances at the Grand Ole Opry and multiple years on the Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson. Mike composed the tune ***"Johnny"*** for Mark's choreography in honor of Johnny's retirement in 1991. They would go on to collaborate on several formative dances for the professional touring **Trinity Irish Dance Company**. Their work together was and continues to be celebrated by audiences world-wide--from Chicago's Auditorium Theatre,

to New York's Joyce Theater, to Tokyo's Orchard Hall--and has attracted critical acclaim from the ***New York Times*** to the ***LA Times***.

Per Mark, "**Mike Kirkpatrick** is the reason why I choreograph dances in a performing arts setting. He's the reason why the **Trinity Irish Dance Company** exists. He was a true artist, creating music every day, continuing to listen and write through his final few. I was in awe of him. Any honest artist worth their salt knew they were in the presence of greatness. He was my friend, and he will be impossible to replace. 'All passes. Art alone endures' is a Milton line that must have been written for him."



The Drovers

The Drovers began in 1988 as a house pick-up band at the Hidden Shamrock on Halsted St., with a revolving cast of local musicians. At its center were drummer **Jackie Moran** and fiddler **Sean Cleland**, who after several months recruited Mike to play electric guitar with the group.

With his guidance and songwriting, ***The Drovers*** would build a formidable reputation as a live act, packing houses from coast to coast, with a brutal schedule of near-constant touring. The sound was so original and fresh that, among Irish-influenced groups, the Drovers had a virtual monopoly on the alternative rock/college music circuit for most of the 1990s. They were also featured in two major motion pictures, **Backdraft** and **Blink.**

The band was paired on bills with acts like Yo La Tengo, Common and Ani DeFranco. "Mike's vision led us into really different territory for an Irish music group," says Drovers bassist and lead singer **Dave Callahan**. "That probably helped open doors for other Irish groups that were trying to shift into rock and pop."

Mike's songs mixed Irish dance rhythms with Beatles-esque pop structures and extended instrumental sequences that were influenced by artists as diverse as Charles Mingus and Soft Machine. The melodies were graced with his unique blend of poetry inspired by an eclectic range of sources, including Sappho, ballads of Irish emigration and fragments of conversation he would pick up in places like Chicago El platforms and bars where ***The Drovers*** were gigging.

Callahan lived around the corner from the **Hidden Shamrock**. An amateur busker, and a journalist by profession, Callahan would eventually join the group and become Mike's right-hand man.

"He was my mentor, a kind of big brother," Callahan says. "He inspired me to begin writing too, and get good enough to contribute songs to the band."

"I used to go down there to listen to them even before Mike joined. When he was recruited you could hear their sound change immediately. His guitar accompaniment had a way of lifting lead musicians so that you hear them in a different way. You heard their strengths and their individual style better."

For many an Irish traditional musician in Chicago, Mike was already a favorite accompanist. Callahan says he thinks Mike really considered himself a dance accompanist.

"Back then, he always told the crowd, 'You know, **The Drovers** play nothing but dance music, so let's see you dance.' Stuff like that."

Aside from airs and ballads, Irish traditional music is intended for dance. But there was more to Mike's thinking than that. "It was one of Mike's principles: that lively music should engage people viscerally," Callahan says. "It should make them want to move. Whenever we finished a gig and were going over whether we did well or not, his judgment always came back to whether the crowd was dancing."

Dave says that interaction with the audience was a top priority for Mike. "It was about getting them to dance but also connecting with them through the lyrics. He spent a lot of time chatting with people in the audience before and after shows. Some of them appear as characters in some of his songs," he says. "His songs were personal and impossible to stop thinking about, and they were always constructed around irresistible jig, hornpipe, reel and polka rhythms.

"They were absorbed into your heart and mind, and into your hips, arms and feet," he says.

Mike's ability to facilitate interactions between musicians was key to his success in blending not only the disparate elements of the Drovers, but in future projects where he recruited jazz musicians to work on genre-bending compositions that also involved Irish musicians.

"Another one of Mike's principles, which also finds its basis in Irish traditional music, was that playing music together is a social thing. Mike was really the first person I ever played music with, in a way that you have to do something original, not just cover a well-known song. I can't exactly explain why, though I know it's not because I'm a gifted musician (which I'm not), but when I first worked out a song with Mike playing guitar, I just knew what to do. Everything literally clicked. There was a communication that was immediate and I think it's because of the way he concentrated on me and how I was playing. He listened to what I was doing as much as I listened to him.

"That's why he was a natural bandleader. Mike knew that each musician has their own unique voice with their instrument, no matter what skill level they're at. And he would zero in on what that is, what it can do, what are its strengths and weaknesses and how he could work it into the music.

"Mike was so good at hearing one's musical identity, that it naturally followed that he would become effective at putting together people - like the Drovers - who have nothing in common musically and make them sound like they belong together," Callahan says. "Maybe it was also because he was as fluent in rock, pop, jazz and classical as he was in Irish trad."

He would succeed at doing this again and again, for years after the Drovers came to a halt.

Along with the Movies **Backdraft** and **Blink**, Mike also has songwriting credit on the movie **Mafia!**, a 1998 comedy film spoofing the Godfather and other mafia movies. He earned a nomination for Chicago's illustrious **Joseph Jefferson Awards** for his original compositions in the **Steppenwolf Theater** production of ***The Beauty Queen of Leenane***. Mike produced albums and composed songs for countless other musicians over the years as well. For some years he taught Irish guitar at the **Old Town School of Folk Music**. He was an inspiration, mentor, and teacher to so many.

Mike did not let his illness slow him down or prevent him from composing, playing, or recording. He formed an extension of **The Drovers** family called ***"The Drovers Unlimited Orchestra"***. This ensemble features some of the greats of traditional music, some of the greats of modern jazz. And some Drovers. Working with some of his favorite musicians was one of the highest points of his life. Some of the best from the tradition on these recordings knew him from the earliest days in Chicago, and included **Liz Carroll, Kevin Burke** (bringing his love of **Bothy Band** full circle), and **Martin Hayes**. His earliest love was jazz, and some of his all time heroes dedicated their time to him, including Jazz Masters **David Liebman, Billy Hart, Cecil McBee, Billy Harper, Nick Mazzarella**, and many others. Local musicians **Bob Palmieri, Larry Gray, Michael Zerang, Jason Stein, Ed Wilkerson, James Conway** to name just a few, also made their contributions. He was especially honored and thankful for the mentorship and support he received from **David Liebman**.

Quoting Mike again, "The rhythms for Jazz and Irish music are compatible. Both styles have a pronounced sense of swing, and a similar type of forward momentum."

Per **Bob Palmieri**, a dear friend, musician, and 26-year DePaul professor of jazz guitar who worked on **The Drovers** Unlimited Orchestra projects:

"Michael's later works were created for the expansive

canvas known as the ***Drovers Unlimited Orchestra***. These musical explorations are spectacular realizations of his wish to integrate Irish traditional music with the most advanced players and components of highly evolved modern jazz. Besides bringing in a stunning roster of some the greatest living practitioners of the modern jazz art, he found the need to integrate Middle Eastern and African percussionists, as well as a star in the world of modern classical flute to join top level pipe and fiddle players from the Irish music scene. And even with this level of individual talents, the whole handily exceeded the sum of these parts.

His unique blend of confidence and humility allowed all the players to quickly focus on Mike's highly evolved concepts

and deliver performances that took on attributes within the context that surprised even the players that created them.

Mike's take was that all music can be world music, and benefits from open structures so players from every background can bring their best to the table, and not only have it fit, but elevate. He was able to embrace spontaneous events sparked by the interactions of the players. The results are wholly unique, beautiful, timeless, indescribable."

This last sentence of Bob's perfectly describes his last recording with the Drovers Unlimited Orchestra, which will be released very soon.

Mike may be gone, but his music lives on, in the recordings, and in the work of the many many musicians that he collaborated with, mentored, and inspired. He leaves us with a library's worth of original compositions left still to be explored. His humor, kindness, and creativity touched all of those who had the fortunate opportunity to know him.

From this valley they say you are going.
We'll miss your bright eyes & sweet smile,
For they say you are taking the sunshine
That has brightened our pathway a while.
[From the song, Red River Valley]

Photo (right) by Michael Donaghy on his last visit with Mike Kirkpatrick, and partner of over 20 years, Rachel Kashen