

The Irish Chieftains take the 'pub' out of public domain

H hvy.com/peterjoneswriter/the-chieftains-irish

Peter Jones

June 3,
2019



The Chieftains are icons of Irish folk. Courtesy of the Chieftains

Unlike other aging men who kept their day jobs while hobbing in Irish folk, the Chieftains have cachet. Performing with them has become like singing next to Tony Bennett or recording a James Bond theme or showcasing at Super Bowl halftime. An artist has seemingly not arrived until he has shared an Irish lament with the Chieftains.

Musicians to up their hip quotient include Willie Nelson, Roger Daltrey, Los Lobos, Sting, Elvis Costello and Jackson Browne, among others. Many such performances are on *The Essential Chieftains*, a two-CD set coupling four decades of the group's general history with a second disk of inter-genre collaborations with outside players.

"There have been the odd requests from different people who love what we do," Chieftains founder Paddy Maloney said of some proposed duets. "I've often screened that kind of thing, and that's caused embarrassment because I know well in advance whether it's going to work. There have been occasions when I would politely say we're in the middle of a tour and get out of it.

A persistent onetime guitarist for Ireland's Thin Lizzy was among the unlikely artists who managed to pass Maloney's radar. The resulting collaboration with an Irish countryman of a harder-rock Blarney Stone worked out quite well, according to the Chieftains' founder, who was as surprised as anyone.

"I have tried everything now," he laughed, "except rap."

Ireland's Tara hillbillies

It is little wonder that the Chieftains have melded their Celtic rhythms with artists of various genres, especially those with roots in other world-music idioms. Traditional cowboy and Appalachian folk came from Irish settlers, whose stringed reels emigrated into the prairie and mountain music that now form the American songbook. Even today, one false move by a country fiddle player can turn "Turkey in the Straw" into an Irish jig.

"Silver Dagger," for another, was inspired by auld Ireland's "The Butcher Boy." The Western tune "Streets of Laredo" lifted its melody from the mournful Irish ballad "The Bard of Armaugh." When the Chieftains cut the latter with country's Vince Gill, they recorded both versions of the song as a sort of cross-continental medley. Hearing the band perform "Cotton-Eyed Joe" with Ricky Skaggs is almost dizzying, but in a multicultural way.

"The beginning of all music is folk music," Maloney explained professorially. "It has themes that go back thousands of years, perhaps hundreds of years anyway. Even when I was in China or Japan, the songs had to do with the mountains and the sea and inspiration of their homeland. Irish music is full of that."

Expanding Irish music from its pigeonholes of drunken pub fare and "Danny Boy" melancholia has been among the Chieftains' greatest hits, so to speak. Prior to the band's emergence in 1964, the good-natured Clancy Brothers had ruled the Celtic circuit, and the classically-trained Chieftains would eventually become a less commercial alternative.

"I always admired the Clancys because they opened up the ballads and the songs of the pub music," Maloney said. "But the pubs were one of the things I preferred not to do. I thought if the Chieftains were to be successful at all, we'd keep out of the pubs and go to the stage. I had that much respect for the music. I wanted to spread the gospel of this great folk art."

The slow luck of the Irish

Maloney and his Dublin-based true believers were slow to make much green. The Chieftains took five years to record a second album and kept their day jobs until 1975. By then, they had cut a grand total of five albums in well over a decade.

"I was waiting for the time to come when I could persuade the band to go full-time," Maloney said. "I was thinking of our families, and even today, it's not rock and roll."

Close, though.

Years before jamming with the Rolling Stones, the Chieftains took home an Oscar statue in 1975 for the soundtrack to Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*. whose "The Women of Ireland" boasted 18th-century aesthetics that were trippy enough to get radio airplay. By then, the Chieftains had dropped office work and day labor from their set list.

In 1979, the band played in front of more than a million people in Dublin as an opening act for Pope John Paul II. Four years later, the Chieftains were among the first Western acts to perform in Communist China and did so with a traditional Chinese folk orchestra.

Staying North of the 'troubles'

The Chieftains are more comfortable in such foreign politics than they are taking sides in Northern Ireland, where Catholics and Protestants have long battled over British occupation.

"It's one subject that I just don't get into," Maloney said. "I give respect to each person, whatever they feel. But we have played right through all the troubles in the North. Very often when we put out an album, we go straight to Belfast and play there. Our audience, right across the board, is mixed completely. There's no boundaries when it comes to music."

Maloney, who refused to perform in South Africa during apartheid, thinks the leaders of the IRA and the British government could learn a thing or two from the Chieftains.

"If they would have a songbook or a tin whistle in their inside pocket, as I always carry, and have a few tunes, instead, the world would be a happier place," he said.

Ireland music Northern Ireland