

A Fiddling Summit:

An interview with Tim O'Brien, Kevin Burke and Dirk Powell

By Candace Horgan

In June 2000, Tim O'Brien celebrated his 25th year playing the Telluride Bluegrass Festival. He put together a world-class band that included Kevin Burke and Dirk Powell, as well as Paddy Keenan and John Williams. During the Festival, Tim, Kevin and Dirk expounded at length on fiddling and Celtic music and its influence on American folk music and bluegrass.

First of all, let's start with some of the basics. How old were you all when you started playing the fiddle, and what attracted you to the instrument initially? Also, was it the first instrument you pursued, or did you get your initial musical education on another instrument?

Dirk: I started piano when I was eight. When I was around twelve or thirteen, I got attracted to my grandfather's music, which was fiddle, so I started playing that.

Tim: I started playing fiddle when I was about sixteen. I actually started on guitar when I was twelve. My aunt gave me a fiddle. I saw Merle Haggard play at the jamboree in Wheeling, West Virginia, and he took out the fiddle and did this whole section of the show doing fiddle stuff. I saw some jazz fiddlers who grabbed me also. I had to play mandolin for a while before I could really learn the fiddle.

Kevin: I was seven or eight when I started fiddling. We were living in England, but my parents come from an area known for fiddling and thought I should learn, so I gave it a go. [laughs] They didn't play themselves, though my father's aunt was a great player, as was my mother's aunt. The area I'm referring to is Sligo.

Given the tradition of learning by ear that is heavily present in fiddle music, did any of you receive formal musical training?

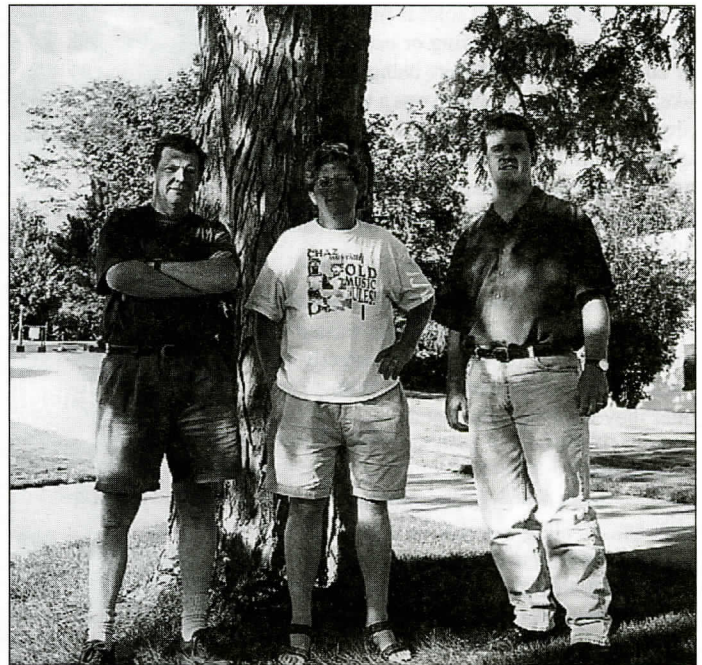
Dirk: I had piano training in classical music, which I think helps you figure out where the notes are, but it is rigid and becomes more about practicing than playing. I think classical teachers need to emphasize playing more.

Tim: My formal training was more like vocal music in Catholic grade school. We'd sing and read music. In high school, the glee club did some challenging stuff. Then I tried to take piano lessons, and would play stuff that wasn't on the page I was reading. It was around Christmas and I learned a lot of the carols. I tried to take guitar lessons, and that didn't work either. After I learned guitar pretty well, I took lessons from jazz player Dale Bruning, who taught me technique on guitar, and I transferred that to mandolin and fiddle.

Kevin: I went to music lessons till I was sixteen or seventeen; these lessons were in classical music. People get very picky about what classical music is, sort of like bluegrass. I guess it was classical. As a kid, any time I went to the areas where there was lots of classical, people didn't seem to have fun, but at the Irish music shows, people were having a great time. That really steered me. I could have a great time playing Irish music, but the classical people didn't have any sense of humor, which was constant with the Irish stuff. It was almost rude to laugh [smiles].

What types of fiddles do each of you play on stage, and what do you do for amplification?

Dirk: I play a German factory fiddle that Rafe Stefanini took the top off of



Kevin Burke, Tim O'Brien, and Dirk Powell in Telluride, Colorado

Photo: Candace Horgan

and reshaped. When I play Appalachian stuff I try to use mics, and it doesn't come across as well with the pickup like it does in Cajun. I also have a fiddle my grandfather won in a poker game that I play on special occasions. It's an old Czech fiddle.

Tim: My fiddle is a Carlo Micelli, and it was made in 1922, really made in Germany to look like an Italian fiddle. It's a '20s factory fiddle, probably a mail order fiddle from a Sears catalog, that is higher quality than other mail orders from that time. I have it rigged for electric with a Baggs bridge, but it depends on the gig whether I use it, and a little mic that I blend.

Kevin: I have a fiddle made by a guy in Portland, Oregon — Jeff Manthos — and he's a great luthier. It has a Kurmann soundpost pickup in it that I use.

Tim: Those soundpost pickups seem popular among Celtic fiddlers.

Kevin: Yes, they are. My other fiddle is a regular acoustic fiddle but it is European, and the neck was replaced by John Dilworth, and he did a great job. It has a whole new life. I use a German mic that I got in England for amplification.

Who have been some of your influences, both on fiddle and in music generally?

Dirk: My grandfather. By the time I was learning he had arthritis and his left hand wasn't good but I could pick up the bow stuff from him. I learned a lot from the traditional North Carolina fiddlers, but added stuff from a variety of influences.

Tim: Who or what characterizes the Piedmont influence from that region?

Dirk: There is more of an African and blues influence, with a real driving rhythm. A lot of Celtic music starts on the downbeat, but the old time stuff starts ahead of the beat. On equal levels you get a more bluesy thing going. That was a big influence on me. Music in general...all my favorite musicians are humble. There is a fine line there. You can be a really good musician performing and have an ego, but there's a place beyond there that you can only get by being humble.

Kevin: I'm still working on the ego thing. [laughs] I grew up on a diet of Irish fiddlers like Michael Coleman and Paddy Killoran, both of whom are from Sligo. And then the people I met when I was young like Tommy McGowan, also from Sligo. He was one of those guys who wouldn't be considered a good player, but when he joined in, the music improved. Brendan McGlinchey, and Bobby Casey, who just died a few weeks ago, also were influences.

Tim: Bobby died? He was the first guy I met in Ireland. He was a great player.

"I like structure teaching you what avenues you might take." — Kevin Burke

Kevin: I really liked what Dirk said about the attitude of musicians. There is a lot to learn there. I think one of the things with traditional music is you usually realize it is a treasure, handed down for so long. It's been around much longer than us as well. In fact it's rather depressing [laughs].

Tim: You lived in London, yet you mention all these Sligo players — did you hang out with them?

Kevin: The first two I heard on records; the other guys lived in London. There was a huge Irish community in London in the '60s. The amount of great players there was amazing. On any particular night, you could meet five or six players all together playing, whereas in Ireland they would have been more spread out. It was a real focal point for about ten years.

Tim: You get people from all over. In the U.S., all these people showed up from Africa and met up for the first time when they went to Europe for WWI.

Kevin: Yeah, war is great for that [laughs].

Tim: Some would say it dilutes the regional style, but people get to check out all this other stuff.

Kevin: It only gets diluted if it's worth diluting.

Dirk: I see that with Cajun music. The people who play it went to WWII and when they came back, everything had changed. In Louisiana, there was a huge resurgence in Cajun music, and they wanted to play their music. They added drums, pedal steel, amplified it. And the dance halls were full again, where they hadn't been before.

Tim: That happened in New York and Chicago also, where people wanted music that reminded them of home. There was a huge Irish community in those cities.

Kevin: It was similar in London, where they leave home and hear this music and realize how important it is to them since they are away from home.

Tim: Country music in America, bluegrass, old time, twangy stuff, people have a similar relationship to it. The reason it got popular is all the people moved to the city and would meet at these places to drink, hear music and dance. Everywhere you go, and it doesn't matter what state it is, they say, "We don't get much bluegrass here." And there isn't much bluegrass anywhere [laughs], so a certain crowd will go for it in a big way. It's a nostalgia thing.

Dirk: I think it is interesting with Ireland that there are so many Irish-Americans going back to Ireland looking for connections, whereas in Ireland they have the roots and it is taken for granted, but the Americans go back, and it's so weird to see them there searching. I think these people have a hole they are trying to fill.

Kevin: There has been a huge resurgence in Ireland with Irish music. And part of it is they are beginning to notice the music. Children grow up now with no concept of having to go to England. Whereas in the '50s, Irish music was almost sneered at by a lot of the locals. It was a small crowd that kept the interest up in the traditional music. But now it's much closer to the mainstream and kids are playing it all over.

Tim: My influences on fiddle? I don't have many. Anyone really.

Kevin: Pizza Hut?

Tim: Yeah, Pizza Hut [laughs]. Kenny Baker was a big one. When I was coming up he was the king of bluegrass fiddle. And Bob Wills and Stuff Smith.

What challenges do you have switching between the fiddle and some of the other instruments you play?

Dirk: Well, with fiddle you don't have frets, so you have to play in tune or learn to not play out of tune. Once you have that in your fingers it stays with you forever. But the bowing needs constant refreshment, because it requires fluid motion.

Tim: I play mandolin and bozouki a lot, but fiddle less. Mandolin and fiddle have the same fingering, but you can't get near as expressive on mandolin. To me, it's sort of a rhythm thing to pump up what is happening on fiddle, or someone who is taking the melody. You have to have that for the mandolin to do its job. It's not as good as fiddle for melody and leads. You can get in the trap where you think you can play anything on either fiddle or mandolin, but it doesn't work that way. Playing all the instruments is great. I like to play things I don't know because it forces you to go back to the beginning. It's like looking at a mountain from different places, where each face has a different aspect. And music is like that using different instruments. It's fascinating.

What role does improvisation have in Celtic music and fiddle playing in general?

Kevin: Mostly, there aren't many people who step outside and improvise successfully in Celtic music. People growing up playing Celtic music don't think about improvising. It is not a part of the culture. A few people do it, but I haven't heard many people do it successfully. It's rare that I hear a piece of music that improvisation improves. I usually think it is better before the improvisation. I don't disapprove of it in principle. There is a way that the Irish players improvise. The tunes aren't static. They do change, and everyone plays them a bit differently.

Tim: In American music, blues or jazz, melody is important, but the structure is chords.

Kevin: Yeah, we don't have a basis for chords. It's not required for Irish music.

Tim: The structure is the melody.

Kevin: The chords are added to the music. Rhythm players try to work out chords, but that is a fairly new thing and it is a work in progress, so until you get a chord structure set it is hard to improvise.

Dirk: You listen to different players using accents and augmentation and improvising on that melody. I think American music suffers from just playing over chord changes, when the whole reason the changes are there is the melody. One time I was playing with some Irish guys at a crowded club, and they told me first two were in D, then it was G, then A, I kept slamming into G, then the third one I came in on A, but it was wrong again. They were all in D [laughs]. I need to go back to school for that stuff.

Tim: Improvising, I like it. I love to hear someone like Coltrane, and they get so out on the edge, and then after five minutes they get a breakthrough, composing on the fly. They will tell you it takes time to play through the junk to get to something interesting. It's pretty cool. The idea of being original is kind of burdensome. It gets bothersome. You can try.

Kevin: That's why I didn't.

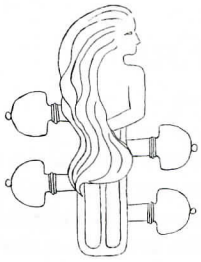
Tim: You don't have to try, because you already are original. Take five fiddle players and they will all sound different.

Kevin: I remember in the '60s that idea of doing your own thing was in, but you don't want to waste effort on it. You are going to do your own thing anyway.

Dirk: A lot of people still suffer from that, especially with dancing, where people stopped couple dancing and did this bopping around. With structure, you can push things, but without structure you can't. I see that in Cajun music because you can dance together.

Kevin: I like structure teaching you what avenues you might take.

Let's go into some of the bands you have played in. First, Kevin, tell me about the Bothy Band. How did you end up replacing Tommy Peoples? Also, has there ever been any discussion about getting the band back together, especially given its popularity in America?



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Kevin: Well Tommy left, and they came and asked me to join, and I said sure. They were very discreet about it, discreetly deceptive, saying Tommy was just gone for a few gigs and asking me to sit in. I was playing with Christy Moore, so I had to clear it with him, but he heard about it before I could talk to him. I called him, and he said, "I believe a situation has arisen and you'd be daft not to take it." As far as getting together, there is always talk but I can't see it happening. Even just for one concert, we couldn't do it. If we were to get together, we'd have to rehearse a bit, so we'd want to tour. And today if you are going to tour, you need to record. So you'd be talking six to eight months, and it wouldn't be worth it. I think everyone philosophically would like the idea, but getting together for six to eight months would take a bit of doing.

Tim, how did Hot Rize get together?

Tim: We all hung around the Denver Folklore Center. Nick was repairing guitars, Charles was selling them, and Pete and I were teaching. There was a scene there. Pete and Charles always had a band, and Pete wanted me to come sing, and I thought it was a great idea. We got together for a summer's worth of gigs, and there was always a carrot there for a better gig, and pretty soon you've been together for years. Then you start touring and you are like family, isolated from others. If you stay together, it's a good thing, but if you fly apart it isn't. If you have fun, it's better music, and you aren't working so hard. That band, when we started, Pete wanted to be more new music, something we invented. We tried, and it always sounded better if we did traditional music, so that's where we went. But as close as we tried to play to Monroe and Flatt and Scruggs, it sounded different. It was our own spin on the traditional music.

Dirk, how did you and Tim get together for the "Songs from the Mountain" project?

Dirk: Tim and I had read the book and kind of had the same idea about how strong the music was in it. And you can't read the book without

"Playing all the instruments is great. I like to play things I don't know because it forces you to go back to the beginning. It's like looking at a mountain from different places, where each face has a different aspect." — Tim O'Brien

thinking about reaching those people with the music. I wrote to the author, and he gave me positive feedback, but he took seven years to write that book and all of a sudden he is a major celebrity. It was picking up steam, and when I mentioned it to Tim we ran with it. It was finished within three or four weeks. He got in touch with the family, found out they were fans of his. Then we had to deal with legal stuff. We moved initially very quickly, then slowly because of that legal aspect.

Tim, let's talk about "The Crossing." First of all, where did the idea for the project come from?

Tim: I was going to make a record for a world music label, and I wasn't sure what to do for it. We talked about doing an Appalachian thing. Then the *Cold Mountain* thing came up and it was done in a month, so I went back to my friend and said, "Well, I did that already." So I suggested an Irish music thing. I had always been interested in Irish music but never felt I could do it justice, but I thought this was an opportunity. I am American, there is no question. So it was a desire to express my interest in Irish stuff. I had been friends with all these people, so I thought it was a good excuse to play with them. Writing some of the music, I scratched the surface and realized it was good, and wanted to pursue it. It's about being Irish-American, but it isn't Irish music. We use some instruments to give it that flavor. Darol (Anger) and Mike (Marshall) arranged it. I didn't want to be trying to be a traditional player when I wasn't, but they put a cool spin on it.

You ended up playing with several well-known Irish musicians on that record. How did you get together with them?

Tim: These are all people that are touring, and we might work the same festivals or venues, and I'm just a fan, so I just say hello and get acquainted with people. I met Kevin years ago in Minneapolis on the steps of a friend's house. It's social; you keep running into everyone. It's interesting, since most people are aware of what I play. When I went to see Altan the first time, I knew the promoter and he took me backstage, and they gave me my money back from the CDs I'd bought and wanted to trade for mine [laughs].

Kevin, what can you tell me about some of the different styles of fiddle playing in Ireland, how they vary, and also how they are set apart from some of the Celtic fiddle in America?

Kevin: If you draw a line down the middle of the country, most styles happen on the west side of the line: Donegal, Sligo, Galway, Kerry and Clare, really. And Kerry overlaps Cork. In general, as you work south from the North, it gets smoother and slower. That's a rough generalization. Then in the North, the further east you go it seems closer to Scottish music. Cape Breton inherited most of their music from Scotland. The Breton style is very different from ours, even though it is a branch of Celtic music. They have a much different rhythm system and play different instruments, and drink better wine [laughs]. Smoke stronger cigarettes, and drink cider out of bowls.

Tim: Do they?

Kevin: Yes they do. Right out of the bowls [laughs].

How did the three of you get together to play at this festival?

Tim: I'm interested in getting a group together that is based in the U.S., so we can perform at festivals without mounting a tour. John Williams, Paddy Keenan and Kevin all live in this country, Paddy in New Hampshire, Kevin

in Portland and John in Chicago. That's convenient because if we are in Portland we can stay with Kevin, or with Paddy in New Hampshire, which should be interesting [laughs].

Kevin: Wherever we go there's someone local.

Tim: The rest are friends that I've played with for years. Kenny (Malone) is the newest. I met him through Darrell Scott. I think it's about there. We will tour in the fall with John and Kevin, maybe Dirk, and Darrell and Mark (Schatz), and Karen Casey who used to play with Solas and now lives in Cork.

When did the fiddle start becoming a dominant instrument in Celtic music, and when did it start to push out the harpists?

Kevin: I really don't know. For a long time, often for periods of time, it was illegal to play Irish music. Maybe the harps disappeared because they were so evocative of Irish nationalism. There's been a union between Ireland and England for 500 years, and it's been very uneasy these last fifty years. Every hundred years or so there's a burst of nationalism. They tried to outlaw the music and language that made the Irish feel separate. The fiddle just showed up and probably was brought by a sailor. The accordion arrived, then thirty years ago, the bouzouki. As a kid, I'd never seen one.

Dirk: When I saw that book on traditional Irish bouzouki it cracked me up.

Kevin: How long does it have to be used before it's traditional?

Tim: I heard the harpists played for courts, but the kings aren't really around anymore and haven't been for a while.

Kevin: The British took the big property away from the kings when they took over.

Dirk: The harps weren't playing dance music were they?

Kevin: No one knows. Turloch (O'Carolan) didn't play dance music, but he was unusual, even at the time.

Tim: The dancing masters 300 years ago taught people how to dance in the country. A dancing master would come for two weeks, and at the end of the two weeks he would do an exhibition, and he would bring in itinerant musicians, usually blind pipers or fiddlers. There were so many blind ones because if you were blind you couldn't work, so music was a way out of a bad situation. One person has suggested the music was invented to meet the dance needs. There's new tunes coming all the time, and they evolve. And they relate to step dancing and group dancing and set dancing.

Kevin: They had square dances in the country.

When do you start to see the fiddle taking a place in Appalachian music?

Dirk: The fiddle was the main instrument from the beginning with the first immigrants. Doing some genealogy, I discovered I have an ancestor who came over in 1726, fiddle in hand, and some of the family in Virginia still have it.

Tim: Have you seen it?

Dirk: Not yet. They made me a banjo though. There was this documentary on Scots-Irish immigration to the area, and I called them up asking to look at it and be part of the documentary. And I'll never forget, he said you need to get in on the ground floor. That's the typical mountain person; they are standoffish.

Kevin: That's a very Irish trait also.

Dirk: There's a reason for that, if you are persecuted.

Kevin: When I came over here to the U.S. first, the people were so friendly instantly that I was a bit scared. I thought, "What the hell are they doing?" I couldn't accept that they would be that open immediately. It's a very American thing, an admirable thing, but growing up meeting people in a different way, it's strange.

Dirk: A lot of these people were indentured servants and had been persecuted beforehand. They were poor, and they had a claim in a piece of land, so they were territorial. And coming from Ireland where there were so many issues with land, they were protective. And these cousins of mine were typical of that. They weren't interested in me coming with a film crew; they wanted no part of it. But I got to know them and they made me two handmade banjos for Christmas, then a fiddle. A lot of the music comes from that. It's stark and very personal and has that edge to it. I still haven't seen that fiddle though.

Tim: Why is it the other instruments didn't make it?

Dirk: The fiddle is a traveler's instrument. Pipes are temperamental.

Tim: I think pipers were more well-to-do also.

Kevin: You hear references to the prince of pipers, but you don't hear that about fiddlers.

Tim: Fiddle is more of a poor man's instrument.

Kevin: There was definitely an aura about pipers, this whole class thing to it.

Dirk: Look at the language too, and you see it in phrases like fiddling around, or playing second fiddle or fiddlesticks, like it's nothing. But it has that devil's instrument connotation to it also, so it's weird.

Kevin: I'll tell you, I was getting on a plane a few years ago, and they argued with me about putting my fiddle in the overhead bin. The flight attendants didn't know what it was, but they saw the size and didn't want me to put it up there. Finally, she asked, "What is it?" And I said "A violin." And she

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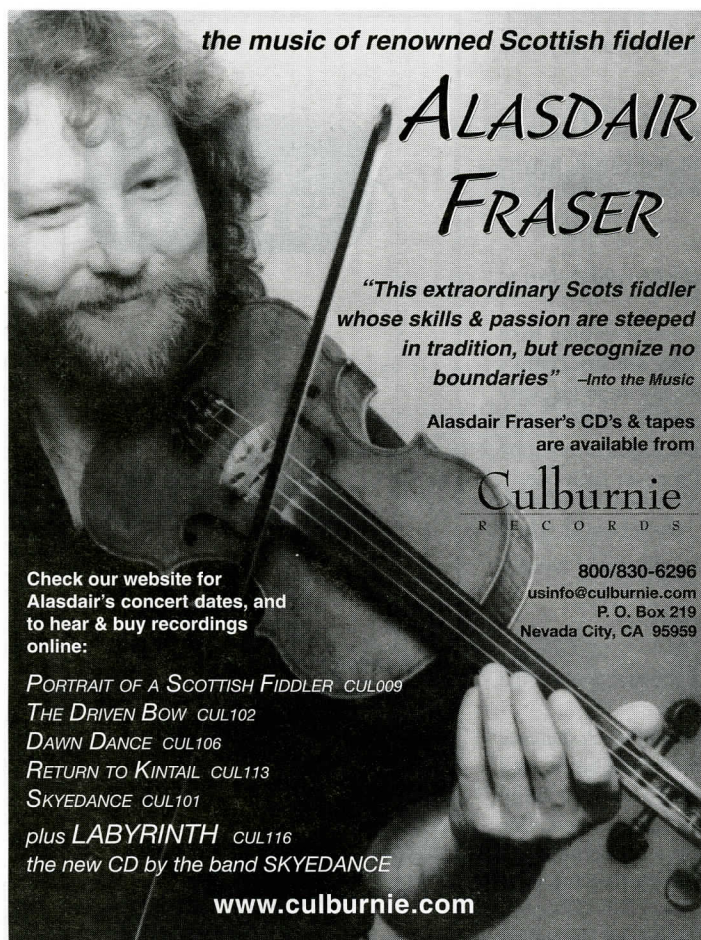
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"A lot of these [immigrants] were indentured servants and had been persecuted beforehand. They were poor, and they had a claim in a piece of land, so they were territorial. And coming from Ireland where there were so many issues with land, they were protective...A lot of the music comes from that. It's stark and very personal and has that edge to it." — Dirk Powell

Chicago and was mixing it up. That is the original heritage of it. And Earl Scruggs and Lester Flatt lived in that deep mountain area. Today, it's hard to say. There is an influence on Irish music from bluegrass. It's more stage music than dance music. Bluegrass came from dance, but now it's more a stage presentation with someone playing a Gospel tune, a country tune, then a dance tune. Listen to Alison Krauss or Nickel Creek and you hear the Irish influence on bluegrass, but it isn't that common. It's funny, too. The harmonic stuff, the way they choose chords in Irish music is new. The chords they choose are different, giving it a Celtic style.

Dirk: Who started playing DADGAD guitar in Irish music?

Kevin: Mícheál ó Domhnaill had the most influence. He would deny it though. He always credits John Renbourn. But Renbourn doesn't have anything to do with Celtic music, really. And it might be connected with the bouzouki, and not having to commit to a major or minor key. That's what the fiddle would say, the guitar has to do the same and DADGAD works well for that. And there's a rhythmic effect also. The typical bass you hear in American music will fit timing-wise but sounds strange to us.

Dirk: I think part of that is the African influence on American music, where someone is laying down the groove, and everyone follows it. In old time music, the guitar and bass set the groove and the fiddle follows. It's polyrhythmic. They have these niches, and if they don't stay there the groove falters.

Tim: Some of these bands using percussion, too, in Celtic music, it's pretty cool. And they put a reggae groove in as well.

Kevin: Irish people often go to London, and young Irish people have an interest in the modern pop music that's happening, and in London, one of the really strong music groups is the West Indian population. You can't go out shopping without hearing it sooner or later. It's not that surprising. And the Indian population is strong, but you don't hear much of them, though it is beginning. You hear Indian rock bands, and violin strings imitating the sitar, and it's for the kids. They take an element of all that stuff. The Beatles have had an influence on it also, especially with the popularity of the guitar. So they try to adapt it to the Irish thing.

Dirk: That whole authentic thing is so strange. I did work for a film set during the Civil War and they wanted real authentic tunes. We did the recording in George Martin's studio in London. And I couldn't believe I was there where the Beatles used to record. And I was going on about it, and the director was like, "That doesn't affect your Appalachian music does it?" It was so weird; he was ready to send me home.

Tim, you are on record as saying that there should be more Irish musicians at the major festivals. Why do think more Irish musicians don't play at the festivals, especially given the history of Irish music influencing Appalachian music?

Tim: I think people are ready for it. They haven't had it much before because the bookers weren't aware of it. Colorado doesn't have a big Irish population either. But now they are aware of it and it is starting to become more common here at Telluride.

Kevin: The first time I came here was in 1972, and I met a lot of musicians interested in folk music and roots music, and they didn't even know much about Irish music, never mind how it sounded. They thought it was Bing

said it was okay to put it up there. During the flight, this same woman came up and chatted, and she was friendly, and said that if I'd said it was a fiddle she wouldn't have let me put it up there. It really made me mad. A classic example of how the average person regards that word.

Dirk: I wouldn't have thought that distinction meant anything anymore.

Kevin: This was in the States. It really shocked me.

Getting back to the "Songs from the Mountain" project, do you think that Celtic music started to influence American music at around the time that the book is set, or do you think that pollination began even earlier?

Dirk: It happened earlier in the mountains. The biggest wave of immigration before the famine was in the mid-1700s from Northern Ireland. And that was where the music came from, that wave.

Tim: What made it American was the black influence though. The melting pot — blacks, Germans, Scandinavians and others. But that was later. First it was blacks and Irish. The English stayed to themselves on the coasts, while the immigrants moved to the mountains.

Dirk: There's a lot of intermarriage in the mountains with American Indians also, which is clear looking at the faces, and their demeanor. It's interesting: in the early history, the association with the Indians was positive, and the settlers identified more with the Indians than the Europeans. Like the Boston Tea Party was a way to claim that they were not European by identifying with the Indians. And that's not taught in school. With the forced resettling, it was removed from our history, when we started exterminating the Indians. I think the Indian influence in the mountains is stronger than people realize. Also, the dancing is a mix. And the music probably is, too.

What do you all think is Celtic music's influence in this country, especially in relation to bluegrass?

Tim: Well, the formation of it, Bill Monroe was proud of his Scots-Irish heritage, and he loved the fiddle. His mom played and his uncle. He played music with this black man, Arnold Schultz, and he heard the jazz bands in

Crosby singing "Forty Shades of Green." In the '70s, a lot of the hip people I met were completely unaware of Irish music. You can't say that these days. Someone pumping gas at the gas station probably has "Riverdance"... I saw a video once of Shania Twain and there is this rake of people doing Irish step dancing behind this country music. I think of talking to these great musicians in the '70s, and now this stuff, everyone knows it.

Tim: "Irish Washerwoman" was the one you heard and it was the only one anyone knew. It was in the movies when they wanted an Irish tune. Bluegrass was the same. Bluegrass is more available though.

Kevin: My first bluegrass experience was "Bonnie and Clyde" [laughs].

Dirk: It's funny how commercial culture leads people on these paths, like Rafe Stefanni, who we talked about earlier, living in Italy. He started playing from the "Bonanza" soundtrack and somehow got back to the other stuff.

What advice would you give those in America who want to play Celtic and Irish music?

Kevin: Buy all my records [laughs]. There is no substitute for going to Ireland, which is where the best music is and the best atmosphere to learn it. That's the best way, undoubtedly.

Dirk: I found people playing here, because Irish music and fiddling is complicated, they think it is a technical thing and that is the biggest flaw. In Ireland it isn't thought of that way. It comes from the joy of sessions and playing the music and the love of music.

Kevin: I've found that a lot. A certain group gets very famous and they are technically brilliant and everyone wants to play like that. But to understand the music you have to hear the guys who aren't that great. If someone wanted to listen to blues, they shouldn't go to Clapton or Hendrix first, but some of the guys who aren't that good but influenced those two.

Dirk: You need that foundation. I think the same thing happened in jazz. Charlie Parker and others played these dance gigs, and after playing for years, and doing the dance music then exploring, got to a technical place so amazing that people wanted to play like that. But they didn't have the same foundation. I had a guy in America say he started with old time and moved to Irish [laughs]. Moving up in pure technical terms in his mind, and he missed the point. When I was playing old time music, it was funny because people who wanted to play Irish music couldn't understand how I could sit down with them and play at a session. It's that playing with heart and soul and love that you need.

Tim: The point of "The Crossing" is — and a lot of records have pointed to it before — that we are all interrelated. All music is connected. There's that stereotypical joke about a classical violinist wanting to play traditional Irish music, so they need to take some part of the brain out, and the doctor takes too much out and the violinist wakes up and says "Let's play some bluegrass!" [laughs]

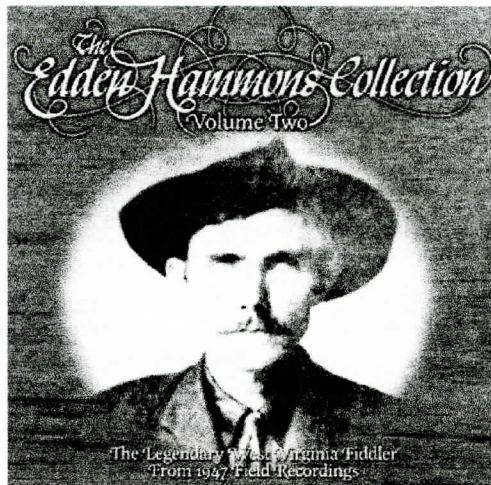
Kevin: We have the same thing in Ireland. The Kerry thing is the butt of the jokes there though.

Tim: It is easier for me to latch onto the Kerry and Donegal stuff for some reason, and I don't know why. The approach is more deliberate, I think.

Kevin: We'll have to learn some slides then. I wanted to play one earlier [at a workshop during the Telluride Bluegrass Festival]. Maybe some polkas also [laughs].

[Candace Horgan is a freelance writer living in Denver who covers music for the Denver Post, Relix and other publications. She also has a bimonthly internet column on musicbadger.com. She is a beginning fiddler and loves the instrument.]

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