

## So Many Tunes, So Little Time: A Festival Co-ordinator's Perspective on Winnipeg's Irish Fest Gord Menzies interviewed by Pauline Greenhill

On November 30, 1996, as part of her three year exploration of *Identity and Cultural Politics in Festival Construction and Performance*, researcher Pauline Greenhill talked to Gord Menzies, the Festival Co-ordinator for Winnipeg's annual fall Irish Fest. Over lunch at the Cafe du Livre at McNally Robinson bookstore in Winnipeg, they discussed Irish Fest, its goals and changing practices, as well as the various agendas and challenges facing it as a small, community-based ethnic music festival. Gord's insights as Festival Co-ordinator could be of interest to anyone involved in planning similar festival events. This is a co-edited transcript of our discussion.<sup>1</sup>

**P—How you did get involved in the Irish Festival?**

**G—**About ten years ago a chap named Joe Kinsella started the festival by bringing to Winnipeg some traditional Celtic musicians to give musical workshops and perform a show. I initially came as a spectator and participated in the workshops, loved the festival format, and fell in love with the whole festival. In 1993, a bunch of us local musicians and keeners pitched in to help Joe out by doing various things. He had been doing this by himself and being overworked at it. I slowly got involved to the point where last year I handled a lot more responsibilities than I had the previous two years.

**P—So the Irish Festival has been going on for about ten years now?**

**G—**It has been nine years. We missed one year in there, so we had our eighth annual this past year.

**P—It happens in October?**

**G—Yes.**

**P—Why is it then and not in the summer or spring?**

**G—**Two reasons. One, the Irish Festival circuit of musicians that we like to bring in generally are not too busy in October. There seems to be a bit of a lull for them. Two is the Winnipeg concert market. Usually November is a big month for concerts, so we decided October would be a good time, when we wouldn't be competing against other events that are on throughout the city. We also usually plan to have it the weekend after Thanksgiving; that way people can register the event in their minds for that time period.

Another reason is that during the summer festival months, you are in contact with a lot of musicians, and that gives you an opportunity to see who might be available to come up. There is a big Irish Festival in the middle of August in Milwaukee, and usually someone goes down there every year, and makes contact about who might be able to come up to Winnipeg in the fall.

**P—So this festival is more than just a series of concerts?**

**G—I**would view it as a learning festival more than a concert festival; we really promote lessons and workshops. We don't bring in one set band, doing one set gig with one set program. Our usual route of organizing entertainment for that weekend revolves around bringing in individual musicians who can run workshops, give lessons, and also, as an impromptu group, put on a main show. We bring in people who haven't played together for a while, or musicians who don't normally play together, and throw them in a mix in a room about two hours before the main show, and they have to come up with some kind of a set of tunes for that evening. That gives the show an edge, and the musicians really love that format.

**P—I also notice that there is a lot of local involvement in the concerts.**

**G—**There is a considerable effort to have that happen, because it is probably one of the few events in the city and in the province where musicians can learn one to one with an established artist. This can happen in a workshop or lesson as well as in performance situations, with some of the best traditional Celtic musicians currently playing in North America. I think that is a big plus for the local musicians, and because of that, we get a lot of volunteer help from them. It is key that we make sure the local musicians and dancers are well looked after that way.

**P—How do you decide who is going to play in the concerts with the visiting musicians?**

**G—**That is probably the hardest decision to make. A few years ago, that answer was quite easy, because the quality of musicianship in the city wasn't as developed as it is now. Today it is very good, and it is very difficult to decide who is going to play and who isn't. It all depends on who's currently playing a lot of music. Some people aren't ready or have material that they don't want to present right now, so it's a bit of give and take on that. We also consider who hasn't played in a long time and try to get them back into the stream of things. It is also a reward for a lot of people who have put a lot of time and effort into their volunteer time helping the festival.

You'd like to get everybody in, but you can't. Having said that, some opportunities present themselves. This year, because

of our financial situation, we had fundraiser shows in February, May, and September. So that as well as our local show during the Festival weekend gives opportunities for about thirty or forty local musicians.

*P—I can see that kind of thing turning political.*

G—Yeah, we get a little bit of it, but so far we haven't had any difficult situations. This year we almost got to the point where we're making up impromptu bands just to make sure we get as many people playing as possible. And that sometimes works and sometimes can backfire. But most of the time people are really interested in playing with new people. We try not to encourage the "band" mentality, more the music sessions and fun atmosphere which are vital components of the tradition that you normally don't get from concerts or recordings.

*P>You're trying to mix the featured musicians too. Why?*

G—Well, somebody coming in from out of town has been used to playing with two or three people in their hometown, or in their local sessions. For instance, a fiddle player we brought up last year from New York, Tony DiMarco, was used to playing with a group out of Washington, a group out of Boston, and a session he ran in at a pub in Manhattan. Now he came here and played with four other musicians that he hasn't played with in a hell of a long time. He got a real kick out of that. As well, it pushes the music to the forefront.

*P—This year, the '96 Comhaltas Ceoltóiri Éireann tour was the main act, and they make a big thing about not being professionals. Why do you think that is?*

G—They don't make money from it personally. The money from the Comhaltas tour goes to their organization back in Ireland, to pay for the tour which is quite an expensive undertaking. For most of the performers, music isn't their main source of income. Everyone plays music in the pub sessions in Ireland, and wherever the evening sessions are held, and generally just play for the love of music. I think their view of a professional would be somebody who is actively recording, playing a lot of gigs and getting paid for those efforts. Don't forget, the Comhaltas Tour makes up the champions of each instrument in a particular age

group from the Comhaltas All-Ireland competitions each year. Comhaltas stands for the Irish Cultural Movement, so it's a cultural activity and not a professional one per se.

*P—Do you have similar sorts of distinctions that you make with the local musicians who play? Would someone who locally made such a living as there might be to make out of playing Irish music, or being a musician, be paid for playing at the festival?*

G—From our local scene, there are a number of individuals who support our festival strongly who are trying to make a living from their music. All it boils down to is their personal feeling about the music. Some of them are quite happy to help out for the festival and not worry about being paid, because they know they are getting

at least three or four good musicians that they can learn from. That helps them, which in turn, we hope, helps their career. There are some who want to be paid, and basically we have to remind them of what the festival is about.

I think if that money mentality really took hold, I'm sure a lot of the organisers, including myself, wouldn't be working very hard for the festival. That is not why we do it. We want to watch, listen, and learn with these good musicians. And by and large, that helps the local musicians.

*P—What about the structure of your organization? It's not a Board plus Executive Director type organization, but it's also not like one of the festivals that I worked on, where people meet a week beforehand and scribbled out the plans on a paper napkin.*

G—We are very much somewhere in between. The Irish Association of Manitoba is our official sponsor. They've been the organization that applies for grants from the Province or the City of Winnipeg on our behalf, but since grants, generally, are getting harder to come by, that is essentially a non-issue. Right from the beginning their cultural centre on Erin St. has been our focus for the festival weekend, and some board members and Association members get in the spirit and help out with Irish Fest quite a bit. The Irish Club and the Irish Association of Manitoba are very much included at the present time. It wasn't always that way, but it is now, happily. They're also the custodians of our festival fund. They provide the infrastructure for the financial side of things in the festival; festival finances are



*Bodhran workshop; the flute, bouzouki, and fiddle provide the melody line for the instructors.*

*Photographs courtesy of Pauline Greenhill*

controlled by the Board.

The cultural decisions are all made by the musicians. About three or four of us sit down in the spring, and decide. What kind of instruments do we want to focus on this year? What local musicians? We heavily depend on the local musicians for their suggestions. Then the next process is just finding out the best players we can and who is available when. For instance, we hadn't had a bodhran player up for years, and we felt it was long overdue, so this year we brought Myron Bretholtz in, responding to a need we saw in the local scene.

*P—You said you had received funding before. Can we talk about grants?*

G—When Joe first started we used to get fairly sizable grants, about \$4000 to \$5000. But they have gradually dwindled and dwindled and dwindled to the point where last year we had \$1000, and this year, none. So we had a challenge to generate more of our own cash. For instance, this year we had a September fundraising show in addition to our February and May shows. This helped us a lot both financially and from a promotion standpoint as well.

To put things in perspective, our expenses are between \$8000 and \$9000. Over the weekend we have roughly 500 seats to sell; we can't generate enough cash then to pay all the bills. That is just the way it has always been, and that is why we have our February and May shows to raise some revenues in order to have a good chunk of cash in the bank going into the Festival weekend. We couldn't survive without them.

*P—Take me through what happens throughout the year in sequence.*

G—OK. Usually after what seems a miserably cold January, we have a February fundraiser featuring our local musicians and dancers doing traditional Irish music, dancing, singing, and poetry. In early May, we have an evening of music and call it the Béaltine festival which is a rites of spring celebration in Ireland. This can either be a local show, or, if we feel more ambitious, we might bring in one performer to highlight. That is something we started last year and it worked quite well, so we might try to make it an annual event.

After that, we sit down in the middle of May, and start making contacts with those musicians we would like to bring in: see who is out there and who is available. An ad goes into the Winnipeg Folk Festival program in early June. Hopefully all our musicians are booked by mid August and then we can really start on promotion. In August, the Association has their Irish pavilion for Folklorama [Winnipeg's annual multicultural event]. The local musicians help out there. Although this is not really part of the Irish Festival, it does give us an opportunity for advertising and promotion. During September, we start looking for seat sales for musicians' travel. We start organizing where they are going to stay—booking hotel rooms, organizing billets. And we start finding workshop leaders and folks to co-ordinate the private lessons. Two years ago that was a big job; we had forty-five musicians take a lesson.

Things start happening in September. We get the press releases out, hound the local media to make sure they know it is on, arrange interviews with the performers who are coming in. I don't know why, but there always seems to be some other Celtic-related music band or event in town, usually a week or two before the Festival weekend. For those shows, we have managed to get displays up and pamphlets distributed, and our local musicians play during the intermission.

I think one of the biggest, most successful parts of our festival is our volunteer group of ticket sellers who go out during September and October and sell ten or twenty tickets each. That is really the reason we are still around. Largely unheralded; they are a group of heroes who keep this thing going. They practically guarantee there will be people in the seats for the concerts. From a promotions viewpoint, this early ticket selling gradually builds up momentum from word of mouth to the point where the week prior to the event everything is starting to fall into place. Financially, the neat thing here is we are creating our own cash flow and getting less pressure. We don't depend as much on walk-in sales which can be affected by problems such as bad weather.

We are not a big festival and that makes it very manageable for a group of volunteers. The week before the festival is a tad crazy, what with taking care of musicians, getting them to their interviews and lessons on time, arranging payrolls, handling cash flow, getting transportation and communication arranged and, of course, getting our volunteer crews co-ordinated. And then sleep deprivation weekend, alias Irish Fest, has arrived. Insomniacs unite.

*P—Often in festivals there are different kinds of groups participating—musicians, audience members, volunteers. Are there any other groups involved with the Irish Festival?*

G—We have about fifty volunteers who will handle anything from donations from businesses—like tapes for raffle prizes—to selling tickets, to providing transportation, billets, and food, to name a few. Sound equipment is donated by one of the musicians. We are lucky to have two excellent soundmen who help us keep our expenses low. There are members of the Irish Association, members of the Comhaltas Manitoba chapter, musicians, audience, and friends, who are all linked together in various ways. There are two traditional Irish dance schools and the Tara Players drama group, who performed a play at the Irish Fest which was a new feature this year.

*P—Are there places where their agendas are different?*

G—The fact is there are quite a few agendas and this is probably a strength, because it creates a lively debate as there are people who care about the festival from different perspectives. Strength in diversity, right? At the same time, there is the possibility of having one agenda dominate and I think we have to be very careful about how that was handled.

A good example is our two dance groups which have about 65 dancers. As you can imagine, it is very difficult to have them all dance at every one of our events, by sheer numbers alone.

We are talking about 20 to 45 young people, how to showcase them properly, make sure they are treated well, get them on stage early so they can go home early because their folks want them in bed at reasonable hours. We definitely want the kids to dance. The kids love it. It is colourful. It is dramatic. They're good.

There is also the challenge of having the instructors participate in Irish Fest in a more profound way than they are now. That is probably coming slowly, but it's something we have been wrestling with for a long time. Dancers add a lot of life and spark to the shows, and by and large, they do not get as much recognition as we would like. But they do get something out of their participation in Irish Fest. This is the dancers' chance to play with live musicians which is how it should be done. Most of the time, they dance to taped music.

#### *P—OK, what about other agendas?*

G—The Irish Fest's relationship with the Irish Association of Manitoba changes with every Board of Directors the Association elects. This creates a dynamic around the use of Festival revenues. Currently, we have a board that includes some people from a cultural background, and their support has been very strong indeed. This has not always been the case. In the past, the Festival organisers had more of a passive Board to deal with, which did create some tension. Generally the club is very supportive, but there is a concern among the musicians that the finances be safeguarded for the Irish Fest. The Irish Association has a great deal more on its plate than our Festival, and we want to ensure that our fundraising efforts for Irish Fest aren't channelled to other Association endeavours.

#### *P—Do you anticipate any future problems in this area?*

G—If the festival gets more successful, presumably our financial resources are going to improve to the point where we are going to start attracting attention, especially if we generate enough revenues to more than cover our expenses. From an artistic standpoint, that has begun to happen in certain ways. We are getting calls from performers interested in coming to Winnipeg. We are "on the map" after nine years. We've been around long enough that people know we exist. There have been enough musicians circulating around the scene in Canada and the States

who put in a good word for us. "Oh, Winnipeg. Great festival! They've got a good reputation. They take care of you." Things like that.

In the life cycle of organizations, eventually we may have to look at incorporating in order to have a structure to formally run the Irish Fest. It is rather amusing that one of those may

have to be put in place for a festival whose main role is to try and be as spontaneous and unstructured as possible. That irony is not lost on me. But if the Irish Association board are not in a healthy state financially, then that directly reflects on us, whether we can even put on an event, and if so, what size of event.

But say we have a tremendously successful year financially. All of a sudden we have more money than we really need to run it. Now do

we expand the format of the festival, or do we just keep it to where it was, and by gosh there is an extra bit of money there that somebody can use for something else? I think that we are maybe two or three years away from that scenario. I am not sure how that is going to work out. I think there might be some kind of formal organization set in place while maintaining a close relationship to the Irish Association because I honestly believe the festival would not be as good without their involvement.

#### *P—What kinds of things does your audience say to you that they want?*

G—We have the workshops on the Saturday afternoon of the festival, which are very strong on audience participation. And the last couple of years we have been getting 60 to 70 people out, which I think is phenomenal because these aren't people who just want to sit and listen, they want to sing, or dance, or try a fiddle tune or a whistle tune. That bumps the festival up to another level, because these folks are going to become musicians eventually—that is what we hope anyway. For instance, we had a kids' Ceilidh band as one workshop this year. We had about twelve kids playing music, and they were very good. These are the new generation of musicians coming along, learning the musical tradition, and this is precisely the way we want the festival to work. The numbers seem to be growing and that's great.

The audience that comes for our showcase concert expects to hear the very best in Irish traditional music—our featured musicians. This is our big show, and we emphasise the entertainment aspect. The show itself is in a small venue, seating about



*John McGann (left) leads a mandolin/guitar workshop at Irish Fest '95*

300. That keeps it small and intimate. The audiences for our local shows are mostly old friends, relatives, and people who want to sit, have a pint, and enjoy some music from the local music scene. This cozy feeling about the festival is something I really like and strive to maintain.

*P—I got a feeling that in some ways the Comhaltas show this year wasn't all that successful for you. And I wonder if that had to do with a conflict between the idea of the festival as far as you're concerned, and this being a really well known group with a big audience. You were sold out at least four or five days before.*

G—Well this year I decided I can't have it my way all of the time. Last year, '95, it ran exactly the way I love to see it run. But I'm just one person involved. So this year the Comhaltas tour was available to come. My concern is I don't want that showcase concert to become the "gig mentality" for the weekend and diminish the local show, lessons, and workshops which are such an important aspect of the Festival. If we get to that stage we are in deep peril of losing support from our local musicians, volunteers, and friends. This year we could only bring in two musicians to give lessons and workshops, as opposed to five last year, and I think the weekend suffered for it in some respects.

Now don't get me wrong, Comhaltas is a great show, with fabulous music. They're some of the best musicians you will hear anywhere. Unfortunately, Comhaltas is on a tour from hell and don't have the time to contribute in the same way as in the '95 format. In future, I would like to see the Comhaltas stay for another day and give workshops and lessons. If they could do that, then it would get closer to what our festival is all about.

*P—So then the structure this year was a little different because usually you would have the people who are playing the big concert do the workshops, but this year it was Myron Bretholz and Liz Carroll mainly doing workshops.*

G—They came in on the Thursday, they gave lessons all day Friday, they had workshops Saturday afternoon, and gave a great show Saturday night. That would have been a gala show last year. Because there were only two musicians, and we needed more, we combined them with a few local musicians. And it worked very, very well. I take great pride in that Saturday night show, because a lot of people really enjoyed it, both the musicians and the audience.



*P—I did. Not that my opinion matters in the least.*

G—But you know what the big strength of that show was? The weather was absolutely horrendous, perpetuating Winnipeg's reputation for bad weather, and we still had 180 people there, despite the fact that there was a torrential downpour outside. This highlights the two big things we do for our success: the input of the local musicians and the advance ticket sales. That is where we have a big advantage over other acts who are coming in. They are relying on posters, advertisements, radio ads, and we just get out there and are proactive in making sure the word gets out and in getting tickets to

people.

*P—What about your own personal agenda for the festival. What would be your ideal festival?*

G—Generally I like to have at least five good musicians, then you get the basis for a really good show. The local musicians can participate in lessons and workshops so they can learn from those individuals. Myself, I play the wooden flute. I have had the great experience of learning from two of the best flute players in North America, Joanie Madden and Laurence Nugent, who came to the festival. I have learned quite a bit from them, so my level of playing, I like to think, has improved.

*P—What could get in the way of that? What could prevent your ideal festival from happening?*

G—Well, sheer time constraints can be a problem. Most of us have full-time jobs. That is first and foremost, of course. But also, for me, the festival is one of two or three things I like to do to support in a small way the active music culture here in Winnipeg. So many tunes, so little time!

Another concern is financial. If there is not enough money, obviously that is a hindrance. We have to constantly be looking for ways to overcome these challenges. There is a certain basic amount of money you do need, but there seem to be creative ways of working in that area. For instance, most performers expect to stay in hotels, but one year we convinced some to stay in homes, and that cut our expenses greatly.

Another important factor is just being burned out. In order to make it work well, year to year, you need to plan on a year to year basis. Some of the volunteers are only interested in that

weekend, or in the weeks leading up to the Festival. That is when you get the most volunteer time. And there are two or three of us who have to keep on it through the year, and that can be tiring. And it is a challenge for us to delegate the work load evenly. Events take just one or two people to really get the ball rolling, but it is not fair if three years down the road they are still doing the same thing. There has to be some way of getting other people involved who will get the job done too. That is easier said than done, though.

*P—I had a feeling at the end of this year's festival that you were getting a little bit worn out. You were talking along the lines of "I'm not going to do this practically all by myself next year." Is it getting to be too much for you? Are you getting burned out?*

G—I was speaking from sleep deprivation! Every festival co-ordinator should go through that at least once; it's a rite of passage! Now over a month later, I can look at it in a broader perspective. I wasn't the only one doing things. This year we actually delegated a lot more than the previous year. What I did discover is that despite the delegation, the amount of time you put into it doesn't go down, it just stays the same. That was

disheartening. On the plus side, Comhaltas sold itself out, so that was a show that was a promoter's dream. Our cash flow was brilliant.

In '95, we had a really good, successful year, but we relied a lot on the walk-in crowd for our show's attendance, so it was a little more stressful. That was my first year really co-ordinating the thing and I was on a roll from picking up the challenge to make sure it worked well. That year was good because the weekend ran more or less the way I hoped it would. This year I didn't have as much input as to who we brought in, or how the weekend was going to work. In spite of that, as Festival Co-ordinator, I still had to put the same amount of time in, so it was a different experience to be sure.

*P—So what are you going to be doing next year? What will your involvement be?*

G—Well I haven't yet thought about that because I still have one bill left to pay on this year's! But I do know I will be around for it, definitely. I've put too much time into this festival to not be involved with it in some way. And I promise myself I'll play more flute and worry less about bills.

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Sarah Koch-Scholte for preparing the initial transcripts of the taped interview. We are also grateful for support from the University of Winnipeg Work-Study program and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which funded aspects of this work.