

# Club Culture

An Góilín Traditional Singers' Club  
The Teachers' Club, Dublin

THE LIVING TRADITION

I began to attend An Góilín sometime in 1990, when it was held in the Trinity Inn on Pearse Street. I remember the first time I walked into that room. I remember the warm welcome I got when I came in and the way the barman accepted orders in sign language and somehow poured drinks silently while the singing was going on. Every single person in the room was listening intently to the singer and everyone seemed to know exactly when to join in with the singer and when to stop and listen. As a child I had loved to watch musicals such as *Calamity Jane*, *Guys 'n' Dolls* and *Oklahoma!* and I couldn't escape the sensation that my universe had tipped sideways and landed me right into the middle of the chorus of a new musical I hadn't heard before. It was the best value I had ever had for a night out. I didn't know it then, but musically, I had come home.

## Origins

An Góilín Traditional Singers' Club began in March of 1979 with a small group of singers and listeners in the Pembroke pub in Dublin. Dónal De Barra and Tim Dennehy were founders and singers such as Treasa Ní Mhiolláin, Liam Weldon and Frank Bryson were regulars at the weekly gatherings. Thomas House became the venue within a couple of months, and a further move to The Four Seasons pub a couple of years later was a positive one for the club. The Four Seasons was already a well known music venue and An Góilín sessions benefitted from the spin-off effect created by the close proximity to those who might come to play at a music session but move upstairs to listen for a while and maybe sing a song. An Góilín has spent time in many pubs around Dublin city, but for the last number of years its home has been in The Teachers' Club at 36 Parnell Square, where it meets most Friday evenings (except July and August).

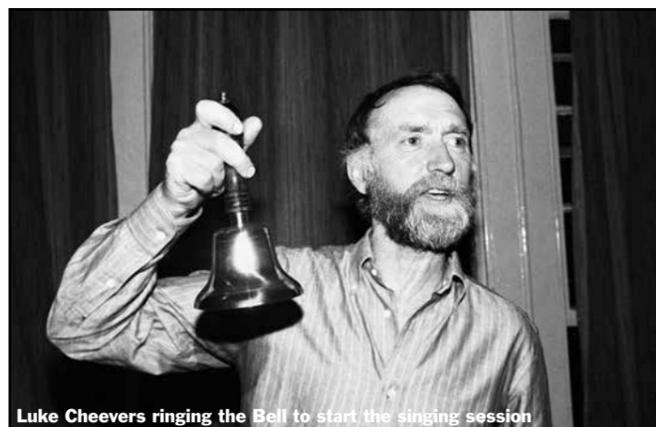


Ferry O'Reilly singing when the Club was in Corbetts in the 1980s, with the late Máire Delaney laughing and singing along

Photos - Colm Keating

## Format

The format of each night is basically the same. The Fear (or bean) a' Tí (the MC) calls the meeting to order by ringing the club's bell. A question - which may or may not be music or singing related, but is usually hopelessly difficult - is asked of the assembly, and €5 is paid on those rare occasions when someone manages to give the correct answer. This tradition developed in the early years of the club in an attempt to encourage people to come early to the singing session. The first three singers are called by the Fear or Bean a' Tí and the session is then opened to whoever wishes to sing. About half way through the evening, the bell is rung for a short break. A contribution of €3 is collected from all present, including the organisers. This money is used to pay guest singers' expenses. Three more singers are called at the beginning of the second half of the session and, again, the session is opened to the floor. The last singer of the night is the brave soul who sang the first song of the night. This format varies slightly when the club hosts a special guest, who will sing four songs during the first half of the evening and another four songs during the second half of the evening.



Luke Cheevers ringing the Bell to start the singing session

The main rule of the club is that, while no standard is set for the singing, a very high standard of listening is expected. Singers get the total attention of all present while they are singing. Joining in is for choruses only, and too much choral singing will result in the call of "one singer, one voice" from somewhere in the room. Each singer puts their own individual stamp on a song and this individuality is too easily lost to the audience if everyone sings along.

One of the features of a session at An Góilín is the way a theme may emerge in the course of an

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evening. A song sung by one singer might remind another singer of a different song on the same theme. Those present will try to keep the theme going for as long as possible until all possibilities are exhausted, or until another theme - emigration, war songs, love songs, weavers' songs, murder songs - grows out of the first. The organic development of a theme in this way keeps the sessions fresh and exciting and can bring back to a singer a song which may have fallen out of his or her repertoire - or it can encourage a singer to learn a song on the theme elaborated in this way.

Roughly once a month the session features a guest singer. Generally guests invited are those who would not normally be heard by a Dublin audience, or younger singers who are not widely known. Guests have come from the USA and Spain as well as from all over Ireland, England and Scotland. Four guest nights per year are reserved for traditional singers who sing in the Irish language.

## Sean Nós Cois Life

Sean Nós Cois Life, the Dublin Irish language traditional singing festival, is held annually in April and provides an opportunity to learn and sing Irish language Sean Nós ("old style" or traditional) songs. The Friday night session of the festival is a bi-lingual night hosted by An Góilín and many of An Góilín's regulars attend.

## Frank Harte

The traditional song collector and singer, the late, great Frank Harte, was a regular at An Góilín. After his death in 2005 and with the agreement of his family, the committee of An Góilín decided to hold a singing festival in his memory. The first Frank Harte Festival was held in September 2006 and has been held every year since. The weekend includes workshops, a lecture and a concert. There are, naturally, also plenty of singing sessions. From being a 'fringe' event when it was introduced, the singing and walking tour, held on the Sunday morning of the weekend, has gone on to become a central element of the festival. This tour takes traditional songs back to the 'scene of the crime' and features Góilín singers singing their songs at or near the places where the song's action took place. The 2011 singing and walking tour took place in Glasnevin Cemetery and gave participants a new and different perspective on this most historic of burial places as we honoured contributors to our rich song tradition who rest there with songs they wrote, songs they sung or songs about their deeds. Other tours have taken place in Dublin's Liberties, the Georgian squares of the south city, the Phoenix Park and the north inner city. 2014's tour was based around a book entitled *If Ever You Go: A Map Of Dublin In Poetry And Song*. The festival has gone from strength to strength and given Frank's love of singing, his encouragement of other singers and his generosity in sharing

songs, it is a most appropriate way to remember him.

## ITMA Góilín Song Project

Almost from the beginning of the club, various members made recordings of the sessions. When some of these recordings were made available to the Irish Traditional Music Archive discussion arose as to how best to preserve them. The result of those discussions is the ITMA / Góilín Song Project. Audio recordings of some 700 songs recorded at An Góilín sessions throughout the years are preserved on a microsite of the Irish Traditional Music Archive together with a selection of photographs, ephemera, broadsheets and newspaper articles written about An Góilín. Long time regular 'Góiliner' and ex-committee member, Barry Gleeson, has written an essay about the club for the site. Some long standing regulars and committee members were filmed being interviewed about An Góilín and these are also available there. The project is ongoing and the next phase of the project involves the provision of transcripts of as many songs on the site as possible.

## Links

As members of An Góilín move away from Dublin for a variety of reasons, and others who move to the capital discover us, our membership changes. Those who have moved away forge links with other singing clubs and circles but maintain their connection with An Góilín. This has had the effect of creating a nationwide network of traditional singers and has helped to preserve the tradition - as well as facilitating the development of many friendships. At the same time, An Góilín has inspired others to bring singing back into the public life of their communities by establishing their own singing clubs. Many of the singing circles and clubs currently operating in Dublin were inspired by time spent at An Góilín. It is said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. However, as far as this proudly partisan An Góilín regular and committee member is concerned, no other singing club will ever reach the standard set by the original and best.

## Máire Ní Chróinín

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