



*INTERVIEW WITH JOHN CARTY – by Brendan Taaffe*

*I met John Carty in the summer of 2003, when he was teaching at the Catskills Irish Arts Week in East Durham, New York. We had a chance to sit down and talk, and I had the chance a week or so later to hear him and John Blake in a small concert in Vermont. It was easily one of the best performances of Irish music that I've seen, and one of the few times I've found myself laughing in the midst of a tune. John is a masterful and a playful performer, treating his tunes with great thoughtfulness and innovation, and throwing in these little musical jokes along the way. 'Tis a pure pleasure to hear him.*

*John grew up in London—known then as “the big smoke,” an amazingly fertile community for Irish music. Learning his tunes from the likes of Bobby Casey, Finbar Dwyer, and Roger Sherlock; Carty more than lives up to that legacy. The thoughtfulness and innovation remind us of the depth this tradition can possess, and the jokes along the way remind us that it's all about having a little bit of fun.*

*Let's start at the beginning. Where did you grow up?*

I grew up in East London, a son of the 1950's emigration to London. It was big that time – my parents, uncles, in fact the whole family, bar the old people, moved over for work. It was a massive emigration, one you could put on par with the 1920s in New York.

*That was when people like Casey and Sherlock were going over.*

All those boys, yeah. And they were young men that time, so there was a huge music scene around London. It always does remind me of what I hear about the scene in New York: vibrant, plenty of great music, from all corners of Ireland. I'm a product of that musically; that's where I was bred, born, and reared.

*And where did your family emigrate from?*

My family came from Co. Roscommon. My father came from north Roscommon, just bordering on South Sligo, and my mother came from Connemara. I live back now in the Carty homestead in Boyle, Co. Roscommon. Back there about 12 years and left the working life, the regular working life, to move back. Living on the family farm, being described as Ireland's worst farmer—coming from London, the city. And I've taken up playing music, and that's where I'm at.

*Did your father play?*

Dad was a flute player, and he also played some banjo and fiddle. He played in the Glenside Ceili Band. The one person you might know that played in the band was



Kevin Burke; Kevin was a young guy, only 16 or so. Dad's still alive and well, and he's a lovely Roscommon-style flute player. Understated, but nice.

*The Glenside was operating out of London, right? And didn't they win an All-Ireland?*

They won the All-Ireland in 1966, and were up against very good company. Castle Ceili Band were there, and some great bands at the time. It was a good time for them. My father used to teach us to play fiddles, but he didn't have no patience for that, so it stopped. Then a guy named Brendan Mulkere moved in to where I was living, and he was like the Martin Mulvihill of London. He had huge Irish music schools, and does to this day. I used to go along to Brendan—I was playing the banjo at that time. I'd be playing the fiddle at home, but I got confident playing the banjo, and played it out more. So I'd be very well-known as a banjo player, especially in England, and in Ireland.

*When I've talked to people in your generation who grew up in Ireland, a lot of them grew up with a sense that there weren't many other young people playing. Were there other young lads in London playing?*

Yes. There was, but we never played in sessions. It was really the older musicians that you'd go to hear—there wasn't a scene of younger people, even though they were learning to play. It was a private thing; we wouldn't be meeting up in pub that time to play in a session. There were the various Fleadh Cheoils going on, and that was really where social interaction started. But other than that, you were a young fellow, you went along and you had to listen to these great musicians. It was that sort of a scene. And plus, the music was played in a pub with microphones. It wasn't like a session. There were three people being paid to play, and they'd call guests up. And certain pubs, they wouldn't need to put songs in with it. It was just strictly reels, jigs, reels, jigs—mainly reels. There was a famous pub called the White Hart; Roger Sherlock used to play regularly there with Raymond Roland, and that was a great stand for music. People would chat, but they'd be all listeners.

*So it would just be two or three people playing, and that might rotate.*

Right, Roger wouldn't be playing every night. It might be a fellow by the name of John Bowe. There'd be different combinations.

*But one of those nights, say when Roger Sherlock was playing with Sean Maguire, is that all you'd hear that night?*

Mainly—and then if they'd see one of the musicians, they might call him up and he'd do a solo spot.

*It was more like a concert than a session.*



It was, you know. But it was a really lovely concert, because you could have a drink and you could have a chat, but you'd listen.

*Who were you playing with then, as a young person?*

As a young fellow, I was going to hear all of those fellows and I played with them when I was young. I was only about 16 when I first started playing at the White Hart with Roger Sherlock and Raymond Roland, and then there were other people around London, people who were a little bit older than me, people like Brian Rooney. I used to go to hear them and loved their music, and eventually started playing with them in pubs.

*I'm curious about that intermediate spot, between where you've taken some lessons and are starting to learn some tunes, and then you're one of the people being miked. What was it that kept you interested and improving?*

I love the music, and I love going to listen to music, and that was the outlet for it: listening. I'd be playing away then at home, and then if there was a young fellow in, they'd call you up for a tune. You'd be mad to get up and play. Tommy McCarthy was great musician, and Bobby Casey—they'd call you up to play. But there wasn't many young people following Irish music. There were people that went to classes. But they weren't that mad into it that they'd be going to all these places—there was only a few of us that were into it.

*All that early playing was on banjo.*

When I was 16 I used to get the odd tune on the fiddle, after it had all finished. Bobby was great: he'd always say, "Give us one on the fiddle." So I used to get the reputation then, handy enough like, playing fiddle. But I didn't have great confidence that time. There were some great fiddle players. You wouldn't be mad to play after hearing Casey play, or Danny Meehan play, or some of these great players. We were very respectful of these fellows.

*Playing two instruments, do you find that they complement each other, or has it been learning totally different things?*

They're totally different. Primarily I listen to fiddle music. Even when I was playing banjo, I was still a great fan of fiddle music: Tommy Peoples. Frankie Gavin. I used to love listening to all of those people, and that's what I was trying to emulate on the banjo, but then of course I was playing the fiddle as well. Then I really got into the music of the 1920s from over here in the States: Morrison, Coleman, Killoran, Lad O'Beirne. And when I moved home then, to a place that I have an emotional draw to, which is Boyle, in Co. Roscommon, it's just a stepping stone from that area of Sligo. That's when I really got into the fiddle, big time. About twelve years ago, I started playing around and then did the recording, and it was received very well. Then Shanachie asked me would I do a whole album of fiddle music for them, which was



called Last Night's Fun, and I did. And they signed me up for a three album record deal, so I'm now a millionaire.

*And Ireland's worst farmer?*

Yeah, I'm Ireland's worst farmer.

*And your first recording was primarily banjo.*

It was a banjo album, yeah. It's called "The Cat that Ate the Candle." There was one fiddle track on it called the Sligo Maid, which is on my new album. Dan Collins of Shanachie records loved it so much that he obtained it from the people that first recorded it.

*The first album wasn't on Shanachie?*

No, that was one I did myself. And it just was a little tape that I brought out. As little back as 10 years ago, CDs were very expensive to make. I couldn't afford at the time to bring it out on CD, so I gave it to a record company, and that's how that happened.

*How long did it take to record the new album?*

Just two days or so. It takes a couple of days mixing then, but playing-wise just two days or three days.

*Mostly straight takes.*

A lot of them were straight takes. You find that if you don't get it the second time you're not going to get it. Well, I don't anyways. It either happens or it doesn't.

*Do you go in and try fix a little bum note here, or just leave it?*

Oh, I would, yeah. If all of it was really good, and there was one little fluff, I would have no qualms about pinching a note. I am honest, you know. Especially in the studio, it's very rare to play without making mistakes. It's probably the most tense place you're ever going to be and the most unnatural setting. There's no frig-all. As soon as he says, "Right, she's rolling," for the next three minutes you're very conscious that one mistake and it's all over.

*Did you track the fiddle at the same time as the accompaniment, or did you track separately?*

Most of it was done live, all that album. Every bit of that album is how you hear it; it's all live playing.



*Where was it recorded?*

We use a studio in Longford called Real World Studios. There's an engineer there called Paul Gurney and he's a really good engineer; we recorded the *At the Racket* stuff there as well. John Blake produced, and he was great because we had a lot of accompaniment stuff. John is a great flute player and accompanist himself, and he could liase.

*Did you go in knowing the tracks you wanted to record?*

Yeah, I had the work done over last winter – I got all the little sets together. It helps to do a bit of homework. You don't want to be gawking at the people in the studio.

*And you play with your brother on the new album.*

Yeah, James is on a few tracks with me. He lives in London, very much a part of the session scene in London. He plays like my father and that generation, because he was never in competitions where he had to play a certain way, like other flute players. He really did his own thing with the flute, and he's just a grand player. It's a pleasure to play with him.

*And in addition to your solo work, you work with At the Racket.*

I do work with *At the Racket* – we've kept that going this last three or four years. That can be a really enjoyable little outlet, and it gives me a chance to play more banjo, because I don't really play as much now because of all my fiddle work. It's very much a fun band, fun music. Seamus O'Donnell is from Sligo. He plays the flute and saxophone and also does our vocals. Brian McGrath does keyboard and banjos, and that's the band. We have different guitar players who play with us from time to time on availability. We've had some great players, so that's the craic.

*In your playing, it seems like the strongest influences are the old recordings from the 20s.*

I don't know if they're the strongest, but they are powerful. I do get a lot out of them. But then you have all that other stuff, which is just as strong, which is something one absorbs without even being conscious of it. That's probably why I have a slightly different style. It's a cross between music from London and then the direct link with the Coleman/Morrison era.

*With these three albums with Shanachie, do you feel your playing has changed over the course of that time?*



I think my playing has gotten a lot better. I think my bowing has improved. I'm getting more confident with every time I play. When I listen to the first album I can see where it's like knife-edge music; it could crash any minute. I find I'm in far more control now. That's a fact—I've put a lot of work into it.

*One of the things I notice the most in your playing is the amount of variation you use, some very inventive stuff. I was wondering if you have any way you think about the variations so they stay within a certain scope of tastefulness or tradition?*

I have to say they just happen for me. Obviously it's because I've listened to an awful lot of players and the different ways they've played those tunes. If you like, I've picked bits of the master's playing, the way they got around the tunes, so it's in the head. And all the tunes are kind of inter-related.

*The current culture of session playing, where there'll be a lot of people playing at once, doesn't seem to be very conducive to variations.*

No, it's not.

*Do you need to play alone in order to come up with variations?*

You can have good fun if you're playing with one other musician. You can still do a little off thing, that will hopefully work with who you're playing with, but mainly the big playing like that is solo playing. That's where the variation can come into its own, where the musician will do his thing with it.

*The London scene that you grew up with was conducive to a lot of variation because it was just two or three people a playing at a time.*

In London all those players were big variation people and highly innovative players. Finbar Dwyer, Bobby Casey, Brian Rooney, Roger Sherlock, Danny Meehan; they were all doing their thing with it. One sparked off the other, and it was all in the confines of one city.

*What do you think about the relationship between your style and dance?*

I haven't got any great thoughts on that. I think that I'm a very thinking musician when I play. I have a bounce because I follow good music that came from the dance music, but it wouldn't be a conscious thing about dancing in there at all. I do love playing for a good dancer, but it's more a piece of music, a little journey from start to finish. Sometimes you get lost in the journey every now and then, but hopefully you come back.



*You've been relying on music as your profession since you moved, for the past 12 years. Is it still as satisfying when it's your work?*

It is satisfying to go somewhere where you can have an audience that's willing to listen to your music. There can't be anything more thrilling; a musician feeds from applause. But you could equally get that in a bar, like, with one other person. If that person knows the music, that can be equally as thrilling. Highs in music are not necessarily the biggest crowd you ever got. I've played some big gigs, and sometimes it's just this sea of people. I've played intimate gigs where it's been 40 to 50 people, and you come off the stage and you'll be buzzing because it's such a great time.

*Do you have to find a lot of work outside of Ireland, or are you able to stay home?*

Personally I gig more in and around Ireland, but yes, you still have to travel. I've been out here a few times, and England, Europe, Scotland of course. I've been all over really. I hear the latest market is in Japan. I haven't been out yet.

*I've heard various rumours that it's now much harder for musicians to come over to the States.*

It's almost impossible, is the long and the short of it. Anyone can tell you the difficulties. It was a struggle just to come here (the Catskills Irish Arts Week). It's a shame because all the musicians always love coming here because the audiences are so good. I always get a great vibe here; I'll start chatting to people here and think they won't know anything and I'll mention a name, and they'll know all about them and have recordings of them, and start telling me all about them. I find that very stimulating, because in Ireland, there is a group of people who follow music, but I'd say over 90 percent haven't a clue about traditional Irish music.

*With a session in every pub in Clare, do people still turn up for concerts?*

It's not easy to run concerts in Ireland, and because of that fact. There's a lot of free music and very, very good music being played, but still and all, it's much better than it was. There are more venues now than ever before, but it's funny like, the one place you can't play as a musician is Dublin, which is our capital. It's very hard to do a gig there. But you can go down to a backwater place like in Co. Leitrim—I suppose I should have said my own county there—you can go to all these remote places and have a great concert.

*Going back to something—you described yourself as thinking through the music pretty carefully.*



I'd say I'm very thoughtful about things. I don't know what I'm going to play until I get to the end. I don't know where it's going to take me. I know there's a series of variation I can use, but when they're going to happen depends on how I feel.

*How thoughtful are you about your bowing patterns?*

I'm very thoughtful about that. Because I struggled with the bow for many years, and as I come here to do these classes I see a lot of people struggling with their bowing. So the technique that has worked for me is to center most of my bowing in the middle. This has worked for me very, very well. I used to find I'd get tangled up if I had the bow too much down one side, so I've made a conscious effort to bow a lot with the middle part of the bow and it's worked out very well. I never feel as though I'm powerless, which I used to at times.

*And also you're quite light on the bow.*

Yes, I have a lighter touch.

*As you've felt more in control have you noticed yourself getting lighter?*

No, I think I'm getting stronger. I think I'm able to put more power into it than I used to. But certain things would only work with a light touch, certain ornamentations.

*You've composed some tunes.*

I have composed two or three tunes. Seanamhac Tube Station gets played; that was a bit of a hit.

*What's the story behind that one?*

Oh, there's no story. I wish I had picked a different name for it, because everybody keeps asking me about the name, but the name really comes from a place name in Connemara, called Seanamhac. In London where I grew up there were just loads of Connemara people, and they'd always shout, "Up Seanamhac." They'd always say that, and then they'd be onto "Up Seanamhac Tube Station." But there's no such thing, it's a fictitious place. So that's the story behind that—pick easier names.

*What kind of fiddle do you play?*

I play a Kevin Sykes fiddle. He's a maker in County Mayo, near me at home. He's a good bloke if you ever have any problems. I can go down to him—like most of the fiddle makers, a great breed of people, people who make instruments.

*Did you order it direct from him?*





I didn't. He made it for a friend of mine, Gregory Daly, and I got it off Gregory because I loved it so much. I had no fiddle at the time, but Gregory gave it to me.

*Anywhere you're hoping to head with your playing?*

I hope to just continue playing. It's getting easier and easier as one's name is getting known. When you ring someone now, you don't have to start explaining who the hell you are. The few recordings have been great for that. So hopefully the scene will continue to open up for me, and I'll continue to play and try to bring my music as far as one can bring it in traditional Irish music, which is a minority music, but it's the music we play and love, and you can't change it. We'd play it anyway; it's just lucky that there happens to be an audience.