

Mick Woods

A Musicians' Musicianer

Charlie McGettigan

They say around Leitrim that there are musicians but then there are musicians' musicians. A musicians' musicianer is someone who is highly regarded by his peers for his ability with his chosen instrument and is usually a very adept musicianer indeed. Mick Woods is one of that rare breed of musicianer that is both admired by his peers and the public at large. He is a musician of high integrity who is equally proficient in the Irish traditional, classical and the Jazz idioms. A quiet unassuming man, he is, sadly, one of a diminishing number of the old style 'pros' left on the circuit but thankfully is still a strong force in Irish music.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Born on 1st May 1928 in Cornacrannaghy, just outside Drumshanbo, second youngest in a family of seven, Mick Woods heard his first tunes from the musicians who were regular visitors to his home in the evenings when he was just a small child. In those days every house had a fiddle or a flute on the dresser but Mick's first tunes were picked out on an old accordion, which was lying around the

Mick Woods with his mother



house. He recalls also listening to the music of John McKenna and Michael Coleman on old seventy eight records sent home from America and these records contained tunes he was to master himself in later years. His first tin whistle, a Clarke's D, was given to him as a Christmas present by his teacher Mrs McRann, who was actually his aunt, when she realised that an academic career was not likely for Mick. She used to say that if the sums had airs, Mick might have been better at the mathematics. He quickly thought himself tunes on the tin whistle and soon Mrs McRann would let him play for the other children at school as a bit of diversion. These were Mick's first public performances and little did he know they were the start of a long career in the music business.



Mick Woods in 2003

EARLY RECOGNITION & MICK'S FIRST FLUTE

In 1936, when he was about eight years of age, Mick's love affair with the flute began. He remembers having 'an awful eye' for a flute, the same as a footballer might have for a ball or a carpenter for a fine tool. He became obsessed with the sound it made and the way it felt in his hands. Practising night and day, Mick soon became as one with the flute and he started playing it in sessions.

One night at the age of about eleven he was playing in McRanns' of Mount Allen when a brother of the late great John McKenna was so impressed with him that he gave him his late brother's flute. This was an enormous compliment to Mick but at that tender age he didn't really appreciate what a compliment it was. Sadly he no longer has the flute. However, Mick's sister in law, Nancy Woods, has the case in her house.

At thirteen years of age and still in short trousers, Mick won the gold medal, in the senior section of the very prestigious Boyle Feis Ceoil beating many fine musicians several years his senior. The win encouraged him to practice day and night and to travel long distances to house sessions all around the area to hear other musicians so that he could increase his repertoire of tunes.

Mick's First Clarinet
Mick's cousin, Barney McCormack, who had a



KEVIN WOODS' SHOWBAND, Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim.
TELEPHONE No. 25.

dance band in Drumshanbo at the time called the Ideal Dance Band, encouraged Mick to take up the clarinet seeing that he was so good at the flute. He was about sixteen years of age at the time. Christy Armstrong, a renowned musician and music teacher from Carrick, sold him his first clarinet for three or four pounds – an awful lot of money at the time—and Mick took his very first music lessons from Christy himself.

Mick is indebted to Christy Armstrong, who over a period of two years taught Mick not only to play the clarinet but also to 'sight read' music. The first tune he learned on the clarinet was 'Carolina Moon', a tune, which he still plays to this day. Soon Mick was playing everything from Strauss to Chopin as he avidly absorbed every piece of sheet music he could get his hands on. Christy Armstrong taught him not only the discipline of playing strictly the music written on the page as the composer intended but also the skill of improvisation which was to prove essential later in his jazz years.

THE KEVIN WOODS BAND

First Performances

Around about this time (1944/1945) Mick and his brother Kevin, who played accordion, formed a family band with his sister Maureen on fiddle and his brother Shane on drums. They began playing in schools and parish halls like Ballinaglera and even as far away as Doobally Hall. They could earn a half a crown each per night (about sixteen cents) and Mick's career as a professional musi-

Mick Woods Band, London



cian had begun. Mick played flute, clarinet and a little accordion in this band.

The family band soon began to be augmented by musicians from outside the family and was playing more and more gigs. Around about this time Mick bought his first saxophone, an SML, in McCullough Piggott's in Dublin for £100. His uncle Jim McRann helped him to pay for it, £100 being an awful lot of money in those days.

THE DANCE BAND YEARS

The band now became known as the Kevin Woods Dance Band and they gradually began playing further and further afield. It wasn't long until the band consisted of maybe two tenor saxes, an alto sax, a baritone sax, a clarinet, a trombone and trumpet player plus a rhythm section made up of piano bass and drums. The band wore red and blue outfits, which were considered very daring altogether because bands up till then invariably wore very formal black dinner suits. Their repertoire consisted of everything from Straus waltzes to Latin Rumbas as well as the big band numbers of Glenn Millar and Woody Herman. They would also include a 'Siege of Ennis' or a 'Walls of Limerick' for good measure and much, much more.

A new chocolate and cream coloured VW van was purchased at the Dublin Show so that all the members and the public address system could travel to the dates together. This, it seems, was the first VW van that was ever purchased in Ireland and it cost all of £800. Bookings began to come in from all over the country. They played mostly parish halls and ballrooms and they became one of the most popular bands around on a par with bands like Mick Delahunty, Maurice Mulcahy and Stephen Garvey's Big Band.

They were one of the first bands in Ireland to hire foreign musicians. Musicians like Fred Barneix and Alex Frieberg came from Germany.

Trombone player and singer, Carl Riley, was a black man from Trinidad and was an extremely popular figure around the town. Irish Tourism was something in the distant future in those days so to have foreigners living in Drumshanbo then was quite exotic.

One of Mick's favourite musicians was Jimmy Shivan from Arigna. Mick poached Jimmy from Barney McCormack's band and stuck with Jimmy night and day teaching him to sight-read. He realised Jimmy's genius and the two were to form a long lasting relationship on a musical and personal level, which continues to this day. Jimmy Shivan now lives in Los Angeles where he still plays his clarinet in a band there.

There would have been up to twelve full time musicians in the band and they were paid about four pounds ten shillings each per week at this time (approx five euro). This was considered good money then although they earned it. He remembers travelling through ice and snow to Youghal on St Stephen's Night for sixty-five pounds (about eighty euro). In those days they played from 9:00 pm until 3:00 am.

Although the money was good, it was a tough business and Mick recalls playing in Kerry three nights in one week and travelling home each night because of other engagements. They played venues like the Glebe Hall in Killarney, the Hayloft in Cork, Barry's Hotel in Dublin and the crowds were enormous in comparison to dances today. He remembers playing to 4000 people for example in the Edel Quinn Hall in Kenturk. At one time they played for sixteen nights running in Kerry alone. The average mileage was 1700 miles per week. I don't know of any band in the country doing that kind of mileage these days.

Although Maureen Doran was the first singer, the band had many singers in its history. One of the most popular was Vera Morgan. Vera was an outstanding singer, according to Mick, and she even had her own fan club with a branch in Belfast. The members of this Belfast branch indeed cycled to Drumshanbo just to see her. Eat your heart out Daniel O'Donnell! It was a great feather in Mick's cap to have Vera as the band's vocalist. Vera later married RTE broadcaster Val Joyce who still regularly visits Paddy Mac's with her.

THE JAZZ YEARS

In the early sixties jazz became very popular in Britain and Ireland with bands like Kenny Ball's Jazzmen, Chris Barber, The Paramount Jazz Band and Mick's hero Acker Bilk. This new trend gave Mick the chance to indulge his interest in trad jazz. The Kevin Woods band began playing jazz

and for a period they became quite well known as one of Ireland's top jazz bands emulating the stars of the British jazz scene. Indeed to this day Acker Bilk's 'Stranger on the Shore' is still one of the highlights of Mick's stage set.

period Mick recorded his first album 'A tribute to John McKenna' accompanied on guitar by Mary Conroy a sister of Joe Burke's wife Ann Conroy. This album was very successful for Mick and was a highly acclaimed piece of work by all who knew the music of John McKenna.



Mick Woods at 20 years of age

THE SHOWBAND YEARS

The end of an era

As the sixties progressed the showbands started to appear on the scene and The Kevin Woods Dance Band had to transform itself into the Kevin Woods Showband. This meant a radical change in the band's format in that the numbers had to be trimmed down and the band had to play standing up whereas before this they would sit down to play behind their music stands. This took a lot of getting used to but they did adapt and were to continue as the Kevin Woods Showband until 1966. By then their bookings had declined and, with income falling, Mick was forced to eventually disband the band and move to London. It was a tough decision but Mick had a wife and family to support and therefore had to bring the Kevin Woods Band era to an end.

BACK TO DRUMSHANBO

In 1980 the management of the Forum Club changed and with things looking a lot brighter on the music scene in Leitrim Mick decided to pack his bags and return to Ireland for good. He was quickly back on the music scene here forming the Mick Woods Band firstly with Longford man Sean Mahon and his brother Shane and then with the late great Aidan Canning and Shane on drums. Soon they were playing five nights a week on the thriving pub scene as well as the wedding and dinner dance circuit. This band was regularly augmented by musicians from outside the area like Donal Keigher and Mick Harkin for some great jazz sessions in places like Paddy Mac's Thatch Pub, Drumshanbo or the Bush Hotel in Carrick.

THE LONDON YEARS

Moving to London was not as easy as Mick had anticipated and he initially had to take work on the building sites until he established himself on the music scene. Mick's first music gig in London was at a dance in Balham but he eventually formed his own band, 'The Triumphs', which played a residency at the 'The Hibernian' Fulham Broadway, for seven years. They then moved to the Forum Club in Kentish Town. They played five nights a week at the Forum and this residency was to last a further seven years.

For many years through the eighties and nineties Mick played a traditional session every Wednesday night at his sister Monica's pub, Doherty's Mountain Tavern, in Aughacashel (now McMurphy's). For these sessions he was joined by his sister Maureen on fiddle as well as Eamonn and Orla Daly, Camillus Kehoe, Edmund Doyle, Kevin Dowler, Teresa and Paddy Smullen, Brendan Farrelly and many more. These sessions are legendary. Indeed this group of musicians produced two highly acclaimed and best selling albums – 'An Tostal Drumshanbo Traditional Music Group' and 'Rolling in the Ryegrass'

regarded bass player who has played with many of the country's top singers including Jimmy Buckley and Eamonn McCann, continues the musical heritage of the Woods family as does his son Fergal who is a highly respected singer/songwriter and guitarist.

Mick Woods, who has contributed so much to the Irish music scene for over sixty years, remains the consummate professional he has always been and continues to entertain all who come to hear him.

While he was in London, Mick rekindled his love for Irish traditional music, which he had all but forsaken for many years. He took a notion to play concert flute again and bought one from the renowned musician Roger Sherlock. He used to play a traditional Irish music session every Sunday Morning at the King's Head in Fulham Broadway playing jigs and reels firstly on the tenor sax but eventually on his beloved concert flute. He also played a little tin whistle in those days but no one ever asked him to borrow his whistle for one very good reason – he played his whistle through his nose! He used to get two pounds for his Sunday morning sessions and all his pints were free, which suited him fine.

PRESENT TIMES

Mick continues to perform up to this day at the ripe young age of seventy-five. He now plays with adopted Drumshanbo man Camillus Kehoe in their regular Thursday night sessions in Gertie's of Keshcarrigan as well as other venues. The jazz sessions, where Shane and himself are joined by Donal and Mick, are still held at Bank Holiday weekends in Paddy Macs where large crowds congregate to hear the wonderful sounds of yesteryear. At the annual Joe Mooney Summer School in Drumshanbo musicians like Joe Burke, Brendan McGlinchey and the Keane sisters make a point of having at least one session during the week with Mick.

Long may he continue.

In the King's Head sessions Mick was regularly joined by many of Ireland's best known musicians such as the legendary Sean McGuire, Josephine Keegan and Joe Burke. During this

Don Woods, Mick's son, a highly

