

LEISURE & ARTS

Irish-American Music Rides a Wave of Immigration

By JAMES RING ADAMS

New York

Eleven o'clock has come and gone this Monday night at Paddy Reilly's on 29th Street, but the pub is waking up with a vengeance. Two young prize-winners from the prestigious all-Ireland traditional music competition are leading their band into a set of what used to be Celtic reels and strathspeys. Bronx-born Eileen Ivers adjusts the knobs on her aquamarine electric fiddle and Irish musician Seamus Egan switches back and forth from banjo to wooden flute, but green-beer music is the last thing on their minds.

Jetsom from the traditional tune book rushes by in a torrent of riffs and skirls, driven by the jazz beat of African-American Kimati Dinizulu playing African tribal skin drums. Miss Ivers, a dark-haired Irish beauty, bends notes like whale songs and then uncorks a wild, ever-accelerating tune, her slender fingers rippling over the violin neck.

On another recent night, the Gaelic-American Club in Fairfield, Conn., has rolled back the partition in its Carolan Room for the largely middle-aged crowd in sports coats arriving for a Frances Black concert. The younger sister of one of Ireland's best-known musical families and the former lead for the traditional group Arkady, Ms. Black delights the room of 250 with pop numbers from Dublin's bumper crop of young songwriters, an a capella protest song and a Doris Day tune.

She is continuing a family tradition in several ways. Her older sister Mary took time from a triumphal American tour last year to perform in Fairfield. They came at the behest of the club's social committee

chairman, Joe Moran, an old friend from West Mayo. Thanks to other mutual friends, Ms. Black already knows the area from a stint as an au pair.

These musicians, and many others like them, reflect the cultural vigor of a large-scale population influx. A 10-year wave of Irish immigration, both legal and undocumented, is buoying a resurgent Celtic music that is just now breaking out of East Side Manhattan bars and suburban Irish-American clubs into the pop mainstream.

The styles range from hard-core traditional to hard rock. The crosscurrents of the New York bar scene have produced the hybrid Eileen Ivers/Seamus Egan Band, the indefinably funky Kips Bay Ceili Band and the underground favorite Black 47. The young, hip generation of Irish musicians no longer fears that American audiences will demand the sentimental "auld sod" (old country) standards, such as "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling," written on Tin Pan Alley.

The underlying rise in Irish immigration has been pushed along by Ireland's perennial high unemployment and a change in U.S. law. In 1984, a little more than 1,000 Irishmen received immigration visas to the U.S.; in 1994, the number was 22,000, about as many as Ireland received throughout all the 1980s. The surge followed legislation that changed American visa quotas to favor Ireland and other older sources of emigration. Of course, there's also been an uncounted wave of illegal immigration.

The subject is sensitive, but it shows up strongly in the music. "I didn't see the Statue of Liberty," sings Cathy Ryan, lead vocalist for the Irish-American group Cherish the Ladies. "never heard her welcoming words./I came through the back

door silently/Unwanted . . . unseen . . . and unheard."

Ms. Ryan's song "The Back Door" captures the lonely existence of an Irish immigrant nanny working without a green card. There are a range of parallels, from several cuts on Pat Kilbride's recent solo album "Undocumented Dancing" (Green Linnet) to any number of harsh lyrics from Black 47, the rock band named for the year of Ireland's 19th-century potato famine.

Such variety reflects the fact that the new Irish immigrants are much more familiar with all forms of popular music than their earlier counterparts were. "This is the first generation of Irish to be raised on television," says Mick Moloney, a Philadelphia-based tenor banjo and mandolin player. Mr. Moloney, who recently completed a doctoral dissertation on Irish music in America, says the newcomers were thoroughly exposed to rock-and-roll, rhythm and blues, and the eclecticism of so-called world music; some only discovered Irish traditional playing in America. Along with fusion, the new immigrants add another element, what Mr. Moloney calls a "hard-edged nostalgia."

"There's an anger that cuts two ways," he says. "There's anger at the society in Ireland for not providing them with opportunities at home. And there's anger at the furtive, gray-area existence they lead here."

Previous generations haven't let their music reflect these realities. "The Irish experience has been sentimentalized," says Mr. Kilbride, a traditional musician well-known in Ireland who came to the U.S. in 1988. "People were supposed to come to America and become millionaires," he said; in his song "Live Bait," an older immigrant winds up in a cardboard

home on the sidewalk of New York's Second Avenue. The title is Mr. Kilbride's metaphor for the recent immigrants to New York, "which is like a large beast that eats people up."

Many new arrivals, however, flock to a more inviting Second Avenue shelter, Paddy Reilly's Music Bar. The pub, owned by the leading Irish tenor of the same name, has fostered many of the trailblazing new groups, including the gritty Black 47.

"They were kicked out of all the Irish bars in the Bronx," says Steve Duggan, the manager of Paddy Reilly's, of the day five years ago when a friend in Black 47 asked him for a gig. He booked the group for one night a week, and found it had a following that jammed his narrow room while many of the city's bars were going out of business. He expanded the program to a mix of traditional rock and fusion groups such as Speir Mor, Chanting House, Mr. Kilbride's Kips Bay Ceili Band and the Eileen Ivers/Seamus Egan Band.

Lately Black 47 (following such groups as the Donegal Band Clannad and the Chieftains, whose latest recording features Mick Jagger) has broken into the big time, with a major-label record contract, international touring and appearances on the David Letterman and Jay Leno shows. But there are plenty of Irishmen to take its place on Paddy's low, black stage. The new Thursday-night band, Rogue's March, fills the room with its own blend of raucous rock and precision mandolin.

Fusion bands are even becoming a genre recognized at major Irish festivals. "There was a time five or six years ago a band like ours couldn't get arrested at these festivals," says Mr. Kilbride. Now, he says, the Milwaukee Irish Fest, the biggest in the country, with 90,000 attendees over an August weekend, devotes the biggest of its seven music stages to what it calls the rock stage. "Every region seems to have a band," he says, naming Ploughman's Lunch in Pittsburgh, the Drovers in Chicago, the Young Dubliners in Los Angeles and Mr. Reilly's roster in New York.

The enthusiasm, and its demographic background, is evident in a burgeoning network of Irish cultural and social centers such as Fairfield's Gaelic-American Club. The vitality of the cross-fertilization shows at the club's annual three-day Irish festival, which pulled in 12,000 visitors last June. Young and old turn out for its year-round cultural programs, which range from the touring shanachie (traditional Irish storyteller) Brain Batt to Ms. Black.

Perhaps no one appreciates the leavening of taste more than the performers. Says Ms. Black: "We can come out here and we don't have to sing 'Danny Boy.'"

Mr. Adams, a former Journal editorial writer, writes for the American Spectator.