

# Pop and Jazz in Review

■ Traditional Irish folk tunes all gussied up in new-age finery ■ A drummer's lesson in how to fill the blank spaces ■ To and for the New York Irish.

## The Chieftains

Avery Fisher Hall  
Lincoln Center

In their 29 years together, the Chieftains have become the world's best-known performers on traditional Irish instruments. Unfortunately, they hardly play traditional Irish music any more.

On Monday night at Avery Fisher Hall, the group performed Irish folk tunes, Celtic music from Spain and Tennessee and new Irish-inspired compositions. Whether or not the tunes were traditional, far too many selections were arranged as new-age easy-listening music or used as backdrops for clowning. A stage presence that started out charming began to seem compulsive and then actively annoying.

The Chieftains are still extraordinary musicians. Playing a slow air on pennywhistle or uilleann pipes, Paddy Moloney makes quick trills and breathy sustained notes bespeak intimacy; in jigs and reels, Sean Keane on fiddle and Matt Malloy on wooden flute use stutters and scratches and double-tonguing as a phantom rhythm section. Kevin Conniff, who plays the bodhran (drum), sings unaccompanied songs with yearning and humor.

Collectively, the Chieftains can create an intricate, music-box tinkling, or jaunty intertwined solos and, in Spanish Celtic music from Galicia, a quasi-classical polyphony.

The early Chieftains used to play solos alone, retaining their starkness and delicacy. Now solos are often cushioned by a Derek Bell's synthesizer parts, or they have to contend with distractions. During a fierce flute solo by Mr. Malloy, Mr. Bell made cranking motions and waved a white handkerchief, as if he was in a

Marx Brothers movie.

Few of Mr. Moloney's group arrangements sound like unadorned laments or fight songs. Instead, old tunes are rendered misty-eyed and sentimental with extended fiddle drones or harp glissandos. Slow melodies tend to give way quickly to a fast jig or reel for the audience to stamp and clap along with.

The Aer Lingus Pipe Band paraded down the aisles after intermission, and Sheila Ryan and Donnie Golden, Irish step-dancers, added speedy tapping and scissor-kicks to reels.

The Chieftains are often commissioned to write film scores and to collaborate with rock musicians, because they represent Irish tradition. But they played Monday's concert as if they had lost faith in traditional music without gimmicks.

JON PARELES

## Ed Blackwell

The Village Vanguard  
178 Seventh Avenue South (at  
Perry Street)  
Through Sunday

The second tune of Ed Blackwell's opening show at the Village Vanguard on Tuesday night, "Beau Regard," started out slow and stately. The bassist, Mark Helias, declared a repeating melodic figure, and Mr. Blackwell, on brushes, dug into the tempo. Then he started doubletapping, and for the rest of the tune, he shifted into fleet and driving phrases, then back into the tune's easy walk, then back into a furiously swinging double time.

The rest of the night was a master class in how to fill the blank spaces Ornette Coleman brought to jazz with his innovations. Mr. Blackwell, Mr. Coleman's original drummer, was

working in essentially the same idiom, using a group that included Carlos Ward on saxophone and Graham Haynes on cornet. More often than not, the tunes had been constructed around a bass figure, or a chord, and in lesser hands the show would have depended on the mood and ability of the front line.

But Mr. Blackwell and his group have done their work filling in the open spaces. In "Pentahouev," a number by Mr. Helias, Mr. Ward and Mr. Haynes counted through the melody, only to keep polyphony in the form of simultaneous solos. Mr. Ward's "Pettiford Bridge" had a bridge that was cued by the soloist, and another song introduced the improvisers with written passages.

But the show's focus came from the taut and graceful rhythm section, which has become one of jazz's best. Mr. Blackwell was extraordinary, keeping each part of his kit separate. And he used timbre to its fullest, hitting his sticks on a drum's rim, for instance, or sticks on sticks, or in a slight variation in the brightness of his cymbals. For part of the show he would stay on the toms, producing a deep sound that recalled, in its rhythms and textures, the West African drum choirs; at other times he played straight-ahead black American swing, with his ride cymbal hissing lightly as if gas were leaking from a valve. He changed meters from drum to drum, and moved from complex, dancing patterns to uncluttered and sleek swing. It was a quiet, virtuosic performance, music at its most inventive.

PETER WATROUS

Black 47's leader, Larry Kirwan, raised his fist and shouted, "I didn't come here to die/but to fight for the rights of the working man." Agitprop is only part of Black 47's message; its songs also tell stories of emigration of drinking and of disrupting an Italian wedding. Most of the songs in Tuesday's early set appear on the band's homemade CD, "Black 47" (BLK).

Black 47's Irish background doesn't make the band insular. In various songs, a hip-hop drum machine backs up pennywhistle and uilleann pipes, a trombone and saxophone play traditional tunes or reggae horn riffs, or guitar noise gives way to unaccompanied ballad singing. The band often uses reggae and rock rhythms, with a nod to Bruce Springsteen and his Irish source, Van Morrison. And a song summing up the band's history so far, "Rockin' the Bronx," was a rap with an obligato for pipes. In his singing, Mr. Kirwan often recalls Kevin Rowland, whose group, Dexy's Midnight Runners, sought to merge Celtic and soul music.

Although Black 47 speaks to its own community, it doesn't shut others out, as Mr. Kirwan's lyrics tell stories that resound beyond their local details. Rowdy, catchy and unrepentant, Black 47's songs give a forceful voice to a group from the margins.

The group plays at Paddy Reilly's, 495 Second Avenue, at 28th Street, on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

JON PARELES

## Marta Istomin Named To Head Music School

Marta Casals Istomin has been appointed president of the Manhattan School of Music, the school's chairman, Gordon K. Greenfield, announced yesterday. She succeeds Peter C. Simon, who left the school to become director of the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto in September.

The school has an \$11 million annual budget and an enrollment of 834 full-time students and 450 in its preparatory division.

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