

# Tommy Makem continues to carry cultural torch

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

PITTSFORD — An evening with Tommy Makem is precisely that — an audience member feels as if he or she is *with* the singer rather than just listening to him.

"And when you come back, be warmed up and ready to do a whole load of singing," the Irish singer told his audience prior to the intermission of his March 21 show at the Nazareth College Arts Center, 4245 East Ave.

More than one-third of Makem's concert was devoted to sing-alongs with audience members. The show featured such classic Irish favorites as "Black Velvet Band" and "The Wild Rover."

Accompanied by New York City guitarist Ron D'Addario, Makem played banjo and tin whistle throughout the concert — which also featured several of his own compositions. He ended the show with "Four Green Fields," a lament about the separation of Northern Ireland from the rest of Ireland that ends with hope for unity.

Makem sprinkled jokes, stories and poems throughout the evening to spice up his musical performances. He told a joke about an atheist's wake — where the corpse was all dressed with no place to go — and one about an Irish space program.

"Did you hear the Yanks sent a man to the moon," one Irishman said to another over a pint of brew. "That's nothing," the other man said. "We're sending a man to the sun."

The first Irishman exclaimed disbelief at the other man's contention, noting that the sun-bound astronaut would be burned to a cinder long be-



Ruth Adams/Photo Intern

Surrounded by a cascade of trademark flowers, Irish singer Tommy Makem serenades his audience during a March 21 performance at the Nazareth College Arts Center. More than a third of his concert was devoted to sing-alongs.

fore he reached his destination.

"Do you think we're daft?" the first Irishman asked rhetorically. "We're sending him up at night."

Makem may joke to vary the pace going during a show, but he is intensely serious about preserving and extending Irish cultural traditions. Ask him where the best place is to hear Irish music and he doesn't even mention his native Ireland.

"There's a tremendous proliferation of poor country music and very bad

rock 'n' roll," he commented about the Irish music scene in an interview with the *Catholic Courier* prior to his March 21 performance.

In particular, he bemoaned the fact that young Irish musicians choose foreign musical traditions over their own and then try to pass it off as "Irish music."

"They cannot see that their own country's culture is far superior," he said, blaming Irish radio and television for failing to expose more traditional

Irish musicians. "There seems to be some sort of plot to keep them from being noticed."

Makem paused for a moment and then relented.

"I'm on my high horse," he joked.

The Irish performer may mount that high horse often because he embodies a family legacy of preserving Irish culture and music. His late mother, Sarah Makem, was a world-renowned collector of Irish songs. Her living room saw visits from the likes of Pete Seeger and other U.S. folk enthusiasts.

"I learned a lot of music from her by osmosis," Makem acknowledged.

Makem also attributed his love for Irish culture to being raised in County Armagh in British-ruled Northern Ireland, where Irish Catholics are a minority among Irish Protestants — most of whom are loyal to the crown.

"Being north of the border, you sort of had to stand up stronger and taller," he said. "It made me more aware that I had to grab onto and hold onto the culture. Down south, they didn't have to fight for it as opposed to those of us privileged to live under the wings of the Queen," he added sarcastically.

Like so many Irish before him, Makem emigrated to the United States in 1956. He worked as an actor in New York City before forming an Irish music quartet with the three Clancy Brothers. Together, Makem and the Clancys made music history throughout the late 1950s and 60s, helping to fuel a general folk music revival both here and abroad.

Along the way he met a number of that era's famous figures, including a young singer named Joan Baez, a budding star named Barbra Streisand, and a folk music poet known as Bob Dylan.

In the early 1960s, Dylan religiously attended shows that the Clancy brothers and Makem performed in Greenwich Village, Makem recalled.

"He'd listen and absorb some of the tunes," Makem remembered. "When we'd meet him, he'd written a song to one of the tunes he'd heard the night before. So we were quite friendly."

Makem has performed solo since 1988 when he ended a 13-year collaboration with Liam Clancy, one of the Clancy brothers. All of his break-ups and make-ups with the Clancys have been amiable, he stressed, noting that he usually goes solo to try out different musical paths.

Currently, Makem has a number of projects in the works, including a couple of TV specials to be aired on stations in New York and in New Hampshire, the state he calls home. The singer expressed optimism about the kind of music he sings, figuring it will outlast any of the current sounds offered by most modern musicians.

"I think folk music is going to rise above all of it," he said.

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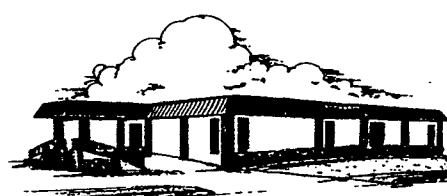
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