

# “Traditional Sessions Keep Irish Music Alive”

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By Michael Eskin  
for the San Diego Troubadour, March 2008

I've seen that same look many times just as they walk around the corner of the glass wall at the entrance to the pub. Most likely they just came in after a long day at work for a pint of Guinness or to catch a game on the TV, but suddenly out of nowhere they find themselves smack in the middle of a flock of fiddles, flutes, whistles, Uilleann pipes, and bodhran flying with wild abandon through endless sets of Irish jigs and reels. They often look shocked. Mostly they smile.

The look on their faces always says the same thing: “What in the world is going on here?”

What's happened is that they've just walked into the Tuesday night traditional Irish session at the Ould Sod, a pub in Normal Heights, which George Rubsamen and I have been hosting every Tuesday night for over five years. I've seen that same look hundreds of times.

So what exactly is a session? An Irish session is an informal gathering of musicians playing sets of traditional Irish dance tunes on traditional Irish instruments. These instruments most commonly include the fiddle, flute, tin whistle, concertina, button accordion, bodhran (frame drum), and Uilleann pipes (Irish bagpipes). Sometimes there might also be a guitar or eight-string bouzouki (octave mandolin) providing rhythmic backup.

The most common question I get is, “What is the name of your band?” When I explain no, we're not a band, it's an Irish session, they generally ask, “Oh, so it's a jam session? I play a little guitar, can I join in?”

Well, yes and no...

An Irish session has a structure and set of sometimes frustratingly simple rules that are more or less the same wherever you go in the world. This structure gives an Irish session a distinct feel and sound. Unlike jam sessions in some other styles of music, players of melody instruments only play the tune melody in unison with no harmony lines. Faking through a tune one doesn't know, or extensively improvising on tunes, is generally considered poor etiquette. Also, because the chord structure to many tunes can be somewhat complicated and oftentimes ambiguous, the chances of two backup players picking the same chords is very small, and as a result many sessions (including ours) have a rule of only one backup instrument playing at a time.

In an Irish session, the tunes played in a set are generally all of the same type, most commonly jigs or reels, with the occasional hornpipe or waltz. Most commonly, each tune is played three times before moving on to another. Oftentimes, there are fixed sets of tunes that everyone in a particular session knows in a particular order. It's also as common that the tunes will be selected “on the fly,” with the next tune to play being determined by someone during the last time through a tune. When this happens, everyone has to listen closely to what is played next and quickly join in. In some sessions, one person picks all the tunes, in others, like ours at the Ould

Sod, any player can pick the next tune in a set, and if two people start a next tune, it's good courtesy for one person to quickly back off and let the other player take the lead.

This can go on for a long time. We've had sets of reels that have gone on for more than a half hour.

The next most common questions we get are about the instruments and what they cost.

Most people are familiar with fiddles, so we don't get many questions about them. The flutes played in traditional Irish music are quite distinct from modern silver flutes; they are based on the old wooden English flutes designed back in the mid 18th century and have anywhere from zero to eight keys. For most tunes, you don't need the keys, and keyless flutes are quite a bit less expensive than keyed flutes. A good keyless blackwood flute costs about \$1,000.

A perfectly good pennywhistles in the key of D can be bought from most music stores for less than \$10, but a whole cottage industry has sprung up to make a range of instruments out of different materials and with specific tonal qualities. Most of these whistles sell for between \$100 to \$300.

I happen to play the Uilleann pipes, which look like I've been attacked by some sort of alien octopus. The pipes are made of leather, ebony, and brass, so I get a lot of questions, usually along the lines of "Is that some sort of bagpipe?" and "How does the air get into that thing?" and often "How much does something like that cost?"

The Uilleann pipes are a bellows-driven bagpipe, with the same range as the flute, having a much quieter and sweeter sound than the big Scottish warpipes. They are used quite often in movie soundtracks and commercials to convey an Irish mood. Most people have heard them but have never seen them played, so here's how it works:

Under my right arm is a bellows that I use to pump air into a leather bag under my left arm. From the bag, the air splits in two directions, the first into the chanter, on which the melodies are played, and the second, to the mainstock, which contains the drones and regulators. The drones, much like the Scottish pipes, sound a constant D pitch in three octaves, but unlike the Scottish pipes can be turned off with a valve. The regulators, which lie on top of the drones, have keys that I can press with my right wrist (while still playing the melody on chanter with my fingers) to provide chords under the melody lines. It's a difficult instrument to master. Every piece of the instrument is handmade, and there are only a few good builders in the world. A full set of pipes can easily sell for over \$10,000.

Sometimes Irish sessions have a reputation of being somewhat unfriendly and strict. In reality, the simple rules of etiquette are there to help make sure that the music sounds good and that everyone has a good time.

For example, there are only four simple rules at the sessions I host:

1. Tune your instrument and try to keep it in tune during the session. An in-tune session sounds better to everyone, and instruments drift in pitch over the course of an evening as the temperature changes.
2. When someone starts a set of tunes, try not to speed up or slow down from the speed they originally set. There's nothing more discouraging than a new player finally getting up the nerve to start a set of tunes, only to be blown out of the water by some insensitive player who speeds things up to where the new player can no longer keep up.
3. Play the tunes you know, don't play the tunes you don't know. This one seems simple enough, but it can be very tempting to try and play poorly a tune you don't really know, often times distracting the person sitting next to you who does know the tune. This particularly applies to backup players since the chord changes in the tunes aren't always straightforward.
4. One backup player or bodhran (frame drum) at a time. As with multiple backup players, multiple bodhran playing at the same can result in cacophony, and can often be louder than the melody players, so one at a time, please.

We are quite fortunate to have such an active Irish session scene here in San Diego, rivaling Los Angeles and San Francisco combined for the number of weekly sessions.

Here's the list:

Tuesday Nights

7–10:30pm

The Ould Sod

3373 Adams Ave.

San Diego, CA 92116

(619) 284-6594

Hosts: Michael Eskin, George Rubsamen

<http://www.theouldsod.com>

Tuesday Nights

7–10pm

Blarney Stone Pub

5617 Balboa Ave.

San Diego, CA 92111

(858) 279-2033

Host: Heike Behl

<http://www.blarneystonesandiego.com>

Thursday Nights

7:30–10:30pm

Thornton's Irish Pub

1221 Broadway

El Cajon, CA 92021

(619) 447-5665

Hosts: Elaine Thompson, Michael Eskin

<http://www.thorntonsirishpub.com>

Sunday Mornings

10am–12noon

House of Ireland

In the Houses of Pacific Relations

Balboa Park

Beginners traditional Irish music class, with sheet music.

Sunday Nights

7–10:30pm

The Field

544 5th Ave.

San Diego, CA 92101

(619) 232-9840

Hosts: The Boxy Band

<http://www.thefield.com>

Free Traditional Irish Stepdancing show every week before the session from 5:30–7pm

Additional Web Resources:

The Session – Popular online Irish session information and discussion site.

<http://www.thesession.org>

Chiff and Fipple – Focused on tinwhistle, Irish flute, and Uilleann pipes.

<http://www.chiffandfipple.com>

TradLessons – Free online tinwhistle, flute, and Uilleann pipe lesson videos.

<http://www.tradlessons.com>

