

DANCING AT FLANNERY'S:

The Transmission of Irish Set Dance at a Manhattan Pub

By Jerry Kerlin

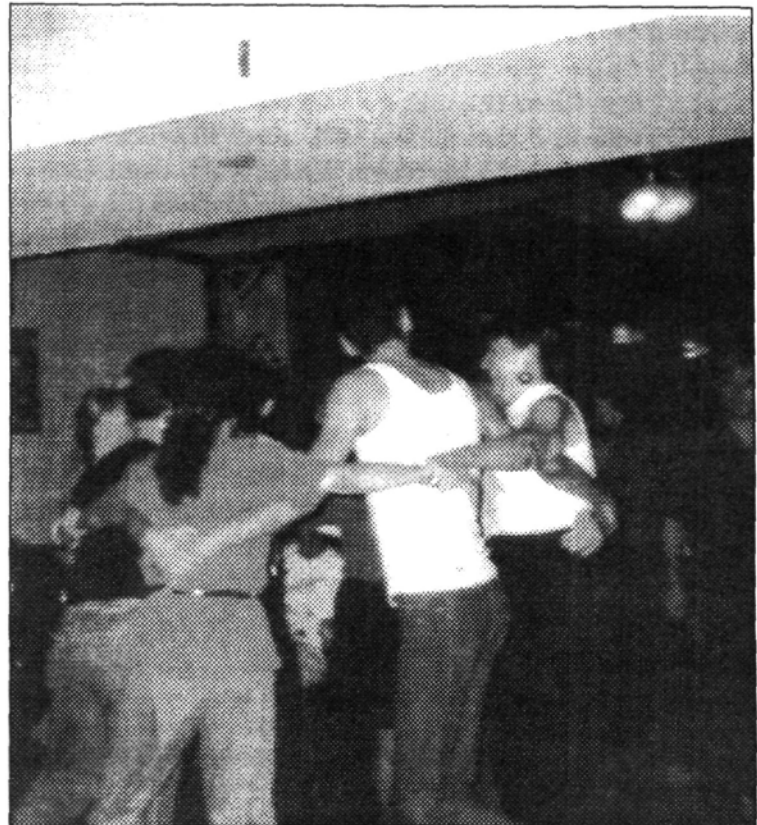
Every Wednesday evening the Irish Arts Center teaches set dancing in the basement of Flannery's Bar and Restaurant on the north side of Greenwich Village, Manhattan. A beginning and an intermediate class are followed by set dancing upstairs with a "session [seisiún] with dance" where prominent Irish American musicians such as flutist Joanie Madden, fiddler Eileen Ivers, and uilleann piper Jerry O'Sullivan lead as "starters" with local fiddlers, box (button accordion) players, tin whistle players, guitarists, and bodhrán (Irish frame drum) players. A core of experienced dancers help the beginners downstairs and draw them into the more expert dancing that follows upstairs and continues as far past midnight as energy will allow. Occasionally, all playing and dancing stop as a singer is called to the microphone to perform several songs in the old style, sean-nós. Whenever guitarist Danny Littwin plays he will at some point stop to sing a ballad or "singer-songwriter" song. This researcher has been attending the dance classes and "session with dance" as a participant observer since the beginning of February, 1993—a study now in the middle of its second year among the New York Irish, their music and dance.

THE HISTORY OF IRISH SET DANCE AND ITS IMPORTATION TO NEW YORK CITY

Two teachers of Irish set dancing have been instrumental in the revival of this dance type in New York City. Paul Keating (Keating 1993, 1994), an Irish American and chief of the newsdesk at *Newsweek Magazine*, began teaching céilí dancing at the Irish Arts Center in the mid-1980s. The summers of 1984 and 1985 he organized groups of IAC dancers to travel to Ireland to study dance at the Willie Clancy Summer School. Influenced by the revival of set dancing in Ireland at that time he returned to New York to start a course at the Center. Donna Bauer (Bauer, 1993), one of his first New York students in 1986, has helped spread set dance throughout the city.

Paul traces the history of set dance from the late 1700s when it took hold in rural Ireland. Set dance was the country imitation of the quadrilles and cotillion dances of the courts of continental Europe. These dances reached Ireland from France through England—Irish serving in the British army during the wars with Napoleon returned to the Irish countryside. Names of the sets—*The Lancers*, *The Caledonian*, and *The Paris*, for example—reflect the transition. Considering the large skirts and cumbersome shoes of the French court the quadrille and cotillion dances were mostly slow. The Irish did not have large weighty costumes to encumber their lively tunes. Set dancing reached the United States with the waves of emigration from Ireland at the time of the British ascendancy and the famine—the 1830s and 1840s. The set dancing that remained was later to be discouraged by some Catholic priests who saw couple dancing as a promotion of sexual behavior.

As a child in the 1950s Paul Keating observed his parents attending New York City house parties, social events in which set danc-



Set dancers at Flannery's perform the micromovement named *The Big Christmas*.
Photo by Kevin Grant.

ing still flourished. The strong impact of American popular music in the 1960s overshadowed his memories of the dancing and other Irish arts of his parents, but an impression had been made. With the revival of Irish folk arts in the 1970s he began to learn céilí dancing (see Table 1), but he did notice it differed sharply from the way his parents had danced. Paul kept his céilí dancing alive through the 1970s and felt confident enough to teach a course in the subject by the 1980s. In Ireland in the summers of 1984 and 1985 he studied set dance with three teachers—Joe and Siobhán O'Donovan and Máirtín Byrnes. Paul returned to New York to teach his IAC classes what he had learned. The popularity of these classes in set dance convinced him to arrange for his first teachers, the O'Donovans, to come to New York to lead workshops that would expand on his knowledge.

Donna Bauer became a dance student of Paul Keating in 1986. She remembers Paul telling her how his parents came from Clare and would dance *The Caledonian Set* at home. Paul taught Donna what he knew—*The Kerry Set* (polka set), *The Cúil Aodha Set* (reel set), other polka and reel sets. By July 1987 Donna and some friends, motivated by dance sessions of mostly céilí dance they organized in Central Park, decided to "go over" (make a trip to Ireland). They attended the *Flach Cheoil na hÉireann* [music and dance festival and competition (Cowdery 1991, 14)] in August where they took a week-long class with Joe and Siobhán O'Donovan in Cork. Donna and her dancing friends began to

actively seek out Irish dancers and musicians back in New York. They started going to McGovern's in Sunnyside, Queens, followed by the Harbor Bar in Bay Ridge, Queens. The Harbor Bar would attract known musicians such as fiddlers Paddy Reynolds from Staten Island and Tony DeMarco from Brooklyn. In the summer of 1988 she and friends returned to Ireland to learn more. In New York that fall they started to learn *The Castle Set* from Paul at the Irish Arts Center. January of 1988 these dancers started going to a new session for musicians at the Milltown Lounge in the Bronx. The best Irish musicians in New York would show up: Camillus Hiney on accordion, fiddlers Martin Wynne, Paddy Reynolds, Fred Rice, flutists Jack Coen and Mike Rafferty. She and three others would make half sets of only two couples. They got to know two couples from Westchester who would come and complete the set. Milltown dancers followed the tunes chosen by the musicians—a group of reels meant reel figures from sets, polkas meant polka figures from sets—all danced without the usual pauses between figures. Also, if the dancing stopped the music might stop. The Milltown continued for about a year and a half up to 1990. Mike Mitchell, the owner and a step dancer from his childhood, was from Milltown Malbay in Ireland, where set dancing flourished in his father's bar. The customers who came to drink were fascinated with the dancers and the dancing. There was much interaction.

When the Milltown was closed by the city in the fall of 1990, Jack Brennan, a set dance enthusiast, found backroom space in a Hoboken pub for the dancers where they met on Sunday afternoons until early 1991. Jean Dulskey (Dulskey 1994), active in set dance since her fall 1990 trip to the annual Irish Dance Weekend sponsored by the Greater Washington Céilí Club in Cape May, witnessed the overlap of the Milltown and Hoboken as set dance centers. She remembers from eight to twenty dancers arriving in Hoboken, sometimes more men than women. Sets of eight dancers would be spelled by alternate couples and individuals so that couples got split up. Monthly, following the Hoboken afternoon, dancers might move to the Bejart American Legion Post on Maclean Avenue in the North Bronx where the Michael Coleman Branch of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann sponsored evening céilís. During this time Jean also recalls Thursday evening sessions at Katie O'Toole's on Reade Street in Manhattan's City Hall area. Multi-instrumentalist Tom Higgins as starter, local fiddler Fred Rice, bodhrán player Mary Ford, string player and vocalist Jerry Donnelly, and Jean (trying her first sessions on the hammered dulcimer), would play for whatever dancers showed up. The set dance scene moved to a pub named Rumours, but the owner did not want people around who did not drink. Donna explains that dancers rarely drink liquor—they drink cranberry juice, and “bar owners don't make money from that.” She is delighted that Seamus Collison, the young owner of Flannery's, thinks the attraction of set dancing sells more liquor to spectators and curious onlookers than the dancers would buy. He was happy to see the musicians and dancers arrive in late February 1991. These early years of set dance sometimes only had enough dancers present to form a half set—two opposite couples dancing shortened versions of set dances.

Since its revival set dance at house parties, céilís or Irish dances, and pubs has been practiced with “proper sets,” full sets of four couples, eight people, all learning prescribed set dances by

oral/aural transmission with some written instructions available (see Table 2). Paul Keating recalls a phenomenon that occurred before and continued during the revival of set dance on both sides of the Atlantic. Using regular show bands instead of céilí bands (session instruments with keyboard accompaniment and snare drum), large Irish dances would have large circles of couples form at the announcement of a set dance. For example, at the annual Clare Ball or Dinner Dance, box player and band leader Joe Madden could call for *The Caledonian Set*, and huge circles would take the floor. The symmetry of a “proper set” with opposite tops and side was lost, but the dancers could perform rudimentary movements like lead around, swing at home, slide in and out, and house around. The exclusion of performing proper sets was avoided, and people who had difficulty remembering the dances could watch other dancers who knew the choreography. Large circle dancing of sets like *The Caledonian* helped to preserve set dance in Irish culture, but the set dance revival beginning in the 1980s with use of “proper sets” has resorted authenticity and completeness to the art.



Flutiest Joanie Madden is the “starter” of the session with dance at Flannery's.
Photo by Kevin Grant.

Donna Bauer believes set dancing became popular because it was a more social way to do couple dancing. She describes it as less of an exhibition and less formal than céilí dancing. She also describes it as more masculine.

Dancing masters from Ireland occasionally teach special workshops in the basement of Flannery's. Mick Mulkerrin from County

Meath taught *The New Market Set* and *The West Kerry Set*, November 17, 1993. A special fee, usually \$8 or \$10, is collected from the participants. The question always arises at the end of each workshop of whether or not the newly learned sets will survive in the New York set dance repertory. Connie Ryan, a dancing master from Dublin well-known to Flannery's regulars, arrived to participate in the session with dance preceding his special workshops for the July 4th Irish Music Festival 1994 in Leeds, New York.

Set dancing is in its third year at Flannery's. Classes meet from fall through spring in the basement with Noel Cotter teaching Beginning Set Dance and Donna Bauer, Steve Casey, and Dan Hunt teaching Intermediate Set Dance. Sometimes a dancer who knows a set well will teach or review it with the Intermediate Set class. During the summer, classes become informal teaching around the Statue of Polish King Wladyslaw Jagiello near the Delacorte Theater in Central Park starting after 6:00 P.M. After sunset some dancers head downtown to the session with dance at Flannery's always beginning around 10:00 P.M.

THE FORM OF SET DANCE

The four types of Irish dance are transmitted by the Irish Arts Center. See Table 1. Set, céilí, and step dance have a special introductory course, *Introduction to Irish Dance*, part of the fall, winter, and spring course offerings—a course recommended by the Center as beginning study for all dancers. Couple dance or two-hand dance has its own introduction.

Table 1.

THE FOUR TYPES OF IRISH DANCE

céilí dance: A formal line dance characterized by high stepping and a battery of choreography.

couple dance or two-hand dance: Partner dance, including the waltz, polka, and mazurka.

set dance: Group dance done in sets, squares of four couples each.

step dance: Group dance in which individual dancers take turns with virtuoso steps.

Set dance refers to four couples in a square formation called the *set*. The man is named the *gent*. The woman is named the *lady*. The lady stands at the right of the gent, shoulder to shoulder. The couple with their backs to the musicians is the *top couple* (also called *head couple*, or *first tops*). The couple across from the *top couple* is the *second tops*. The couples on the sides are called the *side couples*, or *sides*. For most sets the couple to the left of the *top couple* is called the *first sides* and the couple opposite them are the *second sides*. In sets from certain areas in Ireland the *first sides* are to the right of the *first tops*, with their opposite the *second sides*. A *corner* is the gent, lady, or couple at a right angle to another gent, lady, or couple. See Figure.

When sets are formed for the classes at Flannery's students pair up in couples and create a set where they are standing. More women than men usually attend these classes, so many couples are formed with a woman dancing the part of the gent. When the

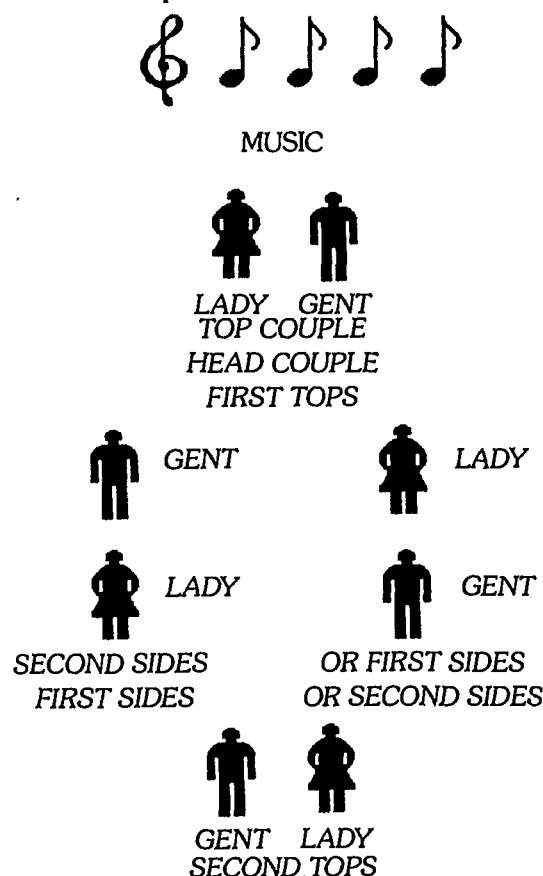
opposite is true extra men become "shut out."

Set dance also refers to organization of the dance movements. A key term in this organization is the word *figure* (sometimes pronounced *FIHger* by Irish language speakers). Each set dance has a name—*The Castle Set*, *The Lancers Set*, *The Mazurka Set*, *The Newport Set*, *The Paris Set*, *The Plain Set*, et cetera—and is constructed of three to seven figures. Each figure in a set dance is numbered to show its sequence with the other sections, has a name taken either from the dance genre or one of the micromovement units within it, has a dance genre indicating the footwork type (reel, polka, jig, hornpipe, slide) and has a count of the number of bars needed to dance that figure. Seven to fifteen micromovements, each with its identifying name (*House*, *Little Christmas*, for example), are contained within a figure. The figures that make up a set dance are danced consecutively mostly with breaks in between, but sometimes not. See Table 2 for an example of the hierarchy of structure in an Irish set dance.

THE SESSION WITH DANCE UPSTAIRS

Musicians begin unpacking instruments and setting up the session before 10:00 P.M. every Wednesday. Paul Keating informed me that flutist Joanie Madden and uilleann piper Jerry O'Sullivan, both judged by him to be good musicians for dancing, were seminal forces in the creation of the Wednesday session with dance at Flannery's. Both are paid as lead musicians of the session by the bar owner (Seamus Collison), a custom that frequently extends to free drinks for the other musicians. When Jerry moved to Ireland in September 1992, Joanie became sole starter.

Figure. Set formation for the Irish set dance. The *head couple* (*top couple*, *first tops*) is determined by the location of the music—that couple is closest to it.



Other regular musicians at the Wednesday night session include fiddler Fred Rice, box player Tom Dunne, bodhrán player Mary Ford, and a guitarist or electronic keyboard player. Other musicians sit along the side. Joanie leads the musicians, as explained to me by Donna Bauer:

Jerry: And so the paid musicians are the ones that are in-charge?

Donna: Although, this one is really Joanie. We'll signal . . . she'll say do you want to dance to—we'll say reels, she'll say, okay, reels, and I think they discuss among themselves what to play or whatever . . . The person who gets paid for the session is really paid to be there and play, but that may not be the person who leads in terms of the music. There's this whole politics that goes on—I'm not that familiar with it, but I know it can get quite intense over who starts the tune and when that's over who picks up the next tune.

Jerry: So there's a protocol?

Donna: Yes there is, yes. You're supposed to know when not to play, and when to play.

Table 2. The hierarchy of set dance structure as illustrated by the first two figures of a set dance (Moylan 1985).
name of set dance: *THE CASTLE SET*

figure sequence:	micromovement sequence:	dance genre:	number of bars:
1st Figure: <i>Slide</i>	A House B Pass Through C Advance and Retire D Swing E Advance and Retire F Swing G Repeat A to F (Top Couples) H Repeat A to F (Side Couples) I Repeat A to F (Side Couples)	slide	200
2nd Figure: <i>Polka</i>	A House B Advance and Retire C Change D Wheel E Swing F Repeat A to E (Top Couples) G Repeat A to E (Side Couples) H Repeat A to E (Side Couples)	polka	136

Over half of the 50 to 80 students in the two set dancing classes in the basement stay for at least a portion of the session with

dance upstairs where they join dance regulars. Besides this writer, new dancers who started in the set classes downstairs include Kerry, an assistant teacher by profession, who studied step dance as a child, Thérèse, an actress who has become interested in many Irish arts, Cathy, an administrator for an energy conservation company, and Frank, a management contractor for the City of New York. Dance regulars include Linda Downes and her daughter Megan, an expert step dancer who now teaches at the Irish Arts Center. Helen, Máirtín, Orla, and Paul are four native born Irish now working in the New York area. Connie, founder of a new céilí at the Cork Lounge in Sunnyside, Queens, Elizabeth, a business consultant, Kitty, a teacher, Mary, a designer, and Maureen, a medical secretary, can always be seen dancing in the sets nearest the musicians. Jean Dulskey and Noel Cotter, Irish dance instructors, also dance in these top sets. Familiar dancers who attend occasionally include Pierre, who builds and sells bodhrán drums (\$175) using authentic materials and process learned in Ireland and who sometimes plays bodhrán with the session musicians, Clare, an actress, was pointed out to me as a student interested in continuing Irish language study at the Center, and Darcy, a sandy-blond Irish American from upstate who moved to New York on a whim last year and got jobs as a music therapist at a private school in Brooklyn and a church organist/choral director. Pat, a Morris dancer, Pat, a frame drum enthusiast, Bill, a dedicated dancer, and Sandra, a *sean-nós* singer can sometimes be spotted in the sets. Set dance instructors Donna Bauer and her new husband Steve Casey, Dan Hunt, and Paul Keating are familiar to everyone. Always present at the table nearest the musicians is Chris, an older Irish American this writer first met waiting for Irish language class to start at the Center. Her husband Mike, who wears the "tis himself" tee-shirt, is a tall man involved in every activity at the Center and ready to share his enthusiasm. These dancers offer a portrait of Wednesday night at Flannery's.

The front half of Flannery's flourishes during the session with dance. The bar stools and tables are always taken, and the narrow floor is crowded with friends talking, laughing, smoking and drinking, and some watching television that remains on muted. The CD jukebox also gets silenced during the dancing. Some bar patrons watch the set dancing with mild curiosity, some with amusement. One evening two middle-aged women came back to the dance area and started improvising a syncretic folk/funk dance of their own. Their dance went practically unnoticed. The two halves of the bar coexist with no conflicts and with some curiosity and only occasional interaction at the border.

Joanie announces the last dance between 12:00-12:30 A.M. Some dancers have left already. Remaining dancers form one or two sets. Afterwards, small groups stay on to chat and drink. Talk includes weekend plans to attend local céilís—"Are you going to Bedford Hills Saturday?" Joanie packs up instruments and sound equipment before moving to the bar where she waves good-bye to dancers leaving for home—all nourished by social gifts hidden in the Irish sets.

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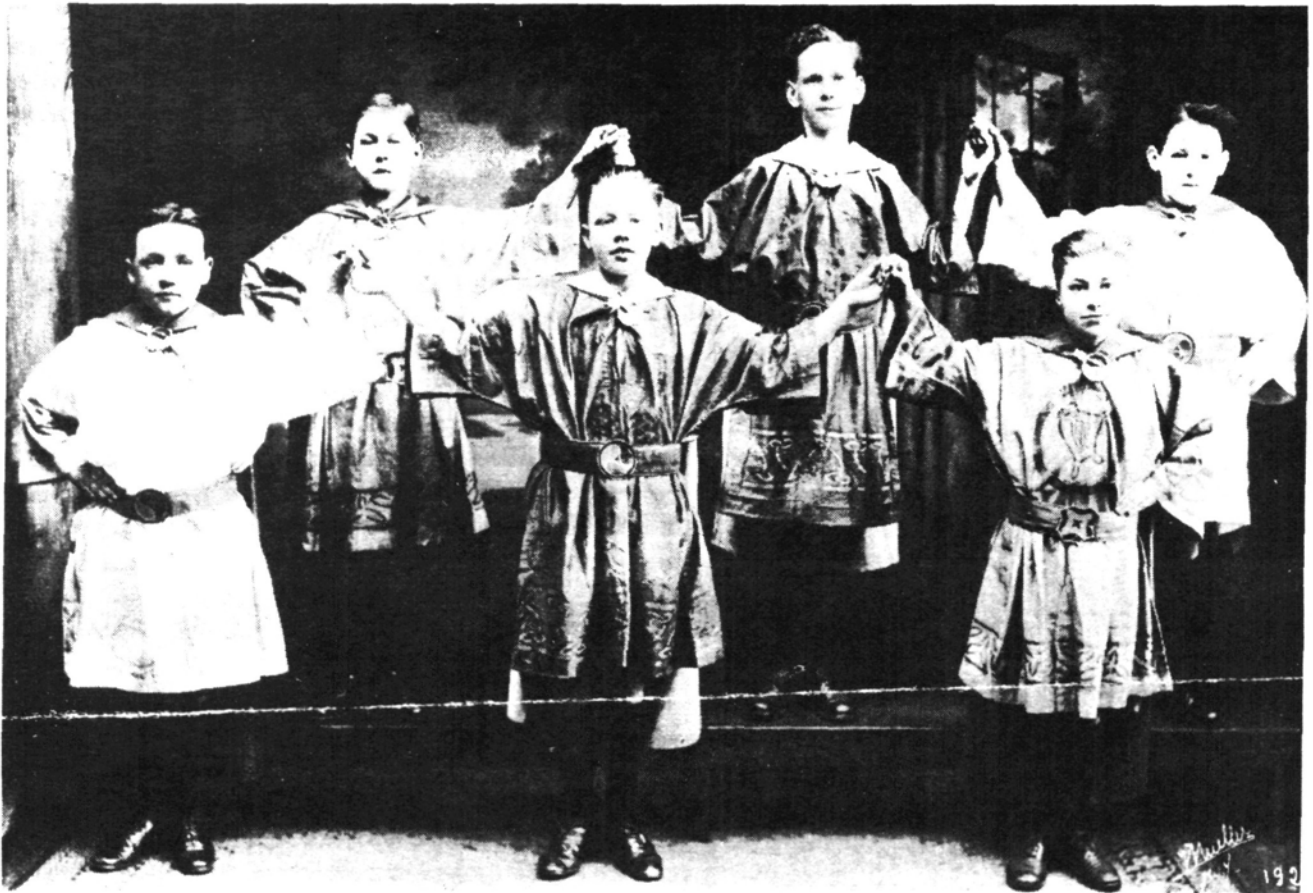
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