



Young John Whelan, 1970 (age 11) with his first accordion at the Harp Club, London

did very well as a musician, he was not as good at keeping his personal life in order. He attributes his confusion to early success and the mixed messages it sent. "When you do your first album when you're 14, you're all of a sudden this child prodigy," he said. "And when you play a tune, people pat you on the back and say, 'You're great, you're fuckin' great, you're the best.' And really you know in your heart that what you just played was shit. Even at 15, you know if you played well or you didn't play well." Although he played well more often than not (he won 13 all-Ireland and all-Britain championships in nine years), he still went through a difficult period. By 18 he had fallen out with his parents and moved out of their house, into the home of his girlfriend and her family. That was where he found his first accordion student, who was his girlfriend's sister. Her name was Karen Tweed.

Tweed, of course, is now a well-known player, one of the top piano accordionists in Celtic music. She is a former member of the Kathryn Tickell Band and a current member of the Poozies and Swāp. All along, she's given Whelan credit for starting her out, a fact he appreciates. "Karen has been very gracious to me in her travels and very respectful of the help that I've given her in the past. She mentions my name in her music books, and that's humbling, and it's nice." Whelan was also close with Tweed's parents and named the tune "Dot's Polka" after her mother.

Whelan's success at fleadh and his reputation as a player soon came to the attention of Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann, an Irish music

organization that arranges world tours of the foremost traditional musicians. In 1979, he joined the Comhaltas tour and visited the United States for the first time. "I got the bug then. I hit America, and I had to come back." In 1980, he came to the U.S. again and has been based here ever since. His first job in America was with a showband called McKenna's Gold, who played on the thriving Irish entertainment circuit in the New York area. Hughie McKenna was the bandleader and drummer, and his sister Sharon was the singer. "Of course, I wasn't doing the stuff that I wanted to do," Whelan remembered. "It was, you know, 'Irish Eyes are Smiling' stuff, a little bit of country, a little bit of rock 'n' roll. We would do 'Okie from Muskogee' and 'Eight Days a Week.'" Although the showband sound was not exactly what Whelan was looking for, he was very grateful for the gig. "It was a very popular band in New York at that time. They were busy, so I was working four or five nights a week. I was 20 years old, not a care in the world, no money."

Whelan's association with the showband provided not only money but valuable contacts.



Kips Bay Ceili Band - New York City, 1991
(left to right) Richard Lindsey, Pat Kilbride, Steve Missal, Whelan

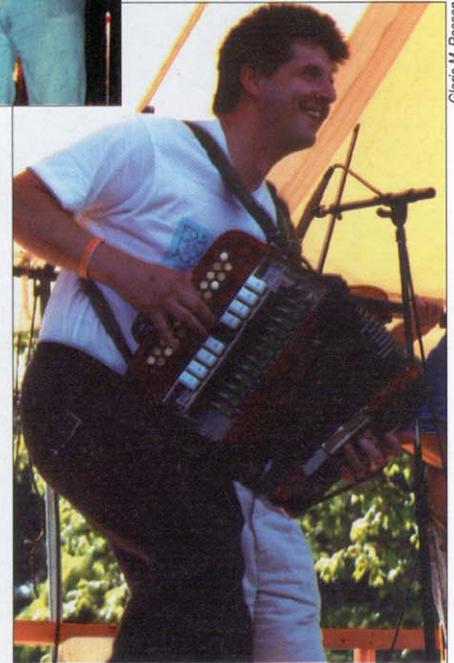
"It was great for me, because I didn't know anybody, and I was new to the country. People who had my *Pride of Wexford* album knew who I was, and people from the tour knew who I was, but outside of that, not that many people knew me." One person who did know him was Brian Conway, one of New York's best Irish fiddlers; he and Whelan had met at fleadh in Ireland. The two became friends and played gigs in the Catskills during the summer of 1982. "We actually competed together," Whelan said. "We won the North American duet championship, I think. I can't remember anymore. But we had fun, though!"

For some time, Whelan played with the showband and with Conway, honing his skills and enjoying himself. In 1984, he had a concert booked with Conway in Canada. "Brian called me up, and he couldn't make it. Something

came up, and he couldn't go. So he gave me Eileen's [Ivers] number. I think Eileen was 17 or 18, and I called Eileen to find out if she'd be interested in going to Canada. She said yes, and the rest is history."

The duo of John Whelan and Eileen Ivers was one of the most electrifying acts in Irish music in the 1980s. In about 1984, Whelan started to book tours for the duo, playing first the Irish festival circuit, then the folk circuit, visiting venues like the Turning Point, the Towne Crier, and the Cherry Tree. "I remember a gig we did at the College of St. Elizabeth with Dougie MacLean," Whelan said. "It was Dougie's first solo tour, I believe. I think it was the first night, and he sold out of all the stuff he brought for the tour. He sold a lot of stuff. I remember he's on the phone to his wife: 'You gotta send me some stuff, I've sold out!' He was overjoyed. And again, the rest was history, look what he's done since then."

In 1987, Whelan and Ivers recorded the album *Fresh Takes*, still a landmark disc of new-style Irish music. The duo's bold approach, the startlingly original arrangements, and unusual tunes made a big splash; in fact, you either loved the album or you hated it. "We pissed off a few people," Whelan confided. "That's the thing, we were so different back then." But gradually the kinds of innovations they were introducing became a standard part of the Irish musician's arsenal. "Last year I went to see Lúnasa in New York," Whelan said. "Somebody big in the audience, who's pretty big



Whelan in 1992