## Arts & LifeStyle

## **Button accordionist John Whelan's big heart**

LIKE other Irish music critics, I get a steady stream of postal mail and e-mails notifying me about various upcoming benefit concerts. I have always



admired generosity and self-sacrifice of those organize such events for eminently worthy causes. Where government or other bureaucracies can't or won't help, the Irish American

community fills the breach. But my admiration for those behind the scene extends equally to those in front of the scene -- namely, the musicians who perform for free on stage.

A brilliant button accordionist and composer, 51-year-old John Whelan thinks first of others before thinking of himself. He has performed for countless benefit or other special concerts. Call John, and he's there.

He was one of the first musicians contacted for "A Concert for the Ages," the Nov. 13, 2010, all-star evening celebrating the life and music of 80-year-old virtuoso Joe Derrane and benefiting the not-for-profit Shamrock Traditional Irish Music Society in Fairfield, Conn. John said yes instantly, even though he was already committed to doing a mid-afternoon concert doing a mid-arternoon concert in Tarrytown, N.Y., with Kerry singer and guitarist Tommy O'Sullivan. The two were on a U.S. tour that had been mapped out for months. John, with Tommy's ready approval, juggled the itinerary so that he and Tommy could perform gratis that Saturday night, the most lucrative time of the week for any musician on tour. He didn't hesitate. He did both

concerts on Nov. 13.

I've known John Whelan since the early 1980s when he was living in Kearny, N.J., and I was living in nearby Lyndhurst, N.J. We met when I asked him to participate in a benefit concert for a small, nondescript radio station where I had a Saturday afternoon program devoted to Irish and other Celtic traditional music. Again, without hesitation, John said yes, and then he brought a band with him to perform for free, including Straide, Mayo, fiddle and whistle player Sean Smyth, currently a member of Lunasa. They were a hit, and subsequent appearances by John on my radio show were always highlights for my listen-

John Whelan connects with an audience in a way some musicians can't. I recall a memHe's composed several beautiful melodies



Button accordionist extraordinaire John Whelan.

ber of Kips Bay, a band John performed in, telling me this: 'If I'm on stage and I start clapping my hands to get the crowd involved, nothing. John claps his hands, and the whole house claps with him. He even gets them to follow him in the aisles while he's playing."

It's easy to take a musician like John Whelan for granted, however. His largesse and largeness of heart can blur just how talented a musician he is.

Born near London to a Wexford father and Tipperary mother, John Whelan has won

seven All-Ireland button accordion titles, including the prestigious senior championship in 1983, and six All-Britain titles. In 1974 he recorded his solo album debut, "Pride of Wexford," cutting 18 tracks (16 were used) in eight hours in one day. John did this at age

He immigrated to the U.S. in 1980 and has been living here ever since. John, his wife Louise, and their two sons, Denis (a freshman at Villanova U.) and Emmett, reside in Milford, Conn., where John founded a Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eire-

ann branch. With glowing praise I could describe the 1987 album he made with "Riverdance" fiddle star Eileen Ivers, "Fresh Takes," or his second solo CD in 1990, "From the Heart," or any of the many other recordings he's made or guested on. His button accordion playing throughout is never less than stellar.

But his own compositions deserve renewed critical and public attention. When I first heard "Trip to Skye," one of three tunes he wrote and

recorded on "Fresh Takes," was stunned by how magnificently it evoked the inspiration for it: his 1985 visit to the scenic Isle of Skye. Not surprisingly John's tune has been covered since then by the Breton band Skolvan and by hammer dulcimer player Jim Fyhrie, used in the HBO series "Sex and the City," and set to lyrics by the group MaterDea, who ther renamed it "Another Trip to

Other drop-dead gorgeous or riveting lively tunes composed by John Whelan include "Louise" (named for his wife and used in the routine of Canadian ice-dancers Shae-Lynne Bourne and Victor Kraatz at the 1998 Winter Olympics), "My Ballingarry Lady" (named for his mother and used in Pat Mullins's "From Shore to Shore" documentary), "Song for Hillary' (named for the daughter of a Connecticut acquaintance and also heard on "Sex and the City"), "Ian's Return to Ireland" (named for Ian Carney, his student who won an All-Ireland title in 1987, and recorded by Girsa on their debut CD) "Desaunay" (named for French accordionist Serge Desaunay and recorded by the Brock-McGuire Band), and "Bob's Garden of Earthly Delights' (named for his father-in-law).

Titling so many of his tunes for people reflects John Whelan's disposition toward family friends, and others close to him. What better gift can a musician give than dedicating his own compositions to the people he cares about?

Dwelling on John's TV and film credits -- he appears or camera in three movies, including "Ride with the Devil" ir 1999 and "Gods and Generals' in 2003 -- might be a splashier approach to touting his achievements. I could also cite his 1998 Traditional Artist of the Year accolade, the highest bestowed by the Irish Echo on a traditional performer, or his Billboard chart success with a number of his subsequent solo albums. But in the end, it's his personality, seeping into his music, that matters most.

Around two o'clock on a Saturday morning many years ago, after John had played a triumphant concert in Manhattan he and I were chatting in a noisy, crowded midtown pub Sitting at the bar and looking distraught was a man nursing a beer. His head was tilted downward, and he rubbed the rim of the beer glass with his thumb in slow circles.