



Sean Cleland

Fiddle

Sean Cleland is the award-winning Irish fiddle player, Irish music teacher, adjudicator, collaborator, producer and executive director of the Irish Music School of Chicago, a non-profit traditional Irish music, language, song and dance school, which he founded in 2003.

Sean grew up on the North side of Chicago in an Irish-American household. He started classical violin lessons at age 7, and at age 9 his parents took him to one of the first North American concert tours of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, Ireland's national music organization. The performers that fall night in 1972 were the absolute best traditional musicians, singers and dancers from Ireland including Paddy Glackin, Paddy Ryan and Antoin MacGabhann. That night was so impactful that he decided right then and there that he would play the fiddle.

His musical education through the 1970s was energized by such legends as Liz Carroll, Michael Flatley and Jimmy Keane who were bursting out of Chicago onto the world stage. Additionally, there were quite a few older Irish musicians who had emigrated to the United States in the 1950s and Sean was incredibly privileged to get to know them and to spend so much time listening to their music and stories.

Both of Sean's parents were teachers so it was natural for him in 1980 to begin to teach Irish fiddle and mixed instrument band classes to kids. He continued to teach part time for many years in between touring and in 1998 started teaching at the world famous Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago where he taught until 2003.

In 1982 he co-founded the traditional Irish music band Baal Tinne, leaving in 1987 to found the Irish-influenced folk-rock band, The Drovers. The Drovers were much beloved in Chicago, played to packed houses all across the US, recorded 4 albums and appeared in two major Hollywood films: Backdraft and Blink, contributing songs and tunes to the soundtracks.

In 2000, Sean co-founded the traditional Irish band Bohola with Irish piano accordion master, Jimmy Keane. While with Bohola, they recorded four critically acclaimed albums on the Shanachie label and toured throughout the US, Canada and Australia. In 2003, he took his extensive musical and teaching experience and founded the Irish Music School of Chicago to preserve and pass on this rich legacy. He continued to tour and perform and ultimately decided to leave Bohola in 2006 to focus on his growing School.

Sean has collaborated with many great artists over the years including the band Aengus with Robbie O'Connell; The Green Fields of America with Dr. Mick Maloney and Lowen and Navarro. He has served as fiddle player/musical director for Chicago's acclaimed Trinity Irish Dancers and for the Steppenwolf and The Long Wharf Theaters' productions of "The Playboy of the Western World" starring Martha Plimpton ("Goonies", "Raising Hope") and Jim True-Frost ("The Wire").

Along with continuing to teach and perform, he has been the fiddle player/musical director of Adam Whiteman's critically acclaimed play, "Music Mad", about the life and impact of Chief Francis O'Neill. Currently, Sean is focused on making sure that the next generation of traditional Irish musicians is educated and nurtured through the Irish Music School of Chicago. He has been an instrumental force in maintaining traditional Irish music in the city of Chicago and works tirelessly to ensure its integrity.

Sean is an in-demand Feis (Irish Step Dancing Competitions) musician traveling all across the US. Sean has taught and adjudicated at such festivals and camps at the Catskills' Irish Arts Week (CIAW), St. Louis, Missouri Tional, the Milwaukee Irish Fest Summer School, the California Traditional Arts Society, the Goderich, Ontario Celtic Roots Festival and Cape Breton, Nova Scotia's Celtic Colours International Festival, among others. Sean also teaches regularly in Ireland at Scoil Eigse, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann's annual international Summer School for students of all ages.