



SAN PATRICIO: THE CHIEFTAINS FEATURING RY COODER

What makes a saga, formal history? How does lore become fact? When bits and pieces -- recollections, traditions, memories -- find themselves laid down on the page, or passed down in oral yarns or song. Those are the chronicles that ensure longevity, a place in collective consciousness, a position within a canon.

Some stories elude the official narrative – by chance or by design. For Paddy Moloney, someone both steeped in and inextricable from Irish culture – its turbulent history, its voluble folklore, its very atmosphere – what vexed him was the fact that he grew up *not* knowing much at all an unusual band of Irish soldiers known colloquially simply as the *San Patrcios*, a story that would seem a linchpin chapter in not just Irish but U.S. and Mexican history. How could a story about a band of daring Irish expats, who fought against America alongside the Mexican Army in the mid-1800s, slip so far into memory's margins, live so far outside of history?

Conveying Ireland's history and hardships through its legends, lullabies and laments, Moloney has been tending this very territory, both as a solo artist and the founder/leader of the Irish consort, The Chieftains, for nearly five decades. This "forgotten" piece of Irish lore seemed an essential story to tell, one begging for its proper framing, yet remained difficult to wrestle down nonetheless. If anyone should tell it, it would seem Moloney's province.

Puzzling out a way to fill in the picture and set this piece of jagged people's history into its proper context haunted him on and off for a good part of 30 years. "The whole thing of this," Moloney explains "It's kept coming back to me." ***San Patricio***, the new album from The Chieftains, part excavation part celebration, is a souvenir of a long, circuitous journey across centuries, continents and the powers of imagination.

It's a story so vivid and sprawling, as Moloney saw it, that ultimately it would take several narrators, points-of-view, styles to give it its proper heft and feel, a panoramic document that felt as if it reflected the fusion of two cultures and the sui generis hybrids that sprung from it.

Recorded in Dublin, New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Mexico City and co-produced with longtime friend and sometime collaborator, Ry Cooder, the album is a collage of set-pieces each detailing a glinting shard of the story. The nineteen tracks feature a roster of artists who cross and thus blend genres -- among them: Linda Ronstadt, Los Tigres del Norte, Los Folkloristas, Moya Brennan, Lila Downs, Van Dyke Parks, Los Camperos de Valles. Liam Neeson also lends his voice, retelling the bloody climatic battle scene and Chavela Vargas, the 92-year old Mexican ranchero singer reports from some remote region of the heart. "I tried to cover all the moods and modes and instrumentation and different styles up and down the country," says Moloney, "Punctuating here and there. Just reminding you that *this* is what it's about."

For Moloney, the question wasn't so much the angle but the portal: Where to enter? The story of the San Patricios was a topic, even in later years, polite gentry tended to circle around, one seldom pursued too deeply: "I was fascinated by the fact that they were -- their existence -- kept so quiet," says Moloney. "You didn't speak of them. Especially among the Catholics. Especially here in Ireland."

Some years back, he recalls, a musicologist friend had been trying to entice him about a project dealing with the American Civil War, "Wouldn't that be a perfect subject for you?' he'd said." But in the midst of his pitch Moloney got stuck back in another piece of the story, ". . . , this 'great Irish battalion.' And of course I was fascinated because it wasn't the hip thing to be speaking about because -- as so many began to understand it -- they were deserters who were hanged for 'going over' to the Mexican side."

The San Patricios, known also as The Legion of Saint Patrick, were men who had fled the Ireland's Potato Famine of 1845 to try to start a new life in America only to find themselves ensnared fighting another country's war. Some enlisted, lured by the promise of advance pay, property, others were conscripted, but it didn't take long for them to understand that this war's goals felt familiar and were dubious at best and the new soldiers were suffering under conditions -- religious bigotry, substandard living conditions, etc. -- that they had hoped to flee. Many of them, says Moloney, "were kind of turfed into the American army without a choice in the first place. They got off the boat at Ellis Island and then, 'Here's a gun and go down there and shoot the Mexicans.' That didn't go down well with Catholics as they were, shootin' Catholics."

Many of these soldiers became part of the thousands of infantrymen who deserted, many of whom swam across the Rio Grande, unwilling to fight what came to be known as "Mr. Polk's War." It was one of the first battles that inspired vociferous opposition among Americans, according to Joseph Wheelan in his comprehensive 2007 study of the conflict, *Invading Mexico*, "[The war] was not so much due to [a] dispute over Texas's putative border as to [President James Polk's] eagerness to divest Mexico of California and the New Mexico territory and thereby fulfilling her 'Manifest Destiny,' ". . . . But [the President] did not foresee that expansionism would kindle a bitter debate over slavery, resulting in the catastrophic American Civil War."

While American newspapers were reporting the country's unity the story on the ground was something all together different, historian and political scientist Howard Zinn argues. The U.S. Army struggled to not just assemble but maintain an army. Young men were enticed with promises of land and money, but their numbers dwindled after word circulated about the abject conditions and unchecked violence committed. It set off a surge of desertion that was difficult to stem.

Once on the other side, many of these Irishmen took up rifles and fought against the very American soldiers who had tricked and abused them, to defend Mexico from the American incursion. Led by John Riley, also a deserter, the battalion marched under a green banner. "He was from Conamara) and was a native Irish speaker," says Moloney. "He came from that part of the world where you only spoke Irish. But he formed the battalion and they fought to the bitter end." "Ultimately, at war's close many were reprimanded, court-marshaled, hung, and some even branded, literally, as deserters (a "D" burned into their cheek) and left to wander.

Their story was eclipsed largely by the devastation of the American Civil War, which followed close afterwards, the high desertion rate of enlisted men which often rendered the topic of the war taboo. Mexico, which was left to attempt to recover from its losses and disarray -- left those who were keeping score (and official record) to deem the San Patricios' actions nothing less than treachery -- both by the both the Americans and the Irish back home.

When you're left with mostly silence, holes and ghosts where do you start? For Moloney, it was then, a matter of conjuring spirits, "And I have a wild imagination. " As a touchstone and model he thought back to earlier projects that required a form of psychological teleporting, "Like "Bonaparte's Retreat," which explores the Irish connection to French history. That was thirteen minutes long. It too was a tone poem. So something like this? -- This is like spreading your wings."

It began as a process of immersion, walking back into it, the sources. "I go with my good feelings and thoughts. People say, 'You must have read about this, or heard about this there. 'Actually, I *go* to the place and meet the people and you *get* the feeling - - and that will lead to something else. "

Winding back into those locations, along the trail of the diaspora -- Cuba, South America, Mexico--and into the very lines of those old songs, Moloney began to hear similarities, fragments of melodies that were eerily familiar: Marks of Europe that were left in Mexico, the Irish influence left like a coat on a hook in a dark corner of a closet, evidence of what transpired linking past to present.

He followed the trail of the music and in the process, "discovered the similarities" There it was "in the mazurkas, jigs, polkas, and that of course is dealing with our [Irish] music as well." And some of the melodies so like ours," he explains. "One song, in particular, "*Persecucion de Villa*," that melody is *so* like one of our own Irish rebel tunes called, "Kevin Barry," who was also a patriot. There were a lot of Irishmen in South America, Cuba, and this happened in Mexico as well. "

With each trip, each conversation he'd have a bit more, another paragraph, another detail, and he'd fit it some safe place in his mind. "I was always getting great encouragement when I was back here at home from all sorts of people -- like from the Mexican Ambassador, who even passed on some tapes and stories."

He'd regale some with his latest finds. One particularly keen and receptive listener was Cooder, whom he'd been sharing enticing anecdotes with for some time. "He always understood it. The music. It's power."

After one of those storytelling sessions about a dozen years ago, Moloney recalls, "Ry got after me and said: 'Look, if you don't do this, I will. Maybe not *quite* those words, but I got the message . . . "

Cooder remembers it squarely the same: "That's right. And I meant it. I didn't want him to put it away -- because Paddy is always moving. Always doing something else. Paddy needed to be doing *this*."

For Cooder, the peculiar resonances didn't crop up just in the music, but most significantly in history's reprise. "I told Paddy, there is timeliness to this. Do this *now*. Here we are now involved in this war that has similar overtones, this shockingly preemptive thing," says Cooder, "I'd studied up on what happened, and reading about it is like reading about the last ten years -- all the events that drew us into this: A preemptive war, a broken faith election. The timing is amazing. It's a coincidence that might work in his favor if it could be handled in just the right way."

He was very helpful because he was so *aware* of it," says Moloney. "He delves into anything like this that's controversial -- things that need to be brought out, understood."

About six or so months ago, says Moloney, the project got some real traction. Musicians brought things along as one would to a celebration -- instruments, ideas, forgotten stories behind melodies.

As well as musicians, ideas and approaches, Cooder carried with him some pieces to add to the mix ("Sands of Mexico" and "Cancion Mixteca"). "He also brought the mariachis, that big raucous sound," says Moloney. "He brought who he knows -- and he knows them all. All the great players. He knows what's on the ground. He lives it."

Ronstadt brought with her a family antique, "She came to the party with a lovely, beautiful song ("A la Orilla de un Palmar") that she got from her grandfather, who is Mexican, that has to do with an orphan girl and that would have happened after the Civil War and you being to see, how it all sort of fits."

Often though, inspiration came serendipitously and Moloney tried to create space -- time to talk, to explore to be open to it. "When we went to Mexico . . . people came out of the woodwork to play. One woman, Graciana Silva, I'd learned, played way up in the mountains. She often came down in the square in her little town and would have a coffee and play there. And there is where we found her. "

There was chance, yes, but there was also some up-front planning, Moloney explains. And without the early assistance of Guadalupe Jolicoeur, an Argentinean radio programmer who'd spent years researching the music of South America and Mexico, Moloney says he might still be puzzling this all out. She introduced him to a river of source music that served as a foundation and jumping-off point -- it helped to train his ear for what to listen for: "It was a "Who's Who and What's What, really," says Moloney. "She was a whole book of history for me. So I had loads to pick from." From this playlist of material he'd create, "what I felt: was a typical Chieftains mix -- a sort of fusion. For instance a lot of the music I actually composed, I used little bits . . . of old Irish melodies to mix in with the Mexican melodies. You'll hear that particularly in the Lila Downs tracks ("La Iguana" and "El Relampago") and Graciana's track ("El Pajaro Cu"). [Graciana] couldn't *believe* that this could happen. It was like a Mexican tune for her, one that she hadn't heard before."

Each artist, each song, wasn't just telling a piece of the story, but lending a different perspective or mood. What was it to march to your death for something you believe in? What was it to make of a life with your parents, grandparents -- your ancestors -- gone? What was it to dream a future in a place so far from anything that was comforting or familiar? What was it to stand on the gallows?

In sessions, particularly like those with Los Tigres del Norte, the grand norteño ensemble from Rosa Morada, Sinaloa, the challenge, says Cooder, was creating an atmosphere that both suited the material and conveyed a very particular authenticity -- a sense of verisimilitude of a moment, of a time.. "We needed a feeling of being in a dance hall. It's an environment. This is not a studio record but an experience record." So the challenge became to in some way transport the ensemble to that place in their own minds. "They came up in dance halls, so they now what that's like. We had the ambiance in the studio, fairly high ceilings," says Cooder. "Through the course of the day, I put the bass player on upright [figuring], the closer you go back to the origins, the closer to you'll be to the time of the origins of the song,, and the closer you will be, yourself, to the song."

History holds messages: lessons, cautionary tales, if we choose to listen. “War,” says Cooder, “in every case, robs the people who make it out of the chance to be good.”

By digging out and dusting off the story of the San Patricios, Moloney is reminded of how important it is to stand for something, how the notion of “good” or “truth” can never be entirely submerged – though it so often takes a beating.

Like nothing else, in its best incarnations music is history, archeology, commemoration all rolled into one. It eludes time. It’s spirit wrapped in song:

Moloney has seen it with his own eyes, “This project has given me another boost,” he says, “My wife used to keep telling people, ‘He’s ten years rehearsing for retirement’ But, no, it’s coming back to me so strong now. This has done it.”

For so long, this story had “so much shame wrapped around it. It wasn’t in the history books,” he explains. And while the San Patricios were long considered heroes in Mexico – with even a commemorative display in a Mexico City museum that enumerated the names of the soldieries lost – it wasn’t until 1997, 150 years later, did both the Irish and Mexican government hold a joint ceremony to celebrate the contributions of the San Patricio Battalions. “It took that long.”

What Moloney hopes, is that people who listen will see what he saw, feel what he felt. “I’m hoping they get the vision of what I’ve conjured in my mind through music in telling this story. It wasn’t all doom and gloom. There were some happy times. You’ll hear that on the record. The same as it was with the Irish on their own land. In many ways it’s a very typical kind of Irish story – you know, about the terrible time we had with the neighbors who came to visit and forgot to go back.,” he says. “There’s a lot of similarities between what happened here as well. It’s not a massive beef but it is a very important story. A very important light has lit up in a historical event that took place. And without getting really crude and hard about who was right and who was wrong: it’s all history now. But it’s something that should be told. A story that’s been waiting.”