

Local musicians keep Celtic traditions alive

By ALLYSON MILLER

A local band has been busy continuing a years-long tradition of bringing the Irish spirit of the Saint Patrick's Day season to South County and beyond.

Local musicians Mary King, Phil Edmonds and Dan Lanier have teamed up to create Celebrating Ireland in Story & Song, a musical, storytelling, joking and dancing trio. The group brings their Irish heritage to life while performing traditional Celtic tunes on unique instruments of the region.

King, a harpist and fiddler, was raised with these cultural traditions instilled in her everyday life. With parents from Ireland, King enjoyed listening to her mother sing tunes from her hometown and savored visits to the country with her family.

"I always had the feeling that my parents didn't want us to be completely Americanized," said King. "They never wanted us to forget where we came from."

Her own music talents grew out of this upbringing.

"I had a friend that was playing the fiddle and I always liked folk music and Celtic music and I really wanted to play the fiddle and be in a band, so I got a fiddle and started playing with some friends," she said.

From there, Celebrating Ireland in Story and Song was born. The idea began about 15 years ago and has evolved since, with different members and songs coming and going over the past decade and a half, but always staying true to the Celtic culture and heritage.

"We all want to keep the tradition of Irish music and storytelling alive," said King.

The band's other two members, Edmonds and Lanier, are Ireland natives. Edmonds from County Clare and Lanier from County Rehoboth. and are talented musicians in their own right. Edmonds, who has been playing in the group for seven years now, learned to play the tin whistle while growing up and is now considered one of the best whistle players in all of Rhode Island. He also performs on button accordion and has authored books on his travels and poetry regarding his homeland. Lanier, a new member to the trio, plays guitar and sings for the group and has traveled throughout New England as a musician.

King looked to libraries right from the start when seeking out venues to perform at years ago, and the annual tradition has stuck. the group performs each year at a number of libraries in the South County area and throughout Rhode Island, as well as a bit into Massachusetts in recent years.

"They have wonderful audiences and they want to come out and hear your music," she said.

Library audiences, mostly made up of an adult demographic with a sprinkling of families and children, make an excellent patrons for appreciating the music and other interactive parts of the program. singing along, clapping, listening to stories and jokes, and even dancing.

"It feels connected," said King. "We don't feel like we're performing. It's more like we're all playing together, we're all singing together."

The success of the program is apparent, as crowds come back year after year to enjoy a new show each time.

"We always tend to pack houses," said King. "They know it's going to be different. They never know what's going to happen."

King acknowledges that the program has changed over the years—namely, that the focus has become less on the stories and more on the songs and jokes—but the traditions are still alive and well.

With a full schedule during the month of March—oftentimes being double booked in a day—the group sets out in early January to think about songs, collect jokes and plan upcoming programs. This year's shows are already in full swing and the group has so far played at venues ranging from Newport to Greene to Woonsocket and more.

At this past Sunday's program at the Jamestown Public Library, King, Edmonds and Lanier got the audience clapping, tapping and singing along with "The Harp Without the Crown," "Black Birds and Thrushes," "Slán Abhaile (Goodbye to Home)" and more.

Between songs, the trio told humorous and interesting stories of their childhood and jokes about Irish folklore and traditions relating to things like marriage, religion and travelers—or, as they're known in Ireland, "inkers." Edmonds read aloud some poetry from his book as King played along beautifully on the harp.

Incorporating her knowledge of Irish step dancing, King even invited a few audience members up and showed them some moves. Finally, the musicians rounded out the performance with a song played on foot, walking around the aisles of the audience, and a dance reel followed.

With a mix of the fiddle, harp, tin whistle, button accordion, guitar and an Irish drum known as a bodhran, the show supplied a great diversity of upbeat songs, fun tales and jokes. The group will continue to stay busy with a number of upcoming performances at the Wickford, Westerly and Providence and East Providence Public Libraries in upcoming weeks. In addition, King offers a "Humor and the Harp," a program that combines her exquisite harp playing with her original jokes, and King and Edmonds team up to present "Celtic Music & Stories," an interactive program of music, folk tales, step dancing and laughs aimed at children.

Combine all of her gigs with constant practicing to learn new tunes and King is one busy musician—especially at this time of year—but it's clear from her smiling Irish eyes that she loves every minute of it.

"We've had great, great fun over the years," she said. "It's just been a blast."

If you go

The public can enjoy Celebrating Ireland in Story and Song at the Wickford Public Library on Friday, March 13 at 6:30 p.m.; the Westerly Public Library on Saturday, March 14 at 1 p.m.; the Providence Public Library on Sunday, March 15 at 1:30 p.m.; and the East Providence Public Library on Monday, March 16 at 7 p.m. Mary King will present "Humor and the Harp" at the South Kingstown Public Library on Tuesday, March 17 at 6:30 p.m. Mary King and Phil Edmonds will perform at The Grange in Providence on Wednesday, March 18 at 9 p.m. For more information, visit www.celticharpri.com.