

## An Interview with Mike Rafferty

*This interview was conducted in July, 2002 by Paul Wells and Mike Casey. Their introductions to the interview follow.*

Mike Rafferty is one of the great exponents of the old lyrical and flowing flute playing style from the East Galway region of Ireland. He was born in 1926 in the village of Larraga in Ballinakill parish, in the heart of a locality filled with great flute and fiddle players. Early on Mike learned much of his music from his father, Tom "Barrel" Rafferty, a flute player and piper, and from neighbors Tom Broderick and Jack Coughlan. He also listened to the renowned Ballinakill Ceili Band, which included flute players Stephen Moloney and Tommy Whelan, as they achieved national prominence through their radio broadcasts and 78rpm recordings. In 1949 Mike emigrated to the United States, where he has lived since. He has performed at concerts and festivals throughout the country over the past 25 years including the Smithsonian's Bicentennial Festival in 1976. He has also taught at the Swannanoa Gathering in North Carolina, the Augusta Heritage Center in West Virginia, and at Boxwood (school for traditional flute) in Nova Scotia. Mike has released three [recordings](#) over the past six years—"The Dangerous Reel," "The Old Fireside Music," and "The Road From Ballinakill"—with his daughter Mary Rafferty, who was a member of the band Cherish the Ladies for many years. Mike Rafferty has devoted a lifetime to exploring, performing, and teaching traditional Irish music and has inspired many of today's leading Irish musicians on both sides of the Atlantic.



*Mike Rafferty and David Levine playing together in Nova Scotia. Photo by Paul Wells*

*—Mike Casey (Flute and guitar player Mike Casey, who has researched East Galway music for many years, currently works at the [Archives of Traditional Music](#) at Indiana University.)*

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I met Mike Rafferty for the first time at the annual Boxwood flute festival in the summer of 2001 where he was one of the featured faculty members. Mike Casey had met Mike R. a few times over the years, but it was also at Boxwood 2001—where Mike C. assisted Mike R. with his classes—that the two really had the opportunity to get to know one another. I was at Boxwood as a student, and had the great pleasure of spending a lot of time with Mike and Teresa Rafferty during the course of the week. The two Mikes worked well as a teaching team, and in July 2002, had the chance to work together again during "Celtic Week" of the Swannanoa Gathering, held at Warren Wilson College in Asheville, North Carolina, USA. I took the opportunity to drive over from Tennessee to visit, share some tunes, and conduct this interview jointly with Mike Casey.

From A Guide to the Irish Flute. <http://www.firescribble.net/flute/rafferty.htm>

The interview took place on July 7, 2002, on the campus of Warren Wilson College. Mike Casey and I transcribed it, and have edited it somewhat from the original in order to improve readability. Our editorial changes have mostly involved shortening the overall interview and tightening up some passages. We've done a bit of re-ordering of material in cases where the same topic came up at different times during the course of our conversation. Mike Rafferty read over a draft of the edited interview and clarified a number of points for us. Thanks to Brad Hurley for agreeing to post this interview on this Web site for the benefit of other flute players.

Many thanks also to Mike Rafferty for his cooperation in doing this interview and for his patience during the long process of transcribing and editing...and, of course, for sharing his music with us! I know that I speak for both Mike Casey and myself when I say that it has been an enormous privilege to get to know and to have the occasional "session of music" with "The Great Rafferty."

—Paul Wells (Paul Wells is a fiddler, flute player, and folklorist who directs the [Center for Popular Music](#) at Middle Tennessee State University.)

Check out Mike and Mary Rafferty's [Web site](#), with information on their recordings, upcoming concerts and workshops, and more.

## The Interview

*Note: Because this interview is longer than most others on the site, it's broken into several sections for easier browsing online. If you want to print the interview or save it to your computer for reading offline, download the PDF (Adobe Acrobat) version.*

**Part 1: Family and Home.** Mike describes the East Galway village where he grew up, and the music and musicians he heard.

**Part 2: Learning to Play.** Mike's first flute, how he learned to play, and where he played.

**Part 3: From Galway to America.** Mike talks about his emigration to New York, the ebb and flow of the music scene there, and the rekindling of his passion for Irish music and the flute.

**Part 4: East Galway Music.** Mike describes the special qualities of East Galway music and how it differs from other regional styles.



*Left to right: Mike Casey, Mike Rafferty, and Paul Wells.*

## Part 1: Family and Home

### Family

Mike Casey [MC]: Mike, what is the name of the village that you grew up in?

Mike Rafferty [MR]: Larraga. That's the village, and then the post office would be Kylebrack. Kylebrack is [on] the borderline of the parish of Leitrim and Ballinakill. If you were going [on the] road from Loughrea to Woodford, well you'd be then about five miles from Woodford, and, say, about a mile off of that road would be Larraga. Ah sure there was a house here, and was another house maybe a couple of fields away, and they'd be small fields, if you will. That's about it. Just...let me think, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven....I remember seven houses in my time. It's not much but at one point there was seven families of Raffertys there. All Raffertys! And if a stranger came in he'd be afraid to say anything because..."Are ye all related, or what?" And now there's nothing, only old ruins, and some of them old ruins were taken away for...because they're building so many new houses there. You can't even find the ruins any more. It's all leveled out.



*East Galway. The area where Mike Rafferty grew up is highlighted. A larger image is available in the Web version of this page.*

Paul Wells [PW]: Ballinakill is a parish?

MR: Ballinakill is a parish. There were only two pubs. There was no town. At one time there were three grocery stores. You know, small little shops as they call them over there. And they'd have the tea and sugar. And there was no such thing as going into the store and buying potatoes, you grew them around there, you know, except in the town you'd buy them that way. You had your own cabbage, and your own vegetables, if you will. And your own milk, and made your own butter, that'd be the small farms. Sometimes you had to buy butter. But it depends on how many cows you were able to keep on the land.

PW: What year were you born, Mike?

MR: 1926

PW: How big a family was it?

MR: Seven. I was the fourth. The three boys were older than me, and the three girls younger.

PW: What did your dad do for a living?

MR: He was a farmer, a small farmer. Very small at that, yeah. And then he lost his eyesight, [because of] cataracts. Well, there was no cure for it at that time. He went to what they call a quack doctor over there, he was supposed to have a cure, [but] nothing helped. I remember him when he had a little eyesight.

From A Guide to the Irish Flute. <http://www.firescribble.net/flute/rafferty.htm>

PW: That must have been tough when he lost it, if he was a farmer.

MR: It was tough, yeah. We were all young at the time. It was tough enough, yes. My mother used to do the [work], and then my brothers, they grew up....

## Music in the Home

MC: Was there music in your house, when you grew up?

MR: A lot of music, yeah, yeah. They used to come to listen to my father, there. A guy by the name of Son Donnelly, you might have heard of him, one of the great flute players. And a great whistle player as well. I don't think there was anything to equal him. He had a great fingering style, and the tone he got out of the flute was great.

PW: Your father was a flute player?

MR: Yes. His name was Tom, Thomas. I don't know where he got his music, now. There's no history of my grandfather playing. Although my father's cousin was a nice fiddle player. And I guess they kind of inspired each other, in their younger days. And there was a guy, another flute player, Tom Broderick. And the two of them, they used to play at benefits and house dances in them days. They were known as "The Two Toms." My father got a great tone out of the flute and people thought it was wind, and they said he could fill a barrel with wind, and that is how he got the nickname "Barrel."

MC: So musicians used to come to hear your dad play?

MR: Oh [they'd] come into the house and have a session of music! There was a gentleman who played the fiddle, up the road, a young man, he was maybe a couple of years older than me, he'd come in regular and we'd have a tune. My father wasn't playing much at this time. But before that they used to come. A fella by the name of Jack Coughlan...Jack used to come to the house. They'd listen to him. And then as I was growin' up, the two of us, we'd have two tin whistles. And there was a couple of house dances at the house, and that was the music, the two tin whistles. And everybody had an ear for it. We played pretty well together, you know, the note-for-note kind of thing. And if it wasn't I'd get a tongue-lashing for it too, mind you, sometimes. But it was a friendly sort of thing.

PW: That was you and your father, playing two whistles?

MR: Yeah, just the two of us. There were no guitars at the time, and there were no accordions.

MC: Do you remember when you first started playing music?

MR: I do, I very well do, because my uncle, Packie Moloney, was [at the house]. I used to bite the whistle, the old Clarke C and Packie seen me doing that. "Don't do that!" he says, "learn how to play it." And he showed me a few notes, and I was playing a little bit of "The Wearing of the Green." And that's what started me off. And there was no biting on the whistle any more. And then my father took me over from that. I was about eight years old.

PW: What was the tune you said you started on?

MR: "The Wearing of the Green," yeah. And I think the other one was "I Have a Bonnet Trimmed with Blue." Yeah, them two marches. Then the next tune I remember I learned was

"The Walls of Liscarroll," and that was a tough jig! But that was the tune he taught me. I don't know how long it took me, but it was a little section at a time, and I'd go out in the field and practice that, and then come back and get the other piece. It was every night, or every evening, you know, if he'd be in the mood.

## Part 2: Learning to Play

### Flutes

PW: What kind of flute did your father play?

MR: The flute, he got, from my understanding, in Loughrea. There was somebody selling a flute. And my father went in to buy something, and to pay a bill or something. This is the story I have; I believe it's true. And this guy was selling a flute. My father tried it out. And whatever he asked, they bargained, anyway! And he didn't pay the bill, or he didn't buy what he wanted, he bought the flute. He neglected something else, whichever it was, I'm not too sure.



*Mike Rafferty playing in East Montpelier, Vermont. Photo by Brad Hurley*

PW: I was just wondering about the source of instruments in those days.

MR: Yeah, there was nobody making them, sure. People didn't have the money to buy them either. It was just like the button accordion, they weren't making them.

PW: Where did you get your first flute?

MR: I worked in the bogs in Kildare and there were two people selling a flute and I bought it. And it was a good one. It had no slide in it. And it was a right good one, I was very happy with it. And I was playing one night, this guy came in drunk, and I had it left on the chair and he sat on it and broke it to pieces. And there was a tangle in the morning, but what could you do? The flute was beyond repair. And it was 10 shillings I paid for it, at that time. What would 10 shillings be worth now? Not that much, but at that time it was a lot of money. It was a good one, it was easy to play it.

And then it was borrow. I was playing with a band then and this fiddle player had a good flute and I used to borrow the flute from him all the time. But he'd always take it home, and I'd go to the house and we'd have a few tunes. He wasn't a great fiddle player, but for the time being I had to keep him on my side of it. And he wouldn't sell it, because I had the money at that time to buy that flute. And he wouldn't sell it for nothing. He says, "It's not for sale."

I think I had an old flute that my uncle had sent to me. It kept me going for awhile. But he had the bore hole in the mouthpiece bored wider. He was fidgety, couldn't leave nothing alone. He had always to play with something. But it did me for awhile until a friend of mine, his uncle



died, and he had an old flute, out here and, it was all cracked and this, that and the other. And there was nothing you could do with it. But I would doctor that up for a little bit.

And then, I wasn't playing for a while, quite some time, and Mike Preston, flute player, was a member of the Tulla Ceili Band, he said "Why don't you try the silver flute?" And I went to the music shop, and [got one] the name of it was "King." It was a cheap flute, but it was good enough for me at the time. I struggled with that for a long time, I struggled with it all the time, but I got a better one then, an Armstrong, I think. And I was beginning to play pretty good.

And then one day I was down in Glen Echo Park, in Washington, and Jerry O'Sullivan, the piper, he says, "There's a vendor down here," he says, "he makes flutes, and he's selling flutes and everything, come on down." There was eight flute players standing around, they were all trying it out. It was a demonstration [model], of course. And, at the time I didn't know whether it was Eb or a B whatever the case may be. When I got it in my hands I tell ya I got great satisfaction! "Jesus," I says, "I gotta buy this." So I went over to him, I says, "Can I buy this off you?" "Oh no," he says, "That's a demonstration." But, he says, "I'll make you one in six months." "And sure," I says, "I could be dead in that length of time!" Anyhow, Billy McComiskey was there, and Seamus Egan. And I conned him into it, I gave him 800 bucks for it, and it was well worth it! He sold it to me. He had pity on me. And there you have it. It was Patrick Olwell that saved my life!

## Learning at Home

MC: That's great! When your father was teaching you, how did he teach you?

MR: Watching his fingers. And it was easy, too, because he was left-handed. And he had a great way of doing it. Little sections he'd do at a time. He'd make me do that section, and as time went on he'd give me more and more.

MC: And if you got it wrong?

MR: He corrected you. "That's not the way it's done." I'd go out, you see, I'd go out to the field or something and practice, although my mother didn't mind. But I'd go out in the field and I'd practice by myself. And there was a [neighbor] he was an old Peeler, he was retired from the police, the Peelers they called 'em then. And he used to play a bit on the whistle. And he'd be showing me things too, to me out in the field. I remember them good old days!

MC: Did your father play rolls? And all the kinds of ornaments that we do today?

MR: Oh he did, he used rolls, yeah! But if he was showin' me he wouldn't use them. "No, don't learn the rolls first! The rolls will come to ya." Just the straight notes, no rolls.

MC: Did you learn those [rolls] from him, then?

MR: Yeah, mostly. Some of them I wouldn't think I did, some of them, but most, some of them, I have his rolls.

## Places to Play

MC: After you got started playing the flute and the whistle then, where did you play?

MR: Play [at] home until you were old enough to ramble around. You'd be invited to the house dance. There was a fiddle player that used to play with me. We were invited to all the house dances, people used to throw a little party, or the "Mummer's Spree," we'd play at that. We used to call them the Mummers. We'd go out when we were young ones, and we'd collect money, go from house to house. Jetty Whelan and myself, now we'd be playing, we had two little fifes, and we'd play for them. There'd be a couple of people, one would be dressed up as a woman, the other guy as a "fool" we used to call 'em. And they would dance a little bit around the kitchen floor, and we'd play a hornpipe or something like that. And then the money that we'd collect there'd be what they call a "Mummer's Spree," so we'd get a bottle of whiskey, and the women would be invited and they'd have to make a cake, or bread. And we had it from there, we'd buy the tea and everything else, and we'd have a night of it! "Mummer's Spree" we called it.

MC: Who was the fiddle player [you played with]?

MR: Jack Dervan. He played with the Ballinakill Band too, but not recorded...he played in the dance halls. And then at that time there was too many flute players in Ballinakill, and I wouldn't get my place in there, although I was good enough for it. But there wasn't enough room for me. So, I don't know, maybe I hadn't the seniority, that's what it amounted to. I had to wait my turn. But there was a band eleven miles down the road, called "Killimor," I played with them. And we were booked, here and there, playing at the dance halls. Marquees and dances. Two nights a week sometimes, and maybe sometimes only one night a week.

I remember there was marquees in the early summer, they'd have those marquees, the football clubs or the hurling clubs would hold those marquees then, and you played for them. That'd be four hours. And the money was good, at that time. 'Twas a pound or thirty shillings, and that was big money at that time. I was twenty-one or twenty-two years old.

PW: What do you mean by a "marquee"?

MR: A marquee is like a dome, it's a big canvas roof, like a circus tent, and a floor put down. It could be there for three weeks or however long they want it, you know. And they'd have the different bands come in, a jazz band, or a ceili band. But when the hurlers ran a dance, there was no...it was all traditional Irish music at that time. You weren't allowed to play even "Buttons and Bows." Now we started "Buttons and Bows" one night and we were told to stop, or we wouldn't get paid! That was a rule of the Gaelic Athletic Association, GAA. They didn't want no part of England in their amateur sports, hurling and football. That was the way it was over there. Of course it's all changed. And then the priests they ran the show over there, too, and the dance halls, most of them. But not the marquees. The hurling club ran that themselves.

MC: Who else was in the Killimor band at that time?

MR: Jetty Whelan played with me in it as well. And old Tommy Whelan played with them after I left, he took my place. The father, yeah. There was an accordion player by the name of Paddy Collins, who's passed away a few years now. Paddy Haverty was the founder of it, or put it together. Fiddle player. Johnny Quinn, played the accordion as well. And who else...there was Peggy Haverty. She's a fiddle player. She used to play with us as well. And we had no piano player. And we had no drummer. Except we would have to borrow a drummer sometimes. But a drummer is a big assist, playing in a band. He was more or less the time keeper, you know.

MC: Do you remember the first time that you heard the Ballinakill Ceili Band?

MR: Actually, the first time I heard them was when the record come out. I heard them on a record. That was the first time I heard them. And then they used to go like maybe for a practice, or just for a session. I would say I was maybe around 10 years of age, around 10 or 11 thereabouts, I couldn't be sure of that. They mightn't be all there, but Anna [Rafferty] would be there, with the piano. Kevin [Moloney], and Aggie [Whyte], and the old-timers, Stephen [Moloney] and Tommy Whelan. Tommy Whelan, by the way, used to come up the road in a donkey and cart—that was his transportation. That donkey would run like [demonstrates] up and down the road, yeah. Tie him outside, and he had a little bag of hay out there, he used to go back and he'd go into the hay barn and there was a place where they had the hay and he'd steal the hay! And he went to old Pat Rafferty who was there, and he'd say: "I stole some of your hay, Pat!" "Well all right," he says, "so long as you'll play a tune you'll make up for it!"

## Part 3: Galway to America

### Emigration

PW: You said you were 23 when you emigrated to America, why did you come?

MR: There was nothing in Ireland to fulfill your dreams, [you] come out here to make money. That was my thoughts, yeah. My sister, she was younger than me, she came out before me. And she was about a year out here and she decided to get me out. Well, how it happened, I don't know if I'd be coming out that soon, only there was a guy and he was very fond of music over there. And I was friendly with him. Well, he had a brother here in New York. And he was a detective in the police department. But anyway, his brother became simple and he was living with the two sisters. And they were afraid of him. He was starting to hide things. And you know, he just went, mentally. Got mentally ill, if you will. And they asked me if I'd stay in the house with them, 'cause they were scared of him at night. But anyway I stayed, I did that for about three weeks and they finally decided to put him in the mental home, in the hospital. But when the brother over here heard that, he went to my sister. And he says: "If your brother wants to come to America," he says, "I'll put up the papers for him." And 'twas a good deed I did. And he says, "I want to do that for him." And he did. His name was Jim MacDonald. And he met me [when] I came off the ship.

PW: That must have been a big change, from a small village to New York City.

MR: Yeah indeed. And everything was. Cause you couldn't travel much in Ireland, except I went to Dublin on an excursion one time. And the music going up in the cars, I remember. And like everything else there was, in my time, you were lucky if you had a bad bicycle, that kind of thing. There were three cars in the parish of Ballinakill. And they would use them as hackneys, or a taxi kind of thing. 'Twas rare, to see. Donkeys and carts, and horse and carts, that was the go at that time. That's all they had.



*Mike and Mary Rafferty. Photo by Brad Hurley*



MC: What did you do for a living over here?

MR: I worked in a private estate as a gardener. Flowers and vegetables and stuff, yeah. For about a year. And then there was an opening in the Grand Union [grocery chain] and I went to work there in the warehouse. I worked in the maintenance department. I drove the trucks for awhile and then I went in the maintenance department. Pretty close to thirty years.

## Music in America

MC: When you came over here did you find music right away?

MR: Not really. The only man I came across, actually, was Jack Coen. He was out here before me. I come across him, we'd have an odd tune together. I wasn't playing that [much]. Well, the old flute I had wasn't much. There was a guy that was from the same place too, but he was living in Chicago and he came to visit us once. I had a few tunes with him again. He played the melodeon. And, then in Englewood, New Jersey, there was a guy that had a ceili club there. He was a Mayo fellow. He used to play there, play the accordion. And another man from Limerick played the fiddle. And I used to play with them for the dances. And we had a drummer as well. It was a little band. Englewood Ceili Band they called us. So we used to play there once a month. And that kind of kept me going, sort of. Until that died out, then that was the end of me. I wasn't playing then for a long time.

PW: And when was that?

MR: It would be around '55, I think it was, that died out. Yeah. '55 up until, then I think it was in 1971 Aggie [Whyte, fiddler from Ballinakill], came out to the Catskills. Her and her husband. And I went up there for a week. And I was trying to get back at the music. And I didn't have a good flute at that time. I remember she turned around she said: "Why in God's creation don't you get yourself a good flute?" I said, "Do you know where there's one?" I said. She said, "I wish I did," you know? But it was a pleasure just to listen to her.

MC: What got you going on it again?

MR: I guess the Comhaltas really got me into it, when they come out here. And then there was Joe Madden, he come out ten years later after I come out. And Sean McGlynn, you've heard me talk about Sean. He came out too, around the same time. And they were only young kids when I left. There was neither one of them was playing, I don't think, at the time when I had left. And, I remember Sean McGlynn saying, rest in peace, he said, "You should be ashamed of yourself from where you come from!" That was encouraging don't you know.

PW: During the time when you weren't playing, there was just no music happening, no traditional music?

MR: No, there was but like, every New Year's Eve we had a party at our house and all the musicians, Sean McGlynn, Joe Madden, and whoever was around would come to the house and they were the mainstays. Paddy Reynolds, Andy McGann. Guy by the name of Gene Kelly played the melodeon. And a few more like Mike Preston of course. Jack Coen. A guy by the name of Paddy Murphy from Limerick that I was out on the ship with. Great style of playing the fiddle. And he was at the house a few times, That was around 1968, after I bought the house. There was a cellar we made room for...they could dance down there. Lots of music was played there, year after year.

## Starting Over

PW: So you said after putting it down for about fifteen years it was almost like starting over again?

MR: Yeah it was, yeah. Learning all over again. Jack, whenever he'd be around, he would be a big assist. He had the tunes. "You know this one? You know that one?" And it wasn't that it happened maybe three or four times. I'll tell ya, this was a true story. You heard tell of the "Maid of Mt. Kisco"? Well they had a wedding reception [in Mt. Kisco], this couple got married. And they had the wedding reception in the house. And we were asked to play there. And Jack and I, there was no bench or seats, we sat on the stairs kind of. And we managed to play the two flutes. But a lady was going around with a tray of whiskey and once we got a couple of shots of them, I tell you, we played good together! I remember that night. And Jack would often say to me, "Do you remember the night in Mt Kisco?" We more or less had the same style.

MC: Do you think you learned more music over there or over here?

MR: Since I came over here. Moreover, since I retired, I think I learned more. I had more time for it, as they say. Yeah I learned more. I'd sit down listen to the records. And I'd put it on the tape. And of course then Mary was another great reason, when she started learning. Cause I was trying to come back. And I was trying to learn a tune on the whistle. And she was a little one, running around. And she says "Dad, give me that whistle, I can do that." And I said "There's no reason why you can't." And it started there. And I taught her a few notes of "The Wearing of the Green," and she kept fiddling with that. And the next thing she had it off! It was in slow motion, a bit, but I kept with her.

And then Teresa and I decided that I wouldn't have time to show her every night, so take her to Martin Mulvihill the teacher. And then any help I can, anyway I can help her I did. Sunday I used to take her on. I used to bartend on a Sunday afternoon, and there was no time to show her except that I'd spend an hour with her if I could, or a half hour. One day I spent an hour. And she came downstairs to her mother and she says "You know Dad kept me a whole hour there." What Martin used to do, he'd put the tune on the tape recorder for her. And if I didn't know the tune, well, I'd learn it real quick and I'd show her how to do it. And she had it going back the following week. And that was a big thing for her as well. But a lot of the students wouldn't have it off 'cause they had nobody. Actually Mary had two teachers.

MC: On your recordings you have a lot of older tunes that were played by the Ballinakill band or by your father.

MR: Yeah, by my father mostly. Yeah and by the Ballinakill, the old band. I think we played a few of them. "The Shaskeen," and "Sandymount," and a few of them old tunes. They recorded most of them I think.

MC: Are you remembering these tunes or are you re-learning them?

MR: Yeah, when you'd sit alone and start daydreaming, I call it daydreaming. They come back to you. Yes.

PW: You play the pipes too, right?

MR: Yeah, well I didn't start them until I was fifteen. And my father was left-handed. And I had them turned upside down. He used to wander out the field. We had a little dog named Lady and she would go out with him all the time. And he'd walk, he'd wander out the field and he'd

go out like by the wall and he'd go out to the road and he'd go to visit the neighbor's house. And he was able to do that every day. But I was fifteen at the time anyway when I decided to take the pipes out. And I was playing, I was, the first time, second time, third time. I was doing it for quite awhile. So he was coming back and he was outside and I guess he was listening. My mother seen him coming and she says, "Put them away, your father's coming in." So I put them away and the first thing he said: "Did I hear music?" Well my mother says "I didn't hear nothing."

So anyway, he let it go at that and I believe a day or two later, [in the] evening or something, he was outside, 'twas in the summertime, I never forgot it. He didn't go anywhere, he made believe. And I wasn't watching, I wasn't paying attention. I thought he was going off down to see the neighbor or something. And he came back in and he says: "Don't ever take them off!" I was getting music out of them. "How the hell do you do it?" He couldn't figure out, I had them turned upside down. So I used to play them from there on, for awhile.

## Part 4: East Galway Music

### East Galway Music

MC: I was curious as to who your favorite flute players were back home.

MR: My idol was Jack Coughlan. Yeah, Jack Coughlan. There was something special about [his playing]. Of course, I was younger when I heard it. He had a great flow of music, rolling it out. I don't know what it was that I used to love to hear. Him and Aggie, if you ever heard the two of them together, they complemented each other as well. And I used to say to myself: "If I ever could play like that!" He had a great tone out of a flute. "The Collier's Reel," was something that he used to [play], you know. You'd think that he never took a breath. He could put in the roll where it wanted it, that kind of thing. I don't know. I liked his style of playing. I haven't heard anybody play like him.

MC: Well, it seems like there were an awful lot of flute players in your area. More than other areas of Ireland.

MR: I would say there was a nest of them there. There was another guy that never got no publicity or never played, maybe even at house dances. Would play home, or if he had a pint or two in him and happened to have the flute...he'd never bring the flute with him. And he had a lovely style of playing as well, was Paddy Holloran. And he's passed and gone. That was another guy that inspired me very much, to listen to him. He was a bit older than me. The steady tone, of flowing music coming out of there! He was another good one. And then of course from Woodford, there was another good one, Tommy Gaffey.

MC: Was the flute playing around your area any different than other areas of the country?



*Mike Rafferty and Mike Casey playing together. Photo by Paul Wells*

MR: At that time, now you could tell what county he came from if he was a fairly good flute player. Like Sligo has a different style, now, for Roscommon...Sligo is much the same. And I don't know about Leitrim, but Sligo definitely stood out, as a style of playing, in them days, from the style of East Galway, or even around where I come from. We were only five miles from the border of Clare there. There was a couple of friends of mine in the Blarney Star one night when I was playing there. And we talked about where we got our music. 'Cause I said, we're only five miles from the borders of Clare, and they were kind of up on the hill and, as you know, we lived down in the hollows. Sound goes up, and that's how the Clare people learned their music!

MC: How do you describe the flute playing in East Galway?

MR: I don't know what it was...I suppose everybody had a fancy to their own style or their own area. I don't know, I never give it attention in a way. I know one thing, Sligo [players] wanted to put in more phrasing, more variations, or whatever you want to call it. You probably heard Seamus Tansey, you've heard his recordings. He has a different style. Mike Flynn, I don't know if you heard of him, he was a Sligo man, I played with him a few times. 'Twas kind of hard to play when...two flute players that don't have the same style, 'twas kind of hard...I found it hard to play with. Michael Flatley had that style too. I never forgot when I was on the tour with him in 1979, he had a Sligo style of playing the flute. And the two of us, it took us a full week before we could play together.

MC: You're often encouraging us to play slower.

MR: Yeah. You'll hear a lot of players saying: "Well, I'm playing for the dance, and you have to play it fast." And it gets into your bloodstream. You'll play it fast all the time. My ambition is to play it slow. You're pronouncing it better, you're gettin' more feelings, you're getting more satisfaction, there's more fun in playing, anyway. You put more body into it, as Joe Madden would say. My belief is if you're learning a tune, especially learning it, play it slow until you get good control of it. But any tune, whether you have control of it or not, I believe that if you play nice and slow, and often, you have to get better.

MC: It must have been harder to remember tunes earlier on, before tape recorders.

MR: There wasn't that many of them, I suppose. When there was only that many, you'd remember them. I don't know how they got the tunes, how them old-timers, that didn't read or write music. And so that was another drawback if you will. I don't know how my father got the tunes. Sure, it would take them a long time to get a tune sometimes. But you'd hear somebody whistling it. Jack Dervan now, as I mentioned before, I'd be walking out the road or be going someplace and he'd be in the field workin', and he'd know I'd be comin' out or something, he could see. And he'd [say] "Did you ever hear this one?" That's how you got that tune.

PW: You don't read music do you?

MR: No, I can't read it or write it.

PW: I guess in the old days when you had to rely on your memory, your memory got pretty good.

MR: Yeah, I suppose so, I don't know. The folks around that I knew of, especially the old ones it just came into their head, and that was it. None of them ever understood music, in writing, anyway.

From A Guide to the Irish Flute. <http://www.firescribble.net/flute/rafferty.htm>

MC: Do you have a tune that's been your favorite over the years?

MR: Not really. A lot are my favorites now. When you had less of them you had [a favorite]. But now what happens is you learn a tune, you take a likin' to it, and it's your favorite for awhile, and then you go on to the next one. I think some of Paddy Fahy's tunes are very attractive. And indeed Paddy O'Brien's, some of them.

MC: Well, Mike, thanks. We really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us.

PW: Yes, it's great...lovely to sit and talk!

MR: Oh, you're welcome I'm sure. You're welcome, I'm sure.

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