

THE REGULARS DISCUSS EROTICISM IN IRISH TRADITIONAL MUSIC

... But Pretty Soon Find Out They Don't Know Much About It
(Or Care, For That Matter)

It was down at Danny Finn's the other night that I overheard the following discussion while trying to follow the NBA playoffs. I thought it might be something you'd want to know about ...

As I enter the pub, Rooskey is struggling valiantly with a joke.

- ... so the cockatoo says, "I wouldn't be caught dead wearing a ..." No, wait a minute. "I wouldn't be caught dead with one of those on my ... er ..." Hold on, let me start again ...

- That's the joke? asked **The Bunser** incredulously. - The cockatoo says "Hold on, let me start again"? Begod that's pathetic, especially since you started off so well. I nearly peed myself when the kangaroo spilled ketchup on the airline pilot.

- That wasn't the kangaroo did that, it was the big garda on the bicycle, said **Mick Fahey**. - ... or is that another joke I'm thinking of?

- There was no garda and no bicycle in my story, Mick Fahey, said **Rooskey impatiently**. - It was a fine joke as it was, complete in every limb and in no need of extraneous elements. The cockatoo would have had the punchline all to himself if only I could have gotten my poor old tongue around it ...

- Of course, Rooskey, there are those who might have objected a bit to the tone of your joke, said **Paul the Fireman cautiously**. - It seemed to me a bit ... erratic I think is the word. You know, calculated to arouse cranial desires as Father Dermot mentioned at the mission last weekend ...

- Now would that be "cranial" or "carnal" desires? asked **Mick Fahey**, putting his pint down as a sign that a serious discussion was about to be initiated. - Because I seem to recall getting the living bejayzus scared out of me in confession years ago about one or the other, but for the life of me I can't remember which one ...

- It's "carnal", said **The Bunser**, from the Latin of course, and the closest I ever came to killing another human being was the night I first heard it used in a sentence by someone not of the clergy.

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- Details please, **said Paul the Fireman.** - But remember that we're in the arch-diocese here. No indiscretion if you can help it. **The others snickered.**

- Yes, Jimmy Dooley used that word, I'll never forget it the longest day I live, **said The Bunser.** - He worked with me in the gas company, and this night we were both down in a manhole on Arsenal Street and the rain was coming down like nothing I ever saw, even back in Ireland. It was filling the hole at the rate of a foot a minute, the emergency lights were shorting out, the smell of gas was everywhere, lightning bouncing off the streets, a few more seconds and most of Boston was going to have the honor of being the first human settlement on the moon. Suddenly in the middle of all this commotion this big eejit Dooley leans over to me and whispers "You know, Bunser, I think I have a carnal desire for McLoughlin's sister, the little redhead with the missing teeth ..." He said it with a big dreamy smile on his face. Maybe the gas was getting to him, but my hand to God, I nearly clocked him with the wrench I was holding. "I'll carnalize you, you dopey bastard," I heard myself yelling through the uproar. Thanks be to God, he snapped out of it quickly enough after Lenehan the foreman bounced a three-inch bolt off his safety helmet ... Dooley never mentioned McLoughlin's sister again, at least not to me. I don't think he was too interested in her after that night ...

- Annie McLoughlin married Corrigan the cop, **said Paul the Fireman.** - I knew him, decent melancholy sort of a man, used to say when he'd a drop taken that she married him just to take advantage of the police force dental plan ... but she wasn't bad looking once she had the porcelain installed. Kind of a flirt but I don't think she meant anything by it. I think she took a few accordion lessons at one time. The Corrigans were Roscommon people, I believe ...

- Of course there's a time and place for everything, **said Rooskey absently.** - I heard a young musician say one time that there were a lot of similarities between playing tunes and making love ... he went into some detail about it, but to tell the truth he had a heavy accent of some kind and I couldn't understand too much of what he was saying. It was the day of a big match, Galway and Dublin, and we were all a little peloothered. Still he might have had a point ...

There was some quiet coughing and shuffling of feet. Warty seemed particularly upset, and Rooskey noticed it. - No, Warty, he wasn't a Connemara man, that much I'm sure of, he said soothingly. Warty ignored any irony in the statement and breathed an audible sigh of relief.

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Jimmy the bartender, who up to that moment had manifested zero interest in the conversation, suddenly decided that the ball game wasn't so riveting after all. - *The relationship of music and sex - now that's an interesting concept, he said, elbow on the bar and his right index finger aimed challengingly at Rooskey. He looked like a second-rate talk-show host. - There may just be something to that.*

- *Well, there's a lot comes in here for the session of a Tuesday that know far more about the one than the other, if you know what I mean, said Mick Fahey with a smirk.*

- *Arrah, what would Mick Fahey know about it? challenged Warty with a sly grin. - Sure some of those young wans in here a Tuesday could be your grand-daughters.*

- *Ah sure, the world is obsessed with sex, pure and simple, said Paul the Fireman disgustedly. - It's awful. If these young people worked at raising a family of fourteen ... no, fifteen ... children like my wife and I did, sure they'd have no time at all for thinking about sex ...*

- *... and the gall to compare playing tunes to making love, Eddie Burke snorted. - Why poor old Michael Coleman, God rest him, would be rotating in his grave if he ever heard the like of that! I remember being at a session up in the Bronx one night long ago, a hot summer night before air conditioning, Coleman and the Lad and Killoran and dozens of others there stuffed into one three-room apartment, reels and jigs pouring out for further orders, begod you could hear them over in New Jersey. Suddenly the door opens and in walks this young woman nobody knew, pretty enough, lots of makeup, kind of a confused look on her face. She takes a piece of paper out of her purse, looks at it and then the number on the apartment door, gives a little shrug, and then starts to take off her clothes. She gets down to not much at all before anyone takes the least notice of her, and at that point Killoran I think it was shouts something to Dinny Cleary who's watching the session from the bathroom. There's a tearing sound, and two seconds later Dinny's throwing the shower curtain around her ... they found out later - after Big Mary helped her find her clothes - that she was one of those birthday strippers, in the right apartment but the wrong building. So happened that her mother was from Tipperary ... anyway she gave up stripping after she and Dinny were married. Turned out a lovely girl. She was a big wheel in the Catholic Charities for years ...*

- *I knew a piper from Tuam who used to say "A choice between sex and music is the easiest choice a real musician ever has to make", said The Bunser. - He was a wise man all right, knew more tunes than a ferret has fleas, but had a problem staying*

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married - three wives left him. The priests around all knew him, so annulments were never any problem. I don't think he ever missed the poor women after the first week or so. Sometimes he didn't even remember their names ... He honest to God tried to be a good husband but the tunes kept getting in the way. He'd often disappear for weeks and then remember to call home. "I'll be in Longford this week, my pet," he'd say - they were all "my pet" because he could never get their names straight.

- And did any of you know Dan Quinn, the banjo player? **asked Rooskey.** - The story goes that he was in the Grand Hotel in Wicklow on his wedding night.

- Lovely place, I know it well, **interrupted The Bunser.** - The brother's son had his First Communion there years ago, beautiful day it was. You could get a pin, a real pint, for two shillings in those days...

- Anyway, **continued Rooskey,** after the reception, Dan and the bride take their leave and go up to their room. Meanwhile a few of the musicians and dancers that were at the wedding decide to start up a little ceili in the ballroom. Not ten minutes later, Dan jumps up out of bed and yells through the floor at the musicians playing downstairs "That's not how you turn that reel, you goddamned fools!", grabs his banjo, tears out the door, runs back to kiss his bride, finally races downstairs to the ballroom, gets the banjo out of the case ... and only then remembers that he hasn't a stitch of clothes on him. The screams of the women and the laughter from the lads were long and hearty.

- I heard that same story from Jerry Conlon, Dan's best man at the wedding, **said Eddie Burke as he wiped tears of mirth from his eyes.** - He swore until the day he died that it was God's truth. And you know, the Quinns were still married forty years later, last I heard of them.

- Indeed, you wouldn't find a bride like Nora every day, **said The Bunser.** - Such a kind sweet lady to be condemned to life with a banjo player!

The lads nodded and continued to laugh quietly. - Dan Quinn would have done that, no doubt about it, **said The Bunser appreciatively.** - Fierce man for the reels. But God help him, the mother-in-law had no use for him, no use at all.

It had gone long past my bedtime. I said goodnight just as Rooskey decided to give his cockatoo joke another try.

