

MUSICIANS YOU PROBABLY NEVER HEARD OF (FOR GOOD REASON)

Chapter I: Tommy "The Brick" McDevitt (1902 - 1973)

The common wisdom among traditional Irish musicians that "the best never recorded" is proven sadly true by the extensive discography attributed to Tommy McDevitt, a native of Lumcloon, Co. Offaly, who emigrated to the Chicago area in the early 1920's.

Known lovingly if disparagingly by his fellow musicians as "The Brick" because of his total lack of musical ability, McDevitt nevertheless managed to convince his next-door neighbors Petros and Ioannis Kazantzopoulos - immigrant owners of a restaurant, an ethnic grocery, and a small record company specializing up to that time in Balkan music - that he could open up the burgeoning Irish record market for them. The good brothers K, knowing little if anything about Irish music, nonetheless took McDevitt - the only Irishman of their acquaintance who liked octopus and feta sandwiches - at his word. As the cliché goes, the rest is history.

As hard as it would be for anyone to believe who has heard even one side, McDevitt over a thirty-year period recorded no less than 128 sides for the Kazantzopoulos Brothers' "K-Bros" label. Unhappily not a single side has been lost, although there seems mercifully to be no interest on anyone's part in re-releasing the material, which apparently lies in a safe deposit box sealed by a restraining order. As a result of legal moves instigated by traditional music interests in Ireland, the present K-Bros management refuses to comment on, or even acknowledge the existence of, this material, and refers all queries to its legal advisers.

The McDevitt corpus - a wonderfully appropriate word in this context - consists of poorly executed - ditto - reels, jigs, and hornpipes that are difficult even for professional Irish traditional musicians to identify. The fact that the labels on K-Bros recordings of the time were printed in Greek or Armenian has not made the task of identifying McDevitt's work any easier. All 128 sides consist of McDevitt's rhythm-free scrapings - apparently he was not familiar with the virtues of bow rosin - accompanied by what could well be an autoharp tuned approximately a flatted fifth out from McDevitt's fiddle. There has been some discussion among musicologists as to whether the backup instrument might in fact be a bouzouki, which would not be surprising in light of the fact that K-Bros' recording logs - also in Greek - allude to the presence of a certain Dimitrios Paraskevas in the studio during all McDevitt's recording sessions.

Not much is known about "Jimmy" Paraskevas beyond the fact that he was the house bouzouki player for K-Bros (as well as being a second cousin by marriage and night manager of a largely ignored seafood restaurant somewhere near Milwaukee).

One interesting aspect of the McDevitt K-Bros sides was the fiddler's insistence on playing triple sets, i.e. three reels, three jigs, and so on. While this procedure succeeded brilliantly with the likes of Michael Coleman - per the "Tarbolton" set

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still known and loved today - it does nothing for McDevitt, perhaps because of his propensity for changing tempos from tune to tune (and more often than not, during a tune). Even a casual listener would be instantly able to figure out which parts of which tunes presented greater technical difficulties to McDevitt, since he regularly slows these parts down to about half-speed, never evidently bothering to alert his accompanist of the tempo changes.

Language difficulties may have played a part here, since as far as is known McDevitt had no Greek and Jimmy's English was primarily restaurant-oriented. The resulting polyrhythmic quality of many of McDevitt's recordings is striking if not particularly pleasant, but again one must respect McDevitt's skill in selling this tripe to the innocent K-Bros as being "real Irish".

The 128 sides clearly show that given the nature of the accompaniment, information about starting keys and subsequent changes would have been superfluous even if The Brick and Jimmy P. had any knowledge of such technicalities. Musicians of the time who knew McDevitt claimed that he was unaware of the existence of any key but G. "Of course we'd play tunes in the keys of D, E minor, A, and so forth, but that never bothered The Brick," said Larry Healey, a flute player who knew McDevitt well but did not always succeed in avoiding him. "He'd still play every goddamned tune in the key of G. At least we think he did - most of the time it was hard to tell what he was playing!"

Although the McDevitt recordings did not for obvious reasons sell well - or at all - in the Irish market, they were surprisingly successful in the small but free-spending Chicago Visigothic community, and McDevitt and Jimmy enjoyed an unexpected degree of popularity performing at Visigoth functions in and around Chicago. There are contemporary newspaper photos showing The Brick and Jimmy performing onstage in native garb at the 1934 Visigoth Cultural Society's annual picnic, held at Downers Grove outside Chicago. One of the best-selling of all The Brick's K-Bros recordings was a side called "The Humors of Glimshmuhurf," apparently an original composition of McDevitt's celebrating a popular vacation spot in the swamp-free region of the Visigoth homeland. Musicologists have exchanged angry words as to whether the tune is a jig or a reel, or perhaps something entirely different. It is hoped that the application of the latest computer sound analysis technology will answer the question once and for all for any who remain interested.

McDevitt never married, although there is some indication that he enjoyed a brief but heated relationship with a young Visigoth exotic dancer named Lola Udkrushpi. For whatever reason, the pair parted company, and a broken-hearted McDevitt composed what is arguably his most ambitious composition, "Lament for Lola", which one critic has described as "an uneasy hybrid of Carolan's 'Blind Mary' and 'The Beer Barrel Polka' ".

Apparently "Lament for Lola" was so hideous that even K-Bros management

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realized its mistake in releasing it, and took the unprecedented step of placing an apology in the trade press for doing so.

The Brick - whose day job involved making random chalk marks on valves for the local gas company - retired from recording in the early 1950's, although he and Jimmy continued to do a few live performances in the Chicago area. Sadly, attempts by The Brick's fans to have him revive his career as the opening act for The Chieftains' first visit to Chicago in 1972 were doomed to failure once Paddy Moloney had listened to The Brick's recording of (perhaps) "Miss McCloud's / The Teetotaller / Trim the Velvet". Moloney never spoke publicly about this experience but is reputed to have suffered from severe stomach cramps and sudden bouts of nausea for weeks thereafter.

McDevitt passed away quietly at his Chicago home in September 1973, attended by the elderly but loyal K Brothers, Jimmy and Lola Paraskevas, all twenty-six members of the Visigoth Weeping Council, and a few unlucky nieces and nephews who arrived late and had to pay their respects from the driveway outside The Brick's bedroom while the Weeping Council performed their moving "flortepki" farewell ceremony (which however omitted the "glufush", or live-bat-roasting, which the kind-hearted McDevitt had never liked).

Not surprisingly, an autopsy revealed that McDevitt had suffered from Bulheimer's syndrome, a rare condition - more popularly known as "tin ear" - involving accretions of metal salts on the auditory nerves. He was buried with his beloved but never-properly-tuned fiddle beside him in the Franciscan Cemetery in Waukegan. Rumors that the fiddle was later exhumed and burned by a person or persons unknown were never substantiated.

A complete McDevitt discography is being prepared and will be released to an anxiously-waiting world once uncertainties - manifested in the rough draft by phrases such as "maybe", "sounds like", "what the hell", "????", "is he kidding?" - are resolved.

- 2005