



- MEET A TOWNIE -



His Master's Voice remembers a lifetime of music and selling Kimberley biscuits!

On the kitchen table in the McTeague home in Glencar sits two programmes from the recent performances of 'The Sound of Music' staged at the Bord Gais Energy Theatre.

More than apt because this is a home where music abounds particularly through the rich tenor voice of the father of the house Dan McTeague.

"It was a great show. We enjoyed it immensely. Celine Byrne was outstanding," he reflects.

Great shows being enjoyed immensely and an outstanding voice can rightly refer to the man speaking these words. For he has entertained audiences and congregations both here and further afield for as long as many can remember.

It all started in Kilmacrenan from where his father, Joseph, came. His mother, Margaret (McMenamin) hailed from Mount Southwell, and it was to the Cathedral Town that the McTeague family relocated.

"We came to Letterkenny in 1934 when I was only six years of age. There were seven girls and two boys in the family."

Dan's father purchased a public house on the Main Street from Willie Gallagher and renamed it the Swilly Bar and Restaurant.

"When we arrived in Letterkenny, the population was around 4,500 and you probably have had about ten or twelve cars in the town in total. Things have changed slightly since then!"

After his primary education involving the Presentation Brothers, Dan attended St. Eunan's College, one of only twenty-four day boys there at the time. "Fr. Arthur McLoone was President in my years there."

And no better President to instil a love of music in his students. "He was a magnificent singer.

"He and Fr. Tommy Doherty were great entertainers and used to do concerts all over."

And for those secondary school students of the modern era who believe they are hard done by in an education sense, Dan and his peers will tell you things used to be a lot tougher.

"After the school hours we'd be back at 5 p.m. for a study period which lasted to 7.45. with a fifteen minute break at 6.15. And then we'd be back for another one hour study period from 8.45."

And further study periods over the weekend to keep the senses sharpened.

"It was tough," says Dan with due understatement.

Dan's own singing talents – and 'magnificent singer' can equally and comfortably apply to him – emerged in his time at national school and participation in the annual Feis Tir Chonail.

"Br. Winifred asked one day if were there any entries for the boys solo competition and Hugh Ferry, who was the only lay teacher in the school at the time and the only teacher who taught singing, said I have one....

"Anyway, 'Tucker' Crampsie got first and I got second in the competition."

Feis Tir Chonail was a huge event at the time and Dan remembers St. Eunan's College hosting it. "They'd



Dan beside his record collection. Photo by Geraldine Diver

cover over the handball alley where the Irish dancing took place and the singing competition would be held in the study hall. It was a very big thing back in those days."

In contemporary terms, Dan regards the late Tommy Fletcher as the greatest singer to originate from Letterkenny. And he recalls the privilege of hearing him perform 'Panis Angelicus' in St. Eunan's Cathedral during a Letterkenny Reunion mass accompanied by Dan himself, Pat Nicholls and Sean O'Donnell.

"Billy Patterson said afterwards that it was the first time he'd ever heard a congregation shouting 'more' in a church!"

Dan joined the Cathedral choir in 1943 and recalls the respective organists they sang to their accompaniment. They included Willie Donnelly - "a big Scotsman" - Anthony Clarke, well known in the day for that familiar smile behind the counter in Clarke's paper shop at Lower Main Street, and Jo McGlinchey, who taught many a student the basics of piano playing.

"They were all excellent musicians. I can remember the day Willie left the town and we all went down to the Railway Station to sing for him. It was very sad as he was very popular.

"Back in those early years, it was all men and boys in the choir. Girls did not form part of it then though they could have their own choir."

Dan performed in concert for the first time in the Devlin Hall in 1945 where starring on the bill was the legendary Michael O'Duffy from Derry.

As a boy soprano, the Letterkenny man had lined up the song 'Little Boy Blue' to perform. "And Michael O'Duffy said he had been going to sing that song too. In the end, I got to sing it. He told me that he had plenty

other songs he could sing which was very gracious of him."

Dan was an avid fan of Fr. Tommy Doherty, his sense of humour and mischief, and the ditties he penned concerning the shark in Dungloe bay, the contrasts between Ballybofey and Stranorlar, and the Lone Moor Bus in Derry.

But one story the late cleric used to tell was of a much more serious and supernatural nature.

He, Fr. Tommy, was on duty one night when there came a knock on the door and a little boy stood there. "My mother's not well, she's dying," he said to the priest.

Answering the young boy's heartfelt appeal, Fr. Tommy went along to the woman's apartment but received no response when he knocked on the door.

A man residing in an apartment opposite finally helped him to force their way in where they found the woman lying in her bed. "What's wrong?," she asked.

And Fr. Tommy mentioned the young boy who had called to his home and pointed to a picture of the lad in question. "It can't be him because he's been dead for years," she responded. Stunned by this, Fr. Tommy gave her his blessing and went on his way to discover that the woman had died the following day.

On a brighter note – and there were musical notes aplenty – Dan remembers the Pantomimes in the Devlin Hall and characters such as Pearse Stevenson and Harry Parkinson performing in them.

He recalls the shops on the Main Street – "none of them there now" – and other outlets such as the Munster and Leinster Bank, the Royal Bank and the Hibernian Bank.

It wasn't any of the banks, however, that drew him into his career path after leaving school. Instead he secured

a position in the office at the Bacon Factory where he worked alongside Phonsie Gallagher, Mary Duffy, Madeline Daly, and Tessie Kelly who was in charge in that section of the factory.

"Jeff Prendergast was the manager. It was a big business and a great place to work.

"I was four years there and then got a job through Michael Mellett at the I.A.W.S. as a representative. "

Ultimately it was a company founded in Waterford in 1851 that saw him find a perfect fit. Jacob's Biscuits was a brand name with bite, the products hugely popular. And after applying and securing a position with the company, Dan found himself travelling his native county, making around twenty calls daily and taking orders. "I was even supplied with a car for the job." And the most popular biscuit? "Kimberleys were a big seller. There was no bother selling them."

Having joined Jacob's in 1961, Dan sold his last biscuit in 1996 before retiring from a job he thoroughly savoured.

Long before that there was a birthday party to attend in Lifford – and very likely that Jacob's Biscuits occupied some of the plates – and a meeting with a woman called Bernie Gilboy, a native of Roscommon, who would become his wife. The term inseparable is one often used too liberally but where Dan and Bernie McTeague are concerned, it describes them to a tee – and whether it's at Mass in St. Eunan's Cathedral or at a community function, they are invariably together.

And it took a lot to prise Dan away from what he calls the Possee – a group of friends who went everywhere together including Frank Gallagher, Bernard McGlinchey, Sean O'Donnell, Barney Doherty, and Jim Ward.

Bernie and Dan got married in Sligo Cathedral in 1960, where Jo McGlinchey played the organ, and had their reception in the Great Southern Hotel.

They went on to have six daughters, Eithne, Fidemla, twins Catherine and Geraldine, Josephine and Joan, and a son, Patrick. Dan's musical memories abide. Not alone as a performer or a member of the Cathedral choir but also as the producer of fund-raising C.D.'s featuring a galaxy of local singers and musicians.

He also performed on the B.B.C.'s 'Songs of Praise' which was recorded in the Cathedral in 1984. "I often wonder how Letterkenny got it. I believe we were the only place in Ireland that got that opportunity.

"All denominations came from all over the county to take part. The broadcast was divided into two parts over two nights and we were told to sit in the same seats on the second night as we had on the first and to wear the same clothes to help give the impression that it was all recorded in the one sitting."

Dan is an avid collector of musical material and photographs and a film of that historic 'Songs of Praise' broadcast retains pride of place.

Listening to Dan McTeague bids you to stay for longer to hear more of his musical odyssey but eventually it was time to take leave of His Master's Voice.

Thankfully it's still performing and also available for listening pleasure on a number of recordings.

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