

### 3.18 Andy Conroy Interview

Dave Hegarty with Andy Conroy biography by Ronan Browne

#### Introduction

This short interview was recorded by Dave Hegarty some time in the late nineteen eighties. John Kelly<sup>1</sup> was also present. Dave thinks that the recording was made in Andy's "rooms" in one of John Kelly's houses opposite the Horse Shoe shop at the top of Capel Street. Dave's recollection of the room is that:

"...the bed had a kind of canopy over it. On the small table was the framed 'Shotokan 1st Dan' black belt certificate in the middle. On one side of it was the picture of Patsy Touhey and on the other was the Our Lord as the 'Sacred Heart'. The hallway was sort of triangular as well. Nancy, Mrs. Kelly's sister was on the first floor and Andy was on the second."

During the interview I can hear other people further away, talking and I also hear a bell every so often - the sort of bell which might be attached to a door which would ring as the door was opened. All of this leads me to think that this interview may also have been conducted in the back room of a hotel, pub or some similar establishment.

#### Short Biography of Andy Conroy<sup>2</sup>

Andy Conroy was a gentleman, wit, black belt karate master and a *very* tight piper. He managed to keep our feet on the ground whenever we took piping too seriously and he had a great knack of tricking one into asking a particular question, only to find that you had been set up when he delivered his punch-line!

Andy was born in Lough Glynn, Co. Roscommon in 1911. Along with his brother Mick, he started on the tin whistle and the concert flute but was aware of the pipes through records of Pat Fitzpatrick and Patsy Touhey brought back on visits by his neighbours who lived in America.

In 1929, at the age of 18, Andy moved to England, followed by his brother Mick and worked as a block layer in London, Birmingham and



Liam McNulty

<sup>1</sup> John Kelly (1912-1980) fiddle and concertina player from south County Clare.

<sup>2</sup> I had intended this piece to be short but once I started writing about Andy, it was hard to stop.

Liverpool. While in England, Mick bought a practice set of pipes by Crowley of Cork, but it was Andy who, once shown the pipes by Mick, carried on playing them while Mick continued on the flute and whistle.

He returned to Ireland in 1939, working first in Kildare for a few years, and then the north of Ireland where he met Richard O’Mealy, Frank McFadden, Seán Maguire (pictured with Andy on right) and Francis McPeake.



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Mick Brophy, Pat Brophy, Andy Conroy

In 1944, Andy moved to Dublin, took lessons from Leo Rowsome and played for a time with Leo’s quartet. In Dublin, Andy got to know the Brophys, John Potts, Séamus Ennis, Tommy Reck and Willie Clancy who was working there before moving to London. The photograph above probably dates from this time.

Andy travelled to America in 1951 and stayed there till 1973. He made quite a name as a piper and played with Lad O’Beirne, John Vesey, Tom Morrison, Andy McGann, Louis Quinn, Larry Redican and of course, piper Tom Busby whose recordings of Andy and others came back to Ireland and now reside in the Irish Traditional Music Archive in Dublin. He worked also in Philadelphia where he made the acquaintance of Ed Reavey

whose name he liked to “drop” regularly in conversations. The picture on the left is of Vincent Broderick with Tom Busby and Andy. Broderick must have been on a visit as to the best of my knowledge, he never lived in America.

Andy returned to Ireland in 1973 and stayed till his death in 1999. He lived on Capel Street in Dublin, opposite *The*



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*Four Seasons Pub* where he and John Kelly could be seen at any time of the day holding court in the presence of a visitor who had dropped into John Kelly's shop next door, *The Horse Shoe*. I studied architecture in Bolton Street Tech in the nineteen eighties but spent much of my time with Andy and John (I no longer have much to do with architects but I still indulge music).

Soon after his return Andy famously took out an ad stating that he was retiring from public performance<sup>3</sup>:

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Jewellery repairs. We have no agents  
All business transacted at our only  
address: Pilar House Jewellers Ltd.  
31A Henry St., Dublin 744816. Tu

I, ANDY CONROY, Irish traditional  
bagpiper. now a sexagenarian, will  
take no further engagements in the  
field of traditional Irish music.

LADIES YOGA CLASSES for slim-  
ming and relaxation in District 14.  
Personal individual attention Phone  
982024. DX4

REQUIRED - Ladies to embroider  
14 x 14 cushion covers at home.  
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Like many of his actions, this was a ruse to confuse and ultimately to coax people to persuade him to play again, something he continued to do from time to time.

Many people recall his performance at *The Tradition Club* upstairs in *Slattery's* of Capel Street where he revealed a coiled rope in his pipe-case. Following the inevitable enquiry he answered that he wasn't convinced about the fire escape. "So, you'll tie the rope to something and climb out the window and down the outside wall?" Oh no, the truth of the scheme was revealed when he explained that the rope was not for him, but for the pipes which were to be lowered out through the window instead of himself!

Andy re-named himself regularly; some which come to mind just now include "Ross (short for Roscommon) Conroy", "Piper Conroy" and "Abel (punning *Able* with [*Cain* &] *Abel*) Conroy". He had a fascination for Maud Gonne and to the best of my knowledge wrote the tune of the same title in her honour. Although he remained a bachelor, a walk through Dublin was always a slow affair as he stopped for conversation with women young and old who loved his oblique wit and gallant ways; and he was charming to each and every one of them.

<sup>3</sup> The Evening Herald, 22/10/1974



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Andy used to carry a tightly rolled up karate magazine on which he regularly demonstrated his great works of tightness; but this magazine had another life as a secret weapon which he gently demonstrated one lunchtime by driving it into my *solar plexus*. He said that he himself was a lethal weapon and woe-betide anyone who tried to attack him now that he had been awarded the Black Belt! His great strength was demonstrated to me on another occasion when he picked up a builder's shovel by gripping it at the very end of the haft with one hand and waved it around. Impressed, but not hugely, I attempted the same and nearly burst my eyeballs lifting it three inches off the ground before collapsing in a heap!

The Piper Conroy was always well dressed, often in his signature navy blue suit. He wore a large fawn coloured duffel coat in winter, draped over his shoulders like a cape. What many people didn't know was that under his jacket, things were very different - his shirt had multiple diamond shaped holes cut out of the front panels both sides of the buttons; around the back his shirt material was sliced into ribbon strips; the arms were cut like a tee-shirt; all that remained of the original shirt were the collar and the buttoned section showing through the V of his jacket. The reason for this bizarre mutilation was to "allow his skin to breathe"!

The picture on the right shows one of his famous poses seen by few as it necessitated the removal of his jacket, thus exposing his shirt. He would place his fingers to his temples and tense and release his muscles in a wonderful show of strength.



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Another skin foible came up in 1980 when he showed my mother (a doctor) and me a small *elastoplast* on his pate. Gingerly lifting it revealed a tiny spot which he informed us was cancer. She attempted to put his mind at rest but he continued his cancer scare for a number of months before going on to live another nineteen cancer-free years!

Skin also appeared regularly in the case of what Andy termed “the natural popping strap” where he rolled up his trousers and placed the chanter on the freshly revealed lily-white skin! As usual, he clucked and his eyebrows oscillated as he explained the benefits of the natural popping strap.



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Andy, of course, was one of the great characters of Irish music in Dublin; a mentor and hero to many of us. He had eccentric ways and was always highly entertaining. He obsessed about tight playing and if you were lucky enough to be in his company at a piping recital or concert, his *sotto voce* comments were hilarious. He described many pipers as being “loose as bran!” Any of us who made the effort to learn some of his “works” were held close and praised incessantly to our face and behind our backs too! He was very proud of his “students”, especially Mick Coyne, Mick O’Brien, Mikey Smith, Nollaig McCarthy and myself. He showed us the “air-lock”, regularly demonstrated the “dodeca-duplet” (Andy’s very own version of the twelve times version of the triplet!) and spoke

disparagingly of many pipers’ attempts at ACA and BCB triplets, explaining how and why they failed to execute them to his satisfaction.

Andy had a Matt Kiernan B flat chanter which he loaned to me for many years. It had a lump of white plastic at the top of the head, into which Andy had had a tenor drone fitted - he eschewed full sets but liked a drone from time to time! Ingeniously, it was fed air by a rubber tube which ran down into the chanter head and through the brass tube into the bag thus providing it with the separate air supply necessary! Soon after I returned the chanter we were upstairs in his rooms. I asked how the chanter was going for him and he answered that it was playing beautifully. “With the same reed?” I asked. “Oh no,” answered Andy, and proceeded to show me the chanter with no head, no reed and the bottom D closed with sticky tape. It turned out that he would blow directly into the top of the chanter and play away for hours at a time, often lying back in the bed. Any other piper would be puffed trying that but as Andy’s music consisted of triplets, quads, quins and dodeca-duplets with the odd short note, a breath lasted a lot longer! He also said it was perfect as Mrs. Kelly’s sister Nancy wouldn’t be disturbed by the sound of piping!

After listening to a certain (un-named here) piper play a little too open for his taste, Andy went up and asked to look at his chanter; he turned it round and round looking it up and down. When the perplexed piper eventually gave him his bone and asked what he was looking for, he answered, “The extra holes!” Peter O’Loughlin remembers Andy speaking of another well-known piper, “Wouldn’t you think he’d ever try something a little harder?” This was followed after a pause with, “...even if he failed?” Cutting words indeed!

To this day, people smile self-indulgently whenever Andy's name is mentioned; he is regularly quoted with a giggle and we all miss him terribly.

In the late 1980s I set up an interview with Andy in my family home. I invited Seán Potts to "conduct" the interview. We had a wonderful night, Andy was on top form and we recorded a few hours of talk on a C120 cassette. To my eternal despair Andy asked to see the tape for a second, immediately popped it in his pocket saying he would have to listen to it to see if he was happy with it all. I was too young and respectful to fight him for it -



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he would have won anyway! As a short example of the wonderful flippancy of the interview as directed by Andy himself, he muttered to Seán, "Ask me about Tennyson..." Seán quickly posed his question, "Tell me Andy, about your connection with the great poet Tennyson." "Oooh, oooh," clucked Andy. "Why, yes indeed, Tennyson..." "well, Tennyson always said that he stood on the shoulders of giants... and I suppose, in his way, he did..."

We waited patiently with enquiring looks for the punch-line which wasn't long coming, in all its modesty: "Well, for me, it was a little different - when I was at the height of my powers I stood up and looked around but... there were no giants at all!"

Perhaps if that tape wasn't destroyed it may turn up eventually.

#### Acknowledgements:

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Dave Hegarty

Mick O'Connor

Mick Coyne

## **The Interview<sup>4</sup>**

The relevant section of the interview is short and soon moves off O’Mealy to pipers in America. At times Andy’s answers are flippant and at others, he is very tactful and careful not to insult people. Andy’s answers to some of the questions give us unique insights into O’Mealy.

Dave’s questions are in ***Bold Italic*** and Andy’s responses are in indented normal text. See elsewhere for an MP3 of the interview.

Dave Hegarty:

***Andy, would you describe how you met O’Mealy?***

Andy Conroy:

Well, you could say I overtook him, I didn’t meet him; I worked in Belfast building air raid shelters for the British. I visited his home through Brother Gildas<sup>5</sup>. Br. Gildas was taking lessons from him, although he doesn’t agree to that now, that he was taking lessons from him. That would have been in 1942.

***Where in Belfast was he living and who put you on to him?***

Rugby Avenue, Ormeau Road.

Oh, the world – McFadden, McPeake and all them. Everyone knew about O’Mealy.

***Was it just himself and the wife there?***

Yes, that was all – he didn’t have any children. God didn’t bless them with any children.

***Did you go on your own or with Brother Gildas?***

I went with my brother Mick first.

***What kind of a reception did you get?***

Oh, beautiful. He played in the attic for us, the garret to you.

***One of those lovely sets he made?***

Oh yes, the sets he made – he made his own pipes all the time.

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<sup>4</sup> See “Associated Files” for the MP3 of the interview

<sup>5</sup> Brother Gildas (Patrick O’Shea) 1882-1960, was a De La Salle brother born in Ballinskelligs, County Kerry. He would have met O’Mealy whilst working as headmaster in the De La Salle school in Belfast.

***How did he sound?***

Well he sounded different really.

***Would he have been closer?***

Well he had a lot of ACA, if you see what I mean. He had a series of ACA, he could put the ACA in with good effect, that a layman think that “Oh, this is it” you see. I think it was a bit of David Curry<sup>6</sup> stuff you see...

***But I suppose you got on to asking him about the pipers of old?***

Oh yes, yes. Johnny Gorman visited that same house. He was a kind of a piper from Roscommon. He pre-deceased myself, you could say.

***So, O’Mealy must have heard him play?***

Oh yes, and he spoke well of him too. I said, “Could he vamp?” To the layman again, it’s good to use the regulators. “Oh yes”, he says. “Johnny would do as much on one regulator as others could do on...”

I suppose RL, we used to call him RL... lovingly... RL would only be looking for a beat or a drumstick talking about the regulator.

***So did you see O’Mealy’s workshop? Or was he doing any bit of work at that stage?***

I wouldn’t think he’d be doing much because, eh... anyway we didn’t see... we went up to the attic as I said before and his wife was up there with him. His wife was very helpful too – if he was playing an air and his memory was going a little bit, he’d nod to the missus and she’d come and hold the piece for him in front of him. She was very good that way.

He said that he thought that the Dublin pipers were shivering afraid of him. He mentioned one man – I won’t mention his name – there was a competition or... I don’t think it would be a competition because he thought he was above competition – a concert or something. And this man, he landed at the concert or the competition and he said he’d left his pipes in the tramcar because when he heard that O’Mealy was there he got scared. A well-known man on paper...

***I believe he had some fairly strong views on the quartet<sup>7</sup> as well?***

Oh yes... ..well, of course, he was mostly for solo piping...

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<sup>6</sup> Presumably Andy is talking here about the classically trained David Curry (1899-1971), leader and violinist with the BBC Northern Ireland Light Orchestra who were formed to perform Irish Traditional Dance Music. It doesn’t take much imagination to work out what Andy thought of what they did - all show with no substance!

<sup>7</sup> Leo Rowsome’s famous quartet was formed in the 1920s. The other members were Michael Padian, Tom Rowsome and Eddie Potts. In later years many others took part including Leon Rowsome, Andy Conroy, Tommy Reck, Willie Clancy, Willie Reynolds and Sean Seery.



***Who else did he talk about?***

He would speak of other people with scorn such as... I don't know can I mention names... Well, the pipers of that day that were in Belfast, shall we say? Yeah, I don't think you would mention them at all but if you mentioned them he might, kind of, let a grunt...

John Kelly:

***Did he ever meet or hear of Patsy Touhey or any of his records?***

He didn't seem to be up on that at all, about the Touhey thing...

Dave Hegarty:

***So, did you pay just the one visit to him or did you call regularly while you were working there?***

Oh, several times... When I went to live in Dublin I went back to him again, for visits because he had a heart condition and he used like whiskey and I used bring him whiskey from Dublin because you couldn't get it in Belfast during the war and he was very nice about it.

So, he died on St. Patrick's Day in 1948.

***You said he worked in Arnotts; was it Arnotts in Dublin?***

In Belfast; he was what they call a 'Floor Walker' sure, and I don't know what that is.<sup>8</sup>

Andy:

***John, you must have heard him on the radio***

John:

He seemed to have a very exciting style of playing; chopping... and he played with great speed - great gusto. I think if a man met him, like you, in the flesh, he'd make a great impression. There's few like him at the present day.

*[At this point the interview moves on to other matters]*

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<sup>8</sup> As floorwalker, R. L. would have been employed by Arnotts to direct and assist customers, and to supervise the sales staff.