

## Review

*Ó Am go hAm/From Time to Time: Tutor, Text and Tunes*  
Tommy Peoples  
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The publication of this extraordinary book lays down a new marker in writing about the lived experience of Irish traditional music. Tommy Peoples, one of the most distinctive musical voices within the Irish music tradition, transitions seamlessly between bow and pen to create a self-reflective masterpiece. In doing so, he opens up a new window onto the idiolect of a musical virtuoso whose life has been shaped by, and within, the practice of Irish traditional music.

A large and weighty tome, the book is divided physically in two sections both with separate content pages, the second of which appears half way through the book. The first section, 'Tutor', is a complete, if idiosyncratic, step by step description of Peoples' fiddle pedagogy. The second half, 'Tunes' contains 130 original compositions, constituting the first official such collection. All tunes appear notated in Peoples' distinctive hand, and some are further complemented by drawings such as 'The Mouse in the Attic' (273), and 'The Wishing Well' (361). Further illustrations and photographs are interspersed throughout the book's text. Underlying every aspect of the book is the importance of place, not least the alliterative Kinny Cally, Peoples' homeplace in Donegal and County Clare where he spent a significant part of his life. It gives detailed descriptions of music-making practices, transmission, performance and composition as they are tied to place as well as emotional attachments to the people that animate and are engendered by those places.

As a comprehensive tutor, it succeeds *The Irish Fiddle Book*, the gold standard on fiddle transmission by Matt Cranitch, now remarkably almost thirty years old (first published by Mercier in 1988). *Ó Am go hAm* provides instruction on music notation and theory, fiddle techniques and posture, and the production of tone which includes the mechanics, maintenance and acoustics of the fiddle itself. While Cranitch looks outwards to reflect on different styles and players, Peoples' digs deep into his own performance and teaching practices. He advises his learners to do likewise, acknowledging the "struggle" of learning and providing ample words of encouragement to his students along the way for "in that struggle lies a proof of their love of that music" (23). As memoir it has few comparable precedents within the Irish music tradition. It draws to mind the works of Paddy Tunney in its intertwining of practice and anecdote and at times the atmosphere of Ciaran Carson's *Last Night's Fun* with its ever-changing possibilities of tune configurations. However, it is through the realised synergy of the title's triplet "Tutor, Text and Tunes" that Peoples raises the bar, in terms of this experiential autobiography of Irish traditional music practice.

By presenting tunes as he might bow, phrase and finger them, he renders the methodology of one of the unique players of his era onto the written page, producing succinct descriptions of a finesse and exquisiteness in music-making that few have succeeded in emulating. The focus of this approach is located rigorously in the explication of bowing techniques. The description of his own bowing skills is one of

the most fascinating aspects of the tutor, as we get up close to how Peoples deconstructs verbally what he executes (magically) in performance. Rarely prescriptive, he suggests it is “easier to execute lightness or finer touch on an up-bow, as opposed to from the natural gravitational heaviness of a down-bow” (35). “You are in charge of the bow” he commands, “not the other way around ... you both become as one in that quest for musical expressions” (ibid). This is accompanied by unique symbols for up and down bows (although somewhat confusingly Peoples’ down bow symbol is the same as that given to an up bow in Western Art Music notation, 18). The particularity of bowing technique in the ornamentation of Donegal fiddling is noted by Cranitch who discerns the distinction in Peoples’ and his openness to a range of influences beyond his native Donegal (Cranitch 1998: 120). Peoples’ detailed bar-by-bar bowing options, devices and rhythmical alternatives, arguably represent a breakthrough in the articulation of technique, an analysis that, heretofore, has been the preserve of uilleann piping analysis and articulation.

This incredible detail is also an opportunity for Peoples to demystify his own legacy and includes a self-reflective engagement with his portrayal by others. He rejects as “Morse code for fiddlers”, Caoimhín Mac Aoidh’s worthy attempt at describing his unique bow hand. Mac Aoidh describes Peoples’ “crackling triplets, which involve various flicks of the bow hand, happening in a single bow stroke”. Unimpressed by this description, Peoples’ very gently informs the reader that in fact he actually bows the three notes separately (110-111).

The personal interpretation of tunes is a Peoples’ hallmark. Pedagogical insights into this transformation are revealed, for example, in the section on ‘The Humours of Glendart’ (24, 27). The ‘straight’ version of the tune is followed by the Peoples’ version (or one of them at least). Incorporating ornamentation, improvisation and variation, it is, quite literally, a tune changer, demonstrating the essence of the creative process at work. His own description of this process is concise: “to renovate, decorate and make it lived in, without pulling the structure apart” (43). He tackles phrasing, that enigmatic building block of Irish traditional music, warning against putting “notes together aimlessly” (23) and nailing inimitably a definition of phrasing; “every two bars becomes its own little story” (37). Ornamentation is “a mood altering substance” (25) and the finished tune product “a moulded musical gem so fine as to touch, caress and converse with a listening soul” (23).

He offers specific advice in relation to slow-air playing that incorporates both the physical and emotional, “that long-held F, which I would shade towards the E by altering the first finger pressure on the E string to slightly flatten the note ... allows the note to veer downward slightly towards and back to, hopefully, F” (64). He observes that all tunes “carry their own mood or emotion” and advocates that these be detected and expressed, yet that detection lies with the individual player. Humility underlies his instruction, “let your ears guide you” he advises (16). Where a genius of equivalent status might patronise, this tutor suggests a latent potential in all learners, that indeed we might all contribute subtle shades and colours to the Irish traditional music spectrum as exemplified by Tommy Peoples.

An underlying playfulness permeates the book, from the fat cats that replace treble clefs on page 257 to the slip jig with the “rare title”, ‘A Health to the Mother-in-Law’

(100). “Mother in laws are mostly much maligned and misunderstood” he proposes, “I played this tune a lot, but my mother in law never enquired as to its title” (100). Musical tongue in cheek jokes abound (106) and the naming of the tune ‘Jack Eez Dead’ releases the frivolity that accompanies (a timely) death (227). The writing is poetic and vibrant, enlivened by its use of direct speech and the present tense. Never appearing opinionated or patronising, it is an approach that enables the reader gain significant insights into Peoples’ musical sense of being in the world. For example he hopes that no injustice is done to Ed Reavy through his variation of a Reavy tune, “Being the generous soul that he was, I am sure that he’d tolerate my meddlesome nature”. In surmising the opinion of Reavy, Peoples shares his understanding of the role of variation within Irish traditional music. “I am sure that he was appreciative of the difference in players’ approaches, or styles, rather than expecting everyone to stick rigidly to a particular version of a tune or to act as clones of a particular player or style” (38).

While there is plenty of humour, there is never flippancy. The centrality of music is written into every page, evidenced from an early age when he first disappears over the wall of St Eunan’s school in Letterkenny to visit an elderly fiddle player. He is clear about his sense of nationalism, speaking frankly about partition and how this impacts on life close to the border. He demonstrates particular admiration for one of his teachers, Sam Nisbett, who moved to Glasgow, and eventually had to forgo his own (Protestant) family on account of continuing to consociate with the Peoples family when making return visits to Donegal. In the naming of the tune ‘Mary and Me’, he makes “no apology for the seeming ungrammatical use of the Queen’s English, as that same royalty took a lot more liberty in their extermination of Ireland’s language” (170).

One of Peoples’ earlier tune compositions ‘The Green Fields of Glentown’, has long been a popular, common even, session tune. However unlike other tunes whose names are lost as they meld into session soundscapes, the esoteric Donegal/Peoples flavour of this reel defies non-remembering, ensuring the reiteration of Peoples’ name in music-making contexts. Peoples explains that many of his tunes are named retrospectively.<sup>1</sup> The tune-naming process presents opportunities for commemorative acts as well as providing a useful story-telling device (which occurs not just in this book but on the sleeve notes of several of his recordings). Tune names present Peoples with an opportunity not just to invest meaning in the tunes themselves, but give testament to the role of music in his life by commemorating people and places tied to music-making.

The story of the naming of the tune ‘The Full Shilling’ presents a metacommunication about the othering of the Irish music tradition and the traditional life of an artist. In the story he recounts how he accepted a lift from a woman who, not realising the identity of her passenger, went on to describe Tommy Peoples in the course of their conversation as “not the full shilling”. The subsequent publication and explication of the tune title enables Peoples to respond and comment in a measured way on such experiences. Indeed of the 130 tunes listed, few are without a good story. However, he also displays a propensity for writing more programmatic music, demonstrated by the Commemorative Suite written for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ‘Flight of the Earls’ (145-154) and the purrs and meows of ‘The Fat Cat’ (257).

Peoples' compositional processes both challenge and confirm established narratives of his prodigious talent. He displays a comfortable relationship with manuscript, writing tunes directly to manuscript, giving the impression that they occur in his head, without recourse to the fiddle. The acquisition of music from the fairies is a long-standing trope associated with musical genius within the Irish tradition. Peoples does not disappoint in this regard, utilising his encounters with the otherworld as a medium through which to contextualise the musical riches with which he found himself surrounded and diverting his own musical proclivity elsewhere. As a diviner of highly regarded tunes, Peoples still leaves the reader aching for further insights into the tune-making process; as such this inscrutability remains a measure of his legacy.

Had the book passed through the hands of an editor, doubtless it would have been subject to significant cuts and refinements. Many of the photographs are undated, even less are attributed and the absence of an index is frustrating. Somewhat scattered geographically and chronologically, it oscillates between Donegal and Clare (and elsewhere), but this reflective perhaps of Peoples' own bi-location. His at-homeness in both places, however, is acknowledged in the text and the Donegal/Kilfenora duet is ever-present in his music-making. The most difficult to read part of the book, relates to the uncertainty and hurt caused by the death of his son Tommy in 1991 (234-244). A similar tenacity is revealed by transcriptions of conversations with Joe Derrane in relation to the composition of 'Gráinne's Jig' (283-290), and the section on protracted relations with Mulligan Records is cryptic at best (220). In the absence of sufficient critical distance from the subject matter, the unmediated result is somewhat jarring in its honesty. Equally, there is a raw edginess to the telling of his encounters with illness, alcohol and what he labels "the great doubt". While this is not a book about overcoming demons, it provides a prescient acknowledgement of such issues in the life of a professional musician.

By weaving his creative output of tune compositions into the narrative fabric of teaching and life experiences, Peoples presents the reader with at least some of the tools required to come to terms with and understand his unique musical syntax. Through the emotional beauty of his description of "what the music means to me" (29-30), comes the realisation that this book is both a crucible and a portal to Peoples' extraordinary musical legacy. With humility he hopes that all readers might "find something of use therein" and without doubt dipping into it "ó am go h-am" is an enduring prescription.

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<sup>i</sup> 'The Green Fields of Glentown' and 'La Cosa Mulligan' appear, without titles, in Breandan Breathnach's *Ceol Rince II* (Breathnach, 1976). Breathnach collected a further five tunes in 1968 from a youthful Peoples which also appear in *Ceol Rince II*, a timely recognition of his young talent in traditional composition and musicianship.