

MadFolk News

St. Paddy in America

By Emily Beebe

The winter days are growing longer, the cardinals are beginning to sing, and woodpeckers have officially entered migraine season. The air is filled with the stale odor of raccoon yawns. Sandhill cranes holler their arrival in the marshlands. In Wisconsin, those are the signs that St. Patrick's big day is just over the horizon at the end of that rainbow.

The official story is that Maewyn Succat, a fifth century Romano-Briton and son of a Christian priest, was stolen by Irish raiders and forced into slavery. In bondage he was said to have received a message from God about a boat waiting on the coast that would be his ticket to freedom. When that vision came true, he dedicated his life to the Christian Church, where he would eventually return to Ireland as a missionary and was credited to have converted many of the Pagan Irish to Catholicism. He was said to have used the three-leaf shamrock, a common and well-respected plant of the Gaelic tribes, as a symbol of the Holy Trinity. Maewyn (who had taken on the priestly persona of Patrick by then) was rather fond of blue, but history and nationalism had their way with tradition, and you all know what color he sports today.

Most famously, Patrick was said to have 'driven the snakes out of Ireland' and into the sea. What he probably didn't realize was that, those snakes were pretty good swimmers and ended up on the distant shores of North America where they discovered plenty of good rocks to warm up on. Centuries later, the Irish diaspora rediscovered their reptilian brethren and realized how much they still have in common. Together, they throw a great party every March in honor of their patron St. Pádraig, aka St. Paddy, who was canonized not by Pope, but by populace.

The week around March 17 is the Black Friday for Irish musicians in America. Music of the Emerald Isle is in high demand this time of year, and this month may be the only time many Irish musicians are reliably paid for their music with money, and if they're lucky, a free stout or two. These are the musicians who may have grown up learning to play slip jigs, slides, and reels, who can subtly ornament a fiddle tune without losing the rhythm, or have committed to memory long ballads in the Gaelic tongue.

In contrast to this vast collective trove of musical lore remembered and passed on by the Irish music community in America, a comprehensive list of songs a typical American audience expects to hear on St. Paddy's Day is as follows:

- Whiskey in the Jar
- Danny Boy
- Galway Girl
- When Irish Eyes are Smiling
- The Wild Rover
- Molly Malone
- Dirty Old Town
- I'm Looking Over a Four-Leaf Clover
- Anything by U2

Now there is nothing wrong with these or other familiar songs, as they are still tied to the spirit of the day. They are, however, but a drop of salt water in the stormy deep ocean of Irish traditional folkways. These songs and many others are anchored deeply in the harbor of the old snake music. Traditional tunes can be heard bobbing about in the waves of folk revival, punk, new age, and bluegrass genres. Sometimes ancient stories found in these songs are found fragmented in mountain, old-time, blues, or country music. Other songs are carried forward whole and nearly untouched by the centuries.

The serpent's tongue is not a dead one.

As Lazarus rose from the dead and the promise of resurrection is proclaimed in the catechism of the Irish Catholic Church, the traditions and musical lore of the Irish are constantly reimagined. Centuries of Irish composers, bards, and performers have continued to create new tradition from old. From Turlough O'Carolan to Tommy Peoples to Christy Moore to Paddy Moloney to the countless unknown tune writers who feed the well of Irish traditional music like an artesian spring, the music stays alive and forever changing with the times.

There is an almost tangible chain that links the soul of traditional Irish music to the spirit of the place that birthed the old songs. Many reels and jigs are cast in ancient modal keys that sound like the sun battling the clouds for its rightful share of the sky. The wild nature of Irish folk is ingrained in this music: civilized and industrious by day but untamed and loose as soon as the bodhrán is dampened and the bow rosined. When the old songs begin to spool out, the American audience understands a little more about this tenacious tribe, older than dirt, one toe always in the waters of imagination. One can't help but recognize something familiar, something so essentially human. This music drills down like the tap root of our species, and therefore it is the right of every Homo sapien to wear something green (although fundamentalists may wear blue) and become 'Irish' for a day.

If you find yourself drinking a pint at the neighborhood tap this March and you are graced with the company of a small band of musicians playing the familiar, celebratory songs we all like to sing along with, be sure to tip them generously and buy them a round. Most importantly, ask them to play a nice long set of their favorite tunes. In doing so you may feel an old and familiar presence enter the room and take a seat near the fire.

We apologize for neglecting to include the byline of the writer of last month's front page article, The Golden Guide to Folk Musicians. We welcome Emily Beebe as a new and exciting contributor to MadFolk News. In addition to her exciting style of writing, she is a musician, hootenany organizer and co-organizer with her husband, Chris, of the Baraboo String Gathering in April.

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• Sat, Mar 5th - Humbird / Her Crooked Heart - @8:30pm - \$20

• Thu, Mar 10th - New Pioneers - @7pm - \$13

• Sat, Mar 12th - Bill Camplin & Michael Hecht - @8pm - \$10

• Thu, Mar 17th - Larry Unger w/ Audrey Knuth - @7:30pm - \$12

• Fri, Mar 25th - Lucy Kaplansky - @8:30pm - \$22.50

• Sat, Mar 26th - Lonesome Bill Camplin - @8pm - \$10



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• Thu, Mar. 10th, 2022, 8pm - The Faux Paws @ North Street Cabaret, 610 North Street, Madison, \$13-\$20

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SOMETIMES A CLOUD IS JUST A CLOUD - FRUIT BATS

2021 - PARKING LOT PANIC ATTACK RECORDS



Review by Kiki Schueler

Sometimes a Cloud Is Just a Cloud could just as easily be subtitled Greatest Should Have Been Hits. Despite a two-decade career and eight studio records (half of them released on Sub Pop) filled with smart, immensely listenable songs, Eric Johnson's Fruit Bats could hardly be considered mainstream, though they do enjoy a fervent fan base and a certain cult status. Curated by Johnson himself, Cloud consists of a two LP set, on pink and violet swirl vinyl no less, each of which is sequenced in reverse chronological order. The first record spans these twenty years with eleven album cuts ranging from Gold Past Life (2019) all the way back to Echolocation (2001). With a nice mix of fan and band favorites, this is the record you play for what Johnson calls "the Fruit Bat-curious." In the (inexplicable) spirit of many a greatest hits collection, it kicks off with a new one. "Rips Me Up" was recorded as part of the 2021 Pet Parade pandemic sessions, but wasn't right for that record. Drenched in spacey soulfulness and big backing vocals, it's evocative of Canadian folkie Bahamas, who has ridden that sound to significant acclaim. At first, I questioned including the "Live at Spacebomb" version of "When U Love Somebody" rather than the infectious original from 2003's Mouthfuls, but this slower version may be truer to its lyrical heartbreak.

For those who are already initiated to the charm of the band, sides three and four are where the magic lives. Demos, unreleased songs, and a curious cover, were unearthed from several hard drives to reveal an impressive consistency in quality going all the way back to the band's origins. The 4-track demos of "Rainbow Sign" and "The Old Black Hole," the studio versions of which are included on their first two releases, are impressive and nearly fully formed. Thankfully they dropped the echoey chirp from the final version of the former, while the latter received only the lightest of polish to be album-worthy. Another demo, "Barely Living Room," suffers from a strangely distracting use of the word "fescue," though that might just be me. On the other hand, the "(Waltz Demo)" of "Baby Bluebird" from 2016's terrific Absolute Loser is pleasantly reminiscent of Bob Dylan's experimentations with tempo heard on his Bootleg Series.

Two of the most exciting tracks according to Johnson (and he's not wrong) are a pair from the days of recording 2011's The Tripper. "WACS" features a guest appearance from Dinosaur Jr's J Mascis, who definitely hits the accelerator on the record's most up-tempo track. Richard Swift, who worked with a who's who of indie folk and rock artists, and who passed away in 2018, plays an expressive piano on the intimate and engaging waltz "When the Stars Are Out." If you have ever thought that Steve Miller's ubiquitous "The Joker" would have been better served on acoustic guitar, you are in luck. Johnson's unironic take is sweet, impassioned, and subtly brilliant.

The record's title comes from a line in "Cazadera," a song from

Gold Past Life included on disc one. It's a deceptively simple lyric worth thinking about, a similarly true take on Freud's apocryphal cigar. And while you ponder that, consider that while the Fruit Bats first record was titled Echolocation, fruit bats are the only bat that don't use it. Better yet, just enjoy Cloud for what it is, a stellar collection of music from an underappreciated band.

Mad Folk News is published monthly by the Madison Folk Music Society, a non-profit, volunteer-led society dedicated to fostering folk music in the Madison area.

Contact us at madfolk@charter.net. Learn about concerts, membership, scholarships, and volunteer opportunities at www.madfolk.org.

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Peter Berryman

PATTER SONGS

*Master Pastor with his ghetto blaster
prays for platinum pews
while the Right Wing whines
on a set designed
to remind us of the actual news*

*Doctor Do-lots deals out flu shots
to workers on the medium rungs
while Michael rows his boat up his nose
and now there's oars in his lungs*

Those are excerpted lyrics from a song by the brilliant Rick Burkhardt, formerly and occasionally half of the magical duo called the Prince Myshkins, the other half of which is the similarly brilliant Andy Gricevich now living in Madison last I heard. Rick is all over the place, currently I think in New York City. Funny how you can email back and forth for weeks and neglect to ascertain where somebody actually has their chassis rusting.

The subject for this **Whither Zither** is the **PATTER SONG**. Let me know if I've already written about this. I have Whither Zithers poking out the windows by now; turns out they don't flush very well, and with my fading memory skills, it's hard to know when I'm repeating myself. It's hard to know when I'm repeating myself. Anyway in my estimation, the Rick Burkhardt song from which I stole the above verse falls into the category of the patter song.

So what is a "patter song"? According to **Wikipedia**, "*The patter song is characterised by a moderately fast to very fast tempo with a rapid succession of rhythmic patterns in which each syllable of text corresponds to one note.*"

This song style is pretty much the opposite of many current pop stylings (excluding Rap) which tend to be melismatic. A "melisma" is a group of notes sung to one syllable of text. For example, in **Angels We Have Heard On High**, the word "Gloria" is sung melasmatically (*Glo, oh oh oh oh oh, oh oh oh oh oh, oh oh oh oh oh, ree-ah*). Quite a melisma. As I say, it's a popular device these days, used extensively by

75% of the singing contestants on shows like **American Idol**. You find melisma in showtunes such as "**Where is Love**" from Lionel Bart's **Oliver** ("*Whey-ey-ey-ey-ere, is love...*"), each "ey" on a different note. It's an ancient device used worldwide, but it's not found in patter songs.

Speaking of musicals, patter songs ARE fairly common as show tunes. **Trouble**, from **The Music Man**, is often given as an example of a patter song. **Reviewing the Situation**, from the above mentioned **Oliver**, is also noted as a patter song:

*I'm reviewing the situation.
If you want to eat, you've got to earn a bob!
Is it such a humiliation
For a robber to perform an honest job?
So a job I'm getting, possibly,
I wonder who my boss'll be?
I wonder if he'll take to me...?
What bonuses he'll make to me...?
I'll start at eight and finish late,
At normal rate, and all.but wait!
I think I'd better think it out again.*

Note the crazy rhyme scheme that finishes with a fireworks of rhyming the four words eight, late, rate, and wait, all within two lines. And the other internal rhymes like "make to me" and "take to me." And the tricky rhyme of "boss'll be" and "possibly." Patter songs often have this sort of wordplay, and almost always with one syllable per note.

You find patter songs in folk music, too, as in **Katy Cruel** that Peggy Seeger sings:

*When I first came to town
They brought me drinks of plenty
Now they've changed their tune
And hand me bottles empty
If I was where I would be
Then I'd be where I am not
Here I am where I must be
Where I would be, I cannot*

And many of Chuck Berry's songs could be called Patter Songs. One of my favorites is **Nadine**:

*Downtown searching for 'er,
Looking all around
Saw her getting in a yellow cab
Heading up town
I caught a loaded taxi,
Paid up everybody's tab
Flipped a twenty dollar bill,
Told him "Catch that yellow cab..."*

I imagine most rap songs* could be considered patter songs, however usually the genre of "patter song" is considered a comic genre. There are rap songs that incorporate humor, of course, but many of them don't (or I don't get the jokes). Rap DEFINITELY incorporates wordplay, and that in itself can be funny, so it's hard to say how much the concepts of rap and patter songs overlap. As a matter of fact, the parameters of "patter song" are generally blurry. Many of the songs that my music partner Lou and I have written I can't decide whether to call "patter songs" or not! For example, we have written quite a few "catalog songs," which are songs made up of lists. Not sure if they qualify as patter songs, but they do have many of the required features.

In fact, Tom Lehrer's catalog song **The Elements**, written to the tune of **The Major General's Song** from patter song geniuses Gilbert and Sullivan in their **Pirates of Penzance**, is just a list of the elements. However it's often used as a prime example of the "patter song:"

*There's antimony, arsenic,
aluminum, selenium
And hydrogen and oxygen
and nitrogen and rhenium
And nickel, neodymium,
neptunium, germanium
And iron, americium,
ruthenium, uranium...*

So like almost everything else these days, the properties of the patter song are open to debate, though with some dittys, it would be hard to deny them the label. For example, here's a verse from Noel Coward's **Mad Dogs and Englishmen**, unquestionably a patter song:

*In the Philippines
There are lovely screens
To protect you from the glare.
In the Malay States
There are hats like plates
Which the Britishers won't wear.
At twelve noon
The natives swoon
And no further work is done.
But mad dogs and Englishmen
Go out in the midday sun.-- Noel Coward*

*FYI, the current record for fastest rapper is held by Domingo Edjang Moreno, who rapped 921 syllables in one minute on December 23, 2008. (**Wikipedia**)

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