



A TRADITION CONTINUES

WITH HARRY O'DONOGHUE

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIOBHAN EGAN



SOUNDS OF LAUGHTER

and singing echo down River Street in Savannah on a cool Thursday evening. Passersby poke their heads in curiously.

Some come in and linger by the door to watch and listen. Maybe it's familiar. Maybe it's not. But many are drawn to the sometimes upbeat and sometimes sad melodies and lyrics of folksinger, songwriter, and storyteller, Harry O'Donoghue, the most Irish man in Savannah.

O'Donoghue jokes easily with the audience in the dining room of Kevin Barry's Irish Pub where he has been a regular act since he moved to Savannah in the 1980s. On stage at the pub he plays the guitar and the bodhrán, an Irish drum, while singing traditional Irish folksongs and some originals, all the while entertaining the crowd with quick witty stories.

"The stories I tell are just personal stories about home, about my family. They don't go on at length. They're just snippets," says O'Donoghue.

He also likes to give a little history about some of the songs he sings. "There's a reason for these songs and that extends to

original songs. People like to know what, where, how and why, but it depends on the audience.

"There's a lot of humorous content in what I do, which is not really, is it, story-telling? I don't know. It's humor. Irish people have sharp wit and a lot of humor. And part of what I wanted to bring to an audience is that, that spark of wit and self effacing humor that kind of juxtaposes with the darker side of the culture."

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Folk music and ballads were a big influence on O'Donoghue's musical development. His earliest influences included The Beatles and Roy Orbison.

"People have this assumption about Ireland that we all grew up listening to trad[i-tional] bands and certainly that's true on the west coast and the northwest and southwest, and some instances in the east, but I never found Drogheda to be a particularly traditional town. A lot of great musicians, but the way I leaned was more lyric heavy so it was a folk, ballad kind of thing..."

Harry grew up in Drogheda, a town 35 minutes north of Dublin on the banks of





Harry O'Donoghue delights a crowd at Kevin Barry's Irish Pub in Savannah

the River Boyne in Ireland. It is a town with a lot of history dating back to Neolithic times. They boast a most unusual relic, the head of St. Oliver Plunkett, which is on display in a shrine at St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church where O'Donoghue was an altar boy.

He bought his first guitar at the age of 20, receiving lessons from a friend who would later go on to co-found the band Terra Nova with O'Donoghue. After moving to Philadelphia from Ireland in 1980, O'Donoghue formed Terra Nova. He then found himself in Stanton, California playing at the Irish Rover. He traveled back and forth between Philadelphia and California over the next couple of

years. After settling back in Philadelphia in 1982, he traveled around playing in St. Louis, Houston, New Orleans, and Wilmington, Delaware. He was invited to Savannah in 1983 by a cousin living on Tybee Island, started playing at Kevin Barry's, and soon after he moved to Savannah permanently.

O'Donoghue sees some connections between Southern and Irish cultures.

"Certainly in music. Appalachian and country is very much a part of our culture. I find Southern culture to be similar to Ireland in day-to-day activity. I like it here. It's friendly. It reminds you a little bit of home. There is that kind of a more



welcoming thing with a slower pace of life. That reminds me of home.”

The development of the Irish community in Savannah was different than other parts of the country according to O’Donoghue.

“The Irish community here grew from a point in time where there was no going back to Ireland. We don’t understand that. I don’t understand that. Immigration is a word I don’t really understand because I can hop a flight and go home. When my mom and dad were alive I was going home six times a year. I would leave here on Wednesday and come back on Sunday. But when these people came it was a one-way thing.

“And I think they bonded together and from that sprang these traditions that still hold true today. The Savannah Irish have their own traditions that they have been doing for many, many, many years and it’s a part of their culture with the greening of the fountain and the inauguration of the grand marshal and it’s every bit as relevant as anything else in any other aspect of Irish culture. The second biggest Irish parade in America is here. It’s pretty impressive.”

O’Donoghue stays busy performing around the world. He often travels to Buffalo, N.Y. to perform and spends several weeks playing on a Norwegian Cruise line ship, the Dawn. He and his wife operate a tour company *O’Donoghue Tours*, that organizes tours to Ireland at least once a year.

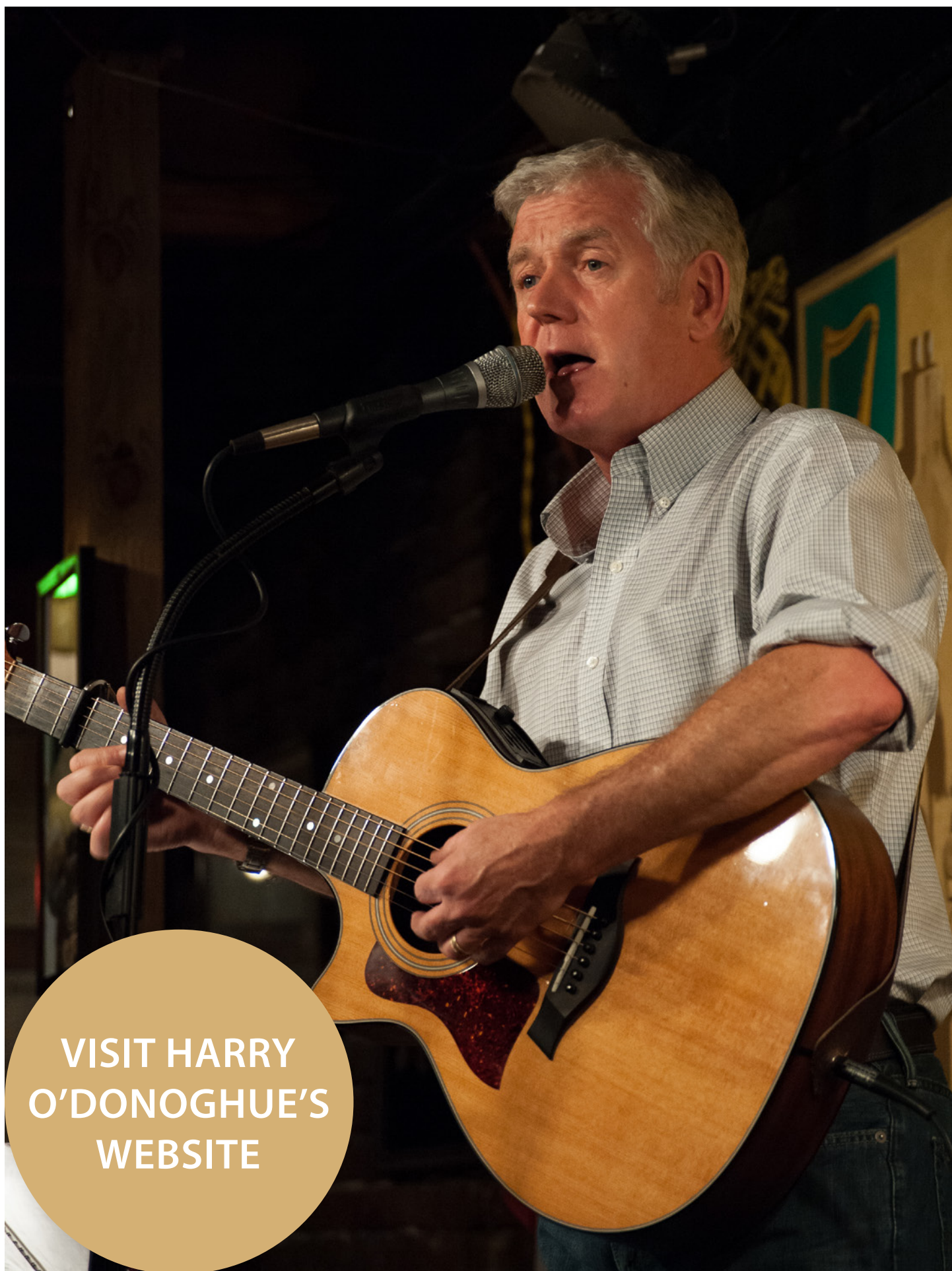
He always brings his guitar and plays at the local pubs sometimes with other musicians and sometimes solo. This year’s tour will take them to Cork and Kerry in July.

Many people tune in weekly to *The Green Island Radio Show* where he has been the host and co-producer for 22 years of the Georgia Public Broadcasting radio show, which plays Irish and Celtic music. With big changes happening at GPB he’s not sure if the show will continue. “We’d like to keep it going if possible,” says O’Donoghue.

You can see Harry O’Donoghue play regularly at Kevin Barry’s Irish Pub on River Street as well as several other locations throughout the Lowcountry. O’Donoghue also has a Christmas tour that takes him from Atlanta to Tampa and the Palladium in St. Petersburg, FL, for a Christmas concert.

Where will he be for St. Patrick’s Day? During the day he will play at Katie O’Donnell’s in Bluffton and Kevin Barry’s in the evening. He will also be playing at the Tara Feis on Saturday, March 15 at Emmet Park along with a slew of Irish musicians, dancers, and entertainers.

“I’m lucky enough to do a lot of concerts so I get the opportunity to put together a play list, a set list, and to work the show from point A to point F and include in there some spoken word and some humor and the like,” O’Donoghue said. “So I’m lucky.”



VISIT HARRY
O'DONOGHUE'S
WEBSITE