

SPOTLIGHT



Judith Burrows

Matt Molloy, Ry Cooder, Paddy Moloney, Kevin Conneff, Seán Keane

THE CHIEFTAINS

Finding a vivid common ground between Ireland and Mexico

THE IRISH ARE DESERVEDLY PROUD of their talent for telling tall tales. But even Chieftains founder Paddy Moloney had a hard time believing the story behind his group's ambitious new album, *San Patricio*, based on the story of a battalion of Irish expatriates who fought against Americans in the Mexican War.

"There's a Catholic Irishman, John Riley, who came from Galway to America," explains Moloney, who co-produced the album with roots maven Ry Cooder. "He was given a rifle and told to go down there and shoot Catholic Mexicans under the command of Protestant generals. That was what he had left behind in Ireland!"

Instead, Riley defected to the Mexican Army and helped to form Saint Patrick's Battalion. They fought five battles before being defeated just outside Mexico City at the Battle of Churubusco. "It was their Alamo, you might say," Moloney notes. "But there was no surrender."

What could have been a eulogy became a celebration in the Chieftains' hands. The goal, says Moloney, was "not to make it a doom-and-gloom thing, but expand it and use all the lovely colors of their music from all the regions of Mexico." After delving into

research, Moloney began finding similarities between Mexican and Irish musical traditions. "It was fascinating," he says. "And where I didn't hear an Irish tune, I made one up!"

Not that the translation was always easy. "There are times where their rhythms jump a bit in the middle of the piece, whereas our rhythms are sort of set," he observes. "You hear the off-beats of the guitar and the back line jumping back and forth. It's difficult enough, but terrific when you get into it."

Meanwhile, Cooder's knowledge of Mexican styles came in handy, as did his address book. "I was 90 percent of the way done, and he introduced me to some of the singers and acts that I wanted, plus some of the sounds that were missing," Moloney says.

Among the talents the group tapped were Linda Ronstadt, Van Dyke Parks and actor Liam Neeson, who served as narrator of the climactic battle scene. "When Liam was finished, he was full of passion!" recalls Moloney. "He said, 'Boy, if somebody's going to do a film, I want to play the commander!'"

Hollywood, you've been alerted—and the soundtrack is all ready.

—Bob Cannon