

# CLEFS OF MOHER

## A MUSICAL TOUR OF IRELAND

Tim Moher, the Kitchener Ontario based leader of the Clefs of Moher Celtic Jazz ensemble talks to IMM's Seán Laffey about musical routes and Irish roots.



Photo : Chow Man Choi Photograph

The late Professor Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin brought a jazz sensibility to traditional music when he popularised the term Hiberno-jazz. Tim Moher approaches his Celtic Jazz from 180 degrees, his eleven-piece Clefs of Moher Celtic Jazz Ensemble combining elements of traditional music with their long established jazz aesthetic.

"I began, before high school, playing the clarinet. As a teenager I attended a jazz concert in a hotel conference room in Toronto.

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The orchestra on the night was led by trumpeter Maynard Ferguson, probably one of Canada's most famous jazz musicians, much in demand for soundtrack work in Hollywood. I knew then I wanted to play jazz like Maynard. I went home, told my parents who were obviously sceptical, but I tempered my ambition by promising to make a living as a teacher." Tim taught music for the Waterloo Catholic District School Board, retiring in 2016.

The clarinet was set aside and Tim took to the Saxophone. "Back then there were no courses in jazz at my university, so my training was in classical saxophone. I became an avid reader, which held me in good stead when it came to teaching myself jazz." He studied jazz from Jamey Aebersold's play along records. Comparatively recently Tim joined the *KW Big Band Theory* to play "difficult music, music that is technically challenging but always fun".

Tim has deep Irish roots; his forebears on both sides of his family came to Canada pre-Confederation and pre-famine, between 1825 and 1845, 60% of all immigrants to Canada were Irish. "It was always something I knew about but it wasn't until I started reading about Irish emigration to Canada that I became enthralled by the Irish experience of the country. Knowing that my own story is part of that movement was truly inspiring," he said.

Tim decided to come to Ireland in 2014. "I intended to just have the one visit, the 'tick it off the bucket-list holiday'. Heading back home on the plane I turned to my wife and said, 'we are definitely going back to Ireland, one day soon'."

The Clefs of Moher came together in 2015 to perform for an annual series of Multiple Sclerosis fundraisers at the Conrad Centre for the Performing Arts in Kitchener. Tim and his collaborators Paul Stouffer and Rick Hutt, writing pieces coloured by Irish traditional tunes; he admits it was music he'd adsorbed by ear inspired in part by listening to Keith Donald's work with *Moving Hearts*. Tim's composition *Wicklow Mountain* won a major award in Canada, and from there he met traditional players who gave him advice about creating the sounds he was hearing.

"With the Clefs of Moher I've had the opportunity to write original Celtic Jazz, and although I had been playing for a quarter of a century, this was my first truly deep dive into composition. I begin by writing out what I call chicken scratch tunes, the basic melodies, then I pass those onto a friend, Rick Hutt, who creates all of the harmonic layers and then another friend uses Sibelius software to create parts for the ensemble. The folks in the Clefs of Moher are all excellent readers so once the score settles in and we get into rehearsals, the sound matures from there. We have some brilliant players in the ensemble, like the young guitarist David Hjin and the fiddler Shane Gusé. Shane is so versatile and can play in all sorts of Celtic styles, Irish, Scottish, Cape Breton, and Western swing."

Tim says he is lucky being retired, as outside of events such as the Sun Life Uptown Waterloo Jazz Festival, performance work is now thin on the ground. "We do play concerts in churches and community halls in the Province and once the Covid pandemic is behind us we will be back on that circuit I'm sure. We are grateful

to the Regional Waterloo Arts Fund for financial support for the new Clefs of Moher CD."

Tim is planning to bring the Clefs of Moher as a fan tour to Ireland in 2022; he is already looking for suitable venues. Even further ahead there's a project forming in his head, which will deal with Irish immigration to Canada, telling the story of a people on the move and the music that they brought along with them.

**Find out more at [www.clefsfmoher.com](http://www.clefsfmoher.com)**

