

tommy makem: THE BARD OF ARMAGH

Tommy Makem is an extraordinary individual. The author of "Four Green Fields" began his career as a member of the Irish folk group "the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem," one of the leading groups of the 1960's folk scene. In 1969 he left the group for a solo career, and in 1975, after being persuaded to do one set together at a folk festival, the duo of "Makem and (Liam) Clancy" was born. This duo lasted until 1988 when Makem returned to his solo career.

What makes Makem such a unique figure is hard to pinpoint. It is evident that he still has the zeal for performing of a — despite over 40 years in show business. On stage, Makem combines his skill as a storyteller (he's a walking encyclopedia of Irish folklore), poet and musician (on the banjo, tin whistle and bodhran) with his wonderful voice. Leading his captivated audiences through a succession of touching ballads, Irish rebel songs, and none sense songs — occasionally broken by a lesson in Irish history or a piece of slightly cheesy humor ("What did the snail say as he hitched a ride on the tortoise? YIPPIE!" as he flings his head and arms into the air sends the entire audience into a fit of laughter) — he comes across as the perfect ambassador for his native Ireland. In fact, Makem is such an embodiment of Irish culture that he served as Prince Edward Island's musical ambassador for the 1990 summer promotion "Year of the Irish," which saw him perform a series of concerts across the

province, as well as appear in that year's tourism ads.

Recently I had the opportunity to speak with Makem on a variety of subjects ranging from his upcoming schedule to his thoughts on the Irish peace process.

Ryan O'Connor: How busy are you these days, and how do you spend your free time?

Tommy Makem: Ah, well, I don't have very much free time, and to answer your first question I'm very, very busy. At the minute I'm working on, I'm doing a one man show that I've written, in New York the last week of September [to] the last week of October at the Irish Repertory Theatre. It's based on "The Book of Invasions," it has to do with Irish mythology — that's the first half of the program. The second half of the program I'll be doing poetry and songs, and I'm getting the music written up for that at the minute, so I'm getting music together...this is out of sequence.

The 20th of August I go to Milwaukee to do the Irish festival...that's the weekend of the 20th, 21st, 22nd of August; that's the biggest Irish festival, I would say probably in the world...The 26th I'm doing something for a local project that's going on here in Dover, New Hampshire where I live. The 27th, I'm in Lowell, Massachusetts; the 28th I'm at the Newport (folk) Festival in Rhode Island; the 29th I go to

Ireland, and the 30th we begin taping two one-hour television specials for public television here in the States...The 12th of September I'm in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and the next week I start rehearsals for the show that I'm doing...there's a bunch of stuff after that, so it's fairly hectic at the minute.

RO: Any plans now for a new album?

TM: I just don't have time to get around to it at the minute. Maybe sometime later on in the year sometime I'll get the chance to do something. But I have to record instrumental music for the television series...

RO: Do you follow the East Coast music in Canada?

TM: I know a number of people involved, a number of them. As a matter of fact, when I was up in Sydney [Nova Scotia]...I was coming back and the Barra MacNeils

were recording a Christmas album, and I stopped off to do a Christmas poem which will probably be on their album.

RO: Seeing as you've been playing so long, where's the incentive to get up in front of a crowd come from?

TM: It comes back from your audience; I'm sure you would've felt some of it in Glace Bay [I attended a Tommy Makem concert there on May 16th, 1999]. But when you're up on stage and you're doing a concert, and you can feel that you're moving people in some way — whether it's to tears or laughter or joy or whatever — if you're moving them and you feel it coming back to you on stage it's the greatest thrill anyone can feel.

RO: How do you go about learning new songs?

TM: It's a bit of everything. There'd be songs that I'd have

