

# *The Dixies* *a Northside* *Showband*

A celebratory appearance by a re-assembled by Stephen Hunter

line-up of Cork showband the Dixies at the Arcadia Ballroom, Lower Glanmire Road, on Easter Sunday, 1997, was a resounding success. That a group with its origins in the mid-1950s should still attract an audience of hundreds is testimony to its enduring appeal. It all began with weekly Trad Jazz sessions at the Shandon Boat Club. The original core of Sean Lucey (leader and clarinet), Theo Cahill (trombone) and zany drummer Joe McCarthy was soon augmented by Larry Neville (trumpet) and Mick Murphy (piano). In the late '50s Jimmy Mintem (singer/saxophone), Christie O'Mahony (bass), Finbarr O'Leary (keyboards), Steve Lynch



(guitar) and John Sheehan (trumpet) arrived. (Personnel changes have been simplified). Becoming fully professional in 1961 the band added Brendan O'Brien as lead vocalist. Virtually all these players were Northsiders, mostly educated at the Christian Brothers' North Monastery School. Several had come to music through the Butter Exchange Band. Innovative promoter and Arcadia manager Peter Prendergast was pivotal to much of their success.

With the first great blossoming of the mid-to-late '60s came No.1 hit recordings, sell-out concerts (4,300 punters jammed into the Arc' one St. Stephen's Night; bill-topping at New York's Carnegie Hall), triumphal

returns to Cork, an audience with Pope Paul VI, stints in Las Vegas. Then an amicable break-up in 1972. Reforming in 1982 the band enjoyed a remarkable resurgence, with landmark tours of the Arabian Gulf. O'Brien's near fatal 1974 encounter with a live microphone on-stage at the Stardust Ballroom (on Grand Parade, now the Waterside Hotel) and his exhausting legal battles for compensation have passed



*Brendan O'Brien*

into popular history. Relative "youngster" (born 1948) Terry McCarthy has mostly filled the lead vocal spot since 1985. The music, rooted in Trad Jazz, Pop and Rock classics from the '50s to the '90s, has perennial attractions, not the least of which is a versatile and exuberant hornsection.

I wanted to retrieve something of the spirit of this era's late '50s to early '70s glory days before it faded from general remembrance. "Examiner" journalist Vincent Power's admirable book "Send 'Em Home Sweating" was a good startingpoint. I interviewed past and present Dixies, promoters, members of the dancing public. Vintage copies of "Spotlight" (a 1960s magazine) yielded a wealth of information on clothing and hairstyles.

Most men wore dark suits to dances, sharply-cut with narrow trouser legs, lighter-hued shirts. Pointed "winkle-picker" shoes, later "Beatle" and "Chelsea" boots. Hair heavily oiled and slicked down, dragged around the sides of the head to meet in the "duck's arse" style. During the '60s these tended to give place to flared trousers and longer hair with an un-oiled "natural" look. Womens' styles included "A-line"



dresses ending above the knee, with a cardigan or jacket of contrasting colour. Footwear was usually practical for dancing - sturdy "court-heels" on "slingback" shoes. Great care went into the preparation of bouffant-type "beehive" hairstyles, with the hair piled on top of the head. Short-strapped handbags; a string of pearls worn around the neck and an accompanying "twinset" of earrings

and a bracelet.

Before television became ubiquitous, the dances offered young people a window onto a wider and more sophisticated world. When Brendan O'Brien sang Buddy Holly songs or the Waterford-based Brendan Bowyer (Royal Showband) gyrated in imitation of Elvis the identities of these local heroes became fused with those of distant, fabled stars. Denunciations of this "devil's music" from some priestly pulpits only increased its allure for the young. Obliging, the horned-one himself made some cameo appearances at a number of halls, generating something of a minor wave of hysteria.

A story from the Arcadia has many variants. A young woman dancing with a handsome stranger dropped her shawl onto the floor. Stooping to retrieve it she was horrified to discover that her partner possessed cloven hooves instead of human feet. She ran screaming from the hall, the sinister beau vanishing in the confusion.

Less frivolously, I have had accounts from credible witnesses concerning strange phenomena in the same building, the "Blue Room" (often used for practice sessions) in particular. An uneasy atmosphere, intense cold, sudden untraceable gusts of wind. Some musicians would not play there after midnight. One

night the proprietor was working alone, all doors and windows locked. From above the stage he saw an unknown man walk across the dance-floor. He called out, ran to investigate, but found no one. Whatever the explanations, these reports are fascinating additions to the corpus of tales of the unexplained that attaches itself to theatres and auditoria.

But most patrons were bent on pleasures of a palpably physical kind, (albeit relatively innocent by 1990s standards). The ambitious policies of Taoiseach Sean Lemass encouraged an unprecedented wave of economic expansion. Workers from building sites and factories such as Ford's and the Sunbeam Mills, paypackets often swollen with shift allowances and overtime payments, eagerly awaited the weekend. A sea-change was taking place in Irish society as courting rituals changed and sexual mores gradually liberalised. People were coming to terms with a difficult legacy of poverty and emigration, foreign domination, civil war and the birthpangs of the new state. They felt that a good time was long overdue and showbands such as the Dixies were there to help provide it. Throughout the '60s the Dixies and other bands made a regular exodus to the U.K. to find work during Lent because Irish halls were closed for the period. This state of affairs was not destined to last much longer. For better or worse, a shift was being effected from a traditional agriculturally-based world with its slower rhythms and conservative customs to a modern internationalist ethos.

At its peak the showband boom provided employment directly to some 12,000 people. The bubble burst in the early '70s, brought on by a whole complex of social changes. People wanted more comfort than the big halls provided (most had been unlicensed to sell alcohol, the "minerals bar" being a fixture). The rise of discotheques, more intimate lounges and smaller guitar-based bands (most showbands had six to ten members) all played their part. The greed and short-sightedness of some hall-owners and musicians contributed, as did television. The Dixies, in various incarnations, still perform in pub lounges such as Blackpool's Bridge Inn or Mayfield's Cotton Ball, and look poised to play on into the next Millennium. Their achievement as contributors to popular culture is secure. A generous entry in the Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music, falling between 1980s Australian avant-garde rockers the Divinyls and Black American blues great Willie Dixon, provides ample

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