

ALL AT SEA WITH JOANIE MADDEN

Paul Keating experiences a floating festival in the company of Joanie Madden and Cherish the Ladies.



Aboard the Norwegian Gem on the Sunday of the Memorial Day Weekend on a brilliant sunlit afternoon, the Norwegian Gem cruised down the Hudson River into the spacious New York Harbour that was teeming with vessels of all shapes and sizes past those monuments to US immigration: Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty.

Picturesque as that photogenic departure from the Big Apple was, it only the start of an extraordinary celebration of Irish heritage and culture for seven hundred fortunate travellers embarking on the fifth annual *Joanie Madden Folk 'N Irish Cruise* on its second year departing from Madden's home port of New York. As you would expect from the first lady of Irish Traditional music in the USA, there would be many magical musical moments over the course of six days at sea and I was very glad to have witnessed many of them as part of the sleep-deprived minions who follow the dynamic entertainer and impresario of land and sea.

As we sailed past the Verazano–Narrows Bridge and Coney Island and Breezy Point charting a Northward course into the broad Atlantic, the late afternoon sunshine disappeared and we were enveloped into a thick fog that would remain virtually all the time we were at sea. It was as if we were being transported to the mythical “Brigadoon” because the non-stop entertainment beginning with the Bon Voyage Party in the Spinnaker Lounge high atop the 13th Deck set the tone straightaway that many memories would be made of this cruise no matter about the weather or the ports of call in Halifax, St. John or Portland.

Though our compliment of 75 entertainers and Madden staffers and 625 paying customers only made up a third of the ship's capacity that week (the ship holds 2,400 usually), you would never know it by the level of activity and excitement that surrounded the over one hundred separate events programmed by Madden and her team and six evening

concerts in the premier venue shipboard, the Stardust Theater, that comprised two decks in the aft section of the ship. (In the interest of full disclosure, your correspondent was part of the staff and programmer team). Trying to pull off a Floating Fleadh or Festival at sea becomes a very daunting and challenging task when available time slots in shared shipboard venues and weather of a still early itinerary to the Maritime climes of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Maine have to be factored in.

The fiercely determined and creative Madden, who has kept her own troupe Cherish the Ladies on the road for 31 years, valiantly worked with the challenges at hand and was fully confident that the multi-talented entertainers she had onboard would give their all to ensure the audience would enjoy all the varied shows during their nautical adventure. Ms. Madden, who celebrated her own 50th Birthday on last year's cruise out of New York has fond affection and loyalty for many performers she has witnessed and worked with who have plied Irish stages big and small over the decades. Her years of intrepid “research” far and wide, early and late have produced an unrivalled rolodex of artists who not only can perform at peak levels but can mix and mingle among their audiences and peers without a penchant for hogging the spotlights. That is a primary prerequisite aboard the Folk 'N Irish Cruise for her annual assembled crew whose seasoned talents truly make this “The Big Session on the High Seas” both day and night resulting in many original collaborations during the course of the cruise.

Gauging from the smiles, laughter and vigorous applause at the well-attended private functions Madden's guests signed on for, this was the norm. There is nothing routine about this cruise so sleep cycles and daytime patterns were joyously disturbed with all the talent onboard from aft to stern. Long days at sea offered music and dance workshops, quizzes, movies like *Older Than Ireland*, *Brooklyn* and even the Irish Catskills documentary subtitled *Dancing at the Crossroads*. I made the point at the later film that the sense of community—sharing and dedication to keeping the Irish heritage alive and preserved for the next Generation while enjoying a bit of “Ould Ireland” in the Catskills evolved into the popularity of Irish entertainment cruises like this one from the States and also for other mainstream Irish cruises like Gertrude Byrnes and Andy Cooney.

Lectures like the Harp Music of Turlough O'Carolan and the Dance Music of Ireland delivered by the superb harpist and neophyte cruiser Cormac de Barra from Dublin showed the kind of added value and information the tour offered in relaxing fashion. Also popular and unscripted were afternoon interludes with some of the singer-songwriters onboard like Don Stiffe, P.J. Murrhly, Dermot Henry and Mickey Coleman talking about the craft of songwriting where Murrhly joked “they gave nothing away” during the session. Billy McComiskey led another exploration of button and piano accordion music by the composers and practitioners onboard like John Nolan, Seamus Shannon, Tony Corbett, Tom Doherty and Joanie's Cherish the Ladies cohorts Mirella Murray and Kathleen Boyle.

The main nightly concerts in the Stardust Theater featured Cherish the Ladies a couple of times with their expanded roster of artists onboard, most of whom had performed with them before and the superb dancing



Photo: Marianne Mangano

of Donny Golden, Cara Butler, Jason Oremus, Tom Lavin and Jon and Nathan Pilatzski. The Black Family led by Mary and the newly-minted Senator Frances Blake and their brothers Michael and Shay were hugely popular on stage and in informal singing sessions and in sharing the spotlight on the next generation in their family with Roisin O'Reilly (Mary's daughter) and Aoife Scott (Frances' daughter).

For this punter the best concert of the week was the Don Stiffe launch of his new CD *1916 Classic Irish Ballads* as his booming voice filled the theatre from top to bottom with sincerity and patriotic fervour for the year that is in it in 2016. Maura O'Connell followed Stiffe and gave one of her top performances with the audience lapping up every note aided and abetted by a dream team accompanying her of Nollaig Casey on fiddle, Artie McGlynn and Bill Shanley on guitars and the hard-working Kathleen Boyle on keyboards and piano accordion.

There were nightly Céilíthe to the powerful playing of the Swallows Tail Céilí Band and the Pride of Moyvane and even the Gem Céilí Band

Late night host Gabriel Donahue led and presented an amazing array of entertainers in impromptu fashion with aplomb and accompaniment that had to be heard to be appreciated. One night Joanie Madden and her Galwegian counterparts like Donahue, Liz and Yvonne Kane, Valerie Seale, Don Stiffe and Mirella Murray tore the room apart for hours.

You really have to experience it all to believe it and your next opportunity isn't even a year away as the Sixth Annual Folk'N Irish Cruise sails from Miami February 4–11th to the Caribbean aboard a new Norwegian vessel named "The Escape" and it surely will be for all those onboard. Visit www.joaniemaddencruise.com for all the details.

Joanie and Cherish the Ladies will come ashore in Ireland in August when they play at the Fleadh in Ennis, headlining the closing concert in the dome. Then they'll be cruising around Ireland on an extensive tour of the country in September. Paul Keating regularly covers traditional Irish music for the Irish Voice newspaper in New York.

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to keep the dancers jumping to sets and Céilí and two hand dances. Jivers, waltzers and quick-step aficionados had the great McLean Avenue Band, T.R. Dallas, P.J. Murrihy and Dermot Hegarty to satisfy their followers day and night. Great ballad singers like Dermot Henry, Gerry Timlin and even old New York favourite John Morrison who came out from Tyrone for the cruise had everyone singing along with them. Henry who doesn't perform very often anymore still has the comic touch and the highlight for me was his late night encounter with the multi-talented Corkman Mairtin de Cogain where they traded comical turns and songs in the appropriately named Bliss Lounge.

To no one's surprise the best entertainment on a cruise like this happens when most had gone to bed save for the entertainers and the hardiest of cruisers who gathered mid-ship in Magnum's Piano Bar.

Frances Black, Maura O'Connell and Mary Black singing the praises of Joanie Madden and her Folk N' Irish Cruise.

