

Céilí Bands:

The word “Céilí” means “a gathering of people for dance”. Céilí bands play solely for dancing. A céilí band must play loud enough so it can be heard by everyone in a large hall over the noise from dancing feet. All the instruments that play the melody play in unison. A standard céilí band consists of ten players. Instruments used include, accordion, concertina, harmonica, uilleann pipes, banjo, fiddle, mandolin, flute, tin whistle, drums and piano. The position of the instruments on the stage is important for balance. Generally the fiddles and flutes are in the front with the banjo a little behind them and the accordion and concertina further back as they are the loudest. Drums and piano are always furthest from the dancers. Well known bands include the Kilfenora and Ballinakill Céilí Bands.

The first céilí was organised in 1897 in London by the Gaelic League. It included music for jigs, quadrille sets and waltzes. There was long rows of dancers facing each other which is a practice that still continues today. Fr Tom Larkin set up the Ballinakill Céilí band in 1926/27 as at that time the clergy wished to get rid of jazz music. They played tunes which were suited to a blend of flute, fiddle and piano. The band was very influential and remained active until the 1960s. They inspired many others who heard them play on radio or live at céilís and feiseanna such as their 1930 recordings of The pipe on the hob, Queen of the Rushes, The old bush reel and the copperplate reel.

Another successful band are the Kilfenora Céilí band which was formed in 1910 in Clare and are still active today. They recorded “The Fabulous Kilfenora Céilí Band” and “The Kilfenora Céilí Band”. Dance houses were banned in Ireland in 1935 so dance halls were built where local priests supervised Céilís such as the Tulla and the Kilfenora in Co. Clare. Céilí music was broadcast on radio in the 30’s and 40’s and it was kept popular by Irish made recordings in the 1950s and also by the Fleadh Cheoil. However in 1960 Sean O’Riada criticised Céilí Bands because of there lack of individual expression however despite all the critics and competition from other genres of music Céilí bands still remain busy today.