

THE SIAMSA ECHO

CHRONICLING SIAMSA'S CELEBRATION OF IRISH MUSIC AND CULTURE MONTREAL, QUEBEC, CANADA

So civil's our Echo in Ireland, quoth Teague, That, if you but whisper to't, how do ye do?

It answers, tho' distant far more than a league, I'm very well, thank ye—pray, Pat, how are you? Robert Anderson 1770-1833

A NEW INITIATIVE FOR THE SIAMSA COMMUNITY

Dear Siamsa friends,
We are presenting to you today a new initiative: a newsletter to chronicle Siamsa's rich and wonderful works from its humble beginnings, and past endeavours to its current projects and activities which shine a light on Irish music, language and culture throughout Montreal, Québec, Canada and the world. The name of our newsletter was inspired by an 18th century Irish poem, *The Irish Echo*, written by Robert Anderson. The poem uses the idea of an echo as metaphor for the friendly and welcoming nature of the Irish - suggesting that even a faint greeting is met with a warm and distant response, accentuating the hospitable spirit of the Irish people.
(<https://allpoetry.com/The-Irish-Echo>)

As a relative newcomer to the Siamsa community, I can attest to experiencing the warmhearted welcoming nature that Anderson speaks of in Siamsa's music classes, weekly trad sessions and monthly céilís. *The Siamsa Echo* will be featuring reviews of events from the past year, highlights on Siamsa's talented music teachers, stories of music classes, concerts, dances, and festivals, along with tid-bits of Gaeilge (Irish language) and Irish history to keep us connected to the roots of the music we all love. If you have a story to share about your experience with Siamsa, please let us know.

This is a newsletter for all who have been touched by the Siamsa experience - this is our story to share to ensure the echo of Siamsa's good works resonates for a long time to come.

Allison Haggart -

Siamsa Board of Directors 2024-present /
Avid intermediate tin whistle enthusiast /
Slow session attendee



A Message from our Director

It is my pleasure to offer a few words of welcome and introduction to this first edition of *The Siamsa Echo*. I would like to thank Allison Haggart and Mayu Egan, for their excellent initiative in conceiving and bringing this newsletter to life.

Siamsa has been going strong ever since Bernadette Walsh first envisioned the concept of a school in 1991. The Internet did not exist at the time, so progress was by word of mouth exclusively. The only means of communication for registration was by Canada Post with notifications sent out to a mailing list. That was followed by a registration evening at Wesley United in NDG, where members needed to sign up for classes in person. It was an extremely labour-intensive process.

We owe much to previous directors of the school Brendan Walsh, Patrick Barthe, Emily Andrews, Marilyn Aitken and Philippe Murphy. We thank them for their guidance and leadership. In addition, I am also personally very thankful for the efforts made by our current board members.

Today, the school continues to follow its original mandate: to promote Irish culture, with specific objectives such as educating members about Irish music, song, language and Irish dance, developing an appreciation for Irish culture among the general public, promoting Irish cultural traditions, and fostering camaraderie. It is this important emphasis on conviviality that sets Siamsa apart from other organizations. Our strength lies in the vibrant culture of volunteering that has developed over the years—people helping people. This value is deeply felt and creates a welcoming spirit in all that we do.

Through the many classes held during the Fall and Spring semesters, the monthly céilís from September through May, the twice-weekly sessions, or our outreach efforts—supporting visiting musicians, the St. Patrick's Parade, the Highland Games, and Porchfests—we nurture a spirit of openness, inclusion, and shared celebration.

Siamsa remains something truly special, and through the dedication of its members, teachers, and followers, may it continue to evolve and flourish.

Denis Martin

Siamsa Director, 2024 - 2025



From left to right :
Harold and Gemma Brooks, Donna-Marie Sullivan,
and Denis Martin with Atsuko and Atsuhiro
Yoshinaka and 2 university students visiting from
Japan - they joined the Saturday Session
February 23, 2025

A Tribute to Bernadette The Spark That Set Siamsa Afire

While playing fiddle at Siamsa's post-parade music session at St. George's Church this year, I felt moved to share a few words about my late wife, Bernadette Duffin-Walsh, who was truly the spark that ignited Siamsa. With Denis Martin's permission, I pay tribute to her.

Siamsa was born out of complaint and creative thinking at United Irish Society's Saint-Patrick's-Day party on March 17, 1991. Of course, I was the complainer, bemoaning the fact that we had nowhere to learn to play the music the band was playing. Thankfully, Bernadette saw things differently. She got up and circled the hall with pen and paper in hand. She returned 15 minutes later with the names of people who she had coaxed into learning the fiddle, tin whistle, and/or accordion."

"Who'll be our teachers?" I challenged. "And where will we learn?" "Already got the musicians," she beamed. "Dave Papazian has agreed to teach fiddle, Nancy Lyon will teach tin whistle and Bill O'Flaherty, the accordion. And Gerry Hughes, the Saint Patrick's Square manager, has offered us free classroom space."

Two weeks later, Siamsa was up and running. Bernadette and I, along with 13 other aspiring Irish musicians attended our first classes on Chemin de la Côte Saint Luc.



Siamsa has come a long way since those early days, thanks to the leadership of four past directors, an evolving roster of board members, dedicated teachers, céilí band musicians and callers, and an army of volunteers who've worked so willingly and lovingly to make our school a success.

As I reflected on March 16th 2025, I'm sure Bernadette would feel proud to see how diverse and inclusive our award-winning school has become. Our céilís, 14 music classes, and Saturday slow sessions, run by Harold and Gemma Brooks and Denis Martin, remain places where people from all walks of life, nationalities, beliefs, and genders can gather to have fun and, most importantly, feel welcome, and safe.

*Céad míle buíochas do chách!**

*100,000 thanks to all!

Brendan Walsh

Co-Founder of Siamsa
FIP (Fiddler in Progress)

35 Years of Teaching at Siamsa

I grew up in England with a Welsh father and an Italian mother. I started playing the fiddle in the late 1970s, in my early twenties. The Irish-music spark came from Planxty and Bothy Band records belonging to a French flatmate, and I soon started hanging around Irish pubs in London. There I learned much through the kindness of a mighty fiddler from Donegal, Danny Meehan.

In 1981 I wandered off to Australia for four formative years, highlights of which were playing and travelling the continent with uilleann piper Geoff Wooff, and spells in the country's leading Irish band, Poteen—a crazy crew of three Irishmen, a Scotsman, an Australian, and, occasionally, Steve Cooney!

I arrived in Montreal in 1987. When Brendan and Bernadette Walsh founded Siamsa in 1991, they asked me to be the school's first fiddle teacher. I declined, but changed my mind shortly after, and have been part of the scenery ever since.

Steve Jones -

Fiddle, whistle, and accordion teacher
Céilí-band musician in Montréal for over 35 years



Here is the track that really made me want to play Irish fiddle: Galway fiddler Martin Byrnes, recorded in 1970s London.

Lovely, soulful playing, with a special charm generated by the tension between the fiddler's exquisite natural intonation and the piano's equal temperament.



You May Be Feeling - by Caitlin Murphy

The following is an excerpt from Caitlin Murphy's podcast **You May Be Feeling** which comments on her first experience of Siamsa's slow session held weekly on Saturday afternoons at the Lord William Pub, Griffintown, Montreal. To listen to the full podcast, [click here!](#)



I'm old enough to know that New Year's Resolutions are for suckers. Sure, blank slates offer motivation, but never as much as we hope. We're lazy and it's cold. And that's fair. But I have been trying each January 1 to pick a bit of a north star for the year. Just a kind of experience that I want to say yes to. I don't rush to change any habits; I just keep this thing in mind. This year I found that north star in the basement of an Irish pub.

Descending into the basement of that Irish pub on a recent Saturday afternoon, what I encountered was this: about two dozen people, of varying ages and identities, sitting around assembled tables, all with different instruments, playing traditional Irish folk music together. It wasn't a performance; it was a session. I turned to my companion and whispered: "I could cry."

Some musicians came and went with the occasional pints or coffees they'd gone to purchase from the bar upstairs, but no one was being hounded to buy anything to earn their spot. I never even saw a server. I felt zero sense that being able to stay was related to spending money.

Though my friend and I felt briefly like intruders on this cozy established scene, we were quickly welcomed in, asked our names, and shown where we could sit. Everyone around us seemed familiar to one another, and I had initially heard about the weekly gathering from a work colleague I've been getting to know. My friend even recognized an old acquaintance of hers playing fiddle at the session; they made a point of chatting afterwards before we left.

Many musicians knew the same songs, and even when they didn't, their shared appreciation kept them plugged in, listening.

Notably there was a wide range of proficiency among the players too. Some were comfortable old hands, but many were new and learning. The point was clearly not to show off or gain status through the music. But to commune through it. But the point of this year's north star for me [...] is the reminder that that place is always worth finding.



Caitlin Murphy is a writer and CEGEP teacher raising her two sons in Montreal's Plateau neighbourhood. She is currently creating her one-woman Toronto Fringe Festival show about women and aging - coming July 2025.

Playing to the Beat of His Own Drums

Growing up in Belfast, Northern Ireland, my musical experiences started at age 9 or 10, playing piano and at about age 12, I was playing side drum in a marching accordion band with my father. Later, as a teenager, I formed a "skiffle band" with some friends inspired by "The Shadows", a popular band in the U.K. Over the years I built up a strong background in both Irish and Scottish traditional music which helped me in competitions in accordion and pipe bands in Northern Ireland and Scotland, and here in Canada.

I began playing Irish session music after coming to Canada in 1966, and later in the 1980s I was invited to a session in a brasserie/tavern on the corner of Blvd. St-Laurent and Sherbrooke St. Among the regular attendees were current Siamsa teachers Steve Jones and Paul Legrand! Around that time too, I decided to make a *bodhrán* (Irish frame drum), since the sound fitted well with a group I was in. I was also invited to accompany a local fiddler, Michael Callaghan, who was Music Director for the Bernadette Short School of Irish Dance. I started playing in the Siamsa céilí band back when Jean Duval was the leader (the band is now led by Steve Jones).

I was invited to teach at the North American Convention of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in Ottawa in March 2005, and in 2010 & 2011, I was invited by the Douglastown Irish Festival (in the Gaspé region of Quebec), to teach the construction and playing of the bodhrán. I am proud that this was a huge hit with the 95% Irish-ancestry of the town! I still make and repair bodhráns AND teach bodhrán playing at the Siamsa School of Irish Music!

I have toured with various bands, including "Reel & MacAdam", and later with "Les bons Diables". In 2007, I was approached by the leader of "The Irish Rovers" for my first tour through New Zealand. I'm still playing and touring with them, most recently across Canada in February and March 2025.



Fred Graham teaches bodhrán at Siamsa, and has over 60 years of percussion experience: playing, teaching, and adjudicating competitions.

A Year of Siamsa

– 2024 –

May

Walk to the Black Rock Memorial
NDG Porch Fest



August

Montreal Highland Games



September

Fall 2024 semester begins

October

Book launch for James Olwell's *The Art of Being Irish in Hell's Kitchen*



December

Recital

– 2025 –

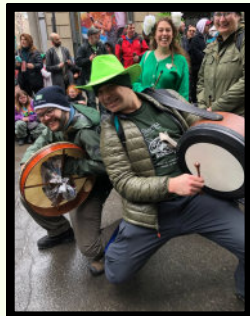
February

First céilí of the year



March

Spring semester starts



Green Season 2025

March 8: UIS Irishman of the Year,
Siamsa delegation

March 15: Saint Patrick's Day ceili

March 16:

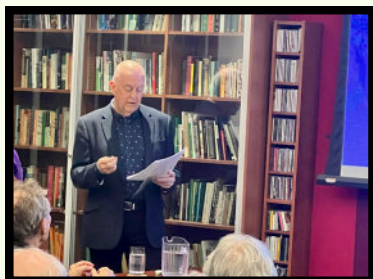
- Saint Patrick's Day parade
- Post-parade session at Saint George's Anglican church

April 5: UIS post-parade dinner

Manus McGuire Visit

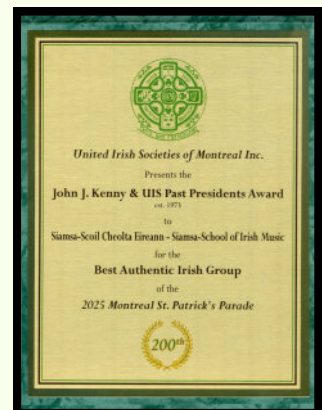
April 10: Manus McGuire teaches a
Siamsa class (intermediate fiddle)

April 15: Lecture at Concordia
University: Regional Fiddle Styles in
Ireland



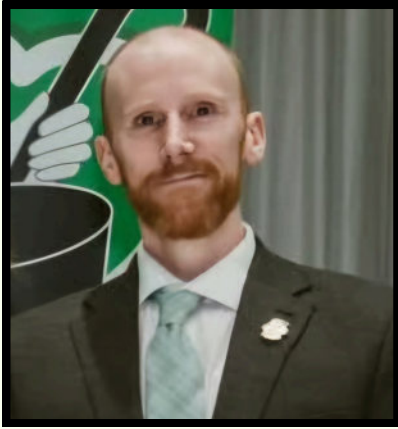
May

Annual General
Meeting & Recital



Irish Language & Culture: A socio-linguistic snapshot on Irish language & culture

By Dónal Gill



Irish Expression: Boycott

Many Canadians are opting to avoid U.S. products considering the ongoing trade war and President Trump's threats to make Canada the 51st state. This is, in effect, a boycott of U.S. goods. *The Cambridge Dictionary* defines to boycott as "to refuse to buy a product or take part in an activity as a way of expressing strong disapproval."

Did you know that the word boycott stems from Ireland?

Captain Charles Boycott was the agent for an absentee landlord in Co. Mayo in the 1880s. He was shunned completely by the entire town due to extortionate rents and evictions that he inflicted upon his poor tenants.

The strategy ultimately succeeded and spread throughout the country during the "land war" led by the "uncrowned king of Ireland", Charles Stewart Parnell. Captain Boycott went down in history and lent his name to a tactic employed by Canadians today!

Originally from Cork City, Siamsa Board member **Dónal Gill** has called Canada home since 2010, and is now raising his young family and teaching Political Science at Concordia University in Montreal.

Gaeilge - the Irish language

Seanfhocal is pronounced as *shan-uck-al*

Meaning: a proverb or saying passed down because of the wisdom or value it contains.

Literal translation: old word

Example phrase: a popular **seanfocal** is "Ní neart go cur le chéile".

Pronunciation: *nee nyart guh curr leh kay-leh*

Translation: unity is strength

This saying reminds us that strength only comes from unity, and that collaboration is essential for success to come.

JOIN US FOR A SESSION!

TUESDAY EVENING: THE TRAD SESSION

Hurley's Irish Pub
1225 Crescent St. Montreal
7:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.
Levels: intermediate & advanced



SATURDAY AFTERNOON: THE SLOW SESSION

Lord William Pub (in Griffintown)
265 Rue des Seigneurs, Montréal
2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.
Levels: beginner & intermediate



SUNDAY AFTERNOON: THE DEP. CAFÉ SESSION ORGANIZED BY FRAN ALEXA

Le Dépanneur Café
206 rue Bernard West, Montreal
4:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

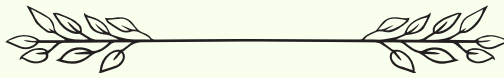
We mainly play Irish trad music, but what we play and how fast we play depends on who turns up!

We often play Quebecois trad tunes, some people bring their original songs, sometimes we play rock, pop, and country covers, and we have even on occasion, played a bit of jazz.

We love it when people bring unusual instruments – so far we have had an Irish bouzouki, autoharp, electronic bagpipes, and a hurdy-gurdy!

Fran Alexa, fiddle player & organizer of the Dep Café sessions





About Us

Siamsa is a registered non-profit organization based in Montreal, Québec, Canada, dedicated to promoting Irish culture & music.

Board of Directors 2024-2025

The school is guided and administered
by a volunteer Board of Directors.

Director

Denis Martin

Treasurer

Paul Cunningham

Secretary

Gemma Brooks

Members-at-large

Allison Haggart

Brendan Walsh

Dónal Gill

Fred Graham

Gina Francis

Kelly Shannon-Parmar

Mayu Egan

Philippe Murphy

Reggie Parmar

Steve Jones

Teachers 2024-2025

Bodhrán

Fred Graham

Elizabeth Johnston

C#/D Accordion

Steve Jones

Fiddle

Steve Jones

Paul Legrand

Mayu Egan

Kate Bevan-Baker

Gaeilge - Irish Language

Miriam Dunne

Guitar, Tenor Banjo & Mandolin

Willy LeMaistre

Harp

Cécile Delage

Set & Céilí Dancing

Caroline Wathier

Siamsa Singers Choir

Ros Williams

Tin Whistle and Irish Flute

Philippe Murphy

If you have questions, comments or
an article idea to share for
upcoming newsletters, please contact us:

info@siamsa.org

