

Irish Dance Music
Highly Subjective Reviews of Irish Dance Music CDs
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Note - many of these CDs are available from Irish Butterfly.

It seems that every time I start out to write a guide, I end up having to add more and more preliminary explanation. I thought this review, intended to help people build and expand their collection of Irish dance music, was going to be really simple. But I keep thinking, oops, they need to know It's so easy to assume that everyone knows ...when in fact the whole reason people requested this project was that they don't all know and want to find out so they can make informed choices about which CDs to buy! So here goes ...

The more different music you practice to, the better. Not only will that prevent your favorite music from getting stale, it will keep your family members, roommates, etc. from going crazy! Pay particular attention to getting a variety of instrumentation. Most Irish dancing CDs feature piano accordion and keyboard accompaniment. Some Irish dancing families have been known to develop a phobia because of overexposure to accordion music. Variety will also help you prepare for shows and feiseanna, where its quite likely that the music will be different from your favorite practice CD. As I mentioned in *Feis 101* the more different music you practice to, with different instruments and different speeds, the better prepared you will be for competition.

As with anything else in Irish dancing, Molly is your best source for advice. She was a world-class Irish musician (she and the band she played with at the time, St. James's Gate, won the All-Ireland Championship for Groupi Coel in 1986) as well as a widely experienced dancer and teacher of both music and dance.

When you look for Irish music CDs, be sure to distinguish between those intended for entertainment and those intended for dancing. Although groups like The Chieftains may have danceable tracks on their CDs, that is not what the album was meant for.

There are seven solo dances that are competed at feiseanna in regular competition: reel, light jig, slip jig, single jig, treble jig, hornpipe and traditional set. Each review will note whether the album includes all seven. If an album doesn't include all seven, that doesn't mean it's not a good album to have, just that it shouldn't be your one and only.

There used to be four traditional sets recognized by the Irish Dance Commission: "St. Patrick's Day", "Job of Journeywork", "Garden of Daisies", and "The Blackbird". They doubled the number to eight in 2002 by designating tunes which had been on the nontraditional sets list as traditional. As with all nontraditional sets, teachers used to choreograph their own steps to those tunes. Now that they're traditional (trad for short) they're supposed to be done the same way all over the Irish dancing world. The newly designated ones are "Three Sea Captains", "Jockey to the Fair", "The White Blanket", and "King of the Fairies". They can still be danced as nontrad sets as well.

Nontraditional sets (there are currently 36 of them) are designated hardshoe tunes that teachers choreograph their own steps to. They are only competed at the championship level.

Two other pieces of nomenclature you need to understand the labels on CDs:

(1) Treble jigs = double jigs = heavy jigs. Musically, light jigs and double/treble jigs are all

double jigs.

(2) What we call single jigs in our Western Region are called hop jigs in some areas or by some teachers. Some CDs omit them because, according to Commission rules, they are optional for competition.

Speeds: each dance has an official speed set by the Irish Dance Commission. For the soft-shoe dances, it's generally 113 beats per minute. Where a CD includes beginner or easy versions, they're generally a little faster. More advanced dancers use slower music to give them time for more intricate steps. An album may include light jigs and single jigs only at a faster tempo.

The hardshoe dances - treble jigs and hornpipes - come in very definitely different speeds, traditional and slow for hornpipes, fast and slow for treble jigs. Adults must use traditional or fast speed in competition. Younger dancers in regular competition have their choice, at least at the higher levels of competition, although almost everybody starts with traditional or fast speed. Champions only use slow speed. On a metronome, a trad hornpipe is about 138, slow about 113. For jigs, fast is between 93 and 84 and 73 for slow. Figure or ceili dances are group dances. Although most can be done to any reel or jig, some have recommended or required tunes of their own.

The First Two

One More Time - Culkin School of Irish Dance - If you only own one Irish dance music CD, this is the one to own. Its virtue is that it offers all of the dances except traditional sets at a variety of speeds so you can use a slower speed to learn new steps, then use the official speeds to master them. Some newcomers to hardshoe dancing are confused because the (otherwise) helpfully arranged track list doesn't differentiate between light jigs and double or treble jigs. The speed determines whether the light-shoe or hardshoe dance is appropriate to that piece of music. This album also uses a variety of instrumentation.

It's About Time - Tony Nother - If you only own two Irish dance CD's, this should be the other one. Tony is a widely respected feis musician as well as one of the nicest guys on the face of the earth. There is a zest to his playing and arrangements which makes dancing to his accompaniment fun. ***It's About Time*** includes the four "old" traditional set dances. Accordion and keyboard.

General Purpose (Alphabetical Order)

100% Pure Irish Dance - Kevin Warren and Colm Keogh - A very popular collection and deservedly so. The music is steady but the style may seem dated compared to the more innovative new collections; some have compared it to a German "Oom PHA" band. It includes dance tunes at three different levels (beginner, intermediate and open) and the four "old" trad sets as well as two of the new ones, "Three Sea Captains" and "King of the Fairies".

100% Pure Irish Dance-The Second Step (2004)- Colm Keogh & Kevin Warren. Keyboard artist Colm Keogh brings us a rollicking album of tunes for all the solo dances in versions suitable for beginners to champions. There are some unusual selections, such as slip jigs at 126 beats per minute (standard is 113, and they have two tracks at that speed) - fortunately, it's a short track because that speed could wear anyone out! Hardshoe dances at both fast and slow speeds. No set dances; no doubt they're expecting you'll invest in their 4-disk collection of set dance music.

Again - Marney McCague (2006). Flute- and whistle-player Marney McCague has set out to fill a need that only the Culkin School's "One More Time" addressed up 'til now: having all the dances except trad sets at a variety of speeds so you can learn at the slower speeds and work your way up to competition or performance speed. If you or your students are suffering from overexposure to accordion music, that's another reason to choose this fine album. "Again" (which seems to be an initial effort; a search on the Net didn't reveal that it was the follow-on to an earlier album) has light jigs at three speeds, single jigs at two, slip jigs ditto, reels at three speeds, treble jigs at four speeds and the same for hornpipes. On almost all the tracks, a strong percussion will keep beginners on the beat; the sole exception I noted was the first track, light jigs at 96, which didn't have enough strength in the percussion to emphasize the beat. That single flaw should not dissuade you from buying and using this valuable and entertaining album. It finishes with a funny little track, "Sound of Mistakes" which records one of the musicians ranting about an error!

Back to the Start - Kevin Joyce - Kevin Joyce has freshened up his sound in this album by recruiting a fiddler and a banjo player. The result makes it a lot more fun to listen to than his previous albums. This is also his first album which isn't focused on the champion dancer. He includes all the dances except trad sets; the hardshoe dances are presented at both speeds.

The Beginning - Laserlight Celtic - This interesting and inexpensive collection of dance tunes is not only good for beginners but also for parents who want to learn the difference between one kind of dance tune and another. To help you out, a pedantic Irish voice announces each type of tune. Be warned: while the pedantic Irish voice is correct about each track, the track list on the back is not. You get a hint when you notice that one of the selections in the second Reel Medley is "Father Kelly's Jig". You know that either the reverend father or the copy writer was confused; it was the copy writer. The hornpipe is played only at traditional speed and there are no treble jigs. However, it includes three of the "old" set dances ("St. Pat's", "Blackbird" and "Garden") and one of the new ones, "Jockey" as well as two figure dances, "Three Tunes" and "Trip to the Cottage".

The Best That I Can Be - World Champion Dean Crouch - Advertised as "Inspirational tunes selected by Dean to encourage and lift you while you practice", this is a useful album of standard tunes played on the accordion with a one-note-at-a-time technique similar to Kevin Joyce's earlier CD's but with some interesting lead-ins and accompaniments. It includes the six solo dances (excluding trad sets.) The treble jigs and hornpipes are only played at slow speeds. There is an interesting seventh track called "Showcase", a medley of up-tempo reels and jigs which might make a good performance piece for multiple dancers.

Change Your Shoes - Gerry Conlon & Seamus O'Sullivan - An old standby, this collection advertises that it includes "The Glasgow Reel". While that's an old favorite and a great tune, it's a mystery why it's featured - there aren't many hit singles in the world of Irish dancing! These very steady musicians - playing accordion and keyboard - are joined by a drummer on many of the tracks, which helps emphasize the rhythm. No set dances.

Dance 2000 - Gary Currie (1999) - A fine album which took its time crossing the Atlantic. Gary Currie plays the accordion with precision and style, and also composed two of the tunes. All the dances except sets are presented; the hornpipes are only played at slow speed. There may be some confusion because one of the reel tracks is labelled "single reels" while two are labelled "double reels". For dancing purposes, they're all reels; anyone

who's interested in the technical difference should consult www.irishtune.info/rhythm. There doesn't seem to be any obvious reason why the last two tracks are labelled "team reels" and "team jigs". They may have been intended for step-about or figure choreographies but they're fine reels and jigs for any other use, too.

Dance Each Moment (2005) - Sean O'Brien. Former champion dancer turned accordionist and composer Sean O'Brien arrives from Australia with a very commendable album of his original tunes. He accompanies himself on keyboard as well. Each of the solo dances is presented at three distinctly different speeds (single jigs at two; slip jigs at four including a blazing 126 beats per minute) to suit dancers of varied levels. This certainly an album with something for everyone! He also includes all four "old" trad sets and one of the "new" ones, "Jockey to the Fair."

Dance for the World (2004)- Christopher McGrory. Brilliant album of original tunes by the master accordionist with piano accompaniment. No set dances but all the other solo dances, in separate sections for advanced dancers and beginners separated by a nice selection of ceili dance tunes: "The Humors of Bandon", "The Three Tunes", "St. Patrick's Day" (the ceili version, not the traditional set version) and "Sweets of May."

Dance 'til Dawn (2001)- NaBac. I put this in the "all purpose" category although it's a very special album in at least one way: the tracks form the basis for an extended dance drama (The liner notes give the story.). If the show was ever produced, I haven't heard about it but would love to see it! Meanwhile, we have a very useful album of music you can use for practice, class or shows of your own. It has 2 heavy jigs (both slow) 3 hornpipes (medium and traditional speeds), a light jig, a polka (which can be used for ceili dances) 4 reels, a single jig/slide and 3 slip jigs. The instrumentation includes accordion, keyboard, fiddle, flute and what sound like panpipes but may be a keyboard effect. Very good selection if you're looking for something fresh and original!

Dance to the Music - Mike Shaffer - If you've taken Irish dance lessons, you've heard tracks from this album, an old favorite from 1991. As was common at the time, there are no single jigs. Treble jigs are only played at the slow speed. The album includes one of the "new" trad sets, "Three Sea Captains" as well as four nontraditional sets and two figure dances, "High Cauled Cap" and "Sweets of May".

Dancers Choice - William Paterson - Very good album of standard dance tunes played very competently on an accordion with refreshingly varied accompaniment. Strong, distinct beat; this would be a very good choice for class, practice or performance. There are two tracks of reels, two of light jigs, two of slow hornpipes, two of slow treble jigs and one each of single jigs and slip jigs. All four "old" trad sets are presented, along with a "Bonus Track" of reels based on "If You're Irish (Come Into the Kitchen)" and other "Music Hall Irish" tunes which are "real Irish music" in the popular imagination. Great for a St Pat's show. The names of each tune are given on the track list, always a nice touch.

Feet of a Dancer - Tony McQuillan - One of the greats of the audio tape era remastered on CD. Accordion & keyboard. Has all the solo dances except trad sets, although the treble jigs are only played at the slow speed. Also includes a really wonderful song (the title track) which should be inspiring to aspiring dancers. Difficult to find from US vendors but available from www.irishdance.com/music.

A Feisin' Statement - Jim Butke with Merv Bell - A fine album with a great accordionist accompanied by a strong keyboard. The beat is especially well emphasized on all the tracks. No single jigs, and treble jigs are presented only at the slow speed. It includes one of the "new" trad sets, "King of the Fairies" as well as four nontrad sets.

Feis Fever - William Paterson (Date not indicated) - Marvelous album by the great accordionist. The first track, 8 minutes of reels, uses the same rock-and-roll chord progression as the sixth track of Stephen Walker's "Feisworld" (without the tamborine) but goes on twice as long. The hardshoe dances are only presented at slow speeds. There is the required music for two of the ceili dances, "Three Tunes" and "Sweets of May." All four "old" trad sets are presented, along with "Three Sea Captains."

Feisin' Statement, A - Jim Butke with Merv Bell - Very professional, solid album with Jim Butke on accordion and Merv Bell on keyboard. It includes two original compositions in honor of Jim's sister, Kristin, a Lord of the Dance star who has since become a very successful teacher. There are reels at 113 and 116, slip jigs at 113, light jigs at 114, treble jigs at 73 (no fast treble jigs) and hornpipes at both trad and slow speeds. No single jigs. There are also five of the set dances, "Downfall of Paris," "King of the Fairies," "Madame Bonaparte," "Miss Brown's Fancy" and "The Orange Rogue."

The Fiddler Round the Fairy Tree - Michelle Bergin - Extremely enjoyable CD by a renowned teacher, fiddler and keyboard player. Very interesting musical arrangements on fiddle, guitar, keyboards, drums, bass and even saxophone. Includes a hilarious 7-minute Irish dance rap which should become the anthem of every Irish dance school! No single jigs, and the treble jigs are only played at the slow speed. No trad sets, but it does include three of the newly adopted nontrad sets.

Fire Dance (2002)- Gary Currie & Michelle O'Leary - This CD is a very steady, dependable collection of traditional tunes played on accordion and keyboard. The beat is very strong, making it a very good choice for beginners to novice dancers. It includes the four "old" trad set dances plus one of the newer ones, "King of the Fairies".

First Step - Chris McLoughlin - This is one of the classic dance-teacher CDs because it has some of the longest sets ever recorded - the first track of reels goes on for just over 11 minutes! It includes reels, light jigs, slip jigs, treble jigs (only at the slow speed) and hornpipes (at both traditional and slow speeds.) No single jigs or trad sets. Lively accordion with keyboard accompaniment by Annmarie Acosta.

First Steps and Beyond (1999) - This ceili band compilation says it's a "Complete Irish Dancing Set" and tried hard to making good on that. All of the solo dances are represented in its 25 tracks, although the hardshoe dances are only presented at slow speed. It has two of the trad sets, "St. Patrick's Day" and "Blackbird" although neither is played according to the An Coimisiun competition versions. On the ceili dancing side, there are two different versions of "High Caul Cap," "Trip to the Cottage," "Sweets of May," and the music for the two-hand ceili reel, "Siamasa Beirte" as well as music suitable for other ceili dances.

Getting Jiggy with It (2005) - Majella Collins & Ann Murray with Emir McParland, percussion - Highly enjoyable album of standard and original tunes played very well on accordion and piano. Although there's something for dancers of all levels on this album, it is aimed more at the championship dancer than the beginner or novice - the tracks for beginner reels, light jigs, hop/single jigs, and beginner slip jigs, heavy jigs and hornpipe average half the length of the slow heavy jigs, hornpipes, reels and slip jigs (two tracks of each) aimed at the more advanced dancer. The shorter tracks for beginners limit the album's usefulness in classes but obviously wouldn't impede its use for practice at home. No set dances. The long set of reels at a lively tempo (120) that begins the album would be great for a show piece or for class.

Heartstone Dance: Irish Dance Music (2000)- Kay Proffitt & Trish Featherstone. A

highly enjoyable dance album with instrumentation worthy of a trad music session - fiddle, guitars, bodhran, flutes and penny whistle in addition to solid accordion and keyboard playing. Despite the number and variety of instruments, the beat never gets lost: it's obvious the musicians took pains to emphasize the beat. The play list includes all four soft shoe dances plus the hardshoe dances at both fast and slow speeds. There are three of the traditional sets - "St. Patrick's Day" played 3 times, "3 Sea Captains" and "King of the Fairies" - plus four nontrad sets - "The Hunt", "Blackthorn Stick", "Kilkenny Races" (at two different speeds) and "Downfall of Paris".

Irish Dance World - Bradley Brothers - This album is a favorite for shows because of the exciting arrangements and innovative instrumentation. It's also great for learning and practice. The hardshoe dances are only presented at the slow speeds but it includes all four "old" trad sets.

Irish Dancer (2005) - Liam Bradley & Damian McKee - Guest appearance by Sean Og Graham on guitar. No other general-purpose Irish dance album since the Bradley Brothers' ***Irish Dance World*** has been this much fun! The music is a blend of the traditional and the original (Damien McKee contributed three compositions and Sean Og Graham his slip jig, "Soggy's" which is also on "Beoga," reviewed in the Special section.) Some of the music is downright exotic, including Arty McGlynn's "Salamanca Samba" in the first reel track and Niall Vallely's "Beyond Words" in the light jigs. The hardshoe dances are only presented at slow speeds, and it includes all four "old" trad sets plus "King of the Fairies". **Highly Recommended!**

Irish Dancing [Music] - Pat King with Brian Grant (1996) - One of the original Irish dance albums that set the tone for subsequent albums and still a universal favorite. Pat King, on accordion with Brian Grant on keyboard and also dancing, plays with the crisp, well-accented style which has made him a favorite feis accompanist. All the solo dances except sets are presented, the hardshoe dances at both fast and slow speeds.

Irish Dancing Beginners - see "The Beginning" above.

Let's Dance: Irish Dance Music (1997) - Christopher McGrory, Martin Daly & Orfhlaith ni Bhriain. This album not only marked Chris McGrory's debut as a recording musician but also as a composer; five of the tracks are his own compositions. It helped set the pattern for having separate versions of each dance for beginners and more advanced dancers, with faster speeds for the beginners. No set dances.

Let's Dance 2 and 3 - Christopher McGrory & Orfhlaith Ni Bhriain - Zesty accordion and keyboard albums, either of them a very good all-around practice and show CD. Both include reels, light jigs, slip jigs at two speeds, single jigs, treble jigs at both speeds and hornpipes at both speeds. Number 2 includes the four "old" trad sets and one of the "new" ones, "King of the Fairies". Number 3 includes six of the newly adopted nontrad sets.

Mike and Merv - Mike Shaffer & Merv Bell - One of the standard stepdancing CDs, a great collaboration between two renowned feis musicians. Although it does not include a slow treble jig, it includes two of the "old" trad sets - "St. Pat's" and "Blackbird" - and also two figure dances, "Three Tunes" and "Trip to the Cottage". Accordion and keyboard.

Mind the Step - Damian McKee - This CD is unusual because the lead instrument is a button accordion rather than the more usual piano accordion. McKee decided to make the arrangements more interesting by involving quite a variety of musicians. However, the mellow sound he aimed at may make the beat too indistinct for beginners on some of the

tracks. The hardshoe dances are only played at the slow speeds. All four "old" set dances are included.

Music for Irish Dance - see Irish Dancing Music, above.

Music for Irish Dancing: Two Left Feet - No explanation of the title, but a very good CD, especially for those who are looking for a change in instrumentation. The lead instrument on most of the tracks is Fiona Coll's fiddle. Seven musicians in all participated, including Merv Bell on accordion. The album has all seven dances, including the four "old" trad sets.

Music for the Feis and More Music for the Feis - James Early (2003). Despite the date of these long-awaited CD's, they're digital remasters of James Early's accordion-and-keyboard classics from the audio cassette era. As was common at the time, they don't include single jigs. Hornpipes are played only at the slow speed. "Music" includes the trad set, "Job of Journeywork" and the nontrad set, "Planxty Drury". "More Music" includes the nontrad sets, "Blackthorn Stick", "Drunken Gauger", "Kilkenny Races" and "Planxty Davis". The two albums are presented as a package by Rego Records for the price of a single album, which is a double bargain!

Over the Bridge - Annmarie Acosta & Matthew Mancuso (2005) Irish dance teacher and musician Annmarie Acosta has put together another fine album of varied dance tunes with the help of fiddler Matthew Mancuso and three other musicians, notably Darren Maloney's banjo. Ms Acosta plays accordion, tin whistle, piano and concertina with great skill. There are three tracks of reels, and two each of light jigs, slip jigs, slow treble jigs and slow hornpipes. There's one track of traditional hornpipes and Turlo O'Carolan's "Eleanor Plunkett" as a listening treat. The album would be even better had there been a track of single jigs; there are no trad sets.

Perfect Timing - Anthony Davis (2005) - Anthony Davis is truly a jack-of-all-trades: he plays accordion, piano and guitar on this album, mixed it, and designed the cover! Oh, and he composed two of the tunes, too. He has a lot to be proud of in this very competent album. It has all the dances although the hardshoe dances are only presented at slow speeds. It also has all the "old" trad sets and "King of the Fairies".

Practice, Practice, Practice! (2004) - Gerry Conlon & Seamus O'Sullivan - The prolific and highly respected duo decided to do the opposite of Pat King's **Three Score and Ten** - cram as many tracks as possible onto a single CD, 54 of them. Doing the math, you'll see that they have to be just over a minute apiece. The aim was to provide variety for dancers to practice at home; they know that we mostly do two steps at a time. Makes sense! Not very useful in class but that's not the niche they were going for. No set dances.

The Reel Stuff (2005) - William Paterson & Gary Forrest - I've wondered from time to time whether the copy of this album I bought at an oireachtas had fallen through a worm hole from an alternate reality since it's so difficult to find! No kidding, a Google search at the time turned up an Israeli web site as the only place on the Internet selling it! More recently, Rampant Lion has started carrying it. Paterson and Forrest on accordion and keyboard play brilliantly but the selection of tunes may make you wonder: there are three tracks of reels, one of light jigs, one of heavy jigs (slow), one of hornpipes (slow), the four "old" trad sets and the same "If You're Irish" performance piece that Paterson plays on **Dancers Choice**. Not a slip jig to be seen or heard, not to mention no single jigs.

Rhythm & Roots - Mike Shaffer & Teresa Shaffer Wilkinson - This collection by the renowned accordionist and his daughter covers all the bases except trad sets. It also

includes the music for three figure dances, "High Cauleed Cap", "St. Patrick's Day" Ceili and "Humours of Bandon". Shaffer's playing is softer and more restrained in these arrangements than in *Mike & Merv* which gives them less zest.

Right on Time - Niall Mulligan (2006). Fine album of dance tunes played by an expert; his "growly" bass makes his playing distinct. There are two sections, the first for beginners and the second for more advanced dancers, separated by three of the "new" trad sets, "Three Sea Captains," "The White Blanket" and "Jockey to the Fair." All the dances are presented, the hard shoe at both fast and slow speeds. Don't be put off that the light jig music is called "light double jigs" because, musically, light jigs and treble (heavy) jigs are done to double jigs. This album will be especially useful for novice dancers and above; the fine artistry that Niall Mulligan puts into some of the tunes that don't have a drum machine accompaniment may make the beat a bit difficult for a beginner to follow, and the single jigs at 126 may be livelier than some dancers want to keep up with.

Right on Time - Sean and Marie Russell - A pretty comprehensive selection of tunes for dancers played on fiddle and piano. The CD has all seven dances, including the four "old" trad sets and one of the new ones, "King of the Fairies". The Russells are excellent musicians and highly experienced feis musicians, but if you've been spoiled by Fiona Coll or Billy Furlong's fiddling on their albums you may miss their brightness and fire in Sean Russell's very melodic playing of certain tracks. On the other hand, his more subdued style may make this a good practice CD in case you run into a feis musician who plays that way.

Rince: Complete Irish Dancing Set - Various artists. There's a phenomenon in Irish dance music called a "ceili band" ("ceili" is the Gaelic word for "party" and refers to a style of multiperson dancing as well.) Ceili bands play Irish dance music on the instruments that were typical of a general-purpose dance band in the mid-20th century. Their music no doubt appeals to fans of Glenn Miller or Lawrence Welk but can strike a more traditional-minded dancer as mushy. There are a number of albums which feature ceili bands but this is the only one which sets out to provide all the solo dances. By its lights, it does a good job, even including the trad sets "St Pat's", "Blackbird" and "King of the Fairies" as well as music for several popular figure dances, "Trip to the Cottage", "High Cauleed Cap" and "Sweets of May". There is a mystery to "High Cauleed Cap": there are two tracks bearing that name. The first is the recommended music for that dance, a Scottish tune called "Highland Laddie". The other one isn't.

Rince Ceol - Annmarie Acosta - Very lively CD with an innovative mix of instrumentation which makes it good to listen to as well as fun to dance to. It even has a slow air, "O'Carolan's Receipt", which is intended solely for listening. It does not include any set dances.

Sandy Jones & Bernie Nau (2007) - This is the most original format I've seen so far and a harbinger of things to come - Bernie Nau is offering single tracks or a whole album as downloadable mp3 files on Udance.com. There's a discount if you buy the whole album or all three of the Techno Reels rather than individual tracks, and you can choose to have them sent to you on a conventional CD if you'd rather. The site also offers the same deal on "Step Into the Beat" by Klein & Lacey, "Mike & Merv" by Mike Shaffer & Merv Bell and "Rhythm & Roots" by Mike Shaffer & Theresa Shaffer Wilkinson, all great albums which I've reviewed in the past. Bernie promises new tracks, so it's worthwhile to check back often to see what they're offering.

Sandy Jones is one great fiddler, and Bernie Nau is an equally skilled accompanist; they're joined by Ged Foley playing guitar on the hop (single) jigs and drummer Mark Hellenberg on one of the reels. The album has five tracks of reels, one of light jigs, one of slip jigs, one

of hop (single) jigs, one of treble jigs at the slow speed, and three of the traditional sets: "St. Patrick's Day," "Blackbird" and "King of the Fairies." Hornpipes in both traditional and slow speed are available as a separate album. The Techno Reels, which are also a separate album, have some very entertaining instrumentation, with Brian Hobart on percussion joining Jones and Nau.

Udance.com also offers any of the set dances at any speed, available individually.

The Sandymount Set - Pat King - One of the standard teaching CDs by one of the foremost feis accordionists. The tracks are divided into two sections. The first is aimed at champions and includes slow hornpipes and treble jigs plus reels and slip jigs at feis speed, as well as the trad set St. Pat's played 3 times in a row to give dancers a chance to practice starting in the middle of the pack. The second section is labeled, "Beginner Section" and includes all four soft-shoe dances plus fast treble jigs and trad hornpipes. In the final track, the song, "The Old Man" by Phil Coulter, Pat King sings a tribute to his father.

Sets & Solos Volume 2 - Olive Hurley - A very valuable album which includes reels at four different speeds, light jigs, slip jigs at two speeds, single jigs, treble jigs at fast and slow speeds, and hornpipes at both traditional and slow speeds. It also has all the "old" trad sets and one of the "new" ones, "Jockey". The usual accordion and keyboard are enriched by having a flute- and whistle-player.

Sets & Solos Volume 5 - Olive Hurley (2004). It's a pleasure to welcome this latest volume in what we hope will be an ongoing series of albums and videos from Ms Hurley. This is another one for everyone although, contrary to its title, it doesn't have any set dances! Varied and interesting instrumentation, with accordion, keyboard, fiddle and a bodhran to keep the beat strong. Although the label promises that the solo-dancing tracks are played at the official feis speeds, the beginner selections are fast indeed. It is very welcome to find two of the historic two-hand ceili dances, "Stack of Barley" and "Shoe the Donkey" as well as three other unusual dance tracks - a polka, the sailor's hornpipe and a set of very slow slip jigs.

Step in Time - Kathleen & Dom Lavin - Bouncy and enjoyable collection on accordion and keyboard (with a drum machine) that includes all the solo dances except trad sets. Also includes three nontrad sets.

Step in Time Vol. II (2006) - Kathleen & Dom Lavin. Another great album from the Lavins, and a real family project it is! Their daughter Aileen plays piano and appears in the photographs on the cover along with her brother Thomas and cousin Christina Scibelli, and Kathleen's brother, Sean Roarty, plays fiddle. What's not to like about an album which has both Richard Wong's "Missing Time" and Arty McGlynn's "Salamanca Samba" in the same track? ("Missing Time" is the tune which animates track 6 of Stephen Walker's "Feisworld," tracks 1 and 2 of William Paterson's "Feis Fever" and Dean Crouch's Reel Medley 2 on "Top Box;" "Salamanca Samba" ends the first track of Bradley & McKee's "Irish Dancer" and starts Reel Medley 1 on "Top Box.") There are two tracks of reels and one of slip jigs at 113, light jigs at 115, and treble jigs and hornpipes at both fast and slow speeds. (No single jigs, though.) All the tracks are long enough to be useful in a class; the slow hardshoe tracks are very long. There are five trad sets, including "King of the Fairies" and the album concludes with a nondancing "Dance Interlude" which is a pleasure to listen to.

Step Into the Beat - Ellery Klein & Ryan Lacey (2006) - Brilliant album with something for everyone, a fusion of a great fiddler, Ellery Klein, and an accomplished percussionist, Ryan Lacey of the band Gaelic Storm. One drawback to dancing to fiddle accompaniment,

sometimes, is that the art of fiddling includes smooth slides from note to note, which can make the beat difficult to follow. The percussion on this album keeps you right on the beat. This album is great to listen to and a real winner for classes because of the distinct beat. Not only is Ellery Klein a brilliant fiddler but a skilled composer; nineteen of the tunes presented on this album are her compositions, including several whole sets. Whether in her own compositions or in her rendition of traditional tunes, Ms Klein imparts a distinctly "country" feel to several tracks including the very enjoyable "Pickin' Party Reels." Definitely good crossover music for country fans! All seven dances are included, with the hardshoe at both slow and fast speed. All four "old" set dances are included and so is one of the "new" ones, "King of the Fairies." **Highly recommended!**

Stepping Out-Irish Dance Music - Tony Nother with Merv Bell & featuring Tara Dunphy - This 25th anniversary album by the renowned feis musician ranks right up there with his "It's About Time" (see "The First Two" above.) As though the music that Tony and Merv play together could be improved, Tara Dunphy on fiddle, whistle and flute does just that, providing the kind of variety that dancers need to prepare to dance to the accompaniment of a variety of instruments. Like the earlier album, "Stepping" is divided into sections for champions and the rest of us. There are additional sections of music to accompany popular ceili dances and two of the nontraditional sets. No trad sets. Tony includes the names of the tunes on each track, which is always welcome.

Step This Way (2004) - David Lindquist. David Lindquist is an up-and-coming feis musician presenting his first album here, and an impressive one it is. His selection of a vigorous guitar accompaniment for his accordion playing on some tracks is quite enjoyable and helps emphasize the beat. The album has three parts: the first is all the dances played at a fast tempo; the second is the four dances which are competed in championships played at their speeds; the third is the trad sets "St. Patrick's Day", "Job of Journeywork" and "The Blackbird" plus one of the "new" nontrad sets, "The Storyteller".

Tempo and Tempo 2 - Brian Glynn - Very strong, steady collections of accordion and keyboard tunes by a first-rate feis musician. There is a bounce to his style which makes his playing easy to dance to and fun. ***Tempo*** has all the dances except single jigs at feis speeds, including both fast and slow treble jigs and hornpipes. ***Tempo 2*** includes the four "old" trad set dances as well, but also omits single jigs.

Three Score and Ten - Pat King - The distinguished accordionist set out to produce a whole CD of long sets and succeeded very well. He uses a guitar accompaniment. Each track is ten minutes long. All the solo dances except trad sets are included, although treble jigs are only presented at the slow speed.

Time to Dance 2 (2006) - Cathal Hayden, Mark Mohan, Brian McGrath, Mairtin O'Connor, Alan Kelly & Arty McGlynn. This delightful album meets the challenge of how to include enough tracks, long enough to be useful in a class, by having two CD's to hold them all. Why didn't someone think of that before? One disk is intended for champions and the other for dancers who are still getting there. More than the physical arrangement of the music, the music itself is what recommends this album. Sometimes, the more musicians you get in a session, the muddier the beat becomes but what saves this excellent album is some outstanding banjo playing which helps drive the beat and keep it distinct. There's also fiddle, button and piano accordion, keyboard and guitar to move the wide variety of tunes along. The recording engineer, Kenny Ralph, deserves credit as a member of the band! All the dances are presented, the hard shoe at both slow and fast speeds, including the four "old" trad sets and one of the new ones, "King of the Fairies."

Top Box (Date not indicated; 2005 or 2006) - Dean Crouch. Dean Crouch has topped his

debut album, "The Best That I Can Be" with this new album. (Former world champion dancer Crouch won the Irish World Accordion Championship between the two albums.) His technique, very precise in the first album, shows a more mature richness in this second album. His accompanist, Carmel Dempsey, deserves a lot of credit for the quality of presentation - this is not only great dancing music but fun to listen to. "Top Box" includes two each of reel, slip jig, heavy jig and hornpipe medleys (the hard shoe selections are all at slow speed) and one each of light and single (hop) jigs. On the final, "Showcase" track they even have a string section. For fans of particular tunes, "Reel Medley 2" starts with the same rock-&-roll tune as track 6 of Stephen Walker's "Feis World" and track 1 of William Paterson's "Feis Fever," and the "Showcase" track starts with the popular "Glasgow Reel." No trad sets. **Highly Recommended!**

Treble Maker - Jim Butke - Even the title is fun! Jim Butke has improved on his enjoyable and valuable **A Feisin Statement** by including a lot of interesting percussion effects on this new album. It includes all four softshoe dances, hornpipes at both speeds, but no double jigs as such. It does have three of the nontrad set dances (The Hunt, The Storyteller and The Wandering Musician) as well as the music for two of the popular 8-hand dances, "High Cauled Cap" and "The Three Tunes". The last track finishes with a vocal chorus of "I Wish They All Could Be Irish Dancing Girls" to the tune of the Beach Boys' "Wish They All Could Be California Girls". Sort of emblematic of the kind of fun on this album.

Up the Steps - Gary Currie (2006). Accordionist Gary Curry presents a very lively and enjoyable album with very effective accompaniment by keyboard and drum machine. As with his earlier album, "Dance 2000" he presents his own excellent compositions along with traditional tunes and compositions by others. He obviously has a sense of humor along with great musicianship: track 2, light jigs @119, begins and ends in the style of a ceili band. I wish he would have indicated the speed of each track but a few minutes with a metronome filled in the missing numbers. (He does give the names of all the tunes, which I appreciate.) There are four tracks of reels, at three different speeds, two of slip jigs @113, a track of single jigs @118, two of heavy jigs @74 (a "heavy" jig is a double or treble jig on the western side of the Atlantic; 74 is slow speed) and two of hornpipes at slow tempo, 113. No trad sets.

Special Applications (Alphabetical Order)

100% Pure Irish Dance - The Show - Liam Bradley - More show-oriented than learning-oriented, this CD has innovative instrumentation and arrangements. It's a lot of fun to listen or perform to. However, some tracks change speed or combine different dances, which limits its value for practicing. No trad sets.

100% Pure Set Dance - Colm Keogh & Kevin Warren - Move over, Kevin Joyce! Your "The Final Round" has a worthy rival for the definitive collection of set dance music. The cover of this 4-CD set advertises that it features 173 set dances, but there are in fact either 43 or 44 (depending on whether the short and long versions of "3 Sea Captains" count as one set or not.) The 173 is the total number of tracks, with each set except "The White Blanket" and "Is the Big Man Within" played at more than one speed.

All Around the World - Gerry Conlon and Seamus O'Sullivan - Duo-accordion album intended for champions, like their album, **Simply Open** (see below.) This one includes a selection of different reels (7 of them), and 4 each of slip jigs, treble jigs and

hornpipes with the hardshoe dances played at the slow speed. Very competently played with a definite beat.

Beoga: A Fine Madness (2004) - Liam Bradley, Sean Og Graham, Damian McKee & Eamon Murray - What do you get when four of the most productive and imaginative musicians in the Irish traditional/Irish dance field put together exactly the kind of album they want? This isn't an album for classes or practice but some of the tracks make excellent show pieces. Excellent listening, too.

Celtic Energy - 45 Minute Cardio (2004) - Christy Hodder/Lochabar Music. Definitely belongs in the "Special" category because you're not going to be using it for your usual dance classes. It brings traditional Celtic favorites like "Mairi's Wedding", "St. Anne's Reel" and even "Danny Boy" to the world of cardio exercise music. If I offer the kids in my Stretch-and-Strengthen classes a choice of music, this has been the universal favorite since we bought a copy. Available from the company's website, www.lochabermusic.com.

The Complete Ceili Collection - Olive Hurley - Despite the name, this lively collection of music to accompany figure dances isn't entirely complete - it omits "Highland Laddie", the recommended music for "High Cauleed Cap" (but see above for other CDs which offer this.) Aside from that omission, it's a very good collection and indispensable for anyone who's running ceili dances.

The Dance Music of Ireland: Jigs and Reels - Celtophile - Most "listening" CDs (see the last section for some of them) may have danceable tracks on them but are more suitable for shows than for learning to dance. This collection is one of the few where every track is danceable. Although the selections are limited to jigs and reels, each of the 14 tracks was recorded by a different band or musician with a wide variety of instrumentation. There's even a track with an accordion, for those who enjoy that instrument!

Definitive Irish Dancing Collection, The (2003) - Buntus Rince, Performed by Donegore Tradition. I had to debate which category to put this album in: it has tunes appropriate for all the solo dances except treble jigs (hornpipes only at slow speed) but its organization and orientation are much more suitable for ceili dancing than solo. And no, it doesn't measure up to the titanic boast of its title! (When you survey the albums reviewed in this document you shudder to think anyone would have the hubris to claim they had the definitive anything!) However, the musicians named in the liner, Wilcil McDowell and Brendan McGarrity, are excellent. The labeling of the tracks approaches the bizarre (for instance, you'd only know that one set of jigs is jigs if you happened to know that "The Siege of Ennis" is danced to jigs.) The "Free Dance Instructions" promised on the label are nonsense.

Evolution (2004) - Kin'sha. This album is aimed at champions and includes the four dances which are competed at that level - 4 reels, 4 slip jigs, 3 slow treble jigs and 3 slow hornpipes. Each selection is played at a slightly different speed than the others, which is great for accustoming yourself to variation in speeds. This album has earned a great deal of interest because of the exciting instrumentation, including a drum set in addition to keyboard, guitar, flute and pennywhistle.

Feisworld (2004) - Stephen Walker - Incredible album on solo keyboard with a very well-integrated drum machine, the more impressive if you've read Stephen Walker's bio on the Antonio Pacelli web site and discovered how young he is! He contributed four original compositions as well as using other modern and traditional tunes. Intended for the champion dancer, this album includes only the dances they compete: six reels and four each of slip jigs, heavy jigs and hornpipes with the hardshoe dances played only at slow

speeds. What sets this album apart more than anything else is the way Stephen Walker plays - his sixth reel track, for instance, uses the chord progressions of 1950's rock music. If this album doesn't get your blood pumping and make you want to dance, you're dead.
Highly Recommended!

The Final Round - Kevin Joyce - A 2-CD album with a fairly definitive collection of set dances, traditional and nontraditional, played on an accordion with keyboard accompaniment. Each tune is played at its minimum speed and again at one to three popular speeds. This is a standard reference for champions and would-be champions (and would-be TCRGs) to study the set dances.

Irish Ceili: Traditional Dance Music from Ireland - This is a great CD for ceili dancing but of only limited application for stepdancers. It features two renowned ceili bands playing a variety of reels and jigs.

Irish Dancing Made Easy (2003) - Irish Music Corporation - Alas! This ceili band CD doesn't make Irish dancing easy all by itself: it's the soundtrack of the best-selling video of the same title. I put it in the Special category because it's more useful for ceili dancing than for solo although it has reel, light jig, slip jig, slow treble jig, slow hornpipe, and two of the "old" trad sets, "St. Patrick's Day" and "Blackbird". It also has the "Highland Laddie" at full length for High-Cauled Cap, "Trip to the Cottage" and music for a six-hand reel (Fairy Reel, perhaps?) the Siege of Ennis and the Haymakers' Jig.

Kick It Up a Notch! Irish Set Dances (2007) - Mark Arrington. Wonderful new collection of the An Coimisiun set dances, both traditional and nontraditional (except the practically defunct "Is the Big Man Within?") One-man-band Mark plays fiddles, mandolins, guitars, whistle and bodhran on these tracks. "Garden of Daisies," "The Hunt," "Job of Journeywork" and "Rambling Rake" are each offered at two different speeds, the rest of the tunes at one. Arrington obviously has considered his instrumentation carefully; when two different speeds for the same tune are included, the instrumentation may differ considerably between them. For ceili dancing fans, there's "The Three Tunes" as well. If you dance nontraditional sets, this is a great album for you!

Kick It Up a Notch! is available from Fay's Shoes or directly from www.markarringtonmusic.com, where you can also order custom set dance music tracks.

Light 'n' Heavy Volume Two: Intermediate/Open - Gerry Conlon & Seamus O'Sullivan - This is the more advanced half of a two-album set (the first one was not available for review) that provides appropriate music for classes and practice by dancers of all levels. As always, these seasoned musicians provide excellent music on accordion and keyboard. This volume concentrates on the four dances that champions compete - two tracks each of reels, slip jigs, slow heavy jigs and slow hornpipes - but also includes a track of light jigs played at a more moderate speed than many albums present. The reels are labelled, "double reels" which should not put anyone off - they're highly dancable reels; see www.irishtune.info/rhythm for an excellent discussion of the musical details that separate single and double reels.

Official List & Official List II, The (2002) - Michael Fitzpatrick & Oliver C. Keane. Between them, these albums present all the set dances recognized by An Coimisiun. The original album, issued in 2001, contains the 30 trad & nontrad sets recognized at that time, II contains the 8 others recognized at the end of 2001. Mr. Fitzpatrick, a TCRG himself, meant these albums to help candidates prepare for their exams - the liner gives the time signature, official minimum speed, and number of bars in the step and the set which you have to know to pass the music test. The inner lining gives handy memory aids to

remember those details. The original has each tune played only once; because there are fewer on the second album, each is played twice, once at the minimum speed and again at a popular speed. Button accordion accompanied by guitar and keyboard, which makes it interesting to listen to as well as study from.

Pat King's Set Dances - This couldn't claim to be an all-inclusive review of Irish dance music without mentioning that renowned accordionist Pat King has recorded the nontrad sets, one per CD with a number of different speeds on each one. They're not widely distributed but you can find them at oireachtais.

Real Rhythm - Kevin Joyce - A champion-level collection of reels (at 113, 114, and 115), slip jigs, treble jigs (slow only) and hornpipes (ditto.) Very competently played on an accordion with piano accompaniment although you may wish that Joyce had exploited the potentials of his instrument more fully.

Reelwork: First Cut - Arlen Clarke (Available from JubileeDanceFloor.com). The cover informs you that this is "Irish dancing with an Attitude" and the contents certainly justify it. This is not an album for class or practice unless you're getting ready to use one of the tracks in a show, which is the intent. Innovative arrangements and orchestration of the tunes, all of them original, certainly put a fresh cast on things. The tracks are shorter than on albums intended for studio use so they'll fit the performance environment better. There's a highly unusual track called a "double slip jig" which combines 9/8 and 6/8 signatures, as in the nontrad set dance "Is the Big Man Within" but much faster. The composer aims this album at "advanced dancers and some visionary choreographers" and it might provide a refreshing break from the ordinary for them.

Sets & Solos Volume 1 - Olive Hurley - Combines the four solo dances done by champions - reel, slip jig, treble jig (slow only) and hornpipe (slow only) with a range of nontrad sets, some of which have been adopted as "new" trad sets since the album was published. The sets are each played at only one speed.

Sets & Solos Volume 3 - Olive Hurley - This album combines all eight trad sets with the champion-level solo dances - reel, slip jig, slow treble jig and slow hornpipe. A four-piece band of fiddle, guitar, accordion and keyboards provides scope for some interesting arrangements. However, a softer emphasis on the downbeats in the set dances may make them sound mushy compared to other renditions.

Simply Open - Gerry Conlan and Seamus O'Sullivan - This CD is intended for champion dancers. It includes a lively selection of reels, slip jigs, treble jigs and hornpipes - 5 each of the reels and slip jigs, 4 each of the hardshoe dances. All the hardshoe dances are at the slow speed. Accordion and keyboard, played with a very definite beat.

Strings for the Sets (1999) - Billy Furlong - A collection of nontrad set dances (including some that turned into "new" trad sets) and other champion-level dances played brilliantly on a fiddle. It does not include all of the nontrad sets.

Teacher in Training - Pat King - This album is intended to help would-be teachers prepare for the musical portion of the tests for certification. Pat King presents the first part of each of the 30 set dances which used to comprise the Irish Dance Commission's canon (the list was expanded in 2002) after stating the name of the tune and the characteristics which candidates must identify successfully to pass the test.

World at Your Feet-Set Dances - Gerry Conlon - The "old" trad and non-trad sets (except the exceptional "Is the Big Man Within?") recorded very precisely, played at their

minimum speeds on solo accordion. The track list gives the time signature, which you can translate into "hornpipe" or "treble jig" if you know that 4/4 or 2/4 are hornpipes and 6/8 is jig time. Two selections, "Kilkenny Races" and "Planxty Davis" are repeated at 95 beats per minute.

The New Sets - Gerry Conlon & Seamus O'Sullivan (2002) - The new sets adopted by An Coimisiun at the end of 2001 plus one track each of the other dances in championship competition - reel, slip jig, slow heavy jig and slow hornpipe. This is the second volume of "World at Your Feet" the same way that "Official List II" is the second volume of "Official List". Gerry Conlon is reunited with Seamus O'Sullivan, playing a very interesting and varied keyboard accompaniment. Each of the new sets is played four times, at its minimum speed and again at three different speeds. The notes don't tell you which are jigs or hornpipes, but you can tell if you know that the ones with a minimum speed of 69 beats per minute are jigs and the ones at 80 are hornpipes.

Mostly Listening

This section includes a number of CDs which have some danceable tracks but which mostly offer dance music-related listening pleasure. The danceable tracks often make interesting and exciting show pieces. This section is not meant to be all-inclusive!

Celtic Dance - Narada Collection - There are actually two CDs of this title, both equally good.

Come to Dance - John Whelan

Dance of the Celts - Narada Collection

Irish Music to Set You Dancing - Chyme Music/Outlet Recording Company - This collection by a variety of musicians and bands is often sold as though it were a standard learning/practice CD when in fact it is not. Although a number of the tracks are danceable, they would be more suited for a ceili than for dance lessons. It does include "High Cauleed Cap" ["Highland Laddie"] at full length and "Sweets of May".