

Tuned to what matters, Daithi Sproule brings his world-class Irish music to a small stage in Amherst

BY JOHN STIFLER

It slightly boggles my mind that tomorrow night you can sit in the Black Sheep Cafe in Amherst and be within a few feet of Daithi Sproule.

Okay, maybe I am overstating things. It's true that Daithi Sproule is an internationally admired Irish traditional musician with a resume longer than the traffic jams in booming Galway, but it's also true that for the past four years he has been living in Easthampton, and, like any other internationally known Irish musician, he plays out when he's at home, in any venue on any excuse.

Sproule is the featured guest tomorrow for the Pioneer Valley Folklore Society's monthly Song & Story Swap at the Sheep and, here, some irony emerges. Twenty-five years ago, the PVFS was presenting concerts on large Valley stages featuring the Boys Of The Lough or Silly Wizard or DaDanaan. Sproule could have been playing in a PVFS concert at the Academy of Music, for example, as part of Skara Brae or Altan, two of the Celtic groups of which he has been a regular.

Nowadays, if performers of that stature come to this area on tour, they're at the Iron Horse or the Calvin, while the PVFS operates modestly with the volunteer-run Song & Story Swap. Tomorrow night, however, the modest setting ought to be packed. Born in Northern Ireland, Sproule first came to the United States in 1978, in the heyday of the Irish folk boom. "I came over to record in New York for the Shanachie label, with Paddy O'Brien and James Kelly," Sproule recalled last Thursday. "I was editing for a publishing company in Dublin, and I took three months off to travel, knock around. I stayed here a year."

Eventually he settled in the U.S., living in the Twin Cities - "Lovely place" - 18 or 19 years before migrating to western Massachusetts. His gigs have been countless, but they include most of the North American tours of the group Altan, where his guitar is sometimes the strummed accompaniment to Mairead Ni Mhaonaigh's definitive Gaelic fiddle, sometimes a deftly picked lead. You may have seen him at the Iron Horse, where Altan has played often.

He has also played on "A Prairie Home Companion" with such various non-Irish folk musicians as Peter Ostroushko. He has recorded superb fiddle-and-guitar discs with Randal Bays, and as part of Altan he has also played with the Chieftains, Bonnie Raitt, and, sure enough, Dolly Parton. "In the mid-90s," Sproule said, "we did a live recording with Dolly Parton. It had been many years since she had done a live album, and she wanted something from across the ocean" - i.e., some of the original Scottish

and Irish elements on which much Appalachian and country music is based. One night when Altan was playing in Nashville, someone from Parton's crew came to check them out and persuaded them to join in the project. "She was fantastic," said Sproule. "A very nice person." He got what seems like the best part of the deal, since the recording included sessions where just the singer and the guitarist were recording tracks together. "She'd be running through the song with me, and she's a fabulous singer." (Note to Dolly Parton fans: RCA Legacy just released the two-disc "Essential Dolly Parton," with everything from "Mule Skinner Blues" to "Here You Come Again" and then some. Buy several copies.)

Sproule's own sound, assisted or solo, is a treat especially for devotees of real old Irish singing and for hard-core guitar fans of nearly any stripe. He sings in English and in Gaelic in one of those beautiful high-ranging Celtic voices that is simultaneously soft, clear and rich. One of many reasons to listen to him is to get caught up yet again in how English and Gaelic can sound like each other - not for the consonants, but for the similarities in intonation and syllabic emphasis, so different from the Romance languages.

As for his guitar work, he was one of the first folk artists to make extensive use DADGAD tuning, which he learned from Bert Jansch of Pentangle. Yes, we're going back a bit. Normally the strings of a guitar are tuned to the notes EADGBE. The more common variant tunings are open - i.e. all six strings are tuned to play one chord with no fretting. Sproule's is neither the one nor the other. "What Jansch did, I just loved," said Sproule. "I listened to his solo albums, tried it myself, left it, came back to it. It ended up being particularly good for Irish music." He continued, "If you use standard tuning, you're getting used to straightjackets, all very solid and foursquare. This tuning gives you an immediately interesting sound. It's neither a major nor a minor chord - not a chord at all in the normal sense of the word. It becomes easy to focus on bass and harmony without ever making an explicit chord, and that opens things up. "A lot of the work I do, I concentrate on the bass strings and use the top strings as a drone. And there was no harmony in old Irish music, so a tuning where chords aren't absolute seems to make sense. But," he added, "it's not the tuning, it's what you do with it that matters."

What he'll do tomorrow night is play and sing the usual Swap guest's set in the middle of the evening. As always in the Song & Story Swap, the program begins and ends with audience members taking turns singing or leading (or just suggesting) songs, or telling stories. Some of the songs and tales will be new, others timeless. The Swap runs from 7:30-9:30 p.m. at the cafe, 79 Main St., Amherst. For more information visit www.filbert.com/pvfs.