

THE SINGS OF EAGLE

With fiddles and flutes and voices from the heart, a 14th St. tavern revives the centuries-old Irish seisiu'n

By TOM O'NEILL

A night descends on the meat-packing district at the far western reaches of 14th St., the crowd in the backroom of a weathered longshoreman's bar sits hushed, listening to a Kerry man raise his voice in a centuries-old Irish ballad.

Sitting alone at a table, his eyes are closed, his shoulders rise and fall with the swell of his thickly brogued tenor. A few listeners, familiar with the tune, hum along. Upon finishing, he bows his head and takes a long draw from his mug of Guinness.

The crowd bursts into applause and immediately across the room a fiddler starts up a raucous instrumental joined by others who, if they don't have instruments, pound on the tables, clap their hands and stomp their feet.

Welcome to Monday Night Seisiu'n at the Eagle Tavern.

"Americans go to Ireland looking for this and never find it," shouts Terry, a plumber from Limerick who just moved to New York.

Seisiu'n — a Gaelic word for the ancient Irish custom of gathering friends and relatives for informal sing-alongs — were brought to America by immigrants, and originally held in family parlors. When the Irish neighborhoods broke up in the '50s, the seisiu'n moved to the only suitable alternative location — the bars. The Eagle's seisiu'n, begun in 1975, is considered by many to be the finest in America.

By 10 p.m., the backroom of the Eagle (355 W. 14th St., no cover) is overflowing with revelers from all walks of life. While most aren't profes-



TRADITIONAL VIOLINIST Paddy Reynolds solos at the spirited Monday night sing-alongs.

PETER DOLAN

sional musicians — or for that matter even Irish — they play and sing with a passion and beauty that often takes the breath away.

Besides the fiddles and flutes, the instruments at the seisiu'n could be museum pieces. The Celtic heirlooms — bodhrans, concertinas, melodeans and mandocellos — are played with an expertise that belies their anachronism. There is no amplification or stage, everyone sits at

scattered tables in the wood-paneled room.

"We're not a set group, there's no announcements, nothing's organized, we don't even know each other's last names," says old-timer Leo Hardiman. "But," he adds, "everyone that walks in here as strangers walks out as friends."

Peter Dolan, the son of Irish immigrants, is the president of the Eagle Sissiu'n Society. "We encourage whoever comes in to participate."

Leroy Lessan, a 47-year-old Harlem-born African-American, bears out Dolan as he raises the roof with some rebel songs on his banjo, even a Mexican and Creole number.

"It's legitimate as long as it's sung from the heart," says Dolan.

The president of an insur-

ance company, Kevin Brooks takes refuge from work at the seisiu'n, even scheduling business trips around them. Touring musicians will also come a few days early or stay a few days late to drop into the Eagle.

Bobby Clancey of the Clancy Brothers ("The band who sparked the Irish music revival in the '60s," says Dolan) wanders in at 1 a.m., after a performance at Lincoln Center.

For librarian Suzanne Corrigan, a dream comes true tonight when she sings a duet with Clancey.

It is 4 a.m. when the seisiu'n finally ends. When asked about the late hour, and the possibility of a worried wife in Brooklyn, Leo Hardiman smiles and says, "She knows. On Monday nights there are no clocks."

(Tom O'Neill is a freelance writer.)

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December 17, 1989

TODAY



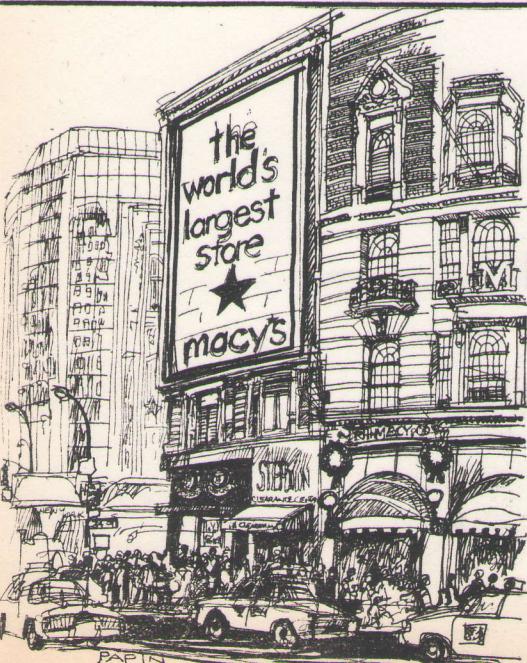
Carolfest

Join professional singers and musicians for the fifth annual Carolfest West at 3 p.m. at the origami tree in the American Museum of Natural History. Carol on down Columbus Ave. to Lincoln Center Plaza for the lighting of the holiday tree by Wynton Marsalis, star of "A Classical Jazz Christmas."

Call (212) 877-7272 for information.

INSIDE

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UNDISCOVERED MANHATTAN

By HOPE COOKE

The slender building at 56 W. 14th St. is the last surviving remnant of the first Macy's, which opened here in 1858. Above the door is the faintly lettered star and logo — the star from R.H. Macy's whaling days in Nantucket.

Today, bargain signs plaster the discount stores on the street level of the old Macy's building — a direct tie with the past. Macy's was the city's first store to offer sales.

Macy was also an innovator in advertising and window displays. His love of theatrics and mechanics led him to buy

a giant wind-up talking bird, which drove his showman friend P.T. Barnum mad with envy. He'd come in to see the bird and chide himself for not having scooped Macy.

Macy's introduced thematic exhibits. During the Christmas season, the work was so intense that employees stayed until 11 p.m.

By the early 1880s, the displays were automated and the staff less stressed out. Dolls, propelled by steam mechanics, danced in windows now brilliantly illuminated with electricity.

(Hope Cooke is a city historian and walking-tour guide.)