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Milwaukee Irish Fest 2009

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This August, the shores of Lake Michigan at **Milwaukee, Wisconsin**, might remind of you Galway Bay, or the Bay of Fundy, or the Firth of Clyde -- that's if you listen to the music being played and the stories being shared at **Irish Fest. coming up 13 through 16 August**. Musicians including Aoife Clancy, Tommy Sands, Sean Keane, The Red Hot Chili Pipers, Salsa Celtica, Natalie MacMaster, and Donnell Leahy will be on hand, with vendors, story tellers, Celtic musicians from the midwest region, representatives from Tourism Ireland, and the Bishop of Conor and Down in Northern Ireland. If the weather holds, about 120,000 people are expected to come along over the course of the festival to enjoy **music from Ireland, Atlantic Canada, and Scotland** and to learn about **Irish culture** through story, song, exhibits, food, and conversation.



Aoife Clancy

"I'd say we're looking forward to good weather, that's right on top of the list," says festival founder **Ed Ward**. Usually, they do have that, although singer **Aoife Clancy**, who will be returning to the festival this year, recalls a festival two years ago when the show went on anyway - "It was just lashing rain the whole time, but still it was totally packed, I thought. The people just kept coming out. I was amazed. They came out, and they stayed," she says.

People keep coming for the music, the variety, the fun, and the chance to immerse themselves in Irish culture. "This year we have more bands that are new to the festival than usual," Ward said, "and I'm not sure why that is, except that we have so many good people going out and looking at artists and keeping us in touch with great people. It's good too, because next year will be our thirtieth anniversary, so we'll probably go back to some bands



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who have been with us along the way for that."



Cherish the Ladies



Aiofe Clancy

Ward, who has been with Irish Fest since the beginning, points out that one of the challenges for such a long running event is to keep raising the bar on what's offered. Several years ago the **President of Ireland** was a guest, for example, and in 2007 the renowned band **Cherish the Ladies** had a reunion concert featuring current members of the group alongside artists such as Clancy and **Cathie Ryan**, who've since gone on to solo careers. **Sean Keane**, one of the most popular singers in Ireland, will be making his festival debut this August, as will **The Red Hot Chilli Pipers from Scotland**, a group who don't, as their name implies, necessarily fit stereotypes people may have of pipe music. *"Natalie MacMaster and Donnell Leahy are an example of that too,"* Ward says of the top Canadian duo. *"They've both played the festival many times before, but Donnell with The Leahy Family band and Natalie with her own band. They're married now, and they're appearing as Masters of the Fiddle. That gives people something to enjoy that they are familiar with but yet it's a little different."*



Masters of the Fiddle - Natalie MacMaster and Donnell Leahy. Photo courtesy of CAMI

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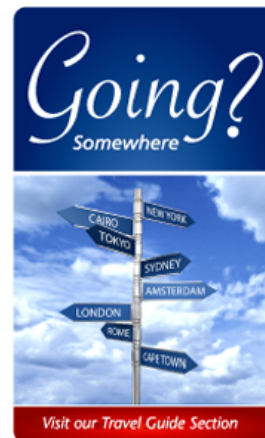
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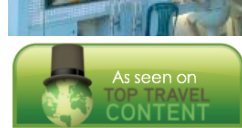


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Festival visitors also look forward to the cultural side of things. *"You could spend a whole day in the cultural village and fill your time up, and never even make it to the music stages,"* Ward says. You might learn about how to trace your Irish ancestors, meet and talk with craftspeople from Ireland and Irish America, learn a few words of Irish or brush up your knowledge of the language, take your kids to a play in Irish or to learn about the Celtic Canines, plan your next trip to Ireland, and sample food and drink from shepherd's pie to Jameson's whiskey.



You will want to listen to the music, though, there's no doubt of that. Wandering Educators' Ireland editor **Corey Taratuta** points out that *"the stages can get chock a block on Friday and Saturday, so I like going to the Grand Hooley on Thursday night. It's a much more intimate experience where you often get the chance to meet the artists."* During the day he goes for the up close experience too. *"The main stage acts are great,"* he says, *"but I like to wander by the the Snug and the Village Pub. You can pull up a stool and enjoy some great tunes."* If you are a player yourself, there are sessions during the day and after things start to slow down at night, so you may want to bring your instrument along.



Cathie Ryan



Sean Keane

This is just a taste of what goes on at Irish fest. Twenty nine years ago it began *"with a wing and a prayer and \$250 in the bank,"* says Ed Ward. Now more than four thousand volunteers, from Milwaukee and beyond, come to assist the hundreds of artists and thousands of visitors on scene. The festival has also been able to start a series of music classes in Milwaukee, helped inspire the start of a genealogy society, contributes to the support of the renown **Ward Irish Music Archive**, and has funded a foundation which gives small grants to individuals and organizations involved in researching, studying, and teaching Irish music. It's also a place where those starting and running other festivals come for inspiration and advice. That's only fitting, in a way, as all those years ago people from the Irish community in Milwaukee volunteered to help at a newly started Italian festival, and began to think, we could do this too. The Italian festival folk shared what they'd learned when it was time for that to happen.

Each year, there's a mass for peace and justice on the Sunday morning of the festival, and a closing concert and fireworks to send people on their way as things close down on Sunday evening. Most will very likely feel the same way musician Aoife Clancy does. *"I had the best time at Milwaukee,"* she says, *"and I'm really looking forward to going back."*

Tickets for the festival are \$15 per day, and there are many opportunities for discounts and free admissions through donating food or school supplies to festival supported causes. Details on all this as well as performer schedules and biographies, directions, transportation information, and links to material about the music classes and other **Irish Fest** programs are at the festival's web site, www.irishfest.com

Kerry Dexter is the Music Editor for Wandering Educators.

Kerry's credits include VH1, CMT, the folk music magazine Dirty Linen, Strings, and The Encyclopedia of Ireland and the Americas. She also writes about the arts and creative practice at <http://www.musicroad.blogspot.com> Music Road. You may reach her at music at

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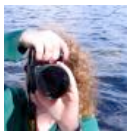
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kerry - this sounds fantastic! i wish we'd be in town for the fest. we'll have to make a plan for next year!

Jessie Voigts, PhD

Publisher, wanderingeducators.com

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Submitted by Dr. Jessie Voigts on Wed, 07/29/2009 - 04:04.

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