

# Sammy's 40 year musical march



FOR 40 years the Limerick City Brass and Reed Band have played an integral role in the city's St Patrick's Day celebrations. **Alan Jacques** caught up with the band's charismatic leader **Sammy Benson** and marched to the beat of his drum.

by Alan Jacques  
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WHEN you meet the dynamic force behind the Limerick City Brass and Reed Band which celebrates its 40th birthday this year, there's no doubting why they are still going strong.

Fondly known throughout the city as the Sammy Benson Band, the man himself is as enthusiastic about the band today as he was when it formed back in 1974.

Celebrating his 80th birthday this May, Sammy is as passionate, energetic and eternally youthful a man as you are ever likely to meet. His love of music and his beloved brass and reed band almost ooze out of him. He's an inspirational character that simply lights up when you bring the conversation round to music.

When I arrive at Sammy's Corbally home, he proudly points to the nameplate on the front of the house which reads 'Artanis'. "That's Sinatra backwards," reveals the charismatic bandleader, who has been a fan of Ol' Blue Eyes since he was eight years-old.

I am immediately struck by the amount of Sinatra and Rat Pack memorabilia among the equally cherished family portraits depicting a lifetime of memories and a dashing handsome young Sammy Benson. Musical instruments, CDs and sheet music are stacked high as are the many prizes the Limerick City Brass and Reed Band have won over the years.

"No matter where we went or what we did, we

came away with a prize," said Sammy proudly. "The closet under the stairs is full of them," adds Sammy's wife, Dottie.

His passion and love of music hasn't faded over the years and it is difficult not to get swept away in his fervour whether he is talking about the great 'Chairman of the Board' or the band he has dedicated so much time, energy, love and money to over the past 40 years. He plays everything from clarinet to saxophone, trumpet and piano, and still plays every day!

"I don't drink or smoke. Music has been there all my life. I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have music," he tells me, horrified even at such a notion.

You can see why kids who joined his band 36 and 40 years ago have stuck with him and still continue to march their weary bones down O'Connell Street every St Patrick's Day. Hence also, why the band once known as the Limerick City Brass and Reed Youth Band, dropped 'youth' from its moniker. Loyal to Sammy they certainly are, but spring chickens, alas, many of them, no longer are.

This, of course, also says much about the great love and esteem the Sammy Benson Band have for their great leader.

One band member I spoke to fondly described Sammy to me as being like "a second dad". And there's no doubting that this great love is reciprocated. Sammy beams from ear to ear as he dotingly refers to his band as "all the lads" throughout our interview.

The Limerick music man first started the marching band back in 1974 when it was originally known as the Boherbuoy Youth Band. The Sammy Benson Band has since represented Limerick at St Patrick's Day Parades all round the world, taking in everywhere from Dublin to New York, Cincinnati and Geneva over the last four decades.

Sammy, who was crowned Limerick City Council's 'Citizen of the Year' in 1988, told the Limerick Post about how his precious band first came to fruition.

"I was playing in all the bands in town, my father Paddy Benson's band especially, all over the country. I was young at the time and I was still a member of the Boherbuoy. There were always boys and girls hanging around outside the band hall. I said to them 'are ye interested in learning to play?' 'If ye are', said I, 'I will teach ye but it will have to be every day. Coming once in a blue moon is no good to me.' So I got the bunch of kids and I taught them all the instruments," Sammy recalls.

"I got the band going anyway and they were getting better. I got them trumpets and trombones and some of the senior members were coming on at this stage. I used to take them out on the street, downtown, up O'Connell Street, all over the place. People used to say 'Sammy you'll walk the legs off them'. That was the start of it."

The rest, as they say, is history!





OVER the last 40 years, Sammy has shared his love of music with countless young Limerick waifs and strays. Even on occasion bestowing his wonderful gift on kids, who perhaps at the time, didn't value how much of a lifesaver it was to be.

"I had the kids out on Edward Street and I was teaching them to march. Anyway there were these fellas coming down the road, they were tough, and I said 'where are ye off to?' They said 'we're going down there to meet our pals'. 'Get in here' says I. I hunted them into the band hall and I went in and got them instruments.

"They are still with the band. One of them told me there a few years ago that if I hadn't hunted them into the hall that night, they would have ended up in trouble, because the pals they were going to meet were all arrested. They were bould children," recalls Sammy with nothing but love and mischief in his voice.

The Limerick City Brass and Reed Band has been a labour of love for the well-known city pensioner. With no funding from anyone down the years, Sammy has also continually, and selflessly, dipped his hand into his own pockets to pay for uniforms

and instruments for his band.

"If I got a couple of quid now, I'd buy an instrument and if I had new people coming in I'd go to the shops and see what I could get. It's all I've ever done all my life. Every penny my brothers Christy, Paddy, Eddie and myself had, we gave to the band.

"For the last couple of years it has all come out of my pocket but it won't be coming out of my pocket for much longer because I haven't worked for two years," he says, laughing.

There can be no doubting the huge wealth of happy memories the brass band has brought Sammy through the years. But the sad memory of the fire which destroyed the band's hall in Caledonian Park is as cutting for him today as it was that awful night over a decade ago.

"I remember I got a phone call around 10 o'clock at night to say the band hall was on fire. A couple of thugs had set it alight. The instruments and everything were beyond repair. It was heartbreaking."

The show must go on, of course, and Sammy, being the showman that he is, picked up the pieces

and was given the use of a hall on Parnell Street that is owned by the Dominican Church.

When asked what he puts the band's longevity and success down to, Sammy instantly replies, "It all comes down to hard work. You have to practise."

"I never let the band down. I'd practise them every night now if I could".

With 40th anniversary celebrations planned for 2014, this St Patrick's Day Parade will be a significant milestone for Sammy Benson and the Limerick City Brass and Reed Band. And as always the familiar calls of 'ah boy Sammy' will go up over the length and breadth of the city as he leads his band down O'Connell Street on March 17.

"A piece the band love playing is that 'Hawaii 5-0' theme tune. As a matter of fact, if I was walking up Parnell Street and there was fellas coming down they'd start humming it at me. Everyone knows me alright and St Patrick's Day will be a special day out this year. I won't be telling the lads of its significance though until afterwards," he says.

Before I reluctantly depart Sammy's company, I

can't resist asking him some more about his admiration for Frank Sinatra.

"Oh, Frank is my man! I've seen him perform dozens of times in London, America, all over the place. I met him in London too. There was a crowd gathering and I asked a fella 'what's going on here?' He said to me that 'Sinatra will be arriving in three minutes'. I was standing there and [Frank] came up to the door and I shouted, 'turn around this way will you, Frank?'

"He turned his head and I said 'my house is called Artank's' and he laughed because he got it," enthuses an awestruck Sammy.

After taking my leave, a wonderful thought springs to mind: Why name a local landmark after JFK? Sammy Benson, a Limerick man in his own lifetime, is more than worthy of such accolades.

To borrow from the great King of the Crooners, over the last 40 years Sammy did what he had to do and saw it through without exemption.

He did it his way!  
Ah boy Sammy!!!

Far top left: Sammy Benson moves to his own beat on St Patrick's Day

Far bottom left: The very early days of the Limerick City Brass and Reed Band

Above and below: Pictures of the Limerick City Brass and Reed Band down the years

