

IT'S A LONG WAY TO LIMERICK

by *Tim Lehane*



I suppose if the 'Tom-mies' of World War I could march off happily singing a song about some unknown place called Tipperary, it should come as no great surprise to learn that seventy or so years previously a song about Limerick had been a great London music hall favourite.

The sudden mushrooming of music hall entertainment brought overnight fame and fortune to many unsuspecting individuals. Initially the music hall auditorium was a long line of long tables where the customer sat, drank, and was entertained. 'Entertainers' suddenly found themselves the centre of competitive demands from different 'music halls' to come and sing, to come and entertain, to come and 'render their ditties'. And of course as far as the drinkers were concerned, the type of song which went down best with the beer, was a good narrative song, or a comic song, or a song with a rattling join-in chorus.

Many a singer/song-writer struggling in some day-to-day menial job became an overnight star via the new music hall opportunities.

And just as nowadays we associate particular singers with particular songs so it was also in music hall days e.g. George Leybourne/"Champagne Charlie", Harry Clifton/"Pretty Polly Perkins of Paddington Green", and Sam Collins/"Limerick Races".

Collins had been a chimney sweep. However his ability to sing and entertain, ensured him a new highly paid career - singing songs of an Irish flavour to the music hall crowds. With the money he made, he eventually built his own establishment in Islington Green in London. It was known as Collins' Music Hall.

Writing in 1946 in his book **Stars Who Made the Halls**, S. Theodore Filstead gives the following account of the hall:

"How many of the old London 'halls' still cling to variety? They, again, might be numbered on the fingers of the two hands, perchance one. Indisputably the oldest of them all is that London institution known as the Chapel on the Green, otherwise

Collins' Music Hall. Nearly a hundred years have passed by since Sam Collins, the Irish comedian who was born Vagg, built the 'hall' which bore his name. Through fair weather and foul, with many changes of ownership, Collins' has kept the flag flying. Not an artiste of note did not appear there ...".

It appears that Collins began his London career in the first of the music halls, the Canterbury Hall in Lambeth, managed by Charles Morton. Filstead tells us: "Sam Collins, otherwise Vagg, (was) a man exceedingly clever, as Harry Clifton was in the eighties, in singing topical verses set to familiar tunes. Poor old Ireland, the theme of Sam's songs, was always a sound trump in England, and Sam did the downtrodden Hibernian with a gusto born of the fact that nobody had ever trodden on him".

In his book **Man at Play** John Armitage gave this explanation for the remarkable popularity of the music hall:

"In the years immediately preceding World War I the music hall brought the greatest pleasure to the greatest number. It was peculiarly English, bawdy, sentimental, pretty and tuneful, as unsophisticated as it could be; it pleased the audience; they sang songs and it went well with the beer.

It is not known if Sam Collins ever sang in Limerick. Though the city did not have its own exclusive music hall, some of the leading British and Irish performers of the day appeared at the Theatre Royal at Henry Street and The Gaff at Charlotte Quay. And Limerick could also lay claim to at least one family of professional players, the Fergusons. Carrie Ferguson was a versatile and popular performer in the earlier part of this century. Her son, Harry Baily, was born (in Watergate), bred and steeped in the tradition of the strolling player, and inherited all his mother's flair. His Limerick apprenticeship stood him in good stead, and he took to the world of the music hall as naturally as a duck to water. He became a successful comedian in Britain and also played in Dublin.

"Limerick Races" was Sam Collins' best known composition. It is a measure of its author's achievement

in this typical music hall ditty that Mannix Joyce in his book **Portrait of Limerick** could describe a slightly modified version of the song as "a good traditional ballad".

Here are the words of "Limerick Races" as composed by Sam Collins.

"I'm a simple country lad
And resolved to see some fun, sir
So to satisfy me mind
To Limerick faith I come, sir
(To Limerick faith I come, sir).
Oh what a glorious place
And what a charming city
Where the lads are all so gay
And the lassies they are pretty.

Chorus -

Oh musha whack fol la lah
Doolie dum di doodie oh,
Oh musha whack fol la lah
Doolie dum di doodie oh.

'Twas on the first of May
When I began me rambles
Sure everything was gay
With jaunting cars and gambols
(With jaunting cars and gambols).
I looked along the road
That was lined with smilin' faces
All drivin' off in style
To go and see the races.

Chorus.

There were fiddlers playin' jigs
And the lads and lasses dancin'
And chaps upon their nags
Around the course were prancin'
(Around the course were prancin').
Some were drinkin' whiskey punch
While others bawled out gaily
Hurrah for shamrock green
And the splinter of shillelagh.

Chorus.

There were bet-fish to and fro
To see who'd win the race, sir
And one of them knowin' chaps
With his book he came to me, sir
(With his book he came to me, sir).
I'll hold your fifty pounds
And I'll put it down this minute
Arrah ten to one says I
But the foremost horse will win it!"

Final Chorus.