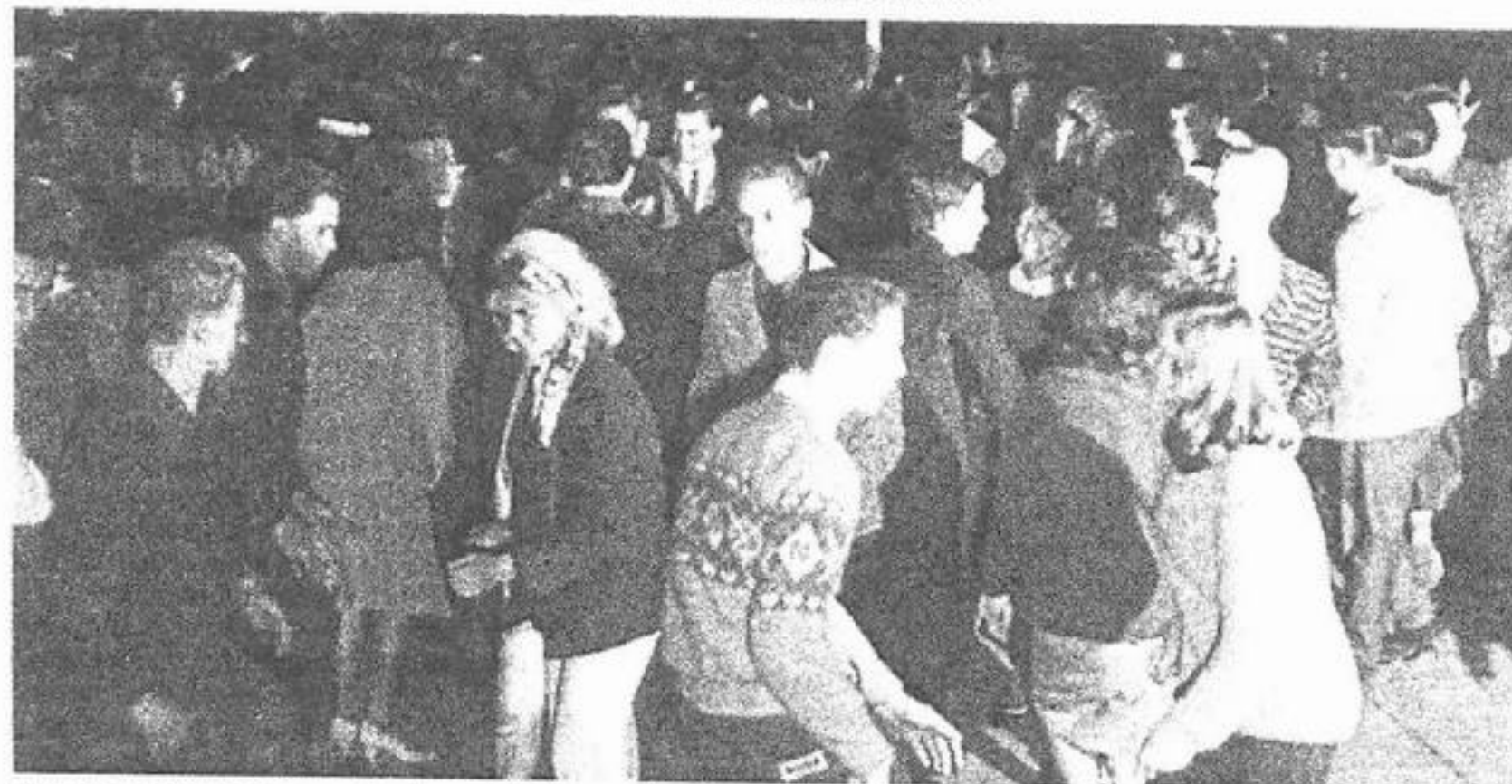


Then & Now

Tom Aherne



The dance hall was always extra busy at Christmas time!

Remembering the Christmas dances

CHRISTMAS DANCING during our holidays, was eagerly looked forward to when I was in my teenage years. The dance hall promoters pulled out all the stops to ensure large crowds were attracted to the top show bands, they lined up to entertain all.

Within my catchment area one could attend one every night if they wished but the top two nights were Saint Stephens' and New Year's Eve. The crowd would be swelled at Christmas time by people who had returned from working abroad or from the main cities.

Pupils attending secondary and third level education were also allowed to go dancing and to enjoy the proceedings. This provided boys and girls with a wider choice of partner, and a more productive night of entertainment. People made a special effort to look their best, and new clothes were purchased and the girls exchanged outfits, to broaden their wardrobe choices. The Olympic Ballroom Newcastle West was one of the most popular in my locality and it was owned by Joe Downes.

He was a true gentleman, who provided a platform, where people could meet and enjoy themselves, and be entertained by all the leading bands of the time, over a span of twenty five years. Joe was a shining light during those early days of the sixties, when work and money was scarce, and a night out at The Olympic was the highlight of the week. He provided a lot of employment to locals as well as putting the Town on the

entertainment map. He was also good for a lift home, if people got detained and missed their bus or drive, and looked after his patrons in a professional manner.

Joe was born in Pallaskenry village in October of 1935 and he had three brothers, and five sisters, and his parents died while he was attending primary school in Pallaskenry. He also attended the Christian Brothers Secondary School for two years, before spending a year working with Mc Carthy Wool Merchants in Limerick. Joe spent one year in Baldonnell and three months in the Air Corps in the Curragh learning to be a mechanic, before getting out on compassionate grounds. He worked as a salesman with Donnelly Sausages from 1956 to 1962, and enjoyed the interaction with people, which was a forerunner to his later career.

He liked the involvement with

people, and he was a founding member of the Pallaskenry soccer club when there were only a handful of teams in the county - Newcastle West, Askeaton, Foynes, and Mungret. He was treasurer of the club, and his cousin Jack O'Rourke, Pallaskenry was the secretary and they ran a few very successful fundraising dances in Shanagolden Hall. They presented Brendan Bowyer, and Maurice Mulcahy to packed attendances, and this got them interested in the idea of opening their own premises. Joe never played soccer but he also went on to be a founding member of The Desmond Soccer League. He also ran very successful five-a-side soccer tournaments, during the seventies in the Olympic.

Joe and Jack O'Rourke and Paddy Linnane, Kilmeedy joined forces to build The Olympic Ballroom, in Newcastle West to cater for the showband craze sweeping the

country at the time. A site was secured from Limerick County Council at Gortboy and the building cost approximately ten thousand pounds to erect. Stephen Clancy and Dinny Cronin from Ballingarry were the builders. It was one of the most modern and largest Ballrooms in Munster, catering for 2,500 people. It got its name because of The Olympic Games being held in Rome that year. It opened in a blaze of publicity in November 1960 and the ballroom was packed as people enjoyed themselves to the music of The Mighty Rhythm Boys from Northern Ireland.

Joe worked full-time in the Olympic Ballroom from 1962 overseeing dances on Friday and Sunday nights. Admission to the dances was ten shillings, and minerals cost six old pence. No alcoholic drink was served in the Olympic, apart from a rare occasion for a fundraising event. The top showbands, and groups, all played there including Joe Dolan, Brendan Bowyer, Dickie Rock, Phil Lynott, Brush Shiels, Freshmen, Gina, and the Champions, The Indians, Dixies, Sean O'Dowd, Tommy Drennan, Sinead O'Connor, Joe Locke, Smokie, Hank Locklin, Everly Brothers, The Wolfe Tone, Horslips, Dubliners, Christy Moore, Mud etc. At Christmas time 10 buses from all over Limerick and Ballyunion would ferry 600 people to the dances in the Olympic Ballroom.

Joe and Donie Collins the band leader from Askeaton opened The River Room Motel in Newcastle West in 1968. It proved to be very popular as well, catering for weddings, dinner dances, and in later year's discos, and nightclub. When Paddy Linnane died in 1967 Joe and Jack continued their partnership until the late seventies when Joe became sole owner of The Olympic. The eighties saw the showband scene in serious decline and The Olympic only opened on special occasions. It closed in 1985 with The Clipper Carlton the last band to play there. It is worth noting that the Olympic also hosted many other events, over its lifespan. I remember my first visit there from school in 1970 to a trade exhibition, promoting local businesses. It was an ideal venue for fundraisers, in the locality with Rathfredagh Cheshire

Home benefiting from dances and concerts.

The Ten Knights of Desmond final was held there for a number of years, with Derek Davis of RTE the compere. Dress Dances were held there including the Red Feather Ball, plus Grand Concerts, and Variety Shows. The Musique Club also held dances there in the eighties, which drew in teenagers from all over West Limerick. Joe sold the building to Mrs. Ryan from Tipperary who ran a cash and carry business, and was involved with Musgrave's. West Limerick Keen Cost Cash and Carry opened its doors on Thursday October 22 1987.

Joe missed the Olympic a lot when it closed but his involvement with the River Room Motel helped a


The crowd would be swelled at Christmas time by people who had returned from working abroad or from the main cities

lot until he ended his association there in 1994. He went full circle in the entertainment business, from the days of the dry ballroom, and the pioneer pen, to the bar extensions and the discos, and nightclubs. He was married to the late Joan Enright, who predeceased him by nineteen years. They were blessed with four children, Adrian, Seamus, Anne-Marie, and Orla, and they lived in Bishop Street.

Joe had great pride and passion for the entertainment business, and he provided a great social outlet for the people of the area. He was always in good form and he would greet you with a smile and a shake hands. He always had time for a quick chat and he was well versed in current affairs, and the state of the country. He was a man of great faith and a regular at Church ceremonies, and involved in charity work. He was kind and courteous, and found it hard to say no to a request, or favour. He enjoyed his days out at the Races, and the Concerts he attended.

He was 76 years old when he died on December 21, 2011, and the last to exit the stage to join Paddy Linnane, Donie Collins, and Jack O'Rourke, in their well deserved rest. Joe would have been delighted at the turnout for his Funeral Mass, in Newcastle West Church on Friday December 23.

There were enough priests present at the altar to form a soccer team, and a large enough crowd to fill the Olympic. He was laid to rest in Calvary Cemetery which was close to his heart through his involvement with the fundraising committee. Joe deserves all our thanks and gratitude, on his anniversary for the many happy unions created and for sending us all home sweating.



Olympic Ballroom Newcastle West

THIS FRIDAY, Oct. 11, at 8 p.m.

Brendan O'Reilly (R.T.E.)

PAUL O'LEARY (Cork Recording Artists) :: CHARLOTTE BYRNE (Vocalists) :: The Rivermen

An Olympic ballroom ad in the Leader from 1974 where Brendan O'Reilly, also a top sports journalist with RTE was performing