

The Shape of Pat Touhey's Career

This article appeared in **The Pipers' Review** Vol. XXXIV, No. 1, received March 2015, a publication of the Irish Pipers' Club, Seattle, WA. Thanks to editor Larry Dunn for permitting me to put this article in the Touhey Archive Webpages. What follows is a slightly revised version with updated information.

Pat Touhey is remembered today because of his recordings and because Francis O'Neill wrote about him. With good reason. The recordings reveal a stylist and virtuoso, worthy of his reputation as the preeminent Irish piper of his day. O'Neill describes him as a swell fellow to be around. "Agreeable in personality and obliging in disposition, he is deservedly popular. A stranger to jealousy, his comments are never sarcastic or unkind, neither does he betray any tendency to monopolize attention in company when other musicians are present." [**Irish Minstrels and Musicians** (1913) p. 315] But what was his life like?

For those of us who are interested, there are the impressions that he was a hit at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair; that he played "in vaudeville." So far, so good. But this picture is incomplete. Touhey's professional career spanned at least 36 years and included concerts, plays, vaudeville, dances. What follows is more information, compiled mostly from contemporary newspaper references, about the career of Pat Touhey.

I am confident that there were scores, if not hundreds, of engagements that did not make the papers. Still, I could verify at least 350 engagements for Touhey between 1885 and 1921. By "engagement" I mean both single appearances, like playing at a concert, and groups of appearances, often done under one contract, such as playing two shows a day for a week at one theatre.

First, two comments. Touhey was most often referred to as "Pat" in contemporary accounts. Throughout his career, sometimes "Patrick." From hundreds of references in newspapers I found but three to "Patsy" or "Patsey." This informal usage in print - "Patsy" - probably originated with the writings of Francis O'Neill, particularly his **Irish Minstrels and Musicians** (1913). Touhey also introduces himself - or is introduced by others - on his cylinder recordings as "Patsy."

In his day and in the United States, the instrument Touhey played was called the Irish pipes, or Irish bagpipes. Today we know it as the uilleann pipes. This later name was used in some circles in Ireland and America, particularly toward the end of his career. I found but one contemporary reference, in 1920, to Touhey playing "uilleann" pipes.

Touhey was born in Galway in 1865, emigrated with his parents to the United States around 1868. In an interview in 1901, Touhey says he began playing

pipes when he was eleven years old, and "considered myself a master of the instrument at twenty-one." [**Irish World** July 13, 1901 p. 8 column 7]

An obituary of Touhey by Michael Carey from the **Irish World** newspaper and quoted in **An Piobaire**, says that Touhey learned pipes first from Bartley Murphy, but lost interest for a few years. Then, at the age of 18 (c. 1883) he heard John Eagan play in a music hall in New York City and interest was rekindled. "The result of his contact with Egan [as Carey spells it] was that the two toured the Eastern cities together for some time, and thus began the career of Patrick Touhey as a professional piper...." [**Irish World** Feb. 3, 1923 p. 6 column 5; **An Piobaire** vol. 1 no. 16/17, Aibreán 1974, p. 11]

Touhey and Eagan toured with "Harrigan's Double Hibernian Co., Irish and American Tourists." Earliest mention of Touhey in a newspaper is in an ad for this company's performance in Mount Vernon, New York, Sept. 8, 1885. "During the tour the following celebrities will appear...John Eagen, Pat Touhey..." [Mount Vernon NY **Chronicle** Sep. 4, 1885, p. 2 column 5] Subsequent ads in the first quarter of 1886 read "...Con. Touhey, John Eagan,..." This may or may not be Pat under another name.

By April 1887 Touhey was playing pipes and acting in a play, "Inshavogue; or, The Patriots of '98" starring Benjamin Maginley. [**New York Mirror** Saturday April 16, 1887 p. 3 column 4]

During the first part of his career - 1885-1905 - there are more references to Touhey as an actor and piper in plays and theatre productions than as a vaudeville performer or even as a solo piper. About halfway through this period he begins to have vaudeville engagements.

Between 1885 and 1905 Touhey played in several theatre productions including "Inshavogue," "The Ivy Leaf," "The Rambler From Clare," possibly the Whitney Opera Company's production of "Brian Boru," and "Shandon Bells."

During the winter of 1888 - 89 he first came to the attention of Captain Francis O'Neill and the Chicago community of Irish musicians, probably when a member of "The Ivy Leaf" troupe. [Mitchell, Pat and Jackie Small, **The Piping of Patsy Touhey** (1986) p. 7; **Milwaukee Sentinel** Dec. 24, 1888, cited in the notes to **The Francis O'Neill Cylinders** CD set.]

In the summer of 1893 - exact dates uncertain - Touhey played at the Chicago World's Fair and was a big success. [**Chicago Daily Tribune** July 15, 1893 p. 10?]

He played at the annual Feis Ceoil agus Seanachas concerts in New York City in

1901, 1903 and 1904. These prestigious concerts were sponsored by the Gaelic Society and were widely covered in newspapers. In this serious and cultivated context he "supplied the feature of the programme," in 1901, according to the "...relentless and merciless musical critic of the 'Evening Sun'...." [Irish World April 6, 1901, p. 8, column 7]

In the summer of 1904 he performed solo at the St. Louis World's Fair. O'Neill writes that the manager of the Irish Village "...engaged 'Patsy' Touhey at the latter's own price, and it proved a capital stroke of business...." [IMM p.313] This engagement also involved him in a widely reported controversy about his appearing as a "stage-Irishman," to some a demeaning representation of the Irish.

His first known vaudeville appearance may have been with the team of "Brannigan, Wells and Touhey" at Proctor's Theatre, New York City, April 8, 1894, although "Touhey" could have been Pat's cousin James Touhey, who often played with dancer Patsy Brannigan. By 1896 vaudeville engagements become frequent, most of them with a partner, usually a dancer. Among the partner acts: "Finley and Touhey," 1896 - 97; "Touhey and Mack," many with "Rice and Barton's Extravaganza Co.," 1898 - 1900; "Touhey and Lacy," 1900 - 03. Touhey and Lacy made their entrance onstage in an automobile, closed the act with bagpipe playing and dancing.

Between August 1903 and August 1905, 20 known solo vaudeville engagements.

Sept. 1905 - Dec. 1906 he appears in his last play, "The Rocky Road to Dublin." From then on it's all vaudeville. Of the scores of newspaper references after 1906, only four refer to non-vaudeville engagements, a dance (Feb. 1913), a boxing match (Oct. 1914) and two concerts (Dec. 1914, Nov.? 1920).

A few words about vaudeville. It was the first mass entertainment business. Its heyday was roughly from 1890 to 1925. It developed from circus, minstrel, burlesque and variety show traditions. Ideally vaudeville aimed to be "polite," genteel, with nothing objectionable for gentlemen, ladies, children. As the industry evolved it tended toward consolidation and powerful men bought up chains of theatres; Pastor's, Keith's, Proctor's, etc. At its peak, say 1910, vaudeville was showing in hundreds of theatres throughout the country, employing perhaps 12,000 people industry-wide.

There was a remarkable variety and diversity of vaudeville acts. Comedians, singers, dancers, acrobats, jugglers, animal acts, ventriloquists, bicyclists, Irish Hebrew German and Negro parodies, blackface & whiteface performers, female impersonators, sharpshooters, magicians, etc., etc. A given vaudeville show was potentially likely to have peculiar juxtapositions of these and other kinds of acts in

succession.

Vaudeville performers had their own subculture, with much travel, their own slang, trade associations, publications. The life was competitive, uncertain and demanding, and not very lucrative for most. Most vaudeville performers were, in a way, independent contractors, who, through booking agents, hired themselves out to individual theatres or theatre chains. A typical vaudeville show might have 5 or 9 acts, repeated 2 to 4 (or more) times per day, Monday thru Saturday. Sunday was generally a travel day; on to the next engagement. The season generally ran from September through May; successful vaudevillians often took summer off, others took engagements at amusement parks, fairs, etc.

In 1906, the first notice of engagements of Touhey with his wife May. May was her stage name; in private life she was Mary Touhey, nee Gillen. She was a dancer. They had 5 known engagements in Illinois and Indiana in the first part of the year. For the rest of his career, Touhey performed with May, either as what was known in the business as a two-act (the two alone), in a trio, or in partnership with Charles H. Burke and others as the Burke, Touhey Company. For the most part these engagements were in the northeastern part of the country, with occasional forays into the central states; Ohio or Indiana, for example. They occasionally ranged further afield, as will be seen.

On October 6, 1907, the first mention of "Burke and Touhey" as a vaudeville team. Charles H. Burke (1870 – 1940) was a comedian and dancer. He was probably born in England, emigrated to the US as a young child or teenager. By 1891 he was certainly in burlesque and vaudeville, and by 1892 in an act with his brother John and "Wise Mike," a trained donkey or mule. "The Burke Brothers" was a successful act for the next 10 years. Charles Burke wrote much of his own material, played Irish and Hebrew (Jewish) comedy parts. In 1904 - 06 he was performing with his wife Grace La Rue. They went through an acrimonious and well-publicized divorce in 1907 and "Wise Mike" died about the same time (perhaps 1908). Then began Burke's association with Touhey.

Burke wrote a "skit" entitled "The Birthday Party," which he and the Touheys performed for many years. The skit ran about 25 minutes, and is mostly a humorous conversation between two old friends, with Pat's piping and May's dancing worked in. The script of the skit still exists. Other skits they performed were "Casey's Visit", first mentioned in 1915, and "Going to the Wedding," 1919. By their descriptions, these skits are also conversations between old friends, much like "The Birthday Party."

Burke, Touhey and Company performed, on and off, for almost 14 years. Their first two years together may have been the most successful. They played several large cities, and had a heavily-reviewed engagement as headliners at

Pastor's Theatre in New York City, January, 1908. [**Variety** Jan. 18, 1908 p. 11 column 2] The Company consisted of Pat and May Touhey and Charles Burke, and often Burke's wife Harriet Carter (1878 - 1967). Sometimes the troupe included a young man, whose role in the act is unclear.

In August, 1908, the Touheys moved from the Bronx, New York City, to relatively rural East Haddam, Connecticut. They lived there until 1919, then lived in Freeport, NY 1919 - 1922. Freeport, on Long Island, was at the time well known as a "show-folk colony." "Nearly every home in the colony was built with vaudeville money." [Laurie, Joe, Jr. **Vaudeville: from the honky-tonks to the Palace** Henry Holt and Co. (1953) p. 298]

The Burke and Touhey Company broke up and reformed at least twice between 1907 and 1922, and Pat and May performed as a two-act in the meantime. In these years, whether as a two-act or in the Company, their schedule conformed to the vaudeville season: engagements beginning in September or October, running through May; summers off.

Burke and Touhey apparently split up between March 1912 and December 1915. For a portion of that time - May 1913 to February 1914 - the Touheys were joined by Tom Connelly and billed as "The Pat Toohey Trio." This spelling of the name is consistent. In reviews Connelly is variously described as a dancer, singer, and straight man. Connelly was at least a generation younger than the Touheys. He later enlisted in the army and was killed in action in France in World War One. Piano playing, likely by Connelly, is mentioned as part of the act, in one case as accompanying the pipes.

Burke and Touhey reunited by December 1915. From November 1917 to May 1918 the company went on an epic western tour, mostly in theatres on the Pantages circuit. There were at least 26 engagements including theatres in Minneapolis; Butte, Montana; Vancouver, B.C.; Portland, Oregon; San Diego; Ogden, Utah; Denver; Kansas City; Houston; Waco, Texas.

The years 1917 - 20 were probably the busiest for Touhey. He averaged over 20 known engagements per year. In 1921 a sharp drop-off, with only four, and his last known engagement was with Burke in Brooklyn, NY, September 26, 1921.

Touhey made commercial phonograph recordings for the Victor Company, probably all recorded in 1919. One 78 record, "Drowsy Maggie-Medley of Reels" was released, with national advertising, in January 1920. The second, a medley of reels including "The Steampacket" was released March 1921. The third 78, "The Maid on the Green Medley of Irish Jigs..." was released in March 1924, after Touhey's death.

Touhey died at his home, by then in back in the Bronx, January 10, 1923, age 57. "He had been suffering from liver trouble for some time...." [**Variety** Jan. 19, 1923 p. 21 column 5]

Touhey had an entrepreneurial spirit which manifested itself in at least two interesting ways. First, Touhey was a believer in advertising. At apparent critical points in his career Touhey bought ads: to advertise for work: to seek a vaudeville partner: for his recordings. He was no shrinking violet, and worked to keep his name in the public eye. Here is an example:



"America's Leading Irish Piper. A Clever Little Dancer. Pat and May Touhey (Formerly Burke and Touhey) In a Comedy Sketch, featuring Pat Touhey's Irish Bag Pipe Solos and May Touhey's Irish Reel and Jig Dancing. Permanent address--East Haddam, Conn." [**Variety** Aug. 21, 1909 p. 32 column 2]

Second, with respect to technology, he was an early adopter of sound recording. As early as May 1901 he was advertising the availability of cylinder records of his playing at \$1.00 each or \$10.00 per dozen. (\$10 equaled at least \$240 in 2013 dollars) By all evidence, these were one-off performances, made individually to satisfy each order. No copying involved. The surviving recordings are a huge part of his legacy.

Pat Touhey was a wonderful musician, but at heart I believe he was a theatre person - ultimately a vaudevillian. This was the life he chose, and I suspect the kind of people he most liked to be with. A look at his life as a whole would tend to bear this out.

Note: Web page references (URL's) and additional images for most of the newspaper and journal articles mentioned here will be found on the "Touhey References" pages, www.whitmerpipes.com/touhey_archive.html

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Jan. 2014
revisions 2015