

January 27, 2025

FOR most of this century, Michael Corbett has been at the very center of the Irish music scene in Savannah.

Whether back in the day with the Savannah Ceili Band, his years of regular stints at the old Kevin Barry's on River Street with former musical partner Colleen Settle as the duo Seldom Sober, or with his current bandmate Dan O'Connell, Corbett has sung and strummed many hundreds of tunes from the musical tradition of Ireland the Irish diaspora.

This weekend, Corbett and O'Connell –as The Galway Rogues – play two sets at the Savannah Irish Festival at Victory North, at 1 p.m. and 4 p.m.

While the Rogues are a much newer incarnation, formed last year in the wake of Seldom Sober's breakup as Settle returned home to New York, Corbett and O'Connell have a long local musical history together.

"Dan and I have played together for quite a while. We were in the Savannah Ceilidh Band from 2007-2019. That was a five or six piece depending on the lineup," Corbett explains.

Corbett plays six-string rhythm guitar and handles the vast majority of vocals. While Settle is a fiddle player, Dan is a multi-instrumentalist, mostly playing melody for the Rogues on tin whistle and accordion.

"Of course Dan's role in a five-person band is different from when he plays with me. In a five-piece, Colleen would be front and center, and Dan could play around her," Corbett says.

The Galway Rogues, unusually, will be a four-piece at the Irish Festival, with a rhythm section in addition to Dan and Michael.

"Johnnie Kennedy will be joining us on double bass. He's a local legend. He's played with The Drifters, The Platters, and The Coasters," Corbett says.

Corbett is especially excited that his son Liam "will be making his debut on the bodhran" – the traditional Irish frame drum, which is held in one arm and played with a single stick, or "tipper," held in the other hand.

With those personnel additions, Corbett says "Our set at the Irish Festival will have a few things no one's heard us play before, unless you've caught us over the past four or five months. We've been going crazy learning new stuff!"

Corbett's primary musical muses are the legendary Clancy Brothers, arguably the artists

most responsible for popularizing traditional Irish music to a general American audience, back in the '60s-'70s.

"I learned from the Clancy Brothers, both through osmosis and directly through my relationship with them personally over the years," he says.

Learning new songs is a constant drive for Corbett, both through serendipity and through deliberate effort.

"It's always a little bit of both. I've had some songs on the radar since the '90s. And I also go fishin' for new stuff. Last year I bought a set of used Irish Rovers CDs, and found a hidden gem on there to add to our set," he says.

While the majority of songs you'll hear the Rogues play are traditionally Irish, you might also hear old tunes from Scotland, the north of England, Canada, the U.S., or even Australia – anywhere the Celtic diaspora has set foot.

"The Irish genre in general will incorporate folk songs from all over. For example, we play a song about Newfoundland, written by an Irish man who emigrated to Newfoundland," Corbett says.

"The Irish style in music is really more about the style of presentation rather than about the precise origin of the songs."

Corbett, a Massachusetts native, laughs when he talks about an "Irish tune" from his hometown, titled "Charlie on the MTA" and made popular by The Kingston Trio.

The MTA of course is the Boston subway.

"That song is not set anywhere near Ireland and has absolutely nothing to do with Ireland," Corbett laughs. "But every Irish band in Boston is expected to be able to play that song."

Corbett's vast repertoire in the traditional Irish genre is really a unique offering, and even old-timers are sometimes taken aback by the extent of his knowledge.

"One time when Colleen and I were playing at Kevin Barry's, an older couple came up to us after a set. The man said, 'My wife and I have been married for 50 years. We've listened to Irish music together that whole time. And you've played so many songs tonight we've never heard before.' That for me is the highest compliment we could hope for," Corbett says.

This will be one of your last chances to catch Corbett live for several months, as he is having surgery in April for an arthritis-related ailment in his picking hand, caused in no small part by his incredible musical dedication.

“Playing all those 12-hour days at Kevin Barry’s on St. Patrick’s Day for so many years, there was eventually going to be a price to pay,” Corbett muses.

“I’m proud of it in a way. I learned an instrument specifically to play Irish music. It’s been my vocation, my mission, to play this music and teach people about its history,” he says.

“And I’ve got the scars to prove it. To prove I did my share.”

The Savannah Irish Festival happens Sat. Feb. 1 at Victory North Savannah, from 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Get tix [here](#).