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The jig's not up yet

Ireland's Chieftains play on after death of harpist, fiddler's semiretirement

January 17, 2003

And then there were four.

With the unexpected death of harper Derek Bell in October, along with the semi-retirement of fiddler Martin Fay, Ireland's beloved Chieftains would seem to have suffered a gut-wrenching, irreparable loss.

True, Paddy Moloney said, he still grieves for Bell, his longtime friend and colleague. But the band's founder, Uilleann piper and leader insisted that the death of Bell will not silence the music. The band may be thinned, but it is alive and jigging.

"Derek wouldn't have it any other way," he said. "We all miss him terribly. He is certainly not replaceable. Still, his passing gave me lots of time to think about our future. And there was never any doubt: We all knew we would carry on."

After canceling everything up to January, the band finds itself in the midst of a 30-date U.S. tour that includes stops in Denver tonight and in Colorado Springs on Saturday. The loss of two members will be compensated for with the addition of seven guest artists for the Colorado shows.

Fay may rejoin the band at selected East Coast concerts on the current tour, along with other former members, Moloney said. As for a permanent replacement for Bell, it's not in the cards. Not yet, at least.

"Derek was a joy to be with," the piper said. "He didn't have an enemy in the world. Sure, he was eccentric - but he became such an integral part of the show and the band."

Moloney is bringing on a guest harper at each concert for a tribute to Bell (Denver-based Star Edwards will play at both Colorado dates). Still, it's not that difficult to imagine a Chieftains concert without the plaintive plucking of a Celtic harp. "Remember that, when I started the band in '62, we didn't have a harper," Moloney reminded. "It took 10 years to find Derek.



The Chieftains - from left, Sean Keane, Paddy Moloney, Kevin Conneff and Matt Molloy - are inviting guest harpers to their shows for a tribute to late member Derek Bell.

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"I'm still looking for that sound. But to tell the truth, I've always loved the cello." This is a reference to singer/cellist Caroline Lavelle, who will sit at stage right - Bell's former neighborhood.

Others who will join the show include Jon and Nathan Pilatzke, traditional dancers from Canada's Ottawa Valley; Irish stepdancers Cara Butler and Donny Golden; country-bluegrass musicians Allison Moorer and Chris Jones, and the usual handful of invited local players for the traditional jam session at concert's end.

The loss of old, familiar faces and the addition of new ones won't change the long-established format of a Chieftains concert, Moloney stressed.

"It's three things: a survey of 40 years of Chieftains, a segment honoring Derek and some tunes from our new record, Down the Old Plank Road."

The latter is a continuation of the band's studio collaborations with Nashville's best players, a successful experiment that began with 1992's *Another Country*.

"Caroline will sing the Alison Krauss song from the new album (*Molly Ban*)," Moloney said. "We'll do a tune we recorded with Tim O'Brien, Shady Grove, and finish the show with the jam session that ends the disc (*Give the Fiddler a Dram*)."

Those Nashville sessions produced more than the 14 tracks included in the Grammy-nominated *Plank Road*, he noted.

"We actually did 24 tracks, so we have enough for another album if we add in some of those earlier songs we did 10 years ago."

Talk of the future is ample proof that the loss of Bell and the semi-retirement of Fay has only briefly slowed The Chieftains. Moloney wouldn't even consider talking about the end of the road for the band. "It is not our intention to stop performing," he said emphatically.

The Chieftains

- When and where: 8 p.m. today, Paramount Theatre, 1621 Glenarm Place; 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Pikes Peak Center, 190 S. Cascade Ave., Colorado Springs.
- Cost: \$30 to \$42 (Denver), \$26 to \$42 (Colorado Springs)
- Information: (303) 830-8497 (Denver), (719) 520-7469 (Colorado Springs)

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