



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK ARTS & HERITAGE PROGRAM

AUDIO TAPE LOG

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Fieldworker(s): Maggie Holtzberg

Interviewee(s): Joe Derrane

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Brief summary of tape contents: Early childhood and musical influences, studying with Jerry O'Brien, O'Byrne Dewitt, getting his first button box, music clubs in Dorchester and Roxbury, older players versus learning from people today, the ballroom scene in Dudley Square, O'Brien Dewitt as an influential record dealer, WVOM in Brookline Sunday night Irish music, Ace Recording Studio, Joe making his first 78 recordings on the Copley label, piano player Johnny Connors, working with Fred Kusik and Bill Harrington as announcers, "Peter Finney's Dream," now a required tune for Canadian accordion students, the collapse of the Dudley Street scene, description of the Dudley Street scene - the five ballrooms, the musicians, the decline and the effect it had on Joe's choice of instrument, the switch to more commercial music on the piano accordion and eventually the keyboard, studying with Dick Bobbit, playing with top notch union musicians.

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	<p>It's March 7th, 2003 and I'm at the home of Joe Derrane in Randolph, Massachusetts doing an interview for the American Folklife Center and also the Mass Cultural Council. Can we start by talking a little bit about your childhood in Roxbury, growing in the '30s?</p> <p>Oh yeah, sure. Actually I was born in South Boston; I'm a Southie boy. But I have no memory of it. When I was just an infant, very early on, they moved and I spent most of my childhood growing up in Roxbury, near Brigham Circle. The Old Mission Church Parish. A typical growing stages I suppose. I had my friends back and forth up to school. I went to Mission Grammar School and then to Mission High School.</p> <p>Was it a predominantly Irish community?</p> <p>Very much. I think you could say that overall it was probably predominantly Irish. Although there were a lot of different ethnic groups in there but they were</p>

pretty well a family here and a family there. But I would say it was predominantly Irish.

And was there music in the home, growing up?

Via the radio and some recordings. My father played but that's a funny thing. I never heard him play. For years, I didn't know he had any clue at all. I was 15 or something like I guess before I found out that my mother played the fiddle.

Mother is from Roscommon, my father's from Aran. Apparently she used to play me to sleep at night, when I was an infant in the crib. I have no recollection of this. This is what she has told me.

Was she playing lullabies or reels?

I haven't a clue; she never went so far. And she said, what difference does it make? You wouldn't have known the difference then anyway. And it's true enough, I suppose. But just how much of an impact that had on me, I don't know. There are people who think that the kind of music you're exposed to from that early -- even before you recognize it for what it is, it kind of sticks in your mind. I really don't know about that but apparently, by the time I was two, for whatever reason, she put the fiddle in the crib. She must have been playing me to sleep or trying to get me to sleep. And then something drew her attention elsewhere. She put the fiddle in the crib and I rolled over it or found a new baseball bat and that was the end of the fiddle. She never played since. And I had no knowledge of this until I was probably 15.

And the thing about my father was apparently he used to play the button box a little bit. Never had one in the house that I knew of until they finally arranged to get one for me. And the way I found out, I came home from school one day early and he had the day off and here he was, sitting at the kitchen table, playing the button box. Looking over a few of the lessons that Jerry O'Brien had written out for me and I had was stunned. He hadn't played with any regularity for years and years and years but apparently he did some bit of playing at one point.

Talk a little bit about how you got hooked up with Jerry O'Brien.

Well that's again, what my parents had told me. I guess very early on there were Irish radio programs, even back then. One of which was the famous Boy from Ireland, Terry O'Toole. Who was an Irish tenor type of thing. And you had a live radio program almost every Sunday. I have no clue as to what the program would have been. But on that same program, there was regularly, this wonderful accordion player, this Jerry O'Brien. And my mom says from the time I was like four or five, when they turned on the radio, that was fine. They'd be listening on a Sunday. But as soon as the accordion started to play, I would come running from wherever I was in the house and she said, "You just stood in front of the radio staring at it. Just jumping and bouncing around." They thought that was hilarious. She said it was almost like you were spastic. But as soon as the accordion stopped playing, that was it. I left. I went out write on the walls or whatever it was I was doing. I have no memory of this. But it was always this way, apparently.

So, it struck something in you.

Oh yeah. And it got to the point where I said I wanted to play, I wanted to play like that man. This went on and on and on. And of course at first they figured, well, five years old -- this will pass. But it didn't. And by the time I was ten I

guess I had driven my parents near bonkers. So they finally shopped around. Of course money was a very tight thing back in those days. So this would put it at about 1935 when they became aware of this. And by the time I was ten, which would be 1940 or so, they had contacted Jerry through the radio station. And Jerry agreed to come out and give me some lessons, private lessons. Now there was another local player who lived right up the street from us, Johnny Bresenham[?] Big John.. Good box player. Very nice guy. And he came down a few times. My father said, "Could you come down and show my son a few little things?" But it didn't, -- you can play but it doesn't necessarily mean you can transmit that. I was getting nowhere with that so I guess then they finally said, "Well, let's try this Jerry O'Brien" and we hit it off right then and there. And I waited for him and he came once a week. I studied with Jerry for about four years. I started at ten so about fourteen I was still studying.

Could he tell that you had something special?

Well, yeah, I guess he could. He never really . . . he never told me that. It was always, "That's a big improvement" But it was never good. It was never great. "Well that's a big improvement over what you did last week, but . . ." and it would it always be there. He was a stickler. Jerry is a small man, physically. And I'm not exactly a big guy either, but he was a lot smaller than I was. Jerry was probably 145 pounds soaking wet. He died I think around 1969. But just about that time, what had happened was, Jerry's button accordion had been stolen. I forget the circumstances, I think he was waiting for a bus. And the bus was late. It was kind of a winter's night. He put the case down and he was sitting on it waiting for the bus. Jerry didn't drive much that I know of. Then the bus came in kind of quick. On the bus he went. And I guess he went a couple of stops and realized he'd left it. So he had to get off the bus and walk back. And of course the box was gone. Without a box to play and not enough money to go out and buy a new one, course now, you've got to remember, you're still in the war years here. Boxes were, there were no new boxes available because all the metal went for the war effort. So you could find a used box but, as luck would be, that would be it. So I was kind of on my own, just carrying on. He wasn't teaching; he wasn't playing.

Otherwise, was he a professional musician or did he do something else?

Oh no, he worked for O'Byrne Dewitt. He did different things. He was a butler I think at one time. He was an immigrant from Kinsale and Cork. Very nice man. Very, very picky. Very strict. It's right or it's wrong. There's no grey area with him. And no matter how hard you practiced, "I want more practice from you. You can do better than this." This was always what he was doing. It was either right or it was wrong. He broke my heart more than once because I had driven myself crazy. And I thought, "Well I'm going to give it to him this week, boy." And he came out with, "Well but that run in there, that's not clean enough." And "You can do better than that." No matter what I did or how good it was, "You can do better than that." He was very patient. He wasn't nasty or scolding or anything like that. He was very quiet. I developed quite a relationship with him actually. He was almost like a second father to me. And Jerry in that time lived out in Reidville, the other side of Dedham. He had a house full of kids. I used to spend a lot of my time in the summers out there. Growing up with his kids, you know, it

was almost like I was the son they didn't talk about. That type of thing. I knew all the family, all his kids, his wife.

Did they play?

Not really. Young Jerry, "Bubba" they used to call him, fooled around with it. It wasn't too serious. But they're all moved away now. His daughter Maria is still down in the other side of Springfield.

Holyoke?

No, it's uh, I can't remember it. God almighty, I'm having a senior moment. The rest of the family I think are out in California. His wife May, as far as I know, is still alive. I loved that woman. God, she was fantastic.

But anyway, I had a great relationship with his kids. Then, oh, a year, two years after Jerry's box was stolen, my uncle George had come home from the military and he stayed with us for about a month until he got on his feet. He came home one evening and he had been down in Dudley Street. And he said, "I saw this wonderful little accordion." I had the old wooden four-stopper, ten key melodion. That's what I started with. That's what we all had. There was only one two-row accordion around that I knew of at the time. And Tom Senior had that. So this was a ten-key melodion but it was a gold metal Globe professional. They made a professional model in those days, with all the celluloid on it. Oh, it was gorgeous.

Where was it made? What country?

It would be German I think. And he said, "It's in this pawn shop down on Dudley Street." So my father says, "Really?" "I don't know anything about it but I know you're looking for a better box for Joe." So we went down and there was Jerry's box sitting up on the shelf in the pawn shop. So we redeemed it. I think it was about forty dollars we redeemed it for at that time. So my father and mother never drove. So we got a friend of ours. When I spotted it I said, "That's Jerry's accordion." I knew he didn't have one. So we had his address and everything. So we called up and said "We were going to be out in that area like the following Sunday. Could we drop in just to say hello?" "Sure, come ahead." So a friend of my father's drove us out. And we walked in with the box to give to Jerry and his jaw dropped. But he used to let me play that. Oh God, I used to love it. It was head and shoulders over what I had. But he refused to take it. And he says, "No, Joe, I haven't played for awhile now. I don't know if I'll ever get back into. You found it. You bought it. You keep it." So we talked it over, back and forth. I really wanted him to have it back, because I knew he wasn't playing. And he said, "Well, that's all right. But I want you to have it. And you did find it. You did pay for it." So anyway, I wound up with that. And that was great.

Do you still have it?

Oh no, no. My brother Paul at one point started studying with Jerry, after Jerry came back playing. What happened was that Jerry finally got himself a two-row instrument. Just before he got his, I believe, Tom Senior, another well-known box player at that time and a great friend of Jerry's, walked into Dewitts, O'Beirne Dewitts, where Jerry was working, and said, "Jerry I just came back from New York. Baldoni Bartolli there, the box makers down in Mulberry Street, Little Italy

in New York." He said, "I saw this great two-row 19-key. I played it. It's a little small for me but my God, that'd be perfect for young Derrane. Why don't you go down?" Jerry told me about it. He came to the house. We talked about it and Tom Senior says, "I think they're looking for about \$400 for it." It was brand new. I mean, that was big bucks in those days. So, my folks scraped up the money and some train fare. And Jerry and I hopped the train and down to New York we went. I must have played 30 or 35 boxes in the store, starting with that one and compared everything else in the store to that. Kept coming back to that, kept coming back and coming back. I said, "That's it." So we paid them, took the accordion and took the train home. And I was in 7th Heaven. Now the thing was that Jerry had not quite gotten his yet or had just gotten it. And it's a whole different thing. So [chuckles] Jerry wasn't of too much help. I had to kind of figure it out on my own. Now you have all the accidentals. So how do you finger them, how do you get around. There's a lot of hit and miss. You just keep going. I just loved it and loved and loved it. The more I got into it the more I wanted to get deeper and deeper. That's my nature. If I get interested in something, it's full tilt. Jump in. Sink or swim. And I stay it until I'm comfortable with it.

Now describe the environment because you were what? Fourteen at this point?

Yeah, actually it was 17 by the time I got the box.

So you're still in high school. What's the environment? Are you going to seisuns?

Or people's homes?

No, there was one thing about it took me years to realize. I was a little upset. It was one of the few times I was upset with Jerry. I knew about the music clubs; that's what they used to call them. They were in fact seisuns. There was the Roxbury Music Club and there was the Dorchester Music Club. And it was always held on a Sunday. One of them was held in the John Boyle O'Reilly Hall, it'd be the first floor in Hibernian building. The Dorchester Music Club, my earliest of it, the first time I went there, they were out in Fields Corner, in Dorchester, on the second floor, in a little hall. And people would pay like 50 cents or something to come in. Well that 50 cents was just to help pay for the rent of the hall. But for that 50 cents, the women got tea or coffee and Irish bread and they'd get maybe a quarter barrel or a half barrel of beer for the men. So there'd be enough men there, they'd each have a couple of glasses of beer. That's about as far as it would go, pay for the rent. And that's all it was. It was just so they could get together and play. Which was wonderful.

I went to one once without the accordion. And I was telling Jerry about that and he came down on me like a ton of bricks. He said, "I don't want you going near that place. Either one of them." And I said, "Well why?" And he says, "Not yet. I'll tell you when you can go but I don't want you going there now." And I said "Why?" He said, "Well, because I don't want you there." And I kind of persisted. That wasn't good enough. So he finally told me, "Look, there's some good players in there. And there are some bad players in there. And there are different ways of doing things." And he says, "You're not firm yet, firmly established, entrenched up here, in the head." So he said, "After awhile, yeah, you can go anywhere you want. But for now, stay away from there." He said, "It's very likely you'll pick up

more bad habits than good at this point." I could not understand this thinking at all. But I lived with it for awhile. So it wasn't until I got a little bit comfortable with my two-row accordion around age 17 when I started. No, in fact I went in there before I had the two-row. That's right. That's when I met my buddy Jack Martin. We were both just kids at the time. And his father was one of the prime movers in the music club, John. Ach, great guy; great family. And Jackie and I have been friends since that time. Very close. We're godmother to Jackie's daughter. And he was in my wedding. I played his wedding. Then we've been in touch all these years.

Anyway, that's kind of the scene. Now the thing at high school was a little strange. It would be the same way today. If you had, like in the public high school or whatever, I went to Mission High. There was never any problem there, but they used to look at me a little strangely. What's with this jigs and reels? What kind of stuff is that? That's so square -- It was a real put-down. But that's all right.

It's also before Comhaltas . . .

Oh yeah. Comhaltas didn't hit here until I'd say 1959 to '60. I think Comhaltas itself started in Ireland in around '55.

So there weren't competitions, you weren't in that whole culture.

There was nothing.

What about dancing? Were there dancing teachers?

Oh yeah. But there weren't too many around. And the classes were very very small. I mean by today's standards. Helen Madden was teaching over in Somerville. The Madden School -- very very good.

Rita O'Shea?

Yeah, I think she was around at the time, but maybe just getting into it, I think. I'm not quite too sure, so I think I'll pass on that.

But there was Professor McKenna, who was an old, old man. And he used to give dance classes down at the seisuns, before they seisun started. The kids would come in there. But the poor old man was quite old at the time. Although I guess he was still able to teach. I used to look at him and say, "how do you teach? You can hardly," you know, he was kind of shakey on his feet. Very nice old guy.

But the music clubs were so interesting in those days because they were all immigrants that played there. There weren't too many Irish Americans there. You could probably number them on the fingers of one hand. There was Jackie Martin, there was myself, Billy Capels, pretty much regulars. Johnny Capels and that's pretty much about it. There might be an odd one that'd come from time to time. But those would be kind of the regulars.

Would it be similar in New York City?

Yeah.

Similar with Mulvihill?

Exactly, exactly. Now these old timers, now these are the guys that had the music. It's that simple. These are the guys that had the music. But what was happening was, you'd have a musician from Galway, you'd have one from Sligo, you'd have two from Cork, or you'd have one from Kerry. That type of thing. You might have a Donegal player or something. And you'd hear these guys playing the same tunes but they're all a little bit different. After awhile they got to the point where one started, Pat Martin was great at this, Jackie's uncle Pat, great flute player. He was great for getting the guys together and tried to play the tunes in unison. So out of that I think you got what, I heard very early on, "Oh I can tell, you're from Boston. A Boston style. And I think that's maybe where that arose from that kind of mixture. There had to be a certain amount of give and take. But of course every one got to play a solo or even two. So now they could let loose and play their own regional styles.

Oh don't you wish we had recordings of [Joe coughs].

Oh yeah, there was nothing around in those days. Now you had the same thing going on in Dorchester. Now the way they'd do it, the Roxbury Club would run the first and third Sundays of the month; Dorchester would run the second and fourth. So there would be no conflict. But it's the same musicians that went to all of them. Yeah, you'd get somebody that was local out there. They were great fun. I really liked them and there was never any kind of trouble or anything. One thing I noticed though, some of the people like Jackie's father now, John Martin, and his brother, that would be Jack's uncle Pat, they'd be great. I mean, if you wanted a tune or something, they'd scratch it out or get somebody to write it out for you. Or they'd play it for you. And there were some like that. But then a lot of the old timers down there, oh, because this was it -- they knew tunes that no one else knew. This was their status symbol now. Now they had this niche occupied. I'm guessing, but this is the sense that I had and boy they weren't too keen on spreading it around. If they thought that you were in a hurry to learn the tune or really wanted to learn their tune, you'd say, "Can you play the tune you played last week?" "Which was that?" "That reel." "Oh sure, I played it last week. I'll play it in another weeks." You'd always get this kind of thing.

Today, this is a totally different story. And I think this is so wonderful. And how much this has to do with Comhaltas or what I don't know. But a lot of young people, my God, tunes are flowing around. "You like that tune?" "Could you write that out?" "Sure, be happy to." And this kind of tune, some of them can't write, but they say, "I'll play it for you." And they'll play it and play it and play it. "Have you got it now?" "Well I'm a little --" And they'll play it again. They're so generous with the music now, everywhere you go. It's just a wonderful thing. But I think back to the way it used to be.

Well there are stories about jazz musicians who would hide their fingers -

Oh yeah, yeah, so no one could see how they did what they did. That's true enough.

Then there were also the incredible dance, ballroom dance scene. Is this the same period of time?

I entered the ballroom scene at around 1947 or so. Somewhere in there. And that was the beginnings of my thing in the ballroom scene. That came about because there was a tailor, Tommy Shields. Good box player. A tailor from Galway and he had immigrated out here and he opened up a little tailor shop. He was an entrepreneur in the true sense. His whole thing was, you know, there are some of these radio programs that kind of skirt just on the edges, we really could use a real good Irish radio program. And he was talking to different people and somebody said, "Well, hey, why don't you do something about it?" So he said, "Well, I will." So he went out and he went to O'Byrne Dewitt, the big record dealer. Of course if you wanted to go to Ireland back then, you went through O'Byrne Dewitts. You booked your steamship passage or an airplane. Or if you wanted Irish records or Irish music. They had a very large catalog business with Irish records, sending them all over the world. And he got him as a sponsor and then he got another one and this type of thing. So he started to put the program together.

And about this time, he used to come into the music clubs. They'd ask him to come up and sing. So he heard me and I got to know him. Then he asked me and I became a regular every Sunday night playing live. No tape or anything, everything was live. And Johnny Connors on piano.

What station was it?

WVOM. Now WBOS. That was the predecessor. And that was on Harvard Street in Brookline, up on the second floor. One of our announcers, actually we had two very, very well known announcers that came out of that radio program. Bill Harrington, who used to do the political news for, what was it, channel 4 for years. The other one was the sports caster for the Boston Bruins, Fred Cusak. Oh yeah, I knew them both quite well. Even back then Fred Cusak had made it known that that, I said, "Where do you go after you get through with the radio stuff? Where do you go from announcer?" He said, "I'd like to be a sportscaster for hockey." That's way back then, that was his dream. He did it. He wound up with it. Nice guys, both of them. We had a lot of fun out there. So every Sunday night, we'd be playing live. We had a piano in the house. I forget how we came by that. I think somebody wanted to get rid of a piano. You can have it if you can get it out of here. I think we got a mover to put a hoist on the roof, took out the window. We were on the third floor at the time. So we had the piano and Johnny Connors. I met Johnny through my teacher Jerry. Jerry would pop into the house almost at any time of day or night. Free spirit, totally. All he wanted to do was play. Lovely guy.

So we'd go out and do that. It was a foregone conclusion that we'd be there every Sunday night. And he others. He had Paddy Cronin, the fiddle player on there. Paddy Cronin came out about that time. There were others -- Connie Foley who did all the vocals. The Boy from Kerry. It was quite a scene. What was happening was that people would go into O'Byrne Dewitts on a Monday or a Tuesday, or

maybe early the following Saturday night after hearing the program last Sunday. "That young fellow Joe Derrane -- do you have any of his records?" He would say, "No, there are no records." But he was getting enough of this, this got to be quite a thing, from what I understand. So finally he said, "Well maybe we should be making records." So he went and made the arrangements, got the label. That was the Copley label. That was O'Byrne Dewitt. Justice Stewart is his actual name. So he went into different people, did some scouting around, where was there a good studio. So he wound up with Ace Studio on Boylston Street in Boston, right across from the public gardens [actually, the Old Burying Ground on Boston Common]. And I've been told, I'm not sure, (I don't think it's there now -- it's in the Little Building. Right on the corner of Tremont and Boylston) That's where the studio was, Ace Recording. I've been told that way back, I shouldn't be saying way back, I'm going back before you, Paddy Page, Old Cape Cod was recorded at Ace Recording Studio. So I've been told. That was one of the selling points for Dewitt, this is a top notch studio. Milton Yakis was the recording engineer in there. Big, big heavy fella. I loved him. I loved him. He was a nice guy and boy did he know his cookies. He was great. And everything was monaural of course at that time.

Just one big microphone?

Yeah, one microphone. No, they had one microphone for the piano and one for the accordion. But they put you both close together. It was a big grand piano. You know how the front of it has that big curve in it? So you kind of get into that curve there. And they just have the top open just a little bit. So there was a certain amount of piano going through not only it's own mic but in there as well. Although it was all monaural so there wasn't much they could do. But they were very picky about the sound.

So what were the first cuts you put on?

Oh God, I don't remember. Jerry gave me a call one night and he said, "Can you come in to Dewitts next Saturday or sometime during the week?" And I said yeah. And I said why. I thought Jerry wanted to see me for his own thing. And he said, "No, Mr. Dewitt wants to talk to you about making a record." And I said, "Really?" I said, "How do I do this?" Of course I'm panicked now. And he said, "No, no, you'll be fine." I said, "Well, what do you think?" He said, "Sure you're ready. You should do it." Jerry had done one for him, I guess. So then with all the people looking a record by the young guy, they said well why don't we record him. Actually, it started off a whole thing; Paddy Cronin recorded for them. Johnny Powell's Band recorded for them. I did, Jerry did, Connie Foley did. And a number of others. So he had quite the thing going.

My sense is that those early recordings became almost legendary. I mean, they went back home, they went to Ireland.

They went all over the world. They went to England, they went to Australia. They went to Europe. They went all over the United States because O'Byrne Dewitt was set up as a catalog and he had catalogs which he would mail out. And people could then call from California or writing from Ireland or wherever. And he had a real jump on others. It was very large catalog distribution for its time. Yeah,

you're right. And I had no inkling for many years. It's only actually in recent years that I became aware that those recordings became the, what did they call them, "the stuff of legend." And I was very surprised by that. I was delighted, but --

Well wasn't it Billy McComisky that, he didn't know that you were still around, but he had learned, a lot of people had learned tunes off those recordings.

Well, I think they were one of the first [recordings.] They were the old 78s so you had a 3 minute window on each side. That's all because as they cut into it, it got closer into the spindle in the middle. If it got too close it was no good. So you had 3 minute, 3 minute, 10 at the outside. So everything had to be timed very precisely. So you would do a medley of reels maybe a medley of jigs on the other side. That was your record. One of the very early ones I had done was Peter Finney's dream. Which is a reel that I wrote. It's a tongue and cheek thing about Johnny Connors. Well the fact of the matter is, Johnny was a great piano player. He had a left hand like a snake, he was wonderful. And we used to love playing together. And Johnny was quite a bit older than I was. Johnny would have been maybe 40-ish then, something like that. But Johnny was a free spirit in the sense that he just wanted to play and drink a few beers. And that's it. That was his dream. He used to say that to me. He says, "You know, my dream is that you and I could just sit and play music and I could drink beer and play and drink and play." And he wasn't too conscientious I guess about some other responsibilities. But I won't go any further into that.

Johnny was also, if he had a couple of beers in him, somebody would come up to him and say, "Johnny, three weeks from tonight, or three weeks from next Sunday, the Corkmen are having their annual dance. I'm going to put a band in there. Would you come down and play with us?" "Ach, sure, sure. Sure, no problem." Oh he was famous for that. And of course as soon as the next day, forget about it. It was all over. But he knew of the standing thing. And he'd always come to the station. Well you never could find him. He found me, more than anything else.

But he didn't have a job?

No, no he didn't have a job. And so this one particular night, and I think it was either Bill Harrington or Fred Kusik was the announcer. And you go in before the show, into the studio. And he said, "What are you guys going to do tonight?" I said, "I don't know. We're going to do a couple of medleys. We'll do a medley of reels, whatever it was." So Fred said one night to him, "It's Joe Derrane, accompanied by Johnny Connors." I said yeah but Johnny said, "Well, wait, wait, wait, you can't do that." Fred says, "Can't do what?" He said, "You can't say Johnny Connors. Don't say anything." Fred says, "They're going to hear the piano; I gotta say something. You gotta be somebody. You gotta be Mickey Mouse. You gotta be somebody." So he says, "Well what name do you want to use?" And Connors says, "I don't know. Pick one." Fred says, "It's your piano, you pick a name." So Connors says, out of whole cloth, just out of the air he pulls this name Peter Finney. So it was Joe Derrane accompanied by Peter Finney. Well that struck me as hilarious. The thing is, he knew he was supposed to have been playing the Cork dance or whatever it was and he said, they'd be looking for him. And he said there'd be hell to pay over this.

And of course I was in stitches all this time. Fred Kusik was leaning up against the wall. The tears were coming down. We're all laughing. Connors didn't think it was so funny.

Then this melody started popping around in my head shortly after that. It was a tongue and cheek thing; I called it "Peter Finney's Dream." And I recorded it that way. That tune is now standard required for the button box students in Canada. Yeah. I didn't know that until I did the accordion festival there [Carrefour Mondial de L'Accordeon Festival] in '95 or '96 up in Montmagny in Canada. And it's all accordions. Wonderful, oh it's gorgeous. The music is, everything from jazz to French to Bulgarian to whatever. Every kind of accordion -- buttons, keys, from all over. They brought out this class. All young players. And I'm sitting there with Renald [Oillette]. He says, "Oh, I want you to hear this student. Do you know this tune?" And of course, he knew the history of it. And he was tongue and cheek. So when they started rattling off "Peter Finney's Dream" I almost fell off the chair. And I said, "That's my tune!" and he laughed. He said, "Yes! It is required for all my students here." It's true.

Now do you think you could play that for me?

Oh I haven't played it for a long, long time.

So those recordings were made and you were only 17.

I started when I was 17. The idea was I went in to do one record, two sides. That's what it's about and I figure, well gee, this is great. But that developed. There was more demand after awhile. Then more and more so I did a total of eight over about a four, five year - so that would be 16 sides.

And of course after awhile, that whole scene collapsed. The whole Dudley Street scene, everything collapsed. Then Dewitt's business went down. He was getting older, and one thing and another. The whole recording thing died.

Give me some context in years. The dance scene -- first of all, were they ceili dancing, what were they dancing?

No, no no. Ballroom. Ballroom style dancing. Now there would be some ceili tunes played. And they would something like "The Seige of Ennis" which is a ceili thing.

But would you be playing jigs and reels for ballroom dancing?

Oh well yeah, but you did a lot of waltzes, you did a lot of polkas. We'd do a full American set. Dancing in the dark. With Johnny Powell now and that particular band, this is what shocked some people, is that you had Frank Murphy on alto, Clary Walsch on alto. You'd have Duke Joker on tenor, you'd have Walter Deese on trumpet. You'd have Tuck Connely on the drums, he used to work with all the local big bands around. All these guys were finely, fully trained professional musicians. They were doing better in the Irish field than the commercial field. And they were working regular. This is how they came into it. You had people on piano like Carlton Bates - fine, fine pianist. Really trained.

I make the distinction always between musician and player. Many times they're one and the same. That's fine. But a lot of people say this guy is a fine musician and he or she is not necessarily a musician, but they're a fine player. The musician also implies that they have this background - of harmonics, theory, the whole thing. That's not a snobbish thing; it's just a thing that I have in my own mind. There is a difference --

Especially with anything involving chords --

Exactly, harmonic structure, theory and why. There are a lot of wonderful players who don't have quite this musical background. They know what they want, but that's another whole thing altogether.

But you had this kind of set up there. Now you had Mor? Flaherty. There were five ballrooms on Dudley Street. Five. And what I don't think a lot of people realize, but in my mind, what made the whole work was Dudley Street Terminal, now the MBTA. The terminal is still there; it's all been upgraded. There were several entrances. You came out onto Dudley Street. Directly across the Street was the Dudley Street Opera House. Matty Tuoey had a band in there. It was a five or six piece band. They were all Kerry people. Wonderful guys. Matty Tuoey was the box player. He used to be on the police force at Harvard, if I'm not mistaken.

Were they doing slides and polkas?

Oh yeah, they'd be doing slides, polkas, waltzes. Lot of waltzes. Highland flings. Two novelty dances, that type of thing. And again, they had a least one saxophone player, good piano player, a good drummer, maybe Joe Fahey or Mike ? on banjo and they'd do some modern stuff, is the way they used to call it, "The modern, we're going to do the modern music now." They were great guys. Gee, I loved those guys from that Era, Matty Tuoey and Timmy Collins. Great guys.

And then, maybe 60 yards down on the same side was Winslow Hall. Everything was on the third floor. Oh yeah, you'd get a nosebleed going to the dance. Nothing was ever, like the smaller little halls for meetings could be on the first and second floors, but the ballrooms, always on the third floor. Oh God. But Winslow Hall, Morcheen Flaherty, he's a Connemara man I think, and he had a box player, a good guy, good player. He had immigrated. He had a group up there. My brother George did a lot of work with him. George at one time played banjo. Then he went to guitar because when you're trying to play modern or more commercial type things, the banjo just, you know "Dancing in the Dark," the banjo didn't quite cut it. Although George was very finely trained knew -- so then he went from that to guitar. He ultimately wound up playing tenor sax.

Anyway and you had Tommy McSherry on the piano. Maybe Finbar Storr would be up there on alto and Frankie Storr used to play up there a bit with them. Now, kitty corner across the street, you're in the square now, the old Rose Croix building, which is still there. It's now a business condos or something. On the top floor of that was a ballroom. And that's where all the Canadians and the Scots used to go. Cape Breton people, French Canadians and Scots - they'd all go up there. [in a near whisper] And they had some wonderful music up there. Some

great bands that would come down from Cape Breton. A good number of Irish used to go up there because they liked the music. The music was great.

Now, that's three of them. Now about 60 yards below that, still on Dudley Street now, was Hibernian. And on the top floor, that place could upwards of maybe 900-1000. There were different ones in and out, and off and on. And another 60 or 75 yards below that was probably the biggest of them all, the Colonial. That was my hang-out. That's where Johnny Powell had the band. Standard thing was about 1200 people there, every Saturday night. So you came out of Dudley Street Station, and you could stand anywhere on Dudley Street. And of course, there was no air conditioning, there was nothing in those times. In the warm weather, all the windows would be open and you were drowning in music. It was unbelievable. So there were thousands and thousands of Irish immigrants that were lonesome, that were homesick. And they'd go to Dudley Street to meet someone from home. Something familiar, this type of thing. Because after the war, the end of the war, a lot of them had wanted to come out but they couldn't come out because of the war. Then the floodgates opened and they came out in masses and droves. And they'd come in from Connecticut, they came in from Worcester. They come down from New Hampshire. They come from all around to go to this Dudley Street scene. And this was a fantastic thing. It lasted it about ten to twelve years, something like that.

Around 1960 it just about caved in. What they did was they had built all the projects in behind the Colonial and Hibernian and the demographic thing had changed all over. There was always the maxim in the dance hall business was, You have to take care of the ladies. You have to get the ladies in. Where the ladies go, the men will follow. Oh yeah, so they would have things like -- but that thing spread from Saturday nights to Thursday nights at the Colonial as well. They came to realize that Thursday night was maids night out. Now a lot of the Irish girls when they came out, they wound up working for private families as nannies and cooks. So Thursday night was their night. So they gave them a place to go. So you'd have another eight or nine hundred down there every Thursday night. Friday night weddings was very popular. So we were doing Thursday night, Friday night weddings. You do two weddings on a Saturday and then run to the ballroom Saturday night. And you do another one or two weddings on a Sunday. And then you get up and go to work Monday morning.

And all this time you're working?

Yeah, yeah. But you see, music was my mainstay. That was the major part of my income. So when that whole scene collapsed all of a sudden, I'm married now -

You have kids yet?

Yeah. So I thinking, what am I going to do? Now there were very few places left to play except for a few bars. Now the bars were bars, as opposed to what we now think of as pubs. I mean these were sawdust on the floor, type of thing. Prop 'em up in the corner, he'll be all right when he wakes up. I said, "no, no, no. I don't want to do this." And try as I might, I couldn't see any other way out of it. So I had been tinkering with piano accordion and I had taken a few lessons way back, kind of a half-hearted thing. Nice, but. I realized that the only place for me to go if

I was going to continue to play, and I have to play, I had to play, I have to go to piano accordion and go into the pop field. I tried and I turned it upside down and sideways and shook it and examined it from every angle. There was really not much choice. So ultimately I wound up selling my button box to help raise money for the piano accordion. And I went into that field and I stayed in the pop field actually then until about 1990, when I just got fed up with the music business altogether.

That's really interesting. So you were playing what, like weddings?

Oh yeah, I was doing weddings, all kind of ethnic things, jazz clubs. I loved Latin and jazz. I was in little trios, quartets, large groups. I was in the musicians union.

Did you enjoy it as much as the Irish music?

I did because everything was so new. As part of this, if you're going to survive in that field, you must, you must read. You work say for Sammy Eisner, one of the big bookers of society work in Boston, the Statler or something. You get a telephone call, [low grumbly voice] "Hey Joe, this is Sammy. How are you?" Little roly poly guy, I loved him. He was very good to me. Jewish guy. Just liked my work. And, "Can you do this and that?" And I did one or two jobs for him. He was very pleased. And I said, "Well that's good." So the names start to spread. It was side man work. Whoever had a gig, they wanted a box player. A lot of that stuff, you'd do strolling during the dinner at a wedding. I thought it was fun. I like it. But boy, you had to have quite a repertoire.

And it's a heavy instrument to carry around.

Oh yeah, it is, but you develop a repertoire real quick. I tell you, you have to. And you have to learn to read and read well. So as part of that I went and studied for about a year and a half with Paul Monty here in Boston. But like everything else, when I get into to something, it's not the standard practice required of one hour, no, no, no, it's four, five, six hours a day. I get into something and it's that way. So I did a lot of study with him and we got into a lot of theory and chord structure, harmonic structure. Then I studied with Dick Bobbit, who's the dean of the old Shillinger thing, before Berklee. So I was a private student of his. I went in once a week. And my average homework for this guy was about 40 hours a week to do it. Oh, it was wicked. But I was younger then, I could stand the gaff.

MH: But also, I'm remembering Scottish traditional music uses a piano accordion as well.

JD: Oh they do, they do. Now back then piano accordion was not very readily accepted in Irish circles around here. Oh yeah, some people thought it was great. But you'd be surprised how many people would say, "What the hell you playing that thing for? Where's your box?" I said, "Well I don't have it." "Oh for God's sakes." And they were very upset with me. I said, "Hey, I have a living to earn. I have a family to provide for." A lot of them resented it. They told me right out. And I said, "Well, you know you're entitled to your opinion but I have a family to support and this is what I have to, I don't have any choice."

MH: But now were you also working for the MBTA?

JD: No, not back then, no. I can't even remember where I was then. But then I worked for the Stop and Shop in their inventory control section. And I had worked for a furniture manufacturer in, where was that, Somerville I think. You know, somebody wanted a sofa, they'd come in. There would be models and they'd pick out this fabric. It was more of a paperwork thing - all the office stuff, the inventory. And then ultimately I wound up with the MBTA. But that was long after this decision had been made. I was deeply entrenched then in piano accordion. I tried doing some Irish work, trying to get at it because I missed. But they just didn't want the piano accordion. They'd say, "It doesn't sound the same. Don't like it." That's at least what I ran into. So it just seems that I got driven deeper and deeper into the commercial work. And the commercial work was good to me. And I met some fantastic musicians, learned a tremendous amount about music. What you do, what you don't ever do. That hands-on type of thing. How do you deal with people on a one-to-one situation, how do you handle the drunks, that type of thing. You never argue. You agree with everybody. You know, a guy says, "Well, I think you're a jerk." You say, "You know, you're right. I am a jerk." No argument. In the meantime I'm standing there with this big box on; if he puts his fist through it I'm in trouble.

Strolling was the big thing. That was the big thing then. You developed a repertoire very quickly. But no one is going to know everything. And then you learned how -- if it was a table for ten people, or eight people, you never look at one person and say, "Well what can I play for you?" No, you kind of include them all in this glance. Well this one will ask you for something, you go "Oh damn, don't know that one." You're bound to get one of them if you got a decent repertoire. So why don't we do this and we'll try to play it for you later on. The band can probably play it. And they did and everybody was happy. It was a musical thing when I got into it. The first of it was counting beats that kind of lit the fire. Then when I got into real chord studies with Dick Bobbit -- "Do you know your chords?" "Yeah, I think so." He said, "Well let's find out. I want you to take all the keys from C through B, all majors, all minors, major 7th, minor 7th, dominant 7ths, 9th, flatted 9ths, 11th and 13ths, print them all out for me, write em all out by hand and bring it in to me next week. Took me 40 hours to write them. All inversions as well. But it took that kind of time. Now he told me, "Joe, I'm very busy; I don't have time to fool around." So I told him I wanted learn a little bit about arranging. He said, "Before you can arrange, you gotta know your chords structures." So I had two errors and I had written an f# and it should have been a g flat. The same note, but you get tired after. But he used to just throw the stuff at you. But he would check it. I want you to do this. "Here's this tune" and he'd scratch out the bare lines of the tune. Cheat sheets. "Score this for me for two altos and a tenor."

So you really got an education.

Well yeah. But I was only able to stick that out for about five to six months. It was just too much. But I learned an enormous amount. Then the hands-on working with some of the best guys in the business in Boston. You know, these are the guys, when the circus comes to town or the ballet and they call up the union, "Well I need a flutist, I need this, I need that. This guy, that." Well two weeks after that, you're playing a wedding with these people. It was just fantastic.

Now did you join the union?

Oh yeah. You had to. You pretty much had to. But I did a lot of jazz work. I did a certain amount of Polish work, not to much. A good bit of Italian work. And I did about three years, it was pretty much predominantly Jewish at the time. But more of a commercial Jewish thing.

Not Klezmer?

No, not Klezmer. No, it wasn't Klezmer. You know, the "Fiddler on the Roof" type of thing. Commercial.

But did you do any actual theatre work? Were you in the pit ever?

No, no, never did any pit work. They didn't need or want accordions, I suppose. They didn't have the parts written for them, for one thing. Sometimes you'd wind up on a job, you'd walk in, "Yeah, I'm looking for so-and-so." "Yeah, well who are you." "I'm Joe Derrane. I'm the accordion player." "Oh, I didn't know we were having an accordion on the gig tonight." "Well, Sammy Eisen sent me." Now Sammy could have seven or eight or ten jobs or three jobs out. So he'd say, "You, you and you go here. You, you, and you go there. And you guys go over there." You were working with new people all the time. So then they gave you the book - the book had all the arrangements in it. "Do you have the guitar?" "Yeah, here's the guitar. Here's the piano book." A lot of these guys would play together quite a bit, but every so often I ran into that, "Accordion? No, we don't have an accordion book. Well here's the first fiddle part, or something like that. Or the second fiddle part." My God, the first time I opened that book and I looked and everything is up above the staff with about six ledger lines.

MH: [laughing] I can't even read that.

JD: Well I wasn't too good at it, I'll tell you. I was looking at this stuff. You get up near the high notes and I said, "I think that is, " and you kind of close your eyes and go "bing." And then I says, "But it's not on the box; it doesn't go up that high."

MH: But weren't they just charts?

JD: Well some of them were actually scored. If they gave me the guitar part for some of them, that was great. I used to love the guitar parts, cause they just give you your chords and everything is there.

MH: Let me just stop for a second. I have to get [another tape]