

# Keepers of Tradition

## African Roots, Fiddle Tunes, & Fancy Footwork

Saturday, June 7, 2008

National Heritage Museum, Lexington



[www.massfolkarts.org](http://www.massfolkarts.org)

# Keepers of Tradition

ART AND FOLK HERITAGE IN MASSACHUSETTS

The Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC) and the National Heritage Museum proudly present an evening of traditional music and dance. This program is produced in conjunction with the exhibition *Keepers of Tradition: Art and Folk Heritage in Massachusetts*, on view at the National Heritage Museum through February 8, 2009. In an object-based exhibition, it is difficult to bring music and dance traditions to life except in performance. Tonight's concert gives us the opportunity to hint at the diversity of performance traditions that are thriving in Massachusetts today. You will hear leading exponents of African kora, old-time fiddle and banjo, swing fiddle, South Indian violin, and Irish accordion and fiddle. This is music that makes people dance. And so it seemed right to complement the musicians' offerings with some of the extraordinary dance steps their musical traditions inspired—rhythm tap dance and Irish stepdance.

Some of these performance traditions may be new to you. It is not until folk traditions meld with popular culture that they reach a wider audience. But this is not "Riverdance," "Hee Haw," or "Bollywood;" it is the living, breathing root traditions from which they sprang. Tonight's program takes place on a concert stage, but it would be more typical to find this kind of music and dance in less formal settings. For generations, people have danced, played music, and sung at venues woven into the fabric of everyday community life. They still do—at social clubs, house concerts, dance halls, fiddle contests, festivals, and parking lot jam sessions.

The world is full of musical languages. One of the threads tying together this evening's program is the violin. We hear the same instrument "speaking" very different musical languages. In fact, the music and dance presented this evening are part of the story of immigration to Massachusetts.



Tunes once played at Irish crossroad dances crossed the ocean in the hearts and hands of Irish immigrants. Oral history, music, and poetry performed by generations of African griots first came to these shores in the souls of enslaved Africans. The griot's kora, a harp-like instrument, is the antecedent of the banjo, a uniquely American instrument. As generations of Irish and Scots-Irish musicians intermingled with African American banjo players a unique sound evolved—Southern Appalachian or old-time music. Rhythm tap dancing, also known as jazz tap, evolved from a blend of African and European cultural influences. It is a dance style that has as much to do with sound—saying something with your feet—as movement. Many South Indians who now make their home in Massachusetts have brought with them Carnatic instrumental music, one of the most ancient music systems in the world. The building blocks of this classical music tradition are melodic scales (raga) and rhythmic cycles (tala); however, much like in jazz, improvisation in performance is key.

Several of tonight's performers—Rocky Mendes, Aisling Francoeur, and Suhas Rao—have also been mentored in MCC funded Traditional Arts Apprenticeships. The relationship between master artist and apprentice is more than just lessons, it is a bond that safeguards many traditional arts.

Get ready to enjoy the griot tradition of Mali, back beat fiddle tunes, improvised melodies and complex rhythms of South Indian Carnatic music, the reels, jigs, and slow airs of Irish tradition, and the synchronized percussive dance steps of people finding cultural common ground.

Maggie Holtzberg, Ph.D.  
Folk Arts & Heritage Program  
Massachusetts Cultural Council

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## PROGRAM

### Welcome

Brian O'Donovan, Host and Maggie Holtzberg, Producer

### African roots to old-time fiddle and banjo

Balla Tounkara, kora with Rose Sinclair, banjo

Mark Simos, fiddle with Rose Sinclair, banjo

### American rhythm tap dance

Rocky Mendes with Matt Glaser, violin and John McGann, guitar

### Intermission

### South Indian Carnatic music

Tara Anand Bangalore and Suhas Rao, violin  
with Pravin Sitaram, mridangam

### Irish music and dance

Boston Edge:

Joe Derrane, accordion,

Séamus Connolly, fiddle,

and John McGann, guitar

with O'Shea-Chaplin dancers:

Aisling and Siobhan Francoeur,

Allison Gendron, and Megan Corcoran





## ARTISTS

### **Tara Anand Bangalore (Carnatic violin)**

Tara Anand Bangalore, an accomplished violinist and vocalist in the Carnatic tradition, began vocal training at the age of four. Her gurus have included esteemed artists such as T.M.Tyagarajan, K.V.Krisnan and Shankara Sarma. She began violin at the age of eight with Mrs.Vedavalli Ramaswami of Delhi and Mrs.T. Rukmini of Madras. Tara has received numerous awards from the Music Academy and Krishna Gana Sabha in Madras. She has been teaching music—both vocal and violin—for over 15 years and is one of the most sought after teachers in the area. Her students have done extremely well at annual competitions and won numerous awards over the years. One of her students, Suhas Rao, will be performing with her this evening. She and Suhas received an MCC Traditional Arts Apprenticeship award in 2007.

### **Séamus Connolly (Fiddle)**

Séamus Connolly, a native of County Clare, Ireland, directs the Boston College Irish Studies Music, Song and Dance Program and is the founder and director of the Gaelic Roots Summer School and Festival. He has earned many awards and honors; he won the Irish National Fiddle Competition an unprecedented ten times and was inducted into the “Hall of Fame” of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in 2002. In the same year, the Irish Echo named him Musician of the Year in recognition of the publication of the tune collection and CD, *Forget Me Not*. He has represented Ireland on three “Masters of the Folk Violin” tours organized by the National Council for the Traditional Arts, and he has performed at most major festivals in the US, as well as on National Public Radio, the “Today Show,” and WCVB-TV’s “Chronicle.” His two solo CDs are *Notes from My Mind* and *Here and There*. He also plays with the group Boston Edge (with Joe Derrane and John McGann) featured this evening. In 2004, he was awarded an MCC Traditional Arts Fellowship.

## **Joe Derrane (Accordion)**

Joe Derrane was born in Boston to Irish immigrant parents. They arranged for lessons under the watchful eye of Jerry O'Brien, an outstanding button accordionist who had emigrated from County Cork, Ireland. By his mid-teens Joe was a regular performer in Boston's Irish ballroom scene. At 17, Joe recorded the first of several 78s that went on to become legendary throughout the Irish music world. But by the 1950s, Boston's Irish dance scene declined. Joe stopped playing the button accordion and switched to commercial music. Around 1990, he stopped playing music altogether. However, in 1993, Paddy Noonan re-released Joe's recordings, which led to his "comeback" performance at Wolf Trap Festival in 1994. Since then, Joe has recorded six albums and is the subject of two documentary videos. Two of his most prized awards are his 1998 induction into the Comhaltas Ceóltoirí Éireann Hall of Fame (Boston's Hanafin-Cooley Branch), and a National Heritage Fellowship in 2004. Joe is the leader of Boston Edge (with Séamus Connolly and John McGann) featured this evening.

## **Matt Glaser (Violin)**

Matt Glaser has been chairman of the String Department at the Berklee College of Music in Boston for 27 years. He has performed widely in a variety of idioms ranging from jazz to bluegrass to early music. Matt is the first and only recipient of the Stephane Grappelli Memorial Award, "In recognition of his significant contribution to the teaching and playing of improvised string music in America," presented by the American String Teachers Association with the National School Orchestra Association. He has published four books on contemporary violin styles including *Jazz Violin* co-authored with the late Stephane Grappelli. He has performed with Stephane Grappelli, David Grisman, Lee Konitz, Bob Dylan, J Geils, Leo Kottke, Joe Lovano, Yo-Yo Ma, Mark O'Connor, Charlie Haden, Michael Brecker, Kenny Werner, the Waverly Consort, Fiddle Fever, and most recently with Wayfaring Strangers—a band that fuses jazz and folk music. The Boston Herald called him "possibly America's most versatile violinist."



## **John McGann (Guitar and mandolin)**

John McGann is a gifted multi-instrumentalist and teacher from Boston, where he attended Berklee College of Music and now serves as Associate Professor in the string, guitar and ensemble departments. He's equally at home in any number of styles including jazz, bluegrass, American traditional music, rock and roll and traditional Irish music. He is a member of Wayfaring Strangers, Durango Reinhardt, and Boston Edge (with Joe Derrane and Séamus Connolly), featured tonight. In addition to recordings with each of those bands, John has a solo album, *Upslide*, where he plays everything from mando to Hammond organ. Major publications include *Developing Melodic Variations on Fiddle Tunes*, *Guide to Octave Mandolin*, and *Joaquin Murphey Classic Western Swing Guitar Solos*. John was the US National Mandolin Champion in 1986. Among others, he has performed with Celtic Fiddle Festival, Darol Anger, Seamus Egan, David Grisman, and the Boston Pops.

## **Rocky Mendes (Tap dancer)**

Rocky Mendes, a protégé of tap legend Dr. Jimmy Slyde, has been dancing since the age of nine. Rocky has danced in Dance Inn Production's *Tapestry*, been a featured artist at Williams College, Florida State University, New England Conservatory, Northeastern University, Jacob's Pillow and other venues, and acted and danced in the Boston productions *A Night of Jazz*, *Rhythm of Love*, *Dramatic Shoutouts* and *Raisin*. Rocky now teaches at Boston Arts Academy and Whitman Academy of Performing Arts, where he first studied dance. Rocky has performed in Toronto, Ithaca, Las Vegas, New York City and Chicago. He has shared the stage with such diverse acts as Savion Glover, the late Gregory Hines, Bob Moses, Jon Hendricks, Aria Hendricks, Clark Terry, Barry Harris, Dianne Walker, Van "The Man" Porter, and Sarah Petronio. He and his mentor, Dr. Jimmy Slyde, were awarded two MCC Traditional Arts Apprenticeships.

### **Brian O'Donovan (Host)**

Born in West Cork, Ireland, Brian O'Donovan has lived in the Boston area for the past 27 years. He is a well known broadcaster in the US with one of the best-known public media entities in the US, WGBH. He is also a festival producer and concert promoter working extensively in the folk music genre. His weekly three-hour radio program, *A Celtic Sojourn*, is heard throughout New England and about to launch nationally. O'Donovan is also the managing partner of Connections Ventures, LLC a media and entertainment company in Cambridge, which produces live events and festivals—including the new Irish Connections – (Icons) Festival—as well as TV and music recordings.

### **O'Shea-Chaplin dancers:**

**Aisling and Siobhan Francoeur,  
Allison Gendron, and Megan Corcoran**

The O'Shea-Chaplin Academy of Irish Dance is one of the longest established Irish dancing schools in the country. The school was founded by Rita O'Shea-Chaplin, a native of Galway, Ireland, who began her study of traditional Irish dance at the age of four. The school, founded in Ireland, has been located in the greater Boston area since the early 1960's. Their students have won many local, regional and national championships and their ceili and choreography teams have captured many North American titles. The O'Shea-Chaplin dancers have performed all over the U.S.A., and have conducted tours in Canada, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Germany, and Russia. Aisling Francoeur is just completing an MCC Traditional Arts Apprenticeship with Rita O'Shea-Chaplin.

### **Suhas Rao (Carnatic violin)**

Suhas Rao is a high honors student at Westwood High School in Westwood, Massachusetts. He has been learning Carnatic violin from Tara Anand Bangalore since the age of six. He has won several prizes in Cleveland and CMANA competitions over the years. Suhas has performed frequently both as solo and accompanying artist in and around the New



England Area. Apart from his pursuits in Carnatic music, Suhas also plays clarinet and saxophone in his school band and has won many laurels for those performances as well. Suhas is just completing an MCC Traditional Arts Apprenticeship with Tara Anand Bangalore.

### **Mark Simos (Fiddle)**

Mark Simos is a renowned songwriter and composer. His “tunesmithery” draws on a long apprenticeship in a wide variety of genres—Irish, Southern Appalachian old-time, New England, Québécois, bluegrass, and Klezmer, among others—creating a musical language grounded in traditional forms, yet uniquely his own. For nearly three decades, Mark’s original fiddle tunes and waltzes have been adopted by fellow musicians and dance communities and have been recorded by traditional bands such as Childsplay, the Hillbillies from Mars, Laurie Andres, and the American Café Orchestra. Mark is also a consummate fiddler, and guitar and piano accompanist. His songs have been recorded by Alison Krauss, Del McCoury and many others. Mark’s landmark album *Race the River Jordan*, and new *Clifftop Notes* project, set the standard for new tunes in the Appalachian old-time tradition. Mark is an assistant professor in songwriting at Berklee College of Music.

### **Rose Sinclair (Banjo)**

Rose Sinclair has played different forms of traditional music for 30 years. A multi-instrumentalist equally at home on clawhammer banjo, zydeco accordion and lap steel guitar, she has also studied balafon, mbira and tap dance. Rose has toured with different bands in the U.S., Canada and Europe, including Girl Howdy and Crooked Jades, and appears on many recordings. Rose was a founding member of Green Linnet recording artists, the Heartbeats Rhythm Quartet, and was featured on *A Prairie Home Companion*, *Mountain Stage*, *E-Town* and *Voice of America*. Rose has taught at folk music camps on both coasts. She has toured as a multi-instrumentalist sideman with Robin & Linda Williams, James Leva and Memory Theater, Rani Arbo & daisy mayhem, and Martha Scanlan.

## **Pravin Sitaram (Mridangam)**

Dr. Pravin Sitaram hails from a family in Mumbai that is steeped in Carnatic music tradition. Introduced to mridangam at the age of 8, Pravin learned this art from his Guru, Shri P. S. Parameswaran—a disciple of the legendary Palghat T. S. Mani Iyer. Pravin has been very active in the Boston area since 1995 and has accompanied several artists of outstanding caliber and repute, including the late Dr. Chitti Babu, Sangeetha Kalanidhi, Dr. R. K. Srikantan, Sangeetha Kalanidhi Smt. R. Vedavalli, Shri S. R. Janakiraman, Lalgudi Shri GJR. Krishnan, Lalgudi Smt. Vijayalaksmi, Mysore Manjunath, Guitar Prasanna, Sikkil Mala Chandrasekhar and Flute Raman. Pravin is a member of the faculty at the Learnquest Academy of Music. His students have participated and won prizes at the Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana.

## **Balla Tounkara (Kora)**

Balla Tounkara is a native of Mali, from a village called Boudefo, a renowned center for griot arts. The griot is the traditional bard native to the Mandinka people of West Africa. Born into this tradition, Balla traces his ancestry to the founding of the Malian empire 800 years ago. Trained by family members, Tounkara grew up playing drums: the doundoun, djembe, and tama (talking drum). As a teenager, Balla became serious about kora, the 21-stringed harp. He came to the United States in 1997 and began to teach and perform. He has recorded three CDs, *Music from Mali*, *Be Right*, and *Yayoroba*. He has performed with some of the biggest names in African music including Salif Keita, Baba Maal, and Baba Olatunje.



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