

## Jim Rooney's 'long run' through music

*Grammy winning Nashville producer to launch autobiography in Galway*

BY CHARLIE MCBRIDE

ONE EVENING in 1951, in the Massachusetts town of Dedham, a young Irish-American teenager happened to tune in to the local radio station as a country band called The Confederate Mountaineers were playing.

He was instantly smitten by the sound of fiddle, banjo, mandolin, and guitar melded with high, clear singing. For Jim Rooney, then aged 13, it was the beginning of a life-long love affair with country and folk music, a passion that would set him on a varied, exciting, and fulfilling career in music as a performer, promoter, songwriter, publisher, engineer, and Grammy-winning producer.

That career has brought him into contact with such iconic figures of American music as Bill Monroe, Muddy Waters, Doc Watson, Howlin' Wolf, Bob Dylan, The Band, The Everly Brothers, Dionne Warwick, and Taj Mahal.

In the 1970s Rooney moved to Nashville where he began engineering and producing records. Here he helped alternative country gain a foothold in Music City as he worked on keynote albums by John Prine, Iris Dement, Nanci Griffith, and Townes Van Zandt. He was also involved in making the landmark TV series *Bringing it All Back Home* which explored the connections between Irish and American music.

Now, Jim Rooney has set down his many adventures and recollections in an aptly-titled and thoroughly absorbing autobiography, *In It For the Long Run; a Musical Odyssey* (University of Illinois Press, €20), which receives its Irish launch at a reception in Charlie Byrne's Bookshop tomorrow at 6pm.

### Not your typical Irish-American

Ahead of the book's launch, Jim took some time to share thoughts and memories from his lengthy and eventful career. I begin by asking him about something he says on the very first page of the book, where he reveals his family moved to Dedham to be "away from the Irish-Catholic enclaves in Boston". I suggest this was atypical for an Irish-American family.

"It was atypical," Rooney agrees. "My mother's family and her relations and my father's family all lived in various parts of Boston. I think she just wanted to get out from under their scrutiny. It's interesting because we moved to a

town that was only 12 miles away but there were no Irish Catholics in our town; there were Italian Catholics and lots of Yankee Protestants; in our neighbourhood we were the only Catholics on the street.

"It was a conscious decision on my parents' part, they wanted us to be not so parochial. My mother had some brothers who were priests while my father did a lot of work in construction and went on to do a lot of work for the archdioceses of Boston, but they both wanted to get a little space."

Given his passion for American folk and country music, it is surprising to learn that Rooney was largely unfamiliar with Irish music until he made his first visit here in 1964.

"It wasn't until I met Carol Langstaff [*Rooney's wife*], whose mother Diane Hamilton put the Claneys and Tommy Makem together, that I heard that music," he tells me. "I hadn't heard any Irish instrumental music. My father would sing 'Take me home again Kathleen' or 'The Rose of Tralee' but that was it. Once I got over to Ireland and met the likes of Peggi Jordan it was quite extraordinary.

"I had read a lot of Irish literature, O'Casey, Yeats, etc, but I wasn't familiar with the music aside from the Clancy Brothers. Then I came to Dublin and stayed with Peggi and we went to sessions around Dublin and then to Scariff. It was incredible there, to hear Willie Clancy on the street. I'd never even seen the uilleann pipes before, and I'd never heard anything like Barney McKenna and Sean Sheehan. It was all very exciting and stimulating."

### Happy to mix it up

Having been bitten by the country music bug, Rooney taught himself guitar (a left-hander, he played it 'backwards' and upside down,) and began performing alongside his good friend, banjo-player Bill Keith. It was not long however before he found himself diverted into the organisational side of things, firstly with the Club 47 in Cambridge where the likes of Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell, and the Staple Singers appeared, and then with the Newport Folk Festival. Did he ever regret not focusing more on his own performing career?

"I've been pretty happy mixing it up," he replies. "Pretty early on, I had a good understanding that I didn't have the level of talent or determination to be an artist full time. You have to be totally

committed and I love to play but I didn't feel I was that level of being a full artist and I think I was right in that judgment.

"I've had the opportunity to work with a lot of artists and I know what it takes to do that and to be successful which is a full commitment to it. I do have this other side which is that I am a pretty good organiser, and I've especially enjoyed being a record producer, that has been my favourite role that I found in life. I can do it well, I enjoy the process, and it is something someone needs to do. It's a big help to the artist to have someone who is a good producer."

The book is full of wonderful vignettes; being stuck with Bill Monroe on his freezing and broken down tour bus; arranging a pre-gig supply of Chivas Regal for Muddy Waters; being invited by Thelonus Monk to admire his wardrobe of tailor-made suits; trading Hank Williams songs with a young Bob Dylan.

### Surviving Led Zeppelin

Rooney also provides vivid pen portraits of many of the people he encountered such as Townes Van Zandt, and Dylan's manager Albert Grossman. While Grossman's public image is that of a hard-ass, intimidating figure, Rooney gives a much more nuanced take on the man.

"Grossman was a complex very interesting person," he notes. "He was a hard person to work for because he was very demanding, he was never satisfied. But people like that can get more out of you than you think you've got."

The book ruefully describes how the Newport Festival lost the run of itself, with one post-show party being marred by the boorish conduct of a drunken Led

Zeppelin.

"Those British bands were pretty rowdy, they were quite full of themselves, they were young and full of vinegar and what not," Rooney recalls. "That was Led Zeppelin's very first appearance in the United States. I just don't think they had a real appreciation of the people that were around them or the circumstances they were in. If you were in a room with Duke Ellington and people of that calibre you think you might want to shut up and pay some attention!"

Rooney is relishing the prospect of his Galway book launch.

"Galway is a second home for me," he declares. "Carol and I spent 12 years there spending five or six months of each year there. My maternal

grandfather came from Barna, and I always go out to that graveyard and there is a feeling of home there, I have so many good friends: Moya Cannon, Mary Staunton, Sean Tyrrell, any number of people, so I am always very happy to be there."

