



BCMFest 2009 Has "Fringe" Benefits

Festival includes acts with different kinds of Celtic connections

They've become a Boston institution, regularly packing 'em in at places like The Lizard Lounge in Cambridge while they play their unique blend of country rock, blues and roots music on the likes of guitar, mandolin, clarinet, accordion, field organ, even a suitcase-turned-bass drum.

So what in heaven's name is Session Americana doing at the 2009 Boston Celtic Music Fest (BCMFest)? The festival, which takes place for the sixth year on Jan. 9-10, 2009, will feature some of the Greater Boston area's finest Celtic musicians, singers and dancers, performing at venues in Harvard Square and Medford.

Putting a band like Session Americana in the mix with performers who play Irish, Scottish, Cape Breton and other Celtic music might seem like a real stretch — and that's exactly the point, say BCMFest organizers.

"BCMFest has always valued the effort to find connections, even unlikely ones," explains festival co-founder and board member Laura Cortese. "Obviously, the major focus of BCMFest is on traditional Celtic music. But we don't think music has to be divided up in neat, separate little categories — in fact, once you start exploring the

connections, our musical differences become rich flavors we can better understand, appreciate and enjoy.

"This year in particular we are drawing attention to music that might be considered on the 'fringe' of Celtic. We're hoping that people who have heard and appreciate Session Americana's sound will be interested in coming to see them in a different kind of setting. The message here is, 'Hey, come listen for yourself and see how this music fits together. You might be surprised.'"

Session Americana member Ry Cavanaugh admits he was a bit surprised when Cortese encouraged the band to apply to BCMFest. "Laura was thinking, 'We want something different.' Well, we're certainly different — other than having a couple of Irish diaspora guys as members, we are definitely not a Celtic band."

But Cavanaugh says the group has a Celtic connection of sorts in their friend Finbarr Doherty, a Donegal songwriter. Doherty's most recent album "The Last of the Name" is based on the eponymous book, a collection of stories told by weaver Charles McGlinchey (1861-1954) that describe long-lost rural customs and traditions, as well as the occasional episodes of hilarity, in his small Donegal parish — an evocative recollection of a way of life now gone.

"We'll be playing some of Finbarr's music at BCMFest," says Cavanaugh. "It's not traditional, and maybe it's not 'Celtic,' but it's certainly Irish.

"And like I said, it'll be different. In fact, it'll be a breath of fresh air — no fiddles," he jokes.

Another "fringe" act at BCMFest 2009 is Fireside, a recently formed quartet of young musicians who draw on Appalachian and old-timey styles — which, Cortese points out, have origins in Celtic music.

The "fringe factor" at BCMFest also involves putting Celtic music in an unusual context, such as "The BCMFest Olympics." Asked to explain the concept, Cortese replies, "Let's just say it'll be all about speed, agility and stamina – not necessarily taste."

Adds Cortese's fellow BCMFest co-founder and board member Shannon Heaton, "We take this music seriously and treat it with respect – but having fun, even being a bit-off-the-wall, is an important part of getting together as a community. Why not go outside the lines once in a while?"

More information on BCMFest 2009 performers and events will be available at bcmfest.com.