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Wednesday, March 12, 2008

**Neal Rubin**

**For 50 full hours, pipes call out for 'Danny Boy'**



The Danny Boy Marathon is wearing AJ O'Neil out, and it doesn't even start until Saturday.

He's lining up acts: 1,000 vocalists, flutists, harmonica players and even a 20-piece family kazoo band from Port Huron to come sing, pipe, blow and hum "Danny Boy" for 50 solid hours.

He's taking phone calls from intrigued reporters from as far away as Russia, South Africa and of course, the motherland, where the Irish public radio network chatted him up last week.

He's looking for one of those funeral registries you sign at a visitation, he's reminding politicians that three minutes is not the same as 10 minutes, and he's slotting the drag queens in for Sunday morning, ahead of the choirs stopping by after church.

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In short, if there's anything short about a 50-hour marathon, he's paying the price for coming up with a truly inspired way to celebrate St. Patrick's Day, which will arrive as scheduled on Monday, about the time O'Neil dissolves into a puddle of shamrock-tinted protoplasm.

O'Neil, 45, and 24-year-old Branden Reeves own AJ's Café in Ferndale, a coffee house and vegetarian eatery half a block west of Woodward Avenue on Nine Mile. Their place isn't inherently Irish, but O'Neil's ancestors bailed out during the potato famine, and he first sang "Danny Boy" in public at his dear daddy's funeral in '96.

That makes him every bit as authentic as the other 36 million Heirs of Erin who identified themselves as Irish in the last census. As University of Detroit Mercy professor Mike Bernacchi points out, that's nine times as many people as actually *live* in Ireland, which didn't give a shillelagh about St. Patrick's Day until it finally recognized the tourism potential in the mid-1990s.

By then, we were already holding parades, chugging green beer and wearing silly plastic derbies. But as best as O'Neil can tell, no one had ever thought to string together 1,000 three-minute versions of "Danny Boy," the lilting, heartfelt ballad whose lyrics were composed in 1910 by some English lawyer who never set foot in Ireland.

**Celebrate without 'Danny'**

This seems like a good point to mention that the Motor City Lyric Opera will also celebrate St. Pat's this weekend, with a 3 p.m. Sunday exploration of Celtic music, poetry and dance called Patricktide at St. Hugo of the Hills Chapel in Bloomfield Hills.

Suggested donations are \$15 and \$10; call (248) 647-7976. It's a memorial

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**Neal's Weblog**

**The least likely lease**

Stop the cyber-presses: I found an even more absurd listing on LeaseTrader.com. For all the links and such, see the previous post. Meantime, how's this for a deal that ... Continued

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performance honoring the recently deceased John Foster Callaghan, whose descendants include lyric opera founder Mary Callaghan Lynch, 17 other children, 60 grandchildren, 35 great-grandchildren and a few great-greats.

As for O'Neil, he opened AJ'S Café last April and took to filling lulls in musical performances by singing "Danny Boy." "People loved it," he says.

"They got teary eyed, even the sober ones."

At least, they did at first. After a while, the regulars started asking him to learn something else. "OK," he said, "We'll have a marathon next St. Paddy's Day and we'll put it to rest."

Which wasn't exactly true. He's hoping a bar in Ireland eclipses his 50 hours next year, then volleys the song back to him to set a new record, and so on in an everlasting show of intercontinental Irish bonding.

#### Reserve your slot now

O'Neil spent 16 years in construction, until he tumbled 35 feet off a roof and his doctors suggested he find something a little closer to the ground.

The marathon is the biggest thing he's nailed together since then. It'll start at 3 p.m. Saturday with a proclamation and perhaps a verse or two from local politicians, and run until 5 p.m. Monday.

Since "Danny Boy" is so often heard at funerals, he'll have every performer sign a memorial registry as a keepsake. At the end, a minister will perform a "Danny Boy" burial.

To reserve a three-minute slot, call (248) 399-3946 or drop by 240 W. Nine Mile.

"We'll have the lyrics set up on a karaoke machine," he says. "It's like 'Danny Boy for Dummies.'"

One performer will sing it in Yiddish. Another will rap it. A man who looks like Gandhi will try it in Hindi. Reeves, who actually hates "Danny Boy," will perform it as a spoken-word poem.

"I'm sure my dad is getting a big kick out of this," O'Neil says. And if he isn't, at least he's far enough away to tune it out.

Reach Neal Rubin at (313) 222-1874 or [nrubin@detnews.com](mailto:nrubin@detnews.com).

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#### In the Blogs...

##### Politics Blog



**Mako Yamakura:** National City is currently harboring a 45% loss in its value. Not one for too much drama, but they enjoy the big green sign on the Top of Troy building off I-75. Poor ... [Continued](#)

##### Tuned In: TV Blog



**Mekeisha Madden Toby:** The Lifetime movie "Wisegal" is a hot piece of trash but if you like Alyssa Milano (who will forever to me be Samantha from "Who's the Boss") and James Caan, watch it. ... [Continued](#)

##### Terry Foster's Blog



**Terry Foster:** Today I am happy to announce I will be writing a full time column again called Terry's Town beginning Wednesday in The Detroit News. Tentatively the column is to run ... [Continued](#)

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**Special section: Madonna, from Michigan to the Hall of Fame**

Madonna might belong to the world now, but we had her first in Michigan. On March 10, 2008 -- 25 years after the release of her first album -- our own Material Girl will be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. - Feb. 28, 2008

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