



Squeeze box

David Munnely pushes all the right buttons

By Chet Williamson, Worcester Magazine, Worcester, Massachusetts

Irish button accordion wizard David Munnely hails from County Mayo, which is on the western side of the Emerald Isle. He says his music is a rough-and-tumble mix of rhythm and sound, reflecting the craggy coastline of its origin.

"It's a wild, rhythmical kind of crazy music," he says speaking by phone from Virginia, where his band is in the midst of their second American tour. "It's not as precise or civilized as the music of the Midlands or from the eastern part of the country. It has a passionate rhythm about it, a drive and energy about it." The group, which has been making waves on both sides of the Atlantic with their first two discs, *Swing and By Heck*, premieres in Worcester this weekend.

The David Munnely Band has built its reputation by bringing a new energy to traditional music. The sound is reminiscent of one that typified the American Irish Dance Hall scene of the 1920s. "I'm a big fan of that music, the jazz-influenced Irish traditional music," Munnely says. "We listened to 78s that came from America."

He cites early Irish musicians like The Flanagan Brothers in particular. "They recorded with Klezmer musicians and clarinet players, military bands and marching bands from America. They recorded Irish tunes with fifes and flutes and drums."

Munnely also mentions the late gypsy guitarist Django Rheinhardt. He notes the verve and spirit of his most popular band, The Hot Club of France. "It was unbelievable," Munnely says. "Anyone from any genre of music who hears it has to tap their feet to it. You have to admire the musicianship. They are the highest musical technicians you can get. No one could do what they were doing even to this day."

Jigs, reels, hornpipes, airs and polkas are still very much in the band's repertoire, but as Munnely explains, "People might say you can't mix jazz and folk music, but I think they jam very well together."

Munnely is known as an Irish button accordion wizard. The particular squeeze boxes that he plays are one- and two-row melodeons. "I play a Dutch-made two row C-sharp and G accordion. Both sides are buttons," he says. "It's a pretty traditional instrument, but I have a few extra basses."

Although just 30 years old, Munnely has been a player in great demand for years. Before organizing his own band in 2001, he toured and performed with The Chieftains, Matt Molloy, Arty McGlynn, DeDanaan, and other legendary Irish artists.

Munnely says he grew up in a house filled with music, where he started playing at the age of seven. "My grandmother lived with us. She played and came from a family of 12 musicians. We weren't taught music; we absorbed it. We listened and heard it in our house. It was like drinking tea; it was so common."