

Magnificent Moments, Remembering Dennis Cahill

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There are two kinds of liquor licenses you can obtain if you have a bar in Chicago. A 2 o'clock license and a 4 o'clock license. Most drinking establishments have a 2 o'clock license. They can sell liquor until 2:00 a.m. in the morning. Last call comes about 10 minutes before the hour then everyone is ushered out at closing time.

So, at 2 o'clock in the morning all over Chicagoland, you'll see a crowd of inebriated people standing outside most of the bars contemplating their next move. Do they call it a night and stagger home or journey forth to the nearest 4 o'clock establishment to continue the evenings activities?

In the summer of 1976, I was just starting out as an acoustic performer. I was a skinny, long-haired guy with a guitar trying to get anyone, anywhere, to hire me. If I was gigging at a 2 o'clock bar, I would leave the bar with the crowd and either go home or, if I had a friend playing at a 4 o'clock bar, I would probably follow that crowd over there to give my buddy some moral support.

And they were gonna need it.

If you were booked at a 4 o'clock bar, chances are the bar would have been empty for most of the night. But shortly after 2:00 a.m. people would begin to filter in from the other bars and by fifteen minutes past the hour the place was packed. That's when your last set of the night began and continued until closing time.

Your audience would be made up of people who had ventured from the variety of surrounding 2 o'clock bars. The Irish bars, country bars, working class bars, punk bars, gay bars and business executives from the upper class "Gold Coast" bars along Lake Shore Drive. Your job was to get up in front of this room full of drunks who normally

wouldn't be caught dead with each other. They had absolutely nothing in common except for one thing, they had all started drinking at about 8:00 p.m. the night before and it was now 2:00 a.m. and they had all come to the same conclusion: *they were still thirsty.*

One night I was performing at a 4 o'clock bar called Jonah's on North Broadway. My good friend, Dennis Cahill, had been booked at a 2 o'clock bar and stopped by with his guitar to sit in after his establishment had closed. That night, however, he didn't join me on stage. He decided it would be much more fun to just sit back and enjoy the melee of crazy drunks and me trying to deal with it.

A scruffy old man was standing in front of me flailing his arms in the air and screaming out a request for the navy fight song, *Anchor's Away*. I didn't know the song and, much, much, worse, I was too inexperienced to know how to handle the situation. I kept politely apologizing and asked if I could play him something else. I was trying to engage in a sincere back and forth with him.

Everything about that response was wrong.

First, never admit you don't know something. Second, never apologize for anything. Third and most important, you should never, never ever engage with a drunk in the first place.

And what was this "polite" shit all about?

Over the years I would learn how to behave in a situation like that. But that night, I was the consummate rookie. And the more I did the wrong thing, the madder and more intense my little heckler got until he was screaming and spitting out his request inches from my face.

Happily, he eventually wore himself out and, with a big sigh, turned around and started to walk away. This is where the wonderfulness of my friend Dennis kicked in. He jumped up and ran over to the guy, put his arm around him and said “I don’t know why he won’t play that song for you. He knows it. It’s one of his best songs!” The guy flung back around and did another 10 minutes screaming in my face.

There are moments in your life that are perfect. Magnificent moments. And when Dennis jumped up and ran over to that guy and said what he said, that was perfection! Life just doesn’t get better than that.

Those moments are like the cups of water people offer runners along the route of a marathon. A momentary pick-me-up that refreshes and revitalizes you along the path of your sweaty, tiring run through your life. They remind you that you are not alone. There are people aware of what you are doing. And one or two of them are actually cheering you on.

Over the years Dennis and I remained friends and exchanged countless more perfect moments, often disguised in a humorous prank like the one back in the summer of ’76.

I wanted to start off this book of essays by talking about Dennis because he was the first of my life-long friends to pass away from an age-related issue. He was 68 when he passed. Or, as us senior folks would say, he was *only* 68.

After his funeral service I went out with friends of mine and Dennis’ that I have known for decades. There was an unspoken “*and so it begins...*” patina to our gathering. We all knew that this was just the first of these get togethers we would be attending in the coming years. We knew the time had arrived in our lives to begin the

process of watching each other die. And, somewhere along the line, of course, we would be the one everyone else was gathering to remember.

Dennis and I first met when he was 17 and I was 19. Our paths crossed at The Red Door Coffeehouse, an acoustic music venue that was hastily assembled every Saturday night inside the Student Center of DePaul University in Chicago where I was a Sophomore. Dennis was still a senior in high school. We quickly became friends, first joined by our music, then by our caustic sense of humor. Going forward we played music together, we hung out together, we even lived together for a time. And peppered through it all were many, many more memorable moments.

Once after a performance of mine at the Red Door that did not go well, Dennis stood off to the side afterward watching as friends and fans of mine came up one after the other to tell me how great the show was. Dennis said nothing.

The next morning the phone rang and it was Dennis "I know how much you are hating everyone telling you how great you were last night," he said. "So let me be the first to say it... You sucked last night. You bombed!" We both laughed and both knew it was just what I was yearning to hear. I was now able to shake it off and move on.

Dennis also said what may be the nicest thing anyone ever said about my live act. Unlike most of the people on the folk scene at the time who didn't really have a scripted banter between their songs, I was very scripted. I labored over each line and practiced my comic timing. I often got heat for being that way and was encouraged to be more spontaneous and free form.

Dennis knew that I got heat for it and once said "I just love your routines. They are like listening to a Beethoven symphony. I wait for the crescendos and the pause

before the punch line that you deliver flawlessly. I could listen to them over and over again.”

Damn, what a good friend he was.

Years down the line, Dennis married a gorgeous fiddle player who was in the cast of River Dance. She died tragically when she was clipped by a car while opening the door to get into hers. I went to the wake at his house and he led me into a room so we could be by ourselves. He broke down weeping and sobbing as I held him in my arms.

He showed me photos of himself with his wife and said “look at my face. Look at how happy I am. I’ll never be that happy again!” I’m so glad to say that he was wrong about that. Years later he met Mary who was, and is, a wonderful woman. They married and she was with him until the end.

Dennis was perhaps the most disciplined musician I have ever known. He would practice for hours every day. He moved from folk music over to the study of classical for a time. He also played in a disco band for a while. Then country music. Dennis and I actually made a road trip together to Nashville, me to try to sell my songs, him to look into the studio musician scene.

Every musical genre Dennis ventured into, he approached with dead seriousness. And that set him apart from myself and other performers playing the club scene in Chicago at the time.

To make some quick money, we might play a dive bar that didn’t want to hear our original music. They wanted us to play popular soft rock hits. We did it begrudgingly. We felt this kind of pandering was beneath us. But not so Dennis.

He submerged himself into every musical challenge he confronted. And, while everyone else was being a snob, he was learning and growing. He never condescended to the music, he studied it, he analyzed it. Then he would practice, practice, practice until he perfected it.

Dennis finally settled into the Irish music scene that was at that time, and still is, very vibrant in Chicago. For a while he was in a band with the brilliant Irish fiddle player Martin Hayes who briefly worked in town before he ventured back home to Ireland where he went on to become the world renown talent he was destined to be.

Once Martin began his meteoric climb to stardom on the international Irish folk scene, he needed a sideman to go on tour with him. He remembered an unusually talented musician he had worked with in Chicago and gave Dennis that golden tap on the shoulder that changed his life forever.

Over the next few decades, Dennis toured the world performing at some of the most acclaimed venues on earth including Albert Hall in London and Carnegie Hall in New York City. He even played for President Obama at the White House. And Dennis' notoriety grew beyond just being a sideman to the phenom Martin Hayes. Dennis himself became a bonified star and influencer on the Irish music scene.

But he never stopped being my friend. Years would go by without seeing each other, but when we did, we picked up right where we left off. And he never stopped being funny. He would call me and others from an airport in Europe just to share the latest joke he had heard.

In his mid-sixties, Dennis began showing early signs of dementia. And then he had a heart incident. While recovering at home he took a tumble down a staircase and

hit his head. The fall wasn't fatal, but it kicked his dementia into overdrive and he began a rapid decline spending the last year of his life in the hospice ward mostly incoherent.

I only got to visit him once during this time when I was in Chicago working on a new CD. A project Dennis and I had talked about him performing on but never got to. He was frail and shaking when they wheeled him in. He was mumbling a stream of unintelligible whispers. I moved my chair close and took his hand. The nurse quickly asked me to back off. COVID was winding down but still a concern and they did not want me to touch him.

When I let go of his hand, Dennis looked at me and said "yeah, I don't want to crush your fingers." It was a joke. And he said it with the same wry finesse I had heard him use telling so many jokes over the past fifty years. It was the only intelligible thing he said that visit. And how fitting. How perfect. He momentarily emerged from his fog just to get in one more joke.

When Dennis passed the President of Ireland issued a press release acknowledging Dennis' contribution to Irish music. The Cultural Minister of Ireland issued his own press release as well extolling the accomplishments of my good friend.

Dennis' funeral was held in a cathedral on the Northwest side of Chicago and the place was packed. A forty-piece Irish orchestra made up of fiddles, accordions, penny whistles and bodhráns performed the music for the high mass. If you have never experienced that, you might want to think about adding it to your bucket list. Especially if you were raised Catholic.

The only prerecorded music at the ceremony was Dennis performing a song from an album he had released in 1979. It was a song of mine called *When the Moon Meets*

the Morning. The song was written as a love song, but one of the refrains in the chorus took on a haunting meaning for this occasion: "*When the moon meets the morning, I'll still be near, I'll still be here with you.*"

It reminded us all that when we wake up tomorrow, Dennis will still be there in our hearts. I didn't know they were going to play the song. I sat in the pew crying. And I thought to myself, wow, even in death, Dennis managed to give me one more magnificent moment.