

I am in the garden, sitting under the hawthorn tree with this blank page, it's about to rain. The blackbird sings sweetly. It's the beginning of summer, May Day. I am waiting for a butterfly to emerge from its cocoon. We too have been cocooned, locked down, in a state of chaos and flux, perfect conditions for creativity and new ideas to develop.

A drop falls on my page. The blessing of a watermark.

There is a whiff of wood smoke on the breeze. Creative Places Tuam have lit the paschal campfire, inviting us to a cup of tea and a chat, a gathering. There is plenty to talk about. Creative Places Tuam arrived as quietly as that whiff of smoke, bringing a bounty of experience, new perspectives and a wide array of possibilities to enhance our communities.

Community and Collaborative Arts is what they call it these days. A new name for something we know well and have plenty of practice with. The Meitheal for bringing home the turf, giving the neighbours a hand, or helping out. Tuam was lucky to be chosen for this pilot programme from the Arts Council, and doubly lucky to have Create as administrators for the project. Carolann came to town, looked around, listened, talked to everyone and told us we were already doing great things.

How Julie McHugh had developed the Fuse Music Collective so much that a whole new generation of teenage singer/songwriters were empowered to write and perform their work. How we celebrated Danny Kelly, the brass band, the showbands, and more recent recordings from Sun Street Studio with the Songs from the Broken Wheel compilation. How everyone in town watched Conor O'Donnell and The Restricted continue that tradition when they performed 'The Bed is Rough' at the 2020 launch in the Pres. How Evan Kelly and David McDonagh were making movies.

Carolann was present too, cheering us on when Soundbites celebrated its 10th birthday with a session at the library.

She saw it all. She saw the Tuam Junior Comhaltas group, my favourite bit of Tuam music making. I visited a session they had at the Mercy primary school hall, a roomful of youngsters with their instruments, parents and mentors teaching tunes and playing along, a nurturing framework for the budding musicians.

It was beautiful to see, and reminded me of the help and support I was given by established Tuam musicians when I was starting out. Music making is a collaborative art by its very nature.

Hope ye don't mind, but I am concentrating on music here because that is the art I have most interest in. I heard about Community Music in the 1980s in London. Jazz drummer John Stevens had written a book on the subject called SEARCH AND REFLECT. He said that music making belongs to everybody, not just the professional performers on concert stages.

'Sing, play and reclaim your own voice, it is good for you'.

Trad sessions, community choirs and drum circles fit into this framework. Community music making, as practiced in Tuam Junior Comhaltas brings something enriching and positive to everyone.

Despite the Covid restrictions Creative Places Tuam have supported art practitioners around Tuam, reflecting our efforts back to us, and providing encouragement and support in practical ways. Seed funding and grants for diverse projects, being there to listen, and offering workshops in various disciplines. It has become a valuable resource for many of us. CPT have described their role as one of 'pastoral care'. I am not qualified to comment on the pastoral care role of community arts practice but I do sense that it has the potential to transform individual lives, communities and the very future of our post-Covid world.

The three year pilot programme is almost half way through its lifespan. We have been spoiled by the support and attention given us, and there is still plenty to look forward to. I was asked to write about my experience in Tuam. It is more than 20 years since I wrote a song on that subject, and can say with the authority of one who has lived in many places that Tuam does have a unique atmosphere that supports and encourages music making.

Tuam allowed me to dream, and helped me realize that dream.

*"I came into this town of Tuam over forty years ago,
As a first-year Christian Brothers boy, with the whole wide world to know.
From the farming fields, and feeding, and the weeding, and the reading,
To the street life, the bubble-gum, and this thing called Rock and Roll."*

Padraig Stevens