

# BIG 'STEPS'



Photos provided

Dancers will perform in the "sean-nós" style of Irish dance during "Atlantic Steps," which will be at the Mendel Center on Saturday.

## Saturday performance at Mendel Center spotlights old-style Irish dance

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO  
HP Features Writer

**BENTON HARBOR** — Dance has always been part of daily life for Brian Cunningham.

Raised in Connemara — home to thousands of Gaelic-speaking natives on the verdant west coast of Ireland — an ancient form of Irish dance known as sean-nós (which literally means "old style" and is pronounced "shawn NOss") is still passed down.

"I was 5 years of age when I started sean-nós dancing," Cunningham says by telephone through his thick brogue. "I learned it by watching my family and

### IF YOU GO

**What:** Atlantic Steps

**When:** 8 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

**How much:** \$25-\$32

**Contact:** 927-1221 or [www.lmcmainstage.org](http://www.lmcmainstage.org)

**Artist info:** [www.atlanticsteps.com](http://www.atlanticsteps.com)

older people doing it and passing it down to us. I just loved the freeness of it. I loved the energy of it. It was around me, it was in me. It

was part of my culture and part of my heritage. I loved the way it brought people together."

The 27-year-old dancer is using Ireland's oldest dance form to bring people together on a larger stage.

Cunningham, whose family of young dancers has been on the forefront of Ireland's sean-nós revival, is now touring the U.S., including Saturday's appearance at Lake Michigan College's Mendel Center Mainstage, with "Atlantic Steps." The international touring adaptation of his successful Irish show "Fuaim Chonamara," "Atlantic Steps" explores the tradition and heritage of sean-nós by

telling the story through music, song and, of course, dance. Cunningham will be joined by five other dancers and accompanied by a traditional Irish band featuring vocals, uilleann pipes, fiddle, flute and piano.

"The Irish are very passionate about their traditions, particularly song and dance," Cunningham says. "It's in my family history. It's in my blood going back at least 300-400 years that I know of."

Compared with the more regimented steps and stylized upper body of Irish step dance, sean-nós uses

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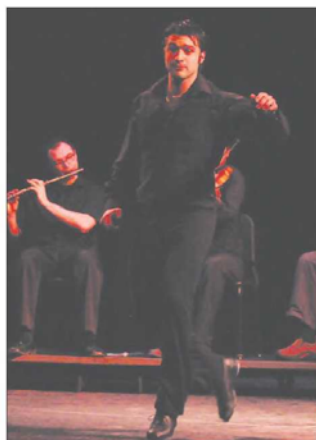


Photo provided

Brian Cunningham's family has been involved with sean-nós dancing for centuries.

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close-to-the-floor rhythmic footwork that is more casual, loose-limbed and spontaneous. The influence of sean-nós can still be seen in American forms such as Appalachian clogging, jazz tap and soft shoe.

"It's a very different style of Irish dancing," Cunningham says. "It's a very high-energy dance. We are all dancing as fast as we can. It's just electric. It's a wild energy. It is very close to tap dancing, but it is a different style. It's closer to tap dancing than to step dancing, but they are all linked. This is where the Irish step dancing – 'Riverdance,' 'Lord of the Dance' – where it all came from. It all came from sean-nós dancing."

Sean-nós dance experienced a major decline in the 20th century as more formalized styles of Irish dancing took hold in Ireland. Within the past decade, however, young dancers like Cunningham have sparked a sean-nós resurgence, committed not only to preserving the steps and traditions, but to reinvigorating the style with new energy and fresh ideas.

"When the English invaded Ireland and we had the problems many, many years ago, the tradition died away," Cunningham says. "There were only a few families that kept that style going. Thank God we were one of them because it was dead and gone throughout Ireland for years."

Cunningham was 15 when a scout from Irish television's "Late Late Show" saw his family perform and booked them on the variety program.

"She said, 'I think Ireland has to see this style of dancing,'" Cunningham says. "We did that TV show and it just took off. They asked us back every year after that. So it's our oldest tradition and it's our newest tradition."

In 2009, he and his family presented their show, "Fuaim Chonamara," as the headline act of Galway's Volvo Ocean

Race spectacular. It was the success of that show that prompted Cunningham to think about bringing sean-nós to a larger stage.

"I thought this was something that could go worldwide but everyone thought I was crazy," Cunningham says. "Sean-nós dancing on the world stage? You're crazy, Brian." That's what they said. We put a show together – a show with the story of the dance – and it just kept building. It was a snowball effect."

Since sean-nós is a more intimate and traditionally solo form, Cunningham tapped Irish-American dancer Kieran Jordan to choreograph the ensemble numbers for the show. On this side of the Atlantic, Jordan has been a major figure in the U.S. revival of sean-nós, a form that girls and women have only recently begun to dance.

"Kieran is a star. She's just amazing to work with," Cunningham says. "She has a great way of working; a great way of tying these routines together. She just has a great mind. It's beautiful the way the story is told. A lot of the success of this show is owed to Kieran Jordan."

Vincent Crotty, Jordan's husband, created the set design for the show. He's originally from County Cork, Ireland, but has lived in Boston the past 23 years. His "Atlantic Steps" imagery traces the history and import of Irish dance, from early village social life through immigration to America, with its host of international influences. Converted to digital images, Crotty's paintings are projected to set different scenes – ocean waves, dawn on the turf bog, the interior of an Irish cottage, the deck of a steamship.

"Nearly everyone in America it seems has relations who came from Ireland who moved here 200 years ago," Cunningham says. "When the Irish immigrated all they had was their tradition. They never got to go home, but this is their blood. This is their heritage. So we owe it to them to bring it here."

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