

Black Irish Band hits 25-year milestone

By [Gary Linehan, The Union Democrat](#) October 23, 2014 08:44 am

Sonora's Black Irish Band this month is celebrating the 25th anniversary of its formation, a musical milestone unmatched in Tuolumne County. "I remember it vividly," founding member Patrick Michael Karnahan recalled of the band's first rehearsal on Oct. 17, 1989. "It was the same day as the Loma Prieta earthquake." The band has gone on the record 24 albums and perform throughout the Western United States, Canada and even Singapore.

They have played more than 500 shows on festival stages, steam trains, sailing ships and even in flight aboard a Boeing 747. They have nearly 100 videos on YouTube and sell music around the world through the Internet.

The band's first gig was at the Gunn House in Sonora, a short set at the invitation of regular venue performer Lori Brandon, about a week after their first rehearsal. Next were shows at the National Hotel in Jamestown, followed by two years of steady work at the Jamestown Hotel, where they gave a three-hour anniversary show last weekend.

They also will perform this weekend in Sonora at the All Hallow Fantasy Faire, which Karnahan founded. He also is founder of the long-running Sonora Celtic Faire as well as a nationally known fine art painter.

The band's other remaining founding member is bass player-vocalist Richard Restivo. A longtime Sonora Elementary School music teacher, now retired, Restivo has dealt with some health issues this year but said he plans to be back on stage next year.

Joining Karnahan and Restivo in the original lineup were Chris Miller and Brian Moss. Over the years, the band has seen about a dozen members, Karnahan said. Death claimed two members in 2004. Guitarist Ken Darby was killed in a motorcycle crash and melodeon player Lloyd Jones died of cancer. In addition to Karnahan, on guitar, concertina, trumpet, banjo, melodeon, octave mandolin and vocals, and Restivo, on acoustic bass, trumpet and vocals, the current lineup is rounded out by 22-year member Steve McArthur on accordion, guitar, piano and vocals, and James D. Nelson, a member since 2000, on banjo, guitar and vocals. Fiddler Dave Rainwater, a former permanent member, continues to appear with the group on special occasions, while Stan Emmons has been filling in on bass during recent shows. Karnahan attributes the band's continuing popularity to its versatility and choice of material.

Each member sings lead vocals and often plays more than one instrument. Their music draws from Irish, Italian and American traditions — spanning railroad, maritime, historical and biographical topics — and includes nearly 100 original songs.

"I call it Americana because it's a mixture of so many different styles of music," Karnahan said.

Among the band's lasting memories are performing for the 100th anniversary of the White Pass and Yukon Railroad and 100th anniversary of the Yukon Gold Discovery, as well as the Singapore International Beer and Music Festival and venues including the Las Vegas Renaissance Faire, Fitzgerald's Casino in Reno, Plough and Stars Irish Pub in San Francisco, Sutter's Fort, Bodie State Historic Park and California State Railroad Museum.

The Black Irish Band has sold more than 240,000 albums independently and has been featured on Sacramento television, National Public Radio, satellite radio and college radio stations. Their recordings feature a host of local guest musicians as well as vocals by famed cowboy musician Michael Martin Murphey.

Karnahan was diagnosed with cancer earlier this year, although he managed to perform in an evening concert over the summer after undergoing surgery earlier the same day. He continues to perform while undergoing treatment.

Karnahan and Restivo first met on the Jamestown set of "Back to the Future III" in 1989. Both were trumpet players in the "Hill Valley Brass Band," while future bandmate McArthur was given a speaking role — and continues to receive residual checks to this day. During breaks in filming, Karnahan and Restivo began to formulate the idea for a traditional folk group that would cross cultural and musical boundaries, with the band becoming a reality just months later.

Karnahan noted that most of the band members over the past 25 years have continued to work another job, even while juggling extended tours. "The key to our success and longevity is don't quit your day job, because when you do play, it's always exciting and fun," Karnahan said. "We may never get rich or famous, but it helps pay the bills and brings creativity into our lives."