



# Dirty Linen

## Folk & World Music

### IN MEMORIAM

# 111 - APRIL / MAY 2004

**Johnny Cunningham** wasn't just a magnificent fiddler. He was also a gregarious, delightful, and very funny man who had the knack of making everyone in his presence feel good. When he died suddenly of a heart attack on December 15 at age 46, the Celtic music community lost not only one of its best musicians, but also one of its most memorable characters.

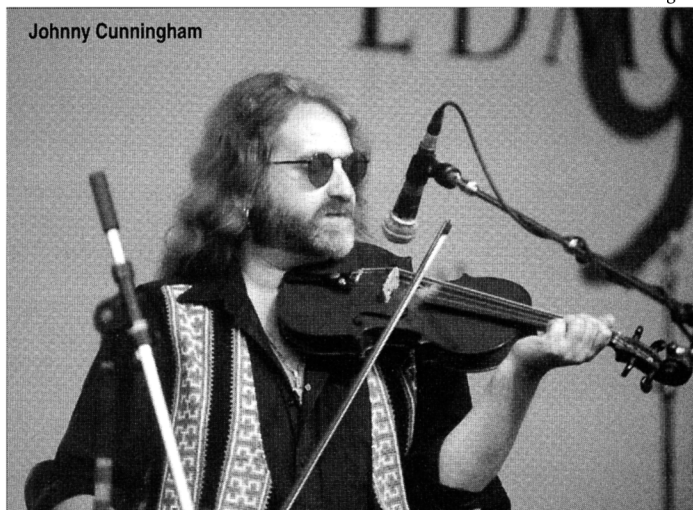
Cunningham was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1957, and started playing fiddle as a child. He dropped out of school at age 14 and quickly found himself in the seminal Scottish traditional band Silly Wizard, where he was soon joined by his equally talented accordion-playing brother Phil. Until the band called it quits in 1988, the Cunningham brothers would be its instrumental core, known for their seemingly telepathic connection on wonderfully convoluted tune sets. Even while still in Silly Wizard, he had begun branching out. He moved to the United States in the early 1980s, recorded two solo albums, played in the Celtic-rooted bands Relativity and Nightnoise and the rock band the Raindogs, and did session and concert work with people ranging from Bonnie Raitt to Bill Morrissey. He got into album production - Seamus Egan credits him for helping Solas first find its sound - as well as composing and arranging music for theater. In recent years he had also begun to write poetry and witty stories based on his Scottish childhood. He split his time between New Bedford, Massachusetts, and New York when not on the road.

And he certainly could play, ranking high on any list of the best Celtic fiddlers of his generation. He knew a vast number of tunes and could improvise even more. He seemed totally comfortable onstage no matter where he was playing, from solo traditional gigs in small venues to high-profile rock environments, whether he was the center of attention or a backing musician. Over the years, he developed a well-deserved reputation for playing with finger-blurring speed when appropriate, but he was also a master of delicate, achingly emotional slow airs and wonderfully sympathetic song accompaniment.

Any account of his performances also has to include a description of his personality. It was impossible to watch him and not smile. An imposing figure with the look of a genial wildman, he was someone who probably never missed a chance for a pint, a party or a joke, yet who also took his music seriously. His sometimes lengthy and always hysterically funny tune introductions were legendary, delivered with a deadpan seriousness that was belied by the twinkle in his eye. As longtime bandmate Andy M. Stewart was fond of saying, Cunningham sometimes had the bemused look of a man who has leaned back too far in his chair and suddenly realized he was about to topple. But wherever he wound up, he seemed to enjoy the experience.

At a New Bedford memorial concert a month after his death, the musicians who took the stage in his memory seemed to echo a common thread, that with Cunningham backing you or producing your CD, you could simply be yourself and he would help you bring out your best. In the process, you'd find yourself laughing away any tension that may have stood in the way. And that's his legacy: Aside from all the fine recordings that he leaves us, Johnny Cunningham made people smile.

- Tom Nelligan



Johnny Cunningham