

# Harrington's tunes a mix of pop, ballads, folk

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what else do you need?"

A blue-eyed charmer with the Celtic knack for storytelling, Harrington usually rounds out his sets with a classic or two by one of the artists who've inspired him — Leonard Cohen, the Beatles, Elton John, Led Zeppelin, Joan Armatrading, Bruce Springsteen — and occasionally one of the traditional Irish songs he was raised on. But he focuses on his originals, a mix of grooving pop tunes and pained ballads, rockers and stripped-down folk stuff.

"I realized that if I was going to do anything with music, I had to write my own things. I didn't want to just be doing covers," says Harrington, 31. He's sitting on a stool in his cozy Richmond District cottage, sipping black tea with milk and eating Irish soda bread. His guitars, a Martin steel-string acoustic and a Fender Telecaster, are in the living room with the upright piano he nabbed at a garage sale for \$150.

Harrington studied classical piano at an early age and stuck with it at the insistence of his late mother, Mary, who always

sang around the house and was crazy for the great Irish-born tenor John McCormack, as well as Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash. Young Eoin (pronounced "Owen") soaked up all that music and sang classic Irish folk ballads like "Four Green Fields" and "Fields of Athenry." He recently sang the latter — about a man imprisoned for stealing corn to feed his starving family during the Great Famine of the 1840s — at the funeral of Anthony Guilfoyle, father of San Francisco's former first lady, Kimberly Guilfoyle. It was her dad's favorite tune, and Harrington's mother's, too.

"All the old Irish songs are pretty much about death, famine, English oppression or drink," Harrington says with a smile. He's a "happy camper" for the most part, he adds, but writes his share of sad songs. Sometimes he sits down at the piano in an up mood and something really blue comes out. He thinks, "Wait, this is too sad for a good humor. So I start tweaking it a little bit." On the flip side, "happy songs can be a pain in the ass. They often come out cheesy if you're too happy. I try to pull it back in again."

While studying engineering

at University College Dublin, Harrington and his chums often caroused at pubs like the Flowing Tide. "Toward the end of the night, we'd have this big sing-song in the corner of the bar. Mostly Irish tunes. People would join in. I loved it. But I never thought it would translate into something you could live off of."

He never sang professionally until that night at Ireland's 32, a month after he and some friends had arrived here on holiday. He was smitten by the place.

"I love all the different people, the nightlife, the attitude," Harrington says. "The biggest shock you feel when you come to America is people's attitude. It's a lot more supportive."

Another chemical engineer he was traveling with played good rock guitar and showed him a few things. A quick study, Harrington taught himself to play, jamming at night while working a temp job at Genentech. He met an executive there over lunch who offered him an engineering job.

"The lads were all pissed," Harrington says with a laugh. "They couldn't get a job and had to go home."

He went home for a spell, too, while his work visa was being arranged. When he got back, he began writing songs. The music usually comes first — a melody comes into his head, or some chords suggest a feeling or structure — then the lyrics.

"All my songs have an arc to them of some sort. I always try to have some kind of tale or narrative if I can," says Harrington. Some of his songs are inspired by people he knows. The wrenching "So Wrong" is about his mother, who died of cancer at 52. The Beatles-like "Is It Over?" is based on a friend who, as the lyric says, "couldn't spell commitment if you tried."

Harrington — who will be joined Friday by Jerry Becker on guitar and organ, guitarist James DePrato, drummer Kyle Caprista and bassist Jeff Symonds — loves the spontaneity of playing his music live. "Having those little frickin' special moments with the lads onstage," he says, "the crowd reaction, to feel the energy comin' back at ya — nothin' beats that."

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