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'Celtic' taps into worlds of rhythm

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(photo © helen mclennan)

James Devine combines traditional Irish jigs and reels with jazz, country & funk.

"Celtic Tap: An Evening With James Devine" is a rhythm lover's dream. The Irish dancer's most flamboyant claim to fame is the ability to tap his feet a mind-blowing 38 beats per second. He's documented by Guinness World Records as the "Fastest Dancer in the World." However, Devine's extraordinary speed would only be shallow virtuosity if he didn't put it to the service of artistic imagination and vision, and that he does, big time.

The sheer rhythmic invention of Devine's industrious feet set him well above the fray (and that includes "Riverdance" phenom Michael Flatley, who he left in the dust long ago.) The new "Celtic Tap," which marked the tapper's Boston debut at the ICA last night, is like a musical travelogue told through rhythm, embracing styles from traditional Irish jigs and reels to jazz, country, funk, and classic

hoofing. He even cranks on "Another One Bites the Dust," though that's not his most impressive moment.

What is impressive is the way Devine can meld these disparate stylistic elements with an integrity and fluidity that seems organic, a seamless morphing of rhythms that suggest two worlds at once. In this, Devine is aided by the considerable talents of Scottish percussionist Paul Jennings and violinist/composer Duncan Wickel. They not only provide musical interludes while Devine catches his breath, they become partners in Devine's rhythmic tapestry, laying down a beat, unleashing contrapuntal lines of their own, or trading phrases like an animated conversation. Improvisatory sections unfurl as long digressive trains of thought.

Jennings's remarkable technical facility brings out color and nuance on a range of hand drums, thundering one moment, fluttering like a hummingbird's wings the next. He also plays a mean set of spoons, setting down a sizzling groove and fueling fanciful interplay with Devine, flicking his spoons on the soles of the dancer's shoes.

Wickel, currently studying jazz violin at Berklee, is as persuasive in a traditional Irish ballad as he is country fiddling or ripping through cascading classical flourishes or atonal double stops. At one point, the North Carolina native plucked a bluesy funk number on a violin pitched down into cello range, and you'd swear he was playing guitar. Then just as quickly, he launched into licks from "Flight of the Bumblebee," Devine's taps matching every bow stroke.

There are some slightly contrived, but still entertaining bits - a "Stomp"-like number with a push broom and a soft-shoe in a sand box, with taps complemented by whispered scrapes and slides. But with all the playful shifts and fusing of styles, Devine really lights up with the more traditional Celtic sequences, and you can see why the County Clare native won Irish dancing's highest honor, "The Grand Slam" of top competitive titles all in one year - when he was a tender 14. He has both power and finesse, with dynamics that range from hammering heels to delicate toe taps. Well-oiled ankles and knees enable sideways swivels and high kicks. Yet untraditionally, his loose upper body suggests the freedom of Savion Glover.

One of the show's defining moments is a duet in which Jennings pounds out a funk beat while Devine resolutely sticks to the squarely defined rhythms of Celtic dance. But gradually, their rhythms begin to cross and connect, combining into a new propulsive language. That moment they find common ground is transformative.