

John McCormack

The Irish Tenor

*Tom Deignan
surveys the
extraordinary life
of Ireland's most
famous tenor.*

The year was 1906. The setting was a stage in Savona, Italy, a northwestern port town south of Milan. The opera to be performed that particular evening was *L'Amico Fritz* by Pietro Mascagni, with a fresh-faced 21-year-old named Giovanni Foli included among the cast members. Though he had only a supporting role, Foli earned quite a bit of attention for his performance. This should not be surprising. After all, this performer would go on to conquer the world, becoming one of the most popular singers of the first half of the 20th century. He shattered box office records during his many trips to the U.S., where he became one of radio's first mega-stars, and was, according to one account, "the best-paid concert singer in history."

If you can't recall any popular singers named Giovanni Foli, that's because it was a decidedly operatic stage name for the acclaimed Irish tenor John McCormack (1884 – 1945).

"Almost everybody who owned a talking machine in the days of World War I was sure to have, along with Caruso's *Pagliacci*, John McCormack's 'Mother Machree,'" *Time* noted, after McCormack died at the age of 61. "He sang up & down the land, and was always good for a benefit — for the Irish, the Red Cross, the Catholics, the U.S. (he sold a half-million dollars' worth of Liberty Bonds)."



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