

‘Traditional Irish music here tonight’: Exploring the session space

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It is a Tuesday night in November 2010, approaching half past nine in a bar in east Cork. The two television screens are showing European Champions League games featuring teams from the English Premier League. A scattering of people are gathered round watching with varied levels of interest; many of them are regulars in that they come here on occasion when the team they support is playing, or simply for a quiet pint. Séamus, the manager, is behind the bar, greeting many by name and knowing their order before they ask. There are fewer faces here now than there would have been five years ago. The pub trade has been significantly hit by the economic downturn. It has also been felt by musicians and music lovers as pubs cut back on entertainment or close up altogether. In spite of the changes, at this pub tonight, a sign outside still advertises an Irish music session. The setting provides a multi-sensory engagement with life in Ireland at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, informed in particular by the soundscape.

I am one of the performers for tonight’s Irish traditional music session. A session is often an informal gathering of musicians that usually takes place in a public house. It can often appear disorganised and without rules to the listener. Musicians gather in a corner and some will turn their backs to the talking crowd. There is a hierarchy and etiquette for the session. Sometimes one or two musicians are paid to be present and get the session going; others who wish to participate simply join them. Even people at the bar come down at times to sing a song and contribute. For some, the session is

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an opportunity to earn money; for others, it is a social occasion with their musical talents the key to inclusion.

In this bar, there is an ongoing arrangement that two other musicians and I will play from around 9.30pm until closing time each Tuesday night. I am a teacher, living locally but originally from Kerry where I grew up in a community rich in the traditions of Irish music, song and dance. These days, I listen to a lot of music during my 100km commute to work in Tipperary and while Tuesday is my only regular session, I do teach music as well. John, a truck driver, is another 'blow-in', this time from north-west Cork. He also grew up surrounded by a strong local musical tradition. He listens to a lot of music while driving but participates in more sessions in the area than I. Éamonn, a local farmer, gets here by taxi and does not come from a traditional music background. The three of us are often joined by other musicians or singers, very few from the locality, some even from overseas.

Reflecting on this session, the setting, the audience and the wider world of Irish evokes questions concerning life in Ireland today, concepts of identity and the importance of tradition in an ever-changing world. The session both incorporates and suggests changes, not only in sound but in the biographical details of the people present, their economic situations and the multitude of cultural references that can be found in the bar. How my fellow musicians and I along with our audience got here provides an insight into changes in contemporary Ireland. The nature of the session throws light on the transition from boom to bust in Ireland in the past decade.

Is it traditional music you play?

When I come in with my instrument case, a few strangers might ask what music we play and what time we will start. The start time is fairly flexible – many of the locals

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are still watching the matches. This can agitate the tourists as they want to hear traditional Irish music before they retire to bed early. They will not stay for the full session; they wait to hear a little, take some photographs or video, and sample a little of the alcoholic offerings associated with Ireland – stout, whiskey or Baileys.

Sometimes they will enquire about our instruments – the banjo, accordion, uilleann pipes and bodhrán – which may appear strange to them.

I play the Irish tenor banjo, a four stringed fretted instrument tuned like the violin and played with a plectrum. Hardly the most traditional of instruments in an Irish context, the banjo probably developed from instruments of African origin. The tuning, frets, and method of playing with a plectrum are all examples of cultural development over the course of about three centuries in America and Ireland. In the nineteenth century, the popularity of the banjo developed through minstrel shows on both sides of the Atlantic. I was influenced to take up the banjo having heard a neighbour play, learning on an instrument that belonged to my primary school. However, the music of the school band was not Irish traditional music – this I learned from local groups including *Siamsa Tíre*, a folk theatre group based in north Kerry, and the local branch of *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* (CCÉ), an organisation involved in the promotion of Irish traditional music around the world.

As the soccer matches near the final whistle, John comes through the doors.

Approaching sixty-five, John comes from Sliabh Luachra, a region to the west of here that is renowned for Irish traditional music. He moved here in the 1970s and has raised his family here. Commenting on the differences in the local economies of Sliabh Luachra and east Cork, he tells me he came here in search of work and has not been unemployed since. He learned many tunes as a young boy from his father and neighbours, some of whose names remain attached to tunes in the tradition. He plays

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an accordion tuned to C#/D in the style of many Sliabh Luachra musicians and in contrast to the more widespread B/C tuning. He readily admits that he did not fully appreciate the cultural world of Sliabh Luachra when he was younger but that link to a region considered rich in tradition gives him status in this part of the world where a sense of tradition is largely absent.

Often Éamonn is here before me. A semi-retired farmer, he enjoys playing the guitar and singing a few songs. The session is a social outlet for him. He often takes a secondary position in the session space though he has rarely missed a night in seven years. He will have a few pints and get a taxi home around midnight. Irish traditional music is often associated with a rural way of life but, though he makes reference to his rural background, Éamonn's first choice in music is not traditional but the popular music songs of the 1960s and '70s. The session helps Éamonn create an identity in retirement. For him, leaving his job was a choice and he can still be involved in the farm by providing his experience through advice. Éamonn's repertoire reflects a blurred identity that is in sync with some in the bar who also do not have a job, more by imposition than choice. These individuals are subsumed into the statistics and anonymity of post-boom unemployment figures. For some, their job was an integral part of their identity; an identity now shaped by their joblessness. Though the bar is shared by people of various national origins, a tension sometimes exists. To sing an Irish song is a statement of intent but it exists on all sides. The Irish-born singer provides a rendition of an American song in the English language before his Polish-born neighbour sings 'The Wild Rover'. The boom brought them together on the building sites but they still hum a different tune.

As we take out our instruments, Seamus turns off the sound from the televisions and comes over to offer us a drink. He comments on the scarcity of people in the bar, how

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things are getting slack and it's going to be a quiet night. He often wonders how he could get more customers. People don't go out in the middle of the week anymore. During the boom, the bar had a steady flow of customers every day of the week. Reference is made to the smoking ban introduced in 2004, changing attitudes in relation to drinking and driving and the downturn in the economy. Access to cheap alcohol in shops and off licences is also a factor but we comment on the social benefits of the pub. This pub is one of the more popular in town and behind the bar are numerous posters of events and groups. There is music here every night of the week, of all styles and genres, and it helps attract customers. Séamus uses catchphrases of the downturn such as 'value for money' and is increasingly selective in his choice of music to best match his customers' preferences. However he, like many bar managers who support Irish traditional music sessions, has a personal appreciation for this type of music.

It is sometimes difficult to see the difference between boom and bust in the session. The winter was always quieter on a Tuesday night but the sharp decline in tourist numbers is also impacting on summer turnover. It is notable that some of the musicians who join us remark on sessions elsewhere that have stopped because of financial restraints in other bars. There is always a suggestion that they will start up again and, in the summer, many do to attract in the passing tourist or add atmosphere and a sense of life. The session, like the Tango in Argentina (Goertzen and Azzi, 1999) or *Fado* in Portugal, is partly dependent on tourism.

On the pub's front door, a large poster proclaims 'Traditional Irish Music Here Tonight'. Tradition, in this context, may be defined as "a cultural practice or behaviour with some historic continuity with the past" (Kaul, 2006: 50). John was raised in a musical house in a very musical place. His father played fiddle, as did his

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uncle who learned from the famous fiddle player Pádraig O’Keeffe. John remembers that when he was young, people would have sessions in each others houses up to six nights a week in the lead up to Christmas. Music was part of local gathering and the rambling house, the house where people would gather for a night of social entertainment, an important part of rural life.

I was born in Listowel in north Kerry. My first experience of Irish traditional music was as a very young baby when *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*, the largest festival or Irish traditional music in Ireland, was held there. The Fleadh, as it is more generally known, is the culmination of a series of local and regional festivals that are primarily competitive events run by CCÉ. It changes location, usually every two to three years, but from the 1970s to the 1990s it was regularly held in Listowel. As well as my own immediate experiences, my mother told me stories of the wonderful nights of music and dance that she experienced in Sliabh Luachra but my father, who worked in a bar when he was a younger man, associated the music with disorder.

As an accordion and banjo duet, John and I reflect a particular aspect of the tradition. Whether the banjo and accordion duet, accompanied by guitar, is more or less ‘traditional’ than other manifestations of Irish traditional music may well be debated but here few ask the question. To most, it sounds Irish and old and for many from Ireland evokes memories of the past or, for foreign visitors, equates with the expectations they have developed from the mediation of Irish traditional music around the world, which has increased since the mid-1990s. While the Celtic Tiger boom attracted a new young, urban, cash-rich audience for Irish traditional music to venues such as the Point Theatre in Dublin and Madison Square Garden in New York, the bust has, in a sense, given the music back to the folk. The rigorous standards of *Riverdance*, with its military precision, is replaced by the untrained voice at the bar

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singing 'Take Me Home, Country Roads' with passion, albeit in a varying key signature. The notion of 'authentic tradition' is replaced by a concern for context and setting.

As well as the tunes passed down orally - Irish traditional music is often termed as an oral tradition where tunes are learned by ear from other musicians rather than from books or written notation - John has adapted to the changing modes of transmission. He listens to radio programmes and recordings to learn tunes and even uses the internet to view video clips of Irish traditional music. We are part of a global community of Irish traditional musicians that share tunes and stories. John communicates a wealth of history from his youth and home place but is also tuned in to changes in a living musical tradition.

Changing spaces and going global

The conflict between notions of tradition/purism and change/innovation has been a central focus of the discourse on Irish traditional music through the 1990s to the present (Vallely, Hamilton, Vallely *et al*, 1996). One aspect of change has been the performance of Irish traditional music around the world, particularly in America, and the relationship between Irish traditional music and other genres (O'Connor, 2001). As a living tradition, Irish traditional music is constantly undergoing change. The changes that take place are influenced by the social, economic and geographic changes in Irish society and the Irish diaspora over the past two centuries at least. Each performance of a tune by a musician may be considered, in itself, a reinterpretation of the tradition. The very existence of a pub session, probably the

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most common setting for the performance Irish traditional music in the present, is itself a reflection of change in the tradition.

Irish traditional music has been performed in private homes, at crossroads, fairs and markets, and in dancehalls at various points in history. In some parts of the country, it entered pubs in the 1930s but in much of the country, the pub session is predominantly a post-Second World War phenomenon (Hamilton, 1999: 345). The development of pub sessions owed much to the perceived revival in Irish traditional music, facilitated by two factors in particular: the formation of CCÉ in 1951 as a significant cultural organisation that sought to promote Irish culture, and the work of composer Seán Ó Riada, who reshaped the sounds and contexts for Irish traditional music in the 1950s and 1960s. As O'Shea notes:

The confluence of economic growth with this mid-twentieth-century revival allowed an emerging subculture of musicians simultaneously to embrace these cultivated forms of Irish traditional music and to emulate the informal practices of an older generation of musicians in the session. During this period, publicans began to build 'music lounges' to cater for a young and more prosperous clientele, who now included women. (2008: 51)

O'Shea also notes the growing commodification of the session in the 1970s and the employment of musicians by publicans as session leaders. In a case of history repeating itself, the session tonight has emerged from the popular post-*Riverdance* revival of Irish traditional music that coincided with another period of economic prosperity, during which time the pub itself was also remodelled. For some, the popularisation and globalisation of Irish traditional music is epitomised by the emergence of *Riverdance* as a cultural phenomenon in the 1990s. I was approaching my twelfth birthday on the 30th April 1994, the night of the Eurovision Song Contest

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when *Riverdance* was first performed as the interval act. It was to have a significant influence on me as a young musician and dancer. A few weeks previously, I had competed at *Oireachtas Rince na Cruinne* (the World Irish Dancing Championships) in Dublin, the stepping stone for many who would go on to perform in *Riverdance* and the many other shows that followed. At that stage, Irish dancing was not cool for a boy of my age who lacked popular heroes in the arts that could compete with the many great Kerry footballers. The commercial success of *Riverdance* and the celebrity status afforded its stars was linked to the social and economic changes in Ireland. *Riverdance*, for many, represented the new, young, confident Ireland that was taking a prominent place on the world stage (Brennan, 1999; Ó Cinnéide, 2002; Scahill, 2009). It is worth noting, however, that the lead dancers in the first performances of *Riverdance* – Michael Flatley, Jean Butler and, later, Colin Dunne – were not themselves a product of this new Ireland but actually descendants of the Irish diaspora in the USA and England.

Riverdance emerged from, rather than encapsulated, the traditional arts. The apparent sudden unveiling of confident, sexy, scantily clad young Irish dancers, led by members of the diaspora dancing to exotic Balkan rhythms performed on bodhrán and uilleann pipes in front of a massive global audience placed Irish musical traditions centre stage in the new Ireland (see also O’Flynn, 2009: 38). Ó Cinnéide explains how, after decades of gradual evolution, Irish dancing developed into ‘an exhilarating modern form’ in the spring of 1994, ‘its traditional rigour being given a new, free expression in keeping with the new spirit of enterprise and natural well-being that is abroad in Ireland today, underpinning “The Celtic Tiger”’ (2002: 184). The importance of *Riverdance* lies in the power of musical change to not only reflect but also become a metaphor for cultural change (Bohlman, 1988: 15).

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In the 1990s, and particularly in the years following *Riverdance*, Irish traditional music became increasingly popular. It was now considered cool and sophisticated to go to see an Irish dance show and to send children to Irish dance lessons. Although Irish traditional music was already played in many parts of the world where emigrant Irish communities had settled as a result of emigration, in the late 1990s Irish traditional music, song and dance truly went global. Since 1999 I have travelled extensively throughout Ireland and the world as a performer. Many of these trips were motivated not only by a desire to perform Irish traditional music, song and dance but were supported by people and groups seeking to promote Ireland to an international market. A 2009 performance at the White House for President Barack Obama as part of the St. Patrick's Day celebrations highlighted the importance attached to Irish heritage and the arts at an event dominated by political and business interests. Other performances have included musical events organised by Irish embassies in Mexico and China, as well as cultural festivals in countries where Ireland does not maintain close diplomatic ties, such as Venezuela. In all instances, the arts provided a reference point for Ireland.

Home again

The internationalisation of Irish art and cultural identity has led in turn to a desire to rediscover local meaning and a sense of belonging (Gray, 1997; Kearney, 1997). Lovering (1998) notes the importance of spatial proximity for creative musical activity while O'Shea (2008) points to the role of places such as Clare (a western Irish county with a strong musical heritage) in the imagination of authenticity, belonging and pilgrimage in Irish traditional music. The importance of the local session to the development of a sense of place and community is highlighted by Cohen's reflection

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on musical activity: 'The consumption and production of music also draws people together and symbolises their sense of collectivity and place' (Cohen, 1998: 273).

There has been increased interest in and promotion of local traditions in response to *Riverdance* (Seavor, 2010). Tonight's session is an example of a post-*Riverdance* session that may initially have hoped to cash in on the popularity of Irish traditional music in the 1990s. It is typical of many of the sessions around the country and in Irish pubs around the world. Outlining the development of sessions with a mind towards sponsorship, Vallely states: 'In the past the bar proprietor merely made the space available, or maybe provided the musicians with some drinks (which in poorer times were not insignificant gestures). At present the publican hires two or three players to simply be there for specified hours each night, effectively to act as catalysts to encourage and/or bait other players and particularly drink-consumers' (2008: 138). Through this practice, 'the community gains a cultural venue or reputation, while the performer carries on a music tradition, gets the chance to play, the possibility of developing a career and, at least, minor fame' (Vallely, 2008: 136). In some instances, the musicians of the bar may avail of opportunities to play in a professional manner to international audiences at festivals and venues around the world.

My own musical adventures have brought some brief moments of local attention.

There is 'five minutes of fame' attached to gigs such as my appearance in the White House in 2009. For a few weeks after prominent performances, especially at such venues as the White House, there are newspaper reports, radio interviews and acknowledgement on the street before the achievement and related fame fades once more. Despite the apparent popularity of Irish traditional music in a post-*Riverdance* context, there is anecdotal evidence of a lack of value placed on the session by an Irish audience. The proprietor of a bar in Cork pointed to the paradox that, while

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musicians who have played all over the world play in the bar, there may be little interest amongst local customers. O’Flynn notes a pub customer in his study stating that he would not pay to attend a pub session (2009). Similarly, a music teacher in Cork commented to me on how many people ask why he does not play in his locality; experience has taught him that the regular customers of the public houses in the area are not interested, to the point of leaving when a session takes place.

Despite potential fame and success, anonymity serves us well in the local pub, creating nostalgic images of a musical community that play for enjoyment alone with silent acclaim from those around us. Few realise that the set of polkas we play are named after John's father, the source and possible composer for these tunes. Few know that one of us played in the White House as part of a celebration of Irish heritage. Even fewer will be aware that some of the visiting musicians who call in have themselves achieved fame through albums, television appearances and world tours. Many of the musicians who play in this pub have been awarded All-Ireland titles at *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* in various instrumental competitions, amongst the highest accolades achievable in the Irish traditional music community.

Is anybody listening?

If *Riverdance* signified the Celtic Tiger and Ireland’s potential on the world stage, it might be argued that *The Pirate Queen*, also produced by Moya Doherty and John McColgan, epitomised the lavish spending that followed. The most expensive show ever staged on Broadway when it opened in 2007, it combined the story of Grace O’Malley, an Irish clan leader who fought to resist colonisation by the English during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. The producers adopted a “money no object” approach but, having suffered from scathing reviews, the show’s run ended in June 2007

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(McKeone, 2007: 1), around the same time that the curtain was coming down on Ireland's economic fortunes.

It is worth considering who is in attendance at the session tonight. As the match finishes, a number of the men finish their drinks and head for home. They are replaced by some later customers, some of whom have an interest in the music. A few girls from Eastern Europe are sitting on a couch to one side. They are disinterested in the football and spend time chatting and nursing a drink. They wait with anticipation for the music to start and acknowledge us when we approach our reserved corner. They may request a song such as 'The Galway Girl' or 'The Wild Rover' but they will not stay late and they will not spend much money. They are 'the new Irish' who are enjoying the culture of their new home and want to become more familiar with it. Their song choices raise questions regarding the nature of tradition. 'Galway Girl' by American singer-songwriter Steve Earle, although it was first recorded in 2000 on an album featuring Irish accordion player Sharon Shannon. Songs such as these have become popular through modern mass media, the ready accessibility of recordings and the affordability of live music performances.

The session in this bar continues despite the economic downturn. Photographs on the wall recall some of the musicians who have contributed to it over the years. Seamus always wanted to create a traditional Irish pub complete with Irish traditional music sessions and, on a quiet night like this, with many punters leaving soon after the soccer ends, it is his desire for a particular identity that keeps the session going on here. The concept of an Irish pub is attractive to many and the music adds to the atmosphere, albeit in the background whereby conversations can continue and applause is optional. The concept of tradition employed is loose enough to include

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songs that have entered the local folk repertoire, including 'Galway Girl' and 'Hotel California'.

Summertime is different. Groups of tourists arrive early having visited the nearby attractions and dined in nearby restaurants. Many of the visitors have some Irish heritage but increasingly there is interest from areas with little connection to Ireland. The tourists are anxious when the music does not start sharply at the pre-appointed time. They wonder at the informality and apparent chaos as the session grows from three musicians to eight or more. They try a glass of Guinness, often sharing it. Like the girls from Eastern Europe, many of the tourists will also leave early, ready to get on a bus for their next destination in the morning. The session remains part of the (free) tourist expectation, along with the Guinness and the Ring of Kerry.

Conclusion

Although this is an autobiographical account of a regular session in one particular public house, it echoes the stories of traditional Irish musicians throughout the country. It is, in some ways, a hidden Ireland yet the character (and characters) are central to the construction and promotion of Irish identity around the world. The session links the local and the global, making links between the West Wing and the West of Ireland. The waves of the Irish economy have always shaped the landscape of the traditional arts and the links across the Atlantic are hardly new. From the early recordings of Irish traditional music by Irish emigrants in America at the start of the twentieth century to the increased availability of funding for musicians and organisations at the start of the twenty-first century, Irish traditional music has evolved and remained a significant marker of Irish identity. The traditional arts are not the property of a single community or organisation. Rather it is a multi-layered,

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multi-regional culture that contributes to the Irish economy and the social life of many.

The representation of Ireland and Irish culture on the global stage is an integral part of the politics and economics of the nation, exemplified by the prominent role of the arts in discussions at the 2009 Global Irish Economic Forum (White, 2010). Irish traditional music is integrally connected to Irish identity but the identity represented by Irish traditional music has changed greatly, as have the spaces for its performance and consumption. The image of the musician has also changed from old bearded men with caps hiding fiddles under large coats to sexually attractive young men and women in trendy outfits as part of lavish productions (Brennan, 1999: 155). While Irish traditional music developed in the homesteads of rural Ireland, having entered public spaces in the twentieth century, it has become a globally and commercially successful genre. In a post-Celtic Tiger era, the significance of tourism to Ireland's economic recovery, and the continuing attachment to place in Irish traditional music, are two keys to understanding the way forward for the traditional arts. As part of the Global Irish Economic Forum in 2010, Dermot Desmond invited a wide range of artists including U2, Enya, The Corrs and Van Morrison to engage in what he termed 'a Cultural Odyssey'. Signalling the end of a previous cultural odyssey represented by *Riverdance*, this marked the changing perceptions towards the relationship between the arts and the economy. The arts are not a luxury for the entertainment of the wealthy but a fundamental part of our economy and self-belief as a nation. While discussions on economic policies and strategies are ongoing, *Riverdance* continues to sell out shows around the world and John and I carry on playing a few tunes in the local pub as part of our cultural odyssey. The session may be a local portal to a global industry of Irish culture but it

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also remains a space for all those present to realise and to negotiate their own identities.

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