

Much More Than ‘Danny Boy’: Bringing Irish Traditional Music to the USA

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ABSTRACT

Performances in the USA during the 1970s by three semi-professional groups - The Chieftains, the Siamsa Céilí Band, and Siamsa Tíre - present opportunities to understand developments in Irish traditional music during that period. These developments led to increased commercialisation of the music and tours by Irish performers to the USA in subsequent decades, providing access to a significantly larger market for the genre, within and beyond the diaspora. Underpinning the study is a critical consideration of audiences’ understanding of Irish identity and culture and the reception of Irish cultural performances in the USA at this time. These tours contributed to a reconceptualization of Irish traditional music that engaged new audiences in the USA and incorporated repertoire beyond what American audiences typically associated with Ireland at the time. Developing a professional approach, the groups presented repertoire from the dance music and harp music traditions, Irish language song, and traditional styles of dance. We examine the motivations for the tours, the itineraries and venues, and the material presented, as well as the impact of Northern Ireland politics on each of the groups and their performances.

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Introduction

For generations, Irish traditional music has found an audience in the USA, particularly amongst members of the Irish-American community, with many Irish traditional music groups touring to the USA today. This article examines developments in the 1970s focusing on three semi-professional performing groups that paved the way for full-time professional musicians today who make their living via international tours, accessing audiences greater than those available at home. Stories of tours by The Chieftains, the Siamsa Céilí Band, and Siamsa Tíre reflect different narratives for engagement with American audiences, with further differences in their reception and legacy. Despite their significant commitment to performing, none of the groups' members, during the period under consideration, were full-time performers and had to take leave from their regular employment to tour the USA. The Chieftains have a preeminent role in the development and international popularity of Irish traditional music in the 1970s but are neglected in scholarship (see also Lamb 2021). We chose the other two groups because of their direct influence on our experience of Irish traditional music; Adèle Commins was a pupil of Rory Kennedy (1924–1993), founder and leader of the Siamsa Céilí Band and Daithí Kearney trained and performed with Siamsa Tíre for many years. Although both use the word 'siamsa' [entertainment] in their title, the groups are two separate entities located in different parts of Ireland – Co. Louth and Co. Kerry. Furthermore, in contrast with The Chieftains, these groups remain community-based and their inclusion points to divergent developments in Irish traditional music. Siamsa Tíre are a theatre company who focus on the traditional arts, the Siamsa Céilí Band exemplify a specific form of ensemble that typically provided music for dancing, while The Chieftains reflect the

approach to ensemble playing pioneered by Seán Ó Riada, partly in rejection of the céilí band aesthetic and aimed primarily at a listening audience (Kearney, 2019).

Drawing on the personal recollections of some of the touring performers, newspaper accounts, recordings, and ephemera related to tours, this paper focuses on three themes which emerged from our research. Firstly, the objectives and motivations for the tours. Secondly, the tours' itineraries and performance venues, enabling us to explore the local reception of Irish traditional music at the time. Thirdly, performance content and approaches, leading to consideration of how these matched with audience stereotypes and expectations. Finally, we focus on the responses of American audiences to the Troubles in Northern Ireland.²

The Chieftains emerged as one of the first professional Irish traditional music ensembles and has sustained a career spanning six decades. Their first performance in the USA was in 1972 with regular tours to the USA almost every year from 1974. They embarked on a commercial and artistic enterprise and went on to achieve a global audience, performing in a variety of music venues associated with other genres. Establishing 'a definitive and commanding sound in Irish music internationally' (Vallely, 2011: 123), and referred to as 'ambassadors of Irish musical culture' (Lawlor, 2013: 192), we encountered their recordings as teenagers learning music.

It is necessary to understand the Siamsa Céilí Band in the context of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann [Association of Musicians of Ireland]. Founded in 1951, Comhaltas

² The Troubles refer to the violent sectarian conflict from about 1968 to 1998 in Northern Ireland between unionists (loyalists), who desired the province to remain part of the United Kingdom, and nationalists (republicans), who wanted Northern Ireland to become part of the Republic of Ireland.

Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ) is an international, Irish-based organisation that aims to promote Irish culture with a focus on Irish traditional music, song, dance, and language. It developed a community-based ‘branch’ or club structure that encourages the teaching of Irish traditional music at a community level. The organisation operates several regional and resource centres and maintains larger ensembles, including a ‘National Folk Orchestra’. It also supports performances by community-based groups, usually drawn from its regional branches, and organises touring groups for international performances.

By the time that CCÉ embarked on their first official tour of the USA in October 1972, plans were in place to build a cultural centre in Dublin which would not only be the headquarters of the organisation but which would also include facilities such as a theatre and a recording studio. As well as selling tickets to the performances, an aim of the CCÉ tour was to attract members to the organisation and establish a network in the USA for future development. Irish-born musicians including Louis E. Quinn (1904–1991), Bill McEvoy (1923–2020), and Frank Thornton (1929–1997), were already leading the development of regional Irish traditional music organisations in the USA. They were integral to the organisation of the 1972 and subsequent CCÉ tours (Ó Catháin 1973), and CCÉ grew quickly in the USA in the years immediately after 1972 (McEvoy 1997),³ supported by a strong sense of community with continuing connections to Ireland. Gedutis (2004) and McCullough (1978) indicate that CCÉ

³ According to an article by Bill McEvoy in the Burns Archive entitled ‘The Growth of Comhaltas in the U.S.A. and Canada’ there was one branch of CCÉ in the USA in 1972. This increased to 10 branches in 1974, and to 15 by 1977 (IM.M104.2001).

musicians had a significant role in sustaining and reviving Irish traditional music in Boston and Chicago respectively.

Established in 1957, the Siamsa Céilí Band from Co. Louth were selected by CCÉ to be part of the touring group in 1972 having won the senior céilí band competition at *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* [Festival of Music of Ireland] for three years in a row (1967–1969).⁴ A community-based band, they had given high profile performances in the inaugural 1970 Fleadh Nua (New Festival) of Irish culture in Dublin. Sligo-born fiddle and flute player John Joe Gardiner (1893–1979) influenced the repertoire and musical style of the band,⁵ and they had a reputation for wearing formal attire, influenced in no small part by their founder, accordion player and draper Rory Kennedy.⁶ They performed regularly at functions for cultural organisations and

⁴ Touring members included the aforementioned Kennedy and Gardiner, as well as piano player Brendan Gaughran, drummer Kevin O’Callaghan, and Brian and Patricia O’Kane on piano accordion and fiddle respectively. As some members of the Siamsa Céilí Band were not in a position to travel, guest musicians including Séamus Connolly (fiddle), Denis Ryan (fiddle), and Eugene Nolan (flute) joined them. In addition to the Siamsa Céilí Band, the performers on the tour included accordion players Joe Burke and Paddy Gavin, singers Séamus Ó Dubhthaigh and Nora Butler, uilleann piper and concertina player Tom McCarthy, flautist Séamus MacMathúna, and fiddle player Paddy Glackin. They were also joined by dancers Celine Hession and Donncha Ó Muíneacháin.

⁵ Gardiner was a contemporary of Michael Coleman, James Morrison, and Paddy Killoran, three fiddle players who had made influential recordings of Irish traditional music in the USA in the first half of the twentieth century,

⁶ For more on Rory Kennedy see Anon. 1994 and Commins, 2019.

political parties for which they often received remuneration, and were amongst the most prominent céilí bands of the 1960s and 1970s in Ireland.⁷ Members of the band founded a branch of CCÉ in Dundalk in 1958, with whom some of them taught music and of which both authors were subsequently members for a time. Kennedy and piano player Brendan Gaughran (1933–2018) were also involved in the establishment of Irish language and cultural groups in Dundalk.

Siamsa Tíre also exemplified community-based developments in Irish traditional music and the use of theatricality in presentations involving song, dance and mime. Established by Fr Pat Ahern (*b.*1932) in Co. Kerry in the early 1960s as Siamsóirí na Ríochta [The Kingdom Players], this semi-professional group was renamed in 1974 as Siamsa Tíre [Entertainment of the Land] when it was instituted as The National Folk Theatre of Ireland.⁸ They attracted significant international audiences to their performances in Tralee, Co. Kerry from 1968 and first performed in the USA in 1976. The touring cast of twenty-six performers, including eight children and six musicians, gave performances of Irish traditional music, song, and dance in theatrical presentations based on rural themes and without spoken dialogue. The songs performed

⁷ These included CCÉ, Conradh na Gaeilge (*Dundalk Democrat* 1965), Cumann Luth Chleas Gaedhal (*The Anglo Celt* 1961), the GAA (Anon. 1971b, 6), Gael Linn (*Drogheda Independent* 1960), Sinn Féin (*The Anglo Celt* 1958) and Fianna Fáil (*The Evening Herald* 1965).

⁸ Siamsa Tíre's Artistic Director Pat Ahern was responsible for a number of CCÉ initiatives, including the first tour to the USA; CCÉ's Director General Labhrás Ó Murchú was on the first Board of Directors for Siamsa Tíre. Some of the performers with Siamsa Tíre were also members of CCÉ.

in the productions were in the Irish language and the step dance style drew on the North Kerry tradition attributed to the dance master Jeremiah Molyneux or ‘Munnix’, of whom Ahern was a pupil in his youth.

Irish traditional music developed in what Thomas Turino (2008) would class as both ‘participatory’ and ‘presentational’ forms in the USA, creating a variety of networks with which Irish touring groups could engage. Scholars have documented the presence of Irish traditional music in several major US cities including New York (Miller 1995), Chicago (McCullough 1974; 1975; 1978; Nichol森 2007; Dillane 2009), and Boston (Gedutis 2004), while Hew (2006) expanded the geographical range of our understanding beyond the urban areas conventionally associated with the Irish diaspora. While these studies provide insights into the emerging and expanding communities of Irish traditional musicians in America, little attention has been paid to the touring groups who interacted with these communities.

To date there has been limited scholarly engagement with each of the groups in question. Two biographies of The Chieftains provide some insights and factual information (Meek 1987; Glatt 1997). The scholarship reviewed for this article failed to examine the role and importance of the tours by CCÉ in the USA.⁹ A complete account of this activity is beyond the scope of this paper, which is confined to the initial 1972 tour with a focus on the Siamsa Céilí Band. The 1976 tour to the USA by Siamsa Tíre receives brief consideration in the history of Irish step dance by Catherine Foley (2013) and a detailed account of this and other tours by the company is developed by Daithí

⁹ The Irish Music Archives in the John J. Burns Library, Boston College, and the Séamus Connolly Collection of Irish Music, also hosted by Boston College, and the CCÉ archives in An Cultúrlann in Monkstown, Dublin, provide important archival sources.

Kearney (2019; 2022). Performances in the USA by The Chieftains, the Siamsa Céilí Band and Siamsa Tíre in the 1970s present opportunities to better understand the development of Irish traditional music during this period and its subsequent commercialisation and professionalization.

A new era for traditional music

The 1970s was a period of significant development in Irish traditional music (O’Flynn 2009; Ó hAllmhuráin 2017) and for the wider ‘Folk Revival’ in both Ireland and the USA (McCullough 1975; Gedutis 2004; Dowling 2016; O’Shea 2019). Ireland was opening up as an economy, having joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 and the connections between the development of Irish tourism and the three groups examined here are very evident.¹⁰ More extensive airplay for Irish traditional music was provided by the Irish language radio station Raidió na Gaeltachta, inaugurated in 1972,¹¹ and opportunities for learning Irish traditional music also

¹⁰ Brendan O’Regan, chairman of Bórd Fáilte, the Irish Tourism Board from 1957 to 1973, was very influential in the development of Siamsa Tíre (Motherway and O’Connell 2022). CCÉ recognised the potential of tourism, most notably through their ‘National Entertainment Scheme’, called *Seisiún*. This scheme was established in 1971 in cooperation with Bord Fáilte Éireann (Anon. 1971a: 7) and the Shannon Free Airport Development Company, and later secured support from the Arts Council of Ireland (Anon. 1981).

¹¹ This offered more traditional music than previously played on Radió Éireann. Dáithí de Mórdha (2019) critically considers the work, impact and significance of Raidió na Gaeltachta.

developed significantly in the 1970s.¹² Responding to this growing interest and market for Irish traditional music, a number of important publications also emerged at this time, offering new insights into its history and style (Breathnach 1971; Ó Canainn 1978), as well as anthologies of pieces collected in Ireland (Vallely and Vallely 1971; Breathnach 1976), and the USA (Reavy and Quinn 1971).

O'Connor (2001: 145) identifies the 1970s as the decade of touring Irish traditional groups and the development of 'supergroups'. It was also a learning period for Irish traditional musicians entering the professional industry (O'Brien-Bernini, 2016; Scahill, 2019). Bands including Planxty (1972), The Bothy Band (1974) and De Dannan (1974) established an international reputation and 'revolutionised Irish traditional music' (O'Brien Bernini 2016: 80), developing a variety of ensemble sounds that integrated new instruments and approaches and musical influences beyond the Irish tradition.

Irish traditional music in the USA during the 1970s can be considered in terms of cycles of popularity for Irish traditional music,¹³ ethnic revivalism (Slobin 1984a,

¹² For example, CCÉ's annual weeklong series of workshops (*Scoil Éigse* [School of Learning]) preceding its music festival (*Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*) was inaugurated in 1972, as was the Willie Clancy Summer School (*Scoil Samhradh*) in 1973. Verena Commins (2014) examines the role of Scoil Samhradh Willie Clancy in the transmission, performance and commemoration of Irish traditional music.

¹³ Although there was significant Irish traditional music activity in the USA prior to the twentieth century, the 1920s are often considered the 'Golden Age' of Irish traditional music in America (Spencer 2010; O'Connell 2010).

1984b),¹⁴ and a broader folk music revival that embraced a variety of musical traditions. Following the popularity of ballad groups such as the Clancy Brothers in the 1960s: ‘In the 1970s, the Chieftains, Planxty and De Dannan brought Irish traditional music back into fashion’ (Dwyer-Ryan, 2002: 20). Theatres and festivals (Moloney, 1992, 2006; Miller, 2006; O’Brien-Bernini, 2016),¹⁵ were important public spaces contributing to the popularity of Irish traditional music in the USA from the 1970s and the USA represented a significant market that included, but was not limited to, a large Irish diaspora. A new generation of Irish American performers also ‘came of age’ in the 1970s, including Liz Carroll, Michael Flatley, Billy McComisky, and Brendan Mulvihill who successfully took part in competitions in Ireland, in addition to contributing to a developing Irish traditional musicscape in the USA.

Representing Irishness

The representation of Irishness in the USA is often based on stereotypes, which were challenged by the presentations of these three groups. As McCullough states in relation to CCÉ performances:

These concerts were convened in halls, with male performers dressed in black-tie-and-tuxedo attire and ladies in formal evening gowns. Irish folk musicians presented in a dignified, respectable manner (the five-dollar ticket price was a further reminder that this was not an event for those seeking cheap diversion). For many Irish Americans, the CCE [sic] concerts were the first real contact with actual Irish traditional music they had ever had, and the sober, professional, formal

¹⁴ Slobin focuses on the post-1976 resurgence of Jewish-American *klezmer* bands.

¹⁵ A more thorough consideration of festivals is outside the remit of this paper, but they are part of the changing contexts for Irish traditional musicians and their audiences during this period.

concert presentation undoubtedly gave many persons in the local Irish community cause to appraise their local Irish musicians with a bit more esteem. (1975 (2017): 88; 1978 (2017): 213)

The performances on these tours established a cultural and economic value and created a sense of dignity for performers and audiences alike. The Chieftains, the Siamsa Céilí Band, and Siamsa Tíre were each conscious of the representation of Irish culture that they presented. Their activities reflected a revival of interest and participation in Irish traditional music in the USA that moved beyond the repertoire of music and symbols that had dominated Irish-American culture.¹⁶ According to biographer John Glatt:

A couple of weeks before The Chieftains left for their first full-scale US tour, Paddy Moloney gave an in-depth interview to *The Irish Times* about his plan to change American misconceptions about Ireland and its music. He told writer Niall Stokes that The Chieftains were committed to eradicating the old ‘Mother Machree’ image of Ireland forever. (1997: 116–17)

There were many reviews of The Chieftains in the 1970s by individuals such as Bill Meek and Charles Acton in *The Irish Times* (see for example Acton 1975; 1976) suggesting that they achieved this mission. There were many references to the Siamsa Tíre performances as an alternative to ‘Danny Boy’ (Gale 1976a; 1976b; Gallagher 1976: 43). Reflecting on the tour by Siamsa Tíre, tour co-ordinator Dermot McCarthy stated:

They didn’t know what to expect. Some people wanted Danny Boy and thought that was what they were coming to see. But then it dawned on them that this was a

¹⁶ Sean Williams (2020: 77–80) provides an engaging critique of ‘Danny Boy’ and other aspects of Irish-American culture in her introductory text on Irish traditional music.

different product. This was the real tradition and not the stage Irish that they had become accustomed to. (cited in Kearney 2019)

All three of the groups were billed as reflecting the pinnacle of Irish culture and engaged a demographic beyond an Irish-American audience, and in doing so challenged particular cultural stereotypes and class associations.¹⁷

The development of interest in Irish traditional music beyond the Irish diaspora is evident in the narrative of The Chieftains (Meek 1987; Glatt 1997), correspondence from host families for the CCÉ group,¹⁸ and accounts of Siamsa Tíre audience reception (Kearney 2019). Writing about this period in the USA, Miller notes that concerts of traditional bands from Ireland such as The Chieftains, Bothy Band and Planxty ‘were presented in both general and Irish-American venues’ (2006, 415). Commenting on the wider folk revival in the USA, McCullough stated:

By the 1970s, the momentum of the revival had carried it into other traditions besides those of the African- and Anglo-American, and traditional Irish musicians and singers started turning up at folk festivals, university concerts and coffeehouses and bars run by folk music clubs. Articles on Irish folk music and musicians occasionally graced the pages of general folk music magazines, and there were now more reviews of Irish folk music records in these same journals. The result of this sudden focusing of attention on what had a decade before been a relatively unknown musical tradition outside its own ethnic community was that Irish traditional music reasserted its claim to the concert venue, a claim it had been denied for decades. (1978 (2017): 211)

The Chieftains, the Siamsa Céilí Band and Siamsa Tíre exemplify how, in the 1970s,

¹⁷ For example, the programme for the 1972 CCÉ tour of USA noted ‘An Evening of Ireland’s Music, Song and Dance by Ireland’s Leading Traditional Artists.’

¹⁸ Letters in the Kevin O’Callaghan personal collection.

Irish traditional musicians were performing in a variety of spaces to an increasingly diverse audience beyond the Irish diaspora in the USA and, in doing so, challenging preconceptions of the tradition at home and abroad, within the context of a broader folk revival.

The motivations for touring in the USA

The Chieftains

The performances in the USA by The Chieftains in the 1970s should be understood in the context of their development as a commercial band during this period. Originally founded in 1963, the year they released their first album, The Chieftains did not turn full-time until 1975, although the approach to the recording of their first album marks a change in the production of Irish traditional music (O'Brien Bernini 2016; Scahill 2019).¹⁹

The first trip by The Chieftains to the USA was for one weekend in 1972 following the release of their third album *Chieftains 3*. This was to promote the album

¹⁹ The first three albums from the Chieftains (1963, 1969, 1971) presented comparable repertoire and structure that not only contributed to the development of an identifiable sound but drew attention to certain previously neglected aspects of the tradition. These included jigs, reels and hornpipes from the dance music tradition alongside melodies attributed to the harper composer Turlough Carolan (1670–1738) and a variety of song airs from the *sean nós* [old style] tradition. The repertoire was arranged with instrumental harmonies and there was no vocal performance. The release of live recordings from performances in San Francisco in 1973 and 1976 by Claddagh Records in 2022 confirm that the live performances align with the recordings (The Chieftains, 2022).

and involved just one concert at the Irish Arts Center in New York along with a number of interviews (Glatt 1997: 83). Reflecting on the largely Irish-American audience, Glatt mentions John Lennon and Yoko Ono's presence; perhaps unsurprising given Lennon's Irish ancestry, interest in Ireland where he owned an island, and support for Irish Republicanism.²⁰ Band leader Paddy Moloney was already 'comfortable' in the presence of rock stars from attending parties hosted by Guinness heir Garech de Brún at his home 'Luggala', conforming with his desire to bring Irish traditional music to a global audience (Bell 2022).²¹ The presence of prominent figures from popular culture is a recurring feature in the narrative of The Chieftains (O'Brien Bernini 2016), reflecting their achievements in the music industry including eighteen Grammy nominations and six awards. For over four decades subsequently, the band successfully toured the USA on a regular basis, becoming the most successful Irish traditional music ensemble, collaborating to critical acclaim with a variety of international artists and in diverse genres.

The Siamsa Céilí Band

By touring to the USA, the Siamsa Céilí Band contributed to efforts at growing and funding CCÉ as a community and voluntary organisation. The first official CCÉ tour in 1972 incorporated performances in a range of cities where venues included school halls

²⁰ Lennon's album *Some Time In New York City* (1972) protested against English occupation of the North of Ireland and against British internment of Irish prisoners without trial.

²¹ In 1974, The Chieftains met rock and pop music legends such as Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead, Don Henley of the Eagles, and Jackson Brown.

and Irish centres.²² These venues were largely parochial, although often large by Irish standards, and very much linked to the Irish American community. CCÉ were gradually developing a network, founded on well-established groups in the USA. Some performances featured receptions for invited guests. Members of the CCÉ tour stayed with families, some of whom subsequently wrote letters to performers after they returned to Ireland.²³ Certain families hosted sessions in their houses that included musicians from the locality, emphasising the development of a community and sharing of musical traditions.²⁴

In advance of their tour of the USA, CCÉ produced an LP *Farewell to Erin* (1972) and copies of the LP were sold at each performance venue to support the fundraising aspect of the tour.²⁵ The Siamsa Céilí Band engaged in a number of radio and television broadcasts and participated in less formal activities, including sessions

²² Performance venues included: Meramec Community College, St. Louis; Marillac College, Normandy, St. Louis; Lane High School, Chicago; Bogan High School, Chicago; Irish American Hall, Cleveland; Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall and Irish Centre, Pittsburgh; Holy Angels Parish Centre, Trenton, NJ; Hunter College, New York; Inishfada Irish American Centre, Minneola; as well as at events in Detroit and Washington.

²³ Some of these are now in the possession of the researchers.

²⁴ A notable example is described in a detailed letter from Rick and Alex Usher to Kevin O'Callaghan dated 11 October 1972. Details on the host families are provided in Ó Muíneacháin (2001).

²⁵ Each performer on the upcoming tour featured on the LP and the Siamsa Céilí Band performed on four of the fourteen tracks, playing two sets of reels, a set of jigs, and a hornpipe composed by band member Brian O'Kane (*b.* 1939).

that contributed to the development of a stronger sense of community for the organisation in the USA.²⁶

Mementos in the possession of the late Kevin O’Callaghan, a drummer with the Siamsa Céilí Band, included concert programmes, tickets, and other ephemera and demonstrate that there was inconsistency in how the concerts and performances were advertised. Some billings referred to an All-Star Irish programme; sometimes it was indicated that the performance was ‘sponsored by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann’; and, in certain instances, the Siamsa Céilí Band were given top billing. It is notable that, in addition to concerts, the Siamsa Céilí Band performed for céilís during the tour. The importance of these céilís at the time is highlighted by McCullough:

Today, the céilí has become the refuge for those who have become irritated by the absence of traditional Irish music and dance at most Irish-American dances; the céilí also serves as a focal point for the scattered remnants of the Irish communities and is a major means of fostering Irish cultural activity in the U.S. (1975 (2017): 91)

While CCÉ continued to tour the USA, the Siamsa Céilí Band did not feature again as the organisation chose different performers for each tour. The band continued to perform in Ireland and although they declined a number of international performing opportunities, they continued to contribute to the development of Irish traditional music in Dundalk.

²⁶ See for example letter from Rick and Alex Usher to Kevin O’Callaghan dated 11 October 1972 and itinerary for the tour and photographs from the tour in IMC.M104. John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

Siamsa Tíre

Siamsa Tíre's tour to the USA in 1976 was part of their rapid development in the 1970s that owed much to the support of politicians, tourism stakeholders, and clergy in Ireland. The appellation 'The National Folk Theatre of Ireland' mirrored their growing ambitions but Siamsa Tíre began as and remains a local company in the southwest of Ireland. Plans for the development of the company were outlined in an unpublished 1972 document that recognised a range of factors, including the desire amongst various stakeholders to develop cultural tourism in the southwest of Ireland (Ahern and O'Sullivan 1972). In advance of the 1976 tour to the USA, Elizabeth B. Burdick, Director of the International Theatre Institute of America, advised that, because of the theatrical style of the Siamsa Tíre production, professional theatrical promoters should be involved. She recommended the firm, Brannigan-Eisler Performing Arts International (PAI), noting that one of the partners, Robert (Bob) Brannigan was of Irish descent. Upon viewing a video documentary about the company produced by tour-coordinator Fr Dermot McCarthy, Brannigan and Eisler agreed to promote a tour and travelled to Ireland where they visited the company's training centre and met members of the company.²⁷

Siamsa Tíre performed in seven cities beginning in the Shubert Theatre, Chicago, on 14 September.²⁸ Like the other two groups, the Siamsa Tíre cast were welcomed to parties hosted in private homes, which contributed to a hectic schedule.

²⁷ For more extensive details see Kearney (2019).

²⁸ Performance venues included: Shubert Theatre, Chicago; Seton Hall, South Orange, New Jersey; Academy of Music, Philadelphia; Grand Opera House, Wilmington, Delaware; Lisner Theatre, George Washington University, Washington DC; Palace Theatre Broadway, New York; Shubert Theatre, Boston.

One notable gathering was organised with the cast of the Ballet Folklórico de México in a Boston hotel, reflecting the efforts by the Siamsa Tíre management to present the company as comparable to other state-sponsored, professional dance ensembles (Kearney 2019). Siamsa Tíre was modelled in part on the Moiseyev Dance Company and Ballet Folklórico de México (Motherway and O’Connell, 2022), which were popular in the USA at the time. Like The Chieftains, Siamsa Tíre were reaching beyond an Irish-American audience, while all three groups were engaging with audiences that transgressed traditional class divides.

Political reverberations of the Troubles

These tours to the USA took place during the height of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and none of the groups escaped the impact. Although they espoused an apolitical identity, both The Chieftains and Siamsa Tíre had already experienced the negative impact of the Troubles in England: Siamsa Tíre had to leave a London theatre mid-show in 1973 due to a bomb threat (Hickey 1973), and members of The Chieftains recalled sectarian and religious stereotyping by a taxi driver hired by the BBC in the early 1970s (Glatt 1997: 84). CCÉ had a more political and expressly republican outlook (Fleming, 2004). The 1971 Fleadh Cheoil was cancelled in support of Republican prisoners in Northern Ireland (Anon. 1972a), and in 1977, the *Ard Stiúrthóir* [Director General] of the organisation was arrested in England on suspicion of Republican activities (*The Irish Times* 1977).

Writing about Irish nationalism in the USA, Kevin Kenny (2006) noted the growing support for physical force nationalism in the early 1970s. Irish traditional music concerts in the USA were sometimes used to raise money to send specifically to Northern Ireland at this time (McCullough 1978), while as early as 1955, the New York

Irish Feis had a permanent Anti-Partition committee (Miller 1995). The Northern Ireland Aid Committee was established in 1972 to raise money for humanitarian relief, although this money may possibly have been later diverted toward the purchase of arms. Later in the decade, a more moderate position was exemplified by the condemnation of the IRA by the so-called Four Horsemen of Irish-American politics, Senator Edward Kennedy, Representative Tip O’Neill, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Governor Hugh Carey, working alongside Irish constitutional nationalist John Hume.

The significant interest in Northern Irish politics in the USA through the 1970s is evident in the reception of Irish performing groups. In the case of The Chieftains, *Village Voice* columnist Geoffrey Stokes observed the political conversations prior to the performance in New York in 1976 but that the band themselves ‘not only ignore that conflict; they negate it’ (Glatt 1997: 118), with Glatt citing Moloney’s assertion that the band are apolitical. In Chicago during the Siamsa Tíre tour, a young couple in no way connected with the company stood outside the theatre each night wearing badges indicating support for the IRA and handing out leaflets promoting a Republican Club (Rushe 1976). A more serious issue arose for Siamsa Tíre in Boston. It was the height of the Troubles and some Republican sympathisers approached McCarthy in a pub and others in an effort to see if guns could be smuggled back to help the cause in Northern Ireland, which they rejected (Ahern, 2022). The story became public in some newspapers with a headline in one newspaper reading ‘Priest Gun Runner (nearly)’ (Sapiens 1976), leading to an apology from Eoin McKiernan, President of the Irish American Cultural Institute. The newspaper later retracted and apologised to Ahern but it reflected the politicisation of performances of Irish culture at the time.

In contrast to the efforts of The Chieftains and Siamsa Tíre to distance themselves from the politics of the north of Ireland, CCÉ presented a more political and

republican rhetoric. In Ireland, members of the Siamsa Céilí Band lived in both jurisdictions and performed on both sides of the border with regular appearances in Newry, Armagh, and Belfast. Pauline White, a daughter of Gardiner, was a founding member of the band and, by 1972, was living in Newry, Co. Down. She did not travel to the USA as she was concerned about leaving her young family behind during the challenging political period (White, interview, 11 June 2021). In the USA, audiences reacted to political content and also to its absence in performances. CCÉ came under scrutiny from some host families. Donncha Ó Muíneacháin (2001), a dancer on the tour wrote:

Some of the host families, who would have had Anglo-Saxon roots and leanings, approached the tour management and indicated that they were offended by certain passages of the narrative written and presented by Donncha Ó Dúlaing (of RTÉ fame), and by some of the songs – it was their view that the tone-sentiment was anti-British and that its republican content seemed to be too strong. After much discussion (and agonising!) a compromise was reached to enable the concert to proceed – it was agreed to omit the offending passages of the script and to change one or two of the songs. This episode really “put a damper” on proceedings.

A host family, the Ushers from St Louis, provide another perspective and recognised differences in how different communities identified themselves in relation to economics, culture, and religion. They referred to the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish families that hosted the CCÉ group and objected to the ‘political message in the second part of the show’, commenting that individuals had ‘been critical of that aspect of the program’. Members of the St Louis group made their feeling known to cast members with the Ushers believing that ‘for the good of the Comhaltas cause it was just as well to

have that tooth out before the tour was too far along the road'.²⁹ They wrote that many Irish-Americans wanted to remember 'the lovely things, the warm, sentimental side of his homeland and not be reminded of her shortcomings'. There is a sense that CCÉ misjudged their audience and the appetite for mixing political and cultural discourse.

Implications for Irish traditional music

The tours mark the beginning of an intensification and professionalisation of tours to the USA by Irish traditional music groups. A number of successful tours followed The Chieftains' first American concert and contributed to their decision to pursue a professional career. For their initial trips, Paddy Moloney was responsible for much of the organisation and promotion but, in the mid-1970s, they benefitted from the involvement of publicist Charles Comer and later the high-profile management of Jo Lustig and thus gained access to a wider range of spaces.

While The Chieftains subsequently embarked on a full-time professional career, with some changes in the membership, the Siamsa Céilí Band and Siamsa Tíre remained primarily community-based. The first official tour of North America by CCÉ in 1972 underpinned the subsequent growth of the organisation on the continent but it had little impact on the further development of the Siamsa Céilí Band. Performers received limited remuneration with the focus on promoting and raising funds for the organisation. The 1976 tour by Siamsa Tíre was ambitious and left the company with a significant financial loss. While PAI were invaluable in arranging and promoting Siamsa Tíre in the USA, the tour required considerable support from the Irish

²⁹ Letter from Rick and Alex Usher to Kevin O'Callaghan dated 11 October 1972.

government (McCarthy, 1976).³⁰ In contrast with the CCÉ tour that year, Siamsa Tíre were officially part of the American Revolution bi-centennial celebrations.³¹ Many, including Aer Lingus, would have been delighted with the positive review by Clive Barnes of their Broadway performances that included an oft-quoted line: ‘it made me want to catch the next plane to Dublin’ (Barnes 1976: 30). The Broadway review of Siamsa Tíre was incorporated into marketing and, as well as attracting American tourists, the stories of the tour inspired a new generation of cast members and pre-empted the success of *Riverdance* by two decades.

The geography of the tours demonstrates the significant changes in the perception and status of Irish traditional music in the 1970s. Each of the three groups performed in different spaces and places that provide informative insights into the positioning of Irish cultural performances in the USA at the time. Through the 1970s, the cities in which the groups performed were largely similar, many of them with large Irish-American communities, but the venues reflected a growing interest in Irish traditional music from middle class audiences and from beyond the Irish diaspora.

³⁰ It is notable that, at a meeting in Dublin on 9 August 1976 involving Irish organisations with branches in the USA, CCÉ were among those who agreed to encourage their network in the USA to support Siamsa Tíre. CCÉ included an article on Siamsa Tíre in their magazine *Treoir* and Siamsa Tíre reciprocated by promoting the subsequent CCÉ tour to the USA (McCarthy 1976).

³¹ By 1975 CCÉ had expanded the itinerary, primarily into Canada, and despite billing the tour as ‘the most extensive Irish involvement in the United States Bi-centennial celebrations,’ they were turned down for funding by the Cultural Relations Committee of the Department of Foreign Affairs (Anon. 1975b; Anon 1976); the committee did support subsequent tours.

The success of The Chieftains reflects changing attitudes to Irish traditional music in 1970s America. The Chieftains' first performance in the USA was in the Irish Arts Center in New York but later performances aimed at an Irish-American audience included engagements in major theatres and music venues, including Carnegie Hall. For the 1976 tour, their manager Jo Lustig, decided against using Irish promoters who had organised the band's previous tours and sought out rock promoters in each city, aiming to engage an audience that did not normally attend 'ethnic' concerts (Glatt 1997: 117). Writing about Irish traditional music in Chicago, McCullough states:

When the Irish ensemble, The Chieftains, came to Chicago in July, 1976, it was no real surprise that they performed in the Civic Opera House for a minimum eight-dollar ticket charge. What did come as a small surprise to some was that, after their sold-out concert, the group was whisked away in black limousines to the rooms of the Irish Fellowship Club of Chicago, an organization of the local Irish-American elite that had largely ignored local Irish musicians throughout its seven decades of existence. (1978 (2017): 212)

No longer confined to working-class Irish clubs and pubs, Irish traditional music had begun to attract the attention of highly educated, middle class, cultural consumers, in addition to various wealthy Americans and stars of popular culture.

For their 1972 tour, it is clear from archival material and reports in *Treoir* that CCÉ used their connections with Irish-Americans to secure venues and support for the performances (Ó Catháin 1973; McEvoy 1997). Some Irish living in America were deeply involved in organisations such as the Irish American Center (Mineola, New York), the Gaelic League (Detroit, Michigan) and the Irish Tourist Board (New York) (McEvoy 1997). Folk music societies including St Louis Folk Music Society and the

International Folklore Federation sponsored or supported CCÉ concerts,³² placing them in a category of ‘ethnic folk music in North America’, rather than limiting them to an Irish soundscape.

Conclusion

Tours in the USA by The Chieftains, the Siamsa Céilí Band, and Siamsa Tíre during the 1970s took place at a time of changing audience desires and expectations, and of changing relationships between Ireland and its diaspora. They also reflected the opportunities of more affordable travel and an intensification of violent conflict in Northern Ireland. The USA, in this context, was not a distant periphery where emigrants lived and sometimes engaged in Irish-American forms of music and dance, suggesting a connection with a romanticised homeland. Rather, it was a key market in an expanding global entertainment industry and one with which Irish groups managed to successfully engage. In doing so, they challenged and reconfigured US audiences’ perceptions of Irish (traditional) music. The three groups exemplify the opportunities for artistic, commercial, and community developments in Irish traditional music.

Researching the tours to the USA by these three groups also provides insights into attitudes towards political unrest on the island of Ireland and the impact that this had on performing groups. The apolitical stance of two of the groups was not without critique from some segments of audiences in the USA but, ultimately, it was the explicit Republican messages of CCÉ that received the least favourable response, prompting a change in programming. Members of all of the groups had direct experience of the

³² These are clearly indicated on event tickets and other promotional material kept by Kevin O’Callaghan.

impact of the Troubles in their lives, perhaps none more than the Siamsa Céilí Band whose members lived on both sides of the border. All were proud exponents of Irish traditional culture and yet they developed different approaches to their performance practice and accompanying nationalistic rhetoric.

The 1970s represent a period of change for Ireland, Irish-America, and Irish traditional music. The performance of Irish traditional music in the USA in the 1970s was not limited to the Irish diaspora or venues associated with Irish American communities. The effect of the tours was to broaden the impression of Irish traditional music and the prevalence of a Republican narrative that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century as a result of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. By incorporating Irish language song, focusing on the dance music repertoire, and staging Irish traditional music in formal and multi-ethnic spaces, these tours contributed significantly to the development of what was quickly becoming a globalised and commercial art form. The performances challenged some of the American audience's preconceptions of Irish culture and signalled an intensification and professionalisation of Irish traditional music groups on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Disclosure Statement

While both authors have personal connections with some of the groups and individuals named in this study, they did not and will not receive financial remuneration or other benefits accruing from this research.

Ethical Statement

This research is informed by our involvement in the community of practice that is the focus of this paper. Some of the information came first from childhood stories and our own experience of learning from and performing with the individuals involved. In some instances, we have inherited memorabilia from deceased individuals whose express intention was to support research. The research data supporting this article is drawn primarily from archival material but also includes a planned interview, for which ethical approval was secured in advance. Data extraction and collation also drew on informal discussions with music community members including players, family members, students, audience. An application was made to the DkIT School of Informatics and Creative Arts Research Ethics Committee (App#11) to undertake interviews with members of the Siamsa Céilí Band, their family members, students and other associated individuals and ethical clearance was granted on 20 April 2021.

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