

A Revolutionary Queen: Philomena Begley’s Use of Country Music Songs to Challenge Social Attitudes in Irish Society

Abstract

Singer Philomena Begley (b.1942) is widely promoted as the “Queen of Irish country music.” This article critically examines examples from the early decades of her 60-year career that highlight her role in challenging attitudes toward women in Irish society. By critically reflecting on her recordings and autobiography, as well as information gleaned in an interview, the article details how Begley appropriated American country music songs with lyrics that resonated with an Irish audience and challenged the social and cultural norms of Irish society during the 1960s. The article focuses on Begley’s covers of American songs, “Blanket on the Ground”, “Truck Driving Woman” and “The Box It Came In,” using semiotic and cultural analysis to exemplify how artists construct meaning through song lyrics and performance. Performing songs written in and influenced by American society, Begley highlighted aspects of the lived experience of women in Ireland and achieved iconic status in Irish country music. Drawing on Philomena Begley’s example this article demonstrates how legacy is created in Irish country music, and highlights the continuing relevance and influence of Begley on the Irish country music scene today.

Introduction



Philomena Begley/Photo: JMG Music Group

Although Ireland has established a strong musical reputation that ranges from traditional music to pop and rock music, scholars have paid little attention to Irish country music.¹ Although heavily influenced by American country music, Irish country music demonstrates the influence of its milieu, incorporating repertoire from traditional musics and reflecting Ireland's changing social realities and values.² The development of Irish country music has been significantly influenced by women performers, including Philomena Begley (b.1942), celebrated as the "Queen of Irish country music." These women, who also include Susan McCann (b.1949) and Margo O'Donnell (b.1951), rejected societal norms of twentieth-century Ireland to successfully pursue careers and perform music that was empathetic with the experiences of Irish women.³

As demonstrated in this article, women in Irish country music such as Begley negotiate their gender identity in a reflection of Irish culture and cultural expectations and their portrayal of gender reflects those cultural expectations and norms. Their actions, however, have also contributed to a reimagination of gender norms in Irish country music. Informed by scholarship on women in music, this article examines how Begley created and negotiated her identity through her music, reinforcing cultural and community identity. But by examining aspects of her career and legacy, we discuss Begley's rejection of the social and cultural norms of Ireland from the 1960s as prescribed by 'church and state' and how she reflected the identity of her

¹ Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, *Flowing Tides: History and Memory in an Irish Soundscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Sean Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020); Noel McLaughlin and Martin McLoone, "Hybridity and National Musics: The Case of Irish Rock Music," *Popular Music* 19, no. 2 (April 2000): 181–99, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s026114300000106>; Colin Harper and Trevor Hodgett, *Irish Folk, Trad & Blues: A Secret History* (London: Cherry Red, 2005); Gerry Smyth, *Music and Irish Identity: Celtic Tiger Blues* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016).

² John Millar, "(In)Authentic Country: Country Music in Dublin" (thesis, 2014); John Millar, "Creating Authentic Country: Country Music Dancing and Old Time Sessions in Ireland" (thesis, 2020); Christina Lynn, "Classifying Operations: Constructing and Manufacturing Identities in Irish and American Country Music," *International Country Music Journal* 9 (2021): 127–150.

³ Christina Lynn, "Isolation to Icon: Three Women Artists in Irish Country Music" (thesis, 2022), <https://eprints.dkit.ie/id/eprint/796/1/Christina%20Lynn%20PhD%20Thesis%202022%20upload.pdf>.

audience through her lived experience in Irish country music. Utilizing Thomas Turino's (1999) semiotic model, this article illustrates how Begley created meaningfulness in the lives of her audience by performing lyrics that reinforce the experiences of the audience to whom she sings. These songs contribute to positive reflexivity by providing a comparison for her audiences. Examining three songs released by Begley between 1968 and 1975, this article analyses how she created a narrative for her audience, and demonstrates how these songs, through Begley's recordings and live performances, have aided in creating a legacy in Irish country music.

An Irish Context for Irish Country Music

From the turn of the 20th century, Ireland experienced significant political and social change. The politics surrounding the establishment of the new state, the partition of the island in 1922, and the influence of the Catholic Church had a lasting impact on the population of Ireland.⁴ Conservative nationalism was to the fore and the Irish nation was often represented by a feminine figure in need of help.⁵ There was a desire to distinguish Ireland from its former colonial rulers and, as the state matured, it adopted largely isolationist economic and cultural policies. Amongst the notable legislation in the early years of the state was the Censorship of Films Act (1923). According to Gearóid Ó hAlmhuráin: 'That measure censored films, most of them foreign, that were considered offensive to the conservative mores of the new Ireland.'⁶ The censorship of literature followed in 1929, before the 1935 Public Dance Halls Act sought to regulate dancehalls in Ireland.⁷

⁴ Tim Pat Coogan, *Ireland in the 20th Century* (Random House, 2003); Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2005); Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-Century Ireland (New Gill History of Ireland 6): Revolution and State-Building–The Partition of Ireland, the Troubles and the Celtic Tiger (Vol. 6)* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2005).

⁵ Tes Slominski, *Trad Nation: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Irish Traditional Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2020).

⁶ Gearóid Ó hAlmhuráin, "Dancing on the Hobs of Hell: Rural Communities in Clare and the Dance Halls Act of 1935," *New Hibernia Review* 9, no. 4 (December 2005): 9–18, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2006.0010>, 9.

⁷ Helen Brennan, *The Story of Irish Dance* (Dingle, Ireland: Brandon Press, 1999); Helena Wulff, *Dancing at the Crossroads: Memory and Mobility in Ireland* (New York: Berghahn, 2007).

Sometimes identified as a factor in the decline of Irish traditional music in parts of Ireland, the Public Dance Halls Act aided the growth of céilí bands and large céilí dances, although such ensembles were already in existence.⁸ So too were halls in which dancing took place.⁹ These were often multi-functional community halls or, in some instances, Primary Schools. Recognizing that “small towns and villages in Ireland were much better served with dance facilities than cities until the 1950s,” Méabh Ní Fhuartháin notes that “although many dances were small in scale, serving mainly locals, increased mobility and marketing resulted in their attracting growing numbers.”¹⁰ The growth of popularity parallels demands for more popular music and leads to the development of the showband era, which those who proposed the Act sought to limit.¹¹

While Irish céilí bands performing Irish traditional music were popular in many parts of the country from earlier in the twentieth century, catering for prescribed dance forms that had developed within an Irish tradition, they began to adapt their repertoire to meet the demands of audiences who were beginning to consume American popular music.¹² Large, seated ‘orchestra bands’ that played music for dancing were popular in the first half of the twentieth century and played music influenced by American popular musicians such as Glenn Miller. A smaller ensemble known as ‘showbands’ embraced amplification, moved out from behind the music stands, and performed with embodied rhythmic movements and greater

⁸ Fintan Vallely, *The Companion to Irish Traditional Music* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999); Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, “Dancing on the Hobs of Hell: Rural Communities in Clare and the Dance Halls Act of 1935,” *New Hibernia Review* 9, no. 4 (December 2005): 9–18, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2006.0010>.

⁹ Méabh Ní Fhuartháin, “Parish Halls, Dance Halls, and Marquees: Developing and Regulating Social-Dance Spaces, 1900–60,” *Éire-Ireland* 54, no. 1 (2019): 218–50, <https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2019.0009>.

¹⁰ Méabh Ní Fhuartháin, “Parish Halls, Dance Halls, and Marquees: Developing and Regulating Social-Dance Spaces, 1900–60,” 233; Méabh Ní Fhuartháin, “Parish Halls, Dance Halls, and Marquees: Developing and Regulating Social-Dance Spaces, 1900–60,” 232.

¹¹ Helen Brennan, *The Story of Irish Dance* (Dingle, Ireland: Brandon Press, 1999); Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (London: Profile Books, 2009).

¹² Hazel Fairbairn, “Changing Contexts for Traditional Dance Music in Ireland: The Rise of Group Performance Practice,” *Folk Music Journal* 6, no. 5 (1994): 566–99, <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/4522470>; Barbara O’Connor, *The Irish Dancing: Cultural Politics and Identities, 1900-2000* (Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 2013).

audience interactions.¹³ The demand for these bands grew, which led to the emergence of professionalization and a focus on popular song performance. A large number of dance halls were built in Ireland to facilitate larger crowds attending showband performances.¹⁴ The coming together of showbands and céilí bands in Ireland led to the development of ‘Country and Irish’ or ‘Irish country’ bands, incorporating influences primarily from American country music and Irish ballads.

The views expressed by the Catholic Church in Ireland and their influence on Irish legislation and society are critical to understanding the context for Begley’s contribution as a woman performer singing about issues that are significant for women’s rights and lived experiences. Ó hAlmhuráin relates opposition to ‘modern dancing’ to the assertions made by the Catholic clergy in Ireland:

Modern dancing, generically referred to as "jazz" in Ireland at the time, had been introduced by commercial recordings and returning immigrants during the wild years of the Roaring Twenties, and mirrored the changing social mores of the country at a time when American popular culture was steadily selling its way across the Atlantic. Its snazzy menu of fox-trots, two-steps, and shimmy shakes not to mention "the sensual moan of the saxophone" and the loose morals of flappers in high heels all became prime targets in the pulpit-beating sermons of the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁵

¹³ Gerry Gallagher, “60’s Showbands,” 60’s showbands, 2020, <https://www.irish-showbands.com/showbands.htm>.

¹⁴ Paul Maguire, “Conditions of Possibility: Changes in Popular Music Culture and the Development of Country & Irish Music,” *Conditions of Possibility: Changes in Popular Music Culture and the Development of Country & Irish Music* (thesis, University of Ulster, 2012); Rebecca Miller, “We Were so Different!’ Negotiating Gender on the Showband Stage,” essay, in *Ordinary Irish Life: Music, Sport and Culture* (Irish Academic Press, 2012); Christina Lynn, “Cultural Expression vs Social Function: How Authenticity Affects Rural Performance Practice” (thesis, 2017); Christina Lynn, “Isolation to Icon: Three Women Artists in Irish Country Music” (thesis, 2022), <https://eprints.dkit.ie/id/eprint/796/1/Christina%20Lynn%20PhD%20Thesis%202022%20upload.pdf>.; Kevin Martin, *A Happy Type of Sadness: A Journey through Irish Country Music* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2018); Gerry Gallagher, “60’s Showbands,” 60’s showbands, 2020.

¹⁵ Gearóid Ó hAlmhuráin, “Dancing on the Hobs of Hell: Rural Communities in Clare and the Dance Halls Act of 1935,” *New Hibernia Review* 9, no. 4 (December 2005): 9–18, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2006.0010>. 10

Despite government policy and the views expressed by the Catholic Church, external cultural influences continued to stimulate change in Irish culture.¹⁶

Aside from music, film, and literature, Irish legislation also had significant impacts on the rights and lives of women in Ireland. With significant influence from church leaders, in 1937, the Irish government established a constitution that further affected men's and women's participation in social and cultural life, with particular impacts on women's rights and perceived gender roles. As Mary Daly suggests:

Most descriptions of women's lives in independent Ireland provide a dreary litany of legislative and administrative restrictions on women's rights: legislation banning divorce and access to contraception, restrictions on women's jury service and on the employment of married women – a pattern which is seen culminating in the 1937 Constitution with its emphasis on the role of women in the home.¹⁷

Slominski noted that historically women were seen as maiden, mother, or whore, and needed the care and protection of Irish men.¹⁸ Laws concerning women's rights and equality were lacking during the 1960s and 1970s. Women continued to be viewed as carers and nurturers, their role was still mainly associated with domestic duties, and the laws governing morality continued to be inscribed by the Catholic Church. In contrast with the official rhetoric, the establishment of a large number of Magdalen laundries, mother and baby homes, and other institutions in Ireland alludes to the number of Irish people who were engaging in extramarital activities during this time.¹⁹ The debate continues into the second decade of the twenty-first

¹⁶ Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996).

¹⁷ Mary E. Daly, "Women in the Irish Free State, 1922-39: The Interaction between Economics and Ideology," *Journal of Women's History* 7, no. 1 (March 1995): 99–116, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2010.0392>, 99.

¹⁸ Tes Slominski, *Trad Nation: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Irish Traditional Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2020).

¹⁹ Linda Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement: From Revolution to Devolution* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003); Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2005); Caitríona Beaumont, "Gender, Citizenship and The State in Ireland, 1992-1990," essay, in *Ireland in Proximity History, Gender and Space*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1999).

century with a proposed referendum on Article 41 of the Constitution, which recognizes the role of the family unit in society, following the recommendations of a Citizen's Assembly in 2021. Article 41.2, which states: "In particular, the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved," is at the center of the current debate. While many women in the public service were required to give up their jobs when they got married and had a limited range of opportunities in the workplace, singers such as Begley pursued opportunities outside of the home and, in doing so, existed in conflict with some of Irish society's expectations for women.

Philomena Begley

Philomena Begley was born in 1942 in Pomeroy, County Tyrone, then a rural village "where Gaelic football and céilí music were at the heart of the community".²⁰ Begley was the fourth born of a family of eight children to a farming father and a stay-at-home mother. At this time in Ireland, it was considered natural for a woman to become a stay-at-home mother and housewife, regardless of her previous employment history or career aspirations.²¹ Begley, like many Irish citizens during the 1950s and 1960s, completed her primary school education but did not complete second-level education, finishing school at the age of fifteen and gaining employment in a local hat factory where she worked for five years.

It was during this period of her life that Begley became involved in music and performance. Begley was at a local dance when she was 'dared to go up and sing' by some of her friends.²² Not one to shy away from a challenge, Begley sang one song with a group called the 'Old Cross Céilí Band.' The band subsequently asked her to fill in for their resident singer

²⁰ Philomena Begley, *Philomena Begley: My Life, My Music, My Memories*, 1st ed. (Dublin, Ireland: The O'Brien Press, 2017), n.p.

²¹ Linda Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement: From Revolution to Devolution* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003); Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2005); Tes Slominski, *Trad Nation: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Irish Traditional Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2020).

²² Christina Lynn, Philomena Begley Interview, personal, 2020.

who had become ill, and she sang for the group as their interval performer for the first time in 1962. Begley continued to work during the day and sing at night with the band. In 1964 Begley and the band became known as Country Flavour and began incorporating more country and Irish songs into their output. Country Flavour and Begley became so popular that in 1966 Begley sought her father's permission to leave her day job and become a full-time singer with the band.²³ This reflects the patriarchal nature of Irish society at the time, an aspect that remains important in understanding her career development. Between 1966 and 1972 Begley became so popular with audiences that she became the main attraction of the band.

Adapting American Repertoire: Murder, Trucks, and Sex

Country music became popular in Ireland during the 1960s and incorporated both American and Irish influences. The connection between Ireland and the United States is important in understanding the development of Irish country music. A history of emigration from Ireland to the USA, which rapidly increased during the 1840s but continued at a high level during the 20th century, led to a significant Irish diaspora in the USA. Many Irish traditional musicians were prominent in the USA and Irish emigrants sent recordings 'home' to Ireland where they influenced the repertoire and stylistic development.²⁴ The Irish diaspora also provided an audience for Irish artists and performing groups who travelled to the USA, particularly in the 1970s.²⁵ Despite many societal and legal differences, the strong transatlantic links are evident in the performance of popular culture in both the USA and, more particularly, in Ireland.²⁶ Through the twentieth century, American popular music stars were, and in many

²³ Philomena Begley, *Philomena Begley: My Life, My Music, My Memories*, 1st ed. (Dublin, Ireland: The O'Brien Press, 2017), n.p.

²⁴ Nuala O'Connor, *Bringing It All Back Home: The Influence of Irish Music* (Dublin: Merlin, 2001).

²⁵ 1. Daithí Kearney and Adèle Commins, "Much More than 'Danny Boy': Bringing Irish Traditional Music to the USA," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 32, no. 2 (May 4, 2023): 251–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2023.2236135>.

²⁶ Sylvie Mikowski and Yann Philippe, *How Popular Culture Travels: Cultural Exchanges between Ireland and the United States* (Reims: ÉPURE--Éditions et presses universitaires de Reims, 2019).

instances continue to be, popular in Ireland. These included country music artists such as Jim Reeves, Kenny Rogers, Johnny Cash, John Denver, and Tammy Wynette, who all reached number one on the Irish charts during the 1970s. It was during this period that Irish acts such as Philomena Begley came to the fore, drawing on both Irish ballads and the popular music of their American country music counterparts.

An early single that achieved success was Begley's 1968 recording of "The Box That It Came In" with the Old Cross Céilí Band. Originally written by American songwriter Vic Alpin (1918–1980), Begley's release demonstrates the often rapid integration of American country music hits into the Irish repertoire at this time. American country music singer Wanda Jackson originally released the song in 1966, and it peaked at number eighteen on the Billboard Magazine Hot Country Singles chart. Beginning with a similar sounding electric guitar riff as the Nashville produced version but with a slightly faster tempo and greater emphasis on the backbeat, Begley's release reflects the quick transition from popular success by American artists to covers by Irish artists at the time. The rhythmic feel is appropriate for the performance context – Begley performed primarily for dancing rather than a seated audience.

In the song, Begley presents a narrative of seeking to murder her cheating husband who left her for another woman and took all of her possessions, even her wedding gown. The singer seeks retribution and, in contrast with the empty cardboard box she finds in the cupboard, states that "the box he comes home in will be all satin lined," a reference to a coffin. While the song reflects aspects of American culture, it is relevant to the experience of women in Ireland. At this time in Ireland, a woman's property became that of her husband upon marriage and, while a man could leave his wife, a woman could not leave her husband.²⁷ These

²⁷ Mary Hederman, "Irish Women and Irish Law," *The Crane Bag* 4, no. 1 (1980): 55–59.

songs provided an opportunity to highlight social issues that those in power largely ignored to the detriment of women throughout the country.

A similar affront to Irish social attitudes is evident in Begley's adaptation of "Truck Driving Woman," made popular by American country music star Norma Jean Beasler (b.1938) in 1968. Norma Jean achieved commercial success and was recognized as a champion of women's rights, performing songs that sought to engage with social issues. "Truck Driving Woman" challenged societal norms at a time when there were few female truck drivers in either the USA or Ireland and the lyrics reflect a woman breaking free from the confines of traditional gender expectations. In Begley's case, it reflected the patriarchy of her society and her emergence as a woman performer in a music scene dominated by men. Released by Begley with Country Flavour in 1972, the impact of the song was enhanced by the cover image, which featured Begley seated in front of a large truck with lettering that connects it to her locality in the north of Ireland.

"Truck Driving Woman" tells of a father's influence on his daughter despite wanting a son who would take on his business. Instead, the singer seeks to 'fill her daddy's shoes,' having learned the way of life and 'every legend of the road.' Furthermore, the third verse challenges 'boys' who believe they can outrun her. The song retains the particular reference to Greyhounds, the American bus company, and the performance incorporates many of the sonic aesthetics typical of contemporaneous American country music including the electric guitar fills, although the Begley recording is at a faster tempo than Norma Jean's and incorporates a greater use of the fiddle.

In 1974 Begley was approached by Irish music mogul, Tony Loughman, and asked if she would be interested in signing with his label Top Rank Entertainment where he would form a band around her. Loughman had a keen ear for Irish country singers and Begley thought this was a great opportunity for her personal career. Loughman formed a band called 'The Ramblin'

Men' around Begley in that same year. They then had their first major chart success in 1975 when they rearranged the song "Blanket on the Ground". Written by American songwriter Roger Bowling (1944–1982), it was recorded by American country music singer Billie Jo Spears who released it in February 1975 as the second single and title track from her album *Blanket on the Ground*. Like "The Box it Came In," Begley's release came swiftly after the original in August of the same year. "Blanket on the Ground" was a popular song in Begley's repertoire thereafter. In Ireland, Spear's version reached number 11 in the charts, but Begley's rose to number five, highlighting the potential of local singers to outperform international stars in the Irish charts.²⁸

"Blanket on the Ground" depicts a woman protagonist singing about her married life, sitting at home, watching life pass her by through her window. She is looking out the window at night reminiscing about the early days of her courtship with her husband and how new and exciting it was back then. The sentiments of the song seem to suggest that the excitement of the relationship has dissipated, and they are just going through the motions of being a couple. The protagonist is trying to rekindle their romance and bring back some excitement into their relationship.

When Spears released this song in the United States, the country music audience initially thought it was a song about desiring an extra-marital affair; an interpretation that Irish audiences also leaned toward initially.²⁹ "Slipping around" in general means to circumvent or circumnavigate someone or something in a surreptitious or inconspicuous manner. Rather, the song describes the desires of the protagonist to rekindle the romance of the relationship and slip out into the night secretly, leaving their marital or parental responsibilities for a while, to

²⁸ Colin Larkin, *The Guinness Encyclopaedia of Popular Music*, 1st ed. (Enfield: Guinness, 1992).

²⁹ Spencer Leigh, "Billie Jo Spears: Country Singer Who Scored Her Biggest Hit With," *The Independent*, December 16, 2011, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/billie-jo-spears-country-singer-who-scored-her-biggest-hit-with-blanket-on-the-ground-6277683.html>.

experience again the excitement that they felt when they were young lovers, courting secretly. When Begley recorded this song in 1975 Irish women did not talk about marital affairs or courtship routines. Sociologist Tom Inglis notes the Foucauldian sense of policing bodies in marriage with few “alternative or resistant discourses.”³⁰ Reflecting on the 1950s, Inglis describes Irish society as one of ‘guilt, secrecy, darkness and oppression’ and “the body was a source of awkwardness, guilt, shame and embarrassment.”³¹ The song reflects the dating patterns and journeys of Irish youths of the 1970s. Dating couples were forbidden by the church to participate in sexual relations outside of marriage, women were conditioned by the Church and state to be shy and reserved and to present a respectability as detailed by the Catholic Church. Singing songs about the nighttime courtship routines that related to the Irish population was not something that a woman “should do.” Begley noted that a contemporary of hers, Brian Coll, stated “my mother loved your music, she loved your voice, but once you recorded ‘Blanket on the Ground’ she didn’t like you anymore.”³² Gradually the intended meaning of the song gained recognition.³³

Begley, a newly married woman (in 1974) presented an atypical Irish woman’s perspective. She was embodying a woman who is longing for the excitement that was once evident in their relationship, she is asking for the attention and love from her partner which appears to have disappeared after marriage, as he goes to work and she attends to her “duties” in the home.

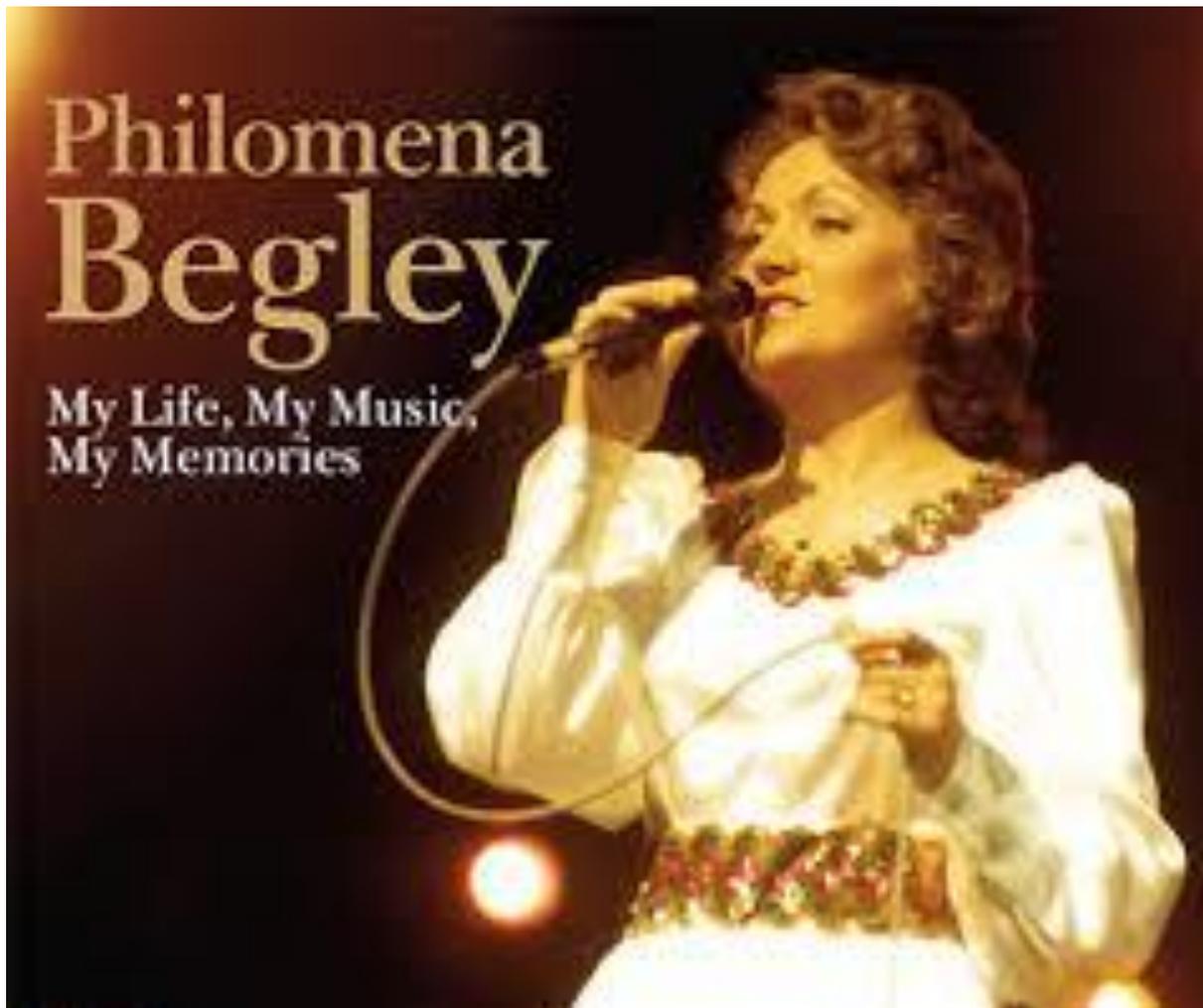
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³⁰ Tom Inglis, “Foucault, Bourdieu and the Field of Irish Sexuality,” *Irish Journal of Sociology* 7, no. 1 (May 1997): 5–28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/079160359700700102>, 12.

³¹ Tom Inglis, *Global Ireland: Same Difference* (London: Routledge, 2007), 122.

³² Christina Lynn, Philomena Begley Interview, personal, 2020.

³³ Mary Hederman, “Irish Women and Irish Law,” *The Crane Bag* 4, no. 1 (1980): 55–59; Miguelbilly, “Billie Jo Spears Performs ‘Blanket on the Ground’ Live on Hee Haw 1976.,” *When The Cowboy Sings*, December 17, 2021, <https://whentcowboysings.com/billie-jo-spears-blanket-on-the-ground/>.



“The Box that it Came in’,” “Truck Driving Woman” and “Blanket on the Ground” spoke to the audiences that Begley performed to in two ways. Begley was seen as the quintessential Irish woman; she displayed the identity markers of the comely maiden, long flowing hair, porcelain skin, natural beauty, and she was now a married woman. These identity markers are what Tes Slominski suggests are part of the historic identity legacy of women in Irish society.³⁴ Begley is reinforcing these markers in her image yet is rejecting the societal constructs of a woman by engaging in a portrayal of women and men “slipping around” in darkness together, engaging in sin. She is speaking to her peers, in a positive way suggesting that she wants to keep the excitement of courtship in her marriage. She is placing herself as a

³⁴ Tes Slominski, *Trad Nation: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Irish Traditional Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2020).

role model for audiences to engage with discourse on rules and regulations that are inscribed to the Irish population, and transgressing these norms by singing about them.

The songs incorporate elements that are arguably more familiar in American culture than Irish culture. Although Begley is performing through the period of sectarian violence known as The Troubles, during which many people in Northern Ireland and border counties were murdered, murder rates were otherwise low in Irish society. The idea of killing a husband for cheating was in stark contrast to the reality faced by women who suffered domestic abuse in a society that did not typically punish the man for his crimes. Trucks stereotypically reflected a masculine image, and women of the time remained in the home or took on employment that was prescribed as suitable for women. In a society dominated by the Catholic church, the subject of sex was considered a taboo subject and rarely spoken about in public forums. Through her performances, Begley raises each of these aspects of social norms and challenges them.

Begley includes “The Box that it Came In” as the final track on her album entitled *My Life, My Music, My Memories*.³⁵ The album juxtaposes songs with explicit American country music and cultural references, such as “Route 65 to Nashville,” “Queen of the Silver Dollar” and “Hillbilly Girl with the Blues, with those that point to her own north of Ireland heritage including “A Village in County Tyrone” and “Old Arboe.” Through alignment, Begley localizes the narrative for her audience who, through her live performances in Ireland, have the opportunity to experience her life and potentially meet her in contrast with the American country music stars who first sing these songs.

Icon and Legacy

By embarking on her career and performing socially topical repertoire, Begley challenged social structures and made it possible for women to perform in similar spaces to

³⁵ Begley used this as the title of her autobiography (Begley, 2017).

that of their male counterparts. Her persistence to continue this career path, and the rejection of detractors along with the support of family, band members, and managers, enabled Begley to transform her status from interval singer with céilí bands to that of bandleader and ultimately icon. In his study of pop stars with a focus on the artist Prince, Rupert Till suggests that in order for a star to be described as “an icon” [it] requires their achievement of a level of fame at which they are treated with the sort of respect traditionally reserved for religious figures.”³⁶ Focusing on Celine Dion and recognizing how performers can have different meanings across different cultures, Ioan-Sebastian Jucu argues that “music legends are iconic figures for different communities, with a spatio-temporal involvement from local to global cultures influencing places and identities.”³⁷ Although singing many of the same songs, Begley provides a more local icon for Irish audiences than the American country music stars of the time, and while many of the American artists achieve international impact, Begley’s impact on her own society is greater.

Although Begley’s iconic status is primarily local to the island of Ireland, she has also achieved international success. Begley’s success with “Blanket on the Ground” greatly advanced her career in the country music scene. She has achieved nine number one successes throughout her career both in Ireland and the UK and appeared on the Grand Ole Opry stage six times. Begley appeared at the International Country Music Festival in Wembley on twelve occasions and received an award from the British Country Music Association in 1985 for her contribution to country music. She was inducted into the UK Country Music Hall of Fame in 2013. Begley was voted the top female vocalist in Ireland in 1980 and was the first woman to

³⁶ Rupert Till, “Pop Stars and Idolatry: An Investigation of the Worship of Popular Music Icons, and the Music and Cult of Prince,” *Journal of Beliefs & Values: Studies in Religion & Education* 31, no. 1 (April 2010): 69–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617671003666761>, 70.

³⁷ Ioan-Sebastian JUCU, “Music Geographies and Iconic Music Legends: Mapping Céline Dion’s Outstanding Contribution to Music and Global Popular Music Culture,” *Territorial Identity and Development* 4, no. 1 (May 1, 2019): 93–127, <https://doi.org/10.23740/tid120195>, 95.

be inducted into the Irish Country Music Hall of Fame in 2020. Throughout her career to date, Begley has recorded over 37 albums and continues to perform today. These accolades contribute to Begley's iconic status in Irish country music.

Begley's impact and legacy on the Irish country music scene is evident in the reception and use of her music with young artists, both male and female. Irish women country music artists such as Cliona Hagan, Lisa McHugh, Claudia Buckley, and Olivia Douglas have noted how they see Begley as an icon and a confidant. She offers support and guidance to new artists and often endorses their careers by engaging them as opening or support acts for her own concerts and events. Emerging artists such as Nathan Carter, Lisa McHugh, Olivia Douglas, and Claudia Buckle have been given the opening slots for Begley's concerts to showcase their music to an already established audience and promoters of country music. Others including Derek Ryan, Mike Denver, and John McNichol have collaborated with Begley on singles, albums, and in concert. Many younger artists continue to perform Begley's repertoire, reinforcing her reputation and legacy as "the Queen of Irish country music".

Conclusion

Irish country music is an amalgam of Irish and American cultural influences that became popular in Ireland from the 1960s. At a time when Irish society was patriarchal and restrictive in terms of women's rights and opportunities, women singers of Irish country music achieved success and, in doing so, highlighted and challenged issues in Irish society. Irish country music gained popularity with audiences in rural and suburban areas of Ireland when the showbands experienced a decline. Irish country bands rearranged the Irish ballads and American country songs to fit the 'beat' associated with Irish country music, which enabled the Irish audiences to dance the old ballroom favorites of the jive and the old-time waltz.

Philomena Begley began performing in a local group and had visualized a life that had already been mapped out for her: have a job, get married, and have children. The choice she

made in 1962 to pursue a music career changed her life. Her voice and music became so popular that she left a steady job, began performing full time, and is now a household name in Ireland and among the Irish diaspora. Societal norms in 1960s Ireland did not facilitate gender equality and access in all aspects of life. This was especially true in the case of women's participation in public musical performances. The establishment of Ireland as a free state in 1922 coincided with the establishment of a very conservative ideology for Ireland and its citizens. Women and men held very different roles in Irish society, and becoming a full-time singer with an all-male band was not considered an appropriate role for a woman in the 1970s. Begley noted that "Working at night, with an all-male band, singing about cheatin' husbands and divorce, was a far cry from the traditional nine-to-five and my very Catholic upbringing."³⁸

Begley did not let the conditioning of Irish society influence her decision of following this career path; she transgressed barriers to portray and reflect an identity and to narrate the lived experience of her audience.

Incorporating American country music songs enabled Begley to perform songs that showcased her early identity - rural, local, Irish, daughter, woman, and religious - while also incorporating her new identity as a country music singer. These songs provide the lens to examine Begley's rejection of social and cultural markers and illustrate a reflection of an identity to which the audience relates. Begley's ability to choose repertoire from both Irish and American sources that connected with her audiences and created a feminist narrative during a period when women's views, rights, and voices were suppressed, highlight her importance as an icon.

The Irish country music sound that developed in the 1960s and 1970s is no longer the only sound associated with Irish country music. Although the popularity of the genre declined in the 1990s, it has undergone a growth in popularity over the past ten years, reflecting an ebb

³⁸ Philomena Begley, *Philomena Begley: My Life, My Music, My Memories*, 1st ed. (Dublin, Ireland: The O'Brien Press, 2017), 66.

and flow pattern. While the jive beat is the mainstay of most artists, a new wave of artists continue to develop the aesthetic, influenced in no small part by changes in American country music. Emerging artists are incorporating a country-pop sound into their music but continue to recognize the enduring popularity of artists such as Begley. Irish country music has evolved with its artists and audience to enable itself to stay relevant in contemporary Irish society, mirroring the efforts of Begley in the 1960s and 1970s.

Begley created a space for herself within a male dominated genre that has led to the emergence of a large number of women artists pursuing a career in Irish country music. By engaging in social and cultural discourse through music, Begley created meaningfulness in the lives of her audience. She highlighted aspects of Irish culture and society that allowed the Irish country music fan base to reflexively assess their own positions. Begley created a relatable identity that has seen her become an icon in Irish country music and a champion for women in Ireland.

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