Building Ireland’s Cultural Identity:

Politics, Economics and Diaspora

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Introduction
The creation of Ireland’s identity has been the topic of much debate before and since the 1922 establishment of Ireland as a free state (Gillespie 2001; Byrne et al. 2009). The country’s economic and political landscapes have changed dramatically, while discourse in globalisation and Americanisation have heavily influenced music and other components of the creative industries. Combined with a history of emigration and a large diaspora, Ireland’s cultural identity has become a strained discussion of nationalism and post-nationalism, global politics and economics and what/who makes up the Irish cultural and creative industries.
Important debate continues as to whether a nationalist, Catholic Irish cultural identity is sustainable (Smyth 2012; Penet 2008; Laws 2012; Moffatt 2011). Multiple reports of abuse within the church mean many Irish seek to distance themselves from the organisation, while globalisation and disenfranchisement with government have left the people of Ireland seeking new cultural steerage. Music, alongside other creative and cultural industries, has boomed in the past 20 years. To understand this debate, we must highlight how nationalism and Catholicism came to lead the nation and examine Ireland’s current need for a new cultural lead.

The revival of the Irish arts began to take off in the 1890s; it acted to curtail the demise of Irish native language, literacy, music and dance, all of which had been outlawed under British colonial rule. The British had worked to replace the Gaelic language with ‘modern’ English and had likewise suppressed outlets for traditional arts (McCarthy 1999, p. 55). In 1893, however, Conradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League) was formed to preserve Irish culture and language (Ó Croidheáin 2006, p. 138).

The 1930s saw Ireland’s government bowing to pressure for moral censorship from the Catholic church. The ‘Anti-Jazz’ campaign of 1934 was a reaction to foreign music’s influence on public morality (Brennan 2011). The Public Dance Halls Act of 1935 was soon made law, meaning local public gatherings were licensed and monitored by local government and clergy. Similar restrictions in media and publications monitored for blasphemy and heresy.

As nationalism and Catholicism became intrinsically linked, debate continued around Irish identity in a free state. Irish writers James Joyce and WB Yeats, writing both before and after independence, commented on both cultural instances. Yeats rejected ideas of cultural hybridity and spoke negatively of the rural, peasant models of Irishness - what he saw as crude representations of real traditions. Joyce welcomed a translational hybridity of Irish identity but preferred a fluid cultural cosmopolitanism rather than racial nationalism (Gillespie 2001, p. 86). Douglas Hyde, founder of Conradh na Gaeilge, held ideals of an Ireland from a previous era: of fairy tales, heroic stories and Gaelic mythology. His belief that the native language was a pathway to a true Irish identity which encompassed traditional artistic practices was embodied in the Irish constitution, which made it compulsory for state schools to teach the Irish language.
Ireland was shackled by the purists of nationalism and Catholicism. The church was in charge of education, while the government brought in protectionist policies. Globalisation crept in, however. After joining the European Union in 1973, new laws and sanctions brought respite from the government and its guidance by the church - a key moment in its decline (Banks 2008, p. 64). Globalisation allowed foreign music and film to flood the country; this was reflected in music at the time. Ireland experienced a series of economic peaks and troughs over the next two decades, alongside neoliberalism (Cocoran 2008, p.165), multiculturalism (Nagle 2009, p.165) and further emigration. Ireland’s nationalist, Catholic identity was slowly watered down by cultural imports and exports.

The Celtic Tiger economic boom in the 1990s coincided with a fresh cultural outpouring: the rise of the Irish pop industry through Boyzone, Westlife, The Corrs, Bewitched and The Cranberries, the emergence of Riverdance (and similar shows) and successful films such as *In The Name of The Father*, *The Commitments*, *Angela’s Ashes* and *Michael Collins* - all movies which reflect important watersheds in Irish cultural identity. It enabled the country to develop creative and cultural industries (Keohane et al, n.d.; Hazelkorn 2001, p. 2) and have independent music industry representation from Britain - The IMRO (Cogan 2008 p. 65).

Now in economic crisis through the failings of the government and the banking sector, with a church in dire straits over sexual abuse and loss of political influence, it is easy to understand the shift from a nationalist, Catholic Irish identity (Smyth 2008, p. 149). However, liberal arts sectors have thrived off the discourses in globalisation, immigration, and individualism (Penet 2008, p. 148-149), building a successful cultural industry connected to a vast diaspora network, guaranteeing an audience for cultural exports (Issue 5).
Issue 2 - What is Irishness? Shaping a cultural identity abroad through cultural activism and the diaspora

Ireland’s history of emigration means more than 70 million people around the world claim Irish heritage. The effects of the diaspora on Irish identity are heavily debated (Mcwilliams 2007; Moffatt 2011; O’Keefe-Vigneron 2008; Ryan 2008), with the diaspora regularly labelled as ‘excessive’ and lacking ‘authenticity’ by those in Ireland. So what effect has the diaspora truly had on cultural identity and defining Irishness?

The Irish diaspora commonly gathered in Irish Centres to celebrate cultural activities abroad. In London, for example, there were two main centres for Irish cultural expression - the London Irish Centre in Camden, and the Irish Cultural Centre in Hammersmith. Both still actively teach Irish culture and host a range of music, dance and literature events. These centres were set up by migrants but were soon seen by later (post-1980) arrivals as ‘excessive’ and inauthentic in their practices of Irishness (Gray 2004, p. 108).

Even so, any excessiveness was evidence that the Irish were becoming more conscious of their identity. Ireland's cultural heritage had been commercialised in leprechauns and tin whistles. A country once famously self-loathing now exported all things Irish (Hussey 1995, p. 470). However, as globalisation exposed Ireland to outside influences, the boundaries of what constituted ‘Irish’ became blurred. U2’s success, for example, may lie in their identity as cultural leaders, as an example of cultural hybridity or as the result of Americanisation and globalisation - or all of the above.

U2 began as a Celtic rock band influenced by American icons such as Bob Dylan, but they became increasingly global in their focus (Danks and Kennedy 2001, p. 119). Bono saw America as a catalyst in recreating the band’s Irishness, as Kearney (1988, p. 187) observed:

“No, as we are rediscovering ourselves through our encounter with others, reclaiming our voice in our migrations through other cultures and continents ... we are beginning to realise that the Irish thing was always there.”

Although U2 is one of Irish music’s great success stories, they were part of a wide circle of musicians driving Irishness - many of whom were not born in Ireland. The Pogues, for example, represented emigrants embracing cultural roots, creating a hybrid genre of punk rock and Irish. Born and raised in London, the band members’ sense of pride sprang from an Irish diaspora
upbringing (Nagle 2009, p.166). Where U2 devised a sound that left the politics and traditional music of Ireland behind, The Pogues thrived off ethnicity and a punk attitude to political messages.

It can be argued that The Pogues projected a greater musical sense of Irishness than U2, although the former were not based in Ireland. U2’s Irishness is based mainly on geography; to say they are a part of Ireland’s success in rebuilding its cultural identity is debatable (Kearney 1997, p. 81). While The Pogues are part of a diaspora affected by nationalist projections of Irishness, U2 represent the post-nationalist ‘home-born’ citizen, influenced by globalisation and Americanisation (Dawe and Mulreany 2001).

In 1990, Ireland elected its first female President, Mary Robinson. She took up her presidency with a clear objective - to redefine the meaning of being Irish. For Robinson, the inclusion of the diaspora was key to understanding what the notion of being Irish had become. Robinson’s speech “Cherish the Irish Diaspora” was one of her most famous; delivered to the Irish government in 1995, it highlighted the importance of diaspora to Ireland’s growth:

*The more I know of these stories the more it seems to me an added richness of our heritage that Irishness is not simply territorial. In fact Irishness as a concept seems to me at its strongest when it reaches out to everyone on this island and shows itself capable of honouring and listening to those whose sense of identity, and whose cultural values, may be more British than Irish. It can be strengthened again if we turn with open minds and hearts to the array of people outside Ireland for whom this island is a place of origin.* (Robinson 1995)

Yet the idea of an Irish identity inclusive of both those born in Ireland and those born abroad has proved difficult to ‘market’. Hostility towards the diaspora is quite common, with those born abroad labelled “tans” or “plastic paddy” (Gibney and Lansen 2005, p. 324), and their Irish authenticity constantly questioned. The idea of an inclusive Irishness may only exist for those who are not actually citizens. So are there actually two separate Irish identities - in Ireland and outside? Do those born outside the island deserve to be barred from an ‘authentic’ Irish identity? The complexity of Irish culture has caused this rift, but it has not harmed Ireland commercially. With Irish music inspired by liberalism, politics, societal restructuring and the diaspora, is geography becoming a non-issue in the creation of Irish culture (Cleary 2007, p. 103)? As long as cultural creativity continues to prosper, the wider debate of “What is Irishness?” may recede.
Issue 3 - Creating Celtic Rock: Hybridity, globalisation and finding Ireland’s new musical voices

As the Irish diaspora looks for links to its homeland, cultural hybridity emerges, raising debates on Irish culture’s evolution into the commercialised commodity it is today (McLaughlin and McLoone 2000, p. 181; Danks and Kennedy 2001; Basegmez 2005). The following highlights important moments in Ireland’s cultural history, looking at the impact of heritage, recorded music and hybridity in popular music during globalisation, creating a foundation for the recreation of Irish identity.

In 1959, the USA witnessed a hybrid céilidh music scene, popular among the already well-established Irish diaspora, with the tunes of Irish traditional music meeting instruments and faster tempo of American bands (Bayor and Meaghan 1997, p. 488). Some of the most influential Irish musical artists of the 1960s were in fact emigrants, using traditional songs to entertain both Irish and non-Irish abroad. Examples of Irish ‘hybrid’ recorded material by emigrant groups such as The Clancy Brothers (USA) were exported to Ireland with an innovative American/British twist (Wyndham 2006, p. 124).

Ireland’s musical heritage underwent hybridisation overseas (Featherstone 2005, p. 56), but traditional music was still “uncool” to younger generations. Sean O’Riada and his project Ceoltóirí Chualann attempted to revitalise traditional music with interesting scores and new instrumentation, but this modernisation caused outrage to traditionalists (Prosser and Sitaram 1999, p. 237). Similar musicians also faced resistance; Luke Kelly, a Dublin native in the UK, was a member of the re-emerging British folk scene. His popularity saw him return to Dublin with celebrity status, later partnering with Ronnie Drew to form a band synonymous with Irish popular music - The Dubliners. The band’s most popular song, “Seven Drunken Nights”, was banned from Irish public broadcast by the state/church run media (Prosser and Sitaram 1999, p. 236). Much like the 1930s Anti-Jazz Campaign (Issue 1), radio still acted as a medium for cultural and moral control (McCarthy 1999, p. 110).

1960s Ireland began to see influences of soul, blues, rock and roll and country mixing with Irish traditional timings and compositions. The sudden surge in cultural imports offered examples of diversity and musical hybridity, including Van Morrison and his band Them. Morrison’s father was
an avid record collector with obscure tastes for the Mississippi Delta and Appalachian music (Hage 2009, p. 1). Morrison himself was weaned on this music, but also had affiliation with traditional Irish music. The 1964 recording of “Baby Please Don’t Go” and its b-side “Gloria” provided an early example of how a Belfast-born singer raised on these sounds could himself become part of their history.

1969 saw the emergence of Celtic rock; Thin Lizzy, a joint project between Phil Lynott and two former members of Them (Eric Bell and Eric Wrixon), became the torchbearer of Ireland’s new popular music genre. In 1973, Thin Lizzy released a take on the Irish ballad “Whiskey in the Jar” - a familiar Irish song mixed with rock influences provided the right balance to break the UK market. Previous releases such as “Ray Gun” were almost ‘too Celtic’ (Byrne 2005, p. 30) to be successful.

However, the political landscape had become more complex; British-ruled Ulster was at crisis point. After the events of Bloody Sunday (1972), artists such as Christy Moore highlighted the Troubles in their songs. Paul McCartney, with his song “Give Ireland Back to the Irish”, was one of the few British artists to comment; the song went to number one in the Irish single charts in March 1972 and spent eight weeks in the British charts despite being banned by the BBC (Strachan and O’Malley-Younger 2012, p. 140).

Although debate continues around Irishness (Issue 2), there is little doubt that this period of cultural hybridity allowed traditional and modern influences to evolve into a powerful medium for expression. This new Celtic identity would be the foundation from which Ireland would build cultural commercialism; in 1998 An Bord Tráchtála (Irish Trade Board) cited the music industry as the largest magnet for tourism into Ireland (Foster 2008, p. 155).
Issue 4 - Celtic Tiger, Riverdance and the Export of Culture

By the 1960s, Ireland was repairing its poor economy, with a new Taoiseach in Sean LeMass and a strong focus on fiscal policy and high-quality secondary education, allowing the country to create a skilled workforce (Casey and Lee 2006, p. 139). The country had begun changing policies to welcome foreign business and move away from protectionism by abolishing the Controls of Manufacturers Act in 1957 (Murphy 2000, p. 8). The IDA (part of the Department of Industry and Commerce) was introduced in 1969 to encourage foreign investment, and the country became attractive due to its foreign investor grant schemes and low business tax (Dorgan 2006, p. 3).

By the 1970s, the economy was showing signs of improvement. GDP per capita grew from 32% (1960) to 42% (1973). However, there were low points: inflation rates grew rapidly through the late 1970s-80s, alongside unemployment rates and government expenditure (Dorgan 2006, p. 3). The oil crisis brought many countries to the brink of recession, and Irish emigration began to rise; approximately 216,000 left between 1980-1990 (Bayor and Meaghan 1997, p.461). Yet by 1995, Ireland was experiencing an unprecedented economic boom; GDP hit a peak of 8% and employment was at its highest rate since fiscal retrenchment policies were introduced in 1987 (Murphy 2000, p. 5). Heavy investment from the IT sector combined with a skilled workforce brought in many multinational corporations.

Ireland also saw cultural exports such as U2, The Corrs, Sinead O’Connor, Mary Black and Enya strengthen its music industry: between 1996-2001 Irish artists won 48 platinum awards (Henry, p. 81). The Irish film industry boomed (Keohane et al.). Ireland had been successful in back-to-back Eurovision Song Contests, highlighting the popularity of its music in Europe. During the 1994 contest, however, a small interval performance called Riverdance became one of Ireland’s most successful cultural exports. After its Eurovision success, the producers turned it into a full-length production. In 1995, an estimated 170,000 people attended the show during its eight-week Dublin debut - equivalent to 10% of the Irish population between ages 15-64 (Henry 2007, p. 82). The show strategically moved to London and New York to capitalise on Irish populations. Its multicultural approach - and the effects of globalisation - meant that it quickly gathered an international fan base and soon became the new symbol of Irish modernity (Wulff 2008, p. 121).
However, Riverdance is in fact a hybrid of the modern and the traditional (Wyndham 2006, p. 124). Irish step dancing underwent many transitions in the 20th century, affected by discourses in imperialism and Catholicism (Keohan et al. n.d.). Originally banned under British occupancy and regulated after, certain movements were deemed immoral while particular dances were sanctioned by church and state. Though modern competitive Irish dancing is elaborate in its footwork and costumes, rigid postures remain. Riverdance sought to change this, simplifying costumes and introducing arm movements, synonymous now with lead dancer Michael Flatley (Keohan et al. n.d.). The result was a new and exciting way of displaying Irish dancing to a wider audience.

Riverdance spent 18 weeks on top of the Irish music charts and was top ten in the UK, contributing greatly to the Irish creative industry and to its economy (Henry 2007, p. 83). However, although Riverdance coincided with economic prosperity in Ireland, producer Moya Doherty was ultimately disappointed that more cultural entrepreneurship didn’t follow:

“I’m surprised – I expected more to happen since Riverdance... I would have thought that we had sown the seeds for a younger generation, because of all of the travel, the different cultures in Riverdance; ... I think what is happening at the moment, and maybe this is what has always happened, is that it is driven by the individual. And the landscape and the scene is very much set by an individual...” (Keohane et al n.d)

Irish dance became popular globally, although there is no monetary compensation in competitive dancing. Shows like Riverdance created a realistic career path (O’Connor 2003, p. 134), and Irish dancers have seen a cultural hobby turn into an opportunity to become cultural professionals as performers or by completing a formal teaching qualification (TCRG) and opening an official school.
Ireland’s economic boom is now a crisis, and a new peak of emigration is happening (Ghosh 2012). However, members of the modern diaspora are better educated and equipped (O’Donovan 2009, p. 97). A convergence of technology and the networking of the public means the Irish diaspora is more connected to Ireland than ever before; restrictions of locality have been removed (Wall 2003, p. 227), exposing Ireland to global media channels while maintaining connections with citizens abroad. For example, the SeventyMillion project launched in 2008 to use the internet to track down and record the 70 million members of the diaspora. It also serves as a social network, allowing people to get more involved (SeventyMillion 2008).

Apart from social networking, the internet serves as discourse to creative businesses. Ireland’s music industry has suffered heavily from illegal file sharing. The economics around which music industry centres were under attack (Wall 2003, p. 201); CD sales fell from €146 million in 2006 to €56 million last year (O’Halloran 2011), forcing the industry to push for laws to police online piracy, similar to proposed SOPA laws in the US. In January 2012, the IMRA filed suit against the government for not implementing ISP blocking to prevent file sharing (Madden 2012), as protection of intellectual property is crucial for profitability (Henry 2007, p. 37). After several months of pressure, the government signed an anti-piracy bill, despite strong opposition (McDonald 2012).

Ireland is familiar with control policies implemented without public support; for many years the Catholic church had powers to censor any media it felt was immoral. The Anti-Jazz movement, which banned the broadcast of Jazz music on Radio Éireann (Issue 1), provides an early example. In the 1990s, similar situations remained; the rock band REM had the video for “Losing My Religion” banned due to a sequence with a crucifix and other ‘homoerotic content’ (Bowler and Dray 1999). Today, however, the power of the music industry rather than the church influences government policy. Where previous controls stood for morality and national identity, we now see corporations pushing government for policies to protect profits.
Conclusion

Ireland’s diaspora and the cultural expression garnered from communities abroad has had a large influence in establishing Irish identity. Music, dance, literature, performance art and images of both traditional Celtic and modern ‘marketing’ nature (shamrocks and leprechauns) became popular symbols of Irish identity abroad, but it is not just the shamrock wearing, tri-colour waving, Irish dancing spectacle typically displayed on St Patrick’s day, nor simply tales of sorrow and despair from poverty and famine.

Although debates question the authenticity of the diaspora’s influence on Irish identity, it is fair to say that emigrants representing Ireland around the world have contributed greatly to the invention of Irishness. Declan Kiberd (1996, p. 288) also credits those who are not Irish:

“Irishness is like Jewishness, whatever people say it is. To be Irish, in such a context, is simply to be called Irish, and to know what that means you have to ask the English”

Ireland in now synonymous with cultural creativity and has developed successful creative industries. This sector is vital to its economics. The positivity in Ireland’s cultural identity is no longer offset by previous discourses in staunch Catholicism, IRA terrorist campaigns, economic strife or lingering stereotypes of the ‘drunk’ or ‘fighting’ Irish. Whatever individual opinions may be, Ireland has seen a significant revival in its culture, its identity and its pride.
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