

## IRELAND: A CULTURE REFLECTED IN ITS MUSIC

by Fergal Kavauagh\*

A country's history can often be traced through its music, and this is particularly true of Ireland. From traditional folk tunes to modern rock, singers and bands have always drawn on the spirit, culture and history of this often troubled nation.

In Ireland music and culture are different sides of the same coin, so much so that the harp has appeared on all coins issued in Dublin since the formation of the Free State in 1922. It also became, and remains, the official symbol on the Government seal, and featured on the State's flag until the introduction of the tricolour. More familiarly, at an international level, Guinness Breweries also feature the harp as the symbol of their famous stout, now Ireland's biggest export.

The harp is, however, misrepresentative of Irish music of the previous century, being in fact typical of the 1500's. The country was then governed by Chieftains, who employed professional harpists to compose and perform for them. When invaders forced the Chieftains to flee, these musicians became "travelling" or "itinerant" harpists, and the tradition gradually faded. There are no written records of how this music sounded, as Irish music is part of the oral tradition, passed on from musician to musician through playing, and inevitably adapted to suit the individual's style (and memory!).

The Celts' arrival in Ireland almost two thousand years ago and the Viking invasion in 800 A.D. helped influence the tradition of storytelling through song, which continues to the present time. At a time in the early 1970's when Irish youth were rejecting their traditions, Celtic Rock group Horslips recorded a song about the arrival of the Viking invaders, *Trouble with a Capital T*, based on a Celtic marching tune and played on two electric guitars. This fusion of rock and traditional music began a renewed interest and sense of identity and pride in Irish music.

Today's home grown superstars continue the tradition of reflecting their culture in their musical output. Both the Cran-

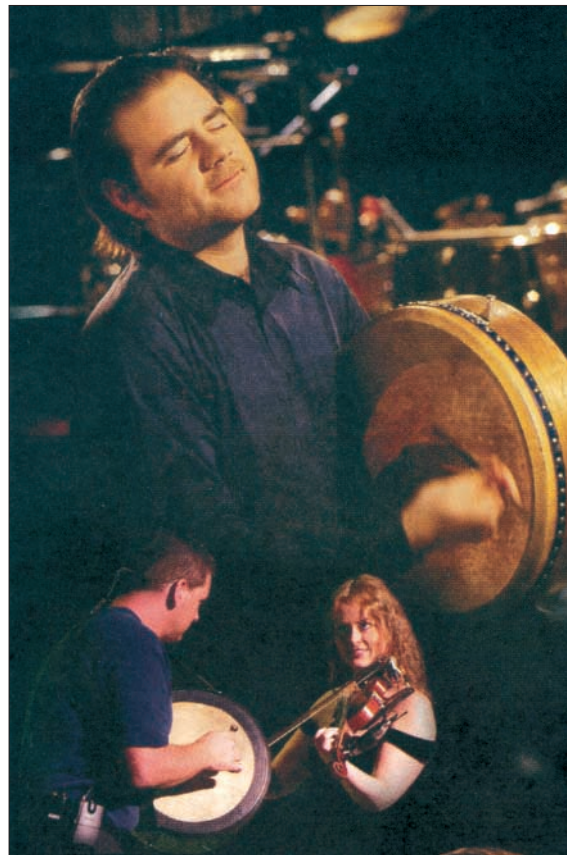
berries (*Zombie*) and U2 (*Sunday Bloody Sunday* and *Please*) are synonymous with songs dealing with the troubles in Northern Ireland. It is true that these bands' repertoires rarely explicitly incorporate traditional music, but Bono claims that "U2 are a folk band – the loudest folk band you'll ever hear", and that they are continuing "the Irish tradition of the story-teller"<sup>1</sup>.

The main themes running through traditional songs are British occupation, the famine and emigration. English settlers imposed the Penal Laws at the end of the seventeenth century, including the ban of the Irish language. With no written record of the songs of the time, many Irish language lyrics were lost forever.

The invaders brought their own music, the ballad form, which was soon incorporated into the form of Irish music. Songs from the time spoke of the imprison-

ment of tenants and the burning of their properties for their inability to pay the landlord's high rents. *The Fields of Athenry*, now popular as a football chant, and *Skibbereen* both speak of these atrocities. Interestingly, in a contemporary demonstration of the country's culture affecting the music in these politically delicate times, Sinéad O'Connor's 1998 version of the latter song leaves out the final verse where "Irish men of freedom stern will rally one and all... to raise the cheer, Revenge for Skibbereen".

When the potato crop repeatedly failed in the mid-nineteenth century, the population fell from over eight million to two and a half million through starvation and emigration. The emigrants brought their music with them to Britain and America, sharing it with who-



ever wanted to listen – this can be seen in the film *Titanic*, where Irish music is performed throughout the voyage. In the 1860's 26% percent of New York's population was Irish, and a third of these were native Irish speakers. Of course this language couldn't be sustained in America, but the tunes of the songs they were singing were translated or set to new English language versions. The traditional *Paddy's Lament* is infused with homesickness – with the promise of a wage many emigrants fought on opposing sides in the 1775 American War of Independence. The song concludes with "I wish I was at home in dear old Dublin". Sinéad O'Connor, who recorded it on *Sean-Nós Nua*, her collection of Irish traditional songs, cites it as "the best anti-war song ever made"<sup>2</sup>.

More emigrants found work on America's transcontinental railroad line, alongside African emigrants – both were said to have sung continuously as they worked. Inevitably the two genres became intertwined, and the traditional songs from both cultures picked up new rhythms and arrangements. The marriage of Irish and African music has been demonstrated to great effect in recent years by the band Afro-Celt Sound System, and many traditional southern Italian folk songs owe their origins to African music, but sound notably similar to Irish reels and jigs.

Emigration has been essential to the survival of Irish music – emigrants wanting to keep in touch with their own identity gathered together to sing and to speak Irish – these songs eventually were integrated into the local culture, influencing American music as we know it today – Bob Dylan's *With God On Our Side* uses an old Irish tune and bluegrass and country music both acknowledge their musical origins. Even the Beatles, looking across the Atlantic, were once a skiffle band, a form derived from Irish traditional music. American film-score composer Elmer Bernstein opines that the music "... comes directly from life, uncensored from the soul of the people; it's soul music"<sup>3</sup>.

As everywhere in the centuries before the arrival of radio and television, the music produced and listened to in Ireland was very insular. One of the factors halting significant musical innovation was the Catholic Church. They claimed dancing was debauched and denounced all involved. They were helped further by the Irish State who, in 1936, banned all dances, even private, without a licence. Many talented young musicians emigrated to America where the Irish traditional music scene was booming. When British and American rock filtered through to Ireland, people began to abandon their musical roots, looking for a more exciting alternative not controlled by the Church or State.

Interest in home-produced music was to finally return in the 1970's with the aforementioned Horslips. Dressed like Celtic druids, their mix of traditional Irish music with electric rock was extremely exciting and uniquely Irish, helping revive the music of their

own country. Rockers Thin Lizzy had a huge international hit in 1973 with a reworking of the traditional *Whiskey In The Jar*, since covered by Metallica. Bono says that this was one of the first songs he learned on guitar<sup>4</sup>.

This renewed interest opened Irish ears to the more traditional vein of their rich culture. Traditional musicians met in pubs for a *seisiún* (traditional session), an impromptu gathering of traditional players contributing freely together. The ballad form became extremely popular and was often used to make social or political statements. Christy Moore is the best known of these singers, with a huge repertoire of songs from not only Ireland, but also Britain and America. Outside influences have enriched Irish music, with both the bouzouki and mandolin becoming important features in recent years. With up to 40% immigrants in some areas of Ireland today, the genre is destined to continue to develop and reflect another thousand years of culture!

\* The author of this article runs the website [www.tuneintoenglish.com](http://www.tuneintoenglish.com), with many activities for learning English through music. He also presents a show in schools called **Tune Into Ireland – a cultural journey through music**, as well as **The Tune Into English Roadshow**.

<sup>1</sup> Bringing It All Back Home, Nuala O'Connor, BBC Books, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Sleeve notes for *Sean-Nós Nua*, Sinéad O'Connor, Hummingbird Records 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Bringing It All Back Home, Nuala O'Connor, BBC Books, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Idem.

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