
Horslips in Irish Musical and Literary Culture

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Abstract. This essay examines the literary impact of a musical electric-folk band. *Horslips* combined psychedelic, and hard rock with Irish traditional motifs and Celtic narrative themes. Spanning the decade from 1970 to 1980, their success and decline followed the trajectory of the countercultural movement, which came late to Ireland. The band's revival of mythic characters and historical events drawn from the Irish past attracted fans from all over the island, as well as the diaspora; many young people gained an appreciation of their Irish heritage for the first time, as *Horslips* became the first electric folk-rock band to fuse disparate genres, and to succeed as an Irish-based independent collective who controlled the graphics, marketing, distribution, and promotion of their music. They inspired the likes of U2 and the Irish punk and new-wave rock musicians who followed them, and without the pioneering efforts of *Horslips*, Irish music and culture today may never have reached its current success, three decades later.

Keywords. *Horslips*, Irish popular music, Irish traditional music, Cheryl Herr, John Kelly, Patrick McCabe, Paul Muldoon, Gerry Smyth.

Resumen: En este trabajo se examina el impacto literario de un grupo musical de folk eléctrico. *Horslips* combinaba rock duro y psicodélico con motivos tradicionales irlandeses y temas de la narrativa celta. Su éxito, que abarca de 1970 a 1980, y su declive siguieron la trayectoria del movimiento contracultural que llegó a Irlanda tardíamente. Al llevar a cabo un renacimiento de los caracteres míticos y los sucesos históricos del pasado irlandés, el grupo atrajo seguidores de todas partes de la isla, así como de la diáspora; muchos jóvenes llegaron a apreciar su herencia irlandesa por primera vez. *Horslips* se convirtió en el primer grupo de rock folk eléctrico que fusionó géneros muy dispares, que alcanzó el éxito como un colectivo independiente asentado en Irlanda y que consiguió controlar los gráficos, el marketing, la distribución y la promoción de su música. Fueron la inspiración y los predecesores de, entre otros, U2, el 'punk' irlandés y los músicos del rock 'new-wave'. Sin el trabajo pionero de *Horslips* la música irlandesa y su cultura no habrían alcanzado, tres décadas más tarde, el éxito del que gozan en la actualidad.

Palabras clave: *Horslips*, música irlandesa popular, música irlandesa tradicional, Cheryl Herr, John Kelly, Patrick McCabe, Paul Muldoon, Gerry Smyth.

Horslips joined literary craft and cultural heritage with musical fusion. Playing traditionally inspired tunes on amplified instruments, they combined harder, commercial rock with Irish themes. Beginning what U2 advanced, *Horslips* became the first successful rock act based for their entire career

in Ireland. Abroad, they hit the charts and toured widely. These five Irishmen formed a home-grown, counter-corporate and counter-cultural collective, influenced by the Beats and the Beatles, Máirtín Ó Direáin and Elvis. *Horslips* controlled their stage presentation, graphic design, record pressing, and concert

promotion. They composed music for The Abbey Theatre which expanded into a concept album, "The Táin". They worked with Paul Muldoon and have been featured in novels by John Kelly and Patrick McCabe.

Their albums in the 1970s adapted legendary and historic texts, as they interpreted the *Book of Invasions*, Turlough O'Carolan, the Famine, and emigration.

This essay will explore the band's musical legacy through their appropriation of Irish motifs. *Horslips* blended the energy of the hippie movement with the glitz of glam-rock. They mixed progressive arrangements with traditional tunes. They issued concept albums that explained the Irish past to an international audience eager for amplified narratives that took forty minutes to hear rather than four weeks of class to memorize. For many young people in the 1970s, *Horslips* energized Irish identity. In the words of bassist Barry Devlin: "There was something about *Horslips* that Irish kids recognised as being theirs. We get lambasted regularly for loads of stuff-- and rightly so for much of it-- but the one thing that is undeniable is that we really did change for ever [sic] how people felt about their own culture. And the place where people really went bat-shit was the North" (Kelly 2004: 43). This quote from a factual interview by Irish rock radio personality John Kelly comes from his fictional take on growing up in Fermanagh, during the height of the Troubles. This was a band that challenged territorial limitations of who, what, or where could be considered Irish. *Horslips* drew its members from Ireland and beyond, as it represented an Irish identity transcending political boundaries. Devlin hailed from Tyrone; keyboardist Jim Lockhart came from Dublin. Percussionist Éamon Carr was born in Kells in Co. Meath, guitarist Johnny Fean grew up near Shannon, and fiddler Charles O'Connor emigrated to Dublin from Middlesbrough in the North of England. Three of the band earned master's degrees, four worked in public relations and advertising, and they began playing only after posing as musicians for a beer commercial.

From these eclectic backgrounds, Ireland's first homegrown success became not only a rock band but a cultural force. *Horslips* also upstaged and satirized rock and folk traditions. This send-up led, in turn, to three literary treatments by writers who came of age in the

1960s and 70s. Two novels feature the band in a cameo role: John Kelly's *Sophisticated Boom-Boom* (2003), and Patrick McCabe's *The Dead School* (1995). Paul Muldoon, contributing to an 2007 anthology of writers recalling their favorite concerts, chooses the band's penultimate Belfast gig at Whitla Hall in April 1980 to muse upon on his fan worship and eventual friendship with the band. I will examine how Kelly, McCabe, and Muldoon's incorporate *Horslips* into their own interpretation of Irish identities as transformed by the musical and cultural changes of the later twentieth century. Taken as a harbinger of Irish cultural change, *Horslips* pioneered today's Celtic Revival within the realms of the media and entertainment. Without the band's example as a creative force who controlled their image, managed their promotion, and collaborated with other Irish writers and artists, the rocky road to success within and beyond Dublin would have proven even more jolting for recent Irish performers.

Horslips began in hippie Dublin. One traveling revue, Tara Telephone, connected the potential of Irish heritage with the power of liberation movements. Schooled in the Beats, fresh from the Liverpool poetry scene, Éamon Carr worked with Peter Fallon on a 1969 magazine, *Capella*. Allen Ginsberg, T. Rex's Marc Bolan, King Crimson's Pete Sinfield, and *Horslips* bassist Barry Devlin's sister Marie's husband, Seamus Heaney, contributed. (Harper and Hodgett 2005: 215-6) The project that became the band *Horslips* coalesced around Fallon and Carr's experimentation. Jim Fitzpatrick illustrated a broadsheet, "Book of Invasions", in 1969. As drummer and lyricist for Tara Telephone and then *Horslips*, Carr played a pivotal role in merging media.

Carr explains that the success of The Clancy Brothers and The Dubliners had not brought to younger Irish in the later 1960s a sense of cultural pride. He felt betrayed and believed that "it was important to express oneself in a way that helped establish an identity". (Cunningham 1999: 192) Carr grew up around Kells. In Newgrange's shadow, he pored over 1950s American comic books. He merged Stan Lee's superheroes with Irish myth. Carr related during the band's later tours of America how he chatted with rock radio d.j.'s about Cú Chulainn as if he was a fullback for the Meath minors hurling squad. Carr mixed Celtic with

countercultural. He elaborates: "The merging of the two cultures was the kind of stuff you used to see in *Oz* and it only took a simple leap of the imagination to visualise how these legendary tales might be placed into a musical format. The parallel was there between Celtic and Marvel comic heroes. But it wasn't a glib thing and you couldn't treat it lightly", he cautions (Cunningham 1999: 192). "It had to be approached properly and fittingly. I had studied Old Irish at college, so it was a case of delving back into these subjects and doing a lot of research, like preparing a thesis. Getting deeper into the story behind *The Tain*, I began to discover things that they never taught us at school. There had been elements of Eastern philosophy infiltrating into rock 'n' roll, possibly through George Harrison's interest in the Maharishi, but now I was examining Western mystery traditions and it was taking *Horslips* on a new journey".

This journey spiralled off into the mystical but its musical grounding remained plugged in and eager for electrification. Although the band began opening for British folk-rock stalwarts such as Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span, its later career paralleled more the folkish flourishes of harder rocking Jethro Tull. However, while the British bands remained content largely with reviving or imitating earlier indigenous sounds, the training of O'Connor and Fean as traditional players, of Lockhart in jazz and classical arrangement, and of Devlin and Carr in rock amplified the living Irish musical legacy itself. Joe Cleary characterizes the band's aesthetic as "essentially a Celtic version of progressive rock, with the latter's high art or rock-symphonic ambitions" (2007: 273). However, as Devlin's remark to John Kelly implies, the band never took itself too seriously amidst its pomp and stomp. While British progressive and folk bands struggled to merge aggressive rock into their repertoire, *Horslips* slipped back and forth between folk and rock teasingly yet adeptly.

Carr served as the lyricist and researched archives for his narratives that structured the band's concept albums. His poetic and eclectic background deepened the group's commitment to their inventive campaign to raise the volume on a musical narrative combination to awaken Irish youth to their heritage. The band emerged during widespread malaise and indifference,

if not frequent hostility, towards what the Republic manufactured as an Irish image meant for tourists more than natives. *Horslips*, like their fellow artists who established such efforts as the Dolmen and Gallery Presses, determined to reclaim Celtic stories and Irish images for a restless younger audience. The band also vowed not to move to London. This "grassroots capitalism", thanks to the decision by *Horslips* to remain in Ireland to control their music, catalyzed their mid-1970s revival of folk themes played with rock energy. Jim Lockhart emphasizes that *Horslips* never meant to be a "hippie novelty act". 1972's debut LP presented "tunes that had been passed down through the generations". Lockhart distinguishes novelty from innovation. "No one had ever given Irish music this treatment – we wanted to take the melodies that were inherently Irish or Celtic, put them in a different form of music" (Cunningham 1999: 192).

Horslips' style echoes their sound. Lockhart and his wife took garish fabric swaths from Clery's for the band's outlandish stage attire, shown to typical contrast on the inner sleeve of their first LP. Its outside sleeve, by comparison, came in an accordion-shaped die-cut jacket that cost, Eamon Carr lamented, as much as "Happy to Meet, Sorry to Part" itself did to record. Gerry Smyth suggests *Horslips* "presented a direct *visual* challenge to the music's associated iconography" (2005: 44).

The cover of the band's third LP, 1974's "Dancehall Sweethearts", symbolizes this. Paul Muldoon views the five as "still hairy, fur-flaunting *Horslips* reflected in a smoked-glass tabletop suggesting the shotgun wedding of Terence Conran and Conan the Barbarian" (2007: 138). Nuala O'Connor defines their campaign: "The 'mythic' and portentous were important visual and conceptual elements in the band's presentation, which ran to high camp in set design, costume, and theatrical grandiosity" (2001: 130). This look jumbled, for Tara Telephone and fellow minstrels, Jim Fitzpatrick's graphic style evoking Alphonse Mucha, Hokusai, Aubrey Beardsley, Stan Lee, and the Cuala Press. Fitzpatrick interwove florid embellishment and lysergic hues into a funky Pop Art Celtic Revival that graced album covers by hard rockers Thin Lizzy, folk innovators Planxty, and the band that blended these two genres, *Horslips*.

Mixing flair with literacy, *Horslips* had been preceded in Dublin counterculture by Tara Telephone. According to Carr, this "poetry workshop" grew a "musical wing". (Clayton-Lea 2004: 56) The revue's name, as Muldoon puts it, "deftly connected the Major Old Heap with the Major New Hip". (2007: 137) Having known Fallon and Carr then, Muldoon reflects how Tara Telephone proved "partly Ireland's answer to the Liverpool poets, partly to a question no one had ever thought to ask, even in an age of matching suits and ties". (2007: 137) Nuala O'Connor imagines their heirs "*Horslips*" as compounding hornpipes with slipjigs, but the band's true derivation defines its own shotgun wedding. (2001: 129)

Paul Muldoon recalls how his mother became besotted with the band's sex appeal. He credits the surname of their first guitarist, Declan Sinnott, as embodying their image. "The idea of sinning or not sinning was somehow in the air, particularly since the band's name itself seemed, in one intellection, to be a pun on 'whore's lips'" (2007: 136). He also compares them to cowslips and oxlips, "but, again, in a perverse way". Their real origin? Drinking at a Chinese restaurant, bandmembers mangled "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse". This spoonerism stuck, and the band found its curious name.

Horslips challenged the norm not only in nomenclature. Dynamism characterized their organization. Three of them met as copywriters; they could better Leopold Bloom as, in Muldoon's phrase, "the literary embodiment of the newfangled Irish advertising man" (2007:137). They supervised illustration, production, promotion, and distribution. Tom Sherlock explains the band's impact. "With a strong background in advertising and graphic design, members of the band brought a visual awareness and strong stage presentation to their work and were pioneers in bringing what was identified as an Irish form of popular culture to a young audience not previously exposed to rock culture" (Sherlock 2003: 503). In 1972, *Horslips'* singles and debut album from their homegrown OATS label topped national charts.

"Happy to Meet, Sorry to Part" set Irish sales records. It's shaped in a die-cut cover template of Charles O'Connor's concertina. This instrument, once disparaged for being a woman's form of accompaniment to traditional tunes, packaged the contradiction that *Horslips*

conveyed. Inside the sleeve, five longhairs lounged in Clery's curtains and tapestries, in glam-rag glory. They mug around a cartoon prop of a bartender – slickly drawn by O'Connor in mid-century Guinness adman caricature – who pours them drinks. This glossy interior offers the unexpected, disguised within a vintage Irish squeeze box. But the concertina once was an exotic import. Now, it blends into many traditional arrangements. Similarly, *Horslips* presents what at the drop of the record needle and just before its rise sound as if sluggish standbys. The album begins and ends with an accordion's wheeze and grunting gents, but the swirling textures of what these instrumental snippets frame as the album's main tracks inject bold psychedelic electronics, immersed in Irish tradition.

The record's hexagonal design replicated stones that Finn McCool trod at his giant causeway. The concept of the inner vs. the outer sleeve combines glam and folk, progressive rock and venerable reels. This blossomed into a full-fledged concept sequel, enriching urban-rural, amplified-acoustic clashes. They added to their musical mix both historical inspiration and mythopoeic vision. The apparent roots of the second album, "The Táin", tap into a 1972 proposal to back a production of the *Táin Bó Cualnge* at the Abbey Theatre. This remained a stillborn project, apparently. But, *Horslips* generated an interlinked sequence of instrumental and sung passages about the Ulster Cycle.

Whether or not the Abbey meant to present the *Táin* in modern setting or medieval dress, *Horslips* premiered the tale on vinyl and in concert. Their 1973 LP, titled "The Táin", begins with textured whirlwinds as time and space collapse. Framed in synthesized mist and processed miasma, production phasing recreates a parting of the present curtain that allows listeners to enter the realm of past myth.

The LP cover glowered with metallic, monochrome contrasts. Muldoon describes the front of "The Táin" with its iconic image of "a somewhat anachronistic mailed fist argent on a field sable that owed something to" Louis de Brocquy's *Táin* illustrations for Thomas Kinsella's translation, but also displayed "the regalia of early-onset punk" (2007: 137-138; see Kinsella 1970). In album art designed by Charles O'Connor, each of the ten *Horslips* studio LPs issued between 1972 and 1979 peddled a different artifact that delighted in overlapping Irish influences – not only

musically and lyrically, but graphically.

Artwork for their 1975 LP "The Unfortunate Cup of Tea" expresses the band's sonic predicament, and their cultural manifesto. The inside photo featured the five musicians crouched beneath the window of a whitewashed cabin trying to hoist a giant green monster, as if pasted from a Marvel comic, through its tiny window. The album's cover manipulates a stereoscopic image of a courting couple from a sub-Dion Boucicault melodrama. Behind the gurning pair, the green monster's outraged face grimaces as he spies them through the window. The interior sleeve shows the stereotype, doubling message and medium, of traditional Ireland. The outer cover situates the band eavesdropping, ready for mischief. They upend a pulp icon into a prop to satirize audience expectations of Irish performers. The LP's music, less fortunately, favored mainstream, slightly progressive but less overtly Irish, rock fusion.

This direction met with less critical acclaim, as had the previous year's aborted concept album "Dancehall Sweethearts" – alluding to Turlough O'Carolan's travels. (Prendergast 1990: 83) Sparking a necessary rejuvenation, Paul Muldoon, producing in 1974 for BBC-Northern Ireland, recruited *Horslips* to compose twenty minutes of theme music for what Muldoon calls "a souped-up version of the *Agallamh na Senorach*", the fifteenth-century *Colloquy of the Ancients* (2007: 138). After an acoustic Christmas record, the band in 1976 bettered their first entry into Celtic tales told in the rock idiom. A more assured 1976 LP, "The Book of Invasions", presented aspects of Irish legend within, as the subtitle of the album indicates, "A Celtic Symphony". This comprises three movements: *Geantraí*, joyous sounds of the Tuatha De Danann's triumph over Fir Bolg, *goltraí*, sad songs of Diarmaid and Grainne, and *suantraí*, sleeping strains after the Tuatha's Tailteann defeat.

Seán Campbell and Gerry Smyth select its song "Trouble with a Capital 'T'" as that Irish hit best representative of 1976. Examining its title, they aver that the word "trouble" was used neither by Tuatha de Danann nor Fir Bolg "when referring to problems encountered in Ireland two and half millennia ago" (2005: 58). This criticism remains true – if to the point of pedantry. But *Horslips*, as Muldoon hints in his essay, meant *The Troubles* too. The LP featured imperialism, resistance, and

betrayal. This 1976 concept album proves relevant to an Irish audience drawn, as the band themselves, from multiple allegiances that two waves of troops killed to defend. The parallels appear obvious even as the narrative remains far in the past: Fir Bolg or Tuatha, British or Irish, Republican or Loyalist, native or settler.

The band, Campbell and Smyth explain, eschews "a gloss of 'Celtic' authenticity on their music by deploying some specious heroic language. Rather the epic imagery ('High on a mountain stands a boat') is set against a level of quotidian experience ('Can't see the fire but we smell the smoke') which attempts to render the *essence* of the narrative. It is in every sense a 'translation' of one world, and the mind-set which sustained it, into another – a sort of dialogue between late twentieth-century Ireland and a number of possible Irelands from the past" (2005: 58). While critics repeat how *Horslips* stirs folk with rock, observers neglect to find the recipe for this blend. I trace their ingredients to the post-conciliar decline of Catholicism in the later 1960s, the loss of patriotism in the guise of its 1916 martyrs, and the significant groundswell of opposition to compulsory Irish. *Horslips* whirls at an urban-rural crossroads: *au courant* with media, pop, and international fads, manipulating their presentation under a Celtic guise, which would seem to tug backwards. Yet, the band resists romanticism. They favor subversion.

Horslips, in Campbell and Smyth's formulation, offers a "representation of a world undergoing change (ancient Ireland) from a world (modern Ireland) undergoing its own set of troubles and transformation" (2005: 59). Cleary insists that the band's radical music lacked a corresponding political message. Smyth in *Noisy Island* separates the band from the Troubles. I argue that the removal in time from the contentions of the Knights of the Red Branch or the Tuatha de Danaan allows *Horslips* to comment upon their fellow Irish men and women locked in mortal combat as if epic heroes mirroring *ourselves*. *Horslips* does not praise such struggle, but they evoke its strife. Unable to deny its presence, they report it – as would a herald, a chronicler, or a bard.

Horslips emphasizes mortal frailty overseen by cosmic detachment. *Horslips*, obliquely commenting in my reading of their albums upon the tensions in the North, refuses to flee from Irish soil into Tír-na-nÓg. Muldoon reflects that the band appeared at a moment

when young Northern Irish students such as himself associated Paisley more with fashion than the Reverend Ian, and Pandemonium with the action on the dancefloor, not at barricades. Yet, *Horslips* weathered the escalation of the Troubles with the 1970s while refusing faction fighting or fleeing into escapist fantasy.

The representative cover of "The Unfortunate Cup of Tea", with its green comic book figure shoved by the band up against a cabin window to gawp at a couple of stagy Irish from a stereoscopic stereotype, stylizes the band's intention. They controlled representation of their hybrid 1970s Irish identity. The counterculture – as Carr himself recalls being inspired by the underground London paper *Oz* – allowed participants to choose their variety of Irishness. *Horslips* liberated their audience from allegiance to sectarian shibboleths. This freedom animates John Kelly's account, *Sophisticated Boom-Boom*, about coming of age while metal battled with punk, and pop with disco, for the attentions of 1970s teenagers. Growing up in the garrison town of Enniskillen, twelve-year-old Declan Lydon seeks escape into music. But, he remains too young to enter the venues where *Horslips* plays across the border in Bundoran. The band represents a vision of Irish culture that liberates 1970s youth from political antagonism or sectarian restrictions. Kelly, through his alter ego Declan, describes how *Horslips* opened the door for his exit out of the Troubles into the musical counterculture.

Cheryl Herr interprets the "gendering of the music scene" in the 1950s, alter – to lift a phrase from the Vétales – "the English Army had just won the war". British and Irish adolescent boys, Herr argues, suddenly grasp pop music as if by "a benign physical compulsion". They become grounded in local and cultural placement by dislocating themselves. Growing up, boys abandon their roots. They seek an alternative way to inhabit the self. Often, this quest locks them up in their bedroom, where they listen obsessively to music so as to create their own "stories for boys" (Herr 2007).

Kelly's novel, cited in passing by Herr, devotes attention to *Horslips*. My analysis deepens her reading of rock music as a subversive, defiantly sub-cultural, and decidedly detached arena of contest for younger Irish. *Sophisticated Boom-Boom* follows the antics of one such rock-addled youth, in late-1970s and early-1980s

Enniskillen. The narrator loves both *Horslips* and punk, Irish traditional and heavy metal music. Tellingly named – combining the Irish saint's name given the son of a Liverpool-born Irish immigrant, known as Elvis Costello, with the Connemara-originated surname of another musician known as Johnny Rotten – Declan Lydon even christens what he calls a "bedroom rock band which would never actually leave the house". He "baptises" himself and his pal, the only two members, as "Furniture". Declan explains: "Not only was this the title of a very long *Horslips* song that we would never be able to play, but it was also an in-joke about the wardrobe that only our fans would ever get" (2004: 94-95).

Later, at Queen's University, Declan places a framed photo of *Horslips* on the nightstand of his lonely Belfast bedsit. He hopes to use the picture to seduce a girl, if one ever enters his room. He imagines she can name the whole band, and that her favorite record would be their début, "Happy to Meet". He will lie to her about seeing them "on long summer nights at the Astoria Ballroom in Bundoran" (2004: 154). This contrasts with reality. Earlier, such reveries resulted in failure in his hometown disco; the girl liked neither *Horslips* nor him.

Earlier, supporting Herr's thesis about the movement from exterior exposure to new music followed by interior introspection that leads to compulsive disc-spinning and air-guitar posing before the bedroom mirror, Declan at twelve attended a "Jamborora '77" at Mount Melleray monastery in County Waterford. This musical festival marked the (fictional) centennial of the Irish Boy Scouts. In a chapter called "The Book of Invasions," Declan anticipates his first glimpse of the band, as he has been too young to see them during their regular cross-border gigs at Bundoran. For too long, he has heard the prefects at his school boast of hearing the band.

The conjunction of Scout jamboree and open-air concert allows Declan his chance to meet the band. "And so it happened that a long-haired glam band called *Horslips* became an actual presence in my life and really did change everything for the better" (2004: 34). Perched at the lip of the stage, "I was as grateful as a boy could be. And *Horslips* did not laugh or put me down, they smiled back and welcomed me to their glamorous Celtic world". This entry into an imaginative identity, rooted in yet removed from the everyday tedium felt by every adolescent and heightened

by the constant tension of his Northern Irish town near the divided border, detaches Declan from his environment. It frees him to find solace and gain energy from earlier inspirations based on legend and language. *Horslips* enlivens his heritage and quickens his own quest to find his allegiances outside the conquests attempted near his occupied hometown, near the contested frontier.

Declan Lydon when travelling on the bus to Queen's will be interrogated as a suspect republican based solely on his name and his birthplace. While he does not deny these facts, he, like *Horslips*, attempts to transcend religious identification or superficial links to a surname or a school. Instead of badges based on chapel or church, Declan and his fellow students display buttons boasting bands. These fans will enter a "bubble", that in the mid-1980s allows them to leave Belfast behind. They create an alternative Ulster, one loyal to a republic of song and dance rather than crown or clergy.

Sophisticated Boom-Boom mingles the origin myths of Enniskillen with Declan's own family tree. His maturity parallels that of an Irish generation able to form its own musically expansive and artistically generated "bubble" within which, at Queens, to live outside the Northern sectarian barriers. While the Troubles do not diminish, Declan speaks for a vision of another island, separatist in its own Celtic Revival. Declan quotes Éamon Carr's annotations within the album copy for "The Book of Invasions", released the year before "Jamborora '77". "'Honourable in defeat', went the sleeve notes, 'the Tuatha retired to a hidden world parallel to ours where life, immortal, goes on as before'". (2004: 35) Similarly, Declan will grow up to find music that nourishes his own complex Irish identity, whether a local ballad, free jazz imported from America, Van Morrison's Celtic soul, the London Irish punk sung by John Lydon and Elvis Costello (né Declan Patrick McManus), or Dublin rockers such as Thin Lizzy, whose iconic album covers illustrated by Jim Fitzpatrick trace their roots back in turn to his work for the broadsheet co-edited by Eamon Carr, itself titled "The Book of Invasions". Out of such spirals, stories emerge.

Within such encounters, Declan forges his loyalty, not to contemporary political causes,

but ancient tales enlivened by electricity and bravado. Such a quest began when *Horslips* entertained a crowd of ten thousand Scouts from all over the world. Joe Cleary distinguishes the band's "undoubtedly aesthetically radical" music from "any corresponding political radicalism". (2007: 274). This entry into a non-sectarian field, I argue, allows their triumph for Declan and his fellow Scouts. The band toured throughout the rural North of Ireland even at the time of the Miami Showband massacre, yet found themselves far less often threatened than welcomed accordingly. Their conquest stays peaceful, while their music remains a raucous recital of earlier bloodshed – but now glossed and polished by the passage of millennia. "And so, at twilight Jamborora '77, with punk raging in London and Elvis about to die in Memphis, our battlefield landscape of tents, flags, and smoking fires began to boom with the sound of funk-ed-up, rocked-up reels, jigs, set dances, and marches". The Troubles with a Capital "T" return, but this invasion thunders far from the contemporary strife, as the scouts gathered assemble in uniforms for adolescent order rather than martial mayhem.

The music releases Declan from his inhibitions as he begins to enter manhood, revamping a key signifier of his scout uniform into a sign of his fanatical membership in another mass movement, but one claimed by men rather than boys. "I faced into the setting sun, tied my neckerchief around my head and opened my arms wide to Barry Devlin's spine-trembling bass as it rumbled like escaping fear into my own guts. It was glorious" (2004: 35). The play-acting of the boys in the crowd merges with the five men on stage. Declan describes each member of the band as they performed, including "the skeletal Eamonn [sic] Carr, scary like one of the living dead, thundering behind the silvery kit".

Such revels lead to Declan's own ambitions. True to the pattern charted by Herr, however, the boy must pursue his rock star dreams in private and in poverty. The postwar austerity that characterized Britain still pinches Ireland, so the Lydon family has little money. He must settle for a tin whistle, yet it allows him to chirp out "Dearg Doom" – "and that meant you could play a *Horslips* tune – and that was the coolest thing I could ever imagine" (2004: 36).

The chapter concludes as “soon my bedroom was the Astoria Ballroom itself, and I was up there throwing shapes with Barry, Charles and Johnny beside me, Jim in the distance to my left and, behind me, Eamon in his black string vest, hammering away at the kit.” Declan joins the band, and enters stardom from behind his bedroom’s closed door. “I was suddenly, finally, able to leave, to travel, to escape as far as Bundoran and back and sometimes even further than that as I played along with records bought at Gannon’s – a musical pharmacy which smelled of a million perfumes, aftershaves and rubbery hot-water bottles” (2004: 36). The mundane mingles with the musical. Declan can elevate another ware bought at the corner chemist into the mystique of identity that crosses borders, transcends the ordinary, and traffics in the mystery shared by fragrances. Even rubber bottles, like vinyl LPs, transform the quotidian into the mythical, or at least the familiar made strange, as the musical artifacts and the chemist’s sundries blend in an almost Joycean collision of everyday Enniskillen with enchanted but less commodified Araby.

1970s tension between Troubles reaction or musical retreat entered cultural as well as political debate. Paul Muldoon situates *Horslips* where “*bodhran*-lined boreen” crossed “the rocky road to Dublin that seemed likely to run into Route 66” (2007: 139). The road from the North into Dublin lures the protagonist of Patrick McCabe’s 1995 novel *The Dead School*. Malachy Dudgeon in 1973, around the time of “The Táin”’s release, attends a gig. The omniscient but indirectly first-person narrator informs us how: “*Horslips* were jigs and reels on speed as you boogied all night long and went half-crazy shaking your head and Kevin Connolly yelled over at you ‘Shakin’ All Over!’ and man were you shouting all over or what!” (1995: 58). This passage during what Malachy calls the Summer of Dreams reveals the intoxicating potential of rock music for Irish youth.

Eamon Carr’s remark that the Sixties came late to Dublin jibes with Kelly, McCabe and Muldoon. All four writers celebrate *Horslips* in concert. Malachy in 1975 imagines *Horslips* on stage. “He thought of them sitting together in The Stadium, the crowd going wild as Eamon Carr appeared with the shamrock on his backside and Barry Devlin the bass player shouting “Hi! It’s good to be here – we’re The *Horslips*!” (1995: 244-245). McCabe spells out

by adding a definite article what precedes the band’s noun in that curious coinage favored by many fans. Yet, as long as nobody knows *what a Horslips* may be, making a collective or plural entity out of five musicians underscores their ambiguity in Irish musical culture. “*Horslips*” hints at apocrypha but eludes definition.

This playful quality in the band delighted concertgoers, but it weakened studio recordings. Malachy sees them in Carrick (a small venue perhaps near Waterford); two years later, they play Dublin’s National Stadium. *Horslips* shot from showband misfits to arena strutters. Paul Muldoon finds in “The Táin”’s mailed fist a proto-punk image. But, as three-chord 45s replaced arena epics, longhairs shrieking over dungeons and druids turned risible. Progressive rock fell from critical favor.

Pat McCabe’s Malachy Dudgeon, down and out in Dublin then London, shuffles about. Booted from his schoolteacher post, on the dole, stoned, he wanders Piccadilly Circus: “Punk music blared from the jukebox and all about Malachy orange-haired youths in tartan struck poses and snarled at nothing. Malachy felt the warm, comforting arms of four pints around him and smiled as he looked at himself in the mirror. His long, lank, greasy hair was way past his shoulders. Sure it was crazy to be wearing a green army surplus greatcoat on a hot summer’s day, blazing or otherwise, as he ordered another pint and said to the punk beside him ‘The Clash, that’s not music, man. *Horslips* – now there’s a band, there’s a fucking band, man!’” (1995: 244-245). *Horslips*, who had like Malachy begun the decade filled with radical dreams, and who along with the band left humble origins in Dublin for mid-decade professional success, declined by decade’s end. Malachy’s once revolutionary appearance in 1970 by 1980 looks anachronistic. Youth who flocked to *Horslips* at a club in Summer of Dreams 1973, or National Stadium 1975, by summer 1980 tended to be, as with Muldoon or Malachy, fans who had grown up with the band. Many in Declan Lydon’s generation raised to denigrate hippies and pose as punks aped not stone idols but Billy Idol. While *Horslips* adapted new waves of music and fashion, their time had passed and, albeit in better shape than Malachy, they too entered early retirement.

As with Malachy, the band endured abuse. *Rolling Stone* and the *Village Voice* excoriated

American releases of later albums. Folk filigrees soured rock purists; electric delivery repelled traditional players. Ciaran Carson, poet and musician, in 1986 mocked: "Others persisted in tinkering with the basic structures of the music, most noticeably when their traditional experience was minimal (*Horslips*, for example); bastardised genres like 'folk-rock' were announced as inspired creative achievements" (1986: 53). During the punk and new-wave era, *Horslips* languished as passé.

By the end of the 1990s, *Horslips*' reputation recovered. Legal battles over unapproved recordings ended. The band controlled their own records, as they had in the early 1970s. A teen musician back then, Philip Chevron, founded Dublin's first punk-era success, The Radiators from Space. He hated "ballads and Irish music generally", but hearing *Horslips*, his attitude changed (O'Connor, 2001: 131). Critical convention may have for two decades dismissed them, but recent players, fans, and critics joined stalwart supporters. Remastered CDs and the rise of Internet fan sites around 2000 widened their appeal across the diaspora. In Spring 2004, an exhibition of memorabilia appeared at Derry's Orchard Gallery. That same year, the *Belfast Telegraph* reported that "local people are being urged to take part in an intense series of peace building workshops based around the legend of ChuChulainn [sic]. The cross community workshops will examine the Celtic tale of the Ulster folklore hero and the Tain, in a bid to explore the relevance and lessons of ancient local myth for people today". The project aimed "to show the madness of war and the benefits of healing through creativity". ("Peace Building") According to its organizer, John Donaghey: "This is a very powerful workshop examining the demands of the tribe versus the authority of the heart. ChuChulainn is someone who has been hailed as a hero and an icon by both republicans and loyalists". This cross-border appeal lured fans from all over Ireland to venues as disparate and scattered as Bundoran or Mount Melleray or Whitla Hall to see the band play. *Horslips* sang of an Irish identity where all fans could share a homegrown sense of Irish pride, send-up Oirish stereotypes as did Carr "with the shamrock on his backside", and cheer together the lusts and combats of ancient superheroes. This embrace of an audience beyond conventional spectators of Irish traditional music in turn extends into the cyberspace venue opened up for *Horslips* during this current decade.

In 2005 a fan site, Come Back *Horslips*, debuted. Here, electric and acoustic folk and rock musicians enlarge *Horslips*' invention of Irish *dúchas* as fusion. CBH as social network links fans, broadcasts film and musical clips, and updates the *craic*. Virtual and real lives merge. Encouraged by such attention, *Horslips* released an "unplugged" album, "Roll Back". They reunited for the first time on stage. *Horslips*' pioneering diversity encourages and exemplifies current Irish postcolonial identity. From around the world, sound files, press kits, video, discussion lists, and publicity campaigns blend multimedia enriching this band's legacy. In 2007, HorsLit, a discussion list of literary influences, began on Yahoo Groups. CBH and HorsLit, under Lora Lee Templeton's direction from San Francisco, draw fans of Irish music, Celtic culture, and medieval lore. *Horslips* once mashed folk and rock into a fresh recipe. Social networking and user-generated content drive today's mixers. Bands post files of *Horslips* songs; musicians recover traditional tunes that *Horslips* arranged. The exchange of ideas, lyrics, and commentary brings at least one band member into the Guestbook chat for a cryptic allusion or witty aside. Three-dozen years later, *Horslips* revives virtually through electronic hybrids.

Electronics resonate when charting the band's impact. Maurice Linnane, Declan Lydon's real-life doppelganger at twelve, heard "*The Táin*". When the band sang: "My love is colder than black marble by the sea", Linnane recognized the landscape that until then had been Christian Brothers history class and "confusingly part fable and part scripture". He recalled basalt, and imagined the Giant's Causeway as "Dearg Doom" rumbled on. A familiar schoolroom story gained intensity. "This was something far deeper", Linnane recalls. "This was something raw, something primitive, something primordial". Even more, *Horslips* bettered a dull class in Irish, for "Sweet Jesus this was actually cool!" (Linnane 2005). His recollections introduce liner notes for his 2005 DVD "Return of the Dancehall Sweethearts". This combines vintage footage with a documentary in which Bono, The Edge, John Kelly, Pat McCabe, Joe O'Connor, and John Waters, among other prominent Dublin-based writers and musicians, credit the band for sketching the blueprint for today's Celtic revival of art and culture.

Horslips allowed young audiences to appreciate the power of old tales, as had Seán

Ó Riada before and the Pogues after them. Muldoon concludes his essay on the Belfast Gigs, waiting for their 1980 Whitla Hall concert in the band's final year. Muldoon conjures Milton, Yeats, and Scripture as he tells us: "There was a howling that came close to Pandemonium in its strictest sense. Any moment there'd be a great disclosure. Some revelation was at hand. We'd see if *Horslips* were indeed 'gods or real folk'. Yes . . . one by one they came on stage, each with a following spot. Just as we'd expected (...) gods" (2007: 140).

The final LP, titled "The Belfast Gigs", captured what would have happened next at Whitla Hall. The live album opened with the song "Trouble with a Capital 'T'", and ended with "Dearg Doom". These two songs were promoted off the LP for radio play, along with the one that dragged Malachy Dudgeon and Kevin Connolly onto the dance floor in Patrick McCabe's novel. The choice that Declan Lydon would have played tin whistle and air guitar to, of one-hit wonder Johnny Kidd and the Pirates' "Shakin' All Over", matched the other songs from the concept albums as a crowd favorite. Whether singing of the Ulster Cycle or a beloved throwaway dance number from the band's teenaged years, *Horslips* to the end conveyed Irish themes through rock's thunder. The song, "King of the Fairies", whose bastardization would earn disdain from Muldoon's fellow poet, Ciaran Carson,

appeared alongside "Blindman," a tune celebrating harpist Turlough O'Carolan, and another recounting Frank O'Connor's "Guests of the Nation".

The band's literary and cultural influences shared the Belfast stage with their musical and lyrical invention. The band in its ten years spanning the Seventies played over two thousand concerts. They opened among hippies and closed for headbangers. But their finest albums matched the sway of accessible rock music with the grace of traditional motifs. *Horslips* reminded Irish listeners how ancient tales and medieval narratives kept a magical power of their own, within the simmering South or the fractured North. Wherever *Horslips* played, Celtic variety and Irish identity energized them.

Portions of this research were presented at the Twenty-First Conference of Irish Medievalists, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, 28 June 2007, and the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures (IASIL), University College Dublin, 19 July 2007. Acknowledgements for archival assistance and interviews to a member of Horslips, Dorrie Finan, Ian Hennessy of Crashed Music, Cheryl Herr, Matt Hunt, Brona ní Ghallchobhair, Cathy Swift, Carrie Twomey, HorsLit Yahoo discussion list, www.Horslips.ie, ComeBackHorslips.com and the indefatigable Lora Lee Templeton.

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