

Irish Music and Musicians in the United States: An Introduction

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“The Irish came early and often to America,” quipped musicologist Charles Hamm in his landmark book *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America*.¹ Although the largest waves of immigration occurred during the years of the potato famines in the 1840s and 1850s, the process began long before then and continues to the present day, albeit with many ebbs and flows in the stream. Today nearly 36.5 million people in the United States claim Irish ancestry.²

Given that music is one of the strongest expressions of Irish culture, it is not surprising that Irish emigrants have wielded a substantial impact on the musical life of their adopted country. The nature and significance of this impact is widely acknowledged but poorly understood, resulting in frequent oversimplification of complex historical threads. There is a pervasive belief that many forms of North American traditional music are derived directly from Irish traditional music. This notion drives the programming of numerous music festivals, concerts, and recordings. For example, the BBC television program *Bringing It All Back Home* (material from which has appeared in print and CD form) is based solidly on the assumption that many forms of North American music can lay claim to Irish parentage.³

A more careful and objective approach calls into question this simplistic model and suggests a far richer and more complex weave of cross-Atlantic connections and influences. Musical transmission between Ireland and the United States is very much a two-way street. The story of Irish musical influence on North American musical practice and repertoire is not a straightforward tale of direct genetic descent. Instead, like all forms of organic evolution, it is a growth that is distinguished primarily by its diversity rather than by a single lineal succession. It is a story of both the development of an Irish layer within various genres of American music and of Irish American music as a form of ethnic music existing largely apart from the mainstream.

In this issue of the *Journal of the Society for American Music* scholars from both sides of the Atlantic examine several threads of the brilliant web that connects the musics of Ireland and the United States. The defining theme of this issue is to acknowledge and trace the contributions of generations of musical emigrants to American shores as well as to better define where and how these influences have taken

¹ Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 42.

² U.S. Census Bureau, http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/facts_for_special_editions/006328.html, accessed 5 March 2009.

³ *Bringing It All Back Home: The Influence of Irish Music* (Dublin: Hummingbird Records, 1990), liner notes by Nuala O'Connor. The epigraph for the record collection encapsulates the theme of this project: “I have a theory that soul music originally came from Scotland and Ireland.”—Van Morrison.

root and flourished. The articles focus on three of the most populous and influential Irish American musical communities: Boston, Chicago, and New York City. Contributors include some of the most recognizable names in Irish and American musical scholarship, as well as newer voices from both scholarly and musical performance communities. This brief essay provides an introduction to these scholars and to the themes presented in this special issue.

Although the contribution of Irish immigrants to the great cities of the Northeast took many visible forms, their musical life is much more difficult to investigate. Because traditional music is often performed in homes, or with private groups that constitute playing circles, little scholarly attention has been paid to the professional or semi-professional Irish musician in the United States. Because direct evidence about these professional musicians is scarce, indirect evidence must often be used to shed light on their lives and times. That there was a sizeable and distinctive Irish musical community in the Boston area in the mid-nineteenth century is strongly suggested by the tunes from collections published during the latter half of the nineteenth century by the Boston-based musical firm headed by Elias Howe. One of those collections, compiled by musician William Bradbury Ryan, is arguably the first sizable descriptive collection of the repertoire of Irish musicians during America's first century. Paul F. Wells analyzes the Ryan collection in the context of other nineteenth-century tunebooks and unearths evidence of a vibrant and broad-based community of musicians who drew extensively from the Irish tradition. This musical community also incorporated other styles and traditions, but the large number of Irish tunes in the Ryan collection suggests that it should be regarded as a milestone in the history and documentation of Irish American music.

Whereas collectors of Irish music in Ireland in the nineteenth century concentrated on preserving the tradition's distinctive song repertoire, a Bantry-born flute player and his Belfast-born fiddler namesake were amassing and publishing a massive and comprehensive collection of Irish dance music in the Midwest. Francis and James O'Neill gathered the bulk of their tunes from contemporary Irish musicians in Chicago, but also drew on earlier printed collections of tunes—including the Ryan collection. Francis O'Neill was a traditional musician who pursued his passion for the music with incredible devotion. He was also one of the most effective Chiefs of Police the city of Chicago has ever known.

Although O'Neill has long been revered by Irish American musicians for his contributions to the preservation of the dance music of Ireland, much less is known about the personal life of this icon of Irish American music. Sally Sommers Smith takes a close look at three recent books about the life and work of Francis O'Neill, including his newly published personal memoir. What these works reveal is a distinct separation between the public life of a policeman who served his adopted city with uncompromising integrity and the private musical life of a dedicated traditional musician. It is primarily the private life we celebrate today, although Francis O'Neill's memoir clearly suggests that he regarded the emigrant narrative of the poor boy who made his way in the New World as the more important of his two very circumscribed lives.

Irish emigrants to North America always brought their music with them and used it to help create communities in their new land that spoke to them of home. Some

of these musical communities have flourished and have permitted development of a traditional Irish music with a distinctive American accent. Irish American music has also influenced the practice of the music in its homeland. Scott Spencer throws a discerning light on emigrant Irish musicians living in New York City at the dawn of the twentieth century who were the first to have their music preserved on sound recordings. Premier among these players was a group of fiddlers who played the vigorous and brilliant style associated with their native County Sligo. This style was not only adopted by their U.S. admirers and students, but when American-made recordings of it were imported to Ireland, they forever changed the way Irish fiddlers approached their own music and musical heritage. Evolution is often regarded as a process too slow to be appreciated in a single lifetime. Spencer argues, however, that musical evolution can proceed in a saltatory manner if it is coupled to technological advances. The advent of personal recording devices and the widespread popularity of playback machines offered traditional musicians in Ireland a glimpse at what was happening to their music in North America. What they heard stunned them—and fostered a revival of traditional music that continues to this day.

If Francis O'Neill and his traditional musical community of Chicago represent the more private and personal aspects of traditional Irish music practice in the United States, the celebrated McNulty Family represents their antithesis in many ways. “Ma” McNulty and her children Eileen and Peter made the stages of the great cities of the Northeast and the Maritimes their musical showcase, and in the process they helped bring the distinctive sound of Irish music into the mainstream of U.S. popular music. Ted McGraw has made a lifelong study of this seminal Irish showband, and here he presents a unique interweaving of photographs and narrative that document the story of the McNultys and their enduring musical legacy. As McGraw points out in the beginning of his presentation, “They were very Irish, and very good!” Their legions of fans agreed. The McNultys and the genre of Irish showband performance that they pioneered have been largely overlooked by musical scholars, at least in part because of the perception that their music represented a popular, rather than traditional, form of musical expression. McGraw persuasively argues for the importance of such popular forms of Irish music in maintaining Irish cultural identity in the United States.

What happens when an Irish fiddler immigrates to Boston and learns that the traditional music he brings with him is played much differently in his new location? If that fiddler is Paddy Cronin, from Gneeveguilla, County Kerry, he adapts his technique and style to the sounds he hears around him, and in the process redefines Irish fiddling in the U.S. Northeast. Matt Cranitch, himself a renowned performer and teacher of the distinctive Sliabh Luacra fiddle style that Paddy Cronin learned from the itinerant teacher and fiddler Padraig O’Keeffe, chronicles the remaking of Cronin’s fiddle style. Cronin adopted both the danceable Sligo-flavored stylings of Irish American fiddler Michael Coleman and the fierce drive and Scottish rhythms of the Cape Breton emigrant musicians he heard in the dance halls of Boston. The result was a new—and highly “American”—style of traditional fiddle playing that is much admired and emulated. Though Cronin has moved back to Ireland, his playing continues to inspire and inform U.S. musicians who learn and perform in the Irish tradition.

For other emigrant traditional musicians, however, nothing so minor as a trans-Atlantic move can alter their approach to the music. When flutist and uilleann piper Mike Rafferty immigrated to northern New Jersey from East Galway, he became part of a community of transplanted Galwaymen who were only too happy to continue to play and to teach in the conservative manner they had enjoyed in Ireland. Scholar and concertina master Tim Collins ably illustrates that musical evolution is characterized not only by innovation, but also by the stability that is achieved by firm grounding in a tradition and precise intergenerational transmission. Mike Rafferty and his frequent playing partner, the late Joe Madden, espoused a deeply traditional approach to the music that also became a cynosure of identity and continuity in their adopted community. Irish traditional music has not always been assimilated into the weave of popular music in the United States, Collins asserts. It can just as easily remain a distinctive and brilliant thread in the fabric, buffed and maintained by the dedication of musicians such as Rafferty and his fellow émigrés from Galway.

Recordings of Irish music in the United States have been helping to woo, entertain, and teach listeners since at least the days of Francis O'Neill. Recently, however, the widespread availability of digital recording devices has permitted every amateur musician the freedom to produce and distribute personal recordings. The quality of these efforts, to be sure, ranges from awful to superb. Earle Hitchner, the dean of Irish music critics, regularly wades through current offerings of Irish music distributed in the United States and guides musicians and audiences alike to the gems of the genre. Here he describes a new—some would say revolutionary—paradigm shift in the business of music, identifies its impact on the recording of Irish music in North America, and reviews select albums illustrating recent trends in performance. Among his conclusions is that Irish American musicians have to some extent adopted a more conservative approach to the tradition than have their contemporaries in Ireland.

Are immigrant musical traditions more likely to undergo change in their new surroundings as players encounter new influences? Or do they remain relatively unaffected because their practitioners cling strongly to the old ways out of a desire to maintain links to their earlier lives? As seen in some of the studies in this issue, both situations can occur; there is no single, consistent pattern. This phenomenon has been noted and studied by folklorists and other scholars; D. K. Wilgus and Liz Doherty, for example, termed it the “paradox of the periphery.”⁴

That Irish music and musicians have made extensive contributions to the distinctive musical landscape of the United States is beyond dispute. For this contribution to be truly appreciated, however, it must be thoroughly examined. This special issue of the *Journal of the Society for American Music* brings us one step closer to an understanding and a celebration of the influence of Irish music in North America.

⁴ Elizabeth [Liz] Doherty, “The Paradox of the Periphery: Evolution of Cape Breton Fiddle Tradition, c. 1929–1995” (Ph.D. diss., University of Limerick, 1996).

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