Irish Music Abroad

Irish Music Abroad:
Diasporic Sounds in Birmingham

By

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For my parents

The conversation drifted, as it always did, towards music.
—Jonathan Coe, *The Rotters Club*

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IRISH WORDS AND ABBREVIATIONS

An Life	River Liffey
Amhrán na bhFiann	Soldier's Song (National Anthem)
Ardchomhairle	General Council
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
Bean an tí	Woman of the House
CBSO	City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra
CCÉ	Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann
Céilí	Gathering/Party
Clann na hÉireann	Family of Ireland
Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann	Association/Gathering of Irish Musicians
Conradh na Gaeilge	The Gaelic League
Craic	Fun/Entertainment
Cultúrlann na hÉireann	Irish Cultural Institute
Dun Mhuire	Place of Mary
Erin Grá Mo Chroí	Ireland Love of My Heart
Fear an Tighe	Man of the House
Feis Lár na hÉireann	Competition in the Centre of Ireland
Fleadh(anna)	Festival(s)
Fleadh Cheoil	Festival/Feast of Music
Fleadh Cheoil na Breataine/hÉireann	All-Britain/All-Ireland Music Festival
Fleadh Nua	New Festival
as Gaeilge	in Irish
Gaeltacht	Irish-speaking district
GPO	General Post Office (Dublin)
Lá Fhéile Pádraig daoibh agus fáilte romhaibh go	Happy St Patrick's Day and welcome to
IRA	Irish Republican Army
Meitheal	Gang/Team
Páirc na hÉireann	Field/Park of Ireland
Raidió Teilifis Éireann	Irish Radio and Television
RTÉ	Raidió Teilifis Éireann
Scoraíocht	Social Evening
Sean-nós	Old Style
Taoiseach	Irish Premier
Thar Sáile	Overseas
Treoir	Guidance/Index

INTRODUCTION

LOCATING PADDY

As I was a walking down London Road,
I came to Paddy West's house,
He gave me a feed of American hash,
And he called it Liverpool scouse.

"Paddy West" was a hit for The Clancy Brothers in America in the 1960s. Its opening verse, above, sets up a narrative describing a man born in Ireland during the nineteenth century, who has travelled to Britain to run a boarding house on Liverpool's Great Howard Street. Revealingly, these lyrics triangulate the Irish migrant's experience between three significant locations: the USA, Liverpool and London, a geographical trio that has often been the prime focus for studies of the Irish abroad. Even in popular culture, recent bestselling novels, such as Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* and Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry*, have described Irishmen charting a course to America's east coast via the docks at Liverpool, reminding their readers of Ireland's past historical migrations. The fact that these books are printed by well-known London publishing houses (Secker and Warberg, and Jonathan Cape, respectively) gives modern Irish writers such as Doyle and O'Connor an imprimatur of success in the mode of earlier London-Irishmen such as Shaw, Wilde or Yeats. When it comes to talking about the Irish worldwide, then, those in the USA, Liverpool and London have received the lion's share of scholarly and literary attention, whilst important communities of Irish men and women living in other locations—such as Birmingham, England—have tended to be overlooked.

Whilst the British cities of Liverpool and London are prominent in the discourse of Irish exodus, urban American centres, such as Boston and New York, tend to head the hierarchy (one only has to look at where the Irish Premier travels to on St Patrick's Day each year for evidence of this) and the USA continues to dominate musical investigations of the Irish diaspora. By contrast, regional Britain has tempted far fewer scholars

examining Irish music during the twentieth century. The musician Reg Hall was so astonished that London's Irish music and dance remained unexplored territory in the 1990s (despite the fact that céilí bands had originated there over a hundred years earlier under the watch of *Conradh na Gaeilge*) that he completed a doctoral thesis on the topic himself.[1] Hall concluded his study of the English capital just as Nuala O'Connor launched *Bringing it All Back Home*, a publication celebrating the music of Irish America in contrast to the bleak musical picture she believes to characterise the Irish expats who travelled east instead of west.

O'Connor's penultimate chapter is a counterpoint to the affirmative American sections that constitute the majority of her book. It is instead dedicated to the "lost Irish soul" in Britain, whose musical representatives she struggles to find, including, as her main examples, the English-born folk singer Ewan MacColl and the fourth generation Irishman and pop star Elvis Costello.[2] The glaring blind-spot in O'Connor's analysis is particularly surprising, given that, throughout the twentieth century, the Irish were the largest foreign-born population in Britain. Unlike in America, where people from across Europe, Latin America and Asia arrived in vast numbers from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, people from Ireland provide the only example of a statistically significant labouring group of migrants in Britain for much of the period until 1939. Moreover, the majority of those leaving Ireland after the Second World War travelled to the cities of England and Scotland rather than across the Atlantic.

The presence of people from the island of Ireland on the island of Britain was hardly a phenomenon of the twentieth century of course. England experienced large-scale Irish immigration as early as the 1400s and the two countries have a long and troubled history of conquest and resettlement, with English landowners in Ireland, Irish labourers in England and the imposition of the English language across the Atlantic Islands. The presence of a distinctive Irish sound amongst English and Irish audiences in the UK has often corresponded with this disquieting sequence of events, verifying the fact that, as Martin Stokes and Philip

[1] Hall dates the first céilí band to 1897. Reg Hall, *Irish Music and Dance in London 1870-1970* (PhD Thesis, University of Sussex, 1994), p.16.

[2] O'Connor explains that the "lost Irish soul" is epitomised by Paul Brady's song about Irish migration to England, "Nothing but the Same Old Story". Nuala O'Connor, *Bringing It All Back Home* (Somerset: Butler and Tanner Ltd., 1991), p.157.

Bohlman have eloquently put it, "we travel with music".[3] Irish music enjoyed a particular vogue during the Elizabethan era, for instance, when the Queen set a tradition for Irish harpers at her English Court. In turn, their repertoire influenced her decision to learn the Irish language.[4]

The appreciation of Irish music by the Establishment would not positively affect Irish social standing in England at this time however. Elizabeth's disregard for the Irish became apparent through her ruthless foreign policy and, as Hugh Brody has argued, the power inequality caused by the Queen of England's imposition of a ruling class in Ireland would define Irish culture from this point onwards. The Cromwellian settlement of the Elizabethan era may have stripped Catholic Ireland of wealth, but Brody believes the establishment of a Protestant authority distinguished the unique language, religion and social mores of Ireland's peasantry at this juncture, and "imbued Irish solidarity and determination to preserve a distinction".[5]

Regardless of how popular Irish music has been at certain moments, separate social statuses have meant that migrant communities from Ireland since the administration of Cromwell have not necessarily been in the privileged position of preserving this cultural distinctiveness for themselves in England. Roger Swift and Sheridan Gilley indicate the limited public display of Irish cultural activity in Victorian England, for example, citing a "progressive accommodation by immigrants to their host society".[6] Swift and Gilley do not expound on some essential features—such as Irish musical performance—that may have served to define these immigrant communities. In this way, they are quite typical of those who research the Irish in Britain. Scholars, generally working within the academic disciplines of history or literature, often apply a narrow set of frameworks to the questions associated with such topics as census returns, high politics, economic history, literary elites, or revisionist historicism.

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[3] Martin Stokes and Philip Bohlman, 'Introduction', in *Celtic Modern: Music at the Global Fringe* eds. by Stokes and Bohlman (Maryland: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2003), pp.1-26 (p.9).

[4] William Grattan Flood, 'Irish Music in the Time of Queen Bess', *Journal of the Irish Folk Song Society*, 13 (1913), pp.20-21 (p.20).

[5] Hugh Brody, *Inishkillane: Change and Decline in the West of Ireland* (London: Allan Lane The Penguin Press, 1973), p.49.

[6] Roger Swift and Sheridan Gilley, 'Introduction', in *The Irish in Victorian Britain*, eds. by Swift and Gilley (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), pp.7-13 (p.12).

The historian Kaja Irene Ziesler produced one of the earliest studies of Irish people living in Birmingham, which, like most of those that have been produced about Britain, entirely neglects the importance of music in securing a recognisable public presence. Ziesler does, however, conclude her important doctoral thesis of 1989 with the thought that, according to the archetypal statistical and sociological evidence, "Birmingham will have a thriving active and increasingly vocal community for many years yet".[7] Ziesler's prediction for Birmingham's Irish diaspora into the nineties is one of a loudening political and economic voice, but her use of that very adjective "vocal", perhaps unintentionally, alludes to the visceral power of sound for defining Irishness in Birmingham. Taking my cue from Ziesler's rhetoric, this book is concerned with the primary ways in which an audible, "vocal", aspect of Irish identity has been created.

The central premise here is that a distinctly Irish musical sound has been formed in Birmingham since 1950. Its volume has increased with the expansion of the city's Irish community from this time, as the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of post-war migrants have counted themselves amongst the Irish diaspora and sought to compensate with music for that most obvious audible signifier of nationhood, a spoken language or accent from Ireland. For these younger sections of Birmingham's Irish community, the silencing of music in studies of historical and social migration from Ireland has often been deafening. As the English-born Irish musician Paul O'Brien explains, "I think the whole second generation discussion is well overdue...we have a voice, and a rather loud one at that!"[8]

By protecting a musical ethnicity, recent Irish migrants and their descendants have coloured the soundscape of the Birmingham mainstream, just as those harpers finding favour with Elizabeth I gave the English Court a certain Irish identity in the sixteenth century, with the Queen herself often heard "travelling with music", humming Irish songs around the corridors of Greenwich Palace.[9] So too, my study of contemporary Birmingham presents the two-way nature of Irish cultural interaction, tracing the ways in which a spatial change has occurred for the minority community in this city. Distinguishable Irish music has moved from a

[7] Kaja Irene Ziesler, *The Irish in Birmingham 1830-1970* (PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 1989), p.345.
[8] Email correspondence with Paul O'Brien, 13 January 2009.
[9] For more on the Irish musical performances at Elizabethan court, see Albert L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1967), p.164.

private area protected in the city centre to a public realm from which it now creates a distinctive sound of Birmingham that has fed back to the home nation. By presenting a panorama of live instrumental and sung musical performances in the city I ask, if the Irish diaspora in Birmingham has indeed proved to be increasingly "vocal", as Ziesler forecast, during the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, then what is that sound, where is that sound, who is listening and why on earth would they want to?

Musical Space for the Birmingham Irish

1950 makes for a significant start date when ascertaining where and how Irish music exists and has existed in Birmingham because, at this time, the local area was boosted by a vast wave of post-war migration from Ireland. From this point, Birmingham became a partial answer to the more comprehensive question, in what environment does Irish music flourish outside Ireland. More specifically, I question where the national identity of Irish musicians in Birmingham has been replicated or conserved. When and why have local non-Irish musicians participated? How have social contexts affected the manner of Irish musical performance in the city? Beginning with these enquiries sidesteps a chronic problem in the general study of Irish music: as John O'Flynn explains, "what is included and what is excluded under that term [Irish music] is very often contested".[10] This book largely avoids such controversies because, rather than the identity of the music per se, my concern is music within a definite place. I seek to discover how all audiences for Irishness in Birmingham relate to the evocation of a shared national past, by connecting the ideas of contemporary urban group identity with that of Ireland's cultural traditions that travelled with migration. This book investigates the development of a unique Birmingham-Irish style of music and the ways in which this informs the musical performance of some of its participants.

I nevertheless remain vigilant about any essentialist notion of what Irish music *itself*, or "the Irish" *themselves*, might be, mindful of the great deal of work scholars such as Gerry Smyth and Harry White have undertaken in recent years that attempt to define Irish music within

[10] John O'Flynn, *The Irishness of Irish Music* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), p.1.

international, changing, fluid geographic contexts.[11] The most straightforward definition of something Irish is to say that it is anyone or anything that is found or locatable on the island of Ireland. But this is clearly inadequate as a definition when we consider the history of migration of people from that island (no European country has experienced the ratio of emigration to population on such a scale as Ireland over the past two centuries) and the prevailing globalisation of Irish music. During the 1990s, the former president of Ireland, Mary Robinson, recognised the fact that Irishness could not simply equal "Ireland", but rather, that "notions of the diaspora circulated in official and media discourses of Irish identity".[12] The physical and cultural globalisation of Ireland, which leaves Roy Foster questioning "whether the country actually is still an 'island' in any meaningful sense", has meant that Irish music and traditions can scarcely hope to be insulated in some kind of pure form from other systems and repertoires.[13]

Globalisation also provoked the international Celtic fashions of the nineties, in the wake of which Irish music has been assured its public place as the world's favourite "other". In turn, Irish music may include elements that originate in performance traditions on the island of Ireland, as well as those perceived to be Irish but that actually derive from elsewhere (Phil Coulter's famous song about Derry, "The Town I Loved So Well", with its classical score for piano, De Danaan's reworking of Handel's "Arrival of the Queen of Sheba" for flute, fiddle and bodhrán, or the inspiration Bill Whelan took from the Greek bouzouki for his *Riverdance* composition, are straightforward examples of this). As Breda Gray explains, being Irish away from Ireland has "involved a re-territorialisation of identity and re-embedding of culture".[14] Irish music ebbs and flows from Ireland, and it relies on the diaspora.

Studying Irish music in Birmingham provides a unique opportunity to observe at close range the processes of this re-territorialisation and re-embedding. In this book I engage with the theoretical literature, like that

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[11] Gerry Smyth, *Noisy Island: A Short History of Irish Popular Music* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2005); Harry White, *The Progress of Music in Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005).

[12] Breda Gray, 'The Irish Diaspora: Globalised Belonging(s)', *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 11/2 (2002), pp.123-144 (p.123).

[13] Robert Fitzroy Foster, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland* (London: Allen Lane, 2001), p.xi.

[14] Gray, 'The Irish Diaspora', p.135.

of Gray, which implies "diaspora" almost as a verb rather than a noun; as a mobile and mobilising space for continual cultural exchange. I associate musical identity with personal identity in this study of an urban English society. At times in the book I will wish to qualify exactly where a particular performer comes from, but being Irish for the purposes of this project is something that is self-defining. If music is recognised as being Irish by an audience in Birmingham and, under the same edict, if a person chooses to consider themselves Irish, then they will be included as Irish in this book, whether that person is of the first, second, third, fourth, or *n*th generation. This ruling may be contentious. David Lloyd has written scathingly about the way in which those who claim the title "Irish American" do so in order to seek "the cultural distinctiveness that they have learnt to see as the 'privilege' of ethnic minorities".[15] After all, lots of these self-declared "Irish" have absolutely no intention of returning to Ireland, being prosperous and well-integrated in countries such as the UK or the USA. In the chorus of his song "Plastic", the second-generation singer Paul O'Brien celebrates ethnic marriages of the "Birmingham Irish", "Glasgow Irish", "Toronto Irish" and many others. The pride in O'Brien's own dual nationality is endorsed by the title of social historian Carl Chinn's comprehensive study, *Birmingham Irish: Making Our Mark* (the first publication to celebrate this local community as current and successful).[16]

The examples in this book present Irish ethnicity channelled into a multicultural flow away from Ireland. Avtar Brah provides a useful template for this in her deconstruction of the "myth of return".[17] In Brah's interpretation, "staying put" is the priority for a diaspora whilst "diasporic space" is an area constructed by migrant subjects *alongside* an indigenous populace. In pointing to the myriad of ways in which music provides the ultimate symbolic transformation of a social space, I relate the same notion to the Birmingham Irish and to the accompanying broader influences of Irish music on England's culture. Rather than following the straightforwardly chronological approach of Carl Chinn's previous historical study of the Irish in Birmingham, then, this book complements Brah's impression of "diasporic space" by focusing on specific musical locations, in which the

[15] David Lloyd, *Ireland After History* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), p.102.
[16] Carl Chinn, *Birmingham Irish: Making Our Mark* (Birmingham: Birmingham Library Services, 2003).
[17] Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (Routledge: London, 1996), p.36.

native space of Birmingham has assimilated Irish music as part of the broader city sound.

Such presentations offer the kind of sites defined by Pierre Nora "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself".[18] Interestingly, Nora separates the realms of history and memory, arguing that, whilst the former is the property of academic annals, the latter might be embodied in particular venues such as museums, cathedrals, palaces and so forth. Taking inspiration from this idea, my interest lies with certain places for Irish musical performance in Birmingham, including churches, public houses and concert halls, with the reasoning of Johanne Devlin Trew that "concepts of 'homeland' and 'Diaspora' are tied to identity, history, and place".[19] However, "place" in Trew's context refers to the origin of the music and from where the performer has moved, whereas I prioritise a present "place", in which music continues to create the diasporic space relevant for the city. By analysing Irish music in association with the places of its exhibition, I introduce a Birmingham performance archive of the music played and the musicians who play it, and, most crucially, of the Irish sites of the region in which it occurs.

This musical mapping of Irishness onto Birmingham is inspired by all kinds of evidence connected with the performance process. According to Nora, objects associated with the event such as tickets, programmes, souvenir T-shirts, performers' instruments and costumes might also be a site of memory, although it must be noted that these items are only fragments of the contemporaneous experience of that live performance. Whilst an academic history, therefore, might try to fix the past and analyse exactly what happened during a particular period, memory does something different. It is, as Nora explains, constantly evolving and changing. The Irish music creating a communal ethnic event in Birmingham is often played live, often remembered only hazily, and to some extent

[18] Between 1984 and 1992 the historian Pierre Nora edited a seven volume project about French history, called "Les lieux de mémoire" (or "sites of memory"). In the 1990s, a condensed three volume version was published under the title *Realms of Memory* and it is Pierre Nora's introduction to this English-language edition, an article named 'Between Memory and History' that I refer to here. Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History', *Representations*, 26 (1989), pp.7-25.

[19] Johanne Devlin Trew, 'Diasporic Legacies: Place, Politics, and Music Among the Ottawa Valley Irish', in *Celtic Modern: Music at the Global Fringe* eds. by Martin Stokes and Philip Bohlman (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2003), pp.93-117 (p.96).

unrecoverable, reformulated as history. If something is recorded we can go back and replay it; the music is more fixed and easier to transcribe than that of a performance that has not been documented in this way. As Deborah Weagel has argued, when it comes to performance interpretation, a particular triadic relationship occurs between composer, artist and audience that cannot be duplicated outside the live event.[20] Even a full recording of a concert has no hope of immortalising or explaining adequately the significance of that concert to each individual member of the audience located in a particular historical space, place, and time. Nor indeed can this be made explicit in any verbal or written account of the musical display, including my own.

Our experience of music is rarely a stable one. My own personal opinion changes throughout the act of listening to a programme. It depends on what other people say after the music has ended (my attitude in the second half of a concert might change dramatically as a result of interval conversations over a glass of wine) and the judgment alters in retrospect. The wider implications of this are clear; those who sang pro-IRA rebel songs in Birmingham in the early 1970s, for example, were likely to see their participation and the meaning of those songs quite differently after the Provisional IRA detonated bombs in the city centre in 1974. Thus this book does not assert the "facts" of the Birmingham Irish in the same manner as statistical studies of Irish migration. I engage rather with the musical events lived by some Irish migrants in Birmingham, following Brah in investigating the "multi-realities" of ethnic performance that provide our "on-going sense of self".[21] In *The Irishmen* (1965), the unreleased film by BBC producer Philip Donnellan, a soundtrack compiled using Irish musicians in Birmingham is coupled with the diegetic singing and playing of Irish men in London pubs. The sound of the production evokes the absent Ireland in an urban English milieu. In the same way, performances of Irishness have reconfigured the English life of Birmingham with a diasporic music.

[20] Deborah Weagel uses as her evidence the work of the pianist Glenn Gould. See Deborah Weagel, *Words and Music: Camus, Beckett, Cage, Gould* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010) p.111.
[21] Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, p.21.

Developing an Urban Ethnomusicology for Birmingham

Specific incidents such as the Birmingham pub bombings of 1974 suggest that Irish music cannot, in fact, always be "global" in Britain; that is, performed unregulated to an entire population without definite geographical and political boundaries. When linked to certain sites, Irish music has provoked social turbulences. Perhaps this thought encouraged Malcolm Chapman to cover his back when contributing the Celtic portion to Martin Stokes' music volume with a proviso; "The author of this piece makes no claim to be a specialist in Celtic music, or any kind of musicologist".[22] Chapman investigates the case for global "Celtic music" providing the audible compensation where a language and political voice is lacking. Specific place-based Irish music has often achieved the same ends in Birmingham, but my introduction can include no such caveat as Chapman's. Indeed, I began conducting fieldwork that would uncover an Irish musical identity in Birmingham before holding any notion of compiling this book. During the 1990s, when ethnomusicology became increasingly interested in the identity of the ethnomusicologist (with the effect that fieldwork became less about observing and more about lived experiences), I was unknowingly cooperative with the trendsetters in the discipline; learning traditional Irish fiddle music, competing in Irish dancing competitions and enjoying regular family get-togethers and religious ceremonies at important centres for the Irish in Birmingham.

In essence then, the idea for a book arose from my own attachments to the Irish diaspora in Birmingham, rooted in these childhood experiences. After all, my family was part of that mass migration to Birmingham during the second half of the twentieth century and because I was raised in a central English conurbation, I engaged in a variety of Irish musical (and other) activities throughout my childhood and adolescence, typical for a second or third generation upbringing. It is through music that I continue to form my own personal belonging to Ireland alongside a strong sense of identification with Birmingham. By means of the classic participant-observant method of ethnomusicology, therefore, I initiate and seek to answer these questions, acknowledging, as Brah does, that where "I" or "Me" is used as some kind of autobiographical authority, "this *experience*

[22] Chapman defines "Celtic music" as malleable and compensation for a language and political voice. See Malcolm Chapman, 'Thoughts on Celtic Music', in *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* ed. by Martin Stokes (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994), pp.29-44 (p.29).

matters".[23] Nevertheless, instead of providing an opportunity for some "confessional" research, my ethnomusicology at home uses these personal reflections and prior knowledge in order to provide insights into an overlooked but significant part of the musical heritage of the English Midlands.[24] The composition of this book is largely ethnographic, based on oral histories of the last sixty years from people still living in Birmingham or else with whom there is a palpable link.

An ethnomusicological study of the diaspora opens new interpretive insights into an overlooked aspect of Irish music as a whole, because, according to O'Flynn, "where the focus is on the last 50 years or so, most musicological studies purporting to engage with Irish musical identities either ignore domestic music or at best regard a limited number of artists as a phenomenon".[25] Investigating such areas as the ignored "domestic music" outlines how Irish music has engaged and developed with Birmingham in recent decades. Ruth Finnegan's publication *The Hidden Musicians* was the first to present the amateur music of a contemporary town—Milton Keynes in her case—as a signifier for the workings of society. Finnegan sought to rectify the fact that, when it comes to acknowledging the cultural dimension of England's urban centres, the onus is generally placed on sports or media with music disregarded, unless in a professional capacity. In her sequel, *Tales of the City*, Finnegan went further in claiming music to be not a hobby, but rather a "moral focus".[26] Finnegan's "invisible system" of musicians in Milton Keynes enjoys a similar dynamic in Birmingham and it is beneficial to adopt her investigative technique of presenting particular case studies of musicians, groups and places. With a spotlight on Birmingham, it is apparent that some of the most fruitful sites for examining the Irish community in the English Midlands echo those that Finnegan has explored; primarily private houses, public houses and churches. Furthermore, although avoiding any overt diasporic theories in her study of Milton Keynes, Finnegan implies a fluctuating connection between regional performances in urban Britain and

[23] Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, p.9.
[24] Jeff Todd Titon explains that some autobiographical ethnomusicology has been attacked as "confessional"'. See Titon, 'Knowing Fieldwork' in *Shadows in the Field* eds. by Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp.25-41 (p.34).
[25] O'Flynn, *The Irishness of Irish Music*, p.15.
[26] Ruth Finnegan, *Tales of the City: A Study of Narrative and Urban Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.103.

Ireland with an initial dedication in *The Hidden Musicians* to "music-makers in that other fair city, Derry".[27]

Gendered Space

The particular sites of investigation in this book—domestic houses, public houses, churches, parish halls and private clubs—are often coded as specifically female or male. This points to another recurring dynamic. The Clancy Brother's song "Paddy West" may have inspired my construction of a musical narrative for the ignored, silent *Paddy West Midlands*, but women play a key role in protecting Irish culture and music in Birmingham. Sharon Lambert has explored the role of women in facilitating Irish cultural traditions in Lancashire, adding to a growing corpus of social scientific work on Irish identity in England, which recognises the insight of women, including that by Mary Lennon, Marie McAdam, Joanne O'Brien and Bronwen Walter.[28] Whilst this book does not prioritise female musicians, at times I follow Lambert in emphasising the gendered consideration necessary for a comprehensive understanding of Irish music-making in Britain's Second City. As Sylvia Walby asserts, "gender cannot be analysed outside of ethnic, national and 'race' relations; but neither can these latter phenomena be analysed without gender".[29]

In a sense, a gendered reading of my topic needs no metaphorical, sonic code. By 1950 the number of women arriving from Ireland in Birmingham matched and, at many stages, overtook the number of men.[30] In a way that was quite atypical for immigrant groups, women ensured the permanence of an Irish community in the city, because, unlike the many

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[27] Ruth Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.xii.

[28] Sharon Lambert, *Irish Women in Lancashire, 1922-60: Their Story*, (Lancaster: University of Lancaster, 2001). See also Mary Lennon, Marie McAdam and Joanne O'Brien, *Across the Water: Irish Women's Lives in Britain* (London: Virago Press, 1988) and Bronwen Walter, *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place and Irish Women* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[29] Sylvia Walby, 'Woman and Nation', in *Mapping the Nation* ed. by Gopal Balakrishnan (London: Verso, 1996), pp.235-254 (p.252).

[30] From July 1946 Irish females could enter Britain regardless of any suitable employment at home. Regulations on males were brought in line in 1952. Between 1946 and 1951 the average net migration to Britain saw one thousand three hundred and sixty five women relocate from Ireland for every one thousand men.

labouring Irishmen in Birmingham for whom constant movement was a prerequisite, the employment of women included jobs predominantly in nursing, administration and domestic service, which were comparatively static. Increasing urbanisation stabilised the nuclear family, but, although Ireland's fine strong sons were building the city, it was the case that "the overall increase in net migration is accounted for by the volume of female migration".[31] National belonging to Ireland switched from maternal duty to participation in the paid labour force when in Birmingham.

Nonetheless when it comes to public presentations of Irish music, women are typically overlooked in song lyrics, tend not to be famous performers and have often been in the minority of audience members (generally taking on childcare duties rather than entering the traditionally male sphere of the social and drinking clubs). In seeking to unmask the hidden narrative, Jim MacLaughlin explains that, separate from the celebrated male identity of Ireland, which travelled easily with emigration; with the bravery, daring tales and noble exploits involved in leaving home for the greater good, was the marginalisation of women's lives, bound up with widespread gendering of the nation as a "poor mother".[32] Such vessels as the gentle harp or the ethereal vocal lilt allow this predictable vulnerable feminine identity of Ireland to be created in music. It is an image contrasted, more often than not, with that of bullish Britain. When brought to bear on a physical, practical level however, this nurturing, national stereotype led to frequent criticism of Irish females who left Ireland, on account of their denying the country her native sons, in what was seen as a selfish pursuit of pleasures in America and elsewhere.[33]

This attitude is certainly reflected in the musical soundtrack to the situation in Birmingham. The experience of Irish migration is predominantly that of men's experience, as expressed through the manual labouring songs, the male-dominated pub sessions, the clergy-controlled music accompanying parish hall dances or the raucous street parades for St

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[31] Enda Delaney, *Demography, State and Society: Irish Migration to Britain, 1921-1971* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p.162.

[32] As discussed in MacLaughlin, 'The Historical Background to 'New Wave' Irish Emigration', in *Location and Dislocation in Contemporary Irish Society: Emigration and Irish Identities*, ed., by Jim MacLaughlin (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), pp.5-29.

[33] See particularly the inclusions by Jim MacLaughlin, Breda Gray, Bronwen Walter and Eithne Luibhead in *Location and Dislocation in Contemporary Irish Society* ed., by MacLaughlin.

Patrick. Each of these presents an Irish performance site constructed in England, although a biased audibility is not specific to diasporic display (the traditional singer Brid Boland explains, so too in Ireland, "[women] aren't celebrated at all in nationalist songs or else they're portrayed as victims or elevated to being identified with their country"[34]). Considerations of gendered space in this book nevertheless endorse Helen O'Shea's observation that women "as Irish emigrants […] have become invisible".[35]

The emergence of Birmingham as the progressive and pluralistic urban centre of post-War England emasculated the concept of Empire. By effortlessly relieving the Republic of Ireland of thousands of unemployed residents during the following decades of recession, and itself providing the stage for the vital contribution of women to the moulding of an Irish musical aesthetic, Birmingham rewrote the colonial England blamed for the sad history of Mother Éire. The public realm of the English Midlands transformed previous gendered ideas of the home nation. Within the sphere of ethnomusicology lies the scope—indeed the moral responsibility—to study music as society. A musical ethnography of Birmingham makes visible, or rather audible, women as Irish emigrants.

Focusing on Birmingham and Focusing on the Irish

Birmingham is an ideal location for a study of Irish identities in music because when it became an important centre for mass immigration from the fifties, those from Ireland were the first and most numerous groups to arrive, advancing the rapid urban development of the city from this point. This ethnography presents various movements of an audible Irishness between Birmingham's sonic architectural levels; a journey, ultimately, from the city's private to the public sphere. I share Jacques Derrida's enthusiasm for defining archives in terms of both place and process, as he expressed in *Archive Fever* (by returning us to the etymology of the Greek *arkhe*, Derrida shows that for audiences "archive" can denote both the physical building and the written material produced there for purposes of storage, retrieval and organisation).[36] At certain moments in Birmingham,

[34] Lennon, McAdam and O'Brien, *Across the Water: Irish Women's Lives in Britain*, p.73.
[35] Helen O'Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), p.117.
[36] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

the Irish migrant found space to protect domestic rural traditions, socialist politics, a nationalist Catholic religion and the anniversary of St Patrick. This book approaches each episode in turn, as structural levels forging Birmingham's Irish identity, while recognising certain social, political and religious themes that interpenetrate the distinct sounds and successes of a specific musical place.

Some of those sites shared with Finnegan are intriguingly liminal and might appear neither fully private nor fully public. There is almost always a risk of music being overheard in any location. As David Toop ruminates, the "ears cannot hide themselves or save themselves".[37] Ascertaining the personal and communal spaces for Irish musical performance and identity in Birmingham is particularly problematic. To give one example, it was reasonably common for the Irish manual labourer to lodge or share "digs" in the city centre during the 1950s and 1960s, occupying a domestic room or bed for only a short part of the day (and often sharing this personal space with others who might be working different shifts). To conduct a private act, such as washing, or a musical act, such as rehearsing a tune on the tin whistle, in this context was to always risk instead performing a public act. Similarly, churches, clubs, pubs and, particularly, city streets are venues where private thought, prayer or musicianship might at any point transfer into a more collaborative, shared endeavour that becomes identifiably Irish to a general audience in Birmingham.

The arrangement of these sites for discussion as successive chapters, beginning with private house displays of Irish instrumental music and culminating with St Patrick's public parade on the streets of Birmingham city centre, means the evolution of this book itself endorses the social phenomenon of music, acknowledged by Bohlman as a case of "private domains persistently giving way to an omnipresent public sphere".[38] Irregular and unpredictable shifts in the extra-musical narrative have

[37] David Toop, *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener* (New York: Continuum, 2010), p.90.

[38] Bohlman makes this observation based on a Thomas Burger translation of Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, published in 1962, and 1989. See Philip Bohlman, 'Composing the Cantorate: Westernizing Europe's Other Within', in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation and Appropriation in Music*, eds. by Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (London: University of California Press, 2000), pp.187-212 (p.196).

affected the progress for Irish music's route around Birmingham's private and public spaces. Because of this, a performance example from the collective central city site of Birmingham Town Hall forms the starting point for every chapter, providing something of an opportunity for the community and reader to regroup.

In Chapter One I lay the groundwork for the various distinct musical studies which follow by introducing the geographical parameters of the city of Birmingham. I explore the adaptation of musical patterns as the situation has demanded at different times for the Birmingham Irish from 1950. This first chapter references music-making in Birmingham that falls within the overarching framework Brah provides, such as West Indian and Irish migrants using the same dance halls in the city centre. By referring to Andrew Downes' orchestral composition *Celtic Rhapsody*, I nod to the current scholarly idea of a rapidly increasing reunion between ethno and historical musicological debate.[39] This chapter also considers the popular musician Paul O'Brien who sings about the perceived "plasticity" of people born in Birmingham. This idea—that those living in England are seen as mere Irish wannabes by those living in Ireland—can be linked to broader arguments about the issues of authenticity and hybridity that has had a bearing on the reception of Birmingham Irish music and other musics associated with creating a diasporic space.

This first chapter discusses where and when Birmingham's ears became attuned to Irish migrants and summarises the multifarious narrative of the community since its inception following World War Two. I highlight the relevance of Baz Kershaw's performance studies dimension—in which he interprets the presentation of memories as serving to decrease historical and geographical distances—for the continuing Irishness of Birmingham.[40] In exploring some of the particularities of the Birmingham-Irish community (or rather communities), I demonstrate its functioning as a microcosm of collective global trends in the migration and integration of Irish music, relating Richard Schechner's account of

[39] As Nicholas Cook persuasively argues, 'We Are All (Ethno)musicologists Now'. See Henry Stobart ed., *The New (Ethno)musicologies* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2008), pp.48-70.

[40] Baz Kershaw, 'The Death of Nostalgia: Performance, Memory and Genetics', in *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*, ed. by Kershaw (London: Routledge, 1999), pp.157-186.

restorative behaviour to those who are Irish outside Ireland.[41] These theories hold the crux of the book; this chapter something of the pizza base accommodating four distinct "toppings" of subsequent chapters, in which musical expressions unite with memory, time and place, in order to show that a performance venue, whether a boarding house, a public house, or a private house, presents a particular site or archive, as do the sonic practices associated with it.

The first specific site for this investigation is presented in Chapter Two. The focus here is Birmingham's private domestic interior, which creates a distinct contrast with some of the city's more public spaces (such as churches and parade routes) that are investigated consequently. Chapter Two considers the establishment of the Birmingham branch of *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* in the city-centre home of Lily Lawrie from County Roscommon. This establishes a loose chronology to the study, as I date today's recognisable Irish music in Birmingham back to the era of Lily Lawrie. Birmingham's earliest Irish music scene was nurtured in the fifties within her four walls in Handsworth, a particularly pluralistic area of the city. I present the pivotal role of the Lawries' house in assisting a version of musical performance in urban Birmingham that continued some traditions of rural Ireland.

The socialist and Marxist spaces of the city are our location in the third chapter. For a period during the 1950s and 1960s, the Irish musician Luke Kelly, lead singer of the band The Dubliners, was a resident of Birmingham. Kelly's formation as a musician took place during these decades, as he lived an active musical and political existence in the West Midlands. Information on this time has often proved hard to come by, save for minor references made by Des Geraghty in his biography *Luke Kelly-Dubliner*. Hence my determination to unveil the relatively unexplored influence that Birmingham had on the well-known Dublin socialist singer. I claim, in this section, Luke Kelly-Brummie, rather than Luke Kelly-Dubliner.[42]

This third chapter explains that Kelly's inchoate socialism is profoundly shaped by a number of specific sites in Birmingham, namely

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[41] Richard Schechner, 'Restoration of Behaviour', in *Between Theater and Anthropology* ed. by Schechner (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), pp.35-116.

[42] Luke Kelly's gravestone in Glasnevin Cemetery, North Dublin bears the inscription, "Luke Kelly – Dubliner".

the city centre folk clubs, his lodgings in Kings Heath and the seminar rooms at Birmingham University; as well as Ewan MacColl's house in Beckenham where he encounters (at a distance) a Birmingham influence. I present the paradox that the analogous musical ideas and singing techniques Kelly took from these venues in Birmingham helped to create what became his and his contemporaries' recognisably Irish sounds. As the BBC recently stated, "for a lot of people around the world, The Dubliners are Irish music, and Irish music is The Dubliners".[43] Rather than belonging to Irish Dublin, however, Luke Kelly belongs to the diasporic space of Irish Birmingham.

Chapter Four locates an Irish musical identity within the religious sites of Birmingham. Although Irish Protestants and members of other faiths were involved in the great move from Ireland to England's cities, the Catholic Church forged a particular public identity for the newly arrived migrant. More often than not, oral histories of contemporary Birmingham echo that "antiquarian scholarship" to which May McCann refers; that distinguishing '"Irish", which appears to mean "Catholic"', from other Anglo-Irish scholarship.[44] In the practice of Catholicism the authority of the Pope supersedes that of the sovereign. This introduces another dimension to a diasporic musical study concerned with protracted ideas of the nation (one rarely considered by scholars). However, in this instance the national identity is bolstered rather than confused because, for some migrants, practising a Catholic religion aided their cultural distinction in the new British city, upholding earlier versions of Irishness that equated music, dance, language and religion. Most of the Irish residents of Birmingham experienced Catholic churches in a most practical rather than ideological way, however, utilising an important social outlet in lieu of the family and friends who had stayed at home.

Unlike the other case studies up to this point, the church is often a lucidly masculine public space and a very specific Irish musical identity developed there through hymns and devotional chants under the supervision of a male-only Catholic hierarchy. Despite the social conservatism associated with this form of performance, at the same time, parish events and dances in church halls fostered a freedom of expression for Irishmen and Irishwomen and a musical fusion for Irish traditional and

[43] 'The Rocky Road From Dublin: 50 Years of The Dubliners' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01blk01> [accessed May 9 2012].
[44] May McCann, 'Music and Politics in Ireland: the Specificity of the Folk Revival in Belfast', *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, 4 (1995), pp.51-76 (p.58).