Whiskey in the Jar
Traditional Irish Pub Music

An Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The expression “Give me the usual,” is an expression that gets used often in Ireland. Customers are beyond regulars in Irish pubs. They are practically fixtures of the bar. Yet, the Irish pub is not just a place to get a pint with friends. The Irish pub is a place to have deep conversations, write a novel, and learn history. The pub is the most important social place in Irish culture outside of the home.

“The best pub is the one where the best musicians are...it can be any pub in town.” The folk tradition that has arisen from pub culture involves another integral part of Irish culture: Irish traditional music. The modern incarnation of Irish traditional music is said to have arisen in the pub atmosphere. The most successful Irish traditional bands were formed during “pub sessions,” and include Planxty, De Dannaan, The Fureys, and Clannad. Today these pub sessions are sought after by tourists and native Irish people alike. Many Irish pubs now sport signs in windows saying “Live traditional music.” However, popular bands continue to be born from the pub sessions, including the Merry Ploughboys, and pubs do better business from these sessions. Therefore, Irish music fuels the success of the pubs and the pubs fuel the success of the Irish musicians.
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INTRODUCTION

The expression “Give me the usual,” is an expression that gets used often in Ireland. Customers are beyond regulars in Irish pubs. They are practically fixtures of the bar. Yet, the Irish pub is not just a place to get a pint with friends. The Irish pub is a place to have deep conversations, write a novel, and learn history. The pub is the most important social place in Irish culture outside of the home.

“The best pub is the one where the best musicians are...it can be any pub in town.”¹ The folk tradition that has arisen from pub culture involves another integral part of Irish culture: Irish traditional music. The modern incarnation of Irish traditional music is said to have arisen in the pub atmosphere. The most successful Irish traditional bands were formed during “pub sessions,” and include Planxty, De Danann, The Fureys, and Clannad. Today these pub sessions are sought after by tourists and native Irish people alike. Many Irish pubs now sport signs in windows saying “Live traditional music.” However, popular bands continue to be born from the pub sessions, including the Merry Ploughboys, and pubs do better business from these sessions. Therefore, Irish music fuels the success of the pubs and the pubs fuel the success of the Irish musicians.

ORIGINS OF MODERN TRADITIONAL MUSIC

The effervescent enthusiasm surrounding Irish music today originated in two distinct waves. The first wave came circa 1960 with Sean O’Riada’s new way of looking

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at Irish traditional music and with the popularity of Irish ballad singing groups like the Dubliners and the Clancy Brothers. O’Riada was a composer who composed scores for symphony and chamber orchestra. His first taste of national exposure came in 1959’s *Mise Eire*, a documentary about Ireland’s war for independence. Previous to O’Riada’s arrangements, Irish music was mainly played by ceili bands in unison without complex harmonics or rhythms.\(^2\) Ceili houses were those homes where people would gather and exchange tunes, songs, and stories before the formation of modern traditional Irish music.\(^3\) With his formation of Ceoltoiri Chualann, one of the first of a new breed of traditional Irish band, O’Riada highlighted individual players with his new compositions of traditional Irish songs. When not performing for film scores, Ceoltoiri Chualann performed at Dublin’s Abbey Theatre, where the bodhran was introduced to Irish traditional music. “The new sound of Ceoltori Chualann…wrested control of traditional music from the prissy parlour rooms and the rigid unison ceili bands and an explosion of Irish folk music groups followed. Every single one of them featured a bodhran.”\(^4\)

Also circa 1960, Irish ballad singing groups became popular as well. The Clancy Brothers, the Wolfe Tones, and the Dubliners became icons of Irish traditional music. The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem were especially memorable in their white matching Aran sweaters that their mother made for them. While their singing and musicianship may not show the most talent, these groups presented Irish folk songs such as “Whiskey in the Jar,” and “Jug O Punch,” that many people across the world can sing

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the choruses to. These groups encouraged the world to open their ears to Irish music and opened the door for groups like The Chieftains, Planxty, and De Dannan.

The second wave which generated more interest in Irish traditional music was a theatrical show which took the world by storm in the early to mid-1990's. This theatrical show was called Riverdance. The idea for Riverdance came from a seven minute performance at the intermission of the Eurovision Song Contest in 1994. The show involves "A Celtic-looking rock-like setting...with highly colored projections to vary the look, a load of Irish music and a lot of Irish dancing."5 In 1996, Riverdance made its way to Radio City Music Hall in New York City. From the Radio City Music Hall performance the show went on to win a Grammy Award for its composer, Bill Whelan and allowed one of the show's stars, Michael Flatley, to form his own popular touring show the Lord of the Dance. The show is still touring the world with two companies, the Boyne Company which tours North America and the Foyle Company which tours the rest of the world. The Radio City Music Hall performance elevated the show's prominence in public consciousness to iconic status. The Mayor of New York City actually proclaimed a Riverdance Day in the city on March 15, 2005, to recognize the tenth anniversary of the show in New York.6 The show's CD has sold more than two million copies worldwide. Many, vis-à-vis Riverdance, have been given a first taste of Irish traditional music which has often led to a further discovery of the music.

NARRATIVE SINGING

Singing is a large part of Irish traditional music. Those who sing do so in both English and Irish. The older songs are often the ones sung in Irish. The more recent songs are usually sung in English. Most singers use a metered technique in which the musical time is kept by a time signature.

Besides metered singing, Irish traditional music involves a specific type of singing called sean-nós singing. Sean-nós singing does not involve using a familiar metered form. It is not performed in 6/8 time, 4/4 time, or any other meter familiar to much of the world. This type of singing is not sung in English, but is sung in Irish. Sean-nós singing depends solely upon the words which are sung. During a performance of this ‘hand-winding’ system of singing, a listener leads the singer’s hands. “The two clasped hands remind one another of each other, following each other; loops and spirals accompany the melody, singer and listener are rooted static to the spot, and yet the winding unwinds like a line of music with its ups and downs, its glens and plateaux and its little melismatic avalanches.”

INSTRUMENTS OF MODERN IRISH TRADITIONAL MUSIC

Several kinds of instruments are also involved in traditional Irish music. Those instruments include uilleann pipes, the bodhrán, the flute, tin whistle, fiddle, and accordion, along with instruments more recently incorporated. Instruments more recently introduced include the banjo, mandolin, and acoustic guitar.

The uilleann pipes are an Irish adaptation of what most people know as the Scottish bagpipe. The original Scottish bagpipe was meant mainly for outdoor use in war

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and sometimes at funerals.\textsuperscript{8} The uilleann pipes were developed in the early eighteenth century. A full set of uilleann pipes consists of a bag, bellows and chanter, drones and regulators.\textsuperscript{9} The pipes, though not in their present form, were used to play dance music before the fiddle came along.

The first violins, called fiddles by traditional Irish musicians, were first made in Italy in the fifteenth century. The fiddle replaced an earlier incarnation of the uilleann pipes as the primary instrument at dances. Nonetheless, the style of Irish fiddling suggests the composers were still heavily influenced by the pipes, as the music often did not descend to the fourth string on the fiddle.\textsuperscript{10}

The tin whistle is also an important part of Irish traditional music. The tin whistle is sometimes called the penny whistle because of how inexpensive it is. The tin whistle is a hollowed out cylinder with six finger holes and is usually made for the key of ‘D’.\textsuperscript{11} The tin whistle’s head is often made of plastic. The tin whistle is also used to play rapid dance music melodies.

The bodhran is often made of goat skin and stretched over a wooden rim. The instrument is a shallow one sided drum and provides rhythm and the occasional solo in Irish music. At the beginning of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century the bodhran was used by Christmas Rhymers in mumming plays and by Wren Boys on St. Stephen’s Day. The bodhran was introduced to traditional pub music during the 1960’s.

Along with the bodhran, other instruments which were not originally used in traditional music have made their way into the mainstream. The banjo, originally an

\textsuperscript{8} Breandan Breathnach, \textit{Folk Music and Dances of Ireland}, (Dublin: Talbot Press 1971) 75.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid. 76.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid 84.
African instrument introduced to the United States by Africans forced into slavery, was introduced to Irish traditional music by a group of Virginian musicians in the mid 19th century. The banjo did not become a popular instrument until the 1960's when Barney McKenna recorded banjo with the Dubliners.12

PUB ORIGINS

Before the Norman invasion, the Irish did have a place to stop and have a drink. These places did not charge a guest for drinking. The lord in charge was supposed to provide hospitality for all of his guests, planned and unplanned. The most generous of these lords were given the title of briugu, or hospitaller.13 These briugu were often very wealthy individuals, for they would have a constant drain on their resources. The tradition of briugu continued after the Normans invaded, but it was no longer quite to the extent as previous to the invasion.

The Normans arrived in England in 1066 at the Battle of Hastings. Eventually, the Normans also conquered Ireland in the 12th century. When the Normans arrived, they brought their law codes and customs with them. One custom that arrived with the Normans was the business of taverns. The Normans law codes began to regulate the trade of these taverns when their primary income became “off-trades” in goods besides alcohol.14 In these taverns the term vintner was first brought to Ireland. Vintner traditionally meant wine seller, but in today’s Ireland vintner refers to anyone licensed to sell alcohol.

14 Ibid 17.
By the 16th century England had re-established a tenuous control over Ireland. At this time the terms tavern and alehouse were being used interchangeably, unlike before when both were used to describe the respective drink being sold within. Legislation of this period began referring to these places as public houses and during the Victorian era the name was shortened to “pub”.

THE PEOPLE IN THE PUB

Today just about anyone can go into a pub unless the publican throws the person out. However, it was not always like that. Originally, the pub was the man’s domain. Wives of married men did not go into the pub even to get their husbands for something important. They would wait outside the pub and ask a man going into the pub to ask after her husband. It would be a disgrace to the man if his wife came into the pub to get him. During a period when men could still beat their wives with little to no repercussions there was also real fear of being beaten that sometimes kept women from entering the “sacred ground” of the pub.

There were, of course, exceptions to this rule. Elderly women were allowed into the pub without a problem. Elderly women would enter the pub to smoke their small pipes and have a small serving of porter. The custom allowed for the elderly women to enter simply because of their age. The men figured that if the ladies had made it this long they deserved their pint now and again.

The other women who were the exception to this rule were the women street market dealers. These women were hard drinkers who fought, brawled, and drank just as

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17 Ibid 41.
hard as any man. In the pre-World War II era there were no bathrooms for these women on the premises. So, they devised their own method of going to the bathroom: the women would simply urinate in the grate outside the bar, sometimes directly onto the men standing in the cellar below.18

STYLES OF PUBS

The traditional Irish pub setting has three distinct styles of pub. The first is a country pub. In many country settings the pub was a place for townsfolk to unyoke their animals and have a “rest and a bait.”19 These pubs have a country ambiance which welcomes incoming strangers. Country pubs like the Real Unyoke in County Wexford, Ireland, still retain a thatched roof and the original fireplace from 1798.

Another pub style is the shop style. This style of pub was during a phase of pub life wherein the pub owner sold more than just alcohol. Pub owners would have a grocery store, and sell drapery and any number of other things underneath the same roof as the bar. Ashe’s in County Kerry, Ireland is an example of this.20 The pub began as a grocery and drapery store. The proprietor later acquired a spirit grocer’s license which led eventually to a public house. The stores and bar were always divided. Women could go into the stores, but they were virtually outlawed from going into the bars themselves.

Finally, the most recognized pub style is the Victorian and early Edwardian style. The Victorian style is characterized by ornate bars. There are many kinds of intricate carving throughout the pubs. Plush red velvet booths decorate the rest of the pub. Highly

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polished reflective mirrors shine from behind the bar. Victorian style bars are mostly located in large cities. The smaller towns were not interested in the fancy style of pub

SOCIAL REALITY OF THE PUBS

Besides being a place for men to get away from women and be around their “mates,” pub life had certain social realities. In the early 20th century during the war for independence, pubs were the place where the Irish Republican Army could meet in relative safety. When the IRA members would go to a trusted pub, the publican would know who in the room was a British officer, a Black and Tan (an Irishman who worked for the British as a policeman), and would signal to the IRA members who was whom. Pubs were also ideal places to hide ammunition and weapons.21

When a man died, his “pub family” would assume a central place at the wake and the funeral. A man’s pub family was the group of friends he made during his evenings at the pub. An American illustration of this concept would be the popular early 1990’s NBC sitcom “Cheers.” The pub family took up a collection for the dead man’s family. The publican would pay for most of the ceremonies associated with Irish burial customs. The publican would pay for the drink at the wake, give money for the funeral, and sometimes even totally take over the funeral arrangements.22 On the way to the grave a hearse would not only pause at the man’s home, it would even pause at a man’s local pub for a few minutes.

An oral tradition is also present at many pubs. Conversation rules the pub. However, the pub conversation rarely varies from the subjects of “politics, religion, the

21 Ibid 38.
22 Ibid 53.
price of drink, cost of living, work and football, and hurling matches." The publican is in charge of defining how heated a discussion can become over religion or politics (or football for that matter).

Conversation is not the only oral tradition present in Irish pubs. Irish pubs are also notorious for song. Irish drinking songs sometimes go back quite a few generations. At least one of these drinking songs inspired a novel. A popular song called "Finnegan's Wake" inspired a James Joyce novel. Irish rebel songs also help to preserve cultural memory. Songs like "God Save Ireland" tell stories of one of the many Irish revolutions.

FAMOUS SONG ILLUSTRATIONS

Many songs known in Ireland are now known in various parts of the world thanks to the explosion of interest in Irish traditional music. One of the most famous songs, which inspired a James Joyce novel, is a song called "Finnigan's Wake." Now Finnigan can be spelled differently depending on who is writing out the lyrics. Finnigan's wake deals with the supposed death of an Irishman named Tim Finnigan. At his wake whiskey, what is traditionally called uische beatha (the water of life), truly re-awakens Tim Finnigan. Verses two, three and five illustrate the Irish customs of wakes.

"Finnigan's Wake," though it is in today's popular repertoire, has changed from even the version which was sung forty years ago. Observe the differences in the song from 1965 and from a modern internet version found in 2006:

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1965: "2. One mornin' Tim was rather full
His head *felt* heavy, which made him shake;
He fell from the ladder, and broke his skull
So they carried him home *a* corpse to wake.
They rolled him up in a nice clean sheet
And laid him out upon the bed,
*Fourteen candles around his feet*
And a barrel of porter at his head.
Chorus:
Whack fol de doo dah, dance to your partner
*Welt the flure, your truthers shake;*
Wasn't it the truth I've told ye
Lots of fun at Finnegan's wake!

3. His friends assembled at *his* wake
Mrs. Finnegan called for lunch,
First they *laid in tea* and cake
Then pipes, *tobacky* and whiskey-punch.
*Miss* Biddy O'Brien began to cry
"Such a *dacent* corpse, did *ever* you see?
"O Tim, *avourneen*, an' *why* did ye die?"
"Och, none of your *gab*" sez *Billy* McGhee!
Chorus:

5. Then Mickey *Mulvaney* raised his head
When a *gallon* of whiskey flew at him,
It missed *him*, and *hopping* on the bed
The liquor scattered over Tim!
*Bedad he revives!* See how he raises!
'An Timothy *jumping* from the bed, 
*Cried*, 'while he lathered around like blazes
'*In the name of the devil! D'ye think I'm dead?'* Chorus:24


2006: "2. One mornin' Tim was feelin' full
His head was heavy which made him shake;
He fell from the ladder and broke his skull
And they carried him home *his* corpse to wake.
They rolled him up in a nice clean sheet
And laid him out upon the bed,
*A gallon of whiskey at his feet*
And a barrel of porter at his head.
Chorus: Whack fol the darn O, dance to your partner
*Whirl the floor, your trotters shake;*
Wasn't it the truth I *told you*
Lots of fun at Finnegan's wake!

3. His friends assembled at *the* wake
And Mrs. Finnegan called for lunch,
First they *brought in tea* and cake
Then pipes, *tobacco* and whiskey punch.
*Miss* Biddy O'Brien began to bawl
"Such a nice clean corpse, did *you ever* see?
"O Tim, *mavourneen*, why did *you* die?"
"Arragh, hold your gob" said *Paddy* McGhee!
Chorus:

5. Then Mickey *Maloney* ducked his head
When a *noggin* of whiskey flew at him,
It missed, and *falling* on the bed
The liquor scattered over Tim!
*The corpse revives!* See how he raises!
Timothy *rising* from the bed,
*Says,* "*Whirl* your whiskey around like blazes
*Thanum an Dhu!* Do *you* thunk I'm dead? Chorus:25

. This example illustrates how dynamic and changing this folk tradition is. While both versions convey the idea that Tim Finnigan was revived by whiskey, many of the smaller details including people’s names, actions, and words are changed.

Other songs which are well known include rebel rallying songs. “God Save Ireland,” is one of those songs. Written by Timothy Sullivan, “God Save Ireland,” tells of three men who died for Ireland. The three anonymous men do not fear death. They embrace each other and proudly go to their deaths for their country. “God Save Ireland,” was an important rallying cry for many Irish people during their years of oppression.

This song is still in the national consciousness and is sung in pubs across Ireland.

1. High upon the gallows tree
   Swung the noble-hearted Three.
   By the vengeful tyrant stricken in their bloom;
   But they met him face to face,
   With the courage of their race,
   And they went with souls undaunted to their doom.
Chorus:
"God save Ireland!" said the heroes;
"God save Ireland" said they all.
"Whether on the scaffold high
Or the battlefield we die,
O, what matter when
For Erin dear we fall!"

2. Girt around with cruel foes,
   Still their courage proudly rose,
   For they thought of hearts that loved them far and near;
   Of the millions true and brave
   O'er the ocean's swelling wave,
   And the friends in holy Ireland ever dear.
Chorus
3. Climbed they up the rugged stair,
   Rang their voices out in prayer,
   Then with England's fatal cord around

them cast,
Close beside the gallows tree
Kissed like brothers lovingly,
True to home and faith and freedom to the last.
Chorus
4. Never till the latest day
   Shall the memory pass away,
   Of the gallant lives thus given for our land;
   But on the cause must go,
   Amidst joy and weal and woe,
   Till we make our Isle a nation free and grand.
Chorus.

TOURISM AND ITS AFFECT ON PUB CULTURE

"It’s like the United Nations in here. There’s a German couple…An Australian…And there’s a woman climbing over chairs taking photographs of every conceivable object in the room from every conceivable angle...so she’s obviously American."

Tourism is an unmistakable part of today’s pub scene and culture. In 2004 there were roughly 12 million visitors to Ireland. On the Irish Tourism Board website a search for “traditional pub” will return 905 results. Tourism accounts for 3.9% of Ireland’s Gross National Product, which amounts to €4.78 billion. In 2004, 68% of overseas visitors came to Ireland for vacation. In that same year 39%, roughly €1.9 billion, of the money these tourists brought were spent on food, drink, and entertainment. The tourism is not concentrated in highly industrialized areas, but in areas that are supposedly unspoilt and natural.

THE CRAIC

These tourists not only go in search of unspoilt and natural views, they also want to take in their idea of Irish culture. These tourists are searching for the atmosphere of those early pub sessions where famous bands were formed. This magic is known as the craic. These tourists are searching for the combination of pub euphoria and Irish traditional music which only comes from late night pub sessions. "They talk about the craic, that indefinable definition of Ireland’s collective passion and capacity for a good

27 Colin Irwin, In Search of the Craic: One Man’s Pub Crawl Through Irish Music (Great Britain: Andre Deutsch, 2003) 44.
32 Ibid.
time.”33 However, some scholars say the craic is not a reality and that it is only a show put on by locals for tourists. Despite the protest from scholars that the craic is a term that has been coined mainly for tourism, there is an unmistakable atmosphere when musicians begin an unforgettable pub session. “Yep, there’s a lot of tourists here but nobody’s playing to the gallery and don’t tell me this session would be any more sparky or emotional were it being conducted entirely for their own satisfaction in some back room away from the prying eyes of daft visitors demanding to experience the mysteries of the craic.”34

CONCLUSION

Irish music brings business to the pubs. The pubs allow the Irish musicians to gather and play their music as they see fit. Therefore, both art and industry are served by each other. Irish traditional music fuels an important part of the new economy of Irish tourism. However, in the end, Irish traditional music will be played in the pubs whether the tourists come to hear it or not. Before 1960 the world of Irish traditional music consisted of ceili houses and bands which played music in unison. After the O’Riada musical revolution of 1960, Irish traditional music was forever changed. New instruments and intricate rhythms became a staple of traditional music. Even this new tradition allows for change. The world of Irish traditional music is not a stagnant, stale world where only the “correct” versions of songs can be played. The 1992 phenomenon of Riverdance brought Irish music to a whole new level. Currently, the music is heard by citizens from around the world. The folk tradition surrounding Irish music is an ever-changing, living phenomenon. Each of these individuals will experience the music

33 Colin Irwin, In Search of the Craic: One Man’s Pub Crawl Through Irish Music (Great Britain:Andre Deutsch, 2003) 11.
34 Ibid. 119.
differently. They will each take home their own versions of these traditional songs and create a new folk tradition.
Works Cited


