



Troubled Voices

A Troubles Archive Essay

Martin Dowling



Cover Image: Joseph McWilliams - Twelfth March (1991)

From the collection of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland

About the Author

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Troubled Voices

Street singers and pedlars of broadsheets had for two centuries been important figures in Irish political and social life. They served as musical barometers of political tension, giving voice to the agitated, the mournful, and the vengeful. A massive repertoire of songs comes down from the "Age of Revolution" (1776-1815), chronicling the events of the day, the great Anglo-French battles, the confrontations of '98, the hangings, and including all the agents involved, from the yeomanry and volunteer corps, the Orangemen, the Defenders, the croppies, prominent United Irishmen, to the exploits of the great Bonaparte himself. Here too lay the origin of a crucial theme in popular political balladry: the remembrance of the dead. Real political heroes such as Wolfe Tone, Henry Joy McCracken, Roddy McCorly, Billy Byrne, all hanged for their participation in the '98 rising, are remembered, along with more figurative characters such as "Little Jimmy Murphy", "An Spailpin Fanacht," and "The Croppy Boy." Singers of this type continued to play their part in the tumultuous decades that followed, but there was a great slackening of the tradition of the political balladeer later in the nineteenth century, when a listless politics was accompanied by a more genteel and domesticated song tradition. But a template had been established, and when political crisis returned to Ireland ushered in by the outbreak of World War I, the ballads found a new life and purpose. "Who Fears to Speak of '98" became "Who Fears to Speak of Easter Week", and songs commemorating the dead heroes now had over a century of martyrdom to draw on:

Remember Lord Edward and Emmet,
And likewise the Manchester Three,
I mean Allen, O'Brien, and Larkin,
Who died for old Erin Machree

By the 1950s this song tradition had slackened again. In 1967, in his then definitive study of Irish political song, the folklorist Georges-Denis Zimmerman wrote:

In recent times new rebel songs have been written less and less, the main reason being certainly the abatement of political passions. Street singing has now wholly disappeared, and popular taste is turning to new types of songs; only the most racy of the older ballads seem likely to be preserved, as relics of times past or because some quality transcends their once topical value.

However, events were to bring the old repertoire back into circulation once again. During the international folk revival that accompanied movements for civil rights and national liberation, the street singer was replaced by the "folk" singer. In Northern Ireland, civil rights confrontations degenerated quickly into the guerrilla war laced with sectarian violence we now call the Troubles. A vicious stalemate scenario, transformed by the Hunger Strikes and Sinn Féin's political successes in the 1980s, eventually gave way to a peace process. The songs of the twenties, and of the early nineteenth century, found renewed relevance. Many new songs were invented, both loyalist

and republican, chronicling new battles, celebrating new victories, and honouring a new generation of martyrs. But the template of these songs – their melodies, structure, and lyrical devices – were old, first established in the eighteenth century. Indeed some of them referred to the older songs in their opening lines, establishing a place in tradition. 'Rocky's Song', written by James "Rocky" Burns in Belfast jail in 1972, begins:

There's many a song has been written,
Of home and lands far away,
But I long to parade up the Shankill,
To the strains of our own Dolly's Brae.

Some sing the Country and Western,
The songs of the famed Johnny Cash
But give me the favourite of Ulster
Need I say it? That song is the 'SASH.'

Professional traditional or folk singers are expected to comment upon the world, but their craft, indeed their livelihood, depends on their sense of occasion, their discretion, their intuitions about consensus in the minds of their listeners. Their songs are shaped and reshaped by circumstance, and many are left behind. In Tommy Makem's 'Four Green Fields', written before the Troubles broke out in 1967, Ireland in the guise of a wise old woman expresses her defiantly nationalist aspiration for the province of Ulster, her lost fourth green field. The song ends with the lines:

But my sons have sons, as brave as were their fathers;
My fourth green field will bloom once again, said she

In recent years the penultimate line is often sung, "But peace will come, my lands will be united," reflecting the reality that today such unity will only come through negotiation and consent, not through the masculine violence of "brave sons", and with the possibility that the blossom on this fourth field will not be a monochrome green. Songs like this have their time and place. This is most poignantly the case with regard to songs about those whose lives have ended prematurely and violently. In his song 'There Were Roses', Tommy Sands mourns the death of two friends, a Protestant and a Catholic, victims of sectarian tit-for-tat murders in the early 1970s. The song takes its distance from the tradition of celebrating the dead in the name of partisan politics. The singer declares in the opening verse:

My song for you this evening is not to make you sad
Nor for adding to the sorrows of this troubled Northern land
But lately I've been thinking and it just won't leave my mind
To tell you of two friends one time who were both good friends of mine

The verses that follow relate with painful intimacy the unfolding of events:

Allen was my friend! he cried, he begged them with his fear
But centuries of hatred have ears that cannot hear
An eye for an eye was all that filled their minds
And another eye for another eye till everyone is blind

In the final verse, the singer again takes his distance from the tradition of folding the significance of these deaths into a narrative of political resistance.

I don't know where the moral is or where this song should end
But I wonder just how many wars are fought between good friends
And those who give the orders are not the ones to die
It's Bell and O'Malley and the likes of you and I

'There Were Roses' resonates with many songs of the international folk and pop revival. In its focus on individuals, reducing overwhelming political issues to a personal level, one is reminded of the influential songwriting style of Joni Mitchell and others. The song also draws on a much older Irish tradition, *an caoineadh*, the lament or keen. In the simple chorus, which begins "There were roses, roses, there were roses", the melody rises and comes to rest on the first syllable of "roses," and here is heard a small melisma of emotion, a vocal shudder of pain, that resonates with the "ochóne is ochóne ó" of more ancient Gaelic *amhrain caointe*. The chorus serves an ancient social function, allowing the singer's audience to perform a public act of mourning in vocal unison. This song has been heard at folk festivals around the world. If we recognise that this song has facilitated the work of mourning, a work that is a difficult process that comes to an end in acceptance of painful loss, then the dying away of this song might be part of that process even as its form and style persist as a reference for later singers and songwriters.

The songs that live in the tradition, even those that refer to real heroes, lovers, or martyrs of the past, abstract from the world and maintain a certain distance from the painful intimacy of a song like 'There Were Roses'. Some songs are softened, others heard only in small settings, many are abandoned. These are old and resilient habits. When Thomas Moore penned lyrics to the melodies of the nearly extinct harp tradition, he softened the energies and bitterness generated by the failed rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798. He followed the habits of generations of Irish language poets and singers from whom we inherit a rich metaphorical vocabulary of Irish desire. Only time will tell how many of the songs invented in response to the Troubles will survive in the tradition, and what shape they will take in the hands of future singers.

Northern Reflections

Instrumentalists, in their mute sonority, have necessarily even less to say about the world, though their wordless language might speak more powerfully to the body and soul. Traversing the expressive contours of an air whose lyric is long lost, or immersed in a vast collection of eight bar tunes in a set rhythm, the traditional musician's craft stays as is, while the world moves on, or regresses. In the serenity of an air or the frenzy of dance music, the world is suspended, refracted, but rarely reflected. Only a tiny segment of the traditional music repertoire can be recognised to have a political valence, yet it is nevertheless subject to the recurrent troubles concerning innovation, integrity, identity, and ownership of traditional music. The selfsame eight bars in strict time, the sonata form of the ballad, the glacial pace of stylistic evolution – these simply structured tools of the traditional musician allow traditional music its recognition as a whole. As such, it can be acquired or rejected wholesale. It can be packaged, hypostasised, bought and sold, and put to use in the world. It becomes, not what it is, but "mine," "ours," or "theirs."

Simultaneous with the Troubles, folk and traditional music were being profoundly reshaped by their integration into the commerce of the international folk revival. A generation gap opened up between the young generation, tuned in to the new sounds emanating from Dublin recording studios in the 1970s, and older players, Protestant and Catholic, throughout the countryside. The complaint that "we don't play traditional music, we just play the old tunes" was often heard, particularly among northern Protestants unreceptive to Dublin influence. But the state intervened just as actively as the market. Throughout the Troubles and the Peace Process, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland promoted the wholesomeness of traditional music and its capacity to enhance mutual recognition through a shared tradition. This idea was perhaps influenced by a nostalgic view of the 1950s and 1960s, when traditional music was organically sewn into the fabric of rural communities, and when young Protestants and Catholics mingled together in the urban milieu of the folk revival.

The rift opened up by the outbreak of Troubles tore right through this nostalgic fantasy. The occasions for sharing traditions became, if not physically impossible, then highly inconvenient if not downright dangerous. The cultural activism that accompanied a reawakened republican movement made good use of traditional music. Set lists that survive from the early 70s at gigs in Belfast show how an evening's music typically progressed from Irish traditional material and anodyne Anglo-American folk song to the more blood-soaked extreme of contemporary political balladry. Meanwhile, to borrow Fintan Vallely's apt title, Protestants for the most part "tuned out" from music, song and dance that the world labelled "Irish." Today, the wholesome idea of one whole traditional music shared by all is out of fashion. It has been replaced by an even more fanciful and politically expedient idea. Now, improbably, we have two whole traditions, one for us and one for youse: one Irish, and one Ulster Scots. This idea of course forgets a third tradition, that of the British multiculturalist who looks on and pretends to adjudicate. We know not how long-lasting these perceptions may be.

Meanwhile, the authentic traditional musician tends towards difference. There is a streak of anarchism running through him. When he is told—as he often is told these days—"there are two traditions, yours and mine", he cries foul.

So, for example, cried traditional singer Sean Corcoran, when bureaucrats at a 1991 conference entitled 'Traditional Music: Whose Music?' tried to force a "two traditions" model on him: "If there is more than one tradition, then there are thousands, because just like accents and just like regional dialects, each area has its own distinctive style and flavour." The bland groove of commercial "Irish trad" carries on over the airwaves and from the gig rigs. Ulster Scots music, unheard of before the mid-1990s, stumbles along while the funding lasts. Away from the microphones and cameras, outside the classrooms, stepping occasionally in and out of the limelight, there persists a world of difference, where songs and tunes speak in local dialects to more parochial concerns, and within a local style is heard a sense of place.

The Sound of a City

If music in a sense reflects the character of a city, where in turn does that character come from? During my first visit to Belfast in 1982, the poet Michael Donaghy and I spent a day in the company of Noel Lenaghan, the Andersonstown flute player and singer who had spent a period in the '70s playing in Canada and the American midwest, which included frequent visits to Chicago. It was a typical Saturday in Belfast, and, for those with a more skilfully wielded pen than mine, provocative of that Joycean stream-of-consciousness style that Carson was to use so evocatively in the autobiographical book about traditional music *Last Night's Fun*: his pubcrawls through the traditional and folk milieu of 1960s Belfast, of university term-time weekends in Ballyweird outside Portrush, of pubs in the middle of nowhere somewhere in the vicinity of the Willy Clancy Summer School, where time accelerates and contracts, where the music and the musicians themselves give shape to the spacial dimensions of a room. Where the very infrastructure of Belfast, the Victorian architecture and decor, the UDR foot patrols, the iron gates and shards of glass, gave shape to precarious and uncanny experiences and connections. In some of the poetry Carson was writing at the time, more menacing and less romantic aspects of these types of experiences come into focus. The eight-bar form of Irish dance tunes distantly echoes in the too-long-for-the-page lines of poems like 'Last Orders' or 'Night Out' collected in *Belfast Confetti* (1989), set in pubs protected by wire mesh gates, where upon entry at the bar "we get the once-over once again," where life and death judgments about a newcomer into a pub are made as quick as a penny drops, where

...the sentence of the
night
Is punctuated through and through by rounds of drink,
of bullets, of applause.

In Noel Lenaghan's company I got my first exposure to the navigational skills required in Belfast, and of the surreal stretching of time, place, and space that is Carson's literary theme. Starting from a warmup in the Europa Hotel, where a Dixieland Jazz band had a regular gig, we ambled off to Kelly's Cellars, which at around 5 pm was packed with musicians and thick with hashish smoke. We lost track of Lenaghan after getting seats at the edge of the session. The evening ended across the river in Tom Kelly's bar in the Short Strand. The wire mesh caged entry with its buzzer led into a long, narrow, and deeply unwelcoming bar. It was clear in an instant that this was not a musical place. Our guide by this time was the fiddle player Paul "Dusty" Dorris who knew to lead us straight up a narrow flight of stairs to a harshly lit room where we found musicians lined up along a long, low, table. We walked the streets nervously late that night, accompanied back across the Queen's Bridge by Dusty, before finally getting a taxi safely back home.

I returned to Belfast many times before settling in 1994. I learned how to navigate these precarious places and spaces and to recognise that the very survival of the sessions was down to accidents of the sectarian geography of the city. The city centre was accessible during the day from various neighbourhoods to the west, north and east; but travelling socially radially around the city had become inconvenient at best, life-threatening at worst. Some of the venues, like Pat's and the Rotterdam in the Docks, survived because of their depopulated and dormant location. Others, like Kelly's Cellars and the Kitchen Bar, stayed open inside the ringed metal fortress of the city centre to host quiet sessions after business hours or on Saturday afternoons.

During the Troubles, traditional musicians were almost entirely responsible for keeping music alive in the city centre. In 1987, we regularly met the McGrory family, Andy Dickson, and Anne Baillie in the Kitchen Bar on a Thursday night. Often we were the only customers. One night, two RUC men on their night beat came in well after closing time, and the atmosphere froze. After an interminable moment of silence, the cops clapped their caps onto the bar and ordered pints. We were told to carry on, and so we did, and I played away with a gun snug in a hip holster eight inches from my ear. Getting home was dicey. You couldn't drive, because there was nowhere to safely leave the car.

The music carried on just outside, sometimes only just, the sight lines of the war. Amazingly, the violent displacements of people during the Troubles opened up new locations for music. One of these was off the lower Ormeau Road, Hatfield Street and Rutland Street, where cheap digs could be had into the 1980s. This became home to quite a number of traditional musicians, some of whom, like Brendan O'Hare from Castlewelling County Down, had come into Belfast from outside the city. I asked Brendan O'Hare about the neighbourhood, whether there was a particular quality to it.

Brendan: We chose this one particular corner to sit in because acoustically it was just great, you know, great sound, like you know. And one of the locals approached me after about a month of us playing there and said, "Why are youse sittin' there?" And I was going, "Why not?" "That's dead man's corner." "Dead man's. . .?" "It's the only place in the bar where you can see who is coming in to shoot ye." You know, because you are facing the door.

Martin: This is the side door, on Hatfield St.

Brendan: You had to go through that door, and you were sitting facing that door, so if someone would come in to shoot you, you would see them.

Today traditional music is no longer heard in that corner. The Hatfield is a safe house for partying University students.

How did the Troubles affect the traditional music of the city? It is worth keeping in mind the fluidity and potential of the scene that had developed in Belfast by 1968. There were musicians of quality spread thinly throughout the city, relatively fresh from the hinterland. There was piper Sean McAloon and fiddler Tommy Gunn, both from Fermanagh, and the virtuoso fiddler Sean McGuire, son of a Cavan father and Ballycastle mother, who in the 1950s began a performing and recording career that took him to London, New York and all around Ireland, perhaps the most influential fiddler of the twentieth century. The McPeake family of pipers and singers from west Belfast also toured Ireland and England in the late 50s and early 60s. Uniquely and to many ears controversially, the McPeakes combined two or three sets of uilleann pipes with harp, accordion, and piano, employing tightly tuned harmonies and complex instrumental arrangements, and famously using the pipes as an accompaniment to singing. McGuire and the McPeakes together produced innovations in traditional music more commonly associated with Dublin-based bands like Sean O'Riada's Ceoltoirí Chulainn, the Chieftains, and Planxty. We can only speculate on the potential of this milieu. Was there a greater fluidity and porousness between musical worlds in Belfast in the 1950s and 60s, with easier crossing of boundaries between the rural and the urban, the classical and the traditional, the mediated and the orally transmitted, between Protestant and Catholic musicians and instrument makers, and between different forms of musical practice, ceili-ing, parading, competing, concertizing, and performing for radio and television?

Banjo player Joe Holmes from the Shankill Road spoke to me about the fluid boundaries between Protestant and Catholic musicians and instrument makers that obtained in the 1950s. He told me about his grandfather, who made lambegs and bodhrans, and his great uncles, who were fiddlers and fifers, transposing fife tunes for the marches and Irish jigs for fiddling back and forth between instrument and context. Holmes was a key player in starting up a "session" in Belfast that was to be the focal point for music making through the Troubles. It began with an unlikely, and accidental, collaboration between a group of Protestant lads and a Catholic publican. Joe explained that sometime in 1962 he and his mates spilled out of a football match, carrying their banjos and guitars with them, and arrived in to the Great Easter Bar on the Newtownards Road. The bar was run by Pat Brennan, who also ran "Pat's Bar" in the Docks area of the city. According to Joe Holmes:

Pat said, "I have a great bar for you fellas, I'll take you down to it right now." And down we went to this bar. I know it's a lot more open now, but I mean it was down a wee narrow street, right down at the security dock gates. The only people who went into it were sailors, off duty harbour police men and one or two locals who lived about there. And he said, "Boys would this not suit?" And we said, "This is wonderful." And that was the start of it. In those days, it was mostly singing. But then you began to find somebody had learnt a new jig, and maybe the total repertoire was three jigs and a badly played reel and half of a hornpipe. But you found that as the months and the years went on, people began to get more proficient, as you would expect them to do. And then eventually it moved more and more towards being a diddly dee session, a traditional music session, you know.

There were other venues for this kind of gathering, of course: The Fiddle House in Albert Street, and the Duke of York where flute player Leslie Bingham played, folk clubs with temporary runs in various premises, and of course house visits. This was a milieu where, as Carson wrote, “we discovered kindred spirits; we discovered Protestants.” It was also a milieu where older rural traditional practitioners resident in the city first encountered the sixties-generation youths from their own neighbourhoods, as well as the new-style folk singers, and those influenced by them, from Scotland and England.

For many Belfast musicians urban house visiting, where all who gathered had their party piece, where music, song, and dance was punctuated by chatter, humour, and argument, had a huge influence. Gerry O'Donnell, a flute player from Sunnyside Street, was one of the first of his generation to discover, and be blown away by, the flute music of Fermanagh and North Leitrim. He often visited the Gunn family who ran a Bed and Breakfast in Botanic Avenue which was frequented by traditional musicians who came to perform on UTV. Gerry McCartney discovered musicians in his own neighbourhood off the Springfield Road in west Belfast only after meeting them in Pat's Bar in the docks. As the Troubles broke out, young musicians first heard McGuire, MacAloon, Glenarm dulcimer player John Rea, the singers Robin Morton and Cathal McConnell, box player Tommy Maguire from Fermanagh, Falls Road flautist Tom Ginley, and Dublin musicians like Barney McKenna. McConnell, co-founder of The Boys of the Lough and renowned for his repertoire of songs and dance music from Fermanagh, had a powerful impact. Singing uniquely Irish material in a southwest Ulster accent, they convinced a number of singers to abandon the American twang of John Baez and Woody Guthrie for a more locally rooted style and delivery. While working for the BBC in 1968, David Hammond produced a vinyl LP, *Ulster's Flowery Vale* that evokes the times beautifully. The album compiles tracks from singers and instrumentalists from around the North, including Tommy Gunn and Sean MacAloon.

The 1970s saw the contraction of this folk scene. Some musicians soldiered on in clubs, pubs, and hotel function rooms behind the barricades, but for many others getting out of town, whether semi-permanently or on temporary excursions, was a typical response, and often a matter of musical survival. For northern musicians coming of age in the 1970s who managed to stay in Belfast and stay active as musicians, the far flung network of County Fleadhanna Cheoil and summer schools became a vital lifeline and connection. This generation of musicians were as likely to meet each other in Donegal, Fermanagh, and Leitrim as in the pubs of Belfast.

One of Andy Dickson's bands during this era was *Na Buachailli* (The Boys), which also included Belfast natives Eugene “Spoolly” Kelly, Gerry McCartney, and Dermie Diamond, as well as honorary “boy” Tara Bingham from Comber. A favorite meeting place of the group was Cinn Casla, near Rinn na Feirste, County Donegal. The sisters Clodach (flute) and Orla (fiddle) McGrory, from the Antrim Road, played much of their early music with Na Buachailli in Donegal in the late '70s, but they rarely saw them in Belfast itself. A cohort of University students in Coleraine from around the north that included Belfast flute player Gary Hastings, bouzouki player Ciaran Curran, box player Ciaran “Captain Sensible” Kelly, based themselves in a cottage rented by Gerry O'Donnell near Derrygonnelly, County Fermanagh on long weekends. Folk singers from the north spread far and wide, right across the global Irish diaspora, where a living could be made in “Irish” pubs on a combination of dance tunes and rebel songs.

Perhaps the paradigmatic example of the self-exiled Belfast musician was Andersonstown flute player Frankie Kennedy. He began playing music in Belfast, learning at weekly sessions in the Rossa Club on the Falls Road, but his musical identity was forged in Donegal and Dublin, having established a strong musical partnership with his wife, the Gaoth Dobhair fiddle player and singer Mairead ní Mhaonaigh. Frankie's music was rarely heard in Belfast until it was recorded commercially. In 1983 they released the seminal album *Ceol Aduaidh* (“Northern Music”) on the Gael Linn label. Coming at the end of a great wave of influential commercial recordings produced in Dublin in the 1970s, the then unheard repertoire from Fermanagh and Donegal put “northern music” into perspective and cleared the musical ground for Altan, the internationally successful group the couple were soon to form.

If the folk and traditional revival of the 1970s found its centre of gravity in Clare and Galway, and its commercial home in Dublin, these musicians brought something new to the scene. Driving north, you could sense it. Even before crossing through the security installations on the border, before the road signs changed to English and the road itself ran suddenly more quietly under the tires, passing through Dundalk on the Dublin Road, or out of Manorhamilton on the Sligo Road, you felt you were entering a hidden musical terrain.

Clawhammer Flute

One evening in 1985 I recorded a session in Pat's Bar that included on fiddles Andy Dickson and Dermie Diamond, flute player Ann Bailie, Eugene "Spoolly" Kelly on guitar, the late Ian Robinson on bodhran, and the unmistakable, sharp, biting sound of Gerry McCartney's banjo-mandolin. This was Na Buachaillí. The tape captures a mixture of the mainstream and the more obscure music of Fermanagh, some of which I had just been learning that summer. I sensed at the time that I was in the middle of something quite special, musically and historically, with a unique story behind it. Any traditional music, if it has anything noteworthy about it, tends to be portrayed in terms of a certain drive or flow, a certain punctuation or smoothness, a certain variability or consistency, a certain harshness or delicacy. The traditional music of Belfast seems to tend to the first of these opposing pairs. Today, or since the mid-1990s, we tend to associate Belfast music with the flute, but this was certainly not always the case. In the '60s the predominant instrument among those coming of age was, for reasons that may remain partially mysterious, the tenor banjo.

Certainly there was a proliferation of banjo players in the sessions that developed in Pat's Bar and The Old House in Albert Street in the '60s and '70s. Here is an incomplete list of those who started out on mandolin, banjo mandolin, and/or tenor banjo: George Holmes, Ken McClintock, Gerry McCartney (who had worked in Dublin and played with Barney McKenna in O'Donoghue's Pub there), Billy Bothwell, Gogie McCullough, Stevie Regan, Wallace Hood, Dermie Diamond, Noel Leneghan, Jim Fitzpatrick. For the oldest within this cohort, the banjo touchstone was Barney McKenna who had appeared a number of times during the Troubles in the Ulster Hall and the Whitla Hall with his band The Dubliners. They struck a chord with Belfast's young men, both Protestant and Catholic. Dermie Diamond from the Falls, who was slightly younger, described what happened to him. His father had taken him to see the Dubliners in the Ulster Hall in the mid 1960s. A few years later:

I suppose I was about 17. I went down to a bar called Pat's Bar, down in the docks in Belfast. I shouldn't have been there, I was underage, but we sneaked down. We had heard this was a place where there was folk music so we were thinking about guitars and that. I just remember going in and hearing this music and it was a bunch of guys, some of whom I still know, Gerry McCartney and Billy Bothwell. Billy was playing the banjo in those days, and a fella called Wallace Hood who's in Canada now I think, he played the banjo as well. And Dennis McCullough, from Belfast on the banjo. So it was like—the Belfast Banjo Band, we used to call them. The sound was just incredible. And they were banging out these tunes and I thought, "This is the Dubliners; this is what Barney McKenna does!" and I thought, "Ah, so this is how it happens," you know? "Gotta get one of those." So I raced off and I bought a banjo from a guy in Ballymurphy for I think five pounds.

Dermie compared the sound of a banjo session in Pat's Bar to "an electric shock." This unpolished, raw, unkempt, stuttering, proletarian style appears now to be the main response of traditional musicians in Belfast to the Troubles. Andy Dickson recalled the scene he entered around 1970:

There would have been banjos, bodhrans, maybe the odd accordion. That was ... the clatter of Belfast music at the time. Loud, brash, noisy. Still that way [laughs] There weren't many flute players around at the time, that's for sure. They didn't turn up for quite a long time

When I pressed him later about the kind of music played in Belfast, the banjos, bodhrans, and accordions, he responded:

Andy: Well that's a sweeping generalisation. It's obviously not ... you could probably find exceptions to that

Martin: It may be a generalisation but I have heard it before from others, that it was a bit rough, and a bit loud, and a bit fast

Andy: Yeah. Bangy. Bangy! Anything bangy would do.

Martin: Where does that come from?

Andy: I don't know. It's just the nature of the Belfast sort of If you think about it you know, ship building, a lot of banging goes on, in the yards with steel hammers, and [he swings his arms animatedly] I don't know I'm only giving you a sort of, throwing away sort of sparks here to, but I mean banjos seemed to have been always the sort of, probably the main line in the instrumental character of Belfast. Banjos were favorite, that was what you made the best noise on, you know. Punchy! Bangy! Arghh.

Martin: Why would that be?

Andy: Simply because it penetrated, made a lot of noise in a confined space with a lot of people yelling their heads off and getting drunk, I don't know. I mean I'm only assuming that this is probably one of the reasons [Animated] But you do! You make a lot of noise! Belfast people always wanted to make a lot of noise, wanted to be heard, you know. People shout.

In early August 1985 Belfast seemed eerily quiet to me, the directionless summer breeze indicating vaguely the uncertain direction history was taking. A key turning point in the history of the Troubles, the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in November of that year, was in the offing. The traditional music scene had begun to change as well. Already by 1985 the banjo had started to recede in the city. Gerry McCartney still plays his banjo in town, and sometimes he brings out the old piercing banjo mandolin. Dermie Diamond, under the influence of Andy Dickson and Oliver Browne, dropped it and took up the fiddle. Noel Lenaghan also moved from guitar and mandolin to the flute.

By the end of the 1980s it was apparent that the ascendant instrument, and the characteristic sound of Belfast traditional music, was the flute. The city has produced and is home to an astounding number of flute players. There were a handful of skilled players active in the 1960s, including Brian Baillie, Tom Ginley, and Leslie Bingham. But the 1980s saw a great wave of skilled players come of age. Aside from the aforementioned Noel Lenaghan, Ciaran Carson, Gerry O'Donnell, Gary Hastings, Frankie Kennedy, Anne Baillie, Brendan O'Hare, and Clodach McGrory, Leslie Bingham's daughter Tara from Comber, Desi Wilkinson, flute maker and player Sam Murray, Gerry "Spike" Callaghan, Marcas Ó Murchu, Davy Maguire, John Hughes, Michael Clarkson, Maria Rafferty, Christine Dowling, Harry Bradley, and many others up and coming. Many of these flute players carried on with a distinct punchiness and loudness that continues to resonate in the city, carrying with it echoes of the Troubles themselves. The mainstream flute music of north Connacht is given a new forcefulness in the hands of Belfast flute players, but they also incorporate into their repertoire fife tunes (many of which are no longer heard on the road), Donegal highlands, and rare gems from Tyrone and Fermanagh barn dances of the last century. When I asked Andy Dickson about this he said:

I suppose in a way there is a sort of Belfast style of playing the flute. And it is very punchy. It's not flowing. It's very punchy. It's almost like tight piping I mean because it's a flute its more open and punchier. Again, it's got a hard edge to it. It's the same, a lot of people would say that Glasgow had a hard edge to it in exactly the same way. "Oh, he's a hard man, he's from Glasgow." Well, same thing goes for "he's a hard man, he's from Belfast." And his music is the same sort of thing. I think that it's difficult to pin down, to sort of take the urban characterisation of it, but you possibly could if you went into it a bit deeper.

The vocabulary of our identity is often enriched by the gifts of observant strangers and distant musical cousins. When I first articulated this transition from banjo to flute that came out of the Belfast scene in recent decades, Ciaran Carson recalled to me an incident on one of his poetry reading trips to Appalachia, when he found himself in up in the mountains in Boone, North Carolina. There he met a woman named Cece Conway, who organised a get-together with some young local musicians. Ciaran described to me the scene:

There was a great fiddle-player called Lucas Pasley, played real old-timey fiddle with the fiddle in the crook of his arm, and this big raw-boned mountain girl playing clawhammer banjo, and a guitar player and a mandolin player. Great music. You know I love old-timey American music, it's got great drive and bounce to it. Makes you want to dance. Maybe you can detect a Northern Irish slant in there somewhere. Most of the fiddle-work done with the bow and not the left hand. Anyway, there was some good old rye whiskey on the go, and I knew a handful of the tunes - standards like Kitchen Maid and Soldier's Joy, and I joined in on the flute when I could. Cece was delighted. "Hey!" she said, "you're playin' clawhammer flute!"

Folk and traditional musicians carry on as before, almost in spite of history, but their music is not unaffected. Those who listen attentively can still detect the sound of an unconscious and collective response to the Troubles, manifested in a peculiar flute style recognisable throughout Ireland and abroad. But just as the song tradition is softening again, so too is the punchy style on banjo and flute giving way to a smoother, less definable sound. The homogenising forces of the market for traditional music persist, and a new generation has arrived on the scene in the wake of the Troubles. The moment of the "clawhammer flute" may be passing.

Martin Dowling

Interviews

Harry Bradley, 20 May 2005

Michael Clarkson, 25 September 2005

Danny, Dermý, Helen and Tara Diamond, 2 June 2005

Andy Dickson, 22 October 2005

Willie Drennan, 15 April 2005

David Hammond, 16 February 2006

George Holmes, 29 September 2005

Noel Lenaghan, 17 June 2005

Gerry McCartney, 20 September 2005

Clodach and Orla McGrory, 15 February 2006

Gerry O'Donnell, 21 October 2005

Brendan O'Hare, 9 February 2006

Discography

The Dubliners and Luke Kelly (TransAtlantic, 1964)

The McPeake Family, Irish Folk (Fontana, 1964)

Ulster's Flowery Vale (BBC, 1968)

Frankie Kennedy and Mairead Ní Mhaonaigh *Ceol Aduagh* (Gael Linn, 1983)

Tommy Sands, *Singing of the Times* (Spring Records, 1985)

The Hidden Fermanagh (Fermanagh traditional Music Society, 2003)

Harry Bradley, *Bad Turns and Horse-Shoe Bends* (Outlet Records, 2000)

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