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Back Where We've Never Been: Daniel O'Donnell and the Country 'n' Irish Imaginary.

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Country 'n' Irish was, as the name suggests, a marriage of 'soft' mainstream country music and specifically Irish themes, often inflected with Irish 'folk' instrumentation – most commonly the accordion – and a particular style of drumming, adopted from the céilí bands that preceded the showbands in the ballrooms that skirted most small towns and villages in Ireland from the 1950s to the 1970s.¹

The songs dealt almost exclusively with nostalgia: whether for the home place that one was forced to leave through emigration, the dead or dying mother, or the girl left behind. While these songs pretended to a certain tradition and 'authenticity' in contrast to pop and rock, the form was entirely constructed and eclectically scavenged from related genres. The lyrical style was a marriage of US country storytelling, with some remnants of the sentimental balladry of the 19th century that fed into Irish- American songs of the early recording era.

The form has been widely mocked in the literature and generally understood as articulating a nostalgia for an Ireland that was passing. In this paper, I suggest that such music actually worked as a way of forgetting, through substitution, the 'real' past: the rural Ireland that close to half a million people fled in the 1950s and 1960s was, according to most sociological and literary accounts, a grim place.² A constructed nostalgia allowed emigrants – whether to Dublin or further afield – to build a narrative that afforded them a space within which to forget while pretending to remember.

The ballrooms that nurtured country 'n' Irish are long gone, but the form survives in the music of Daniel O'Donnell and younger exponents such as Nathan Carter. I argue that this survival is not symptomatic of a regression to country idiocy, but, in fact, a distinctively modern inflection of the earlier form, one that exploits a kind of nostalgia for nostalgia – and one that makes sound commercial sense, integrating older, and now richer consumers into the world of expanded popular music consumption.

¹ See Erraught 'The Country and Irish Problem' in *Popular Music* 39: 3/4 December 2020 pp. 568 -584
And Maguire, P. 'Conditions of Possibility: Changes in Irish Popular Music and the development of Country and Irish Music' Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Ulster 2012

² See Arensberg, *the Irish Countryman*, London: Macmillan 1937. See also Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* (Harmonsworth: Penguin 1988) for an artistic exploration of the sterility of country life.