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Erraught, S. orcid.org/0000-0003-1569-5063 (Accepted: 2024) *Emerging from the Darkness? Irish Rock Music at 'A Sense of Ireland' (1980)*. In: 22nd Annual Plenary Conference of the Society for Musicology in Ireland (SMI), 28-29 Jun 2024, Galway, Ireland. (Unpublished)

This is an author produced version of a conference abstract originally presented at the 22nd annual plenary conference of the Society for Musicology in Ireland, Galway, Ireland, 28-29 June 2024.

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Emerging from the Darkness? Irish Rock Music at ‘A Sense of Ireland’ (1980)

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‘A Sense of Ireland’ was a showcase for Irish art and culture in London, mounted in 1980 across more than 40 venues, curated by John Stephenson, then Artistic Director of the Project Arts Centre in Dublin. Looking back, Stephenson wrote:

We had emerged from the darkness and there was no going back. Sense of Ireland was a foolhardy declaration [...] that Irish art and artists could take their place alongside the best in the world without deference [...] It took London by storm, but Dublin even more so. Never again would we doubt our own worth. (UTV/ BFI 1980 – programme note)

The event was explicitly aimed at countering the negative effects of the conflict in Northern Ireland upon perceptions of the island as whole: to showcase Ireland as a place of artistic adventure. (King 2018) The programme notes to the short feature detailed above conclude with the following ‘‘the festival ended with a showcase of new Irish rock: just a few days after playing the Acklam Hall, U2 would sign their first record deal’ (UTV/ BFI 1980)

The inclusion of rock music in this exercise of government -sanctioned and funded ‘soft power’ was new then: while the musical centrepiece of the festival was Planxty at the Albert Hall, the showcasing of Irish rock bands, from both jurisdictions, was more than a token – it was intended to stand as an index of modernity.

In this paper, I examine both the reception of this showcase at the time and its position as an early token of the inclusion of rock and popular music more generally within a broader notion of what constituted Irish culture.

Works cited:

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Linda King, 'A Sense of Ireland: Reflecting and Refracting Modernity in Irish Culture', *Irish Studies Review*, 26.3 (2018), 318–34

Biographical Note:

Stan Erraught is a lecturer in Music Business and Popular Music in the School of Music at the University of Leeds. He holds a PhD in Philosophy from University College, Dublin. He has published a monograph on *Music, Value, and Utopia: Nostalgia for an Age Yet to Come* (Rowman and Littlefield 2018) and his article, 'The Country and Irish Problem' was published in *Popular Music* in 2021. He is currently writing a book on *Popular Music, Modernity and Anxiety: Ireland 1950-1990* to be published by Liverpool University Press.