

Peter Carr: Two Films

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Abstract

In the mid-1970s, filmmaker Peter Carr made two documentaries for British television about bands on tour in Ireland (respectively, the Republic of Ireland-based showband Nevada and the American soul group, The Realistics). Commissioned at a time when the Troubles were synonymous with Ireland for viewers in Britain, both films reflect this wider context in different ways. Filmed in a distinctive *verité* style that reveals much about the social, cultural and political forces that shaped the performance and business practices of musicians in both Northern Ireland and the Republic, these films are valuable for their realism and their unpatronizing look at commercial music making in Ireland.

Keywords: Ireland, popular music history, showbands, music documentary, BBC television, Granada television

Biography

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Introduction

Born in Scarborough, North Yorkshire, in 1942, English filmmaker Peter Carr's career spans more than sixty years. After attending university in Manchester, Carr moved to London to work for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). He returned to Manchester in 1974 to take up a post at Granada TV, then the Independent Television (ITV) franchise for North West England. Highlights among his extensive output while based at Granada include "Elvis Costello in Nashville" for *The South Bank Show* (1981), which documents the recording of Costello's *Almost Blue* country album and *Heroin* (1983), a series of three one-hour films about heroin use in Edinburgh. Carr later moved to West Cork. Since moving to Ireland, he has independently produced a substantial body of work for RTÉ (Raidió Teilifís Éireann) and TG4—Ireland's public service English and Irish language broadcasters. Carr's work includes *Bringing It All Back Home* (1990), a BBC/RTÉ co-production tracing the connections between Irish and American folk and popular musical forms, and *Sean Nós* (2000), made for broadcast on TG4, a series of five one-hour documentaries about traditional Irish language singers and songs. The range of subject matter in his long career has been wide; an interest in music and musicians remains a constant throughout.

In this article, I analyse two TV films that Carr made in Ireland during the 1970s.¹ The first, "All the Best Years of My Life" ("Best Years" hereafter), was one of a series of three programmes aired as *The Entertainers* and made for BBC Two in 1974, a time when that channel retained its original reputation as the highbrow pendant to the more popular BBC One and the ITV networks. "Best Years" documents the eight-piece showband Nevada as they tour the Republic of Ireland. At the time of filming, Nevada was most often billed as "Red Hurley, Kelley, and (the) Nevada". Like most showbands of the time, Nevada had more than one vocalist, both for variety and to allow the singers some respite during sets that typically lasted up to three hours.² There is very little in the way of surviving filmic record of the showband era, despite its popularity in

Ireland over more than two decades. What does survive is, for the most part, footage shot with publicity rather than documentary intent. This film is therefore a valuable record of an era in Irish popular music. The second film was made for Granada Television in 1977. *The Realistics in Belfast* follows a four-piece American soul vocal group on their tour in late 1976. At a time when Belfast was rarely visited by musical acts from elsewhere, and where any such visit attracted a great deal of attention in the city, this film is valuable for the insight it provides into popular music performance under circumstances that were anything but normal.

In examining these films as documents of popular music making in mid-1970s Ireland, I ask what they reveal about the social, cultural and political forces that shaped the performance and business practices of the musicians during this era. I also query how the music business both reflected deeper social currents and functioned as an agent of cultural transformation. My analysis highlights how the structures of broadcasting and the still-developing characteristics of music documentary afforded Carr considerable freedom to experiment with content and form.

Research for this article was conducted with the aid of archival copies of both films that were provided by the filmmaker. As of 2026, neither film is accessible online on YouTube or any such platform. Textual analysis is supported by an interview with Peter Carr conducted by the researcher in April 2025.

Documentary film and popular music practice

The music documentary as a form is now so commonplace in TV and film that the generic and stylistic features are next to invisible. We expect a certain story arc for these kinds of documentaries: early struggles, setbacks, a crisis, triumphant success, fade to reflective song. In 1974, however, the popular music documentary was still evolving. Films such as *Woodstock* (1970) and *Monterey Pop* (1968) that focus on a single concert event and use a lot of performance footage exemplify one strand of the developing genre. Another approach was inaugurated by D. A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back* (1967). This fly-on-the-wall documentary about Bob Dylan's UK and Ireland tour in 1965 epitomises the artist-on-tour *cinema vérité* genre. The two films discussed in this article were made before the music documentary genre became formularised. While Carr was not inventing a new form in his films about musicians, the production model for British broadcasting at the time, and the relative novelty of devoting serious documentary attention to popular music practice, allowed freedom from generic expectations that would later be foreclosed.

Michael Chanan argues that music documentaries have tended to be understood as unserious with implications for their critical reception and neglect:

The music documentary is a paradoxical genre. Films about music and musicians have been a major strand of documentary since the 1960s, but you wouldn't know it from the attention they've received in documentary studies—all the more odd given the huge predominance of music in popular culture. There is no ready explanation for this omission, but a pioneering conference on the subject recently threw up an interesting suggestion: that music documentary tends to operate according to an unwritten law in which the film-maker looks at the musician with the eyes of the fan, which results in the film being seen as

essentially promotional and therefore unworthy of serious attention. (2013, 413)

When making a film about an already established musical artist, there will be an existing audience, drawn from the fan base, that the artist will be hoping to grow through the resulting film. Indeed, such films are often incorporated into promotional campaigns, hence the rather dismissive attitude Chanan discerns. Documentaries about relative unknowns are valuable in their ability to represent all the dimensions of musical life, but are harder to access funding for and to sell to broadcasters or producers and so rarer. Nevada, for example, were not unknowns in Ireland, but in Britain, where the audience for this programme was located, they would have had little name recognition.

The presentation of popular music on television, even beyond the documentary format, shifted in the late 1960s and into the 1970s, moving away from a chart-oriented *Top of the Pops* model.³ As rock musicians and fans began to take themselves and their practices more seriously, they created a demand for music television beyond the limitations of the pop charts. Carr began his TV career working on *Late Night Line Up*, a magazine programme that ran on BBC Two from the launch of that station in 1964 until 1972. An occasional spin-off from the normal live format was *Colour Me Pop*, a series of half-hour pop specials that celebrated the vigour of British pop and rock, as well as the arrival of colour television. In 1970, *Late Night Line Up* aired a 45-minute documentary, “Gene Vincent: the Rock and Roll Singer”, about the veteran and, by then, very much ailing rocker on tour in the UK. Notably, the Gene Vincent documentary was suggested by Carr but not, in the end, filmed by him (Carr 2025). It is not difficult to discern a thread in style and method to “Best Years”, although the latter is without the nearly unbearable pathos of the Gene Vincent film.

If the origins of popular music documentary as a genre are under-researched (see Harbert 2018, Halligan et al. 2013 for exceptions), so too is the place of popular entertainment in the filmic documentation of Irish life in the twentieth century. For example, there is a somewhat surprising lack of footage of the showband era in Ireland. RTÉ broadcast *The Showband Show* over five years (1963–1968) but saved none of the footage. Peter Collinson’s *The One Nighters* (1963), also produced by RTÉ, follows the Royal Showband for a week. It is a valuable source but less than critical as the band helped finance it. The “Best Years” is the closest we have to an accurate document of an era in Irish popular music that, despite a revival of interest over the past few years, remains under-researched and under-theorised. Indeed, the absence of documentary record of the showband era is symptomatic of a larger neglect of music—especially popular music—in factual Irish filmmaking. Harvey O’Brien’s *The Real Ireland: The Evolution of Ireland in Documentary Film* (2004) devotes four pages out of more than 250 to films about music and sport, and most of the music documentaries he mentions are biographical portraits of individual performers. Of the 267 films listed in his filmography, eleven are on music and musicians in Ireland. An understanding of music as an activity is largely absent in these films and in O’Brien’s analysis. It is in the context of this absence that Carr’s films are especially valuable.

Documenting popular music in Ireland in the 1970s

“Best Years” and *The Realistics in Belfast* document two Irish popular music scenes

at a time when few other filmed records exist. The significance of the films goes beyond their subject matter; of equal importance is how musicians, audiences, and social and political contexts are presented. It is not incidental that these films were made by an Englishman, someone who was not yet familiar with Ireland. The relative lack of choice for UK television viewers in the 1970s meant that broadcasters could justify devoting significant budgets to documentaries that might only be transmitted once and had limited resale potential. With only three television stations available and a lack of competing mediums, broadcasters could afford to assume a level of engagement by viewers that later generations might not so readily count on. Both films, in other words, could forego explaining and instead focus on showing to engaged viewers. Some of this approach was a product of broadcast culture of the time, but it can also be attributed to Carr himself.

Carr's approach to filmmaking was informed by being a musician; for a short while he carved out a modest career as a performer and songwriter. He first encountered showbands, albeit in a scene transplanted to London, while performing. While working for the BBC, he also played bass in a combo at the King's Head in Fulham. During his breaks he would nip next door to a pub patronised by Irish builders and general labourers, the characteristic occupations of the generation of Irish men that emigrated to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s. Traditional musicians, he recalls, played in the pub and, after closing time, the crowd would move to the Hibernian Dance Hall beside Fulham Broadway tube station to dance to the showbands (Carr 2025). His interest in the scene was aroused so he subsequently visited the Town and Country Club in Kentish Town near where he lived to see another band (he cannot recall who). There he met showband manager Tommy Hayden. Carr was looking for subject matter to round out *The Entertainers* series, so Hayden's suggestion that he might want to come to Ireland to see Nevada was opportune. Carr's perspective offers freshness and instinctive empathy with musicians and audiences in "Best Years" that normalises musicians' lives and work. A similar sympathy for musicians navigating their lives on tour is apparent in *The Realistics in Belfast*, though in the extraordinary context of the Troubles.

Some of the stylistic and editorial features of both films are a consequence of the technical limitations and affordances of working with film. Film was expensive and closely rationed with the expectation of using a high proportion of what was shot in the final cut. As film had to be sent back to base for processing, the filmmaker was unable to view the content until it was too late to reshoot. In both "Best Years" and *The Realistics*, a wild track audio component was recorded once filming was complete. Wild track audio records sound independently of the camera and therefore is not synchronised with moving images.⁴ This content was mixed with diegetic dialogue (audio that accompanies filmed scenes). Very little non-diegetic music features in either film and what little there is comes from the bands in question. There are few captions beyond date and time included in either "Best Years" or *The Realistics* and speakers, either on screen or voiced, are not named. In each film, Carr includes a scene from the bands' respective performances where members are introduced. In the case of *The Realistics*, this scene features at the top of the film, along with brief biographical details. No one else is introduced in the voiceover, though occasional names are audible in conversation. This austerity can sometimes be hard on the

viewer; even for someone such as this researcher, old enough to remember the period in question and who has written on both the showband scene (Erraught 2021) and the intersection of politics and popular music in Northern Ireland (Erraught 2025), parts of *The Realistics* are hard to follow.

“All the Best Years of My Life”

Showbands were a particularly Irish type of ensemble that, from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, dominated the music industry in Ireland. Often dismissed as “human jukeboxes” (Prendergast 1987, 11), showbands played long sets for dancing in ballrooms and marquees across the island. They covered contemporary hits, country, soul and pop standards, as well as featuring the occasional ballad and versions of Irish folk or folk adjacent songs, all arranged in a popular idiom. Discussion of the showband phenomenon in the early literature on Irish popular music, written after the global success of U2 and other rock bands, is usually dismissive of such outfits. Prendergast (1987) and Clayton-Lea and Taylor (1992), for example, both begin their respective books with swipes at the lack of originality and superficiality displayed by the showbands (for a historiography of this scholarship, see Erraught 2021). As Smyth puts it “disdain for the showbands was...an important part of the way in which modern Irish society stratified itself in terms of cultural value” (2005, 17). More recent scholarship offers a more sympathetic and altogether better researched view of showband history (Power 2000; Miller 2025). Beyond academic writing, in recent years a patina of nostalgia has settled over the showband era: programmes such as *Ballroom Blitz* (2024), narrated and presented by U2’s Adam Clayton; *The Showbands: How Ireland Learned to Party* (2019), presented by actor and comedian, Ardal O’Hanlon; and Padraic McIntyre’s play, *The Night Joe Dolan’s Car Broke Down* (2010) all exploit this longing for the past.

“Best Years” begins, as do all gigs, with unpacking the van and setting up. We see the band and their unnamed roadie/soundman arrive at the venue, the Royal Ballroom in Castlebar, County Mayo, and prepare the stage for the night’s entertainment. The equipment is high-end for the time—Hi-Watt amplification and Binson Echo units—and the fact that everyone is using the same brands suggests a sponsorship deal. We overhear some conversation as the setup is going on, but the first voice we hear properly is a voiceover. Tommy Hayden, the band’s manager, provides refreshingly straightforward commentary throughout the documentary. He discusses the division of revenue, how he manages personnel changes and how he nurtures his charges. The one thing he never mentions is an exact sum of money, though it becomes clear in the scenes that follow—from the cars the musicians drive, the houses they discuss and the family lives that the older band members enjoy—that the band is providing a relatively good living for nine people by standards of Ireland in the 1970s.

Next, we see the band members fixing their hair and changing into their stage costumes in a repurposed rearview mirror. They wear black and silver and are very glam—a contrast to conventional images of showbands in matching polyester suits. If the band’s equipment and presentation are sophisticated, the hall itself is not. Dancehalls of this era were spartan at best and unlicensed for alcohol. As Carr later recalls:

[There] was no licencing of dancehalls in those days, it was just fizzy water and

Coca-Cola and that sort of thing. But everybody was out in the car park. The car park was full of cars and tractors. A lot of people came to those dances on tractors, and they were out there drinking their beer out of cans and so on. There was a pub next door, so one or two of them, who thought themselves a bit more respectable [would have gone there]...So when they came in, they had had their bit of drink, they had their bit of excitement. So they were just up for it...and the whole of the dance hall would be entirely empty with this poor old support band playing away. And it would fill up in just seconds. (Carr 2025)

There is a sense of limited ambition evident throughout “Best Years”, a realisation that the world the showband scene inhabits will not allow the band to translate success in Ireland to success elsewhere. This foreshortened horizon is reflected in the relative lack of comfort for either band or audience apparent in The Royal Ballroom and later in the film in the National Stadium, and in the separation of drinking and dancing recalled in the quote above.

The first ten minutes of the film feature edited highlights of the set. After performing Mud’s 1973 hit “Tiger Feet”, we hear segments of “The Most Beautiful Girl” (1973), a hit for rockabilly and country veteran Charlie Rich, sung by Nevada bassist Dan O’Connor. Next is the devotional hymn “How Great thou Art” as revived by Elvis Presley (1967), a hit in Ireland for Nevada in 1972, sung by Kelley (Eileen Kelly), while the dancing crowd is transformed into a late-night congregation that watches, listens, and cheers raucously at the end. We then see and hear Red Hurley sing Albert Hammond’s “The Air that I Breathe” (1974), a hit for the Hollies that year. Some of the audience sway slowly, enjoying the last slow dance, but there is also a sizeable mostly female contingent watching Hurley give the ballad his all. The sequence finishes with Hurley introducing the band over a funky vamp before they leave the stage.

We then follow the band into the dressing room where they enjoy a few drinks before hitting the road back to Dublin, a journey of 240km that might have taken up to five hours to cover on the roads of the time. We hear Hayden discuss his constant anxiety about the band’s safety as they travel. These were not irrational fears given the state of the roads and the lax drunk driving laws in Ireland: “The enemy”, he says, “is the road”. In 1972, Red Hurley and Kelley were both injured in a car crash and, a year after “Best Years” was shot, lead guitarist Liam Hurley (Red’s brother) suffered serious injuries in a crash that ended his live career and led to his second career as a sound engineer and producer. Nevada survive their journey and we see them get out of the converted van, a cramped enough space, with seats for everyone and room in the back for the equipment. They separate into their own vehicles and we hear a voiceover of Liam Hurley pondering the strangeness of a day’s work finishing just as everyone else’s starts.

We next meet the band on Monday, the traditional showband day off, when they get together to play golf. They play a not-particularly-serious game and then head back into the clubhouse, where we hear conversation as it happens in the room (rather than as voiceover). The club has a piano, and there is a short interlude during which Red Hurley (at the piano) and Kelley sketch a version of “American Trilogy”, a song written by Mickey Newbury that was a hit for Elvis Presley in 1972. We then return to voiceover and hear Kelley talking about life on the road “for a girl” (she is in her mid-twenties). She describes the difficulties of finding a private dressing room and the

challenges of watching her weight and her skin given the diet and the late nights. She discusses her father's opposition to her taking up music professionally—"I had a good job as a secretary"—and how long it took him to come around. "But it's great now," she says, not sounding entirely convinced. Kelley's struggles with her family about her career as a singer are discussed at some length. By contrast, the career choices of her male counterparts, including Red Hurley, are unexceptional and do not require further interrogation. Miller (2025) and Lynn (2022) argue that, in the context of the deep misogyny of Irish society at the time, the ability of women to carve out sustained careers in the showband scene is noteworthy. Such women, almost without exception singers, often ended up as bandleaders and competitive with their male counterparts, especially in the country-oriented end of the market.

One scene of the film appears contrived, a conversation that features the entire company around a table which Carr (2025) later confirmed was set up. Their discussion focuses on playing in Northern Ireland against the backdrop of some of the worst years of the Troubles. As Carr notes, British audiences of the time filtered any content from Ireland through the lens of conflict in the North (Carr 2025). The Nevada musicians concede that playing "up there" is rewarding and that the audiences are great, but one voice wonders, "Why would you subject yourself to all that?", referencing the risk of being stopped and searched by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the British Army, or, much worse, by paramilitary operatives. A year later, the Miami Showband encountered such a patrol with tragic consequences; the killing of three band members and two others largely put an end to bands from the Republic performing in the North.

Another voice continues the discussion, adding to the list of concerns the issue of being unable or unwilling to answer requests for certain songs when performing in the North. "The Men Behind the Wire" (The Barleycorn 1971), the anti-internment ballad that was a huge hit in Ireland in early 1972, is mentioned as an example. Liam Hurley, the most thoughtful and analytic voice throughout the documentary, suggests potential for musicians to do more than just provide entertainment; they could "make a record" that draws attention to the situation. In the aftermath of Bloody Sunday in Derry in January 1972, for example, Red Hurley was part of a fundraiser concert featuring many showband performers at the TV Club in Dublin to support dependants of those killed by the British Army. A 7" single titled "Freedom, Peace and Unity" (The Times and Friends 1972) featuring many of the same performers from north and south of the border (though not Nevada) followed.

We next come across the band rehearsing in what looks like the upstairs of a pub. They are not set up in full performance mode; instead, the drum set is reduced to a snare with a towel over it and the singing is unamplified. There are discussions about what works and arrangements are sorted out through a variety of formal and informal means: instrumental lines are sung while the brass players annotate sheet music as required. Over the rehearsal noise, we hear Liam Hurley talking about the frustrations of playing covers. There is no outlet for original material or creativity; "getting it right", Hurley explains, means fidelity to a version of a song recorded by someone else. He reckons there is "a lot of talent" in the country stymied by the demands of the market. He concedes that he has a good life that is enviable in some ways, but he also sees a gap between what is achievable in Ireland as compared to Britain or the United

States.

The next to final scenes are shot in the National Stadium in Dublin; then, as now, the stadium is primarily a boxing arena and a venue that does not quite live up to the pretensions of its name. The occasion is the annual New Spotlight Awards, sponsored by the magazine of the same name. At that time, *New Spotlight* was one of the biggest selling titles in Ireland and held a virtual monopoly over the youth market, with articles covering folk and rock music alongside core showband content. The latter was its central concern, dictated both by its readers and writers, many of whom had business interests connected with the showband industry. Nevada and its singers win awards for best male and female vocalists, and for being a top-five band. They perform a short set to the packed audience, with advertisements for Players Cigarettes and the Irish Sweepstakes forming the backdrop of the stadium's small stage. In the voiceover, we hear Red Hurley discuss his need to make a break for it and try for a career elsewhere having gone as far as is possible in Ireland. We also hear Hayden affirm that he has been in discussions with parties in Britain who are interested in Hurley. Red Hurley left Nevada at the end of April 1974, soon after "Best Years" was shot.

The divergence between Ireland and the greater English-language pop world is perhaps best illustrated by the first number we see Nevada perform in "Best Years": Mud's 1973 hit "Tiger Feet". The short-lived success of artists such as Mud in early 1970s in Britain exemplified the growing gulf between pop and rock; pop was disposable singles and appealed to youthful female audiences, whereas rock was increasingly framed as serious art, with male gatekeepers and presented via longform albums (Coates 2003). In Ireland, these distinctions mapped onto divisions between showbands and the nascent rock scene (Smyth 2005, 16–20). While rock bands in Ireland set their sights on success abroad, showbands depended both on the home market and United Kingdom's Irish diaspora market. Red Hurley's ambitions for success outside of Ireland are not fleshed out and it is unclear as to what the offers that Tommy Hayden talks about amount to, but it was surely the case that Nevada's repertoire of covers would be left behind and a more defined solo identity developed.

The film ends with a get together in Hayden's house—"I think he wanted to show it off", Carr (2025) recalled years later—and we see Liam Hurley play the song that gives the film its title: "Rock and Roll (I Gave you all the Best Years of my Life)". Hurley plays solo, singing quietly, with some of the company joining in the chorus. Most of the band are chatting, drinking and, in Red Hurley's case, devoting attention to more than one of the young women present. Originally released in 1973, the song was a hit for Australian singer-songwriter Kevin Johnson and tells the story of a young man obsessed with music who dreams of being a star. The young man is always "one step behind you"—the "you" being rock and roll—with the music imagined as a capricious and even cruel object of unrequited devotion. Johnson's version of the song was a hit in Ireland in 1974, though less successful in the UK. Perhaps in Ireland, as in Australia, the sense of "being one step behind" resonated. Both countries were connected by language and popular culture to Anglophone heartlands, but unvisited by touring bands. This absence supported development of their own different but analogous performance cultures that centred on cover bands rather than the originality prized in UK and US markets.

The Realistics in Belfast

The second film that Carr shot in Ireland also followed a band over a week in their careers and featured a similar mix of performance footage, rehearsal and daily life on the road, in this case, during a residency. The production and storytelling for *The Realistics in Belfast* are dictated by the material conditions of Belfast at the end of 1976. This was the second bloodiest year of the Troubles with 297 deaths (of which 201 were civilians) directly attributable to the conflict. Very slightly over half of these casualties (150 of a total 297) were concentrated in Belfast (Sutton n.d.). As Stiff Little Fingers, contributors to the city's emergent punk scene, later sang, there was "Nothin' for us in Belfast" (1978; for more on Belfast's mid-1970s live music scenes, see Bailie 2018; Burgess 2024). Unlike Nevada, a showband working in a still flourishing genre and the relative peace of the Republic, the Realistics operated in an environment of risk. Sensible people stayed at home or in the relative security of local pubs and clubs rather than venturing out to gigs in the city centre. British bands had abandoned the city and, in the aftermath of the Miami Showband killings, almost no showbands from the Republic ventured into the North.

Unlike "Best Years", *The Realistics in Belfast* includes a narrator, who speaks with an authoritative sounding upper-middle-class English accent: the received pronunciation (RP) favoured by the BBC. While the naturalistic and under-determined style of the Nevada documentary allowed British viewers into the showband scene and let that world explain itself, I suspect that a similar approach would have been considered impossible given the complexities of the political situation in Northern Ireland and the challenges attendant on representing an African American soul band in this context.⁵ According to Carr, the backgrounds of band members made this project seem like an attractive way to document life in Belfast. Sandy Sanders, for example, served in Vietnam as a conscript in the US army. Another, tenor James "TC" Hamilton, worked for Martin Luther King during the Civil Rights Movement; he was shot in an argument with a rival Black Power group. They were clearly bright and self-aware, with the quick-witted social skills musicians develop to navigate diverse audiences and unfamiliar situations. The story told about the Realistics is not simply of their experiences on tour, but of their sometimes-bewildered encounters with the actuality of the Troubles.

The Realistics in Belfast documents their residency at the Abercorn, a restaurant and bar in the centre of Belfast that was the scene of bomb attack in March 1972. The attack left two young women dead and injured 130 (for a detailed account, see Bailie 2018, 75–79). The film starts with some news footage of the aftermath of the attack before cutting to the semi-detached estate house in Lancashire where the Realistics are staying, presumably their base while touring the north of England. The band are discussing the engagement in Belfast, where only one of them has visited before.

We see them arriving at Belfast Airport and being met by the promoter and taken in a van to the venue. Their first encounter with the realities of life in Northern Ireland is an army checkpoint on the way into the city. It is immediately obvious that everyone—soldiers, audience members, people in the two drinking clubs they visit—is acutely conscious of the camera; unlike "Best Years", where people rarely seem all that concerned about being filmed, everyone in Belfast is very aware of the perils of media visibility. Indeed, the seemingly natural interactions and encounters throughout the

film all first required explanation and clearance with relevant authorities, whether official (as with the British Army at the checkpoint) or unofficial (as with their later foray into Republican West Belfast). Carr (2025) recalls, “Well, from the moment they arrived at the airport, I had to go ahead of them in the crew car and say to the soldiers that they were coming through, that I was filming, was that OK?”. Even as the van is searched and they are questioned as to their movements, the voiceover switches the focus to the Realistics’ concerns about the pick-up the band will be using.

The film cuts to the club where they rehearse with supporting musicians later that afternoon; the Realistics are pleased that the musicians seem to know the material and are able to play it competently. The Realistics move to the dressing room before the first performance. Similar to the preparations depicted in “Best Years”, we see nervous pre-gig banter, costume changes and hair care issues. The Realistics also reveal persistent undercurrents of concern about performing in Belfast during the Troubles. In this case, they worry about transport arrangements. They need a taxi back to their hotel each evening but, because the venue is inside the “Control Zone” (the area of the city cordoned off with security barriers and search areas), they need to meet their taxi at the security gates. Before the tension is resolved, the focus shifts to their performance. We see a small segment of the show interspersed with clips of the multigenerational audience seated cabaret style. The band run through recent soul hits, in essence they are a cover band, not unlike Nevada. Synchronised dance moves are integral to the performance. These are executed by the four vocalists with rather more panache than is apparent in the Nevada’s routines. Once the performance is over, they attempt to return to their hotel, located off the Newtownards Road in East Belfast. We see their worries about the taxi situation confirmed. They wait for more than an hour while reassurances from nearby soldiers fail to assuage their anxiety. Taxis, including the complexities of which cab to get to where and attendant denominational demarcations, are a recurring theme in the film.

We next encounter two members of the band walking down a ghostly and completely deserted street near their hotel in search of a drink. Their nose for alcohol leads them to an apparently abandoned pub. The venue houses a Loyalist Prisoners Support Club and there are pictures of “King Billy” (as William of Orange is colloquially known to locals) and Queen Elizabeth II on the walls; Ulster Defence Association (UDA) graffiti decorates the outside of the pub. Everyone seems relatively relaxed about the camera and the two Realistics appear to settle into their surrounding quite well. One of the men they meet explains the nature of their organisation in understated terms as “helping the families of men imprisoned”, though the reasons for imprisonment are not articulated.

Once this scene was recorded, something that happened almost as randomly as it appears on screen, Carr got onto his boss at Granada and requested more airtime, more shooting time and more film:

[So] I rang Norman Swallow, who was my executive producer or whatever he was my patron, a very important person in my life. And I said “Norman, this is turning really interesting” and at the moment it was scheduled as half hour film that’s, say, an ITV half hour, 26 minutes. And I said, “is there any chance I could get some more film and give you an hour?” (Carr 2025)

Carr’s request was granted on condition that, to preserve balance, the Realistics’

encounter with a Loyalist drinking club be complemented with a similar visit in a Republican part of the city:

I described to him the scene he said, “well, if you do, you have to be extremely careful about balance so I can hear what you’re telling me about this sequence.” [And] remember, it’s on film, so I couldn’t show him the material...Because it’s not processed yet. So he said “if it’s as good as you say it is. And I trust you...but you have to go on to film in a Catholic club”. (Carr 2025)

The demand for balance resulted in two visits each to the Loyalist and Republican clubs: the first apparently random visit to the Loyalist drinking club, followed by an organised visit to a Republican club on the Falls Road. In each case, the band return later in the week to visit and perform.

Before visiting the Republican bar in West Belfast, the Realistics encounter the Peace People, the cross-community group that flourished through 1976 and 1977 and that brought thousands of people onto the streets to protest the continuing violence in Northern Ireland. The band attend a Peace People meeting somewhere in South Belfast that was organised in advance of a gathering planned at the site of the Battle of Boyne the following Sunday (“Battle for Peace on the Boyne” 1976, 11). Fortuitously for the filmmaker (less so for the people involved), a shop belonging to their host is bombed and some of the band go to visit. They are impressed by the spirit of cooperation among neighbours and remark on distinctions from their experiences in an unnamed but comparable US city.

Their visit to West Belfast is notably less relaxed than the earlier session in the Loyalist club. They go into Walsh’s Bar on the Falls Road at “the heart of IRA-land”, as one of them puts it. This visit was clearly expected and cleared in advance by the unofficial authorities in the area: the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA). The rather less relaxed demeanour of both the band and their hosts during the two visits to West Belfast may be attributable to the fact that Republicans might be more uncomfortable in the glare of a British broadcaster than their Loyalist counterparts. There is a tendency, especially as the Troubles recede from popular memory, to present Loyalist and Republican activists as symmetrical antagonists. This view ignores the much greater security presence in Republican areas and the asymmetry in the legal status of paramilitary organisations. While the Ulster Volunteer Force, responsible in collusion with the security forces for the Miami Showband killings, was proscribed (made illegal) in 1975, the larger Ulster Defence Association (UDA) remained legal until 1992. In contrast, both IRA factions (Official and Provisional) and other Republican paramilitary groups were proscribed almost as soon as they were formed and the great majority of those interned without trial from 1971 onwards were Republicans. Inequalities in legal status and security presence provide essential context for the nervousness of Republican activists and sympathisers in the sequences we see in West Belfast. The reference to “IRA-land” suggests that the band may have been more aware of Republican paramilitary violence than of Loyalist activities. Indeed, the Loyalist groups benefited from a degree of invisibility; despite the two visits to the Loyalist Prisoners Support Club, no sponsoring organisation is named.

The final scenes in the film take place on return visits to social events in the Loyalist and Republican clubs. In the Loyalist club, a guitar and drums duo play “Blanket on

the Ground" (1975), the Billie Joe Spears hit from a few years previously. On the voiceover track, Sandy Sanders, a member of the Realistics, says they felt very relaxed in the club, but also remarks:

I bumped into one guy and I felt he had a gun, and he knew that I knew he had a gun—and the same thing happened in the other club [...] and they treated us really nice, but I'm just saying that if we weren't well received in that place, there were some people who could have taken care of us if it had gotten out of order; and that's one reason I was kinda nervous there.

On the corresponding second visit to the Falls Road club, the Realistics perform as special guests on a talent show; the concert seems to be a fundraiser of some kind, though for what remains unclear. As they enter, another band is on stage performing a laconic version of "A Walkin' Miracle", a hit for Limmie and Family Cooking in 1974. There is an undeniable resemblance to the entertainment on offer in the other club, surely an intended echo on the part of the filmmaker. The Realistics perform an *capella* version of Kern and Hammerstein's "Ol' Man River" from *Showboat* (1927), most often associated with Paul Robeson since the 1951 film (Robeson's better-known version is captured on a 1936 78rpm release). Robeson was a singer and activist whose radical credentials would be well-known to the performers and, perhaps, to many in the audience given parallels between the Civil Rights struggle in the US and the more recent one closer to home.

Carr brings the same instinctive empathy that he demonstrated in "Best Years" to documenting the Realistics, but this time in an extraordinary situation of danger and fear. There is, unavoidably, more editorial framing than in the earlier film, but Carr still allows people to speak for themselves without relying on a predetermined narrative. Musicians who might be considered "journeymen"—professionals engaged in making a living by performing cover versions rather than self-conscious creatives—are shown to be articulate and self-aware. As the film progresses, the Realistics emerge as acute observers of a city that was unproductively misunderstood from all sides. Authoritative voices of politicians, journalists, academics, or clergy are completely missing; instead, ordinary people are trusted to explain themselves. Carr's approach of allowing people on both sides of the conflict—including those clearly associated with paramilitary organisations, though not identified as such—to speak without editorialising was time and place dependent. Section 31 of the Republic of Ireland's Broadcasting Authority Act (1960) allowed the Minister for Post and Telegraphs to prohibit interviewing or otherwise publicising any organisation subject to a ban under the Act. From 1973 onwards, this restriction applied to Provisional Sinn Féin and the IRA. In practice, Section 31 meant that not only would named spokespersons for these organisations be banned from Irish broadcasts, but also anyone suspected of being a member, even if they were commenting on a matter unconnected with the Troubles (Purcell 1991). As an English filmmaker working for a British institution however, Carr was able to feature voices from proscribed organisations; this would have been impossible for a filmmaker from RTÉ.

Conclusions

The conflict in Northern Ireland provides the context for both "Best Years" and *The Realistics*. This backdrop is unmissable in *The Realistics*, but also exists in the rather

awkwardly situated conversation about playing north of the border inserted into “Best Years”. Indeed, Carr contends that for British audiences, the whole island of Ireland in the 1970s was synonymous with the Troubles, a mysterious and threatening series of events that often appeared—and was framed as—mad Paddies at it again (see Smyth 2009:52). There is an extensive literature on British media representations of the Troubles, too much to document fully here. McLoone (2009) is a good place to start. Even before the Troubles in Northern Ireland however, Ireland and the Irish were the object of stereotyped and prejudiced representations in British media (see Hickman 1995 for a long view). As the Leeds post-punk band Gang of Four put it barely a year after *The Realistics* aired, “Armalite rifle and the Holy Trinity / It’s used against you for Irish jokes on the BBC” (1978). The jokes long predated the Troubles, but the news from the North sharpened the edge considerably.

Carr’s films allowed ordinary unfiltered Irish voices into the arena of broadcast representation in the United Kingdom. In “Best Years”, Carr was not particularly invested in articulating any view about Irish culture and the place of such unpretentious entertainment—showbands—within it. Neither was he remotely interested in exoticising Ireland or Irish popular culture. The distinctive characteristics of the showband scene would have been clear enough to British viewers, but, unlike many Irish commentators, his outlook was not clouded by embarrassment or defensiveness. While viewing Belfast through the eyes of an African American soul group in *The Realistics* might seem, *prima facie*, as overdetermined with too many perspectival layers, the device works well. British viewers see the situation through the eyes of an outsider without entanglements or complicity and hear Belfast people to share their experiences to relatively neutral visitors.

Northern Ireland during the years of the Troubles was and is saturated in representation. Carr’s motives for undertaking *The Realistics* project were framed by this saturation; he was attempting to get behind the already tired narratives and the voices that normally articulated the polarisation of society from engaged and pre-determined positions—not excepting the notional objectivity of British (and Irish) broadcasters. The conjunction of popular music and Northern Ireland through the period is almost exclusively one framed by punk. Very soon after *The Realistics* was filmed, John T. Davis began shooting footage of punk bands in Belfast and across Northern Ireland. This filming culminated in *Shellshock Rock* (1979), a documentary that initiated the somewhat naïve notion of music’s ability to dissolve conflict—a narrative that continues to be reflected across popular and academic writing, in film and in fiction. Though *The Realistics* aired before these discourses took hold, the film offers a corrective to oversimplifications. While the centre of the city was, and is, a neutral area of consumption and leisure (albeit somewhat etiolated then), it was (and still is) a world away from the divisions and disadvantage evident in the scenes shot to the east and west of the city.

“Best Years” and *The Realistics* are not part of a wider corpus of work investigating the lives of working musicians. They are close to singular in their focus on genres of popular music that do not privilege notions of creativity and artistic endeavour. As noted, Carr’s sympathy and understanding with regard to lives in the foothills of the music industry gives his documentaries an integrity and resonance that is distinctive. In an Irish context, where questions of identity and curation of culture are intimately

connected and always political, his dispassionate eye is especially useful. These films allow those more intimately concerned with such questions of Irish musical history to free ourselves a little from the attendant anxieties.

Endnotes

¹ For clarity as the films traverse a contentious border, I use “Ireland” to refer to the whole island. The two jurisdictions will be distinguished as “Northern Ireland” (or “the North”) and “the Republic of Ireland” (or “the Republic”).

² The band referred to themselves as “Nevada” (without a definite article) but were usually promoted on posters as “The Nevada” or “the Nevada Showband”.

³ *Top of the Pops* was a long running weekly BBC television programme (1964–2006) that showcased live, or more often, mimed, performances of the week’s bestselling records.

⁴ Wild track typically captures ambient, external sound or sound effects, though in the case of both the films under discussion, what is captured is most often the voices of the people on screen.

⁵ While racial representation may have been a factor in the decision to narrate *The Realistics*, it was not a focus of the documentary. Despite the context of a city that was almost uniformly white, whatever its other complexities, only a single reference to race is made, and a passing one at that, as the band enters a pub on the Falls Road: “I guess they can tell we’re not from here”, one of The Realistics remarks. As four African American men, one must imagine they were conscious of being conspicuous in Belfast at the time, where there were few black people and where a suspicion of new faces in working class areas was endemic.

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