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Introduction

- 1 From the mid-1950s, when rock and roll first emerged as a transformational musical and cultural form, until the late 1970s, popular music across the island of Ireland followed a significantly different trajectory to that which obtained in Great Britain. Showbands—large ensembles covering a wide variety of popular music styles and playing long sets in the network of ballrooms that covered the country—and popular folk acts dominated both live and recorded music markets in Ireland. *Prima facie*, this might appear somewhat surprising; Northern Ireland—six counties in the north-east of the island—remained part of the United Kingdom, and the Republic of Ireland, comprising the rest of the island, while functionally independent since 1922, was deeply imbricated politically, economically and culturally with its larger neighbour until the 1990s. To pick one key fact; according to the 1971 UK census, there were a million Irish-born residents of Great Britain, mostly from the Republic, at a time when the population of the home country barely reached 3 million. Ireland was almost entirely English-speaking, bar a few areas in the west where Irish remained the vernacular, British media circulated across the island, and the economy, north and south, was heavily dependent on Britain. Despite these conditions and a long-connected history, and a shared cultural space, rock music, hegemonic within popular music in Britain from the mid-1960s, did not become the dominant popular music form in Ireland until the end of the 1970s. In this paper, I investigate why this was so, and more pertinently, how the advent of rock as a newly confident form was seen as a harbinger of modernity, in a country – north and south – where anxieties regarding

modernity, its opportunities, but also its moral hazards, were a constant preoccupation of politicians, religious leaders, and cultural commentators more generally.

- 2 Arriving at a definition of modernity that is specific enough to have descriptive power with regard to a particular national accommodation with forces of change, while being general enough to allow for comparison with other such instances, is difficult. Enda Delaney suggests, drawing on Pocock and Taylor, an attractively reflexive notion of what it means to be modern; “in order to be modern, you need to be thinking about being modern.”¹ In these terms at least, as we will see, a concern with being modern—with keeping up—informed much discourse within and around the development of rock music in Ireland. More concretely, modernity, at least in Western Europe and North America, is conventionally taken to

[Refer] to the novel kind of society that emerged from a sequence of major transformation in Europe and North America, culminating in the industrial and democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.²

- 3 Ireland had a peculiar relationship to these revolutions; one of adjacency rather than full participation. From 1801 to 1922, all of Ireland was a constituent part of the United Kingdom, and sent Members of Parliament to Westminster, but the relationship was not one between equals and the majority of the population were excluded from both power and any access to meaningful economic progress. Apart from the Lagan Valley, around Belfast, the industrial revolution bypassed most of Ireland, at least with regard to the presence of factories, mines and shipyards, but huge numbers of Irish emigrants to British and North American cities experienced industrial modernity at its fullest. Modernity, for most Irish people in Ireland, was somewhere else, a sense that, as we will see, lingered after independence.
- 4 This paper will first look at two festivals which bookend the period under discussion. The first “A Sense of Ireland” mounted in London in 1980, as a showcase of contemporary Irish culture, intended to display Irish cultural life in a way that belied the somewhat clichéd view of Ireland held to obtain in Britain. There was an explicitly political aim to this, coming as it did at the height of “the Troubles” (1969-1998) in Northern Ireland, the period during which a low-level civil war across the province was the key referent for Ireland in Britain and productive of significant levels of anti-Irish feeling in British cities with large Irish populations. The second is Féile ’90, a more conventional rock festival happening that year in Thurles, a small market town in Co. Tipperary, that, I will argue, represented a coming of age for Irish rock music in many ways, and also as an index of the appropriation of rock within a larger narrative of modernisation that foreshadowed the economic upturn of the decade that followed, the so-called “Celtic Tiger” boom.
- 5 We will then turn to a wider discussion as to how this narrative was situated within a larger set of discourses about modernity, modernisation and modernity in Ireland, focusing on cultural commentary from the period immediately after this that attempted to make sense of the rapid transformations within, and across, Irish social, political and cultural life.

“A Sense of Ireland”

- 6 “A Sense of Ireland” was a showcase for Irish art and culture, mounted in early 1980 across multiple venues in London, and curated by John Stephenson, then aged 29, who

was the artistic director of the Project Arts Centre in Dublin's Temple Bar district. Temple Bar is now a favoured destination for stag and hen parties, a square kilometre of pubs, clubs and tourist shops. In the mid-seventies, it was a neglected inner-city working-class neighbourhood with some remaining light industry. The Project took over an empty print works and initiated the familiar process by which a cultural quarter is instituted, appropriated by capital, and largely abandoned by culture within a generation—although, as it happens, the Project is still there, in a new building on the same site. Stephenson recalled, in the programme notes for a short film about “A Sense of Ireland,” hosted on the British Film Institute website:

We had emerged from the darkness and there was no going back. Sense of Ireland was a foolhardy declaration by the many hundreds of us involved, that Irish art and artists could take their place alongside the best in the world without deference, and were of central importance to the future of Ireland. At the time, many within the Irish establishment thought the festival would never happen. But we were young, we were reckless, and we were proven right. It took London by storm, but Dublin even more so. Never again would we doubt our own worth.³

- 7 Stephenson was a familiar type of cultural entrepreneur in the aftermath of the long sixties. Like the Sex Pistols manager, Malcolm McLaren, or the founder of Factory Records in Manchester, Tony Wilson, he was confident, educated, and middle-class, and fluent in the cultural discourses of the artistic avant-garde. The Project was certainly brave in its programming, particularly of theatre and the visual arts, in a conservative country with a risk-averse cultural establishment. He was, however, by no means an outsider; his uncle, Sam Stephenson, was Ireland's best-known architect, a controversial brutalist in a low-rise city. He came from a family with a long history of involvement with Fianna Fáil, the centre-right party who saw themselves as the inheritors of the “old” IRA who fought and won conditional and partial independence for the country in 1922, and who had governed, almost without interruption, since 1932.⁴ So, while he was “young and reckless,” he also had a direct line to “the Irish establishment.”
- 8 In 1979, a year before “A Sense of Ireland,” Stephenson had produced an event called “Dark Space” at the Project, using the whole building to present, over 24 hours, 26 bands, and a series of music-related films. The original headliners were to be Public Image Limited, the band formed by John Lydon (Johnny Rotten) after the dissolution of the Sex Pistols, and who are seen as one of the pioneers of what would later be known as “post-punk,” uniting the ethos of punk with a wider range of influences, including dub reggae and *musique concrète*. Throbbing Gristle, pioneers of what latter became known as industrial music, and from an avant-garde art background that would resonate with some of the work the Project had championed, and the Mekons, from the Leeds art school scene, a scene that was more politically engaged than other nascent scenes in British cities, were also on the bill. In the end, for a variety of reasons, only the Mekons made it across the Irish Sea. There were a handful of bands from Belfast, but apart from these few, the rest of the bill comprised Dublin punk and post-punk bands. These included U2, not yet seen as exceptionally likely to succeed, the Virgin Prunes, and bands such as the Atrix and DC Nein, big in Dublin at the time, but unable to translate that success elsewhere. Rudi and the Outcasts, both signed to Good Vibrations record label in Belfast, also played.⁵
- 9 The gig sold out the 200+ capacity venue, but it is unlikely that any band from Dublin at the time within those genre confines would have sold many more than that; the scene

was small, self-contained, and under-recorded. A year later, as part of “A Sense of Ireland,” a selection of these bands (U2, The Virgin Prunes, The Atrix, and Berlin), and others, appeared at small venues across London. As the same BFI programme notes attest:

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.

- 10 There is evidence that the rock showcase was a bit of an afterthought, and badly managed, but the programme book of the festival makes much of this inclusion

Rock Music is hardly part of the conventional image of Ireland. For this reason, its sudden institutionalisation in these two cities [Belfast and Dublin] is indicative of recent social changes—of urbanisation and of shifts in demographic or class structure. The explosion of rock music in Dublin also gives rise to questions about the traditional image of North and South: is the South, in some respects now, at least, more “modern” than the North?⁶

- 11 The factors identified in the quote are certainly suggestive; there were substantial demographic shifts in terms of where people lived and what they did over the preceding decades. In 1971, for example, the total urban population in the Republic (defined as settled areas with 50 inhabitants or more) was 1,753,171 from a total population of fractionally under 3 million. By 1981, the population had increased by over 400,000 of which 2,161,289 lived in towns. This represents a shift from 58% of the population to 65% over a relatively short period. Ireland, in these decades, was, for the first time, a majority urban society. This was not just significant in terms of where people lived, but also in terms of what jobs they did and how they were paid. In 1971, just under a quarter of a million people were employed in the agricultural sector; by 1981, that had fallen to 175,000 with a commensurate increase in those employed in manufacturing. People were moving into towns to work in industry, and more were now wage earners, rather than working on a family farm or associated business. Women remained underemployed, but there had been a modest increase between 1971 and 1981; just over 329,000 women were now employed, as against a little over 278,000 in the previous census. This represented slightly under 40% of the total female population of working age (defined then as over 15). Class, in the Republic, did not—and perhaps still does not—map consistently onto the structure associated with societies that took much of their present form during the industrial revolution. The north was different; in the east of the province, it was heavily industrialised with a large urban working-class component, for the most part unionist and Protestant, as Catholics were systematically excluded from the shipyards and other well-paying employment. As we will see below, class—and more pertinently, perceptions of class, will play a role in the differing perceptions of punk, north and south of the border. Perhaps the most telling part of the passage above is the notion of a contested and competitive modernity, between the two jurisdictions. We will return to this in more detail below.

- 12 “A Sense of Ireland” was not politically innocent, as Linda King notes:

The intent of “A Sense of Ireland” was to raise the profile of Irish culture in Britain and to foster a positive understanding of Ireland after a particularly bleak period in Anglo-Irish relations [...] a year before the Sense of Ireland events the INLA murdered Airey Neave, the Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and the IRA murdered Earl Mountbatten in Sligo. Indeed, throughout 1980 the North would remain the focus of national concern and international media attention as the “Dirty Protests” at the Maze prison continued and the first IRA hunger strikes began.⁷

- 13 The conflict in Northern Ireland,⁸ after the initial rush of support and sympathy from those in the South during the era of the Civil Rights marches and peaking after “Bloody Sunday” in 1972, was viewed in the Republic, and more so in Britain, as atavistic, a nasty sectarian relic from times past.⁹ Both “communities” in the North were regularly urged to “move on” and find an accommodation that would end the violence. In this context, punk rock, blossoming in Belfast and Derry from 1977 onwards, was seen as an unlikely model of reconciliation; if Catholic and Protestant kids could socialise together and listen to bands such as Stiff Little Fingers, the Undertones and Rudi, their elders might take the hint.¹⁰ For many in the Republic, there was an uneasy awareness that the North had a head start when it came to present a coherent and what was seen as authentic version of punk/ post-punk. As Bill Graham, writing in the *Hot Press Yearbook 1980* put it, talking about bands in the Republic: “A mastery of a certain beat style may have been steadily acquired but the language has been less extended”: in other words, Irish bands lack the confidence to play with the form. And a little later, in the same piece, he identifies a structural weakness:

[if] Good Vibrations [Belfast record label, that put out early records by Rudi, the Outcasts and the Undertones] has one achievement, it is that it is built around a co-operative community of musicians ...this hasn’t happened in the south. What we have here is a conflict between orthodox notions of business and musical invention...¹¹

- 14 In an unsigned review in *Hot Press*, after the showcasing of Irish rock during “A Sense of Ireland,” another weakness of rock south of the border is identified:

Then there’s that unfortunate beastie, the “standard model new wave band,” the 50 or so bands [Dublin] that fit in between the Vipers, Resistors, Blades and—yes—Lookalikes. Their problem is that they’re emulating the form of (early) British new wave without the context. Daddy’s house in Foxrock or Clontarf, or a pad in Dun Laoghaire [*all wealthy areas of Dublin*] are no substitute for Brixton squats. Struggling Irish bands may have no money, but they’re seldom short of food and a place to crash and have a bath. Deny it if you like, but Irish new wave (southern variety) is substantially a middle-class phenomenon.¹²

- 15 This was not necessarily true of all the bands cited, but the point stands; post-punk and new wave bands, in Dublin at any rate, were largely from middle-class backgrounds and – the Blades excepted, not coincidentally, a band from working-class Ringsend – startlingly unpolitical. There was much commentary in the pages of *Hot Press* and elsewhere from Irish bands complaining about what Wiseman-Prowse calls “the performance of class” among British punk and post-punk bands.¹³ Phil Chevron of the Radiators (from Space), pioneers of punk in Dublin suggested:

While we shared many of the characteristics of the UK punk bands – the energy and the attitudes—we had nothing to say about tower blocks or anarchy.¹⁴

- 16 And later, more pointedly:

We’re middle class, we never claimed otherwise... never tried to hide anything. The Pistols have pretended, the Clash have pretended. [...] RnR is a fantasy.¹⁵

- 17 In this, bands from the North had a clear advantage in the authenticity stakes, coming from an environment where the chaos that punk talked about was enacted in day-to-day life to an extent unimaginable in London or Manchester. Bands from the North were not slow to capitalise on this, as Greg Cowan from the Outcasts recalls:

The Black Catholics [once a band, later the collective name for a posse of generally working-class punks, with a reputation for causing trouble at gigs—and particularly U2 gigs] adopted us. They were rough. U2 had a reputation of being middle-class

boys in Dublin. Even though we were middle-class boys from Belfast, we got away with it. They adopted us to the stage where we were banned from playing anywhere in Dublin for almost two years. We didn't realise Dublin was a far more deprived city than Belfast.¹⁶

- 18 The suggestion that the “South might, in some respects be more ‘modern’ than the North” opens up a number of questions. What did “modernity” mean in 1980s Ireland? And what role did government economic and industrial policy directed at modernisation play in these narratives?
- 19 The stated ambition of long-serving Taoiseach (prime minister) Eamonn De Valera (1881-1975) who led government nearly continuously from 1931 to 1959 for self-sufficiency and frugal comfort, and an Irish speaking Ireland, devout and culturally pure had ensured that hundreds of thousands of people who “couldn’t afford to love Ireland” emigrated, leaving a demographic hole between the very young and the very old where a productive, wage-earning and tax paying generation should have been.¹⁷ When De Valera’s deputy Sean Lemass finally took over in 1959, he wasted no time in overturning this isolationism, creating conditions that would attract foreign direct investment from Europe and the US and beginning the process that would see Ireland join the EEC in 1973. “Modernisation” was the watchword after the detour into isolationism in the post-independence decades.
- 20 That demographic hole had consequences for popular music in Ireland. While the country experienced rapid changes through the 1960s, often in parallel with the energies of that decade elsewhere, popular music took a distinctively different path to that in Britain; something perhaps more remarked on given the proximity and shared cultural space. While, by the mid-to late-sixties in Great Britain, rock was the dominant form of youth oriented popular music, in Ireland, rock came a distant third after the showbands and the folk scene.¹⁸ “Showbands” were, in the eyes of their detractors, mobile jukeboxes, churning out covers of contemporary chart material to dancers in Spartan—and dry—ballrooms up and down the country.¹⁹ Ireland was sparsely populated, and with a population that showed little sign of growth between the twin ravages of emigration and a low marriage rate. These factors, taken together, meant that “youth culture” was a near-impossibility outside the cities of Dublin and Belfast. There were simply too few youths to go around. Dances in the small towns and villages that made up the showband circuit were multi-generational and attracted an audience unconcerned with originality or artistry; they wanted to dance to music they knew—and the showband industry, a significant economic player in an underdeveloped economy in the Republic, was eager to provide it. It is an irony that, in a much poorer state than now, a great many more musicians were making a living, and a good one, in many cases.²⁰ As well as crowding out the live circuit and confining what rock bands there were to the many, and usually short-lived beat clubs of Dublin, the showband managers also picked off any promising musical talent; the offer of a good living was too tempting to turn down, when held against the uncertain prospects of breaking the British market. The Greenbeats, for example, once Dublin’s biggest Rock/RnB attraction, bit the bullet in 1965, added a brass section and became a showband.²¹ Rory Gallagher and Van Morrison, Ireland’s two most successful rock musicians through the late sixties and into the seventies, both had spells in showbands.
- 21 Folk music, the most identifiably Irish music played in the country was also by far the most successful abroad and overall, perhaps the most profitable sector of the music

industry in Ireland. The revival of this music, from the 1950s onwards, had its roots as much outside the country as at home; the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, who spearheaded the “ballad boom” had formed in Greenwich Village in New York and re-exported their brand to Ireland much later. The pub session, now the mainstay of Irish traditional music performance, had its origins in Irish pubs in London, where players from different parts of Ireland met and swapped tunes and playing style to develop often exhilarating syntheses.²²

- 22 Thus, by 1980, and “A Sense of Ireland,” rock was still not, as the programme note above put it, “part of the conventional image of Ireland.” The notion of a “conventional image” raises its own questions; “image” as in how the country appears to the outside world, or “image” as in how “we appear to ourselves and what that means about who we are?” As noted in the introduction, at least one definition of a modern society might be one that worried about its own inclusion in the ranks of the modern.

Féile '90: The Trip to Tipp

- 23 A decade later, in 1990, in a quite different setting, Féile '90, a festival of (mostly) Irish rock music took place featuring a similar number of bands as performed at Dark Space. This time, however, the attendance was many times greater—estimated at 60,000 over 3 days—and the scale of the production and the profile of the artists performing much higher. Headline acts included Van Morrison, The Hothouse Flowers, and Scottish band Deacon Blue, with a supporting bill of almost exclusively Irish acts, the two other exceptions being Big Country and Meatloaf, both of whom performed on the opening night. Féile '90 took place in Semple Stadium in Thurles, Co. Tipperary over the first weekend in August. Thurles, then, had a population of under 8,000; the stadium had a capacity of many times that. To understand this mismatch of scale, it is necessary to understand something about the Gaelic Athletic Association (the GAA) who owned and ran the stadium and the distinctive place they occupied—and still occupy—in Irish life.
- 24 The GAA was founded in Thurles in 1888 to codify and manage “Gaelic Games,” chiefly hurling and Gaelic football. The first of those laid claim to being ancient, played across the country from antiquity. Gaelic football had less secure claims; effectively, like rugby and association football across the Irish Sea, it was a confection of previous practice and new rules. However, in a country that had all but lost its language, sport, but also religion, came to occupy much of the affective space that language and literature would in a nation with a vigorous vernacular culture. The GAA then at least, was an organisation deeply embedded in Irish life, chiefly outside the cities, notionally at least, completely amateur. Many of those involved in the GAA were prominent in the Catholic Church and in the two centre-right political parties—Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael—that had, alternating power between them, governed first the Free State and then the Republic to the exclusion of parties to the left. The GAA was widely seen as a conservative and nationalistic organisation, and, as rock music still retained a certain counter-cultural cachet then, running a rock festival at a venue with strong historical resonances was widely commented on and many in the GAA itself, disapproved strongly.²³
- 25 Tipperary GAA and Semple Stadium found itself in debt to the tune of £1.3 million after hosting the All-Ireland Hurling final in 1988, the centenary year of the GAA. In order to plug this hole, the man who was chair of the county board of the GAA, Michael Lowry,

who was also a TD (a member of the Dáil, the Irish parliament) representing Fine Gael, half of the conservative duopoly that had governed Ireland since independence, looked to music.

- 26 Lowry met with Denis Desmond, the “D” in promoters MCD and quickly found he was someone he could work with.²⁴ In some ways this was surprising; the other major promoters in the country at the time were all showband veterans; the skills they learned in those early years translated into promoting big outdoor one-off shows. MCD were different; Desmond was a graduate of University College Cork, who had begun promoting bands while working on a North Sea oilrig. MCD were rock promoters, rooted in punk, post-punk and metal.²⁵
- 27 The majority of the bill at Féile ’90 featured a generation of Irish rock acts, only a handful of whom made much of an impression outside the country, but who could fill venues across the state. Rock music now occupied the place vacated by the showbands, but with a young audience and no longer confined to the cities. It had also shed any counter-cultural or resistant flavour it might once have had, never particularly striking among Irish bands of a previous generation. Bands like Something Happens!, The Four of Us, An Emotional Fish, The Sawdoctors, and The Stunning were all big attractions across the country without much to show in the way of success elsewhere. This was in contrast to previous generations where rock bands, frustrated by the lack of access to audiences at home, would leave at the first flicker of interest from abroad. Bands such as Thin Lizzy and the Boomtown Rats would then return triumphant after successful assaults on the British market. This was to a great extent due to the inability to make a living from live work at home, and the attraction of a much bigger market within reach. U2 broke this mould by remaining based in Ireland and by focussing at least as much on the US market as on Britain. The bands listed above, while for the most part signed to UK labels, remained based at home. What was also distinctive was the relative lack of an independent sector at a time when “indie” was becoming recognisable as a genre as well as a business practice. Whereas, in Britain, being signed to an independent label such as Rough Trade or Factory brought with it a degree of what Sarah Thornton, following Bourdieu, calls “subcultural capital,”²⁶ Irish bands remained focused on “the deal” with a major label. What was also noticeable was the relative lack of oppositional political engagement by such bands. Given the ongoing conflict in the North, the battles over social issues in the South—divorce, still unavailable, access to contraception, and the constitutional ban on abortion—and persistent, chronic emigration, it is perhaps surprising that Irish rock music at the time eschewed any comment on anything remotely political. These bands were radio friendly, greatly facilitated by the establishment, in 1979 of a second national radio channel, dedicated to popular music, and a host of licensed regional stations. Irish records no longer suffered in terms of production against UK and US material and the publicly owned broadcaster, RTÉ, had a felt obligation to promote Irish artists. Also noteworthy was the geographical spread: The Sawdoctors, probably the single most successful of the cohort mentioned above, were from Tuam, a small town in Co. Galway, The Stunning were from Galway City, and The Four of Us from Newry in Co. Down. Rock was no longer “a Dublin thing.”
- 28 Something clearly had changed over the intervening decade. The 1980s were not, economically or socially, a happy period in Irish history: the enduring, and seemingly endless conflict in Northern Ireland, the return of emigration on a scale not seen since

the 1950s, and the decimation of what little “old” industry the Republic had, made for a grim decade. Nevertheless, within a very few years after 1990, the so called “Celtic Tiger” seemed to many no less than a miracle; a country that had been one of Western Europe’s poorest was suddenly rich and, despite the deep and persisting inequalities, the new prosperity did, modestly, lift all boats, just as neoliberal economic doctrine suggests. The roots of this stretched back further than 1990, and, for many academics and political commentators (detailed below), the search for the “why” and “how” of this transformation produced a slew of books and articles through the 1990s and found a ready audience in a country equally interested in itself. For many on the left, this was disconcerting; capitalism appeared triumphant. Ireland had not been transformed by socialism, which had always been electorally weak, even as trade unions were strong. For some on the right too, this was also uncomfortable; the naked consumerism, the vulgar enjoyments of a *nouveau riche* country sat uneasily with notions of Irish communitarian and religious virtue, interested in the higher things. It appears we were not that different after all. The counter-cultural energies that had briefly informed rock elsewhere in the 1960s and re-surfaced, at least initially in punk and post-punk, were muted in Irish rock music during those eras. When Irish rock did emerge into the light, it was in a period when rock and pop forms were being assimilated into the cultural mainstream wholesale, thanks to innovations in media—MTV, the introduction of the CD—globalisation following the collapse of the Soviet bloc and democratisation in South America and parts of Asia, and the demographic growth of the rock audience beyond its historical identification with youth. Irish bands were noticeably adept at suggesting continuities within a form that was becoming conscious of its own past, and developing the backward glance that would increasingly characterise rock in the 1990s.

- 29 What was noticeable about much of the academic and popular commentary that emerged in the wake of the Celtic Tiger was the relative neglect of popular culture, in attempts to account for this transformation. The affective economy of the cultural products that most people enjoyed was overlooked in favour of literature and drama, with occasional nods to cinema. Literary studies, along with history, dominated the academic discourse around national self-understanding.²⁷ The kind of cultural studies engagement with what people actually did with the stuff they read and listened to was weak.
- 30 In the next section, I will look briefly at some of this literature, before arguing that it is only through a closer understanding of the place of popular culture, and in particular, popular music, that this transformation can be fully appreciated.

“Pre-Modern to Post-Modern”?

- 31 When Giraldus Cambriensis (Gerald of Wales), a scribe and clergyman, was appointed by Henry II of England to accompany his son Prince John to Ireland in 1185, he compiled his topography of Ireland (*Topographia Hibernica*) for the benefit of his royal master. He noted especially the application of “commendable industry in playing upon musical instruments” and that in this [the Irish] “are incomparably more skilful than any other nation I have seen.”²⁸ This, however, is the one exception he discerns in an otherwise unpromising picture: the Irish in every other respect display a deplorable ‘want of industry’.

- 32 If, for Gerald of Wales, a “want of industry” was a moral, or at least, a social failing, to be deplored in Ireland and the Irish, for the Irish Industrial Development Authority (IDA) in the late 1980s, a different kind of absence—or “want”—of industry was to be celebrated. In an essay in a collection published in 1988, edited by Richard Kearney, called *Across the Frontiers: Ireland in the 1990s*, Luke Gibbons notes a slogan in an advertisement produced by the IDA and aimed at American investors: the copy reads “missing the Industrial Revolution was the best thing that ever happened to the Irish.”²⁹ It suggests, to Gibbons, that “modernisation” in Ireland, still more anticipated than present, will marry “advanced industrial development” without any concomitant commitment to “social, political, or cultural modernisation.” The subtext of the IDA copy is obvious enough: the potential investor in Ireland will not be dealing with entrenched labour practices, nor will they be dealing with the environmental and demographic consequences of a post-industrial landscape.
- 33 This identification of a gap in history, the view that Ireland somehow missed the industrial revolution and jumped straight from the “pre-modern to the postmodern” was common currency in commentaries on Ireland’s social, political and cultural landscape in the last decades of the 20th century, up to the crash of 2008 and beyond. To pick a well-known example, in his introduction to *Plays 1* by Martin McDonagh, in 1999, Fintan O’Toole wrote that the playwright’s sensibility reflected a land that was “pre-modern and post-modern at the same time.”³⁰ It was a conceit O’Toole was later to employ in his angry polemic about the failures that led to the near-collapse of the Irish economy after the banking crisis of 2008. In *Ship of Fools*, he went with the same notion as a running discursive thread: that Ireland went from being a pre-modern, nearly feudal society into a postmodern, technological enabled future without passing through a model of modernity that, as O’Toole suggests, would have inculcated the habits of a mature democracy more securely than the somewhat loose grip of the virtues of civil republicanism that had allowed what, in the subtitle of his book he refers to as “[the] stupidity and corruption [that] sank the Celtic Tiger.”³¹ The notion of moral failure, as opposed to structural and economic forces, as the root of Irish misfortune is a recurring theme in O’Toole’s work and he is not alone among commentators within the academic discipline of Irish Studies and beyond.
- 34 This conceit of Ireland’s Great Leap Forward as a passage from the pre-modern to the postmodern appears more than a decade earlier in an essay by Desmond Bell, published in the same collection as the Luke Gibbons piece cited above. Bell’s piece in the collection is called “Ireland without Frontiers? The Challenge of the Communication Revolution.” Bell develops a critique of the Ireland of the late 1980s that charges that
- The contradictions of Irish modernization [are such] that we have prematurely entered the postmodern age* (italics in the original).³²
- 35 Ireland was, he charges, experiencing monetarism without previous experience of social democracy, a new right without an old left, and, most important for Bell, the “nostalgia and historicist pastiche of ‘post-modernism’ without the astringent purgative of modernism.”³³ It may seem odd to suggest Ireland suffers from an absence of “modernism” given the pre-eminence of two Irish writers in the canon of international modernism, but Bell argues that the influence of Joyce and Beckett was minimal at “home” and that, by the time a late version of modernism made its appearance in Ireland, it was as

A shoddy simulation of consumer prosperity in a society undergoing a tawdry and short-lived experience of global post-war capitalist boom.³⁴

36 There are quite a few things wrong with this “pre- to post-modern” picture. One is the fact that, if even we take “modern” to mean industrialisation, then, up to 1922, Ireland was one jurisdiction and one corner of it, the Lagan Valley around Belfast, was one of the powerhouses of the Empire. However, even if we confine ourselves to the under-industrialised and supposedly “pre-modern” territory that became the Republic, the notion that modernity was not the condition of its economy is unsupportable. Ireland may not have produced iron or steel, but it produced beef, in huge quantities and with a very distinctive division of labour that maximised profit for the ranchers of the east, maintained a class system indexed according to position within the cycle of livestock production, but exported the end product live to Britain.³⁵ The identification of modernity with the modernity of the coloniser is a central insight of any postcolonial analysis.³⁶ It was, perhaps, the very permeability of the membrane that only lightly separated the two islands that made the asymmetry appear acute.

37 In contrast to this picture, a different and more interesting account was popularised by Declan Kiberd’s book *Inventing Ireland*, a work that escaped the academy and became a modest bestseller.³⁷ For such a book, most of which was concerned with Irish literature from before and just after independence (1890s-1920s), it reached a perhaps surprisingly wide audience. It has also, as Roy Foster states:

...exercised a huge influence on a generation of students, at once pioneering a synthesizing, comparative, and internationalist approach to Irish writing through the centuries.³⁸

38 When a work of historical scholarship achieves such a reach, we can possibly infer that it addresses its own time as much as its ostensible subject. As Kiberd notes regarding romantic poetry:

The romantic lyric ... is predicted on three selves: a past self, a reporting self which writes, and the self which the author will become by the very act of writing.³⁹

39 *Inventing Ireland* translates this act of self-actualisation to the country itself, of which he – Kiberd—is but the vessel: the past of which he writes, “the Irish renaissance,” written into the present—Ireland in the 1990s—will safely steer the ship of state into the future. In order to do this, we need to rescue the period in question from the “condescension” of the revisionists: we need to restore the actors in the rising to the status of exemplars, not, as previously, seen as anachronistic and anti-modern, but as thrillingly in advance of their times.⁴⁰ It is up to us to catch up. We also need to come to terms with the literature of the time and understand the depth and complexity of its contribution to “inventing” the nation to come.

40 It is hard to overstate his commitment to the view that the nation was built—invented—by its poets in advance of its actual instantiation, a view that can lead to a reduction of practical politics to the working out of aesthetic categories. Thus, he charges, De Valera’s notion of the frugal but pure Irish nation

[would be] a world in which men could fertilize and farm the land with machines made, most conveniently, elsewhere. By no means ridiculous, this was the state sought by many other leaders, to solve the problem posed by modernity with the right kind of modernity. Recognizing the protest against a shallow cosmopolitanism latent in the national movements, its sponsors hoped for a new dispensation, under which the best of tradition might blend with the benefits of modernity. Such a radicalism was both modern and counter-modern. *In that sense, it was a political*

version of literary modernism [my italics], which compensated for all that was lost in the consumer society by emphasizing the complexity, beauty and quality of many traditions.⁴¹

- 41 This translation of all the things that the modernisers thought were wrong with Ireland, and were the causes of economic underperformance and cultural conservatism and, in some eyes, sterility, to being thrilling harbingers of the salvation to come—the present state of affairs in the 1990s—was audacious; but, just like more pessimistic accounts, it had no room for popular culture. Kiberd’s understanding of culture and politics is strictly demarcated by “high” literary culture and drama. Popular culture is either ignored or patronised, as in this passage, defending the apparent obscurantism of Douglas Hyde, one of the founders of the Gaelic League, dedicated to the revival of the Irish language, and later, Ireland’s first president:

This diagnosis [of The De-Anglicisation of Ireland] has more in common with the future strictures of F. R. Leavis or, for that matter, Theodor Adorno, than might at first seem the case. The alleged anti-modern element in Irish revivalism, of which revisionist historians have made so much, turns out on inspection to be a prophetic critique of mass-culture and of the vulgarization of popular taste.⁴²

- 42 Kiberd is clearly on the side of those who would deprecate “mass culture” and the “vulgarisation” of popular taste (when has popular taste not been “vulgar”?) while allowing that it might be “worthy of attention” within the field of cultural studies. Not, to be sure, attention to any aesthetic or political worth such cultural dross might have, but as symptomatic of that from which “the people” might need rescuing.
- 43 My argument here is twofold: one, that the anxieties about «wrong’ modernity expressed above—the notion of the pre-to post-modern leap that short circuited the development of mature political institutions or a civil society worthy of the name, or the flooding of Irish culture with “vulgar” trash—miss the fact that Ireland was always, and already, modern. It may in fact be the case that it was the rural Irish smallholders and working classes who were more securely anchored in modernity, thanks to family members in Britain or the US and the passage of cultural goods through these channels. Emigration was not always “for life”: the returned Yank was a familiar figure across rural and small-town Ireland through the 20th century. Emigrants to Britain returned frequently, and often this was seasonal migration rather than a permanent location. Modernity in Ireland was subaltern, bypassing an insular middle-class, who were largely risk averse and jealously guarding their privileged access to the respectable professions.
- 44 The stream of commentary on the apparently sudden access of Ireland to full-blown modernity in 1990s was rooted in a frame derived from postcolonial studies. Too often, in the attempt to use the postcolonial condition as a diagnostic tool for the nation’s ills, there was a failure of reflexivity—an inability to recognise that the critique was itself a symptom of the condition it attempted to diagnose and cure. Complaints about the “shoddy” and “tawdry” simulations, the vulgarisation of popular taste, and the lack of confidence in native cultural forms misses the long-standing imbrication of hybridity and adulteration in exactly those forms, and also misses the complicity of Irish people and representations of Irishness therein. The roots of much 20th century popular culture lie in minstrelsy, as famously explored by Eric Lott; and, as he also explains, many of the forms through which the misrepresentation of African American life were expressed had their roots in “stage Irishry”—and very often it was Irish faces to which

the burnt cork was applied.⁴³ The identification of modernity as elsewhere and late misses *itself* a symptom of postcolonial projection.

- 45 My second concluding point is that the adaptation of rock music to Irish conditions, and the détente between a supposedly oppositional form of music and notionally conservative elements in Irish society, might be viewed as a harbinger of what was to come as Ireland rapidly adjusted to its new prosperity in the 1990s. The very lack of any counter-cultural baggage around rock in Ireland, allied to the relative weakness of Western art music in Irish cultural life, allowed rock to develop a certain prestige quite quickly, hastened in no small part by the success of U2 throughout the 1980s.⁴⁴ In some respects this accommodation with what was still a conservative society, prefigured the adoption of rock and popular music by figures such as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair later in the 1980s as indices of their own “cool” but also as cover for projects that dismantled elements of the post-war settlement. There was less to dismantle in Ireland, and perhaps here at least, the leap from pre- to post-modern model has a certain currency.

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NOTES

1. Enda Delaney, *Making Ireland Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), 12.
2. Delaney, *Making Ireland Modern*, 11.
3. John Stephenson in programme notes for "Sense of Ireland" at British Film Institute. Accessed July 7, 2026. <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-a-sense-of-ireland-1980-online>. See also *A Sense of Ireland Catalogue* (Dublin: Sense of Ireland Ltd, 1980).
4. Dick Walsh, *The Party: Inside Fianna Fáil* (Gill and Macmillan, 1986).
5. The band in which this author then played, the Modern Heirs, took the stage at 6am at Dark Space. We needed to borrow a bass amp at short notice; none of the Dublin bands there would oblige, but the Mekons, true to their politics, stepped up.
6. *A Sense of Ireland Catalogue* (Dublin: Sense of Ireland Ltd, 1980).
7. Linda King, "A Sense of Ireland: Reflecting and Refracting Modernity in Irish Culture," *Irish Studies Review*, 26.3 (2018): 319.
8. Northern Ireland was constituted deliberately in 1921 as a unionist and Protestant state. The sizeable Catholic and nationalist minority within its borders were subject to discrimination in areas such as housing and employment, and, by and large, withdrew from political participation in a jurisdiction designed to exclude them. In the late 1960s, a younger generation, inspired partly by the civil rights movement in the US, began to agitate for equality and recognition. This provoked violent repression from the unionist state, and from Loyalist paramilitary organisations. Many northern Catholics fled south across the border to the Republic, and the southern state was thrown into crisis as it attempted to deal with unrest north of the border. The

Irish Republican army (IRA), largely dormant, revived to defend Catholic areas of the north, and, from 1971 onwards, saw the conflict as an opportunity to end British rule in Ireland and undertook a campaign of bombing and other actions against the British Army on the streets of northern Irish cities and also in Britain. By 1977, after numerous failed political initiatives, and the suspension of the limited devolution Northern Ireland had enjoyed up to 1972, the conflict seemed endless to many, with no resolution in sight.

9. Brian Hanley, *The Impact of the Troubles on the Republic of Ireland 1968-1979* (Manchester University Press, 2018).

10. For positive affirmations of this picture, see Stuart Bailie, *Trouble Songs* (Bloomfield, 2017); Timothy Heron, "‘Alternative Ulster’: The First Wave of Punk in Northern Ireland 1977-1983," in *Made in Ireland*, ed. Áine Mangaoang, John O’Flynn, and Lonán Ó Briain (Routledge, 2020); Martin McLoone, "Punk Music in Northern Ireland: The Political Power of ‘What Might Have Been’," *Irish Studies Review*, 12/1, (2004): 29-38. For a more jaundiced view, see Thomas Paul Burgess, *Wild Colonial Boys: A Belfast Punk Story* (Manchester University Press, 2024); Fearghus Roulston, "‘Justa Nother Teenage Rebel’: Space, Memory and conflict in an Oral History of the Belfast Punk Scene 1977-1986" (PhD thesis, University of Brighton, 2019).

11. *Hot Press Yearbook 1980* (Dublin: Hot Press, 1980).

12. Conor Owens, Review of "A Sense of Ireland" in *Hot Press*, March 1980.

13. Nathan Wiseman-Prowse, *Performing Class in British Popular Music* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

14. Gerry Smyth, *Noisy Island* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2005), 57.

15. Phil Chevron interview, *Hot Press*, October 1977.

16. Quoted in Stuart Bailie, *Trouble Songs* (Belfast: Bloomfield, 2018), 122.

17. John Kurt Jacobsen, *Chasing Progress in the Irish Republic* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 50.

18. See Smyth, *Noisy Island*, 12-13, for more.

19. See Mark Prendergast, *Isle of Noises* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1987/1990) and Smyth, *Noisy Island*, for more on this.

20. For a comprehensive history of the showband scene, see Rebecca S. Miller, *Are You Dancing?* (Indiana University Press, 2025); for a racier account, see Vincent Power, *Send ‘em Home Sweatin’* (Mercier Press, 1990/2000).

21. See Daragh O’Halloran, *Green Beat: The Forgotten Era of Irish Rock* (Belfast: The Brehon Press, 2007), 32.

22. Scott B. Spencer, "Wheels of the World: How Recordings of Irish Traditional Music bridged the gap between Homeland and Diaspora," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 4, Special Issue 4: Irish Music in the United States (November 2010): 437 -449.

23. For a more complete account, see Colm O’Callaghan, "The Triumph of Féile 1990," *The Blackpool Sentinel*, accessed July 7, 2026, <https://theblackpoolsentinel.com/2018/05/08/the-triumph-of-feile-1990/comment-page-1/>

24. Desmond is now MD of Live Nation Europe, the continent’s biggest music promoter.

25. For a comprehensive account of the staging of Féile 90, see Colm O’Callaghan, "The Triumph of Féile 1990."

26. Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1995).

27. Linda Connolly, "The Limits of ‘Irish Studies’: Historicism, Culturalism, Paternalism," *Irish Studies Review* 12.2 (2004): 139-62.

28. Leith Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender: The Construction of Irish National Identity, 1724-1874* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

29. Luke Gibbons, "Coming Out of Hibernation? The Myth of Modernity in Irish Culture," in *Across the Frontiers: Ireland in the 1990s*, ed. Richard Kearney (Wolfhound Press, 1988), 217.

30. Martin McDonagh, *Plays 1* (Introduction by Fintan O'Toole) (Faber, 2003), xi.
31. Fintan O'Toole, *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger* (Faber, 2009).
32. Desmond Bell, "Ireland without Frontiers: The Challenge of the Communication Revolution" in *Across the Frontiers: Ireland in the 1990s*, ed. Richard Kearney (Wolfhound Press, 1988), 229.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. See Conor McCabe, *Sins of the Father: Tracing the Decisions that Shaped the Irish Economy* (Irish History Press, 2011).
36. See David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Duke University Press, 1993).
37. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Vintage, 1995).
38. Roy Foster, "Will the Center Hold?" *New York Review of Books*, July 19, 2018.
39. Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 115.
40. "Revisionism" dominated discussion within Irish historiography through the latter half of the 20th century and its echoes reverberated beyond academic walls. The popular version of revisionism, usually articulated by those hostile to it, was that it questioned the founding myths of nationalism, the long struggle against British occupation and, most offensively, questioned the wisdom, or even the sanity, of those involved in the Easter rising (1916) that started the chain of events that ended in independence. Opposing scholars sought ammunition in postcolonial theory that sought to situate Ireland's struggle within the context of the larger Empire. The controversy was particularly fraught, as the Provisional IRA, and other republicans, explicitly affirmed a direct lineage from the men and women of the "old" IRA, which, given the ambitions of all the parties in the south were, at least formally, towards reunification, put the establishment in an awkward spot.
41. Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 295.
42. Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 145.
43. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford University Press, 1993).
44. See Harry White, *The Keeper's Recital* (Field Day/ Cork University Press, 1999) for more on the relative weakness of art music in Ireland.

ABSTRACTS

This article examines the linkage between the rise of Irish rock music and the conquest of the economy by an aggressively neo-liberal regime. Did the former merely «reflect» the latter, or did the cultural ambassadorship of bands such as U2 and the Cranberries manifest a «soft power» that enabled the economic transformation that followed and inaugurate a new representation of Ireland and Irishness? Using contemporary accounts of the country as it looked then, and looking back from the aftermath of the crash of 2008 that devastated the still novel prosperity, I ask how we may understand rock music, not as a *countercultural* force, but rather as a modernizing agent, very much in step with a neoliberal economic project.

Cet article étudie le lien entre l'essor du rock irlandais et la mainmise sur l'économie par un régime néolibéral agressif. Le rock a-t-il simplement « reflété » cette évolution, ou bien le rôle d'ambassadeurs culturels joué par des groupes tels que U2 et les Cranberries a-t-il participé d'un

« *soft power* » qui a rendu possible la transformation économique et inauguré une nouvelle représentation de l'Irlande et de l'identité irlandaise ? En m'appuyant sur des témoignages contemporains décrivant le pays tel qu'il était à l'époque et en portant un regard rétrospectif depuis les conséquences de la crise de 2008 qui a anéanti une prospérité encore récente, je m'interroge sur la manière dont nous pouvons appréhender la musique rock, non pas comme une force contre-culturelle, mais plutôt comme un agent de modernisation, en parfaite adéquation avec un projet économique néolibéral.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Irish rock music, Irishness, modernity, Celtic Tiger, A Sense of Ireland, Féile '90

Keywords: Rock irlandais, identité irlandaise, modernité, Celtic Tiger, A Sense of Ireland, Féile '90

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