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*Race Class* 2001; 42; 49

DOI: 10.1177/0306396801423003

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BILL ROLSTON

## **‘This is not a rebel song’: the Irish conflict and popular music**

The ability of popular music to link in with and advance popular progressive politics has, at times, been beyond doubt. Take Jamaica in 1978. Political violence between armed gangs loyal to prime minister Michael Manley and opposition leader Edward Seaga was rife. Bob Marley performed at a peace concert in Kingston where he brought Manley and Seaga on stage. Standing between them and holding their hands high, he and his group, the Wailers, sang ‘One Love’. It was, says Denselow, ‘one of the great, strange moments of political pop history’.<sup>1</sup>

Twenty years later, Irish group U2 staged a concert in Belfast a few days before the referendum held to ratify the Good Friday Agreement. U2’s lead singer, Bono Vox, brought on stage the leaders of two of the main pro-Agreement parties, David Trimble of the Ulster Unionist Party and John Hume of the Social Democratic and Labour Party. Standing between them, he held their hands aloft and sang U2’s ‘One’, followed by John Lennon’s ‘Give Peace a Chance’ and Ben. E. King’s ‘Stand By Me’.<sup>2</sup> The difference between Marley’s gesture and Bono’s would have been even more stark if Bono’s initial choice of song had been accepted; incredibly, it was Rolf Harris’s anodyne ‘Two Little Boys’.

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*Race & Class*

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Vol. 42(3): 49–67 [0306-3968(200101)42:3; 49–67; 016113]

What could have been an act of homage turned out to be a case of pale mimicry. The Belfast concert was a government-sponsored public relations exercise, not the symbol of a truce between rivals. The audience consisted of young people invited by the two political parties involved, not representatives of the warring factions in the North, nor of the third main party to the Agreement, Sinn Féin.

The political power of reggae at a particular conjuncture in Jamaican history stands in stark contrast to the political subservience of pop at a key point in Irish history. The potential and limitations of pop thus revealed in this comparison form the focus of this article.

### **The limitations of popular music**

In traditional sociological wisdom, the prognosis regarding popular music's ability to tackle political issues is poor. For Adorno in particular, and the Frankfurt School in general, popular music – like the rest of the 'culture industry' – suppresses and smothers political thought and cannot be progressive.<sup>3</sup> As Adorno concludes, all that popular music is capable of is the production of 'silly love songs'.

Such pessimism has dominated sections of left-wing analysis of pop music for half a century. Thus Harker dismisses pop music as pap for the masses produced by an industry hopelessly compromised by its incorporation into capitalist structures. The only exception to the rule is the space he affords to music which articulates progressive political aspirations and serves approved progressive causes – 'our' music as opposed to 'theirs', as he puts it.<sup>4</sup> One flaw at the heart of this argument is its over-reliance on the importance of lyrics: a song is political if it speaks of political issues.

The issue of lyrics in pop songs in general is problematic. There are those, such as Street, who argue that the meaning of music is forged in use, rather than emerging simply from the intentions of authors and producers. '[P]op's meaning is inevitably confusing',<sup>5</sup> and that is precisely its power; the listener attaches meaning and in doing so identifies with the music. On the other hand, Frith points out that 'most contemporary popular music takes the form of song', even dance music linked to recreational drug culture; the text may be minimalist and repetitive, but it exists.<sup>6</sup> Why are words so important? For a start, they power the central instrument in much of popular music – the voice. Moreover, music can give us words to express 'emotions that otherwise cannot be expressed without embarrassment or incoherence'.<sup>7</sup> At best, songs can work like poetry, providing an experience of transcendence beyond the banality of ordinary everyday living. When voice and words combine effectively, the emotion and passion – the poetry – is unmistakable.

This is relevant to the political potential of pop. Robinson, Buck and Cuthbert concluded in their global survey of musical meaning that ““political” music for most people, including the musicians we interviewed, is synonymous with politicized lyrics’.<sup>8</sup> In short, political songs have a preferred reading and are not open to endless interpretation.

That said, there is a second issue which needs to be considered, namely, pop’s ability to speak for and to a community. For all that consumption is individualised, the magic of popular music is that it allows for *shared* pleasure. Yet, the ‘community’ that pop music can create is often fleeting: the imagined community of the individual fan, the temporary community of the audience, or the transitory community of the teenage rebel. Music’s ability to create a sense of a more fundamental or lasting community is severely limited. But where such a community – based on shared interests of class, gender, race, ethnicity, subculture or age cohort, and so on – exists, there is no reason to believe that pop is unable to articulate, and thereby serve, the community’s aspirations and needs. Street disagrees, his conclusion underlined by his use of dismissive adverbs.

The record then simply provides a service, an excuse for the faithful to get together. It confirms, it does not convert . . . Where a song is used by a people already united by their politics, then it merely has to confirm their sense of unity.<sup>9</sup>

I would wish to question that conclusion. What Sivanandan imaginatively refers to as ‘communities of resistance’<sup>10</sup> have mechanisms of solidarity and support; one of these has traditionally been music. There is no reason to believe that such a role is confined to ethnic or traditional folk music; pop music has the potential to inspire, mobilise and galvanise political groups. In this sense, music, including pop music, can be organic in the Gramscian sense of the term, growing out of a political constituency and speaking to and for that community.

In short, when preferred meaning, consumer interpretation and political community come together, pop music has the power to articulate and celebrate political aspirations and causes.

### **A brief history of Irish rock<sup>11</sup>**

‘In the beginning you had the showband and very little else.’<sup>12</sup> As rock began to emerge as a global industry in the 1960s, popular music in Ireland was dominated by hundreds of showbands playing cover versions of British and US hits. Their popularity was undeniable, as was their musical competence; Van Morrison began his musical career with the Monarchs, while Rory Gallagher played with the Fontana

Showband. Despite this, 'serious' musicians regarded the showbands as unoriginal.

At the same time, 'beat' music emerged in clubs in Dublin and around Belfast. Groups like Bluesville in Dublin and Them (with Van Morrison) in Belfast played American soul and R&B. When hippie-based psychedelic rock emerged, Ireland had its groups capable of producing the same sound, like Eire Apparent and Granny's Intentions. But they did not merely produce cover versions; the musical traffic was not one-way. Bluesville had a top ten hit in the US in 1965 ('You Turn Me On', Jerden Records). Them's 'Here Comes the Night' (Decca 1965) reached number three in the British hit parade. Skid Row toured in the US with the Grateful Dead. Thin Lizzy (Phil Lynott's group) made number six in the British singles charts in February 1972 with 'Whisky in the Jar' (Decca). And Rory Gallagher (of Taste) was considered in the same league as fellow rock guitarists Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton (see *Rory Gallagher*, Polydor 1971).

The success of the music outside Ireland – and not merely the aping of international musical trends – continued to be characteristic of Irish rock. 'Celtic rock' is a case in point. In the hands of a group like Horslips, it was an imaginative fusion of rock and Irish roots. Horslips' reworking of the eighth-century epic *Táin Bó Cuailgne* ('The Cattle Raid of Cooley') was an innovative masterpiece (*The Táin*, Oats 1973) and their *Book of Invasions* (DJM 1976) was an ambitious and relatively successful 'concept album'.

The sound of contemporaneous group Clannad was more ethereal than that of Horslips. In 1982, they reached number five in the British singles chart with 'Theme from Harry's Game' (RCA). It was the first time a group had sung in Irish on *Top of the Pops*. As Prendergast points out, they 'managed to transcend the limitations of the use of the Irish language by the sheer beauty of their sound'.<sup>13</sup> In fact, as Irish music of this kind joined the wider pantheon of 'world music', sound became all important. A prime case is that of Enya (originally a member of Clannad), whose ambient music merged the mystique of Ireland with the mysticism of 'new age' style (see *Watermark*, WEA 1988). Parallel with these developments was the growth of folk rock in Ireland. Artists such as Christy Moore, Donal Lunny, Andy Irvine and Paul Brady took a traditional music form made popular in the 1950s and 1960s by groups such as the Clancy Brothers and the Dubliners and transformed it. High points in this development were the groups Planxty and Moving Hearts. The latter's sound imaginatively stretched Irish folk in the direction of rock and jazz (see *Moving Hearts*, WEA 1981).

Ireland has also produced artists of global stature. Foremost among them has been Van Morrison whose music merges elements of rock, folk, jazz, soul and R&B. His constant search for identity through

music has conferred on him the reputation of one of the most thoughtful of the world's rock singer/songwriters.

No Irish group has made more global impact than U2. Emerging from Dublin's punk scene in the late 1970s, by the mid-1980s, they had established themselves as the thoughtful, authentic voice of rock. Their overtly Christian messages and their more secular political ones have been rejected as inappropriate evangelism by some commentators, but, in the 1980s in particular, they managed to convey an aura of 'caring' which was commercially unbeatable; three consecutive albums reached number one in the British charts – *War* (Island 1983), *The Unforgettable Fire* (Island 1984) and *Joshua Tree* (Island 1987).

Part of the reason for the success of both Morrison and U2 was the marketability of their 'Irishness'. In Morrison's case, a constant introspective urge, which has led him to incorporate elements of Eastern mysticism, Jungian psychology and scientology in his music, took a distinctly Irish twist with songs such as 'Celtic Ray' (*Beautiful Vision*, Mercury 1982) and 'Dweller on the Threshold' (*Inarticulate Speech of the Heart*, Mercury 1983). As Bennett puts it, he 'reinvited himself as a Celt', eventually teaming up with the doyens of Irish traditional music, the Chieftains on the single 'I'll Tell me Ma' (Mercury 1988).<sup>14</sup> The popularity of many Irish artists is thus partly due to their ability to slot into a widespread definition of Irishness as mystical and spiritual.<sup>15</sup> No matter if the spirituality is judged to be overbearing, as in the case of U2, or eccentric, as in the case of Sinéad O'Connor; Irish rock has found a niche in global culture.

It is difficult (and arguably unwise in market terms) for Irish groups to ignore their origins. Thus, the Corrs interweave Irish dance music in their easy-listening hits (for example, 'I Never Loved You Anyway', Atlantic 1997). B'Witched's 'C'est La Vie' (Epic 1998) ends with a lively Irish jig. Various Irish pop stars frequently include a version of the obligatory Irish traditional song in their repertoire; for Brian Kennedy it is 'Carrickfergus' (BMG Records 1996), and for Boyzone, 'She Moved Through the Fair' (Polydor 1996).

Even the most unlikely candidates for the label of Celtic mysticism, punk rockers, could not escape being marketable in part for their Irishness. In the North, punk had many of the same characteristics that it had in Britain, in particular, its badge of youth rebellion. The added dimension, however, was the conflict in the North. Although few punk groups made any direct comment on the political situation, all were viewed, especially outside Ireland, as breaking down sectarian barriers to bring young people together – a role seemingly at odds with punk's nihilistic reputation.

Punk in the South of Ireland was less angry. Perhaps for that reason it spawned a commercially successful 'punkish' group, the Boomtown

Rats, who produced a British number one hit with 'Rat Trap' (Ensign 1978). Lead singer Bob Geldof later became famous as the conscience behind Band Aid, a role arguably more in keeping with his perceived Irishness than his punk origins. A more orthodox Dublin punk group, the Radiators from Space, supplied one of the members – Phil Chevron – of one of the most successful punk bands of the era, the British-based Pogues. With songwriter and lead singer Shane McGowan, the Pogues invented 'folk punk', 'a schizophrenic style that could be at home with Irish traditionalism while insulting its backwardness' (see *Rum, Sodomy and the Lash*, Stiff 1984).<sup>16</sup>

### **'The sound of silence': rock, pop and the 'troubles'**

While these developments in rock music in Ireland were occurring, political conflict was rife in the North. Between the civil rights marches of the late 1960s and the peace process of the 1990s, the society witnessed intense warfare, sectarian assassination and intimidation and numerous human rights abuses. Over 3,600 people died and more than 40,000 were injured. To what extent was popular music able to relate to this violent conflict?

Music and politics have had a long and supportive relationship in Irish history. Nationalists and unionists have, during the last three centuries, had their own repertoires of songs celebrating their respective victories and defeats and articulating their aspirations. In the recent conflict in the North, both republicans and nationalists have been able to draw on some of these traditional songs, as well as producing new ones relating to contemporary events. Political song is thus a live and popular phenomenon; although there is little airplay on the official broadcasting outlets, the songs are performed in republican and loyalist clubs and are available on CD and tape.<sup>17</sup>

The situation is very different in relation to commercial rock and pop. Rock is said to be rooted in rebellion and freedom. It is imbued with the myth of authenticity; the singer means what s/he says and will never sell out to the culture industry. Rock is music with something to say. Pop, on the other hand, supposedly centres solely around pleasure, in particular the pleasure of romantic (usually heterosexual) love. Pop is inevitably commercial, its lyrics containing no deep 'message'. On closer scrutiny, the distinction is less watertight than first appears. The supposed authenticity of the rocker is often a thin veneer. Moreover, the 'message' of rock is often imprecise and individualistic; freedom is never defined, or is portrayed in individual rather than communal terms. Although artists like Sting and Bono have publicly supported groups such as Amnesty International, more often than not, when rock and sometimes pop artists turn to political themes or support political causes, they are making a personal state-

ment. Mainstream commercial rock and pop do not sit easily with movements of resistance.

Consequently, few rock or pop artists have dared to touch the issue of the 'troubles' in the North of Ireland. Take Van Morrison as an example: 'While a large amount of his work wrestles with his very personal concepts of Celtic mysticism . . . troublesome aspects regarding his place of origin rarely, if ever, feature.'<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, some artists who have tackled the 'troubles' have easily confirmed the cynic's belief that pop and politics do not mix. A case in point is Boney M's 'Belfast' (House Records 1977); with its minimalist lyrics and catchy dance beat, this was the 'troubles' as disco.

Despite the relative paucity of pop songs about Northern Ireland, the phenomenon of 'lyrical drift' allowed for a broadening of the repertoire. Lyrical drift occurs when the meaning of a song is taken out of the context in which it was originally produced and reinterpreted by an audience in a different political context. This can be a case of political imagination (as in the use of Pink Floyd's 'Another Brick in the Wall' in apartheid South Africa) or political manipulation (as in Ronald Reagan's attempt to hijack Bruce Springsteen's 'Born in the USA' for the Republican Party cause). In the Irish case, there have been a number of examples. Labe Sifre's song about South Africa – 'Something Inside so Strong' – was adopted as a theme song by republicans in the aftermath of the 1994 cease-fire and was used effectively by Sinn Féin during an election broadcast for the new Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998. Tina Turner's 'Simply the Best' was used in the early to mid-1990s as a theme song by the Ulster Volunteer Force, particularly its mid-Ulster Brigade, and referred to the group's efficiency at assassinating nationalists. NWA's 'Fuck the Police' is popular with republican prisoners. The Boomtown Rats' 'Rat Trap' emerged as a popular song with INLA (Irish National Liberation Army) supporters after members of that organisation killed Billy Wright (leader of the Loyalist Volunteer Force, widely known as 'King Rat'), while he was in prison: 'It's a rat trap, Billy, and you've been caught.'

Some artists, however, did attempt to tackle the politics of the North directly. For example, Bananarama's 'Rough Justice' (Chrysalis 1983) relates in part the killing of one of the group's road crew, Thomas 'Kidso' Reilly, a 22-year-old from West Belfast, at the hands of the British army in August 1983. Their brief reference to the incident in the chorus – 'Innocent people passing by,/No time to run before they die./Don't call that justice' – was so oblique that it is doubtful if most listeners were aware of its significance.

In terms of the lyrics, the relatively few rock and pop songs which tackled Irish politics can be grouped according to one of four themes. First, Northern Ireland is an awful place, full of tanks, guns, hate and despair. Belfast-born rocker Gary Moore's 'Wild Frontier'

(10 Records 1987, the 'sole exception to [his] apparent distancing of himself from his native land'<sup>19</sup>) puts it this way:

I remember the city streets before the soldiers came.  
 Now armoured cars and barricades remind us of the shame.  
 Now we're drowning in a sea of blood, the victims we have seen.  
 You'll never hear them sing again the forty shades of green.

Elton John's 'Belfast' (Rocket 1995) is less strident, more questioning; but, even through the sympathy, comes a picture of Belfast as a living hell. 'In every inch of sadness, rocks and tanks/Go hand in hand with madness.'

The second theme is the desperate search for any signs of hope, no matter how flimsy. Take Police's 'Invisible Sun' (A&M 1981): 'There has to be an invisible sun./It gives its heat to everyone.' For Simple Minds ('Belfast Child', Virgin 1989) the 'solution' is equally nebulous: 'Some say troubles abound, some day soon they're gonna pull the old town down./One day we'll return here when the Belfast child sings again.'

There is, of course, one source of hope: love can overcome all. This is the message of Spandau Ballet's 'Through the Barricades' (Columbia 1986).

Born on different sides of life, but we feel the same and feel all of this strife,  
 So come to me when I'm asleep and we'll cross the line and dance upon the streets.  
 And now I know what they're saying as the drums begin to fade,  
 And we made our love on wasteland and through the barricades.

A third theme involves condemnation of the protagonists. However, not all foes are equal. Specifically, loyalism's violence is invisible and goes without censure; condemnation is reserved for violent republicanism. The Cranberries' reference to a central date in republican history, 1916 in 'Zombie' (Island 1994) makes this clear: 'It's the same old theme since 1916./In your head, in your head they're still fighting.'

One of the most sophisticated songs of accusation was U2's 'Sunday Bloody Sunday' (Island 1983). To first appearances, this is surprising, given that the song referred in part to an incident in Derry in January 1972, when British paratroopers shot dead fourteen unarmed civilians during a civil rights march. U2 were undoubtedly aware of the potential reading of such a song as pro-republican, a possibility made more likely by the endorsement of Amnesty International carried on the cover of the album, *War*. Hence they were at pains to distance themselves from this reading. 'When they performed this song live, Bono always prefixed it with the introduction: "This is not a rebel song".'<sup>20</sup> Bono went on at later concerts to rip apart the Irish tricolour on stage,

discarding the orange and the green so that he was left only with the white as a sign of peace. The first line of the song had originally been 'Don't talk to me about the rights of the IRA'.<sup>21</sup> Although it was changed to 'I can't believe the news today', Bono made sure that the song's preferred reading was decidedly anti-republican. After the IRA had blown up eleven people at a Remembrance Sunday commemoration in Enniskillen in 1987, Bono introduced the song in a US concert as follows:

Let me tell you something. I've had enough of Irish Americans who haven't been back to their country in twenty or thirty years come up to me and talk about the resistance, the revolution back home and the glory of the revolution, the glory and dying for the revolution. Fuck the revolution! They don't talk about the glory of killing for the revolution. What's the glory in taking a man from his bed and gunning him down in front of his wife and his children? Where's the glory in that? Where's the glory in bombing a Remembrance Day parade of old-age pensioners, their medals taken out and polished up for the day? Where's the glory in that? To leave them dying or crippled for life or dead under the rubble of the revolution that the majority of people in my country don't want?<sup>22</sup>

Finally, tackling state violence has been the most difficult theme in popular songs about the Irish conflict. The most that some can muster is to ask demanding questions weakly, as in Paul McCartney's 'Give Ireland Back to the Irish' (EMI 1972): 'Great Britain you are tremendous and nobody knows like me/But really what are you doing in the land across the sea?'

Fellow Beatle John Lennon went much further in his *Sometime in New York City* (EMI 1972). This was his least commercially successful album, but also his most politically explicit. Two of the songs were about the Irish conflict. The first, 'Sunday Bloody Sunday', expressed naive, even embarrassing, sentiments. The other, 'The Luck of the Irish', worked better musically, its whimsical, almost folk-like, sound fitting well with the irony: 'Should you have the luck of the Irish,/ You'd wish you was English instead.' The song remains one of the very few pop songs to explicitly condemn the British state's role in the conflict in Ireland.

Why the hell are the English there anyway?  
As they kill with God on their side!  
Blame it on the kids and the IRA!  
As the bastards commit genocide!

Despite the failings of the album, Lennon at least tackled the state head on. In doing so, he swam against the tide of what rock and pop had to say about the Irish conflict.

**‘Alternative Ulster’? Punk**

As a musical genre, punk was a response to rock’s decline into ostentation and commercialism. Punk was also a social statement which fitted the times. It provided a voice of protest in relation to unemployment, police harassment and youth alienation in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The rebellion was short-lived. The culture industry was able to absorb the challenge: ‘Punk was a gesture, a fart in the face of authority – it was never an answer.’<sup>23</sup> But, while it lasted, punk was capable of delivering a strong political message in its music, articulating the frustrations of young people in Britain during a period of socio-economic decline. Although one section of punk, Oi!, was associated with skin-heads and fascist movements, most punk groups took a more progressive political stance, in particular Rock Against Racism.

Given the ease with which British punk rebelled against the status quo in its lyrics, it was probably inevitable that the conflict in Ireland would become a theme, albeit a minor one, for British punk groups. Groups such as The Angelic Upstarts (‘Last Night Another Soldier’, EMI 1980) and The Pop Group (‘Who Guards the Guards?’, Rough Trade 1979), criticised British policy. The Au Pairs sang sarcastically about the strip-searching of women prisoners in Armagh Jail (‘Torture’, Human Records 1981): ‘We don’t torture./We’re a civilized nation.’

However, the substance of punk’s lyrics on the Irish conflict was sometimes much less radical than the form. Behind the noise and the rasping voices were songs such as the Gang of Four’s ‘Armalite Rifle’ (Fast Product 1978), in its own way a simple peace song. ‘It’ll do you damage, do you harm./It’ll blow your head off, it’ll blow your guts out./I disapprove of it . . .’

On the other hand, the Pogues revealed that it was possible to pen hard-hitting political lyrics in relation to Ireland. Their ‘Streets of Sorrow/Birmingham Six’ (Pogue Mahone 1988), told the story of the miscarriage of justice against Irish people for the IRA bombings in Birmingham and Guildford in 1974.

There were six men in Birmingham, in Guildford there’s four  
That were picked up and tortured and framed by the law.  
And the filth got promotion but they’re still doing time  
For being Irish in the wrong place and at the wrong time.

Finally, at least one Oi! band, Skrewdriver, laid down its marker on the North’s conflict with perhaps the only punk song in support of militant loyalism (‘Smash the IRA’, White Noise 1983). Skrewdriver was led by National Front member Ian Stuart, whose influence on the development of right-wing punk cannot be underestimated. His prolific output of songwriting through the 1980s up until his death in 1993

served to forge a crucial link between right-wing extremist ideology and skinhead subculture. Music became the basis of a widespread neo-Nazi network in a way that more structured political organisation could not. There are currently estimated to be a hundred white power bands in over thirty countries, many of them trying to copy Skrewdriver's lead.<sup>24</sup>

Punk groups within Northern Ireland faced a different problem from their comrades in Britain.<sup>25</sup> For many young people who had grown up during the violent conflict in Northern Ireland, those who advocated, perpetrated and supported violence were as much a part of the establishment as the Thatcherite state was for British punks. The dilemma facing punk groups was whether or not to sing about the 'troubles'. The Undertones from Derry decided not to.<sup>26</sup>

The other option was to rage against all those groups that advocated violence; this was the approach of Stiff Little Fingers. Their targets included paramilitaries – 'They're nothing but blind fascists,/Brought up to hate and given lives to waste' ('Wasted Life', EMI 1979) and state forces 'Take a look where you're livin',/You've got the army on your street,/And the RUC dog of repression/Is barking at your feet' ('Alternative Ulster', EMI 1979). These were brave sentiments. But the belief that Stiff Little Fingers were harbingers of a new cross-community youth culture that would lead to an end of the conflict turned out to be somewhat premature. For all that they spoke to a large number of young people of the problems of living in a violent, repressive, morally stunted society, in the end their message was in many ways little more than a plea for some space for young people: 'They take away our freedom in the name of liberty./Why can't they all just clear off? Why can't they let us be?' ('Suspect Device', EMI 1979).

Such nebulous political thinking led to the decision of some punks, like Sean O'Neill, to espouse a more systematic political position. When his group the Undertones disbanded, he formed That Petrol Emotion, a group whose sympathies were unashamedly pro-republican (see for example, 'Big Decision', Polydor 1989). On the other side of the political see-saw, Paul Burgess's group Ruefrefx set out to articulate the unionist case. In one song ('The Wild Colonial Boy', Kasper 1985), Ruefrefx ridiculed Irish-American support for militant Irish republicanism: 'It really gives me quite a thrill/To kill from far away.' Commercially speaking, That Petrol Emotion was relatively successful, more so than Ruefrefx. But, in the end, it was the enthusiastic but ultimately non-threatening energy of Stiff Little Fingers and the even less threatening *joie de vivre* of the Undertones that were the lasting memory of Northern Ireland punk.

More than a decade later, the groups still clung tenaciously to their respective positions. In a radio series entitled *Rockin' the North*, broadcast in 1994, most of the punk veterans interviewed stressed that punk's

*raison d'être* was to escape from the 'troubles'. Most also rejected Stiff Little Fingers' attempt to swim against this tide. Stuart Baillie of *New Musical Express* summed up the argument:

Without Stiff Little Fingers, bands like Rudi, Protex would probably have had an easier ride, because all of a sudden people were trying to get this 'rock against sectarianism' going. 'Rock against sectarianism' was a lot of people getting drunk in the Harp Bar; it was nothing to do with stupid, you know, 'I'm a suspect device: I'm gonna blow up in your face'. That was just nonsense. It was just tabloid songwriting. It was shameful.<sup>27</sup>

### **'Give peace a chance': folk songs**

Folk music's connection with protest is time honoured. Moreover, folk can point to many instances where singer-songwriters were integrated fully into movements of resistance rather than simply making individual statements. Woody Guthrie articulated the Wobblies' politics in the US in the 1930s, as Ewan McColl did that of the Communist Party in Britain in the 1960s. In the US in the 1960s, folk rested easily with directly political themes such as black civil rights and anti-war movements. Yet, the problem for many folk artists was that their political acumen, honed in one era and society, did not easily transfer to other instances of political conflict.

Take the case of Joan Baez. In her opposition to the war in Vietnam, she argued that the US had no moral authority to wage war in South-east Asia, that it should bring its troops home immediately, and that the Vietnamese people, including the Viet Cong, should be left to decide their own political future. She did not succumb to the state's anti-communist agenda. Translated to Ireland, this would have meant that she would have been opposed to British involvement, demanding the withdrawal of British troops and supporting the IRA's military campaign to unify the country; she would not have followed the state's anti-republican agenda. However, when Baez came to Belfast in 1977, it was in support of the Peace People. Formed in August 1976 in the aftermath of the horrific death of three children, the Peace People were quickly incorporated into a state and media offensive against republicanism. Baez's politics were consistent only at the level of form; in both the US and Belfast, she supported peace. But in one case only did she side with the anti-imperialist forces.

The dilemma facing Joan Baez also confronted indigenous folk singers in the North of Ireland. Some concluded that opposition to violence was paramount. In this vein, Tommy Sands effectively used pathos in 'There Were Roses' (Spring 1985), to condemn the actions

of republican and loyalist paramilitary groups. The song tells the story of two friends from near the border, one murdered by republicans, the other in retaliation by loyalists. The moral is clear: 'An eye for an eye was all that filled their minds/And another eye for another eye till everyone is blind.'

Where Sands used pathos, Paul Brady employed irony. His mesmeric song 'The Island' (Fontana 1992) contrasts the miasma created by political violence with the bliss of 'making love to the sound of the ocean' on a deserted island. The song finishes in a masterpiece of irony:

Now, I know us plain folks don't see all the story,  
 And I know this peace and love's just copping out.  
 And I guess these young boys dying in the ditches  
 Is just what being free is all about.  
 And how this twisted wreckage down on main street  
 Will bring us all together in the end  
 As we go marching down the road to freedom.

Ireland's most popular folk singer of the last three decades, Christy Moore, responded directly to Brady in one of his songs, 'The Other Side' (WEA 1987). The island of Ireland is portrayed not as an escapist paradise, but as a place where young republicans languish in prisons, where young people have to emigrate in search of work, where women flee secretly to England for abortions and where the violence of the British state is a fact of everyday life.<sup>28</sup>

Moore has been one of the few Irish folk singers willing to tackle the most politically controversial subjects, including opposition to nuclear power stations in the South.<sup>29</sup> Specifically in relation to the North, he sang about the blanket protest in Long Kesh prison, strip-searching of women prisoners in Armagh jail and the 1981 republican hunger strike. He also recorded two songs written by Bobby Sands, the first hunger striker to die ('I Wish I Was Back Home in Derry' and 'McIlhatton'), and was a central figure in the innovative folk-rock band, Moving Hearts.

In a situation where it became almost *de rigueur* for academics, poets, writers and others to preface their work with condemnations of violence, Moving Hearts' subject matter left them open to accusations of support for terrorism. Thus the *Hot Press* journalist Graham subjected the band members to an intense grilling on the grounds that part of one of their songs, Jack Warshaw's 'No Time for Love' (WEA 1982) could be interpreted as a call to people to help shelter gunmen and bombers.<sup>30</sup> 'The fish need the sea to survive, just like your comrades need you,/And the death squads can only get through to them if first they get through to you.' The band denied Graham's interpretation, but he remained unconvinced. He concluded that they needed to be more forceful in their rejection of this interpretation:

In Britain, neither the Clash nor the Beat have such problems and need not be subjected to what may appear over-pedantic questioning. But in Ireland, the gap between principles and armed policy is not so comfortingly wide.

As Graham implies, it was easier for artists from outside Ireland to write songs against state repression or in support of republican struggle. English folk singer-songwriter Maria Tolly's album *Voices* (Stroppy Cow 1986) contains a number of such songs. 'Living in a Nightmare' condemns the use of plastic bullets; 'Maghberry Jail' is a call to feminists to support their sisters being strip-searched in prison and 'Troops Out' links the experience of the 1984 miners' strike to the struggle in Ireland. In a sense, the themes of Tolly's songs represent what Joan Baez would have been singing if she had been seeking exact equivalence with the songs she had sung in the US. But, in the absence of a widespread, popular, anti-war movement in Britain, Tolly's songs, while representing serious and worthy causes, were destined to be confined to a small, devoted niche market.

### **'Get up, stand up': reggae and rap**

Reggae was, for a time, the cutting edge of political pop. It originated in Jamaica in the 1960s as a musical form closely associated with the Rastafarian religion. In the hands of a genius like Bob Marley, reggae was a powerful critique of capitalism and colonialism, though, in time, many other groups which adopted the reggae beat, in the process jettisoned the politics.

Rap's origins, however, are in the hip-hop subculture of black inner-city areas in the US. It thrives on a number of elements of African American youth street-culture: machismo, bravado, self-aggrandisement and the trading of insults. Themes covered include police brutality, gang wars, sexual conquests of women and attitudes (often negative) towards other ethnic groups. Consequently, leading rap groups such as Niggaz With Attitude and Public Enemy have been accused of racism, sexism, misogyny and incitement to hatred. At the core of the criticism is the question of meaning. Rap is a highly theatrical form of posturing and may demand no more identification with the lyrics from the performer than an actor has to the script of a violent movie.

No major international reggae or rap performers have tackled the topic of the Irish conflict. But both styles became incorporated in the repertoire of a number of groups which took a specific political stand in relation to the 'troubles'. House of Pain from Los Angeles is an orthodox rap group which just happens to be white and Irish. The content of their lyrics – numerous boasts about their powers of conquest

over women, unspecified threats to those from different ethnic backgrounds who threaten their 'turf' and oblique references to police brutality – plus an overall macho style of delivery are clearly direct from the rap stable. For them, rap is the expression of ethnic identity and pride, as it is for disenfranchised blacks. As McGurk puts it: 'If it all seemed a bit like brawn over brain, with their centre of gravity in their groins, then at least the novelty value of white boys playing at being hard black men tilted the balance in their favour.'<sup>31</sup>

The critical question, however, was whether there was any political substance behind the macho veneer. Their reputation as 'republican rappers' seems to derive from statements they have made in interviews and attitudes they have expressed about the conflict in Ireland, none of which make their way into the lyrics of their songs. In McGurk's words:

Sadly, what could have been House of Pain's strongest and most interesting hand – their ideological adherence to a United Ireland in a music industry timorous of pop mixed with politics – is self-detonated by mindless sloganeering and trite trivialisation.<sup>32</sup>

Other groups incorporating rap and reggae styles, such as Black 47, Seanachie from New York and English-based Marxman, have had much more success at mixing pop and politics. Black 47 (named in memory of the worst year of the Great Irish Famine, 1847) used reggae to represent the struggle in the North as an anti-imperialist one; it was a case of the genre and the lyrics meshing neatly in an imaginative musical approach to the Irish conflict. 'You can break down my door, you can even strip search me./Never gonna take away my human dignity./Beat me, shoot me, flame keep on burnin',/Never gonna put out the fire of freedom' ('Fire of Freedom', EMI 1993).

When Black 47 disbanded, one of the group, Chris Byrne, went on to form Seanachie (the Gaelic word for a storyteller or historian). The group produced the hard-hitting rap number 'Fenians' (1997), which recounts the involvement of Irish-Americans in the struggle for Irish freedom. 'Sedition's our tradition and it won't just go away./Say it loud, say it proud;/Unrepentant fenian bastard!'

As the name suggests, Marxman (made up of three young men, one of whom was the son of Donal Lunny of Moving Hearts) was an avowedly Marxist group. They used rap to put across a relatively sophisticated message linking contemporary experiences of miscarriages of justice against the Irish community to wider issues of colonialism ('Sad Affair', Phonogram 1993).

And my culture is as strong as a pyramid  
And you will pay for these things you did,

Not just to we, but to the African,  
The Asian and the true American.

There is no denying the popularity of these groups, albeit in a niche market, where they have managed to blend elements of popular and youth culture with local republican concerns. Black 47, Seanachie and Marxman have all played open-air concerts at the annual West Belfast Festival to capacity crowds. House of Pain was due to perform in 1994, but cancelled at the last minute. Seanachie's 'Fenians' was one of the most requested and most played songs on the local radio station serving the West Belfast Festival, Triple FM, in 1997. At the same time, those groups which have used rap and reggae to advocate Irish national liberation comprise an extremely minor element in the wider global world of pop music.

### **Conclusion**

The relatively small number of songs about such a protracted conflict, along with the superficial treatment of the subject in a number of songs, would seem to confirm the impression that popular music is quite inept when it comes to such major political themes.<sup>33</sup> That said, there are variations in the ability of different musical genres to approach this political issue. Pop, as might have been expected, has been the most superficial, even naive. Rock, for all its claim to authenticity, has done little better; the politically articulate conflict in Ireland has not easily been incorporated into a genre which relates to more transitory, less articulate forms of rebellion. As a protest against rock and pop, punk was more amenable to political themes, but it is clear that punk groups outside Ireland found it easier to handle issues of state repression, armed struggle and so forth, than similar groups within the North of Ireland. Reggae and rap are genres born in the midst of black resistance and have therefore had some affinity to songs about Irish resistance; as a result, it is in these genres, as well as within folk, that the grander themes of imperialism and colonialism get what little airing there is in popular music about Ireland. That said, folk is split between those who have taken the base line of the genre – protest – as a signal to side with those who resist the state, and those for whom it is the inspiration to oppose violence, especially paramilitary violence.

Of course, the explanation of pop's relative failure to engage with political issues in this instance goes far beyond the limitations of particular musical genres. For a start, in the British context in particular, there is little incentive for popular music as a cultural expression to go against the stream of the common political views on the Irish conflict – namely, that Ireland is different and its troubles archaic, inexplicable, that the Irish conflict is about hate between people rather than the

result of historical processes of repression, and that violence for political ends is never justifiable. Moreover, there were negative consequences for those who broke from the herd. Paul McCartney's 'Give Ireland Back to the Irish', mild as its sentiments may have been, was banned by the BBC. The Pogues' 'Streets of Sorrow/Birmingham Six' was banned under the broadcasting regulations in force in Britain between 1988 and 1994. The video accompanying the Police's 'Invisible Sun' proved problematic for the BBC's *Top of the Pops*, and so the song was pulled in September 1981.

Pop cannot escape the ties of ideology. For the popular artist, the dilemma, if any, is between authenticity and commercialism. Pop solves the dilemma easily: commercialism rules. Other artists, especially in rock and folk, believe that the musical genre allows them to make political statements. But these genres, no less than pop, are governed also by the ideology of individualism. It is rare for the 'authentic' statements of rock and folk artists to be grounded in communities of resistance. And, as individual statements, they are often born out of an ignorance, particularly outside of Ireland, about the nature of Irish politics. For those, whether outsiders or insiders, who can overcome that barrier, the issue of commercialism still looms large. At least one element explaining indigenous punk's remarkably tame political conclusions is the fact that groups played to young people from both sides of the political divide. While some bands, like Ruefrefx and That Petrol Emotion, threw caution to the winds, few were foolish enough to cut off half a potential audience in advance. Even as politically committed an artist as Christy Moore was not immune to the demands of the audience; the repertoire of his concerts in republican West Belfast was noticeably more political than that of his concerts in the centre of town.

Music is now a major global industry and is restricted by the structures and ideological imperatives of that industry. As a consequence, most performers are far above the day-to-day political concerns and struggles of race and class. They are not organic to the communities of resistance which attempt to forge a collective, communal response to capitalism and racism; or, if they are, they are quickly incorporated into the music industry and its concerns. From within that virtual monolith, there are rigid limits on what they can say and how it can be said.

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- 21 N. Stokes, *Into the Heart: the stories behind every U2 song* (London, Omnibus Press, 1996), p. 38.
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- 24 See J. Cotter, 'Sounds of hate: the role of white power rock and roll in the development and diffusion of the neo-Nazi skinhead culture', paper presented to the International Studies Association, South, Annual Conference, Charlotte, North Carolina, 1998.
- 25 For a sympathetic celebration of punk's ability to transcend Northern Ireland's traditional fault lines, see John T. Davis's film, *Shellshock Rock* (Holywood Films, 1980). For brief accounts of each of Northern Ireland's punk groups, see G. Trelford and S. O'Neill, *It Makes You Want to Spit: punk in Ulster, '77–'82* (Belfast, the Punk Appreciation Society, 1998). In passing, it is worth noting that rave is currently viewed by some in a similar way to punk, namely, a musical form which brings young people together across the sectarian divide.
- 26 'It's Going to Happen' (EMI 1981) is possibly the only exception. According to Damien O'Neill of the Undertones: 'The original lyrics to this were about the

- hunger strike . . . but the verses were shockingly cornball, so Michael wrote new lyrics.' From the sleeve notes of *The Best of the Undertones*, Castle Communications, 1993.
- 27 Cited in *Rock 'n the North*, part 3, 'Rock 'n a Hard Place', Radio Ulster (16 August 1994).
  - 28 Paul Brady was seen to redeem himself partially in the eyes of republican critics as a result of his powerful song, 'Nothing But the Same Old Story' (Warner 1981), in which he practically screams his opposition to anti-Irish racism in Britain.
  - 29 See F. Connolly (ed.), *The Christy Moore Songbook* (Dingle, Brandon, 1984).
  - 30 B. Graham, 'Irish ways and Irish laws: the Moving Hearts interview', *Hot Press* (Vol. 5, no 21, 30 October–12 November 1981), pp. 7–9.
  - 31 J. McGurk, 'Republican rappers cancel gig', *Irish News* (11 August 1994). House of Pain's first CD is entitled *Fine Malt Lyrics* (XL Recordings, 1992). See interview with House of Pain member Danny Boy O'Connor in B. Cross, *It's Not About a Salary: rap, race and resistance in Los Angeles* (London, Verso, 1993), pp. 249–52. Interestingly, House of Pain's CDs are often filed under 'Black music' in German outlets, a fact which would undoubtedly please the group!
  - 32 Ibid.
  - 33 An exhaustive list of pop songs tackling the Irish conflict would include: Black 47's 'Fanatic Heart' (EMI 1993) and 'Time to Go'; Luka Bloom's 'This is For Life' (Reprise 1990); Billy Bragg's 'My Youngest Son Came Home Today'; Billy Connolly's 'Sergeant, Where's Mine?' (Polydor); Phil Coulter's 'The Town I Loved So Well'; The Divine Comedy's 'Sunrise'; Everything But The Girl's 'Sean' (WEA 1985); Fun Boy Three's 'The More I See (The Less I Believe)' (Chrysalis 1982); Nanci Griffiths' 'It's a Hard Life Wherever You Go' (MCA 1989); Christy Moore's 'The Time has Come' and 'Unfinished Revolution' (WEA 1987); Sinéad O'Connor's 'This is a Rebel Song'; Martin Okasil's 'Troubles Will Pass' (WEA 1997); Rogue Male's 'Belfast' (Music for Nations, 1986); The Rolling Stones' 'Blinded by Rainbows'; Ruefex's 'Paid in Kind' (Kasper 1985) and 'On Kingsmill Road' (Flickknife); The Saw Doctors' 'Freedom Fighters'; The Screamin' Bin Lids' 'Running Up Hill' (1997); The Storm's 'Malice in Wonderland' (Silent Records, 1985); U2's 'Wake Up Dead Man' (Polygram 1997); and Andy White's 'Religious Persuasion' and 'The Walking Wounded' (Decca 1986).