

Getting to the Heart of the Music: Idealizing Musical Community and Irish Traditional Music Sessions

HELEN O'SHEA

Expectations of musical community, and claims to have located it, are common to scholarly and popular narratives about music of many genres and locations—cathartic narratives that begin with the beauty of the rainbow and end with an eloquent account of the golden booty it yields. It is not the structure of these quests that I want to interrogate here, but the 'imaginative cultural narratives'¹ within which they take place, and in which the experience of making music becomes idealized. I will begin this examination by looking at a number of ways in which the Irish traditional music session has been represented, and misrepresented.

Romancing the session

Clare, it is said, is the heart of Irish traditional music, and, since no discerning tourist (let alone musician) would now be seen dead in a Doolin pub, East Clare is the new destination for musicians and followers seeking authentic Irish traditional music.² At sessions I regularly attended in two music pubs in Feakle, East Clare, however, the well-documented authenticity of the area's music began to recede, like a mirage, as I advanced upon it.³ One of those pubs, Pepper's, is widely known as a venue for Irish

¹ Frith, 'Music and identity', in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), 108–27: 124.

² *The Rough Guide to Irish Music* warns that 'there's always Doolin where music's possible any night of the year, though many musicians now avoid the influx of tourists. In the east of Clare, Feakle, Killaloe and Tulla might make a more authentic alternative.' See Geoff Wallis and Sue Wilson, *The Rough Guide to Irish Music* (London: Rough Guides, 2001), 563. Other guides have not caught up with this intelligence. For example, the advice that Doolin is 'the unofficial capital of Irish traditional music' is retained in *Frommer's Ireland 2005* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2005), 378.

³ I regularly attended the sessions referred to in this paper during fieldwork in 2000 and 2001 for my doctoral research through the School of Social Sciences, Victoria University, Melbourne and the

traditional music due to the enterprise of publicans Gary and Mary Pepper in hosting recordings, CD launches and concerts as well as the annual Feakle International Music Festival and, since 2002, the P. J. Hayes memorial weekend, honouring the Tulla Ceili Band's former leader. I was there during the last year of PJoe's life, when he led the weekly traditional music session at Pepper's until his death in 2001.

From my seat as a participating musician in the session at Pepper's, I was able to observe and directly experience the social and musical processes of group playing and to examine the tactics outsiders used in attempting to assimilate. In focusing my subsequent analysis on moments of disharmony, I followed the research strategy of anthropologists, most famously Clifford Geertz, of 'scratching the itch'. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha writes that it is in these disjunctures that differences are articulated and in which 'the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated'.⁴ My goal was to understand how these identifications were negotiated when musicians from various cultural backgrounds played Irish traditional music together.

Disjunctures were all too obvious in the session at Pepper's, but it was only after I had completed my fieldwork that I became aware of an additional form of disjuncture: that between representations of the session—and not only academic and popular writing about 'The Session' in general, but accounts of this particular session—and what I had witnessed. This led me to examine both representations of Irish music sessions and, more generally, ideas about musical communities in the scholarly literature. A good deal of what has been written about the session reveals a propensity to romanticize, to view it through the distorting lens of other, idealizing narratives such as those of the nation, with its assumption of cultural unity and the associated myth of the robust integrity of country life.

First, I want to look at an account of the Pepper's session by an *Irish Times* journalist, Rosita Boland, who wrote this piece in January 2001 as background to a

Department of Sociology, Trinity College Dublin. I, too, was a foreigner in East Clare: a fifth-generation Australian, who thirty years earlier had heard Irish traditional music and become a convert, a self-taught fiddle player whose mentors in Australia had emigrated from East Clare and East Galway in the 1950s and 1960s. Although the sessions described below were not necessarily typical of the thousands I had attended in Australia, on visits to Ireland and during periods of residence there, the dedication, idealism and squabbling among the Feakle musicians were not unfamiliar.

⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Frontlines/borderposts', in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, ed. Angelika Bammer (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 269–72: 269.

Music Network tour by musicians from East Clare who included concertina player Mary MacNamara, fiddle player Martin Hayes and singer Helen Hayes:

That evening, it's the weekly session in Pepper's, which has been running for years now.

There is a little wooden plaque on the wall near the fire, PJoe's place. The PJoe is PJ Hayes, the famous fiddler, father of Martin and Helen. His wife, Peggy Hayes, says he never misses the Wednesday night session. The tradition of giving the honoured guest the best seat by the fire is entirely appropriate here; a small gesture of respect to a superb musician.

The musicians come in twos and threes, with fiddles, concertinas, and accordions. The session grows. The fire is bright orange. Feet tap on the Liscannor flags. There's talk, too. These musicians do not insist on undivided attention, as can occur elsewhere. The music creates the talk; the talk fuels the music.

The only time there is pure silence is when Helen Hayes sings; her unaccompanied voice a presence in the silence like something physical, elemental. Hairs stir. The moon is full. I'm proud to be a Clarewoman.⁵

Rosita Boland depicts an intimate evening around the midwinter fireside of a country pub, where music has an integral part in creating community ('the music creates the talk; the talk fuels the music'). She writes admiringly of a musical tradition that is both continuous ('for years now') and organic ('the session grows'), embedded within an Irish tradition of hospitality ('the honoured guest') and informality ('the musicians do not insist on undivided attention'). She also invokes the idea that Irish music performs a deeply felt sense of identity that is simultaneously physical ('hairs stir') and spiritual ('the moon is full') and inheres in a particular place ('I'm proud to be a Clarewoman'). But can this musical community be as 'pure' as the silence that falls over it?

My recollection of that evening differs in several important ways, for the session at Pepper's that night was neither as one (homogeneous), nor at one (harmonious). East Clare was the destination rather than the origin for most of the performers present, including myself. In a photograph illustrating Boland's article,⁶ I recognize the dancer as a visitor from Canada and six of the nine musicians pictured as 'blow-ins' (people from elsewhere who had settled in the district) or visitors from England, Australia, and other parts of Ireland. Two of the musicians were not on speaking terms; another,

⁵ Rosita Boland, 'From here to Clare', *The Irish Times*, 15 January 2001. Although my presence was (understandably) excised from Boland's account, I had spent the day with Mary, Helen and Rosita, and had taken part in conversations and music making discussed in the article.

⁶ Photo by Frank Miller, *The Irish Times*, 15 January 2001, 9.

not only a 'blow-in' but an 'alternative',⁷ was ignored by the other musicians; and the noise from the punters⁸ in the small bar was too loud for the musicians' comfort, inhibiting rather than fuelling their music.

If, as Rosita Boland points out in her article, the seat by the fire is customarily given to the honoured guest, why should a plaque have been necessary? The answer lies partly in the conjunction of the 'public house', the tourism industry and the musicians. Pepper's pub is situated at a crossroads half a mile outside the village of Feakle. Compared to the village pubs, its clientele at that time was eclectic and included a greater proportion of the tourists who came for the fishing, walking and music, as well as the blow-ins. At Pepper's, the regular influx of new customers often included musicians keen to play in the session, who might arrive early and take a musician's seat,⁹ rather than waiting to be asked (in which case, they might wait all night). By putting up PJoe's plaque, the publican not only reinforced the session's reputation of providing the authentic East Clare music associated with this renowned musician, but also anticipated such intrusions, just as the 'Reserved for Musicians' cards on the musicians' tables during the busy summer months averted similar territorial disputes. As I relate below, this did not prevent other disputes over seating, between those who felt they had earned their place at the centre of the session and newcomers who wanted to join them.

Musical chairs at Pepper's

Newcomers were welcome to join the session, according to the East Clare Musicians website constructed by one of the regular session musicians at Pepper's:

Visitors from outside the area, including overseas, are always made very welcome to either play in the session, or just listen to the music.

⁷ The term 'alternative' is used in East Clare to refer to those people, mainly from England and European countries, who have settled in Ireland in order to live an 'alternative' lifestyle that might include a commitment to self-sufficiency and environmental issues, underpinned by a rejection of consumerism. Some are unwelcome in pubs and reasons publicans have given for excluding them include not disciplining their children, drug-taking, and unconventional dress and appearance (e.g., dreadlocks, piercings).

⁸ 'Punters' is a term workers in the hospitality trade use for customers, its use by musicians indicating that they regard themselves as insiders, or 'backstage'—a central concept in Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Allen Lane, 1969).

⁹ As Ciarán Carson warns, 'Woe betide the naïve yellow-anoraked German who takes a musician's seat...', in *Last Night's Fun: A Book About Irish Traditional Music* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), 114.

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The pub session is a very weird and wonderful affair not always understood by non-players. There are a few local regular players or anchor men, usually three or four, and then the visitors. Sessions have been known to contain more than 20 musicians in summertime. Visitors come from all over the world (even the far east) to play. Total strangers come into the session, are introduced around, play for a while and leave, sometimes never to be seen again. But, while they are there, they are part of one big family, sharing their innermost feelings through the music.¹⁰

One big happy family? Not on my first night at Pepper's, when, as one of those 'total strangers', I encountered fiddle player Vince:

Arriving early, I found a bearded, bespectacled man wearing the kind of checked shirt and baggy trousers I associate with 'folkies', sitting alone at the table reserved for musicians. I introduced myself. He nodded.

'Would it be all right if I joined in the session?' I had already asked the publican, but his view of things would not necessarily be shared by the musicians.

'You'll have to get yourself a stool,' he replied in a North of England accent.

I took a stool from a pile by the door and sat down just outside the circle of empty chairs. The man got up immediately and made a fuss of finding another stool to replace the one I'd taken. Those, he said, pointing to the pile of stools, were in case musicians came in later.

'But I'm a musician,' I wanted to protest, 'and I'm here now!'¹¹

Over the following nine months, I often played in the Wednesday night session at Pepper's. Sometimes I was invited into the inner circle, but only if regular musicians and their friends were already catered for. At other times, the reserved seats remained empty all night. One night I sat in one of them, just to see what would happen. Within moments another stool was lifted over my head and thumped down in front of me and a handbag placed on it. Those who controlled this game of musical chairs were the middling players: not those who were regarded as 'East Clare musicians', nor the beginners like the two fiddle players who drove up from Shannon each week, and certainly not the publican, who frequently fielded complaints from visiting musicians who had failed to get a seat in the session. To Vince (b. 1941), the fiddle player I had identified as a folkie (and who did in fact run a folk club at another pub), policing the seating arrangements was 'the way it's always been'. According to him, 'anybody who's new has to sit by the fire, and you earn your place away from it! You know, it's custom, that's just observed.'¹²

¹⁰ <http://claremusic.tripod.com/>, accessed 20 April 2006.

¹¹ Edited field notes, 19 April 2000.

¹² Personal communication, 23 November 2000.

Another English musician, flute player Kim (b. 1958), like Vince, was an adult learner who, enthralled by Irish music and country life, had moved with her spouse to East Clare. While Kim was the more capable musician, she claims never to have been made welcome in the session at Pepper's. She found the 'business with the chairs' 'plain rude':

You could never get a seat, because all the seats were saved for somebody else. So you were stuck out on the outside, so you were never part of the session, ever ... It was just ridiculous! And there'd be a row of seats there! All these empty seats! That's exactly when you start to feel humiliated.¹³

Musician and ethnomusicologist Colin Hamilton observes that 'the musical behaviour in a session is largely controlled by the relative status of the people playing, with the higher status musicians exercising more control over the way the session develops', and identifies status in the session as depending on a musician's age, competence, reputation, and instrument played.¹⁴ He has also identified seating arrangements as an important aspect of session behaviour, observing that musicians tend to form a closed circle with session leaders in the middle of the group. If they are seated in a circle, however, some will be facing the punters (who may or may not be listening) and it will generally be found that the highest status musicians (in this case P. J. Hayes) are seated in this advantageous position.¹⁵ This spatial arrangement allows the musicians to hear one another better and as it is not a concert, there is no pressure to face an audience.¹⁶ This does not mean, however, that an audience is 'redundant', as another ethnomusicologist, Hazel Fairbairn, maintains.¹⁷ Fiddle player and composer Charlie Lennon expresses a view widely held among musicians and enthusiasts that 'the importance of good listeners positioned around the musicians cannot be overstated as they help to bring the best out of the musicians and make the session a

¹³ Personal communication, 3 December 2000.

¹⁴ Colin Hamilton, 'Session', in Fintan Vallely (ed.), *The Companion to Irish Traditional Music* (Cork University Press, 1999), 345–6.

¹⁵ That is, farthest from the noise and movement of the bar and with a clear view of the bar, the punters, the other musicians and probably the door and the exit to the toilets: in *feng shui* terms, a position of power and advantage as well as comfort.

¹⁶ Colin Hamilton, *The Session: A Socio-Musical Phenomenon in Irish Traditional Music* (MA diss., Queen's University Belfast, 1978), 39.

¹⁷ Hazel Fairbairn, *Group Playing in Traditional Irish Music: Interaction and Heterophony in the Session* (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1993), 120.

success'.¹⁸ The inverse is equally the case, as it is easy for unsympathetic or insensitive punters aurally to overpower the musicians.

This indeed was one explanation given for the friction in the session at Pepper's. Dermot (b. 1959), a fiddle player from Ennis, had been playing in Feakle sessions since he had moved to the district in 1993, in search of opportunities to play East Clare music. He no longer enjoyed the Pepper's session but continued to play there and, as a respected performer of the local repertoire, always found a seat close to the action. In Dermot's view, the regular musicians were unwelcoming to newcomers because they were unhappy. He attributed their discontent to an influx of loud, disrespectful 'blow-ins' who 'sit down, right beside the musicians, and they have a few drinks, and start roaring their heads off, like, talking to each other' but have 'no real affinity with [the music], or understanding'.¹⁹ Dermot was equally critical of foreigners who came along to the session expecting to be feted and praised. Yet, in a way, we were all outsiders.

At the Pepper's session, only P. J. Hayes would have been regarded in the district as a 'local'. None of the musicians lived in Feakle itself, and others travelled up to thirty miles to attend. Apart from their differing musical abilities, they varied in terms of age, occupation, education, class and political leanings and very few friendships extended to activities outside playing music together on a Wednesday night. Each of the musicians (apart from the beginners, who cheerfully accepted their low status) made a special case for inclusion in the category of East Clare musician, offering to the company credentials that might enhance their status as musicians and legitimate their participation in the session:²⁰ Vince had been mentored by PJoe, Angela's uncle was a famous musician, Dermot's mother was from East Clare, my musical mentors were from the area. If (to use Edward Said's distinction) they could not claim filiation, they would claim affiliation.²¹ These claims contributed to the status of individual musicians, but could not make them 'locals' (born and raised in the district in a family that had been resident there for several generations), although several of the more

¹⁸ Charlie Lennon, *Musical Memories* (Dublin: Worldmusic Publications, 1993), 9.

¹⁹ Personal communication, 14 December 2000.

²⁰ Irish musicians make similar claims in their tune introductions at concerts and on sleeve-notes to recordings. If a musician cannot claim musical pedigree via a parent, they may claim other kinds of filiation (through relatives, teachers, living in a musical district) or affiliation (the influence of high-status musicians either personally or, as a last resort, via recordings).

²¹ In *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983), 174–5, Edward Said distinguishes between an individual who pursues a cultural identification through affiliation (identification in culture) and one whose identification is based on filiation (identification through heritage).

capable musicians were now included in concerts of East Clare music. An affiliation or affinity with Irishness was also important for those who were, or were perceived to be, foreigners.²² English-born musicians in particular stressed their Irish connections and their acceptance by individual neighbours and musicians, although, given longstanding Republican allegiance in the area and its fast-growing population of disaffected English immigrants, the undercurrent of hostility to the English was not surprising.²³

The session at Pepper's was not always as unwelcoming as this, nor am I suggesting that all pub sessions are as hostile to the outsider as this one. The generous welcome offered to newcomers by musicians at another Feakle pub attests to this. Yet it is a common enough experience that a musical outsider—from another country, another generation, another county, another pub in the same town—will not be made welcome to participate in a session. If an unwanted musician does join a session, they may be 'frozen out' in various ways, as I have witnessed and (to my shame) participated in. Noted Donegal fiddle player, teacher and scholar Caomhín MacAoidh, for example, has complained that, having taken his fiddle into five music sessions in Ennis in one evening, he 'was not asked on a single occasion to join in playing'.²⁴

MacAoidh echoes a frequently-voiced complaint when he suggests that it is the commercialization of the session that produces these disharmonies and that musicians are reluctant to invite in others because 'it simply upsets the economic balance of the gig'.²⁵ This explanation does not account for the fact that unpaid session musicians, like those at Pepper's, also at times resist the expectation that visiting musicians should be invited to join their musical circle.

What is notable on these occasions is the disjuncture between the ideal of the session as a community of musicians and the reality that to achieve and maintain a sense of community (including its manifestation in musical style and repertoire) may

²² Kim's husband, a Dubliner, had lived in England for many years before moving to East Clare. People who did not know him often assumed he was English, possibly because of his accent and his marriage to Kim but perhaps also because he was learning to play Irish traditional music.

²³ Kim, for example, remarked that 'you would notice that English visitors would often not be made as welcome by certain people as visitors from other countries'. Kim, personal communication, 3 December 2000.

²⁴ Caomhín MacAoidh, 'Donegal: A voice in the wilderness or the voice of reason?', in Thérèse Smith and Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin (eds), *Blás: The Local Accent in Irish Traditional Music* (University of Limerick, 1997), 70.

²⁵ MacAoidh, 70.

require the beating of boundaries, for boundaries are what maintain and contain identities. The incompatibility of an ideal of community and a set of rules for constructing it is suggested by Charlie Lennon's juxtaposition of two apparently contradictory statements in his definition of the session: 'A session by its nature is unrehearsed and spontaneous and it is not possible to say in advance whether it will be very good, fair or mediocre. There are also certain unwritten rules which everybody should respect.'²⁶

The tension between spontaneity and rules may account for conflict in several ways. Niall MacKinnon, in his study of *The British Folk Scene*, suggests that a session is vulnerable to disruption because these 'rules' are not made explicit. He contrasts this with the 'structured informality' of folk club nights, where rules about repertoire and style and silence during performances are strictly policed.²⁷ It is perhaps significant that the musicians most involved in policing the Pepper's session had been involved in the English folk scene and the social conventions MacKinnon describes.

At the Pepper's session, the friction between newcomers and regular players was not simply a matter of ignorance that the session has 'unwritten rules', but more a matter of conflicting ideas about what those rules were. Visiting musicians almost always had experience of playing in sessions, but not all sessions are the same; the conventions according to which different kinds of sessions operate, including the degree of openness to visiting musicians, vary considerably between sessions led by a paid musician, spontaneous gatherings of friends, 'slow' sessions for learners, and many other variants.

One of the observable characteristics of traditional music revival in the late twentieth century was the change in focus from musical text (as exemplified by tune collections) to musical process, including performance contexts and styles.²⁸ This led

²⁶ Lennon, 9.

²⁷ Niall MacKinnon, *The British Folk Scene: Musical Performance and Social Identity* (Buckingham, UK and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1994), chapters 8, and 9.

²⁸ Georgina Boyes, in *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester University Press, 1993), attributes this change in the priorities of revivalists in post-World-War-II England to the greater availability of performance models through radio and recordings, and through the Working Men's Association and the proliferation of folk clubs that brought performers from an oral tradition into close contact with revivalists (in contrast to the performance of 'folk' texts by an urban elite separated from the rural working-class whose songs were collected by Cecil Sharp and others in the early twentieth century). Neil Rosenberg notes a similar change in this period in the American folk revival, when the notion of authenticity broadened from texts and sources to performance style and an emphasis on immersion in the music-culture, in his introduction to

urban revivalists to emulate authenticity not only in repertoire, but in instrumentation, performance style and (in the context of the pub session) the performance of social values. A survey of popular guides to the session²⁹ indicates that codifying the session as a set of rules, even when leavened with humour, has the serious purpose of socializing newcomers by prescribing those behaviours that will lead to acceptance in a session and the enjoyment of all, while proscribing those that will spoil it for other musicians and result in a newcomer being shunned. These rules vary somewhat, especially on such contentious issues as whether certain instruments, or multiples of instruments, should be allowed.

My observations suggest that, while there are some rewards for more competent musicians (status, reputation, payment, the ability to influence repertoire), many of the highest-status musicians avoid playing in public sessions; indeed, some musicians deplore the 'musical brawl' of the larger session,³⁰ while numerous commentators regard it as weakening the tradition of solo performance.³¹ It is the novice and improving players who show most enthusiasm for sessions and have more to gain from them. They can 'sit in' and play along with more proficient leaders, acquiring repertoire and style while concealing their deficiencies. From inside the session they

Rosenberg (ed.), *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

²⁹ Four books were surveyed: Ciarán Carson, *The Pocket Guide to Irish Traditional Music* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1986); Gearóid Ó hAllmúráin, *A Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1998); Barry Foy, *Field Guide to the Irish Music Session* (Boulder, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart, 1999); Wallis and Wilson (as note 2). Internet resources surveyed included the archive of the discussion group <http://www.thesession.org/> and the following articles posted on ten websites, accessed in March 2004: 'Session etiquette: Some reflections on sessions' at <http://www.oblique-design.demon.co.uk/musicbook/>; Jack Gilder, 'Seisiún' at <http://pweb.jps.net/~jgilder/sessiun.html>; 'The small circle tune learning session: Etiquette' at <http://www.slowplayers.org/>; Martin Doering, 'Session etiquette' at <http://www.mucl.de/~mdoering/konzertina/en/learn/playing/sessions.htm>; 'The good session etiquette guide' at <http://www.pressbar.freemove.co.uk/sessions/etiquet.htm>; 'Folk session etiquette' at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/alabaster/A432127>; Vivian T. Williams, 'Jam session etiquette' at <http://www.voyagerecords.com/>; Phil Rubenzer, 'Session etiquette...' at <http://www.c7r.com/sessionbook/>; Chris Smith, 'How to start and run an Irish slow session' at <http://members.cox.net/eskin/sessiondynamics.html>; George Keith, 'What is a "session"' at <http://groups.msn.com/TraditionalIrishMusic/sessionsetiquette.msnw>. Note that all of these websites are located outside Ireland. Numerous threads on session etiquette are archived by Irish-moderated discussion group, IRTRAD-L (<https://listserv.heanet.ie/irtrad-l.html>).

³⁰ Musician and television producer Tony MacMahon, quoted in Fairbairn, *Group Playing*, 215.

³¹ Brendan Breathnach, 'The traditional music scene in Ireland', in *Ireland and the Arts*, ed. Tim Pat Coogan (London: Namara Press, 1983), 170–5: 172.

can experience the uplifting sound of group performance while temporarily elevated to the status of ‘musician’ that they would be less likely to earn by their individual performances.

When foreigners follow the guidelines of session etiquette ‘by the book’ rather than responding to the social situation in which they find themselves, misunderstandings and conflict may result. When insiders add new rules—such as ‘anybody who’s new has to sit by the fire’—this is almost inevitable.³² Having rules that kept newcomers away from the centre of the session (in contrast to another Feakle session where newcomers were often invited to sit next to the leader) was a way of preserving the ‘Pepper’s sound’ that the regular musicians valued. In the winter months each week’s session sounded much the same, with the same musicians playing the same sets of tunes (based on the repertoire of the Tulla Ceili Band) and following PJoe Hayes’s distinctive rhythm and style. Vince’s position in the seat he had ‘earned’ next to PJoe secured both status and access to PJoe’s rhythm and repertoire. Both were threatened during the summer months, when an influx of visiting musicians introduced different instruments, styles and repertoires, changing the dynamics of the session and the sound it produced. For Vince and other middling musicians, the session was ‘ruined’ because the ‘lovely’, ‘beautiful’, ‘very, very true Pepper’s sound’ had ‘gone missing’ along with PJoe’s rhythm, which was the key to the musical style they passionately wanted to acquire.³³

Seeking out, emulating and preserving a particular sound, repertoire and context is a quest typical of folk revivalists in Ireland and elsewhere.³⁴ Ethnomusicologist Jos Koning noted an earlier manifestation of this phenomenon when he conducted fieldwork in the Feakle area in the mid-1970s. Koning observes that pub sessions occurred *only* when ‘musicians from the nationally and internationally successful young urban traditional music culture visit East Clare (usually in order to expand repertoires of tunes and techniques)’.³⁵ At that point in the revival of Irish traditional music, local musicians outnumbered visitors, a situation that is now reversed and which may also contribute to the musicians’ anxieties about keeping their session as

³² Vince, personal communication, 23 November 2000.

³³ As note 32.

³⁴ See Boyes; and Rosenburg.

³⁵ Jos Koning, ‘The fieldworker as performer: Fieldwork objectives and social roles in County Clare, Ireland’, *Ethnomusicology* 24/3 (1980), 417–29: 420.

pure as possible from what were perceived as polluting influences.³⁶ This suggests that the 'unwritten rules', rather than facilitating the spontaneity Charlie Lennon sees as a defining quality of a music session, inhibit it.

Over the past thirty years, the session has acquired the patina of tradition at the same time that it has become institutionalized through its codification in guides to the session and its study by sociologists and ethnomusicologists. For example, Hazel Fairbairn, in her study of group playing in Irish traditional music, while acknowledging that the session is a recent innovation, nonetheless argues for a line of continuity between the sociality of the house dance and the new social context of the pub session.³⁷ This continuity is exaggerated, however, for the regular pub session in Ireland was an urban development dating from the 1960s and its most enthusiastic and numerous participants have been young, urban revivalists, born after the house dances had disappeared in rural Ireland. The idealization of the house dance in its dying days also romanticizes somewhat the rural gatherings where, according to both official and anecdotal accounts, alcohol-fuelled fighting was commonplace.³⁸

Theorizing collective musical identities

I began by suggesting that both popular and scholarly representations of group musical performances tend to idealize musical community according to certain imaginative cultural narratives. When I examined one weekly Irish traditional music session, the interactions I witnessed and took part in, my discussions with the musicians concerned and their conflicting accounts of the session eventually led me to look more sceptically at representations of musical community in general and ultimately to question the adequacy of available theoretical models of collective musical experience to account for difference and conflict. I am referring here not to structural anthropology's legacy of Romantic primitivism but to a linking of musical community and utopian social organization that is common to scholars in various disciplines and theoretical persuasions. This tendency seems especially to arise in cases where the writer has struggled to become accepted as a participant.

³⁶ Vince, for example, complained that an accordion player's style was 'not East Clare', even though he was from the Feakle area. Vince, personal communication, 23 November 2000.

³⁷ Fairbairn, *Group Playing*. See also Hazel Fairbairn, 'Changing contexts for traditional dance music in Ireland: the rise of group performance practice', *Folk Music Journal* 6/5 (1994), 566–99.

³⁸ This is consistent with experiences at Australian rural dances of the same period (1920 to 1940). See Helen O'Shea, 'Country-hall dances', in *The Currency Companion to Music and Dance in Australia*, ed. John Whiteoak and Aline Scott-Maxwell (Sydney: Currency House, 2003), 199–200.

As the focus of ethnomusicology shifted during the 1970s from the study of music in culture towards the study of music *as* culture, innovative theoretical work posited not only a structural correspondence between musical performance and social values and organization but also a socially formative role for music. Music was theorized, not as reflecting society, but as producing it. This change in thinking is evident in the work of John Blacking. In *How Musical is Man?*, he concludes from his study of South African Venda society in the 1960s that music is ‘a metaphorical expression of feelings associated with the way society really is’.³⁹ This position is shared by so-called ‘sub-cultural studies’ (the most influential of which is probably Dick Hebdige’s study of alienated British youth),⁴⁰ which argue that a creative and engaged consumption of music produces a sense of socio-cultural identity. This notion of homology—‘the symbolic fit between the values and lifestyles of a group, its subjective experience and the musical forms it uses to express or reinforce its focal concerns’⁴¹—subsequently was recognized as problematic, in assuming stability and homogeneity and overlooking change and ambiguity within the cultural group studied. As another popular music theorist, Richard Middleton, has noted, this approach appears to work in relatively homogeneous, stable cultures by eliding the gap between ‘culture’ and ‘society’, but is inapplicable to more highly differentiated and dynamic societies.⁴²

In later work, which must be read in the light of his sympathy for the political struggles of his Venda associates, Blacking expounds the view that, because of its capacity to express social alienation, ‘music may precede and forecast other changes in society’.⁴³ He writes of music’s formative role in society: that individuals can, ‘through certain kinds of musical performance and tuning-in with others, transform abstract structures of cognition and affect into social and cultural forms’.⁴⁴ Christopher A.

³⁹ John Blacking, *How Musical is Man?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), 104.

⁴⁰ See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Methuen, 1979).

⁴¹ Hebdige’s definition of Levi-Strauss’s term ‘homology’, *Subculture*, 113.

⁴² Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990), 150.

⁴³ John Blacking, ‘Some problems of theory and method in the study of musical change’, in *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council* 9 (1977), 1–26: 22. Blacking’s view of the transformative role of music in society is analogous to Jacques Attali’s phase of ‘composition’ of music as prophetic of coming social forms in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

⁴⁴ John Blacking, ‘Coda: making musical sense of the world’, in *Lost in Music: Culture, Style and the Musical Event* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 259–64: 262.

Waterman, an ethnomusicologist whose work on West African *jùjú* music⁴⁵ similarly adopts the view that both individual and collective identities are socially constructed, shares Blacking's belief in music's socially transformative capacity, arguing that music *enacts* an ideal society, effectively *predicating* the structure and ethos of a coming social order. In *Music of the Common Tongue*, his study of Afro-American music, musicologist Christopher Small similarly theorizes participants in a musical performance as unconsciously exploring, affirming and celebrating a sense of identity, taking part in an ideal society that they have created within the performance, although he does not join Blacking in positing a socially transformative role for music.⁴⁶

Studies of late-twentieth-century western popular music similarly underplay the ambiguities and differences that are present within any social group, including groups performing music together. Significantly, this kind of idealization coexists with the adoption of post-structural theories of identity, such as Stuart Hall's conception of identification as a *positioning*, a point of 'temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us'.⁴⁷ In his seminal essay on music and identity, for example, Simon Frith takes this idea of a mobile self and attempts to conceptualize the *process* of identification, the experience of moving between one subject position and another. He uses music as a key to understanding identity, because 'it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective'.⁴⁸ For Frith (like Blacking and Waterman), musical performance neither represents nor expresses the common attributes of a particular group but 'articulates *in itself* an understanding of both group relations and individuality, on the basis of which ethical codes and social ideologies are understood'. Music *embodies* values, thus giving us 'a real experience of what the ideal could be'.⁴⁹ Frith asserts that 'the self is always an imagined self but can only be imagined as a particular organization of social,

⁴⁵ See Christopher A. Waterman, *Jùjú: A Social History and Ethnography of an African Popular Music* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), or a brief exposition of this argument in "'Our tradition is a very modern tradition": popular music and the construction of pan-Yoruba identity', *Ethnomusicology* 34/3 (1990), 367–79.

⁴⁶ Christopher Small, *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in Afro-American Music* (London and New York: John Calder/Riverrun Press, 1987), 74.

⁴⁷ Stuart Hall's position on positioning is articulated for example in 'Cultural identity and diaspora', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222–37; and 'Introduction: who needs "identity"', in Hall and du Gay, 1–17.

⁴⁸ Frith, 'Music and identity'.

⁴⁹ Frith, 'Music and identity', 111, 117 and 123.

physical and material forces'.⁵⁰ What is problematic is his concurrence with the view of musical collectivity articulated by ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin as the 'enactment of musical fellowship', which in some way manages to transcend discourse⁵¹—an apparent contradiction and another case of special pleading to account for the euphoria that participants in group musical performance may experience. (Here I use Simon Frith's definition of musical performance as including engaged listeners and dancers.⁵²)

What all of these attempts at conceptualizing the group performance of music have in common is a tendency to idealize the process of making music together (as if it *always* produced a transcendent experience) and to elide the experiences of participants (as if *everyone* had the same experience). Despite their production within different disciplines across a number of decades and continents, these concepts of collective musical identities all focus on the embodied, transcendent experience of an ideal society. I am not denying the euphoria that can and does arise for the musical performer.⁵³ Yet, if musical performance—which Christopher Small inelegantly calls

⁵⁰ Frith, 'Music and identity', 109–10.

⁵¹ The passage Frith quotes reads in its entirety: 'Music seems to have an odd quality that even passionate activities like gardening or dog-raising lack: the simultaneous projecting and dissolving of the self in performance. Individual, family, gender, age, supercultural givens, and other factors hover around the musical space but can penetrate only very partially the moment of enactment of musical fellowship. Visible to the observer, these constraints remain unseen by the musicians, who are instead working out a shared vision that involves both the assertion of pride, even ambition, and the simultaneous disappearance of the ego.' From Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 41. The concept of 'superculture' in Slobin's work is related to Marx's ideological superstructure, to Gramsci's hegemony and to Althusser's social formation and refers to the overarching structure present in ideology, practice, concept and performance. Examples of 'supercultural givens' would include the music industry and formal music education, but also 'intangibles' such as stereotypes, styles, repertoires and performance contexts.

⁵² Simon Frith draws on John Blacking's work when he articulates this understanding of musical performance as drawing together cultural narratives with those of the body—the fusion of imaginative fantasy and bodily practice—in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 275.

⁵³ Blacking, Small and Frith all concur in defining musical performance as simultaneously imaginative, cognitive, spiritual and bodily.

'musicking'⁵⁴—*always* produced these ideal societies, would not the human race have 'musicked' its way to utopia long ago?

Researchers are understandably moved when—perhaps after long years of arduous preparation and intense longing—they are invited to participate in a musical event. Nor is it surprising that their experience of participation produces an enveloping sense of musical and social unity. The following account of one such moment comes from Barz and Cooley's collection of insightful essays on fieldwork in ethnomusicology, but similar accounts are available in almost every ethnomusicology monograph of note:

My senses tingled; I was finally inside the singing and dancing circle. The song was 'Makala', and singing it came more easily to me while I danced. As I moved around the circle, the voices of different people stood out at moments, affecting my own singing and my choices of variations. Ndami sang a yodelled elaboration I had not heard before. I could feel fully the intermeshing of sound and motion, and move with it as it transformed, folding in upon itself. This was different from listening or singing on the sidelines because, while moving with the circle, I became an active part of the aural kaleidoscope. I was part of the changing design inside the scope, instead of looking at it and projecting in.⁵⁵

My own experience of musical community arrived with the New Year, 2001, when I attended a party where the musicians included two East Clare fiddle players whose musicianship I had admired for over twenty years. At two (or three) in the morning, only a handful of musicians remained and the dancers were still roaring for music. Perhaps it was the company's conviviality—certainly the whiskey contributed— or the fact that I was now familiar with the other musicians' repertoire, but as we played together I experienced a surge of euphoria, a feeling that I was right at the centre of the music I loved, that I understood through my body the meaning of dance music, a level of exhilaration as if I were dancing myself, and to the best possible music. Other factors contributed to my sense that I was 'at one' with the music making, for the evening was a culmination of many years of learning and playing within a cultural narrative that accorded the highest value to a house dance with older musicians such as those present. Or perhaps it was simply that, with my tapping toes at times literally under the feet of the dancers as they stamped their rhythm on the music, I was sitting

⁵⁴ Christopher Small's neologism counteracts the tendency to think of music as a thing (implied by the noun), rather than as a social process (expressed by the verb).

⁵⁵ Michelle Kisiuk, '(Un)doing fieldwork', in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23–44: 23.

in the best seat in the house. But for me, for the duration of one dance, I was inside the beating heart of Irish music.

Scholars who have written about the group performance of Irish traditional music tend to share the view that collective musical performance enacts an ideal community. These resemble the kind of community imagined by Rosita Boland and Vince, as well as my own transcendent New Year's Eve experience. Hazel Fairbairn, for example, argues that the pub session is a contemporary manifestation of the sociality of the rural house dance.⁵⁶ Anthony McCann, who has raised important issues relating to the notion of ownership in Irish traditional music, represents the session as a 'gift-cycle' in which gifts of 'the risk of self, the tunes, the songs, the chat, the shared experience, the history of personal endeavor' produce 'music as community, community as music'.⁵⁷ McCann's understanding of musical community resembles Henry Glassie's definition of community as reciprocal engagement or 'neighborliness' in his ethnography based in an Ulster district, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*.⁵⁸ Crucially, however, Glassie's 'neighborliness' recognizes that community is constructed through a process of dialogic engagement with (political, religious, class) *difference*. Individuals may share the pursuit of an ideal community, but this does not mean that their ideal communities will be the same. In a divided and volatile society, Glassie observes a dialogue, a process of negotiation that moves back and forth between rejection and acceptance, to and fro between individual and group priorities. With this more nuanced conception of community in mind, I would suggest that, despite its discursive construction as a musical community and despite the willingness of participants to experience it as such, the group performance of Irish traditional music in the session is as much about engaging with difference (through acceptance or rejection) as it is about the pursuit of sameness.

By assuming either a homological relationship between the group producing music and the wider social formation, or an ideal state of communication and community outside the ambit of discourse, scholars idealize the experience of musicians and listeners as harmonious and simplify it as homogeneous. Such concepts of collective musical performance, however, underplay the importance of engaging with difference, which is integral to the process of *identification*: the process of 'identifying

⁵⁶ Fairbairn, *Group Playing*; Fairbairn, 'Changing contexts'.

⁵⁷ Anthony McCann, 'All that is not given is lost: Irish traditional music, copyright, and common property', *Ethnomusicology* 45/1 (2001), 89–106: 93 and 97.

⁵⁸ Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

with and through another object, and object of otherness'.⁵⁹ Identities are produced through a process that creates distinctions from others, that marks difference. No matter how homogeneous collectivities may appear from the outside, the nearer one approaches, the more highly differentiated they become.⁶⁰ 'Community' is an equally illusory concept when examined at close quarters, as it is always an ideal. Individuals may share the pursuit of an ideal community, but this does not mean that their ideal communities will be the same.⁶¹ Nor will the power they generate necessarily be harnessed for the collective good, as Blacking hoped.⁶²

The examination I have undertaken here of ways in which we, as researchers and writers, engage with narratives of musical community leaves unanswered the question of *why*, in an era when notions of cultural continuity and authenticity have long since been interrogated and found wanting, we continue the quest for musical utopias; why contemporary researchers, with up-to-date toolkits of self-reflexive methodologies and dialogic relationships with their collaborators continue to quest for authenticity? Why, as we move closer to the music making we study, as we tune in and take part, we succumb to the illusion that we are 'at one' with our fellow musicians: that we have grasped our pot of gold? My provisional conclusion is that, in formulating our research goals, we foreshadow the illusory treasure of authenticity through an imaginative cultural narrative that seeks wholeness and community, a sense of home where the heart is, yearning for what cultural theorist Iain Chambers calls 'the myths we know to be myths yet continue to cling to, cherish and dream'.⁶³

⁵⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, 'The third space', in Rutherford, 207–21: 211.

⁶⁰ Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern found this in her struggle to identify genuine 'insiders' in an English village, an objective she represents as a mirage. See Marilyn Strathern, *Kinship at the Core* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁶¹ Iris Marion Young (among others) rejects the notion of 'community' as 'undesirably utopian' in denying difference. See Iris Marion Young, 'The ideal of community and the politics of difference', in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (London: Routledge, 1990), 300–23: 301. I propose a less pessimistic view of community as an ideal that takes multiple forms that are constantly being negotiated: community as a *process* of dialogue. This is not to deny that the concept of community (as a component of social structure) has been useful as an intervention in the discourses of global capital, class, civil society and the nation; for example in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 230–1.

⁶² Blacking, 'Coda', 264.

⁶³ Iain Chambers, *Border Dialogues: Journeys in Postmodernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 104.