Hybridity and national musics: the case of Irish rock music

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Introduction: Irishness and the 'gift of song'

A key element in the range of stereotypes characteristically assigned to the Irish has been their natural proclivity for music and song, a feature of colonial discourse that can be traced back even to the Norman invasions of the twelfth century. However, the powerful link between the Irish and musicality (along with a host of other, considerably less attractive traits) was finally consolidated in the Victorian era at the height of the British imperial project (Curtis 1971; Busteed 1998). Irish music by this stage was constructed as a specific ethnic category based on the assumption that there was an identifiably Irish musical style that existed as an expression of the people, a reflection of their innate feelings and sensibilities. Music, therefore, became a feature of 'race', taking on properties for the coloniser that appeared to transcend the passage of time, that remained fixed and unchanging.

In this way the various musics of Ireland were homogenised and categorised as an 'ethnic' music, a process that was begun by the Protestant Anglo-Irish Ascendancy in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, was adopted in the late nineteenth century by Irish nationalism as a response to negative stereotyping and continues today in Ireland by government bodies like the Folklore Commission. As Middleton has noted, 'the primary motives for ethnomusicological exoticism . . . lie in value judgements about ''authenticity'' in musical culture' (Middleton 1990, p. 146), and it is this notion which continues to motivate much discussion about traditional music in Ireland today (Corcoran 1992; MacMathuna 1992). Thus, if such ideas were originally imposed on Ireland and the Irish from the outside, they have now become internalised and today bear the traces of a particular nationalist political and cultural history. For example, Tony Clayton-Lea and Richie Taylor attribute the current predominance and popularity of Irish rock music internationally to a 'strong sense of national identity' (Clayton-Lea and Taylor 1992, p. 71). In a similar vein, Philip King, producer of the acclaimed BBC series *Bringing It All Back Home* (1991), which sought to explore the relationship between Irish and American musics, sweeps away any conceptual complexity and suggests that 'the Irish simply have good natural voices and love to sing', adding that this arises (magically) 'from a strong sense of place' (Bradby 1994). In a similar vein, rock press discourse in both Britain and Ireland, through countless reviews and feature articles, continually reiterates and reconfirms these tropes – Sinéad O'Connor's 'fiery Irish temper', the 'banshee-style wailing' of Dolores O'Riordan, U2's 'Irish spirit', and so on.

Authenticity and hybridity

In postcolonial theory, this appropriation of the 'gaze' of the coloniser has been much commented on and has been the subject of much debate (Memmi 1957; Spivak

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1990; Lloyd 1993). In one sense, it seems to condemn the very notion of a 'national' resistance to cultural domination because the national is already deeply imbued with the ideologies of the oppressor, especially, and most debilitatingly, by its appropriation of colonialism's essentialist definitions of difference. This construction of difference, moreover, is liable to be just as exclusivist and oppressive to internal minorities as the imperialist project was formerly to its colonial 'Other'. Built on a romantic and 'philosophically impoverished' notion of the imagined community, it can, itself, create an equally impoverished and reactionary national culture (Anderson 1982). On the other hand, postcolonial theory does seem to open up the possibility of what Spivak has called 'strategic essentialism' which, as Azoulay argues, 'does not preclude alliances between different social groups; nor does it presume that communities are bounded, fixed or that ''race'' is an essence shared by all members of any given group'. It might be poor philosophy, she contends, but 'at least strategic essentialism does register the politics of commitment' (Azoulay 1997, p. 102). In the Irish context, this point is argued forcefully by Seamus Deane. Attacking what he calls the 'promiscuous embrace of pluralism', he contends:

Therefore, while I would accept the need for a recognition of diversity, I don't at the same time say that because things are diverse, because things are so infinitely complex or apparently infinitely complex, there can be no supervening position, that you can't have a political belief or a religious belief. (Deane 1992)

In terms of music, the essentialist notions that underlie dominant conceptions of 'Irishness' (and which are most characteristically applied to Irish traditional music) can be seen on the one hand as ideologically conservative and analytically restrictive, privileging 'nature' over culture and alluding to a deep essence of Irishness that withstands historical change. On the other hand, the need to mark difference, especially in the global discourse of popular music, might also require the 'strategic' mobilisation of aspects of this 'Irishness' precisely to identify and mark out a space in the global 'noise' where the experience of being peripheral might be articulated (and a firm political belief or sense of cultural identity asserted). The contradiction here represents a considerable epistemological, theoretical and political conundrum and one that seems to preclude the development of a cultural strategy that will not be impaled on one or other horn of the dilemma.

Postcolonial theory does, however, signpost approaches to these issues that may have considerable critical potential and which are particularly appropriate to a discussion of popular music. Of course, the colonising culture is no longer that of the imperialist nation states of the nineteenth century (though Ireland's long historical interface with Britain provides fertile ground for applying postcolonial theory to revision and/or reassertion of the dominant narratives of this relationship (Deane 1992; Lloyd 1993; Graham 1994; Gibbons 1996). Rather the imperialising presence now is global capitalism, manifested in cultural terms by the USA, 'the cultural-electronic Goliath of the universe' (Schiller 1998, p. 181). But if postcolonial theory has turned its perspective onto the narratives of resistance from within the colonised, prising open the supposed closed spaces of essentialist nationalism, it has also suggested a more complex relationship between the centre and the periphery than is offered by a 'cultural imperialism' paradigm. Thus, for example, it can be argued that in the stultifying and conservative Ireland of the 1930s–1950s, the images and pleasures of popular American cinema or the urban rhythms of jazz music were

positively liberating (and, not surprisingly, both of these popular forms were subjected to a long campaign of cultural denigration led by the Church). In these cases, the power of global culture was instrumental in prising open the cultural sterility of an overly essentialist national culture (Rockett 1991; McLoone 1994).

Furthermore, global capitalism today works, not by 'homogenising' world culture but rather through 'niche marketing' and the marketing of 'difference'. As Sharma *et al.* would have it, the 'coolie has become cool' (Sharma, Hutnyk and Sharma 1996, p. 1). This can have the effect of releasing local energies and local cultures (albeit to feed a voracious marketplace) which themselves lay dormant under the weight of a nationalist hegemony. Thus a new relationship between the periphery and the centre (now the local and the global) has developed 'in which the local should be seen as a fluid and relational space, constituted only in and through its relationship to the global' (Robins 1991, p. 35). If peripheral cultures inhabit this space, then they do so in complex and contradictory ways, feeding into and out of the global in a mutually sustaining manner, even if the power relationship is so obviously weighted against them. Thus the potential for a culture of resistance which can challenge the definitions of identity imposed by the global (and by extension, offer a challenge to the existing power relationship) lies not in a retreat back into the very essentialist narratives which have been part of the oppression in the first place, but in the exploitation of the site of contact between the local and the global. In cultural terms, this has meant the validation of forms of hybridity that grow out of the 'liminal spaces' provided at this intersection, offering a critical perspective on both (Chambers 1985, 1990, 1994; Gilroy 1987, 1993; Mercer 1990, 1994; Robinson, Buck and Cuthbert 1991; Graham 1994; McLoone 1994; Werbner and Modood 1997, and many others). The literature in support of the idea of a hybrid culture is now vast and the result is that the postcolonial debate often appears merely to celebrate hybridity as an end in itself and offers no critical approach to discrimination and evaluation. Much of this literature has, in fact, moved away from analysing texts altogether in favour of a more discursive approach to the process rather than the products of hybridity.

The following discussion attempts to redress this imbalance by considering in detail some key hybrid texts themselves. In exploring a range of musical strategies in the work of some important and successful Irish artists, we hope to assess also the ways in which these inhabit the spaces between 'Irishness' and the global culture of rock music. We want to consider these texts as forms of hybridity, to locate them in their sociocultural contexts, looking at the discourse about them (especially in Ireland) and to assess their strategies and achievement against the postcolonial concerns we have outlined. Our selection of texts cannot, of course, be comprehensive and therefore represents, to some extent, our subjective judgement of what are the most interesting, the most challenging and, in the end, the most successful. Our starting point has been to choose texts that mobilise recognisably 'Irish' idioms and styles (especially aspects of traditional music) but which attempt to marry these to a more mainstream global rock sound.[1]

The discussion is motivated, also, by the observation that, relative to size of population and the economic strength of the local market, Irish rock music has enjoyed a disproportionately large presence in the global market in recent years. This fact alone should, by now, have merited more critical appraisal than has been apparent, especially in debates about the relationship between national music cultures and the increasingly global market. As a culturally specific test case, Irish

popular music surely offers interesting points of comparison to these wider postcol-
onial debates, especially in relation to questions of authenticity and hybridity.

In addition, however, Irish cultural discourse itself has been dominated over
the last two decades by debates about the definitions and meanings of 'Irishness'
and Irish culture, in both its 'indigenous' and its 'diasporic' forms. Fuelled initially
by the rapid modernisation of the Irish economy from the 1960s onwards (and the
great social and cultural upheavals that this entailed) they were given added charge
by the continuing political crisis and violence in Northern Ireland. These are, in the
main, extremely sophisticated and complex (if sometimes acrimonious) debates and
the essentialist assumptions that are central to the dominant discourse on Irish rock
music seem rather bland and crude in comparison.

The exception here, of course, is the band U2 whose global success in the
1980s and 1990s has resulted in a number of academic and semi-academic studies
(Bradby and Torode 1984; Dunphy 1987; Graham 1990; Keohane 1991; Bowler and
Dray 1993; Waters 1994; Flanagan 1995) and an almost continuous process of
appraisal in Ireland's influential rock magazine *Hot Press*. Given the impact that the
band has had, this level of attention is hardly surprising. The quality of this work
may be variable but it has had the effect, nonetheless, of disguising the wider musi-
cal context in Ireland, and of marginalising discussion of other acts and other musi-
cal strategies and it is some of these that we wish to explore. In this regard, if U2
are the most internationally successful rock act, then Van Morrison is Ireland's most
enduring and critically acclaimed artist and his particular blend of the local and the
global provides an interesting starting point for such an exploration.

Rootedness and transcendence: Van Morrison

In 1968, Van Morrison released his first solo album *Astral Weeks* which continues to
this day to figure prominently in various 'best-album-ever' lists. Looking back from
the 1990s, what Morrison's success meant for the Irish music fan of the time was
the thrill of witnessing the periphery take centre-stage – of hearing Sandy Row,
Fitzroy, Belfast (and Dublin) being invoked in a space normally reserved for the
likes of Memphis, Nashville and all those famous places along Route 66.

Astral Weeks is, of course, about Belfast and in its carefully layered references
to the city as it was before the outbreak of violence there are textures of a recognis-
ably 'ordinary' working-class lifestyle. This is the key to understanding the music
of Van Morrison over the last thirty years or so and to assessing its importance in
the cultural context of (Northern) Ireland. For at its heart lies a paradox. He, more
than any other Irish (or British) rock musician, has maintained a strong sense of his
roots while at the same time exploring – and extending considerably – the inter-
national rock idiom. His art is an art of the periphery, soaking up the influences of
the centre, adapting them to its own designs and then offering them back to the
centre in a wholly unique form. A powerful and recurring symbol of this process
of cultural interchange in his music has been the role that radio has played in his
own musical development.

The power of radio is a recurring motif in his work. In the track 'Caravan',
from his second album *Moondance* (1970), he invokes it for the first time but returns
to the theme many times throughout his work (most recently on songs like 'The
Days Before Rock'n'Roll' from the 1990 album *Enlightenment* and 'Hyndford Street'
from 1991's *Hymns to the Silence*). A peripheral culture's relationship to the influ-

ences emanating from the outside (symbolised, in this instance, by the radio) is, as we have discussed, an extremely complex and contradictory one. On one hand, the radio can represent a threat to the integrity of indigenous culture, the possibility that the local will be overwhelmed by the culture of the centre, pouring down the airwaves from the outside (hence the long war of attrition waged by Catholic nationalist authorities against American jazz music being played on Irish radio in the 1920s and 1930s). It is assumed in this case that the indigenous culture has a quality and a relevance worth preserving – an 'authenticity' or 'rootedness' from which a sense of identity grows. On the other hand, however, this local culture can also appear insular and stifling to such an extent that the cultural influences from the outside are to be welcomed as positively liberating and life enhancing (again, as we have argued was the case with American cinema and popular dance music in Catholic Ireland up until the 1960s). In his more recent work, especially in *Enlightenment* and *Hymns to the Silence*, Morrison has given us some unforgettable images of 'listening in' to the exotic sounds of American jazz, gospel and blues music – as if this were some secret ceremony beyond the bounds of accepted behaviour. These are, of course, cherished memories of his childhood roots but they are also moments of transcendence – memories of imaginative escape from these roots.

Talking about the song 'Wild Children' from his 1973 album *Hard Nose the Highway*, Morrison explained, 'I think that where that song is coming from is growing up in another country and getting our releases through figures from America, like the American anti-heroes.' (Yorke 1975, p. 105) And yet, when this imaginative transcendence became physical exile following the success of his band Them in the mid-1960s, the pain of being distanced from his roots provides continuing inspiration and is explored in his 1993 album *Too Long In Exile* (among others).

The song which, perhaps, best sums up the paradox between rootedness and transcendence is his reworking of the traditional Christian hymn, 'See Me Through Part II (Just a Closer Walk With You)' from his 1991 album *Hymns to the Silence*. Against a gospel rendition of the hymn (more Salvation Army or Belfast Gospel Hall than the Edwin Hawkins Singers), Morrison remembers again the days before rock' n' roll and incants a list of influences which are both rooted in his Belfast upbringing and, at the same time, have transported him out of this. In doing so, he paints an evocative picture of a Protestant Sunday in Belfast which is spiritual, celebratory and sustaining and yet from which he seeks to escape through the un-Godly (and very un-Protestant) practice of 'tuning in of stations in Europe on the wireless'. The object of his Sunday devotions would not have appealed to traditional Sunday-school values either – 'jazz and blues and folk, poetry and jazz' or 'Hank Williams, Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet' (and elsewhere on the album, Morrison acknowledges the influence of Jelly Roll Morton, Big Bill Broonzy, Mezz Mezzrow, Jack Kerouac, Sonny Boy Williamson and Ray Charles). All the Morrisonian themes of ambiguity, contradiction and paradox are here – belonging and yet trying to get away; the competing pleasures of the spirit and the flesh; the relationship between the local and the foreign, between the inside world and the outside, between Ulster and America, between the private and the public persona. Most importantly, this track conjures up the almost illicit thrill and excitement of 'the Devil's music'.

Another musical path which Morrison's explorations have taken is, of course, through Irish traditional music, with a concomitant interest in notions of Irish and Celtic identity. These interests first emerged in 1974's *Veedon Fleece*, re-emerged

with vigour in the recordings of the early 1980s and reached their high-point in the collaboration with The Chieftains on 1988's *Irish Heartbeat*. This collaboration was Morrison's most commercially successful recording for some time and certainly his most accessible. The possible political implications of this meeting of two traditions was much commented on at the time of the album's release, but one needs to be a little cautious about reading too many metaphorical meanings into such a collaboration. While there is no doubt that the album remains an interesting example of cultural pluralism (Protestant Belfast meets Nationalist Ireland, one of the most distinctive voices in rock music meets the unmistakable rhythms of Irish traditional music, setting up interesting tensions both musical and cultural), this caution is warranted.

Morrison said at the time that they were 'just a bunch of songs', and it is probably advisable to view the whole process as a musical interchange rather than as evidence of Morrison having discovered 'his essential Irishness'. Throughout his career, Morrison invokes too many cultural influences to warrant raising the Chieftains' collaboration above all others or to suppose that his sense of cultural identity is synonymous with a traditional Irish nationalist conception. The geography of his mental landscape is too complex and too idiosyncratic for this, taking in contemporary myths like Woodstock or California and the 'ancient roads' that lead to Caledonia, Avalon, Albion and the England of the romantic poets. Just as, over the years, he has continually acknowledged the influences of a whole gallery of popular American musicians, so too he has addressed a pantheon of literary figures, including Walt Whitman, Tennessee Williams, John Donne, James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett, as well as the romantic poets of literary England. Against all these invocations and influences, The Chieftains' traditional Irish music must stand in line.

Indeed, *Too Long in Exile* is probably a more representative collection of songs – to mark his return to Ireland, an 'end-of-an-era' retrospective of his own biography and the influences on his music. The key tracks here are two duets with blues legend, John Lee Hooker: a reworking of Morrison's 'garage band' classic from the days of Them, 'Gloria', and a new song of regret and reaffirmation, 'Wasted Years'. Elsewhere on the album, Morrison does versions of rhythm and blues classics and jazz standards and the overall musical style is a blues-inflected jazz, the source of his musical hybridity. And in the end, it is the music that really matters, more so than the literary figures, the mysticism, the esoteric speculation, pastoral invocations of a primordial Garden of Eden and the sometimes incongruous incantations. As he has said on many occasions, he is a working musician doing a job. Thus it is the tensions and balances in the music, rather than the speculation in the words of the songs, which mark out his unique take on the question of cultural identity. In the sequence of albums released in the 1980s, beginning with *Beautiful Vision* in 1982, the sense of a 'dweller on the threshold' or an 'in-between' traveller – in the real world and in the imagination, in Ireland and America – allows for a unique synthesis of musical influences – American black music (including gospel, blues, jazz, and an early form of white-adapted rap), Irish traditional music and song, English balladry, a touch of Scotland and a good dose of Belfast Protestant hymn-singing.

Morrison's music is, therefore, an interesting case of hybridisation and one which suggests that an adherence to, and a transgression of, 'rootedness' can be a more creative response to transglobal popular culture than either essentialist denial

or uncritical embrace. His music addresses directly, in both form and content, the paradoxes of the 'liminal spaces' outlined in postcolonial theory and the vast range of influences he invokes has resulted in a body of work that is both 'Irish' and 'global' and yet which confounds sedimented notions of both. Morrison reminds us, as Francis Mulhern argues, that Ulster Protestants know more than one way of singing about Belfast and that while he is certainly an icon of the 'Anglo-American cultural complex', his music, nonetheless, constitutes 'elements of actually existing Irish culture' (Mulhern 1998).

It might still be argued, however, that Morrison's music is too recognisably of the 'rock' idiom (jazz-inflected rhythm and blues in particular) to stand as a marker for an interesting hybrid of Irishness and that his own background coming out of Protestant Belfast is in itself antithetical to traditional notions of Irish nationalism. If what is at stake is the question of the 'authenticity' or otherwise of Irish music in its interface with the global, then it is necessary to look at other forms of musical hybridity and to consider in more detail the relationship between folk/traditional music and rock music in Ireland.

'Celtic rock': Horslips

Horslips emerged in 1971 at the tail end of the international folk revival and are now recognised as one of the most important bands in the Irish rock canon. Their sound was multi-instrumental, with traditional – flute, bodhran, acoustic fiddle, mandolin, concertina – meeting with rock instrumentation – guitar, bass, drums, keyboards and vocals. They recorded their debut album *Happy to Meet, Sorry to Part* in 1972 and, in keeping with the progressive rock genre of the time, this was a rich tapestry of sounds – complex arrangements and symphonic textures allied to traditional airs and rhythms. Keyboard player and flautist Jim Lockhart, reflecting on the importance of Horslips and the context from which they emerged, notes:

When we were being pretentious we would say we were trying to forge a new rock and roll idiom. I remember talking to a guy in a band in the early '70s just before Horslips got started. He told me he had written a new song that went 'a nickel is a nickel and a dime is a dime. . .' I never failed to be overwhelmed by the complete oddness of that situation. A guy who is sitting in Dublin is singing about nickels and dimes! What is all that about? The point was avoiding writing about nickels and dimes and writing about things that had some kind of relevance to us. . . (Lockhart 1995)

In one important sense, then, part of the pleasure in Horslips' music, as with Morrison, was hearing local place names and local sounds within a rock format. In this way the band was challenging the easy and apparently unselfconscious adoption of Americanised references within the local context. However, unlike a lot of Morrison's music, Horslips did not refer to the mundane and everyday but focused lyrically on the 'fantastic', that is early Irish history, myth and legend. These themes reached their high point in two subsequent albums, *The Táin* (1973) and *The Book of Invasions: A Celtic Symphony* (1976). This had particular representational and ideological consequences, as we shall see.

An important historical detail of the Horslips strategy in Ireland was that the band brought this synthesis of traditional music, myth and progressive rock to the ballroom circuit throughout rural Ireland. This circuit consisted of hundreds of large ballrooms, situated at rural crossroads or on the outskirts of towns and villages, which provided a (sometimes lucrative) living for dozens of so-called show-

bands (multi-instrumental bands of up to ten players and singers who provided cover versions of top-ten hits and standard country and western fare). Lockhart summarised the Horslips strategy:

We were the first 'non-showband' to go out and play in those venues. If we had an achievement it was that we did so much work in the ballrooms, the significance that we had was giving the kids something that wasn't an import. That in coming to see us, they weren't attempting to be second-hand English kids or second-hand American kids. . . (Lockhart 1995)

Prendergast also describes their importance in just such tones:

. . . Pioneering groups like Horslips, catching the hard rock beat from overseas, began to break the showbands' iron grip on clubs and the state-run airwaves. They introduced a new sound to the nation. . . Irish bands came into their own, blending overseas influences with a *purer*, indigenous Celtic sound. (Quoted in Talbot 1992, emphasis added)

Despite the apparent cross-cultural thrust of Horslips' iconography and music, for Prendergast the 'indigenous' sound, perceived as being 'pure', dominates the other aspects of sound and style that comprise the hybrid. Horslips' achievement, the 'pioneering' dimension of their music, was that they wrested control of the venues from the purveyors of a second-hand, non-indigenous music (the showbands) and allowed the real and more natural music of Celtic Ireland to emerge (traditional rhythms and sounds).

It might be noted that in this version of Irish rock history, the showbands emerge as the cultural debasement against which the 'authentic' music of Ireland has struggled, and, given what we have argued in relation to both American cinema and American dance music of the 1920s and 1930s, this might appear to be something of an anomaly. Could it not be argued equally that the showbands brought to the youth of rural and provincial Ireland the same kind of liberating hedonism that was associated with other imported forms of popular culture? Has history, in a sense, been too hard on the showbands, which, after all, provided the infrastructure for so much of what was to follow in terms of Irish rock music? (The most notable graduate from the showband circuit was Van Morrison, but he was by no means the only one.) The showbands were, anyway, really only a local inflection of what was a common response throughout Europe in the 1950s/1960s to the emergence of American rock 'n' roll – pale imitations and covers of the originals repackaged with local heroes aping the American originals.

If there is an anomaly here it has much to do with the complexities of the local/global relationship and the central issue of authenticity. In one sense, authenticity is guaranteed once the musicians begin to write their own songs (even if, as was the case with so much British rock music of the 1960s, this actually entailed singing about nickels and dimes). In the Irish case, though, authenticity was double-coded – original songs, written and performed in traditional idioms. Nickels and dimes in Dagenham represents one kind of musical hybridity – one way of the local responding to the global – and 'Blue Suede Shoes' sung by a local hero in Waterford quite another. But the progressive rock, traditional rhythms and Celtic mythology of Horslips was a much more audacious engagement with the local/global dialectic, an ambitious hybrid caught in the contradictory whirl of tradition and modernity, between progressive re-imagining and regressive reassertion.

Not surprisingly, Horslips elicited a range of responses among contrasting audiences and subgroupings. Thus they were able to play in the students' union at the Chelsea College of Art in London in the same year that they also played in the

Borderland Ballroom at Muff, Co. Donegal, a few miles from Derry. These seemingly contradictory responses flowed from the meeting of various musical and visual forms. On the one hand they had 'druggy' connotations, as befits the complex structures, improvisation and other aspects of 'psychedelic coding' (Whiteley 1994), and on the other hand they wedded these in a creative tension to the naturalistic and 'folkie' associations of traditional music. In relation to the latter, Middleton has argued:

> However arbitrary musical meanings and conventions are – rather than being 'natural', or determined by some human essence or by the needs of class expression – once particular musical elements are put together in particular ways, and acquire particular connotations, these can be hard to shift. It would be difficult, for instance to move the 'Marseillaise' out of the set of meanings sedimented around it . . . similarly it is not easy to disturb the connotations of folk song . . . as signifying 'community'; an organic social harmony. (Middleton 1990, p. 10)

In similar fashion, it is hard to shift Irish nationalist sentiment and aspiration or notions of the 'authentic' from the meanings which have accrued to traditional music in Ireland, no matter what kind of rock music idiom it has been inserted into and despite the best intentions of the band itself. When wedded to traditionalism in this way (with the added emphasis on the primitive timelessness of Celtic mythology), the danger was that the rock music idiom was enlisted behind a very traditional notion of rural Irish identity.

The irony is that the progressive rock of the late 1960s/early 1970s had counter-cultural connotations linked to experimentation, drugs and the avant-garde, a very different set of accrued meanings to those of traditional music. Progressive rock, a heterogeneous mix of styles, emphasised individual virtuosity and personal expression, fetishised complex structures and diverse rhythms, and drew in elements from classical as well as folk music. One way of understanding Horslips, therefore, is to see their music as 'liminal', in the postcolonial sense, caught in a tension between a countercultural ideology of 'opposition' and the more mainstream cultural traditions of rural Ireland. In other words, they could be recruited into supporting traditional nationalist representations of Ireland and the Irish with an appeal to a rural romanticism and preindustrial primitivism, but were able to activate these within a 'hippie'-inflected version of the pastoral fantasy centred on alternative ways of living. To that extent, they were an early-seventies band, very much of their time. In discussing the progressive rock genre, John Street argues:

> The music's complex structuring and barrage of sounds denied any opportunity for popular involvement. It was to be admired. In trying to transform popular music into electronic classical music, progressive music was, in fact, 'regressive'; it sought to establish aesthetic criteria and patterns of consumption which were both elitist and traditionalist. (Street 1986, p. 101)

Horslips were, however, a dance band. Jim Lockhart regarded the incorporation of traditional elements as a way of making the music easier to dance to, and accounts of the period reveal that Horslips encouraged popular involvement (Prendergast 1987, O'Connor 1991, Lockhart 1995, Stokes 1995). One of the tensions in the music, then, was the danger of conflicting audience expectations. On one hand there were audiences composed of (largely middle-class) 'hippies', interested in the psychedelic aspects of the music and performance and who came along to watch, to listen and to be impressed. On the other hand, traditionalists were drawn to the jigs and reels (and frequently complained when the band did not play enough

of these). Added to this, the Horslips hybrid certainly offended folk 'purists' who were not only angered by the apparent dilution of traditional form but also by the hedonistic and excessive elements that were now being attached to folk modes.

Horslips broke up in 1980, at the height of the punk explosion in Ireland. They were the first (relatively) successful band to come out of Ireland trying to marry traditional music with the idioms of rock, and history has been kind to them. The verdict in Ireland would seem to suggest that the traditionalist and folk meanings predominated and the band have retrospectively been assigned a celebratory nationalist status, rather than remembered as pioneering and challenging avant-gardists. Thus their particular hybrid was quickly recuperated into the dominant discourses about 'Irishness', and their example is a good illustration of the fact that hybridity in itself is not the unproblematic template for a 'culture of resistance' that either they or contemporary postcolonial critics might imagine.

Now it is important to note here that while folk and traditional musics may have conservative associations (in their emphasis on regressive imaginings of ethnicity and associations with essentialist nationalism), this is not to suggest that all hybrids utilising folk or traditional are straightforwardly retrogressive and nostalgic. This would be to underestimate the complexity of aesthetic form and musical production and their relationship to audiences and meaning. Following John Street's discussion of country music, there is good argument to suggest that there is nothing intrinsic to the form of folk music which is necessarily conservative (Street 1986, pp. 188–9). Folk forms can be brought into interesting new relationships when wedded to pop forms. These, in turn, arguably usher in new meanings. Each such hybrid involving traditional or folk music need not necessarily have the same ideological consequences that have been argued here in relation to Horslips. The Pogues are an interesting case in point.

Traditional punk: The Pogues[2]

Formed in North London in 1983, The Pogues began their career playing rebel songs in Irish pubs and busking on the streets of the predominately Irish enclave of Kilburn. Steve Redhead offers a common enough reading of The Pogues as conforming to the most obvious of negative Irish stereotypes. Although Redhead does not specify which particular aspect of representation is offensive, he presumably means the combination of violent and drunken Paddy and the comic stage Irishman of yore (Redhead 1990, p. 14).

Of course, it needs to be noted that The Pogues occupy a controversial position in ongoing debates about Irish music. These arguments centre on their appropriation of traditional musics and the excessive manner in which these are performed, and in this regard they were greeted initially with a hostile reaction from traditionalists similar to that which greeted Horslips previously. The aim here, however, is to consider The Pogues more broadly – as a pop group with a particular range of iconography, style, attitude, performance and music. Eamon McCann has described The Pogues as 'Irish music viewed through the prism of a North London sensibility' (O'Connor 1991, p. 159). What this implies is that The Pogues, in appropriating traditional Irish folk music, have inflected it with aspects of a punk sensibility, which has consequences for how we understand their relationship to representational issues. As Nuala O'Connor argues:

What had happened was that Irish ballads, like those popularised by the Clancys, had met punk. Pogues' music represented children of the sixties 'born after Carlow building workers had set up homes with Mayo nurses'. They were assimilated to the extent that they were reared, educated and socialised in Britain. They rejected the anodyne ballad culture of the Irish communities their parents identified with. The Pogues showed a way in which they could be Irish in Britain. The music was exciting and contemporary in form and content, yet it was culturally familiar also. . . Off-stage and on, The Pogues disported themselves like archetypal Paddies, with a reputation for hard drinking, bad manners, and disdain for personal appearance. The Pogues' music, attitudes and lifestyle outraged a wide range of people from parents to traditionalists. (O'Connor 1991, pp. 158–9).

As O'Connor goes on to acknowledge, the band's belligerent interpretations and anarchic performances of traditional songs served as an 'antidote to the stultification of folk music by purists'. Or, as Elvis Costello famously and succinctly put it, 'The Pogues saved folk from the folkies.' (quoted in O'Connor 1991, p. 159) There is certainly merit in this line of argument, as folk purism was often intertwined with a narrow cultural nationalism and no doubt the music of The Pogues did, indeed, offend purists.[3] But, as was argued in the case of Horslips, can The Pogues be appropriated to signify the maintenance of, rather than a challenge to, tradition and nostalgia? There is certainly a suggestion of this in O'Connor and Costello. They see the band as having kept *the* music alive within a veneer of contemporaneity. Any noise thrown up is absorbed into this achievement and, whatever about the challenge they might represent, in the end it is the tradition that survives.

However, while blatant Irish stereotypes are certainly present, these are rearticulated in interesting ways. In music and performance, the nostalgic associations are wrenched out of their context both by the irreverent way that folk forms are played (and played with) and in the lyrical associations that are attached to them. The Pogues parody and interrogate aspects of Irishness in complex and confusing ways, and to see in them only a lack of positive stereotyping is to miss the point. What is interesting about them is the full range of characterisation present – drunken Paddies, sentimental Paddies, homesick Paddies, pathetic and nostalgic Paddies in tandem with representations of an Ireland collapsing under the weight of tradition and economic peripherality.

In one sense, then, The Pogues address the Irish emigrant through song narratives that offer an 'in-betweenness'. Within this there is a critique, through parody, of national stereotypes. They rant about the absurdity of nostalgia for Ireland and twist and bend sentimental ballads to rearticulate feelings of alienation in London or New York. Although the boundary between parody and pastiche is not always clear, The Pogues introduce a debate within the Irish diaspora about the relationship between (the differently constructed) centre and periphery (and at the same time provide good rousing party music). The cover of their 1980 album *Rum, Sodomy and The Lash*, based on French romantic painter Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa,* depicts the members of the band out at sea, 'in between worlds', looking for land. The Pogues, in a sense, became a musical companion for certain sectors of the Irish who were/are 'on the move'.

Against the 'singularism' of essentialist conceptions of music, Middleton argues:

. . . the apparent coherence of most musical styles, and the relationship they have with the societies in which they exist, is not 'natural' but contrived, it is the product of cultural work . . . the strength with which particular potentially contradictory relationships are held together depends not only on the degree of objective 'fit' between the components, but also

on the strength of the articulating principle involved, which in turn is connected with objective social force. (Middleton 1990, p. 15)

The problem with narrow definitions of music and nationality is that they may limit the range of music and performance possibilities by closing off options and alternatives. The example of The Pogues, however, illustrates an important point. Traditionalism does not (reductively) always equal conservatism despite what was argued in relation to Horslips. Equally it does not straightforwardly follow that musical texts in themselves are either reactionary or radical. Their meanings are constructed through a complex system of production and consumption contexts and thus have to be struggled over. Middleton's notion of the 'articulating principle' within a wider social context is central to this struggle over meaning.

The tensions in The Pogues (between tradition and travesty, between insult and invocation, between critique and celebration) flows from their layered articulation of Irishness and offers an alternative to the narrow readings suggested by Redhead and implied in valorising them as saviours of the folk tradition. The work of Sinéad O'Connor shows clearly how important 'the articulation principle' can be to the meanings of hybrid musics.

Black boys, ragga and banshees: Sinéad O'Connor and Paddy-a-go-go

Sinéad O'Connor's work in the late 1980s and early 1990s constitutes an exciting combination of new and old sounds and styles. As a highly visible and controversial performer, she has been engaged in some key rearticulations of both musical form and the narratives of Irish stardom. In this sense, she fulfils one of the primary duties of a pop star – not to be dull. Her significance lies in her status as both musician and icon and in the cultural contradictions articulated both in her music and performance and in the discourse about her. In this complex weave we will look first of all at her music.

'Black Boys on Mopeds', from her 1990 album *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got*, is a bare arrangement in the archetypal folk song mode. The vocal is close miked with connotations of intimacy and is accompanied solely by a lightly strummed acoustic guitar. This sparse form serves to focus attention on the narrative offered by the lyric. The song is ostensibly about images of Englishness and attempts to use the Irish ballad form to challenge representations of English romantic pastoralism ('mythical land of Madame George and roses').[4] These are replaced with urban images of a Britain divided along racial lines, where black boys are the victims of police brutality and an endemic racism. What is interesting here is the lyrical association of Irishness and blackness and the mode in which it is utilised in the interchange of 'black boys' and 'my boy', suggesting a common experience of racism in Britain. So here the traditional Irish ballad narrative (a mother's lament about her son and exile from Ireland) eschews the 'easy' sentimentalism associated with the genre and politicises the narrative. Returning to Ireland does not, therefore, refer to a sentimental romantic yearning for a magical homeland, but simply the desire to return to a place where anti-Irish racism is absent. 'Black Boys on Mopeds' pulls together disparate discourses and musical forms – blackness, Irishness, folk song, narratives of home and displacement and their corresponding associations and identities – but mobilises them into new clusters of meaning.

This type of critical reworking and recontextualisation of form and associations is continued in 'I Am Stretched on Your Grave', from the same album and

'Thief of Your Heart', one of the single releases from the film soundtrack to Jim Sheridan's 1994 film, *In the Name of the Father*. However, the musical genres invoked in these songs are pulled together from different areas. Both 'I Am Stretched on Your Grave' and 'Thief of Your Heart' are marked by an eclectic mix of Irish traditional and hip hop rhythms with rock instrumentation. 'I Am Stretched on Your Grave' utilises a Nellee Hooper-produced sparse hip hop/trip hop rhythm track in a similar style to that associated with the dub-inflected hip hop of Massive Attack (and what later became known as 'the Bristol sound'). This is overlaid with a vocal melody in an Irish traditional style composed by Philip King. Steve Wickham's fiddle brings the track to a powerful close, the traditional riff and rhythm accelerating the pace in a manner that both invokes 'traditionalism' but manages to sound 'contemporary' and stylistically novel.

Indeed, it was rare at this time to hear such a meeting of sounds and styles as are yoked together on 'I Am Stretched on Your Grave' but, as we have noted, the success of a hybrid is dependent on the articulating principle involved and the associations attached to the various musical styles yoked together. To tease this out we can compare New York band Paddy-a-go-go's 'Wake Up Irishman' with Sinéad O'Connor's 'I Am Stretched on Your Grave'.

On the surface, Paddy-a-go-go would appear to constitute an interesting hybrid and one with radical potential. Their music is a marriage of the traditional (uillean pipes, bodhran and fiddle) and the contemporary (drum and sequence loops, scratches and samples), appropriating the 'natural' and nostalgic associations of traditionalism and recontextualising them into new spaces with different associations. In one sense, this would appear to conform to the types of interesting cross-cultural, cross-border dialogues described by Iain Chambers (Chambers 1990, 1994), where residual traditional ideologies are apparently broken down into a type of 'in-betweenness' or 'fourth space'. Press reviews in Ireland endorsed the view that the band offered just such a radical form of musical hybridity. Bill Graham announced the band as:

. . . filling a vacuum to which other homebred acts have been sadly indifferent . . . when it works it really works, this album can be devastatingly ear-opening in its signposting of new and previously unfamiliar possible connections that must be explored.

Later, he inducted them into the canon of Irish popular music:

Every so often, we seem to desperately need our new Irish interpreters, bands like Horslips, Moving Hearts, The Pogues and The Saw Doctors who reconnect identifiably Irish musics with the trends beyond our shores and give the national audience a new home team to cheer. . . Auditioning for that absolutely essential role, Paddy-a-go-go. . . (Graham 1995)

The picture that emerges here is that the band represent a radical and adventurous departure from the past while maintaining a place in the canon. Clearly for Bill Graham, Paddy-a-go-go are understood as a (more contemporary) continuation of the legacy of Horslips, where value, both critical and pleasurable, resides in traditional, 'recognisably Irish music' being 'kept alive' within new musical forms. The hybrid, therefore, is here anchored to conservative rather than radical ends. Do they, nonetheless, represent the kind of challenging 'in-betweenness' that we located in The Pogues or in the political reconfiguring of Sinéad O'Connor?

Aesthetically, 'Wake Up Irishman' and 'I Am Stretched on Your Grave' are similar hybrids using sounds and styles with different associations and meanings and bringing them together. However, in performance, the hybrid form is articu-

lated differently in each case and this has implications for the meanings which they suggest. Paddy-a-go-go's song attempts to integrate elements of a ragga vocal with traditional music and hip hop rhythms to overtly political ends. The problem though is that the ragga vocal is extremely unconvincing and comes across as merely comical and absurd. When married to the agit-prop lyric – 'wake up, wake up Irish man, sectarian hatred me no understand' – the articulating principle appears strained in a desperate attempt to link the political radicalism associated with Jamaican styles with an American voice that is simultaneously attempting to sound Irish. The song takes as its basis a reading of hip hop, ragga and black styles as already and intrinsically oppositional and attempts to integrate Irish and black struggles as similar types of resistance. This also raises an interesting question about Irish attitudes to the Irish diaspora and the sometimes absurd imaginings of Irish-Americans. In Ireland, two traits are stereotypically assigned to the Irish-American: romantic imaginings of Ireland and the Irish and a reputation for crude musings about Irish politics and history. Much of what is comical about Paddy-a-go-go is the naive political commentary offered by the lyric and the absurd manner in which musical conventions are hybridised in support. This is not to attempt, in a sense, to police hybrids. It is not that hip hop and Irish elements cannot and should not be integrated (because clearly they can, with culturally disruptive results). Rather, it is the articulating principle involved here that is the problem.

Given this fact, what is surprising is the critical reception afforded Paddy-a-go-go in Ireland, being inducted warmly into the Irish rock 'family' while, for example, fellow Irish-Americans, House of Pain, with whom Paddy-a-go-go once toured, are excluded. As Jackie Hayden, concluding his review of a live Paddy-a-go-go performance in Dublin, writes: 'they unequivocally expose bands like House of Pain for the contrived, pretentious sham-rappers we always suspected they were' (Hayden 1995).

Hybridity itself, therefore, is not always cherished. Ironically, as Barbara Bradby has argued, House of Pain are significant precisely because of the hostility towards them within Ireland, and because they self-consciously parody aspects of Irish 'authenticity'. Their MC is called 'Danny Boy' and they conspicuously advertise via sleeve notes 'their finest malt lyrics' (Bradby 1989). The implication is that their more challenging hybrid response to Irishness is less acceptable in Ireland itself than Paddy-a-go-go's safe and naive familiarity.

This raises an interesting issue. Why are certain hybrids included in the Irish rock/Irish musical canon and others are not, and what types of definitional authority are at work in this selection process? Martin Stokes points out in an anthropological study that includes a discussion of Irish musics:

'Irish traditional' music is . . . one of the many ways in which public recreational space is intensely politicised. Where political issues are at stake, questions of (musical) definition assume great importance. (Stokes 1994, p. 9).

As Martin Stokes has affirmed, Irish traditional music plays a role in marking out political territory, and frequently traditional sounds, however combined, have nationalist meanings, irrespective of intent (Stokes 1994, pp. 9–10). Conversely, as noted, the marriage of traditionalism, folk and pop elements has the capacity to offend purists (as with Horslips and The Pogues) with attendant arguments about the dilution of the national heritage for the purposes of 'pop' novelty. Given this, it is hardly surprising that some hybrids involving traditional music prove to be controversial.

It also raises the interesting question as to why some hybrids are (or are deemed to be) more successful in an aesthetic and cultural sense than others, and returns us to the question of whether hybridity, in itself, is ever a template for a culturally resonant text.

In the case of Sinéad O'Connor, what makes her challenging is the way in which she employs a range of performance strategies deliberately to unsettle and disturb traditional notions of Irishness (and Irish female singers). While 'Black Boys on Mopeds' is by no means a radical text, it nonetheless significantly alters the representational thrust of other Irish women singers by avoiding much of the senti-mentality that is characteristic of singer-songwriters such as Dolores Keane, Mary Black or Eleanor McEvoy. The latter rarely move out of a discourse about feminin-ity, offering lyrically, musically and in performance, a more traditional equation of the feminine with the 'soft', the romantic, the pastoral and the home. Their vocal style, lyric and composition do not set out to unsettle, and 'home' is often yearned for in idealised pastoral romantic terms.

What also distinguishes Sinéad O'Connor's work is her voice and vocal interpretations. Unlike the soft romanticism of her female contemporaries, O'Con-nor's vocal style is less restrained, the timbre harder. She is renowned for a vocal range that can 'jump from a whisper to a holler' and is often described as 'wailing', redolent of the tradition of 'keening', a vocal style with primitivist rural associations which she uses in the rock music context as a form of punk articulation. Aspects of O'Connor's famed 'bolshiness' are articulated in use of voice and microphone technique – close miked crooning to distant miked 'banshee wail'. This in turn is often poly-vocalised via double or multi-tracking, jumping from soothing intimacy (frequently confessional) to a hardened timbre (rebuke) to great shock effect.

The challenge represented by Sinéad O'Connor is not only consolidated through the terms of address embodied in musical and vocal style, but it is also extended into her status as 'icon'. Until recently, her shaved head was the most prominent feature of this, but the look was completed with Dr. Marten boots, three-quarter-length blue jeans and white tee shirt. This was a self-conscious appropri-ation of skinhead iconography, associated with the racist subculture in Britain (though by no means exclusively so). Here it is rearticulated onto the body of an Irish woman. The contrast with the more traditionally 'feminine' aesthetic of Mary Black and others is striking. In addition to this, Sinéad O'Connor's relationship to Irish culture has been turbulent. She has managed to extend the agenda of Irish rock and pop by bringing populist feminist concerns to her work. Both lyrically and in political statements she has consistently made pro-abortion, pro-choice state-ments and become infamous for vehement anti-Catholic rhetoric. (The song 'Three Babies', for example, from the 1990 album *I Do Not Want What I Have Not Got* is also featured on the soundtrack to Margo Harkin's feminist film *Hush-a-Bye Baby* (1989), in which O'Connor played one of the main characters).

Inevitably, though, within rock criticism any complexity and contradiction is swept aside and O'Connor is assigned to a familiar discourse about nature. Thus Nuala O'Connor writes, 'she has a strong true voice which needs neither accompaniment nor studio effects to show it off' (O'Connor 1991, p. 131). This description again employs the trope about nature and a preindustrial purity which, as we have seen before, is the primary means of conferring a sense of Irish authen-ticity.

While she publicly disavows the notion of Ireland as being anything other than a twentieth-

century society, her choice of material and singing style belie this. The vocal influences, particularly the emphasis on the solo voice, are Irish and pre-pop. 'I Am Stretched on Your Grave' is frequently mistaken for 'the real thing', an Irish traditional song (O'Connor 1991, p. 131).

She is praised for the apparent 'naturalness' and 'purity' of her voice and 'the absence of studio trickery'. Other elements of the O'Connor persona are filtered out, deemed irrelevant, as having no purchase on 'the music' and its pre-modern power. This validation of 'naturalness' is read onto and is not an intrinsic property of her voice and is, of course, a means of avoiding complication. It could be argued just as persuasively that O'Connor's voice is unnatural – hard, twisted and painful. Like any other popular music vocalist, her voice makes extensive use of studio techniques.

Sinéad O'Connor's work is interesting, then, because of the tensions set up within the various levels of articulation involved: the voice, its associations and the way it recalls and articulates biography and political stance; the play on prior folk and traditional conventions and song narratives; the subversion of aspects of the lyrical confessional and the pulling together of disparate styles and genres.[5] This does not, of course, prevent her from being coopted to nostalgic, familiar and clichéd discourses of 'Irishness', as we have seen, but O'Connor and her music straddles the analytical division between the national and the nationalist. As a performer and as a star she is best understood as caught in a dialectic between unsettling pre-existing national imaginings and then reworking them on the one hand, while on the other she is critically praised for the manner in which she is seen to consolidate just such traditional imaginings.

Conclusion: a critical regionalism?

Irish popular music continues to be framed within the hegemonic thrust of both nationalist and international expectations of what Irish music should be, pushing out to the margins a range of styles and identities that do not conform to these centralised conceptions. Thus even in the case of an artist as unsettling as Sinéad O'Connor, the performance is often filtered for the appropriate registers and the artist recuperated for a sense of Irish identity that she has, herself, actively challenged. This ideological *pas-de-deux* is played out where the local meets the global – where the struggle to address essentialist limitations internally meets a fear of cultural domination externally. Rock music is a resonant site where this dialectic is played out, but in Ireland, as elsewhere, it is not the only one.

In discussing the emerging Irish cinema of the last decade or so, McLoone has appropriated Kenneth Frampton's concept of 'critical regionalism' to describe what is most characteristic in the best of recent Irish film-making and to promote the concept of a 'cinema of national questioning' (McLoone 1994, pp. 168–9; Frampton 1985). What is interesting about the notion of 'critical regionalism' is that it might suggest a useful distinction between a local culture which seeks blandly to celebrate national difference (and which posits an essentialist definition of this) and that which sets out to critique, interrogate or extend the local/national in a manner that is sensitive to both local specificity and global context. Culture is formed at the interface of the local and the global, between the periphery and the centre, and the trick is to succumb to neither 'a self-defeating essentialism nor a self-abusing domination' (McLoone 1994, p. 153).

In a similar way, this discussion has attempted to define and give support to the idea of a regionalised popular music culture that operates in tension with, and is even critical of, dominant notions of national identity. Thus an interesting and successful Irish music need not have to pander to the familiar expectations of 'Irishness' that exist in wider circulation, nor assume that only forms of traditional music can act as registers of musical identity (as in the case of Van Morrison). We have attempted to unpack key hybrid texts which do employ traditional idioms and to describe how they work and how they might be understood, arguing that a simple celebration of hybrids is not enough. Furthermore, we have concluded that musical hybrids which in some sense challenge residual and conservative norms within musical forms (like The Pogues or much of the music of Sinéad O'Connor) appear significant and of value in the manner in which they permit the articulation of identities and pleasures ignored at the centre. Where musical strategies have attempted to challenge a narrow definition of identity, they often do so at the risk of opprobrium from purists or, more worryingly, find themselves reconfigured and filtered to meet dominant expectations (as in the case of Horslips, The Pogues and O'Connor again). The more challenging the music (The House of Pain, for example), the greater the risk that it will be excluded and marginalised by those agencies, internal and external, which act as the arbiters of what gets made, distributed and valorised. The 'liminal spaces' of the local/global interface are, in a sense, cultural war zones, and the experience of Irish popular music clearly demonstrates that radical strategies and 'strategic essentialism' are both fraught with difficulties and dangers. As Van Morrison has said, however, 'It's too late to stop now!'

Endnotes

1. For this reason, we do not discuss the impact of punk music in Ireland. This was, of course, both considerable and diverse, especially across three main urban centres, Derry and Belfast in the north, and Dublin in the south. Punk helped to create the climate and infrastructure which would propel the growth of popular music production in Ireland (including the emergence of U2). However, punk's characteristic attack on 'establishment' values, including those of popular music, involved a rejection of the 'traditional' in favour of an 'international' idiom of challenge and confrontation.

2. The Pogues were originally called Pogue Mahone (Irish: 'Póg mo thóin', meaning 'kiss my arse') until an Irish-speaking RTÉ producer spotted the reference and ushered in the abbreviation.

3. This frequently resulted in confrontation. In an interview with B.P. Fallon on Irish radio in 1985, sections of the press and a group of traditionalists hurled insults and expletives at the group. Commercial success was to gradually see the Pogues' absorption into the national rock canon.

4. Significantly, there is no Madame George in English mythology or history. The most famous 'Madame George' is, of course, the central song on Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks*. This has led some critics (associated with *Hot Press*) to interpret 'Black Boys on Mopeds' as a barbed critique of the pastoralism in much of Van Morrison's work and, by association, as a comment on the fact that Van Morrison refuses to deal with the specifics of anti-Irish 'racism' in Northern Ireland, preferring to offer a romanticised vision of Belfast and Northern Ireland. Whether this is the case or not, the reference is certainly puzzling.

5. This is not, however, to imply that all of O'Connor's hybrid experiments are successful. On her 1995 album *Universal Mother*, the track 'Famine', a rap about the Irish famine in a hip hop rhythm, suffers from many of the same problems as 'Stand up Irishman'. However, here the paradox inherent in postcolonial theory's 'liminal spaces' is apparent. O'Connor attempts to offer an alternative reading of Irish history that is neither essentialist in a narrow nationalist sense nor amnesiac in a revisionist sense. Her application to Ireland of the 'abused child' metaphor is intriguing, but here allows for a complexity that is ultimately confusing.

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