

## Off the record: Irish traditional musicians and the music industry

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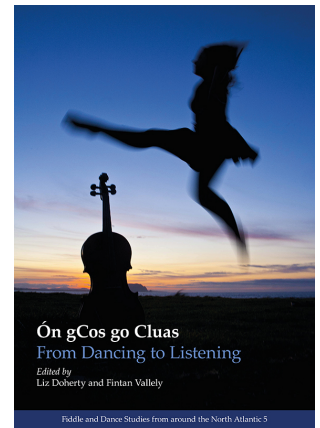
### From Dancing to Listening

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

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## Off the record: Irish traditional musicians and the music industry

LEAH O'BRIEN BERNINI

The music industry, the institutionalisation of the production of music commodities for profit, is a largely-unexamined nexus of dynamic, coded, and ritualised performance interaction. Within it, artists, producers, musicians, and audio engineers – sometimes with conflicting agendas – must constantly negotiate a delicate, often skewed balance of power. Professional musicians and singers continuously traverse the delicate ‘balance between commerce and art [...] between the urge to create and the opportunity to profit from that creation’.<sup>1</sup> Professional artists originating from traditional-music communities face additional challenges as they transform communal traditional music, which had typically been for dance accompaniment, into a stand-alone, presentational commodity. These artists often have to reconcile conflicting desires such as a sense of responsibility to ‘the tradition’ with the decision to commercially exploit that tradition to earn a living. Such negotiation can significantly influence artists’ creative processes, business decisions, and perceptions of self. In examining how traditional music interacts with the global commercial system, my research focuses on the intersection of traditional music and capitalism as experienced by prominent Irish traditional artists, music industry personnel, and employees of the largest contemporary Irish/Celtic record label, Compass Records.

I use participant-observation and personal interviews to add essential, hitherto-missing voices – those of the artists and the industry personnel – to the current ethnomusicological understanding of the music industry. Long-term, ethnographic and ideographic studies of record labels and the commercial recording studio presently are but a small (albeit growing) sub-genre of ethnomusicology. The upsurge in student engagement with ethnographic popular music studies since 2007 is now bringing ethnomusicology into the world of commercial music, something that can be seen when reviewing trends in conference-paper topics and MA and PhD projects.<sup>2</sup>

Yet two issues still distinguish ‘ethnomusicology’ from ‘popular music studies’: the use of ethnography and of music analysis. But a few ethnomusicologists have pioneered conceptual frameworks for music-industry ethnomusicology in order to bridge ethnomusicology over to popular music studies. When fieldwork methods are tailored to

fit the commercial context, I have found that the music industry can provide meaningful, evocative, and substantial context for ethnomusicological analysis. Two people pioneering such conceptual frameworks are Timothy Taylor (UCLA) and David Pruett (UMass Boston); my own PhD work explores this too – the commodification of music experience.

### **The issues**

Excluding some outstanding exceptions, too many extant ethnomusicological studies of popular music and the music industry have been deficient in varying ways, such as primary-source ethnographic content, music analysis, or in-depth theorisation. In the commercial music industry, multiple agendas of the artist's label, producer, and audio engineers may ultimately obscure the artist's creative intentions. Therefore it is problematic to attempt to derive artists' intentions and meaning from recorded commercial music or other published media. As Taylor explains, previous music-industry studies were typically structured around unacknowledged biases, thus lacking reflexivity and historicisation, and so they tended to ignore the capitalist process with which commercial music is inextricably linked.<sup>3</sup> Such studies depicted an irreconcilable dichotomy between the interests of musicians and those of the music industry, risking misleading readers, dehumanising participants, and devaluing the field of ethnomusicology. Despite shortcomings, however, these earlier studies did indicate the broad range of challenges that the music industry posed for musicians, their creative processes, and their music products, and thus helped inspire later ethnographic popular-music studies.

In my ethnographic study of Irish traditional musicians in the music industry, I have followed the examples of Taylor and Pruett in constructing a conceptual framework wedding ethnomusicology and popular music studies to social theory. I have found the works of certain theorists more helpful than others, among them Bourdieu, Adorno, Marx, Hall, Erlmann, Frith, and Appadurai. I was introduced to the business side of commercial Irish traditional music while working at the Nashville-based music label Compass Records Group, the largest Irish and Celtic music label. My initial research set out to explore where and how traditional music and musicians fitted into the global commercial system based on the experiences of numerous prominent Irish traditional artists and music-industry personnel. That research is based upon open-interview discussions with forty-five industry and artist participants, some of whom are the most successful people in the business.

### **Findings**

Through this work I have come to a few preliminary conclusions that have been contextualised by my personal experiences in several Irish traditional music communities: Compass Records, the Irish World Academy, Belmont University Schools of Music and Music Business, and the Nashville music industry. Firstly, it would seem that professional artists view themselves along a continuum of perceived control: from believing in their near-complete autonomy to believing they have relinquished their freedom and control entirely. Where, why, and when artists perceive their place along this continuum affects their personal and professional lives.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, it seems that artists who embrace marketing are generally more savvy about the business of music.<sup>5</sup> They may be more likely to expand outside

their immediate social circles than artists who choose to not actively market themselves.<sup>6</sup> However, artists who assign a disproportionate amount of effort to their business at the expense of music integrity, with the intention of achieving a mainstream appeal, seem less-popular within the traditional communities while appearing significantly more successful (in monetary and popularity terms) among mainstream audiences.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, throughout this research integrity in music creation and performance is a reoccurring theme. Many of the most popular and respected traditional-music commercial artists say they value integrity in performance, and view Irish traditional music as primarily a vehicle for communication and emotional expression.

Artists' emphasis on 'integrity' can be distinguished from 'authenticity'. Authenticity, or 'the authentic', in performance (and even in academic discourse) is a highly-contested concept. To these artists, 'authenticity' is not interchangeable with 'integrity'. Rather, in commodified performance it seems to refer to an external judgment of the product or music-outcome using subjective criteria. 'Integrity' seems to refer to the artist creating with a pure intention. In music performance (and the translation of integrity into commodified form) 'integrity' is both a personal aim of such musicians and a marker for judging the work of their peers – judging the way the product was created (integrity) rather than judging the product (authenticity). Finally, artists who are both commercially successful and respected within their community often possess four qualities; they:

1. maintain integrity in their performance and translate it into commoditised performance;
2. embrace marketing;
3. are virtuosos in their field;
4. incorporate external ideas from outside of a conservative understanding of 'tradition'.

Martin Hayes is one such traditional musician who is respected both inside and outside his music community. According to him:

My business plan is really to play very well, and if that doesn't work – to improve and develop [...] also to take every concert very seriously, and actually endeavour to communicate and express to the audience that I play for. And to find a musical experience for myself, share that musical experience, and basically trust life after that.<sup>8</sup>

With regard to 'going commercial', one esteemed fiddle player and teacher in the Irish tradition expressed strong beliefs about integrity in performance:

I've seen a great band [that] signed to a major label, and there was a lot of money involved, and they started to compromise straight away. And I think at that level, particularly because it's a folk music, and it's the voice of the people, I think you have a massive responsibility not to sell out [...] I find everything is disturbed by money, to be honest, so it's how far you're willing to compromise yourself for a concept [...] I have seen musicians who go on stages and it's frightening how far they are willing to go [...] We do talk about musical prostitution [...] But [the music industry is] [...] aware that the market knows fuck-all about Irish music, because if they did, they wouldn't buy it [...] To get to the root [of trad], it's like being a person. It's like [the] level of how good a person do you want to be? And when I say 'good', I don't mean 'well-behaved'.

I mean, as 'a thing' – how far do you want to explore what you are or [what] your possibilities are, and are you willing to put the effort in to do that? That's trad to me.<sup>9</sup>

### Conclusion

These examples point toward generalisations that require further exploration. Further research could help illuminate what attracts audiences to Irish and other traditional musics and what motivates those artists to commoditise their music. Much seems to depend on what the artist wants out of their business, what they are willing to put in, what they are willing to give, and what (or if) they are willing to sacrifice to achieve their goals. Examining how professional Irish traditional musicians experience and interact with the music industry helps reveal how professional musicians negotiate the intersection of commerce and art, the commodification of music experience. It also shows that the interaction between musicians and the hegemony of the music industry has much to offer future investigations in areas such as identity, the performativity of self, negotiation of public image, perceptions of agency, the creative process, hegemony/resistance, and commodification/commercialisation. Such work on and within the music industry offers fruitful possibilities for an engaged and applied ethnomusicology. As consumers and stewards of music, I believe we require a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how commodification affects musicians and their music, and we should use our skills and knowledge to help artists navigate the industry.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bill Whelan, 'Ireland and the Global Culture Market: A Creator's View', presented at the *International Association of Music Information Centres Annual Meeting*, (Dublin Castle, Ireland, 11 June 2010), <http://soundcloud.com/cmcireland/future-of-music-in-the-digital-world-bill-whelan> [accessed 15 June 2018].

<sup>2</sup> For example: Janet Meryl Krieger, 'Rough to the Board: Creating Performance in American Recording Studios' (unpublished PhD thesis, Indiana University, 2009); David B. Pruett, '*MuzikMafia*: Community, Identity, and Change from the Nashville Scene to the Popular Mainstream' (unpublished PhD thesis, Florida State University School of Music, 2007); Eliot Bates, 'Social Interactions, Musical Arrangement, and the Production of Digital Audio in Istanbul Recording Studios' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of California: Berkeley, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Taylor, personal interview, 8 June 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Tommy Peoples, personal interview, 2011; Martin Hayes, person interview, 30 March 2011; Taylor (2011).

<sup>5</sup> Hayes (2011); Dónal Lunny, personal interview, 30 June 2011; Peoples (2011); Gary West, personal interview, 8 June 2011; Helene Dunbar, personal interview, 4 June 2011.

<sup>6</sup> West (2011); Dunbar (2011); Taylor (2011); Michael Londra, Skype interview, 29 June 2011; Hayes (2011).

<sup>7</sup> Londra (2011); John Spillane, personal interview, 15 March 2011; West (2011); Peoples (2011).

<sup>8</sup> Hayes (2011).

<sup>9</sup> Anon [name withheld by request], personal interview, 24 February 2011.