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The Jazz Seen: An Ethnographic View of Contemporary Jazz in Northern Ireland

Abstract: This article analyses the development and the characteristics of the contemporary jazz scene in Northern Ireland with a special focus on Belfast. Jazz was introduced in Ireland in the early 20th century when the country fought for its independence, leading to its partition in 1921. In the Irish Free State, the music was originally seen as subversive within a morally conservative state, while in Northern Ireland, its traditional form was firmly rooted until the 1970s. While the Dublin scene became a hub for musicians by the late 1960s, the Belfast scene picked up from the 1990s on. In order to better understand the development of the music in Northern Ireland, an ethnographic approach that involves the researcher with the object of his study is necessary, thus allowing to penetrate a small but vibrant community that created its own subculture.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, jazz, subculture, ethnography, modernity.

Résumé: Cet article analyse l'évolution et les caractéristiques de la scène jazz contemporaine en Irlande du Nord, avec un accent particulier sur Belfast. Le jazz a été introduit en Irlande au début du XX^e siècle lorsque le pays luttait pour son indépendance, conduisant à sa partition en 1921. Dans l'État libre d'Irlande, la musique était à l'origine considérée comme subversive au sein d'un État moralement conservateur, tandis qu'en Irlande du Nord, sa forme traditionnelle s'est affirmée jusque dans les années 1970. Alors que Dublin est devenue une plaque tournante pour les musiciens à la fin des années 1960, Belfast s'est davantage imposée comme scène musicale à partir des années 1990. Afin de mieux comprendre l'évolution de la musique en Irlande du Nord, une approche ethnographique impliquant le chercheur dans l'objet de son étude est nécessaire, permettant ainsi d'accéder à une petite communauté dynamique qui a créé sa propre sous-culture.

Mots clés: Irlande du Nord, jazz, sous-culture, ethnographie, modernité.

In one of the central scenes of Ken Loach's film *Jimmy's Hall* (2014), Father Sheridan solemnly addresses a fearful, humbled and static congregation from his overlooking pulpit: "Jazz music: rhythms from the darkest Africa that inflame the passions. Pelvic thrust, salacious body-grabbing, instead of the elegance and beauty of our own Irish dances".

For him, this alien music has a morally and sexually subversive nature that characterises new aspirations, "this craze for pleasure, this fascination for the materialist and most recently, the pagan and the Anglo-Saxon". This music, played at Jimmy Gralton's Dance Hall, comes along equally subversive political ideas: "But there is even more evil hatching in that Hall, Gralton and his crew are communists. They are atheists, they deny the existence of God".

Father Sheridan makes it clear that jazz and communism jeopardise the true nature of Irishness in the nascent Irish Free State. “What is wrong with being true to ourselves, to our deepest roots, to our own true Irish values?”, he goes on. His views contrast with scenes of the dance hall that alternatively punctuate his speech. The dancers are equally at ease with traditional Irish dances and jazz, the transition between one dance and the other being shown as natural and smooth. Both types of music share a common instrument: the banjo. Jazz is also adopted by the old generation, with Jimmy Gralton’s mother naturally tapping the second and fourth beats that characterise the swing of the music. Earlier in the film, people who attend alternative activities at Jimmy’s Hall are introduced to the new music through the gramophone, an odd feature of modernity to them. After their initial giggles, uneasiness and the non-offensive banter about black people in the United States, the participants joyfully learn the steps to the new dance.

The way jazz music is represented in the film goes beyond the historical period in which the story unfolds, i.e. the Irish Free State in the 1930s. It reveals the subversive, rebellious and avant-garde nature of jazz and the tensions between tradition and modernity that underpins the music itself. This is supported by two major works in the field. Howard S. Becker, a sociologist and jazz musician, devoted two chapters of his 1960s study on deviance in the music along with his analysis of marijuana consumption¹. Similarly, historian Eric Hobsbawm underlined these aspects of the music in his collection of articles in *The Jazz Scene* and *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz*, published respectively in 1959 and 1999². In the introduction to the former he states:

[Jazz] has made its way as a music which people made and participated in actively and socially, and not one for passive acceptance; as a hard and realistic art and not sentimental maundering; as a noncommercial music, and above all as a music of protest (including the protest against the exclusiveness of minority culture)³.

Later in a chapter entitled “Jazz as a Protest” he further expands, thus echoing the views expressed in the film *Jimmy’s Hall*:

In this chapter I wish to suggest [...] jazz is not simply an ordinary music, light or heavy, but also a music of protest and rebellion. It is not necessarily or always a music of conscious and overt political protest, let alone any particular brand of political protest; though in the West, in so far as it has had political links, they have been pretty invariably with the left. [...] But its very nature and origins jazz therefore expresses some kinds of protest and heterodoxy and lends itself to the expression of others. The mere fact that it originates among oppressed and unconsidered people, and is looked down upon by orthodox society, can make the simple listening to jazz records into a gesture of social dissent⁴.

1. Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* [1963], New York, Free Press, 2018.

2. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Jazz Scene* [1959], London, Faber & Faber, 2014; Eric Hobsbawm, *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz*, London, Abacus, 1999.

3. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Jazz Scene*, p. liii (introduction to the original edition).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 230 and 239.

This last sentence resonates in Ireland, often described as a land of the oppressed and yet where conservative and orthodox forces are at play. How far has jazz music penetrated Irish culture which, to the candid observer, seems more defined by its traditional music or since the 1990s by famous pop and rock bands like U2, The Corrs and The Cranberries? The author of the article, both an academic and a jazz musician, has experienced the lack of “obvious” visibility of jazz in the country.

As a regular visitor to Belfast for the last thirty years, I only became aware of Northern Ireland’s thriving jazz scene in 2015, when I played my first gig with local musicians. This gig was organised through the owner of an alternative bookshop called No Alibis, located on Botanic Avenue near Queen’s University. Over the years, David Torrans has extended his activities to organising book launches by local novelists, public lectures and poetry readings, and putting together jazz concerts with both local and international musicians, thus making his bookshop a cultural hub where artists meet.

After this initial gig, I played with various other jazzmen and in other venues, gradually discovering a whole community and network organised around this music and spreading across the whole of the island.

I then realised that, like Howard S. Becker or Eric Hobsbawm, one had to be somehow related to the music itself (either a player or an aficionado) to be able to have access to a minority cultural form that is not, at first sight, visible. The lack of research in this music in Ireland supports the idea that the jazz scene is best approached by an insider.

That is why the study of jazz in Ireland, and for the present article in Northern Ireland, requires both an ethnological and a historical approach with an insider-outsider perspective. This allows a closer understanding of the place and of the development of jazz on a seemingly unfertile soil.

Researching jazz: an insider-outsider perspective

Researching the jazz scene in Northern Ireland came out of my own interest and participation in it since 2015. It also came with the realisation that the place and the history of jazz had received scarce attention from academia while a vibrant and active community of musicians and a series of venues existed especially in Belfast and, to a lesser degree, in Derry. My initial instinct was to use my relationships with those musicians and my experience as a performer there to bring this subculture to the fore. Adopting a participant observer’s approach for this study was later confirmed in the books and research that will be the backbone of this article. Their authors have all used their involvement in the music – either as a performer or a fan – to analyse various aspects of the jazz scene.

In 2016, Damian Evans completed the first PhD on the Dublin jazz scene for which he carried out an ethnographic study⁵. In his introduction, he states,

5. Damian Evans, *The Creation of Meaning and Identity in the Dublin Jazz Scene, Past and Present*, PhD thesis, Technical University Dublin, 2016, on line: <https://arrow.dit.ie/appadoc/71>.

I do not approach the Dublin jazz scene as a passive, unbiased observer. [...] I am both an insider on the Dublin jazz scene and an outsider. This is not an entirely unusual position to be in as a researcher or as a musician, and I do not point it out as a negative factor, merely to be clear as to my own pathway through and position in the Dublin jazz scene⁶.

The justification of his method, which follows in the tradition of the Chicago School studies in sociology, also clearly underlines the relations between the object and the subject of research in the Humanities. Norbert Elias analysed these relations in *Involvement and Detachment*, in which he concluded that in the social sciences, unlike natural science, the boundary between the object and the subject was blurred, and the researcher was more or less detached, or more or less involved:

C'est la tâche des chercheurs en sciences sociales que de trouver les moyens de comprendre les configurations mouvantes que les hommes tissent entre eux, la nature de ces liaisons ainsi que la structure de cette évolution. Les chercheurs sont eux-mêmes inscrits dans la trame de ces motifs. Ils ne peuvent s'empêcher – car ils sont immédiatement concernés – de les vivre de l'intérieur ou par identification⁷.

Cornelius Castoriadis also supported this view concerning historians whom he considered as part of the history they were writing,

Lorsqu'on parle de l'histoire, qui parle? [...] c'est un être historique. Or cela même, qui fonde la possibilité d'une connaissance historique (car seul un être historique peut avoir une expérience de l'histoire et en parler), interdit que cette connaissance puisse jamais acquérir le statut d'un savoir achevé et transparent [...]. Avoir une expérience de l'histoire en tant qu'être historique c'est être dans et de l'histoire, comme aussi être dans et de la société⁸.

Research objects and subjects being intertwined in various respects discards the figure of the ideal “unbiased observer” that Damian Evans evokes. Sociologist Edgar Morin goes even further in explaining the vulnerable position of the researcher:

Le sujet ici réintégré n'est pas l'Ego métaphysique, fondement et juge suprême de toutes choses. C'est le sujet vivant, aléatoire, insuffisant, vacillant, modeste, qui introduit sa propre finitude⁹.

This interplay at work in the knowledge process strikes a chord with the essence of jazz music that Damian Evans hints at in the introduction to his PhD thesis. He draws parallels between “developing new methods of interaction within a jazz trio” and studying “jazz performance as experienced by its practitioners”¹⁰. Indeed,

6. Damian Evans, *The Creation of Meaning and Identity...*, p. xi and xiv.

7. Norbert Elias, *Engagement et distanciation*, Michèle Hulin (trans.), Paris, Fayard, 1993, p. 24.

8. Cornelius Castoriadis, *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, Paris, Seuil, 1975, p. 48-50.

9. Edgar Morin, *La méthode*, t. III, *La connaissance de la connaissance*, Paris, Seuil, 1986, p. 22.

10. Damian Evans, *The Creation of Meaning and Identity...*, p. xiv.

jazz puts a particular emphasis on the interplay between musicians and values the performance itself as a creative moment when listening to each other and using instinct is important. One could object that this is true of any music genre, but it is even more specific to jazz as the music relies on improvisation within the framework of a partially-written music. Most music scores, and especially jazz standards, only display a melody written on a staff with chords transcribed in letters (A, B, C...) on the staff below. This leaves the musicians freedom to harmonically arrange those chords according to the melody. During the performance of a tune, musicians are able to subtly respond to each other's harmonies and rhythms with a view that each performance will be different and new.

Damian Evans' methodology based on the insider-outsider approach is supported by previous research. In his literature review, he explains how researchers in jazz studies have gradually adopted an ethnomusicological stance coupled with anthropological and sociological methods. The focus on the insider's experience allows us to move away from musicological analytical frameworks that tend to consider music from a neutral and universal perspective, to take into account the performance and the non-visible musicians – as opposed to the “great men” of jazz. Evans' approach to the Dublin jazz scene is informed by various authors who alternatively studied musicians' introduction to jazz, the practice of their instrument, the way they compose and improvise and the interaction that occurs during a performance both within the band and with the audience. The practice of jazz can also be viewed as a way of life or as belonging to “a jazz community”, which means people who share an interest in jazz and in its culture. The concept of “jazz scene” that includes the network of musicians, venues, the record industry and the media is paramount to understanding the music globally. Studying the jazz scene allows us to investigate “cultural events that are of great importance to people yet go in many ways unnoticed and unstudied”¹¹. Finally, being a musician himself, the academic is better equipped to have access to and to understand his research object.

This is the case of Howard S. Becker who published a major sociological investigation in the workings of what he defined as deviant people in the 1960s in the United States. Part of his study is concerned with jazz musicians that he calls “dance musicians”¹². As a professional pianist, he observed the musicians' behaviours and attitudes “in a variety of situations that made up their work and leisure lives”¹³. To him, studying their way of life is essential to understand their subculture as a somehow “deviant” group, as “their culture and their way of life are sufficiently bizarre and unconventional for them to be labelled as outsiders by more conventional members of the community”¹⁴. This brings us back to the attitudes expressed in the film *Jimmy's Hall* and is of interest for this study on the Northern Ireland jazz scene that operates as a subculture and is less visible within the other mainstream cultures.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

12. Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders...*, p. 77.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

Howard S. Becker studies the relationship between musicians and their audience, relying on the presumption that musicians are members of a service occupation that “plays popular music for money”¹⁵. Interestingly, the tensions arising from this relationship explain aspects of their beliefs and attitudes which is summed up in the word “square” that musicians use to speak of people who do not share their values. In a mirror effect, outsiders consider those who do not agree with their way of life as outsiders.

Jazz musicians see themselves as a subgroup endowed with a “mysterious artistic gift”¹⁶ inaccessible to people outside their group, and as leading unconventional lives according to unconventional values. In short,

The musician thus sees himself as a creative artist who should be free from outside control, a person different from and better than those outsiders he calls squares who understand neither his music nor his way of life and yet because of whom he must perform in a manner contrary to his professional ideals¹⁷.

To solve this conflict, the musician can give in to his audience and “go commercial” or socially isolate himself further from the rest of the population. His career is also dependent on the tension between artistic freedom and commercial music. He gets hired through various networks that operate at different levels – from weddings to more prestigious and steady jobs in bands playing in renowned clubs. In each network or “clique”, members secure jobs for each other and are bound by “mutual obligation”¹⁸. Networks that provide job security and success tend to be more commercial and the jazz musician is once again faced with the dilemma of safeguarding his artistic integrity or going commercial.

This tension and other features of jazz music are described in historian Eric Hobsbawm’s *The Jazz Scene*, a collection of articles¹⁹ and essays he wrote on the subject and first published in 1959. Like the previous authors, his interest in jazz as an academic also comes from his passion for it. He opened the introduction to the 1993 edition of his book with the following words:

Discovering jazz, as the Czech writer and jazz-buff Josef Skvorecky has said, is, for most people, rather like first love – on the whole it is more lasting – and it usually happens at very much the same time. In the case of the writer it happened at the age of sixteen [...] ²⁰.

This introduction, written in the tradition of *ego histoire*²¹, explains how the author developed his taste for jazz and how, from being an aficionado, he started to

15. Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders...*, p. 79.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

19. Columns for the *New Statesman*.

20. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Jazz Scene*, p. xiii.

21. Historical approach developed by French historian Pierre Nora. The historian analyses his own history and methods in a reflexive way (*Essais d'ego-histoire*, Pierre Nora (ed.), Paris, Gallimard, 1987).

be commissioned by the *New Statesman*, as an academic, to write articles about it, which seemed an “odd combination” at the time. It “struck both jazz and non-jazz people as [...] bizarre. [...] A historian who also writes about jazz is still considered in many quarters as freaky, in some way, though attractively so”²².

He sketches out the evolution of jazz as a tension and oscillation between tradition, mainstream and *avant-garde* music and ponders over its future development.

[...] [as] a central concern for anyone concerned with twentieth-century society and the twentieth-century arts [...] jazz has shown extraordinary powers of survival and self-renewal inside a society not designed for it and which does not deserve it²³.

This reminds us of the isolated place of jazz in society. Hobsbawm insists that “jazz is unofficial, unestablished and unpredictable, or it is nothing”²⁴. This uncompromising remark also supports Becker’s argument that the jazz musician is an outsider. Hobsbawm joins Becker when he indicates that “a rejection of success [...] is characteristic of *avant-gardes*, and jazz, which has always lived by the paying customer, concessions to the box office seemed particularly dangerous to the player who wanted the status of ‘artist’”²⁵ and “the very essence of jazz is that it is *not* standardized or mass-produced”²⁶.

This explains why it is seen as a minority music with its players and the community around them forming a subculture that is uneasy to penetrate.

Jazz in Ireland: from hostility to adhesion

To understand the current jazz scene in Northern Ireland, it is necessary to highlight the salient periods in which jazz developed on the island as a whole. It originally developed in a hostile environment, notably in the Irish Free State. Before the 1920s, Ireland, as part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and like other European countries, came into contact with early forms of the music through minstrel shows. These shows originated in the United States in the 19th century and consisted of music and dance performance by mostly white people made up in blackface that portrayed black people in a derogatory way. Blackface minstrel shows can be traced back to 1936 in Ireland and various bands including those with Irish players performed in the major cities²⁷. Despite the campaign of the Irish abolitionist movement, the blackface minstrel shows strongly influenced the construction of a racist stereotype of black Americans in Ireland. In the early

22. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Jazz Scene*, p. xviii.

23. *Ibid.*, p. xix and xxii.

24. *Ibid.*, p. xxxviii.

25. *Ibid.*, p. xxxii.

26. *Ibid.*, p. xlv.

27. Damian Evans, *The Creation of Meaning and Identity...*, p. 35. See also Eric Hobsbawm, *The Jazz Scene*.

20th century, a few jazz bands played in Ireland, notably in Dublin, but the political and social construction of the music was determined by the creation of the new state after the War of Independence and the ensuing Civil War, and later by the focus of researchers:

Academic writing about pre-1960s Irish jazz has been more concerned with the efforts made by the Irish state and the Catholic Church to contain the perceived threat posed by this foreign music, and to maintain cultural control over the new state coming into more contact with outside forces. Ireland, like many other countries dealing with an emerging nationalism tended toward economic and cultural insularity in the decades following independence²⁸.

These writings insist on the perceived racial and sexual aspects of the music that were thought to arouse primitive instincts both in the listener and the dancer, as jazz was mostly associated with dancing²⁹.

An anti-jazz movement was launched by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in 1933 supported by the Catholic Church, members of the Dáil and other prominent figures such as the president Éamon de Valera and Douglas Hyde as the music threatened the moral values that the new state wanted to establish. “Down with Jazz” and “Out with Paganism” could be read on banners during a march organised on 1 January 1934 that gathered 3,000 people³⁰. The hostility to jazz continued with an anti-jazz campaign during debates at the Dáil and culminated with the Dance Halls Act of 1935 which restrained the activity of dance halls and applied to jazz dances among others. In the 1940s, jazz music was banned or discouraged from being broadcast on radios – a debate still exists on the extent of the prohibition among historians. However, this anti-jazz sentiment started to dwindle during the same period and jazz, through recordings and a few venues, gradually made its way into Irish society and began to be enjoyed by a larger audience in the post-war era.

In Northern Ireland in the 1920s, jazz did not seem to have been met with the same institutional hostility as in the Irish Free State, although no research has been devoted to the attitude of the Catholic Church, the Protestant denominations or the government institutions in the newly formed statelet in 1921. What stands out from the only book³¹ written about jazz in Northern Ireland to date, *Tracking Jazz: The Ulster Way* by Brian Dempster³², is the development of a traditional form of the music, “Dixieland” and “New Orleans” or “Trad”, whose influence is still somehow felt nowadays. Also, the connection with the rest of the United Kingdom is highlighted, the statelet being a backwater of the wider jazz scene in Britain.

28. Damian Evans, *The Creation of Meaning and Identity...*, p. 41-42.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 42-44.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

31. The book is biased towards the traditional jazz scene. Only a few pages are devoted to the new jazz scene.

32. Brian Dempster, *Tracking Jazz: The Ulster Way*, Belfast, Shanway Press, 2012. The following paragraphs rely on information from the book.

The first reported mention of the word jazz is when the Glenarm Jazz Band played at a dance in the Glenarm Orange Hall on 25 April 1925³³. However, the style of music performed then did not correspond to any form of jazz music. During the Second World War, the stationing of US troops in Northern Ireland spurred the development of the music, especially in Belfast and Derry. Various bands had been touring the province until a jazz boom occurred in the 1950s. Local musicians were influenced by recordings from the United States or concerts by American musicians such as Nat King Cole at the Royal Hippodrome in Great Victoria Street in Belfast in April 1954, or Sidney Bechet at the Ulster Hall in September 1956. At the same time the Dixieland tradition continued³⁴.

Most of the well-known musicians of that period, at least from Belfast, had been educated in Grammar schools such as Campbell College, Royal Academy, Annadale, Royal Belfast Academic Institution, Methodist College and Grosvenor High School. As suggested by Brian Dempster, this lends to the belief that jazz was “an elitist activity, created by and served up to a mostly middle-class society”³⁵, contrary to the British jazz scene.

In the 1960s³⁶, the emergence of pop and rock music together with the phenomenon of the Irish showbands that developed on an all-island basis, kept traditional jazz in the background. The showbands were dance bands that played a wide repertoire ranging from pop and rock to traditional music, including country music and sometimes Irish *Céilí* dance. They were also famous for playing covers of contemporary artists. The phenomenon lasted until the 1970s, partly due to the opening of discos and the development of new musical tastes. In 1975, the Miami Showband killings, when three members of the band were killed in Banbridge by the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), a loyalist paramilitary group, put a halt to the touring of such groups.

The visit of Louis Armstrong at the King’s Hall in Belfast in 1962³⁷, together with the Whitla³⁸ concerts, “Jazz at the Whitla”, starting in December 1961³⁹, and BBC shows on TV revitalised the jazz scene in Northern Ireland. In 1964, *The Jazzmakers* was the first local BBC programme dedicated to jazz. Other programmes later followed on the BBC (*Jazz Club*) and on UTV (*The White Line*) featuring local musicians. Belfast also had a jazz record shop on High Street called Atlantic Records founded by Solly Lipsitz⁴⁰, a prominent figure of the jazz scene in Northern Ireland, that provided “a wonderful atmospheric assembly point for the jazz enthusiast and serious record collector”⁴¹. Local musicians also organised in societies, e.g. the Belfast Jazz Society.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 19-51.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 75-82.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

38. The Whitla Hall is a building at Queen’s University Belfast.

39. Brian Dempster, *Tracking Jazz...*, p. 117-136.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

41. *Ibid.*

The Whitla concerts introduced a more modern style in the prevailing traditional jazz scene in Belfast by booking international stars like Oscar Peterson and the Modern Jazz Quartet. Alongside these concerts, another venue called the Guinness Spot introduced more experimental jazz styles.

With the start of the Troubles in the late 1960s, jazz continued to be played in hotels and golf clubs in Belfast and outside the city with famous venues like the Glenmachan Tower Hotel, the Europa (in the 1980s) or the Groomsport Inn in County Down⁴².

Training courses were instrumental in educating a new wave of young jazz musicians. This was initiated by the Music Centre set up by the Down County Education Committee in the mid-1970s⁴³. In 1980, the centre offered classes in jazz performance notably through the establishment of the South Eastern Youth Jazz Orchestra, modelled on the National Youth Jazz Orchestra set up in Britain. In 1985, the City of Belfast Youth Orchestra was formed by Arthur Acheson who had developed courses in big band swing and jazz at the City of Belfast College of Music since 1979 (he was also a member of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and president of the Northern Ireland Musicians Association)⁴⁴. One year later the Ulster Youth Orchestra was born and became a catalyst for the education of a young generation of artists, leading to the transformation of the jazz scene in the 1990s with musicians more prone to the influences of modern and contemporary jazz. Project Jazz, initiated by Clifford Henry and Brian Carson in 1987, aimed at providing local musicians with new venues where they could play a variety of jazz styles. Carson was appointed as the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Jazz Administrator. His aim was to develop jazz further than the long-standing traditional jazz stream rooted in Northern Ireland:

[...] I feel jazz, which has had its up-and-downs locally, has come to the end of its current revival phase. In any event the emphasis has always been on the traditional and mainstream jazz. Very few people are into modern jazz which I prefer. I see my job as pulling all the branches together and this is a major task⁴⁵.

Carson later set up the organisation Moving On Music⁴⁶ to promote, among other music genres, alternative and contemporary jazz with the Brilliant Corners⁴⁷ festival as a showcase.

Portraits in jazz

The title of this part clearly alludes to Bill Evans trio's album *Portrait in Jazz* released in 1960 that gave a new dimension to the way jazz would be played by future

42. Brian Dempster, *Tracking Jazz...*, p. 142-164.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

46. See <http://www.movingonmusic.com>.

47. See <http://www.movingonmusic.com/about-us-2> and <http://www.brilliantcornersbelfast.com>.

musicians. Until then, the rhythm section composed of the double-bass and the drums was mainly used as an accompaniment to the soloist instrument. In this album Scott LaFaro on bass and Paul Motian on drums interacted with the pianist Bill Evans by responding harmonically or rhythmically to his playing, a musical practice that was called “interplay”.

To describe the current jazz scene, I choose to present the portraits of five well-known musicians in Northern Ireland. The selection of these musicians was dictated by their position of influence in the jazz community, their intimate knowledge of the Northern Ireland scene, and my close association with them as a musician who has played with them over the last five years. This interplay of portraits gives an overview of the nature and place of the music today and resonates with the analyses and remarks of the previous parts of this article. Each musician sheds a light on the development and the tenets of the current jazz scene in Northern Ireland. Through these portraits, we will analyse consecutively the recent history; a player and mentor’s team approach; the importance of experimental jazz; the self-taught development of both Irish musicians and audiences; and finally, how Belfast free jazz aims to break the boundaries of “inplaying”.

Tommy Thomas and the early development from the 1960s to the 1990s

Tommy Thomas⁴⁸ is a drummer and vibes player from North Wales who has been active for the past five decades. He was interviewed for his rich experience of the jazz scene in Belfast from the 1960s to the 1980s. He originally came to Northern Ireland as a soldier in 1961-1962 and then settled permanently in Belfast in 1965. To him, Belfast was “a jazz desert with very little in it at all”, the music scene being dominated by the showbands. There were six hundred of those bands in Ireland playing covers of pop music together with a special Dixieland set. Some of the musicians “were quite good” and “jazz orientated”. However there was something “ludicrous” about them, some of the bands having “names like the Indians dressed in Indians gear, Cadets that looked like flying officers” and “jumped about the stage”. The jazz scene itself was organised mainly around Trad or Dixieland or New Orleans jazz, with “a few good trios playing in hotels doing swing music and a bit of jazz when they could, but mostly dinner music”. Tommy Tomas also remembers the influence of the record shop, Altantic Records on High Street, “run by a guy [Solly Lipsitz] who ran his own fiefdom and dominated the scene with Trad and New Orleans [...] it was a kind of restricted menu until the mid-1980s”.

The scene started to develop around 1978-1979 and it “began to get an infusion through the Belfast Festival” which allotted some of its programme to jazz. It provided a place for interaction with major names from the international scene mentioned before. Michael Emerson was in charge of the Belfast Festival. He was an agent, “a hyper-efficient guy, futuristically [*sic*] looking” that “put the Festival on the map”. At the same period, the Cork Jazz Festival had kicked off. Emerson put

48. Interviewed on 28 October 2020 on Zoom.

Tommy Thomas trio – composed of himself, Billy White, and Billy McAlpine – in the festival for fourteen nights in the Guinness Spot which ran gigs at the same time as the Whitla Hall concerts. This made it easier for international and local musicians to mix. “We were exposed to good people there as we played on stage for a warm-up to the groups at Whitla”, which included Stan Getz, Astrud Gilberto (who eventually cancelled their gig because of an argument as they were heading to the gig), Steve Swallow, Roy Haynes, Dave Brubeck Quartet, Buddy Rich. Tommy Thomas remembers that Dave Brubeck appreciated some of the local musicians. “He said to Billy White [a local pianist] if you ever come to the US I will fix you a gig” and to Gay MacIntyre, a saxophone player from Derry, “if Paul Desmond leaves me I will give you a job”. Prior to that, Tommy Thomas “used to go down to Dublin once a month for an infusion as there was nothing here to listen to. The standard was much higher. [...] On a Sunday in Dublin I could go round five places. It was much more enhanced than the Belfast scene”.

In the early 1980s, Tommy’s trio was given the opportunity of being featured on the UTV show *The White Line* that ended in 1985. This show was unprecedented and consisted of regular programmes with special international guests and some musicians from Dublin like Louis Stewart. The show gained popularity and success over the world and was sold to New Zealand and Australian TV, East Anglia and Scottish TV. Tommy Thomas recalls that he “bought [his] house thanks to this programme”. It was initiated by the “very visionary producer Andrew Crockard” who “tried all sorts of scenic experiments in order to create an atmosphere”. The exposure that the trio got from the show had a trickle-down effect on the number of gigs it would get, especially “jazz gig suitably diluted for weddings”.

In 1983 Tommy Thomas opened a jazz club called the Linen Hall Bar located at the back of the BBC headquarters. A gig was organised every Saturday afternoon for eleven years with a special session once a fortnight. To guarantee a good fee to musicians who would fly over from England, he would secure seven gigs altogether, including two at the Linen Hall Bar. Local musicians who had an experience outside Northern Ireland, like Louis Stewart who played in London at Ronnie Scott’s jazz club, then came back with “[their] talent and ability that upped the game for everyone”. But “it never went to the same standard or diversity as the jazz in Dublin”. With his trio, Tommy Thomas played mostly standards and during the special gigs on Tuesdays they “were able to indulge [themselves] in more esoteric stuff while on Saturday the concert catered for people who came round for a pint, so it was more commercial”. The Northern Ireland modern jazz scene, away from Trad or Dixieland, really started to develop in the 1980s to eventually boom in the 1990s.

Linley Hamilton, a team approach

Linley Hamilton⁴⁹ is a trumpet player and a key figure of the jazz scene in Northern Ireland. His early experience with the music occurred when he joined a swing

49. Interviewed on 24 October 2020 on Zoom.

band when he was 13. He was the youngest player among a group of 50-year-old musicians who were good music readers but did not improvise. On the contrary, he enjoyed that element of the music: "I did it, I had no fear. I wasn't very good but the more I did it the better I became". This remark is shared by most musicians who consider that you learn jazz and improvisation by playing it on stage. The performance is paramount in the learning process.

Linley Hamilton then joined an orchestra in Dublin conducted by Bobby Lamb. Most of the new musicians of this period came out of this orchestra. At the age of 29, Linley was asked to take part in the team for the movie *The Commitments* and he then realised he wanted to be a full-time musician after having worked as a civil engineer. As a self-employed performer, he had to start "learning how to promote gigs, to do music business, advertising and marketing". In his early career he took part in over a hundred albums as a session player, i.e. not as the leader of the album. He released his first album in 2001 and then moved on to a parallel academic career completing a Masters in 2008 and later a PhD on "tension devices during solos". He finally found a lecturing job at the Ulster University, Magee College in Derry. He also runs a BBC radio show (ongoing since 2007), called *Jazz World*, every Saturday night at 9 pm. This reveals the extent of his connections within the jazz scene and his position as a focal point.

He has now moved to the countryside and opened a new forty-seat venue called Maggie's Farm booking different kinds of music. He is interested in the development of young groups, mostly singers and folk musicians. "We sponsor them to make sure that they don't fall through the cracks and get a job in the supermarket when they might have had a career". The organisation provides a free space to rehearse and pays tuitions for recordings. This place has been developed "to do jazz and not only watch to get better", once again the emphasis being placed on practice.

Linley insists on passing on his experience to the younger generation and the current context is favourable to the development of jazz in Northern Ireland. This was not the case during the Troubles, although, contrary to what one might suspect, the conflict did not put an end to the jazz scene, and people continued to play. However, to him "no local players could be considered world class". The music played "was mostly mainstream jazz, i.e. commercial jazz and none of them had records. People were more interested in getting four gigs a week" to be able to live which meant playing at weddings. They seemed "not to want to build a career, and those who did, didn't stay in Northern Ireland but went to England".

The situation is different today as there are "a lot of opportunities through Moving On Music and the Arts Council to get funding". It is also much cheaper to record and to be broadcast. You can record good quality music with only "one digital mike and iPhone". To build a career, musicians need to "draw a fan base so the fan base is supporting to them". In turn the musicians "look after the fans, not only for business purposes but also [because they] like their audience. We know them by their names". This is made easier by the use of social media.

For Linley,

Beyond talent, artists are good communicators who are prepared to finance their career at their own cost. They take gigs that cost them money to create their visibility [which has] a long-term implication for their career. Funding is an issue. Funding tends to go to the similar set of people who are in the know. The drawback is [this system] keeps funding the same people, and it doesn't encourage them to take a risk. They don't value audience-building. Most artists are relying on building an audience. You have to invest in your audience as they invest in you. You can offer free tickets or make them your friend. The audience becomes your friend. In Northern Ireland we can take that to the extreme because the country is so small.

The bond between the musicians and their audience materialises through the existence of long-standing venues. Linley has a residency at Bert's on Sunday nights with Kyron Bourke (pianist and singer) and Steven Davis (drummer). Bert's is a restaurant and a pub attached to the Merchant's Hotel in Belfast and has live music seven days a week. People do not pay for the concerts themselves, but it is a steady place where musicians can play, "practice and get better". Linley points out that "paying to see local musicians is a new phenomenon in Northern Ireland. I have been a driver of that with my radio show. On the show [I play] a mix of international musicians and local ones". Listeners of the show then realise they can go to high-standard concerts to see the local musicians. This also helps building a network that allows local musicians to stay rather than migrate to other countries.

Linley is instrumental in booking bands in various venues, where the jazz scene can develop. To him, "the way forward is to be collaborative and supportive. It's all about being part of a community and the audience likes being part of that community. You need a team-approach to make a scene work". Linley concludes by emphasising that "the jazz scene is now a global scene which everybody can access. Jazz is a global music" especially thanks to the social media and digital streaming platforms.

Stephen Davis and experimental jazz

Stephen Davis⁵⁰ is a drummer from Belfast. His father played Irish traditional music and Doo Wap, a sort of Italian rock and roll. He remembers his family had only one jazz record by The Glenn Miller Orchestra, which he thought "was alright, but didn't really get" him. His parents were running a guest house and he was once again exposed to jazz thanks to one of the guests who gave him a tape with Dave Brubeck on one side and the Woody Allen jazz band on the other. "I remember putting it on in the 1980s. I didn't know what the hell it was. I didn't understand it. I kind of liked the mood of the music, something got me". Stephen then hung around other musicians and formed a rock and roll band in which he sang and played the harmonica. He thought he was "really bad at it" and started to play the drums as the drummer of the band was "pretty bad" too. After trying the drums

50. Interviewed on 26 October 2020 on Zoom.

during breaks in a gig, the other musicians decided he was better than the current drummer. Stephen also remembers that at the age of 13, he had had a dream in which he was playing the drums. His parents bought him a second-hand drum kit, which he set up with “the cymbals upside down”. He then left it in the spare room until he was 17 and took a real interest in them.

In 1995, he joined a music course at the Bangor Tech run by Brian Irvine, a world-renowned composer with a jazz background, who had studied at Berklee College of Music in Boston.

This was a typical moment for a lot of musicians in Northern Ireland. It influenced a lot of people. His whole vision was to get rock, country and jazz musicians in a room [every Friday] and make music instantly with graphic notations, symbols and rhythmic ideas. It just blew my mind. My whole music ideas just expanded more than I have ever had in the rest of my life.

He took seriously to his practice and explains: “I wanted to be the best drummer. Everyone I asked said the best drummers are jazz drummers”. He joined a course at Jordanstown University run by Brian Carson from the organisation Moving On Music. Brian Carson brought musicians from around the world for a one-week residential. This is where Stephen met Keith Copeland from New York “who changed his life”. He pursued his music training at Leeds University as there were no opportunities to study jazz either at Queen’s University or Ulster University that only proposed classical music courses. After graduating he “seeped into the English jazz scene in London. [He] was told you have to go to London or New York to make it”. During the same period, he played in the European Jazz Orchestra (2003). After spending three years in London, he “moved back to Northern Ireland [as] [he] couldn’t afford to buy a house in London. And now [he] ha[s] no money. So that was a bad idea”.

He underlines the influence of Brian Carson on the Northern Irish jazz scene.

Brian set up a production company back in the 1970s early 1980s. His idea was to produce music that would be on the fringe. He had a big sway on free jazz or experimental jazz. He didn’t want to put on the mainstream stuff unless it was very good quality. Brian put on gigs that exposed local musicians [and the public] to this sort of music. It was a mind-blowing experience.

He used a room at Queen’s University where students took their exams and turned it into the Guinness Spot, heavily subsidised by the company. Stephen also mentions the importance of the Belfast Festival at Queen’s, Brilliant Corners, and other occasional venues such as the Black Box or the Mac⁵¹, where more experimental jazz is played. To him, another catalyst for the development of the jazz scene is Linley Hamilton.

51. The Mac is a cultural centre in the Cathedral Quarter in Belfast.

He considers jazz a subversive music and “true jazz has always been an art music. It will always be a minority music. I cannot see it as coming into the mainstream”. He thinks that, contrary to the European audience,

[The public in] Northern Ireland and the UK is more conservative in their taste. This might be a hangover from the showbands. They want to hear something that is rehearsed, together. They don’t want to see musicians fall down on stage and mess up. And with jazz you have to take chances and make mistakes. That’s where the magic is. European audiences understand that.

He fears that jazz might be standardised through university. He recalls that he had been invited to give a paper at Manchester University for a conference entitled “Where is jazz today?”. “Jazz could become an academic music. A lot of musicians are getting work in academia because they don’t find work otherwise.” With a hundred students getting their degree every year, the danger is that jazz musicians will only play within a university framework as they cannot find gigs. “It is going to standardise the music. It is a worry.”

Scott Flanigan, a self-taught musician and the relationship with his audience

Scott Flanigan⁵² is a well-known young pianist from Belfast. His experience with jazz is similar to the previous musicians as he thinks “you get into jazz by accident”.

He started classical piano lessons on and off from age 6 to 9. “[He] hated it, could not stand it.” When he was 12, he took lessons again with his school music teacher who enrolled him in the school orchestra, took him on to accompany the choir and asked him to join the jazz band. “[He] hated it. [He] could not understand what this jazz thing was like. It didn’t make sense.” This did not prevent him from also joining the Ulster Youth Orchestra. But he remembers that he was not very good at it. So, his first experience with jazz was not convincing.

What really hooked him to the music was listening to Chick Corea’s album *Spain*. He started to practice by listening to more music. He notes: “I played [the music] before I listened to it, which is not what most people do”, which explains his original aversion or indifference. “I was hooked up after that.” He is entirely self-taught in jazz. Since 2001, he has learnt the music by transcribing solos, and reading books about jazz. When he was able to “get through a tune” he was asked for gigs by Dave Howell, a saxophonist, whom he grew up with. “Gigs went up from there. Playing on the gig was my practice. You learn [the music] by practicing on stage because it’s different every time, especially through the solos that you take to improvise.” It is a case of “learning by doing, learning by recreating stuff that I had listened to on a record”. This is a specific feature of jazz. He recalls going to workshops but “most people had the theory but couldn’t play”.

He likes jazz because it is a combination of three aspects of the music.

52. Interviewed on 26 October 2020 on Zoom.

First, it requires a lot of instrumental technique. Jazz piano will push you to your absolute limits in terms of your technique. Second it is the nuts and bolts, the harmony, the theory. Jazz theory is fairly widely accepted as very advanced theory. I like this fairly extreme approach to theory, melody and harmony. The third is creativity. I love classical piano and working on a phrase, trying to get it right. With jazz it is totally different. You can play it differently each time. You have the freedom to express yourself through the music, much more than you would if you were playing a Chopin Prelude. It is to be able to play a piece with “how I feel” at that particular time. It could be through improvisation, through a standard. Jazz is a reflection of yourself. There’s no other music that requires the three of those aspects.

When asked about how jazz developed in Ireland, Scott posits that it may stem from the love of American culture. “One of the biggest forms of music in Northern Ireland now is country music, called Country & Irish.” The influence of the London scene is crucial as bands who were booked in Britain went across to Ireland for more gigs. The influence of the British and local TV shows from the 1950s up to the 1970s also played a role in exposing the public to the music.

Scott himself toured both the United Kingdom and Ireland. He explains that to build an audience and reputation he had to raise his profile on the international scene. He came to Paris to record and play with the author and also toured Germany with Markus Strothmann, a drummer he had met in Belfast. This had a snowball effect as “people take notice when you do things abroad. It influences bookers and agents”. In 2017 he was nominated for the Take Five scheme developed by promoters of the company called Serious based in London. “It is a talent development scheme that gathers eight musicians in a farmhouse in Kent for a week.” He met two guitarists, Rob Luft and Ant Law, whom he toured with later. “It helped to push the career further, [although he feels he is] not much of a better player.” During the workshop musicians learn about the business of music. They meet people who run a jazz club, who own a jazz label, a jazz touring agency, and learn about the legal side of the music business. Scott remembers that the British musicians “had no engagement with the Irish jazz scene”. The next step for them after London is other European capitals like Paris, Berlin, Zurich, but not Ireland. It would never occur to them to play at the Cork Jazz Festival. This might be due to the historical relationship between the United Kingdom and Ireland. “Ireland is a bit of a backwater”. Ireland can be seen “as a step down from London jazz scene”.

Scott notes the self-deprecating visions that Northern Irish musicians have about themselves. They tend to look up to people who have studied abroad, especially the United States.

Somebody has come back to Belfast from New York where he studied jazz there so they must therefore be incredible⁵³. There’s an element of: he went away and he came back, therefore, he must be incredible because all of us people in the Northern Irish

53. For instance, musicians like Mark McKnight and Darren Beckett.

jazz scene haven't studied. We're all self-taught, there's no jazz education here. These learned people come back to Belfast and they are going to show us how it is done.

It is true that there is no dedicated jazz degree in Northern Ireland while Dublin thrives by having developed its education in the field with the Newpark Centre amalgamated into Dublin City University where they run a full-time jazz degree.

In the last fifteen years Scott has built an audience by "trying to do as many gigs as he can. They don't necessarily pay". For a gig in Dublin at The International Bar, he would get a phone call in the morning. He would make €20, while driving to Dublin cost £25 in petrol and he would have spent €10 to eat. This reveals the dedication of jazz musicians who usually would lose money to get a gig. Scott spends his time on the roads but "dedication to the music, to the performance and the scene pays off". "The audience will reward you." "You are acknowledged on the scene and by the community."

Jazz requires a high barrier of entry for the musician and sometimes for the audience.

People are scared of the J word, but there is always a point of entry. The first time you might not like the music and usually after a gig some people from the audience will note "I didn't know I liked it".

But they are most of the time "enthralled by the spectacle of it".

Kyron Bourke: breaking boundaries

Kyron Bourke⁵⁴ is a singer and pianist from Dublin who joined the Belfast jazz scene in 1992. He explains that "there are very good musicians in Dublin but very few gigs. [He] realised that the jazz scene in Belfast was much better than Dublin".

He was born into a theatrical family, as his mother was a singer, and his father was an actor. He became acquainted with jazz music through the songs from musicals that his parents put on stage. He also remembers they had a gramophone on which they would play music by Maurice Chevalier or Édith Piaf. "I didn't know the songs were jazz standards." Later, as a teenager, he went into rock music "as everybody does". At the age of 20, he became aware of the particular sound of jazz chords, listening to Gershwin. "I was never seeking jazz but I liked the sensibility." So, he started to incorporate these chords into his rock band called Les Fruits that gradually became synonymous with fringe jazz. He also got a recording contract with Polygram that pulled him out of jazz, making a hit in the radio charts with a rock song. However, "fame lasted for three months and then nothing".

With no money in his pocket, he began to play in piano bars such as Georgie's Bistro, a little basement in Dublin. He notes that he was not a good pianist, but he had a personality. Subsequently, more jazz musicians came in to play and gravitated

54. Interviewed on 29 October 2020 on Zoom.

around that venue. After playing the bass, he realised that his voice would propel him on. He made a living playing in bars and recording commercial music.

In 1991 he saw an ad looking for a piano player in Belfast. He got the job at Larry's piano bar in Bedford Street and the venue became famous in the end. "People were standing on the tables. It was more being a ring master than a piano player", he recalls. He suggested to Larry to set up a proper jazz venue 1993-1994, and he was given a very small budget. His idea was to have a bass player and a trumpet player playing as a duet without the rhythmic section, which would be an unusual lineup for a jazz gig. But that was too adventurous, and it eventually did not work. A jazz session was set up between 6 and 9 pm – "jazz has always been shoved in the corners" – with most musicians being in their sixties, and previously evolving in showbands and dance halls.

In the last ten years Kyron has been booking the jazz gigs at Bert's bar. Some musicians would not consider the venue a proper jazz club, which Kyron explains: "There is an element of snobbery from certain jazz musicians in Belfast. We're jazz, he's only pop". However, he insists that the audience at Bert's can be exposed to different kinds of jazz by finding a compromise between mainstream and modern tunes during the same gig. There is a need to bring in some show to capture the audience. With the Covid pandemic, Kyron is thinking of new ways to expose people to jazz by streaming live music from Bert's and at the same time linking up with other venues around Europe. This would bring in more interaction with international players and would break with the "inplay" of the Belfast jazz scene.

Conclusion

Jazz may have met with defiance and hostility from institutions in Ireland, at least in the Irish Free State at the beginning of the 20th century, yet it is remarkable that the music, as a minority music, has continued to evolve and survive, with the Dublin and the Belfast scenes expanding or shrinking according to time. In Northern Ireland, traditional jazz was a major stream until the 1990s when a contemporary style started to emerge thanks to the opening up of the province to international influences.

Despite partition, musicians do not seem to have confined to the south or the north of Ireland. On the contrary they have used all venues across the border. While musicians have all used both the Dublin and Belfast scenes, they seem today to have more opportunities to play in Belfast rather than Dublin where the number of venues is small. Besides, other cities have jazz venues: Kilkenny (The Sofa Sessions), Cork, Limerick, Sligo (Festival), Castlerock, Derry (Bennigans Bar). In another interview⁵⁵, I have presented the work of David Lytle, a prominent drummer, who

55. Fabrice Mourlon, "Performing Jazz and Sharing Creative Spaces", in *New Cartographies, Nomadic Methodologies, Contemporary Arts, Culture and Politics in Ireland*, Anne Goarzin, Maria Parsons (eds.), Oxford, P. Lang, 2020, p. 157-171.

plays on the Derry scene. Like the other interviewees of this article, he insists on the role of the performance and on developing alternative venues to reach out to new audiences (on small islands for example). The Murray Brothers and Joseph Leighton (guitar) are regular players at Bennigans Bar, a pub and jazz venue owned by pianist John Leighton. This is a special community venue that gathers regular local residents and local artists (musicians and painters). The Derry and the Belfast musicians do not really mix, and the Derry players have links with neighbouring county Donegal, notably with the Falcarragh Jazz Festival.

So the scenes, both north and south, are scattered amongst sporadic and sometimes ephemeral venues. Although there has always been a tension between traditional and contemporary jazz in Northern Ireland, musicians there seem to have similar habits and values as any jazz musician in Europe. They have a very slow career, trying to build up audiences, very often losing money on their gigs, and moving on to the next “clique”, as Becker would say, to get more popularity and visibility. The jazz community is small but is composed of solidary members gathered around a minority music, not easily accessed either by the musicians or by the audience, but a music that hooks them up at one point, and usually durably so.

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