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Much has been said and written about the relationship between music and identity in Ireland, but very little has been attempted to academically explore Ireland’s rock and pop identity in detail, despite “the sheer volume of quality” on “a relatively insignificant popular musical market”, as defined by Martin McLoone and Noel McLaughlin. Their first collaboration for a 2000 article on “Hybridity and National Musics: the Case of Irish Rock” (Popular Music, Vol. 19/2), led to the publication of the present book, which offers a global revision of Irish rock and pop history, exploring 50 years of music-making in Ireland, from the very early days of the showbands to the streaming profusion of Myspace and Soundcloud, in 3 chronological segments: a reinstatement of the pre-80’s artists, a thorough exploration of U2’s access to fame and subsequent evolutions, and a panorama of Irish musical diversity in the nineties and noughties, through a very personal choice of artists and genres.

Mostly chronological, the book fittingly starts with the 1st visit of the Beatles in Ireland in November 1963, the authors arguing that this was the year Ireland finally entered modernity, but stating perhaps exaggeratingly that “Ireland’s music was as dormant as the rest of its culture”, apart from “the showband and the traditional and folk scene”.

While U2 is seen as a pivotal figure in Irish rock music, the authors insist on the importance of their somewhat neglected predecessors and on the contribution of the folk and trad scenes, from the seventies to the eighties. The arrival of U2 marks a turning point in Irish musical history, “articulating a new confident and intelligent Irish identity”. The band’s subsequent self-reinvention in the nineties is developed in parallel with the Celtic Tiger era, itself linked to the electronic dance music scene, while a renewed marker of Irish identity, nostalgia, is illustrated by the study of the cabaret scene in the noughties. The loop is looped and the authors clearly insist on the significance of art with a view to changing the future, “when music had the related capacity to subvert, surprise, challenge and change”.

The interest of the study does not only reside in the long list of bands and artists under close scrutiny, although the absence of such figures as Liam Ó Maonlaí or such events as the Eurovision Song Contest is objectionable when dealing with identity or pop music in Ireland. Instead, the authors expose their analyses of old and new signifiers of Irishness in the global musical context: hybridity & purity, urbanisation and industrialisation, exile and provenance, the absence of gender play, compromise and failure, etc. In that respect, as in many others throughout the work, the analysis of the relationship with Great-Britain is extremely convincing, pointing out among other things the acute difference between British punks and Northern Irish punks, or the imposition of “dominant and preferred versions of Irishness” onto aspiring stars from Ireland.

Obviously, such a book makes no claim at being comprehensive and cannot answer every single question about the subject under scrutiny. But since the respective worlds of academics and popular music are still too shy of one another, and since the authors have acknowledged that their work could attract a much wider audience than academia (as evidenced by the launch of the book at the Oh Yeah music centre in Belfast, or through the use of key words in the title), we would have liked to see such a study being written in a style even more accessible to a general readership.

That being said, it is obviously a landmark read from two immensely knowledgeable researchers on Irish rock and pop music (but slightly less on the folk and trad scenes) and deserves to be put into the hands of anyone with the slightest interest in music or Ireland, and beyond. We just so wish such a book existed for traditional Irish music.

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