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From ‘Boys’ to ‘Lads’: Masculinity and Irish Rock Culture

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**Introduction**

Musicality has been an enduring trope in constructions of Irishness since at least the twelfth century (Smyth 2009: 2-3). Moreover, music making has played a major role in Irish culture at home and among the global diaspora (Cullen 2012; Murphy 2012). However, as late as the 1990s, the musicologist Harry White could observe that ‘music does not form much (if any) part of the vigorous discourse which preoccupies thinkers in their assessment of the condition of being Irish and of Ireland’ (cited in McCarthy 1999: 5). This curious lacuna has been counterbalanced in recent years via a series of texts on popular musical practices in Ireland and among the diaspora (Campbell 2011; McLaughlin and McLoone 2012; O’Flynn 2009; Smyth 2009). While this emerging address has been useful in opening up our understanding of Irish music, it has – with few exceptions (McLaughlin and McLoone 2012; Sullivan 2006) – sidelined issues of gender generally, and masculinity particularly. This is unfortunate, as the Catholic-nationalist ideologies of independent Ireland have unquestionably had ‘specific implications for the construction of young masculinities’ (Mac an Ghaill 2000: 52). Moreover, male Irish musicians have often engaged with gender issues in noteworthy ways (Frith and McRobbie 1990: 374, 382; Gilbert 1999: 45; Reynolds and Press 1994: 48, 68-9). This article explores invocations of masculinity in Irish popular music culture, addressing how they operate alongside ideas of marginality in the work of key Irish-associated rock acts. Masculinity is, of course, ‘not static or essential’, as

Taylor Houston explains, but it does have hegemonic modes that stress certain values such as ‘strength, competition, violence, prestige, rationality, heterosexuality, sexualization of women, homophobia, and suppression of emotion’. Its alternate modes, meanwhile, have comprised less conventionally ‘masculine’ or (what might be socially perceived as) feminine values, including, for Houston: ‘expressing emotions such as caring, joy, sadness, anxiety, and fear; being openly affectionate with peers; maintaining stylized/fashion forward dress codes that accentuate the body … and performing activities that sexualize the body and draw the gaze of onlookers’ (Houston 2012: 159). This article explores the enactment, contestation and restoration of hegemonic masculinities in Irish rock culture across three decades (1970s-1990s) and different musical milieus (hard rock, post-punk, indie), whilst addressing instances in which alternate modes of masculinity served to challenge hegemonic norms. Beginning with a reflection on Thin Lizzy, the bulk of the essay focuses on the work of the Dublin-based band U2, and the Manchester-Irish act Oasis.

**‘The Boys Are Back in Town’: Thin Lizzy**

In the first scholarly account of masculinity in rock, Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie (writing in the late 1970s) observed a trend they called ‘cock rock’ (1990: 374). Describing this practice as ‘an explicit, crude, and often aggressive expression of male sexuality’ (1990: 374), they claimed that it was best evinced in the work of Thin Lizzy (1990: 374-5), the Irish band led by Phil Lynott, who came to international fame via the hit song, ‘The Boys Are Back in Town’ (1976). Frith and McRobbie cite the cover of the band’s album, *Live and Dangerous* (1978), which comprised, note Noel McLaughlin and Martin McLoone, ‘a low angle “crotch shot” of a bare-chested Lynott, his phallic bass guitar resting on his upper thigh as he (seemingly) groans in sexual ecstasy’ (2012: 94). Such imagery was underlined, for Frith and McRobbie, by a comment that Lynott would make during the group’s live shows of this period. Prior to his band’s performance of the song ‘Emerald’ (1976) (which invoked Irish themes and styles), Lynott would address the audience with an ostensibly affable enquiry: ‘Is there anybody here with any Irish in them?’ Amidst the affirmative cheers from innumerable members of the audience, Lynott would affix an audacious follow-up question: ‘Is there any of the girls who would like a little more Irish in them?’ (cited in Frith and McRobbie 1990: 382).

Such moments invoke what critics have seen as the two sides of Lynott’s persona: the ‘soft’ sentimentalist (‘Is there anyone here with any Irish in them?’) and the ‘hard’ chauvinist (‘Is there any of the girls who’d like a little more … ’). The co-existence of these modes is said to account for Lynott’s popular (and enduring) appeal (Campbell and Smyth 2005: 45-7). Whether or not this is the case, it is clear that his band’s rendition of ‘Emerald’ staged a highly gendered conception of Irish ethnicity, in part via Lynott’s low-register opening words (‘Down from the glen came the marching men/with their shields and their swords’), but also through the ‘cock rock’ rhetoric that Lynott deployed in his spoken-word preface, in which he conjoined a rather crude form of male sexuality with an overt expression of Irish ethnicity, presenting himself as a kind of fount of Irishness, and offering to infuse fans with this identity.

Such posturing had the effect of obscuring Lynott’s own rather complex position vis a vis Ireland, for the singer had been born in England to an Afro-Guyanese father and an Irish mother, and spent much of his early life in England, where his mother continued to live after Lynott relocated to Ireland at the age of four (Lynott 2011). Lynott’s biography was, then, profoundly diasporic (and his national identity marked by de-territoriality). In this context, Lynott’s onstage bravado arguably served as a means to offset his own outsiderness, with the singer perhaps (over-) compensating for the ostensible absence of an orthodox Irish identity through the adoption of an overblown mannishness. This appears to be the view of McLaughlin and McLoone, who suggest, in their account of Lynott: ‘When you are doubly “othered” it is not surprising that a lot of the songs you write tend to glorify being “one of the gang”’ (2012: 95). In this sense, the machismo that was manifested in ‘The Boys Are Back in Town’ and ‘Emerald’ – not to mention the ‘little bit of Irish’ comment – might be seen to mollify the anomalousness that attended the experience of a black-skinned, English-born boy in 1970s Ireland. This matrix of mainstream masculinity and social marginality would emerge in other key Irish rock projects, albeit in markedly different ways.

The ‘swaggering chauvinism’ of Thin Lizzy (Reynolds and Press 1994: 69) was largely eschewed by the wave of musicians who emerged in the 1980s. This new generation came of age in the immediate aftermath of punk, whose ‘year zero’ effects brought significant aesthetic and ideological shifts to popular music (Savage 1991). While this was most obviously registered through sound and style, it was also evinced through punk’s inchoate gender politics, which (at least initially) displayed a disdain for rock machismo (Mueller 1989; Savage 1991) and afforded a space to what Jon Savage calls ‘weird boys [and] hopeless boys’ (Thomson 2010). In an Irish context, early post-punk bands, such as U2, aligned themselves with anti-sexist projects (Breen 1979) whilst mining an expressly male imaginary, most notably through the title, songs and artwork of their debut album, *Boy* (1980). The latter’s sleeve comprised a stark close up of a young boy and featured songs such as ‘Stories for Boys’, a self-conscious address to male interests. However, in marked contrast to the noted machismo of Thin Lizzy, such efforts staged a quite reflective address to the in-between space of male adolescence.

**From Boy to Man: U2**

The figure of the boy in popular music has often functioned, note Ian Biddle and Freya Jarman-Ivens, as ‘a site of slippage’, occupying ‘the border between childhood and adulthood’. In this context, the authors note that

The androgyny that underpins the boy’s body – the hairlessness, his ‘pretty’ face – also positions him at a point on the borderline between the sexes … [and] between effeminacy and homosexuality (Biddle and Jarman-Ivens 2007: 6).

The transitioning space implied here (and particularly the moment of coming into male adulthood) became the focus of U2’s early work: ‘In the shadow/boy meets man’, sang Bono in the quiet refrain of ‘Twilight’ (1980), a key song on the band’s debut album. Such songs conjured, through voice and instrumentation, a somewhat liminal sense of self. Thus, Bono’s singing (which drew on the vocal styling of English punk singer Siouxsie Sioux) often sounded self-consciously child-like (and even ‘like a girl’, as Bono later acknowledged) (Moolallem and Guggenheim 2011). Meanwhile, the Edge’s guitar playing was informed by what the musician claimed at the time were more ‘feminine’ tones, with the guitarist developing ‘highly personal theories about the “sex” of guitar strings and creating chords that left out certain “male” notes to give them a more fluid “female” character’ (McCormick 2012: 17). The Edge’s guitar playing thus eschewed the power-chords, blues-based riffs and virtuosic soloing associated with more ‘masculine’ modes of rock (and, notably, with 1970s Irish musicians such as Thin Lizzy and Rory Gallagher). It is worth noting that certain listeners felt that there was a ‘queer’ sub-text to the *Boy* album (Stokes 2005: 11). In this context, Bono notes a conversation with one such critic: ‘he was saying he’d always thought of us as a gay band ... He made the point that within the gay community, people were excited about the fact that we were the first band to deal with sex outside machismo’ (cited in Stokes 2005: 11).

Whether or not this is the case, it is clear that the post-punk musicians who came to prominence in 1980s Ireland would present a more complex address to issues of masculinity than their 1970s predecessors. Indeed, even figures such as Lynott would evince, in the eighties, less traditionalist modes of masculine rock. Thus, the singer’s best known solo track, ‘Old Town’ (1982), which featured synthesizer instead of guitar, included the memorable hook-line ‘this boy is cracking up/this boy has broken down’, a much less celebratory invocation of the ‘boy’ than that which informed ‘The Boys Are Back in Town’. If such self-reflection served to correct the ‘cock rock’ persona of Thin Lizzy, then the early eighties milieu in which U2 emerged also sought to cast itself against the more hegemonic modes of male identity in 1970s Ireland. Thus, the members of U2 often stressed their rejection, in their formative phase, of the normative codes of Irish masculinity, eschewing the ‘macho’ spaces of the sports field and the pub. ‘We didn’t drink’ and ‘didn’t play soccer’, says Bono of this period (Wenner 2005), adding that he viewed Gaelic sports as ‘neanderthal’ (Waters 1994: 71). Thus, U2 defined themselves against the ‘hard’ masculinities of late 1970s Dublin, not least (what Bono calls) ‘the jocks’, ‘the skinheads’, and ‘the bootboys’ (Heffernan 2000; Wenner 2005).

It is clear, then, that U2 felt a sense of difference in 1970s Ireland. In this context, it is worth noting that the Protestant and British aspects of the musicians’ upbringings were at odds with the (Catholic, nationalist) ideologies that infused Irish life at this time. Thus, Bono, the band’s singer, was raised in the (Protestant) Church of Ireland, while U2’s guitarist, the Edge, was born in London to Welsh Presbyterian parents (Dunphy 1987). Reflecting on this point, the Edge explains: ‘Growing up as a kid, I always felt that I didn’t quite belong [in Ireland]’. He goes on: ‘in a weird way, that’s why I got into music … in an attempt to resolve that to some extent (Waters 1993: 289). Bono also felt at variance with conventional Irish identities, suggesting that, as a youth, he ‘didn’t know’ whether he was ‘Protestant, Catholic, English … or Irish’ (Waters 1994: 71). This aspect of U2 would evidently inform the band’s reception. Thus, at the band’s early shows, anti-Protestant comments were shouted from the crowd (McElhatton 1979), alongside other sectarian gestures from a group known as ‘the black Catholics’ (Graham 1989).

Even the band’s supporters, such as the Dublin music paper, *Hot Press*, noted U2’s social difference, describing them in early reviews as ‘Church of Ireland rock ‘n’ roll’ (Lynch 1979). Not unlike Phil Lynott, then, U2 were in certain ways seen as outsiders in Ireland. And like Lynott, they seem to have found a symbolic ‘home’ in the realm of Anglo-American rock.

In this respect, the creative sources that informed U2’s early work were David Bowie and Patti Smith (McCormick 2012: 16). Such figures had of course staged transgressive disruptions of pop’s traditional gender codes in the 1970s (Whiteley 1997). Despite this point, though, post-*Boy* U2 would assume, throughout the 1980s, a highly masculinized set of personae, from the quasi-military posturing of *War* (1983) to the pioneer poses of *The Joshua Tree* (1987). Indeed, when the band came to perform a major ‘homecoming’ concert in the mid-1980s at Dublin’s Croke Park (the headquarters of the Gaelic Athletic Association [GAA], an institution imbued with nationalism, Catholicism and male athleticism) (Cronin et al 2009), Bono rhetorically compared the band to a Gaelic sports team. ‘The Jacks are back!’, he exclaimed from the stage, alluding to the nickname of Dublin’s GAA team. ‘And what an All-Ireland we have for you tonight’, he went on, conflating the concert with a sports event. Such jocular gestures arguably had echoes of Phil Lynott’s acts of overcompensation, with Bono eliding the band’s outsiderness via an association with official Irish culture. Despite their masculinized performance, though, U2 made little direct address to issues of gender or sexuality in their creative work. Thus, Simon Reynolds and Joy Press observe that U2’s songs prior to the 1990s elided bodily themes, both in terms of their pleasures and their politics. Reflecting on this point, Reynolds and Press suggest (with reference to the song lyrics and stage persona of the young Bono) that

For the young warrior, ardour for lofty abstractions and cosmic intangibles is a way of sublimating sexuality; male-bonding is purged of homoeroticism because passion is projected outwards to a distant goal or vision. It was very apparent, at the height of U2’s success in 1987, that their mission spirit involved a similar evasion of sexuality and gender. Everything about U2 – from their lyrics to Bono’s bellow to the Edge’s ionospheric guitar – was ‘uplifting’, veering towards the sun and away from seething male hormones and sticky female secretions. It was remarkable that for a band with five albums under their belt, that not a single U2 song dealt with desire or love – unless it was universal rather than flesh-and-blood (1994: 82).

This aspect of U2 also extended to interviews. Thus, when Bono, a famously effusive (and articulate) interviewee, was faced with questions about his own sexuality, he was unusually reticent (Block 1989). Such restraint was seen to confirm critics’ claims that U2’s oeuvre was ‘sexless’ (Block 1989).

This feature of the band would undergo a striking transformation, however, at the start of the 1990s. Following a period of creative crisis (after the perceived failings of their most retrogressive effort, *Rattle and Hum* [1988]), the band embarked on a process of reflection and experimentation. This would, in turn, bring issues of gender and sexuality to the fore of their work. Thus, the sleeve of U2’s first record of the nineties, *Achtung Baby* (1991), replaced the stark, pre-pubescent boy of their debut LP with a multihued collage of, amongst other things, the Edge’s crotch, a naked Adam Clayton, and Bono aside a bare-chested woman. Such imagery echoed the themes of the band’s new songs, which comprised allusions to such hitherto uncharted topics (at least for U2) as oral sex, divorce and male/female relations in general. As Reynolds and Press observed, ‘there were more instances of “she” and “her” in the lyrics of a single song on *Achtung Baby* than in the rest of the U2 oeuvre put together’ (1994: 83). This thematic turn towards sexuality and the feminine was also played out at the group’s live shows, where a leather-clad Bono would self-consciously cavort with a belly dancer, before spraying female fans with a (phallic-like) bottle of champagne, and directing on-stage video cameras towards his lips or crotch (Godley 1992). Such signals marked a distinct loosening of the aesthetic and ideological stance that U2 had assumed in the 1980s. Indeed, this new persona appeared to serve as a re-working of 1970s ‘cock rock’ for the (postmodern) nineties, refracted through the (then) fashionable prism of irony and play. Thus, Bono was seen to be self-reflexively masquerading as the ‘macho’ rock star, rather than simply *being* one.

If this (re-) staging of U2’s sexuality was assuaged in part by its ironic inflection (and by the group’s hitherto sincere personae), it was also allayed by the band’s accretion of androgynous styles, most notably in the video for ‘One’ (1992), which featured the musicians in full make-up and drag (Corbijn 1992). This visual foray into feminine modes was enhanced by Bono’s vocal experimentations with falsetto styles on key tracks like ‘The Fly’ (1991), ‘Lemon’ (1993) and ‘Numb’ (1993). Such songs marked a departure in the U2 sound, not only via their singer’s incursion into uncharted registers, but also through the band’s increasingly synthetic and dance-oriented styles, which invoked pop artifice more than rock authenticity (Keightley 2001). If this shift carried certain gender implications (pop has been seen as a less masculine form) (Reynolds and Press 1994: 4-5), then the gendered connotations of Bono’s new voicing were made clear by the band in interviews, where they called it his ‘fat lady’ voice (McCormick 2006: 225). Indeed, falsetto arguably acts as ‘a form of drag’, a ‘vocal masquerade’ that affords male singers more ‘feminine’ positions (Miller 2003) and thus ‘confuses gender distinctions’ (Whiteley 2007: 31). In this respect, falsetto functions as

the stuff of ‘anti-masculine’ musics, situated in a dialogic relationship with the traditional ‘cock-rock’ canon, and thereby exposing something of what we perceive to be ‘masculinity’ in musical expression (Biddle and Jarman-Ivens 2007: 7-8).

Thus, Bono’s ‘fat lady’ voice – in conjunction with other sonic and visual shifts in U2’s persona at the start of the 1990s – signaled new possibilities for how masculinity might be configured in Irish rock. While U2 continued with this project in the 1990s, most notably in the video for ‘Discothèque’ (Sednaoui 1997) (which included an homage to the Village People), they returned to more mainstream masculine modes after 2000, with Bono describing himself in interviews as ‘a macho, Irish guy’ (Degeneres 2011).

Outside of Ireland, of course, alternate masculinities had often been explored in the sphere of Anglo-American rock, which has served as a site of gender transgression and experimentation, offering a visible space in which men can assume less hegemonic modes of male identity (Hawkins 2009; Whiteley 1997). While this was less evident in pre-1990s Ireland (where rock was dominated by relatively conventional figures such as Van Morrison, Rory Gallagher and Philip Lynott) (Smyth 2005), it had certainly been the case in Britain. In this context, McLaughlin and McLoone explain that Irish popular music culture, with its stress on notions of the ‘organic’ and ‘authentic’,

did not develop the same kind of ‘plastic arts’ or ‘androgynous pop’ familiar to British culture, especially in the gender-bending days of glam rock in the early 1970s (David Bowie, Marc Bolan and others) and the era of The Human League, Soft Cell, as well as The Pet Shop Boys, Jimmy Somerville and Boy George in the 1980s. British, especially English, popular music, in other words, has long embraced the plastic arts, and much interesting English music sits in the hinterland of pop plasticity and art-rock complexity, of the authentic and in-authentic (one need only think of the hybrids of the pop song and electronica in punk’s aftermath and the threat it posed to ‘real’ music and ‘creativity’, and dominant, ‘naturalised’ conceptions of masculinity). This provided an experimental, risk-taking musical and performative culture that allowed for sexual ambivalence and playfulness. But in Ireland, the climate was very different (McLaughlin and McLoone 2014).

While this might have been the case for island-Irish popular music, it was perhaps less true of the Irish diaspora in England, many of whose key figures had critiqued pop’s gender norms.

**Masculinity and music making among the Irish in England**

This section of the diaspora has, since the 1970s, played a key role in popular music, via figures like John Lydon, Kevin Rowland, Boy George (George O’Dowd), Morrissey, Shane MacGowan, and Noel and Liam Gallagher (of Oasis) (Savage 1995). Morrissey and Boy George, in particular, were at the forefront of challenging masculine norms in pop in the 1980s. They were also perceived to be on the margins of Irish life in England. In this context, the young Boy George was seen – amongst his Irish migrant milieu – as ‘the Irish-Catholic clan’s odd duck’ (Fricke 1983). The young Morrissey was also seen to be at odds with the normative codes of Irish migrant life (Rogan 1992: 69). Moreover, when the singer came to public attention, as the ‘unmanly’ front man of The Smiths (Reynolds and Press 1994: 48), his work would ‘take the cock out of rock’, as the *NME* put it (Brown 1988). Whether or not this is the case, the gestures of Boy George and Morrissey would (in their different ways) expose rock’s masculine modes, for as Biddle and Jarman-Ivens have explained,

those places where masculinity becomes most legible are precisely those places where it leaves normatively ‘masculine’ musical expression, when it ceases to be the music of self-assuredly normative ‘masculine’ bodies (2007: 7).

Despite their achievements and significance, however, figures such as Morrissey and Boy George were not always acknowledged as Irish in the 1980s (the decade when they came to attention), as England’s Irish were assumed (at this time) to be located outside of the ‘authentic’ territorial space of Irishness (Scully 2010), despite the sense of Irish difference evinced by Ireland’s diaspora in England (Ullah 1985; Ullah 1990). At the turn of the 1990s, though, this strand of Ireland’s diaspora would become increasingly visible (and increasingly acknowledged as Irish) in Ireland. This shift was born, at least in part, of the new stress on diaspora that was made by the (then) President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, through the symbolic ‘light in the window’ that she placed for Ireland’s diaspora at the President’s Dublin residence in 1990, and via the celebrated speech (‘Cherishing the Irish Diaspora’) that she made to the Irish government in 1995, which argued that ‘the men and women of our diaspora ... remain, even while absent … a precious reminder of the many strands of identity which compose our story’ (cited in Gray 1996: 182).

This discursive weaving of Ireland’s diaspora into the web of Irish identity coincided with a conspicuous increase in the visibility of England’s Irish in popular culture. This visibility was largely brought about by the role of the second-generation Irish in the Republic of Ireland football team during the early 1990s. This incarnation of the Ireland team (which reached the quarter finals of the World Cup in 1990) had the effect of increasing awareness of Ireland’s diaspora in England (Holmes 1994). The invocations of Irish ethnicity associated with these athletes (and their fans) were, of course, highly gendered (Free 2007). Such modes of masculinity were, moreover, of a piece with perceived ideas of Irish manhood in England which have been infused, note Mary Hickman and Bronwen Walter, with notions of physical strength and bibulousness (1995: 12). While this narrow index of Irish maleness had been eschewed by Irish diaspora musicians (such as Morrissey and Boy George) in the 1980s, this was less evident in the 1990s, when popular culture (particularly in Britain) became imbued with an especially regressive form of masculinity centered on the ‘new lad’, a term coined in the 1990s to denote the increasingly loutish young masculinities that became prevalent in popular culture. As Joanna Knowles has observed: ‘The New Lad represented a brash, regressive mode of young British male culture that dominated the 1990s’ (2004: 569). This figure was, Knowles notes, ‘consciously immature and anti-intellectual, preferring a lifestyle of drinking, casual sex and “masculine” leisure pursuits – particularly football and violence’ (2004: 569). For Knowles, this new pop-cultural figure was ‘epitomized by Oasis singer Liam Gallagher’ (2004: 569). Whether or not this is the case, it is clear that the ‘new lad’s emergence on the popular-cultural landscape coincided with the advent of Oasis, who became one of the decade’s most high-profile rock acts.

The ‘laddishness’ of Oasis was staged in myriad ways, not least via their ‘vacant hedonism’ (Reynolds 2001: 28), cocky persona and sporting attire, as well as through certain musical means, including the generally low-register – as well as strained and throaty singing style – of lead vocalist Liam, which was augmented by the band’s use of high volume, distortion, and lengthy (and often blues-based) guitar solos. The latter, in particular, was an inheritance of the 1970s ‘cock rock’ that had been disavowed by U2 and The Smiths, and had become antithetical to the British ‘indie’ scene with which Oasis were associated (Bannister 2006). As Houston explains, indie rock had often comprised a certain challenge to ‘hegemonic constructions of masculinity’ (Houston 2012: 160). Despite their aesthetic inheritance to indie, however, Oasis would come to restore rock’s conventional gender tropes in the 1990s, leading to claims that they had revived a ‘reactionary rock masculinity’ (Gilbert 1999: 45).

**‘Irish lads’ and Oasis**

Emerging in the English city of Manchester in 1991, Oasis comprised five musicians of immediate Irish descent, and centered on the brothers, Noel and Liam Gallagher, who served as songwriter and lead singer, respectively. Irish ethnicity was a key aspect of their persona, and served as a crucial point of commonality amongst the band members. ‘The reason Oasis came together’, explained Tony McCarroll, the group’s drummer, ‘was because we were Irish Mancunians and working class’ (Yates 1999). If this context informed the group’s formation, it also played a role in their demise. Reflecting on the intra-group acrimony that impelled Oasis’ split, Noel Gallagher claimed this was an effect of the band’s Irish masculinity. ‘If I could turn the clock back’, he suggested, ‘I’d go for a walk [and] consider what I was going to do’. ‘But we’re Irish lads’, he continued. ‘When the red mist comes down you’re going to kill some cunt’ (Hodgkinson 2011).

Such conflations of violence and Irish ethnicity are highly problematic, particularly in light of the fraught history of Anglo-Irish relations (Hill 1987). The point to note for the moment, though, is that this casual invocation of Oasis as ‘Irish lads’ was somewhat at odds with the ambivalence the band expressed towards orthodox Irish masculinities. In this context, one of Oasis’s best-known songs, ‘Whatever’ (1994), a major UK hit, was informed by Noel Gallagher’s wish to throw off (what he saw as) the rather rigid form of Irish ethnicity that (he felt) had been imposed on him by his Irish-born father. Reflecting on this point, Noel’s elder brother Paul recalls that

Noel was never into the Irish clubs and all that; he found them depressing, with too many bad associations. I reckon that’s why my dad picked on him. Noel didn’t want to be what he always called me – ‘a plastic Paddy’. He didn’t like the music … the bad jokes and the strange level of hypocrisy that existed in Manchester’s Irish community. Everybody knew everybody else. You were expected to go out with a girl who was of Irish descent, get engaged, get married, have kids and steer them through the same rituals of school and that community which really belonged to another time and idealised itself … I think Noel felt shackled by it and stifled. If there was anything he was going to rebel against, it was all that hypocrisy as he saw it; a life being mapped out before him. Those Irish tunes were the sounds of oppression. When Noel wrote the lyrics to ‘Whatever’, was he singing about escaping from our father and the Irish heritage he felt being forced down his throat? He didn’t want to be that typical *Irish lad* at all(Gallagher and Christian 1996: 67-8: emphases added).

Noel’s refusal of his father’s wish for him to be a ‘typical Irish lad’ has resonances with the accounts of other diaspora musicians, not least those outlined above (Campbell 2011). One of the means by which Noel appears to have expressed this resistance was via an occasional gravitation towards Englishness and/or Britishness (Gallagher and Christian 1996). In this context, it is worth noting that Gallagher appeared on stage with Oasis playing a guitar adorned with the British flag, an apparent gesture of affiliation with the host culture, and a tacit endorsement of Britpop, a phenomenon associated with British nationalism (Bennett and Stratton 2010). As David Hesmondhalgh suggests, however, ‘the Irish roots of the two brothers, Noel and Liam Gallagher, at the centre of Oasis, make [their] relationship ... to the phenomenon [of Britpop] quite complex’ (1999: 52). Indeed, when Oasis were asked to record a song for the England football team in 1996, the band responded with a robust assertion of their Irishness: ‘over my dead body’, Noel Gallagher said, ‘we’re Irish’ (Masterson 1996: 56).

These ostensibly incongruous gestures point to the ambivalence that has been observed among the Irish diaspora in England (Arrowsmith 1998; Ullah 1985).The music critic, Jon Savage, suggests this ambivalence is evidenced in Oasis, and originates in ‘an aspirant will to succeed, to move on up and out, to go further than their parents were allowed to go, allied to a fierce pride and anger about their background’ (Savage 1995). Such ambivalence is arguably evoked on the ‘Whatever’ single cited above, for despite that song’s allusion to eschewing Irish ethnicity, the track’s B-side, ‘(It’s Good) To Be Free’ (1994), comprised Oasis’ only foray into Irish-sounding styles. Although this track was largely typical of the band’s oeuvre in terms of style and delivery, during its coda – signaled by a burst of guitar feedback – there is a distinctive switching of musical codes (Slobin 1993: 87). Here, a jaunty folk-style melody is performed on an accordion by Paul Arthurs, the band’s (then) rhythm guitarist, who had previously played the instrument in a traditional Irish band in Manchester (Hewitt 1997: 141). Arthurs’ accordion is accompanied by a set of male voices laughing and cheering, as if to replicate the ambience of an Irish social club.

This implied conjunction of Irish ethnicity and male camaraderie was invoked in innumerable ways in the band’s oeuvre. Thus, in a promotional film made for British television in 1997, the band members were seen returning to their Manchester home, where they surveyed the key locations of their youth, including the fields where they played football, as well as a local record store that, as Liam explained in passing, ‘sold some good old Wolfe Tones records’ (Connolly 1997).The Wolfe Tones (a folk band associated with Irish nationalist views) have enjoyed a certain degree of popularity among the Irish diaspora in England (Ullah 1990: 179).However, it was not the Wolfe Tones, but Thin Lizzy, that supplied the soundtrack to this Oasis film, with the latter’s track, ‘The Boys Are Back In Town’, being played over the film’s opening scenes (which tacitly framed Oasis as the titular ‘boys’). Admittedly, Oasis’ masculinity was somewhat different to that of Thin Lizzy (the former were seen more as ‘yob rock’ than ‘cock rock’)(Stud and Price 1996), but the band’s use of ‘The Boys Are Back in Town’ underlined their self-ascription as ‘Irish lads’, and invoked the mode of Irish masculinity that was evident elsewhere in their work.

**Performing Irish masculinity**

One of the key means through which Oasis invoked their Irish ethnicity was via their authorization of a biography that expressly located them in an Irish diasporic context (Hewitt 1997). This book achieved this act of cultural self-location, moreover, in markedly gendered ways. Thus, the book’s opening pages observed: ‘Hard people, the Irish: hard workers, hard thinkers, hard players’ (p. 15). This ‘hard’ Irishness is then inferred in Oasis’ oeuvre. Here, Hewitt suggests that an Irish ‘sense of freedom aligned with a drinking culture’ became a ‘principle’ that the band ‘would stand for’ (p. 69). Similarly, he observes that Noel Gallagher’s professional commitment to Oasis was ‘a direct result of his Irish blood and a Catholic upbringing which demands full and utter dedication’ (p. 102). Elsewhere, Hewitt notes Noel’s involvement in Gaelic sports (Gallagher had played Gaelic football at Croke Park in the 1980s) (Sweeney 2012), seeing this as invaluable preparation for his later lifestyle: ‘this is where Noel would have gained his strength from, developing a strong constitution that would be constantly tested by drink and drugs in the coming years’ (p. 84).

The band’s laddishness is illumined by this mode of Irishness. Throughout the biography, displays of physical violence become a recurrent trope, underlining the simplistic caricatures of Oasis that emerged in the British tabloid press (Duff 1996; O’Brien et all 1996; Wright and Wallace 1996; Darvill and McJannet 1998). Thus, we learn of Liam’s bar room brawling in Manchester (p. 310) and are informed of Noel’s ‘violent side’ (p. 100). The source of this behaviour is expressly located in the band’s Irishness: they had, notes Hewitt, ‘undoubtedly inherited large doses of that wild-hearted spirit which sustains and propels all Irish rebels’ (p. 149). This invocation of archaic – and highly masculinized – archetypes was, moreover, echoed in the band’s other performance media, such as record sleeves and song lyrics.

The sleeve art of the group’s debut album *Definitely Maybe* (1994), for instance, features a horizontal Liam Gallagher framed by a packet of cigarettes and an alcoholic drink, while in the lower right hand corner of the sleeve is a photograph of football player George Best. The decision to include an image of Best – who, as a former Manchester United player, would be unfavourable to Manchester City supporters such as the Gallaghers(Connolly 1997) – is clarified by Noel, who notes that Best ‘was first and foremost an Irishman’ (p. 280). However, Best was not simply an Irishman, but a hard-drinking and professionally erratic Irish sportsman living in England in the 1960s.

As some of Oasis’ songs evoked such sensibilities, this image of Best arguably served as an index of the mode of Irish masculinity that Oasis engaged in their persona. Perhaps the most striking instance of this was found on the album’s eighth track, ‘Cigarettes and Alcohol’, which seemed to animate the sleeve image: ‘Is it worth the aggravation/To find yourself a job when there’s nothing worth working for?/It’s a crazy situation/But all I need are cigarettes and alcohol!’. If such sentiments evoke the ‘laddishness’ of the mid-1990s, they also echo certain stereotypes of the Irish in England, not least those regarding alcoholism and indolence. As outlined above, such stereotypes had largely been eschewed by Irish diaspora musicians in the 1980s. However, a notable exception in this regard was Shane MacGowan and his group, The Pogues, whose work confirmed certain stereotypes of the Irish, not least those pertaining to ‘drunkenness’ and ‘aggression’ (Smyth 2005: 75). This accretion of archaic archetypes has been chastised for its regressiveness (Smyth 1992). Oasis’ allusions to alcohol consumption, read in conjunction with the group’s ‘hard’ persona (and ascription as ‘Irish lads’) arguably points to a similarly retrogressive conception of Irish masculinity. As English-born (and English-accented) musicians, the ‘Irish lad’ appears to have offered an accessible means by which to assert Irish ethnicity in the popular-cultural matrix of the 1990s.

**Coda**

Eschewing the alternate modes of masculinity that emerged in the 1980s, Oasis assumed an unashamedly ‘laddish’ persona that served to restore to popular music culture a highly conventionalized masculinity, with expressly Irish inflections. In this sense, Oasis’ persona had more in common with the pre-punk machismo associated with Thin Lizzy than the post-punk innovations explored by U2. The enactment, contestation and restoration of hegemonic masculinities across three decades, and shifting musical milieus, brings to light the different modes of masculinity deployed in Irish rock culture, from the ‘boyish’ bravado of Thin Lizzy to the reflective ‘boy’ of early U2, and via the playful men of 1990s U2 to the laddish regression of Oasis. Some of the most striking engagements with masculinity in Irish rock culture have, moreover, emerged from musicians who in many ways were marginal to mainstream Irishness, whether through religion, ethnicity or place of birth. In this sense, masculinity seems to have served as a means for marginal figures to slip, through a certain musical sphere, into the stream of Irish culture, enabling outsiders to assume more orthodox identities. While scholarly work has recently addressed Irish rock as a popular-musical practice, this address has often sidelined issues of gender. This article has outlined the salience of masculinity in Irish rock culture. The task that lies ahead for scholars in this field is to theorize notions of nation and ethnicity alongside those of gender in making sense of this often overlooked strand of popular music culture.

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