

SEÁN CAMPBELL & GERRY SMYTH, *BEAUTIFUL DAY: FORTY YEARS OF IRISH ROCK* (Cork: Cork University Press: Atrium, 2005), ISBN 0-95353-535-5, 240pp, €20/£17.50/\$25.

There is a frustrating dearth of academic discourse on the subject of rock or popular music in Ireland. Historically, writing on rock or popular music in Ireland appears outside the domain of the academy and has a journalistic basis. A particularly good example is *Irish Folk, Trad & Blues: A Secret History* by Colin Harper and Trevor Hodget (London: Cherry Red Books, 2004). However, 2005 witnessed the publication of not just the book under review, but also of *Noisy Island: A Short History of Irish Popular Music* by Gerry Smyth (Cork: Cork University Press, 2005). *Beautiful Day: Forty Years of Irish Rock* explores the topic from 1964–2004 and succeeds in filling in many of the *lacunae* that have heretofore been apparent. The comprehensive, introductory essay suggests paradigms by which Irish rock music might be examined: firstly, the often declaimed, but nebulous, assumption of the inherently musical nature of the Irish. This notion, evoked by notables from Giraldus Cambrensis to Thomas Moore, smacks of colonial condescension at best, and at worst nefarious bigotry. The second paradigm established, and more fully explored, is the idea of ‘a rock sensibility—the idea of composing, recording and performing original music as a means of self-expression’ (33) underpinning the entire history of Irish rock.

Creative self-expression, of a particular kind, was an essential part of the folk music culture prior to this, and not antithetical to the notion of tradition as Campbell and Smyth assert. Nonetheless, during these four decades Irish society radically shifted ‘from aspirationally modern to post-modern’ (2). Indeed Roy Foster maintains that Ireland moved from ‘archaism to post-modernism without really allowing the time to become modern’.¹ Rock music embodied the emerging ‘present- and future-oriented practices’ (3) which were to define a new Ireland. In those culturally turbulent times, rock offered an opportunity ‘to speak your truth...removed from society’s prevailing narratives’ (4), and through rock, group allegiance based on age, rather than religion, gender, or class, was possible for the first time (4). Allied with this was the emergence of an international youth culture largely accessible only through rock. What can be deduced is that an epistemology of youth culture must have rock music, and the habitus brought to the field of rock music, at its core. Bourdieu explains habitus as the structuring mechanism that allows people operating in different fields, in this case

¹ R. F. Foster, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 24.

rock music, to organize, interpret and respond to contexts and actions as they happen and develop.²

Following the initial discursive essay, a representative song from each year, 1964–2004, is selected and used as a frame of historical, cultural and musical analysis. Many of the songs are chosen not because they are the best-selling or indeed the ‘best’ song, but because at the moment in time at which they were heard these songs functioned as dynamic spaces where identity, both personal and group, were explored and negotiated. This relies on the belief that music is not merely reflective or representative of culture, which it surely is, but potentially a place where cultural meaning is debated, stretched, contracted and experienced.³ This is a Top 40 list, but not as we know it. The habit of making lists is a systemic condition in popular or rock music: Billboard Charts began in the 1950s and ‘best of’ compilations are a dime a dozen. Lists are certainly a convenient way of organizing knowledge (5), but just as important, lists operate as filters, a method of establishing those who are in-frame and, perhaps more importantly, those who are not.⁴ Acknowledging both the liberations and limitations of the list format, there are many inclusions here of bands, if not of the specific songs, which one would expect to find: U2, Rory Gallagher, Van the Man and The Boomtown Rats, to name but a few. There are also surprising inclusions, such as The Dubliners, leaders in the ballad boom/folk revival period. Their appearance on Top of the Pops in 1967 (surely that alone warrants inclusion) illustrates the complex interface between rock and folk idioms. The list format guarantees exclusions too, for example the absence of The Stunning is surprising, but the corresponding years (early 1990s) have stiff competition for the slot. The Sultans of Ping, FC rocked the nation with what is a classic pop/rock song with a peculiarly vernacular twist, ‘Where’s Me Jumper?’, but alas this did not find its way in either.

The individual short essays attached to each song strike a careful balance between situating the recording, culturally and historically, and exploring the performance itself. The style of language and writing used oscillates between the familiar and analytical, almost as a split voice. Indeed, one wonders does this actually reflect the dual authorship? However precarious a strategy this might be, it caters to both academic and anorak on some level, annexing neither in the process. The essays are

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

³ Martin Stokes (ed.), *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* (Providence, Rhode Island: Berg, 1994), 5.

⁴ See Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Bruce Springsteen Fans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 106–7.

detailed and considered, and often draw surprising, but convincing, connections between musical and socio-political domains. Orange Machine's moniker has an ironic significance not alone with regard to the psychedelic music that they performed, but also in the light of the fact they were a Northern Irish band, at a time when events were heating up, politically speaking, in that region. Each essay gives a 'Best Bit' recommendation: what the listener should particularly pay attention to. The 'Best Bit' suggestions are in a fanzine style, assuming a high level of familiarity with the musical references.

Due to the extensive number of songs examined, there is a restriction on the length of analytical engagement in each case. Provocative ideas, at times, are cut short. So, in addition to 'N17' being 'one of the most affecting accounts of Irish emigration ever composed' (126)⁵—the wider significance of The Sawdoctors' ability to represent and appeal to a non-urban (but not necessarily rural) audience lies unexplored. This non-urban constituency had participated in creating, defining and supporting Irish rock, but their concerns up to now were represented generically: The Sawdoctors gave voice to this experience but solidly within the field of rock 'n' roll. It is in the overlap between engaged fan and interested scholar that the most efficacious writing is to be found. The essay on U2's 'Beautiful Day' for the year 2000, though not the final song, acts as some sort of logical climax which the reader has anticipated from the start. It was never a question of would U2 appear, but when? A prosaic analysis of the lyrics, in conjunction with a detailed historiography of the band, provokes questions and provides answers in equal portions.

Seán Cambell and Gerry Smyth assert that music for the Irish is 'a simultaneous remembering and forgetting' (1), but the genesis of rock music in Ireland announced the possibility of an imagined future from which there was no retreat.

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⁵ Paul Brady's 'Nothing But the Same Old Story' (*Hard Station*, Compass Records, 1981) and The Pogues' 'Fairytale of New York' (*If I Should Fall From Grace With God*, Island Records, 1990) vie for the same accolade.