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# Déan é tú féin – DIY Music and Music Culture in Ireland: Introduction

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DIY music and musical practice has a long history of credibility and success on the island of Ireland. The lineage of Irish rock and punk bands that have gained prominence on the world stage over the past sixty years from Thin Lizzy, Stiff Little Fingers, My Bloody Valentine, the Cranberries, Sultans of Ping FC to Fontaines D.C. all found their beginnings in DIY scenes in Dublin, Cork, Belfast and Limerick. Young people in beat, rock and folk groups, and later in punk, rave, indie and hip hop (and more recently again in rock and folk), who had musical interests and aspirations which counteracted the mainstream found ways and places to congregate and form communities that were the epitome of underground and do-it-yourself in every aspect from production to performance. Although often synonymous with the style and approach to music making that came to prominence in the 1970s and early 1980s. Through the alternative scenes that emerged in late night cafes, pubs, and festivals around the country. As a reaction to the dance halls and country Irish music that was popularised by the showbands and that had become the prevailing music culture across the island of Ireland from the mid-1950s through to the mid-80s, it is important to move away from that narrow timeframe and genre focus.

DIY music culture and did not begin in the 1970s and many musical practices that were critical parts of rural and urban working-class identity for the past century in Ireland were predominantly and intrinsically DIY. At the height of their popularity, showbands employed an estimated 10,000 plus people, more than 4,000 full-time musicians and a further 6,000 either directly or indirectly employed as a result of the showband industry (Power 1990:28). Showbands emerged from and in some instances maintained a strong DIY approach, which resulted in many musical entrepreneurs. Niall Coghlan's piece in this collection on their early sound systems looks at showbands through a new and important DIY lens. Although often derided, there is an important cultural context to this era of music even if it taken as its most basic level to be a counterfoil to the underground scenes that were developing concurrently around the country.<sup>1</sup>

The DIY ethos, although synonymous with music scenes across the island often goes further than music creation; it sees people release their own recordings, set up their own music labels, and manufacture an alternative press through zines. An examination of these practices from the perspective of Irish punk and punk DIY culture appears in Murphy (2014, 2020), while Ryan (2017, 2020) explores the importance of zines in Irish DIY scenes. Neil O'Connor's article focuses on the work of Dublin based record label and shop All City Records and its reissuing of rare and unknown electronic and post-punk recordings, breathing new life into our DIY historiographies.

The articles that are presented in this special edition are a diverse snapshot of elements of DIY culture as it has been practised in Ireland over the past sixty years. While popular music can at times be dismissed at times as style over substance, the Dublin and Belfast punk scenes, the early queer rave scenes of the 1980s and the Cork indie scene of the 1990s are evidence that DIY artists have often adopted a strong political stance and engaged in meaningful activist work

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion on their impact see Power (1990) Hogan (2014) and Erraught (2020).

through consciousness raising activities that have contributed to social change on the island of Ireland. Heron (2015:2) argues that punk's significant role in the everyday lives of a section of the youth of Northern Ireland, loosened the hold of 'seemingly immutable identities forged over centuries and negating the discourses of unionist exceptionalism and republican idealism.' McLaughlin (2004:81) draws similarities between the punk and rave scenes in this respect and argues that free parties could be seen as having a bearing on sectarian culture, even temporarily. Ann-Marie Hanlon's article on the importance of the DIY translocal music scene, that emerged around Ireland's first purpose built gay nightclub Flickers in the Hirschfield Centre on Fownes St., for queer socialisation and activism in 1980s Dublin, is both timely and enlightening. In more recent times musicians have played prominent activist roles in campaigns in Ireland, such as those to legalise same-sex marriage in 2015 and to repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment in 2018 and, in Northern Ireland, the subsequent "North is Next" campaign for the decriminalisation of abortion. In 2017 Dublin based feminist punk band Sissy self-released their song "Sail and Rail" which featured Radie Peat from Lankum. The song's title was a direct reference to the fact that more than 3,000 women had travelled to England for an abortion in 2017 alone, many of them using the ferry from Dublin to Holyhead and then the train to London, which is colloquially known as 'the Sail and Rail.' It was released in aid of Need an Abortion Ireland, a pro-choice group who support women in accessing abortion services in Ireland. Other female-led collectives, such as SKIRT and Room for Rebellion, promoted a series of gigs in Belfast and Dublin to raise money and awareness for both campaigns. Lankum, one of the pioneers of the new folk revival in Ireland over the last ten years are a good example of a band that position protest at the forefront of their music. The title track of the band's breakthrough album *Cold Old Fire* (2017) was self-released by the band before they changed their name from Lynched (a reference to the surnames of two of the members of the band). The song written about the 2008 recession and subsequent rise in poverty of the working classes sees the singer lamenting:

'We look for signs that Dublin's heart's still beating/ that concrete and glass and peelers and mass/ they haven't stopped the people from screaming.'

Issues of class struggle and social deprivation have long been to the fore of folk music around the world, and it is not surprising therefore that Lankum would continue to carry the mantle. Lankum and the other folk revival artists such as The Bonny Men, the Mary Wallopers and John Francis Flynn have been at the forefront of social campaigns to prevent the over development of Dublin and to protest against the homelessness crisis. Their ongoing activism and self-proclaimed DIY punk ethos arguably aligns the current scene closely with the grass roots punk scenes of the 1970s.

Female musicians from Ireland, like their counterparts around the world, have often found themselves excluded from or situated on the periphery of both the mainstream music industry and local DIY Scenes. While it may be reasonable to expect that the bottom up and egalitarian structure that is espoused by DIY scenes would make them a more welcome home for all, research which I conducted with women who were involved in various Dublin music scenes from the 1990s to the present day found that through social interaction, the prevailing messages that women receive are discouraging to their sense of 'belonging' to DIY music scenes. Instead of women gaining access to the positions that incur both economic and cultural capital, such as headliner or producer, they often continue to find themselves corralled into roles that offer them very little in terms of monetary or cultural reward (O'Sullivan, 2017). As a result of this exclusion, women have a long history of organising amongst themselves to create music as both a political act and practice, often forming collectives, which operate as a fortifying, collaborative, and safe space where members can provide each other with support, education, and opportunities. Contemporary Irish examples are the DJ and 'noise making technology workshops' run by Gash Collective, Women in the Machine and SYNTHESIZE\_HER\_ for female identifying and non-binary participants,

and the ongoing advocacy of groups such as FairPlé, Girls Rock Dublin and Sound-ing the Feminists.

Until very recently, female acts have often been overlooked in the canon of Irish popular music, only to be discussed as folklore or background actors. Dil-lane’s research on Sinead O’Connor (2020) and Cusack’s work on *A Women’s Heart* (2022) are important additions to the literature. Hanlon’s work on the Irish elec-tro-pop duo Zrazy (2020) is also critical in addressing this gap especially in terms of lesbian music. There remains a disparity, however, between the representation of male and female perspectives in scholarship on popular music within the Irish context.

DIY music culture in Ireland has shifted both its location and its focus over the past fifteen years as a result of the proliferation of modern technology and the impact of online spaces and social networks.<sup>2</sup> However, online or off, it remains a site for social and sonic experimentation, affording diverse and new voices the opportunity to be heard. Across the country volunteer led and community focused collectives continue to provide opportunities for the marginalised to find their voice, and for countercultural music to thrive. For example, this is facilitated in Limerick by DIY LK and The X Collective, the Hausu Collective in Cork and the Gash Collective in Dublin and Galway. Ciaran Ryan’s work in this collection focuses on the contemporary DIY practice of two music collectives, one in Dundalk and the other in Limerick, two important but often overlooked places in terms of Irish mu-sical culture.

This special edition of the *Irish Communications Review* was the result of a symposium ‘Déan é tú féin – DIY Music and Music Culture in Ireland’ that was due to take place in TU Dublin on the 3 April 2020. The symposium aimed to bring together disparate voices to explore some of the myriad ways in which DIY culture has impacted Irish popular music. However, just weeks before the event Ireland

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<sup>2</sup> See O’Sullivan (2020) for a more in-depth discussion on how this has impacted Dublin based musicians.

went into its first lockdown on the 12 March 2020. At 120 days the lockdown was recognised as the longest in Europe, yet, for the music industry, the lockdown was much more restrictive. Many venues, pubs and community spaces that housed gigs closed their doors from March 2020 until the 22 October 2021, a total 589 days. Those that could open were prohibited from having live music performances. Venues and nightclubs were only open for three weeks when they had their opening hours reduced before being shut again on the 7 December 2021. It would be the 22 January 2022 before there was a full reopening of the sector. The extent of the impact that the pandemic has had on Ireland's already contracting music culture is yet to be seen. What is evident however, is that the spaces where DIY Music culture has thrived over the past thirty years have greatly diminished over the past five years, and this decline is likely to continue over the next couple of years. 2021 alone saw the permanent closure of many music and community spaces across the country. Jigsaw, the community space in Dublin 1, which opened as Seomra Spraoi (the Irish for 'playroom') in 2004 and had been a thriving hub for a diverse range of DIY music culture, including Dublin Digital Radio and other collectives over its lengthy existence, closed in April. In Cork Nancy Spain's (which closed in the early 2000s) was home to many alternative nights in the 1990s (including an infamous Fugazi gig in 1999) and the Kino, a converted cinema which had been housing live music since 2019, were both granted demolition orders. The Electric in Galway and the Trinity Rooms in Limerick, both ostensibly mainstream nightclubs but renowned for facilitating a diverse roster of independent promoters and dance acts, also permanently shut their doors. *Give Us the Night* the grassroots campaign to change licencing laws in Ireland reports that the number of nightclubs across Ireland has diminished from 500 in 2000 to 85 in 2022. While many of these would have been music spaces that foregrounded commercial music there would, however, have been some spaces provided by these venues for DIY music and culture to emerge. It is not just commercial venues and nightclubs that have diminished in recent times. Community spaces, recording studios and rehearsal spaces

have all suffered from the impact of the shortage of property, particularly in urban areas which has resulted in many sites being repurposed and redeveloped as hotels, student accommodation and apartments. For musicians young and old, experienced and starting out, the situation has never been more precarious or uncertain. The much-publicised Government of Ireland *Basic Income for the Arts* pilot scheme was opened for applicants in April 2022, but with only 2,000 recipients across the entire Arts sector in the pilot scheme it is unlikely to have a major impact on grassroots and non-mainstream musicians in the short term. The future for DIY culture on the surface may seem bleak, however, one thing Irish artists, producers and promoters have proven over the past sixty years is that they are both resourceful and creative and they will find ways for new music and musical practices to thrive.

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