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DIY Connections and Collaborations: Mid-West to North-East

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Abstract

Alternative music cultures can be found in various Irish cities and towns outside of the capital Dublin. These scenes may retain their own local idiosyncrasies, but those subscribing to do-it-yourself (DIY) ideals in Ireland are clearly influenced by sounds and styles from further afield. As punk mutated into different forms from the 1980s onwards, political and musical cues came from the countries to the East and West of Ireland - hardcore (Fairchild, 1995) from the United States, and anarcho-punk (Dines, 2004) from Britain. The DIY aesthetics of the early punk movements have since translated to numerous music genres and practices since, including rap, indie, and dance (Bennett, 2018).¹ This article looks at contemporary DIY practices in Ireland, with a specific focus on two urban centres approximately 300 kilometres apart from each other – Dundalk, in the north-east of the country and Limerick, in the mid-west. Both have burgeoning independent music scenes, with young music-makers across disparate genres (alternative rock, hip-hop, electronica) subscribing to the ideals of do-it-yourself through the self-promotion, recording and distribution of music. This article examines contemporary perspectives from practitioners involved in these scenes. It explores networks - formal and informal - that are developing, with a specific focus on collectives in the two locales investigated for this study.

¹ It is worth noting that DIY practices in the making and sharing of music did not commence with punk rock. Amy Spencer (2008) charts its origins back to the skiffle movement of the 1950s, where simple rhythm sections (utilising homemade string bass and washboards) complemented banjos and guitars for a musical form that hybridized folk, jazz and blues.

DIY music and collective action

In her wide-ranging study of all types of music-making in Milton Keynes in the early 1980s, Ruth Finnegan (1989) draws on Becker's (1982) idea of art as collective action. In his articulation of "art worlds", Becker explains that the final piece of art that we engage with as an audience is the result of several layers of cooperation. As Finnegan expands:

Far from being the autonomous products of asocial individuals, music, like other art and craft practices – and indeed any kind of work – depends on a system of interlocking institutions and activities which, whether we are conscious of it or not, form a recognized part of our social world (1997: 125)

Using this framework, she points to a network of collaboration that surrounds the musical infrastructure of Milton Keynes. This includes those involved in selling musical instruments to those providing tuition to perhaps most importantly, audiences. When this is extended to DIY music communities that also incorporates various collectives and groups involved in promoting and publishing music. Small, independent labels can be a catalyst for creativity within DIY scenes, and Michael Mary Murphy's work exploring the history of record labels in Ireland points to such labels as potential hubs for 'ingenuity, attention to detail and creativity' (2021: 28).

One of the more recent and noteworthy of these is the Dundalk-based Pizza Pizza Records, which was established in early 2018. The label's founders were members of various emerging local acts and assorted others involved in the local music scene. Pizza Pizza's first release was *Wednesday*, the debut album from Just Mustard, which was released to critical acclaim and was also a minor commercial success for the label, selling out two pressings of its vinyl release. Joey Edwards is one of the people responsible for running the label. As well as his A&R and administrative day-to-day duties with the label, he is the manager of Just Mustard, a member of the band Larry (also on Pizza Pizza Records), a live sound engineer, a

DJ, and occasionally a driver when bands need transportation. Edwards's position is not atypical; the ability to fulfil more than one role is commonplace within a DIY art world. In an interview conducted as part of this research, Edwards outlines that those involved in bands on Pizza Pizza also contribute in other ways to support various releases, whether that is through photography, artwork, driving, cooking for and housing touring bands. 'The idea of "I'm a drummer and I don't do anything else" doesn't seem to apply, not in our group anyway,' he explains (Edwards, 2020). When Larry recorded their debut album with legendary engineer Steve Albini in Chicago in 2018, it was Just Mustard's singer KT Ball that made a full-length documentary about the process, entitled *The Full Bosco* (2019).

Previous studies of music scenes have highlighted the role of venues (Shank, 1994) and pinpointed the needs for the support mechanism of independent labels and small record stores (O'Connor, 2002). In an era where the term "do-it-yourself" has been stretched to an extent that technology has allowed acts to create and perform without the need for outside intervention - record themselves, distribute the music digitally, and even perform virtually - it is interesting that the likes of Edwards see value in a more orthodox indie music system. He credits the local record store Classified Records for helping to promote the label and sell its releases, not just in Dundalk but further afield.

A relatively small urban centre,² Dundalk is a border town that is roughly halfway between the two largest cities on the island of Ireland. It has currently just one regular licensed music venue, The Spirit Store, which is situated on the outskirts of the town by the docks. The venue has been central to the story of Pizza Pizza Records; the first fundraiser they had to launch the label was there, and they even ran a one-day festival entitled *The Big Slice* at The Spirit Store in the summer of 2019. When Just Mustard performed at The Spirit Store in Dundalk in February

² According to the 2016 Census, Dundalk is the eighth largest city/town in the Republic of Ireland, with a population of 39,004.

2019, their invited support act was Cruiser from Limerick. Some of the members of Cruiser are significant stakeholders in the Limerick music scene through their involvement with DIY LK. This particular collective has been described by one music journalist as ‘a vital presence in the country’s ever-evolving independent scene’ (Coney, 2020).

The history of DIY LK somewhat mirrors that of Pizza Pizza; the notable difference is that DIY LK’s does not tend to release music. The one exception to date is the release of a digital compilation *Bed Covers Volume 1* in 2020, during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. With funds raised going directly to a local human rights NGO, the compilation epitomised the spirit of DIY LK - seven local acts closely knit with DIY LK’s history feature all covering songs from each other, highlighting a sense of community as opposed to competition amongst them. DIY LK’s primary focus is on the live arena. Unlike Pizza Pizza, DIY LK has more viable options when it comes to finding venues in the city to host its shows. Since its inception in 2017, the collective primarily utilises the upstairs room at Pharmacia, a city-centre bar. The venue affords the collective relative autonomy and includes its own PA system. It is also doubles up as Cruiser’s practice space, and houses their backline, something that can be quite helpful for traveling bands. DIY LK’s operations bear similarities to a previous DIY collective in the city, the Aspersion Music Collective (AMC), which ran from 1999 to 2006. Like the AMC, DIY LK operates on a not-for-profit basis, and it tends to avoid using the largest music venue in the city, Dolan’s (a premises that now consists of three separate music venues). Diarmuid O’Shea, one of the members of DIY LK, also plays in the band Casavettes, further demonstrating the interconnectedness of the Limerick scene. He explains that emerging alternative bands in the city were trying to gain more control, without having to rely on support slots from larger touring bands: ‘We wanted to put on shows ourselves. Dolan’s was great. It helped us get off the ground but it’s not a sustainable method for running gigs for ourselves, because we’re just young guys in our twenties who don’t have money’ (O’Shea interview, 2020).

While there are five core members of DIY LK, including O'Shea and Cruiser guitarist Chris Quigley, they note that there is a 'broader community' which can vary from twelve to twenty people, depending on the time of the year, that are active in putting on shows:

What allows it to be a community is maybe that we don't overburden people with expectations either. Sometimes people will come forward and be like "I can put these people up" or whatever. Diarmuid and I would generally be the people doing sound, and a lot of the logistics. That's the position we've put ourselves in and we're comfortable taking a relatively high amount of the work on, and other people contribute when they can. People do want to help, and there's goodwill there (Quigley interview, 2020).

Just as is in the case study of Pizza Pizza Records, there is evidence here of DIY scenes relying more on generalists as opposed to specialists. It seems a requirement to participate in numerous different ways, even if that is in an area where participants have limited previous experience. Quigley talks about how different people are trained up in how to operate the sound desk, and acknowledges that it is vital to bring new people into the collective continuously. O'Shea indicates his time with DIY LK has opened up his musical tastes beyond alternative guitar-based music. This has also coincided with the success of Music Generation in the city, a national youth-centred music education partnership. With tutors who are already ingrained in the local scene, it has been an incubator for young alternative bands such as PowPig. It has also played a significant role in positioning Limerick as an exciting centre for rap and hip-hop, with the city's scene receiving national and international media attention. A recent *Vice* article claims that 'over the past few years, Limerick has become a hotspot for both mind-expanding experimental music and riotous rap' (Gannon, 2020), focusing specifically on the label and collective PX Music, and name-checking The Unscene, whose Bandcamp page states is 'not really a label.'

The Unscene is the brainchild of Andy Connolly, who currently records and performs under the moniker of Naïve Ted. His involvement in music dates back to the late 1990s when he started off as an underground hip-hop DJ, coming specifically from a scratch DJ perspective, before later moving into producing his music. Connolly is one of the tutors at Music Generation, with a particular youth work remit to his work, liaising regularly with the probation services and Garda Youth Diversion Projects.

Through that, I'd have strong links with the hip-hop community here, which has really kind of flourished in the last few years, though my own personal output has probably veered more into the dance music territory in the last three to four years as well... It's [The Unscene] kind of a repository to host stuff. 40% of it is my own stuff and the rest is people who I like who couldn't get released somewhere else or didn't have the means to put it out themselves, so I can always step in and say 'I'll host it for you and I'll do emails and I'll hook you up with a video person if you want that,' or whatever. It's certainly not a money-maker. I view it as a place to host stuff that would otherwise be on someone's hard drive forever (Connolly interview, 2020).

Analogue and Digital DIY

Connolly views his earlier influences as coming from underground rap movements with an inherent independent spirit, where artists are expected to avoid making music that sounds too "pop" and are to steer clear of major labels. This notion of authenticity is explored in several other studies of popular music; Reynolds (2006) links it to the reaction of devotees of jungle music to move further underground as a reaction to the popularisation of drum and bass in the mid-1990s, whereas Thornton (1995) equates it with insider specialist knowledge in clubbing cultures. Elsewhere, scholars have investigated the relationship between music formats and authenticity. Chivers-Yochim and Biddinger (2008) demonstrated how music fans have attached human qualities to vinyl records; Farrugia and Swiss (2005) explored how EDM DJs value the analogue over the digital as being more authentic,

while Goulding and Berbaix's (2019) investigation into the contemporary resurgence of the vinyl format argues that authenticity must be treated as a fluid notion.

In an era of digital reproduction, those involved in DIY music practices give mixed perspectives. For Joey Edwards, the format was central to the establishment of Pizza Pizza Records: 'We wanted to put out records. All of us being just music enthusiasts ourselves and fans, and loving our own record collections, and building them up over the years, and some of us DJing. It was just a thing that we were passionate about really,' Edwards (Interview, 2020). Small labels like Pizza Pizza around Ireland have a tendency towards releasing limited runs of vinyl records; larger quantities are prohibitive because of the rising costs of vinyl production and increasing demands from major labels on pressing plants. Of course, there is much irony in this; what was once a format that the majors tried to make extinct is now a key component in the commodification of music. Whereas DIY labels and bands were once expressing resistance to the music industries by favouring a seemingly antiquated format, they are now utilising the same mechanisms as the mainstream. Additionally, and perhaps an area that has received limited consideration, the manufacturing of records is 'decidedly anti-green' (Connolly, 2019), at odds with the environmental aspects of some DIY music movements in the past. Andy Connolly saw the arrival of digital music as more liberating than many of his peers from the underground hip-hop scene:

That's when I realised that you really could do it yourself. Twenty years ago, just to press a record was much more expensive and harder. You still needed to do some professional stuff, like get mastering engineers and lacquers cut, whereas with digital, I could do nearly all of it myself. That was quite inspiring really. Even though I would use records in my music, I had no real attachment to them as actual things really; they're just like tools... I guess the internet made everything DIY in a lot of ways. That's being the big change from when I started to now (Connolly interview, 2020).

As Naïve Ted, all of Connolly's recent recorded output has been digital. During his twenties, he encountered a wider range of music, and learned more about 'the punky, lo-fi aesthetic' (Connolly, Interview, 2020) which started to influence his work. His performances and recordings now are an example of cross-pollination of music genres and scenes in the city. In the summer of 2015, he collaborated with fellow Music Generation tutor and Limerick musician Stephen Ryan, known for his involvement with a host of guitar-based bands (Tooth, giveamanakick, and Windings) over the past two decades. The pair performed a short set of improvised music at an outdoor street festival that was showcasing local talent. Both Connolly and Ryan demonstrate a collaborative spirit in their work. Connolly has remixed Ryan's band Windings and featured the likes of local fiddle-player/ multi-instrumentalist Post Punk Podge on his recordings, whereas Ryan has recorded guitar for a number of Limerick-based rap and hip-hop artists including Denise Chaila, Rusangano Family, and Murli. The lack of rigid boundaries between genres extends to visual aspects in Limerick. Steve Savage, the drummer in Cruiser, produced the video for rap group Same D4Ence's track "A Beauty Named Shannon" (2016), and his collection of over four years' worth of live footage of the city's rap scene was uploaded as "Unscene Tapes// Vol.1" in 2019. The relative ease of access to recording and distributing music by those in DIY scenes has also been extended to ways of promoting and documenting these cultures, without relying on the music press. In Limerick, a healthy and supportive environment has emerged, which seems to not only cross genre classifications, but also social and generational boundaries:

You're seeing 19-year-olds and you're seeing 40-years-olds, which is kind of rare at a gig. All the weirdoes are converging on those gigs because they feel they have to... there's a real community spirit driving it all. Even if it's not quite your cup of tea, you'll still probably go along to shout and even if it's just to pay your fiver, or your tenner, or whatever. There's a lot of gigs I'd go to and I haven't got the time, so I'll just show up and pay and stay for ten minutes and leave again. I think there a lot of people like that (Connolly interview, 2020).

Music scenes are fragmented and transient, particularly in smaller towns and cities, where their capacity to survive is under more threat than larger urban centres. There is an acceptance by the likes of Connolly that in order for such movements to remain viable, active patronage is required by practitioners. In the process, musical horizons are being broadened, and this has been manifested through an annual festival, Féile na Gréine that started in 2018. The three-day music trail, hosted in different locations around the city, is a collaboration between DIY LK and electronic music collective Lower Your Expectations. As opposed to promoters competing with each other for a relatively small audience of enthusiasts of left-of-field music, the two groups working together has been a significant success already, according to DIY LK's Chris Quigley: 'What was really nice about the Féile is the amount of musicians from all generations. I think Blindboy [Boatclub, member of comedy/musical duo The Rubberbandits, podcaster] was tweeting about it; different generations, different disciplines and they're all talking to each other. It felt very authentic,' (Quigley interview, 2020).

An Irish DIY 'Scene'?

The make-up of Limerick's musical ecosystem could be classified as a number of different "microscenes", loosely categorised as the underground indie/punk scene, the hip-hop/rap scene, and the electronic scene. All share DIY practices - (often self) recording locally, and releasing and promoting those recordings independently - as well as occasionally crossing over on bills. One of the earliest bills that DIY LK assembled was in the summer of 2017 when Cork experimental jazz combo Fixity were supported by local rappers 2Kommen and punk outfit Static Vision; a previous show had seen Cruiser share a bill with Naïve Ted. Grazian (2013) positions non-traditional urban performance spaces as key outlets in his articulation of the microscene concept. While some earlier DIY LK shows were

house gigs, and other events have happened around the city in arts spaces/ BYOB (bring your own booze/beer) venues, the majority of live activity in Limerick happens at licensed premises. Chris Quigley had explored the viability of opening an autonomous DIY space but met obstacles. He believes that a lack of such public spaces in Ireland is having a detrimental impact on all art forms, and concedes that collectives and bands such as his are at the mercy of commercial premises. Despite the mutually beneficial relationship they have with Pharmacia, he admits that 'as long as they [commercial venues] are doing good, you might get away with it' (Quigley interview, 2020).

Whereas there are more diverse musical styles meeting in Limerick, in Dundalk the local music scene is seemingly more directed towards guitar-based alternative music. Joey Edwards characterises the scene as anybody in the town and its environs producing their own music, 'a sense of like-minded people' (Edwards interview, 2020). Pizza Pizza Records is not exclusively Dundalk in terms of its roster, signing acts from other cities such as Trick Mist from Cork and Careerist from Belfast, but is defiantly proud of its origins:

Identity is important. We put out a cassette last week of Just Mustard, a session that we recorded in LA last year, and it says on it 'Pizza Pizza Records, Dundalk' and that's important. I feel like we are trying to represent ourselves as a Dundalk-based thing, and that's important to us. That's where we're from and we have those roots (Edwards interview, 2020).

Edwards talks about how he sees the label and local scene as 'a work of passion, connectivity and friendship' (Edwards interview, 2020) emphasising the social nature of music scenes. Turino (2008) posits that music needs to be considered beyond just being a piece of art, but also thought of as something which engages with people. Music is interwoven in the fabric of the everyday and social lives of those invested in such scenes. For practitioners like Edwards, that sociability can greatly heighten the attachment to not just the music, but the people and places that form the community. Moreover, the idea of scene, for him, is not necessarily

locally-bound anymore, either. Bennett and Peterson (2004) propose that scenes can be local, translocal, or virtual, further emphasising the fluidity of the concept. This is also evident in the discussion with Edwards. Scenes are based on collaboration and shared social interaction, and he suggests that this is something that is happening more on a national scale as part of a larger do-it-yourself community.

We started doing nights in the Spirit Store, and we started bringing bands from Belfast, or Cork, or Galway, or Limerick, and it felt like the scene opened up; it wasn't just a Dundalk scene anymore, it was more of an Irish scene, an Irish DIY scene. I think around the same time we started the group DIY LK in Limerick started, and they share a very similar attitude (Edwards interview, 2020).

He expands that he keeps in regular contact with members of the Limerick contact and is highly complimentary of the scene that is in place in the city. He adds that regular trips to Limerick have made him familiar with the people who routinely turn up for the shows.

There is always something there where I just felt that they were so up for it, no matter whose band it was. That was something we noticed and really tried to bring back with us too. There's a brilliant sense of community. It seems to me that there is a bit of foresight there, that it will generate more people starting bands, and more people performing or playing music. That's never a bad thing (Edwards interview, 2020).

His sentiments are echoed by the members of DIY LK that I spoke to, who saw Pizza Pizza as sharing a 'similar worldview' (Quigley, 2020) as them. This relationship has resulted in numerous gig exchanges between the two, with a full Pizza Pizza line-up of Just Mustard, Larry and Trick Mist scheduled to play at Pharmacia in April 2020 cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Both parties also pinpoint initiatives such as the compilation series *Litany of Failures*, which has released three editions to date, as material artefacts that showcase an entire Irish DIY scene. The previously mentioned *Féile na Gréine* festival in Limerick is described as a 'mini

Irish music holiday, maybe like Other Voices, but for people without any money. Everyone just came down and stayed at various houses and ate and drank and were merry for the whole weekend' (Quigley interview, 2020). Events such as this and Pizza Pizza's one-day *The Big Slice* festival demonstrate loose connections between the various scenes.

Dundalk act TPM, a duo (brother Charles and Andrew Hendy) that straddle hip-hop and quasi-anarchic parody, have established connections with Limerick through their house shows, with an all-Limerick bill hosted in 2019. Among the line-up for that particular event was Post Punk Podge and The Technohippies, an act perhaps as equally unclassifiable as TPM. In an extended interview on national radio on the Limerick music scene, famed Irish broadcaster Dave Fanning described Post Punk Podge's output as 'a genre-defying sound and humorous references and quite often scathing political and social commentary' (2020). Post Punk Podge also incorporates the different microscenes in Limerick; Podge himself is a member of the DIY LK collective, while some of the recorded music has been released by Andy Connolly's The Unscene. The guest appearance of Dundalk's veteran punk poet Jinx Lennon on the track "Lobster" (2017) from Connolly's Naïve Ted alter ego is one of the few examples of a more formalised collaboration between the two locales. In 2020, the relationship developed between Post Punk Podge and TPM resulted in the single "Hard Man" (2020), an attack on contemporary masculinity. In both the lyrics and the accompanying video, place is central. Limerick and Dundalk are referenced throughout, with the corresponding imagery incorporating numerous locations around Dundalk. The track opens with the following lyrics:

If you're a hard man this is what's going to happen to you because of Post Punk Podge and TPM. / We are going to kill all the hard men then we will be the hard men. / We're gonna start with Dundalk and then we're gonna move onto Limerick and there's no hard men in Dublin, everyone knows that.

In the radio interview with Fanning, Post Punk Podge positions collaborations like these as invigorating for DIY practitioners, and as representative of a scene that is not bound by city or county boundaries:

I learn something new every time I collaborate with something, and it makes the country smaller where people are interacting with one another and making music with each other. It's very easy to do, I suppose, in a technological era now whereas it wouldn't have been so easy before (Post Punk Podge, Interview with Dave Fanning, 2020)

Conclusion

The recorded collaborations between Dundalk and Limerick are limited to date, but have worked, partially thanks to the ease of sharing music in a digital era, as attested to by Post Punk Podge in the Fanning interview. At the time of writing this article, Ireland - and indeed, the world - is in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has greatly affected those that this study focuses on. For some there has been a monetary impact, through the loss of earnings particularly from the live circuit. Others within DIY scenes will indicate that playing live shows is not necessarily a financial driver (breaking even often being the objective), but the live spaces where networks and indeed friendships are developed are currently on hold. Recognising a potential collapse of the industry in Ireland, the State intervened with the introduction of the Music Industry Stimulus Package, with various grants available to musical artists around songwriting, recording, and the pressing and publication of recorded music. While understandable at a time when citizens are expected to curtail social interactions and travel, the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media perhaps missed a trick by not exploring how schemes like this could encourage creative exchanges and collaborations between scenes such as those explored in this article. On the other hand, DIY music has tended to exist outside of government policies around creative industries. Traditionally, they have been anti-establishment and underground and state interference could lead to a dilution of what could be achieved in a more organic, informal

manner. While definitions and expectations of what DIY music entails have shifted, what is still evident is that collective action, sociability and networking are still very much integral to their survival today.

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