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Early Sound Systems of the Irish Dance Bands and Showbands

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Abstract

This paper examines the culture and technologies around the sound systems used by the Irish dance and show bands of the 1950s and 1960s. With limited financial and technical resources available to the average musician of the period, many performers were forced to adopt a DIY approach, adapting or building their own instruments and sound equipment to meet changing tastes and needs. Literary sources are augmented by material drawn from interviews with two musicians who played with the showbands. The evolution of the technologies from the post-war period is documented and a self-sufficient, DIY approach is evidenced, prior to the adoption of mass-produced commercial sound equipment.

Although DIY in musical contexts is often associated with underground scenes (Bennett & Guerra, 2018), and specifically with the emergence of punk music in the 1970s, there are a number of precursor examples of musical milieu that demonstrate many aspects of a DIY perspective (Spencer, 2008; Garson, 2015). A common thread is that of “bottom up” activities (Baker & Huber, 2013), with participants in emergent musical scenes often restricted financially, technologically and infrastructurally, leading to DIY approaches. The Irish showband scene, emerging in the late 1950s and continuing through succeeding decades, often required participants to adopt a DIY approach, constructing their own sound equipment, performing in improvised, unorthodox or adapted venues and, at least in the early years, struggling for legitimacy against the musical status quo. Although never intended as an underground music scene, the bands became hugely popular in Ireland at the time, the showbands never realised the same success abroad (MacLaughlin & Braniff, 2020).

The evolution of the “dance bands” of the late 1940s and 1950s into the “showbands” in the late 1950s, was a uniquely Irish spin on the rock n’ roll music that was sweeping the world at the time, largely music of British and American origin (Miller, 2014). These bands toured Ireland (and sometimes further abroad) performing the hits of the day and were one of the main sources of popular exposure to this nascent musical genre (along with radio, gramophone recordings and film). They evolved from the larger dance “orchestras” that were the primary live popular music groups of the 1940s, along with the Ceilí bands and traditional groups who focused more on specifically Irish repertoire. The dance and show bands typically performed versions of popular songs of the day, with the repertoire including traditional, orchestral, rock n’ roll, jive, mambo and jazz (O’Leary, 2018). The showbands trimmed the overall numbers of performers down, usually to a maximum of five or six performers, developed a less formal performance style that moved away from the seated, sheet music driven performances of the dance orchestras, to incorporate dance moves, co-ordinated outfits and comedy interludes. The genesis of this form of “show” in showband is frequently credited to the Clipper Carlton showband (Kennedy, 2015). Showbands performed in a wide variety of venues, from the dance halls soundtracked by the dance orchestras to parish halls, temporary marquees, barns and ballrooms purpose-built to create a network supporting the touring bands (O’Connor, 2003; Shanagher, 2014). The bands were a core part of the emerging youth culture of the 1950s and 1960s. This is documented in-depth in the work of O’Leary (2018) and Holohan (2018), and in Mike Connolly’s documentary *Showbands: How Ireland Learned to Party* (2019). Holohan (2018: 108) notes that the home-grown nature of the showbands was a source of national pride, ‘Irish youth [...] providing music for Irish dancers’, and Miller (2013: 25, 28) estimates that there were up to 800 groups performing in the period 1960-1975.

Many young musicians of the time would have aspired to membership of a showband, a route taken by two musicians interviewed for this research: Derek Farrell and Gerry Muldoon. Both interviewees performed regularly with showbands spanning the period examined by this research, as a drummer and guitarist respectively. Along with their performance roles they became closely involved with the more technical aspects of public performance and amplification, positioning them ideally to comment on the technologies and audio techniques of the day.

During the post-war period, the dance bands would usually have performed entirely acoustically, with no electric instruments or amplification. As the venues and audiences became larger some elements of amplification became necessary, particularly in respect of the vocal performers who, with the lyrics typically being the focal element of the performance, had to compete in level against the other combined instruments. Often a compromise would be found in the singer only performing a verse and chorus, or taking a solo as an instrumental player might (Farrell interview, 2020). Adding a microphone to a group's equipment mean using an entire Public Address (PA) system (microphone, amplifier and speakers) with a single purpose of reinforcing the singer's voice. In the late 1950s the showbands added other amplified instruments to the mix; 'pickups' for the acoustic guitars, electric organs and the signature of the rock n' roll sound, the electric guitar. As Farrell (2020) notes 'the electric instruments came in when the dance bands started doing a bit of Rock n' Roll, most people would only have heard these records on the radio and it wasn't until they saw the instruments in films that they realised "that guitar has a wire coming out of it"'. Initially, these would have been run through modified accordion or organ amplifiers (such as Italian brands Cordovox and Farfisa) rather than dedicated vocal or guitar amplifiers (Sheehy, 2018). Most of these instruments would not have been amplified using the PA system, which was reserved for the singer and occasionally brass or softer acoustic instruments.

Control over the balance between elements was a haphazard affair with no dedicated sound engineer role at that time (Muldoon interview, 2020; Farrell interview, 2020). As more amplified elements were added to the stage and audiences and venues grew larger, it became necessary for bands to pay more attention to their equipment and to ensure they had a 'sound ... (which) ... in those days to many musicians meant that they had to be heard in the next parish' (Costelloe, 2014). Audio fidelity was not a prime concern at the time, increased volume was the main goal of the 1950s and 1960s PA system. Audiences of the day were not discerning when it came to sound quality, with limited sources of reference for comparison (Farrell interview, 2020): 'quality didn't mean a thing' (Muldoon interview, 2020). Later, as musicians and audiences became more discerning, part of the reputation of a band was dependent on their equipment. Inter-band competition drove bands to upgrade their gear, in order to better their rivals and to not

‘sound a bit dead compared to the way they’re starting to sound’ (Coughlan cited in Miller, 2014: 86).

With, at least initially, poor networks for field-specific knowledge dissemination and often severely limited financial and technical resources, a self-sufficient, DIY attitude and approach was integral to cultural participation and band membership (Shanagher, 2014; O’Leary, 2018). Sheet music was not available for the latest popular songs so when ‘... a tune would become popular on the radio - a hit tune - now they’d listen to it and they’d play it exactly - and they were good enough to play it exactly as it was played on the radio by the big bands’ (‘Mícheál’ in Shanagher, 2014: 135-136). Bands would often initially have to build, source or adapt makeshift sound equipment, drawing on whatever local knowledge and resources were available, ‘generally there was someone in the band who came from a trade, they were all working men’ (Farrell interview, 2020). The typical venues of the day did not usually have installed sound (PA) systems and bands would have to bring all their own equipment. In the rare cases where the resident “house” band in a venue had a sound system already set up, visiting bands would still have been expected to bring their own equipment. Even on-stage electric power was not a given: ‘a lead that we had had a light fitting on it, and we stuck that into the light socket to get the power’ (Farrell interview, 2020). Predating the advent of the disc-jockey (DJ), the band would usually be responsible for providing all the entertainment, playing for several hours over the course of the evening with less experienced relief bands drafted in so the headliners could take a break. These relief bands would typically perform using the main band’s equipment and sometimes their instruments, although it was not unknown for particularly prized or vulnerable items (such as cymbals) to be removed for the relief band (Farrell interview, 2020).

Local entrepreneurs were quick to spot the economic potential of this emerging scene as noted in a showband focused periodical of the time *Spotlight* magazine (founded with the backing of ballroom proprietors) ‘thousands of pounds cascade into the dance hall and dance band coffers and into the outstretched palm of the Income Tax collector’ (Meehan, 1963). A later iteration outlined some of the areas to which this trickled down; builders, record pressing plants, printers, music publishing concerns, recording studios, record shops, amplification equipment firms, and so on (*New Spotlight Weekly*, 1967). Miller (2014) outlines how the advent of

hire-purchase enabled working-class Irish people to acquire media technologies such as radios and phonographs and how this helped to build fan bases for the emerging showband industry. In turn, hire-purchase allowed musicians to acquire the necessary equipment to perform. There were often close relationships between the providers of music equipment, or the finance for such, dancehall owners and the showbands, such as that described between legendary dancehall owner, showband promoter and music shop owner Joe O'Neill who 'struck a deal with Western Finance in New Inn who financed many of the bands for their equipment on hire purchase agreements' (Costello, 2014), or how the Royal Showband met their manager when he delivered a hire-purchase set of drums to them as they were rehearsing and talked his way into the role (Byrne cited in Miller, 2014). Based in the West of Ireland, O'Neill was a key supplier of music equipment (Gilmore, 2014). It had been said that if you wanted to be sure of getting a booking in his dancehalls, a band would also be prudent to have purchased their equipment from him to 'demonstrate that you were serious' (Farrell, 2020). A musician who regularly performed around the country notes that 'every time you'd play ... which would be once a month, he'd come out and say "you've a problem with that amplifier, there's a valve gone" or something like that' (Muldoon interview, 2020). Often when the more 'amateur' showbands were paid, the money received was used to buy new equipment rather than paying the band members (Miller, 2014). This had an associated economic impact on local economies due to the continuing demand for instruments, equipment and repairs (Miller, 2014; Gilmore, 2014). Indeed, many of the more technically astute band members would go on to found businesses supplying the growing demand for music equipment (O'Reilley, 2012; Anon, 2017; Sheehy, 2018).

The speakers used by the bands in the 1950s up to the early 1960s would have consisted of a single 10- or 12-inch speaker powered by a valve amplifier. Speaker enclosures were initially hand-built, or cannibalised and converted from existing equipment, drawing DIY parallels with the emergence of sound systems in Jamaican (and subsequently British) popular culture (Jones, 1995). These typically consisted of large wooden boxes, filled with an assortment of speaker drivers and powered by separate amplifiers, to broadcast the music of the showbands to the larger audiences of the ballrooms and marquees. With poor access to commercially produced PA systems a do-it-yourself approach was necessitated, drawing on skills such as carpentry and electronics (Jones, 1990). Showband veteran Farrell

illustrates this when he says that ‘a lot of the cabinets looked homemade. They probably got a local radio repair engineer to put the system together for them. If you wanted to buy gear manufactured abroad it was very expensive’ (Farrell interview, 2020). An example of these may be found in the ‘Crazy Boxes’ built by Dermot Hurley (Muldoon interview, 2020). These large cabinets ‘contained 6 x 10-inch Goodman 15- or 20-Watt speakers’ (Costello, 2014) and with a distinctive triangular front panel, supposedly got their name due to the complex interconnected internal wiring between the various speakers. They were later complimented by the “Giant Box”, which ‘was a bit wider and deeper than the Crazy Boxes but with the same shape... [and] more speakers or bigger speakers’ (Farrell interview, 2020). These ‘were invented by putting 18-inch speakers in boxes and putting them on the floor to get extra bass’ (Muldoon interview, 2020). Many of these early speakers ‘had a rope handle on them and when you’d go into the hall, you’d hang them up on a hook at the side of the stage’ (Farrell interview, 2020) which allowed them to project sound over the heads of the dancers.

The amplifiers used by the dance bands and early showbands were of much lower output power (expressed in Watts) than anything that would be considered acceptable by today’s standards. These valve-based amps were in the range of 15-50 Watts for the dance bands of the 1950s, with the showbands in the 1960s using 100–200-Watt amplifiers, with between 1 and 3 inputs available for microphones. Muldoon recalls ‘Philips brought out a 100-Watt amplifier and this was revolutionary. With the 100 Volt line they were really pumping out volume’ (Muldoon interview, 2020). Amps that utilised a 100 Volt Line system were popular as additional speakers could be added without concerns for impedance matching as required by more sophisticated systems, reducing the complexity for non-technically minded band members. British company Vortexion made several models used by many bands, a major advantage of which was that they could be powered using a 12 Volt car battery. Some venues had no electric power and if the band were lucky enough to have arrived by car or coach, the battery could be pressed into service. Others might only have a single socket, requiring some rudimentary electrical knowledge and a cavalier approach to safety in order to wire everything to the same outlet (Farrell interview, 2020), an approach that also applied to the sound equipment. ‘The amplification that was used at the time didn’t facilitate 3 microphones. So they got one jack plug and put the wires of the 3 microphones onto

the one jack plug' (Muldoon interview, 2020). Sligo company Marmac, a portmanteau of the owner's names (Gallagher, 2004), also produced a range of amplifiers and speakers, for electric guitars and PA systems. As the market for band equipment began to expand, and new transistor technology hit the market, companies stepped in to meet the demand. The Dynacord "Gigant" was a popular model in the late 1960s and came in 100-Watt and 200-Watt models (Sheehy, 2018; Farrell interview, 2020) and in 1969 Simms Watts produced a range of equipment designed to amplify the whole band, from guitars to keyboards to entire PA systems (Henry, 2016) with other significant brands of the time being Phillips, Selmer, EKO and Vox (Sheehy, 2018). A variety of microphones were used but key models were the Grampian DP4, Shure 565sd and the visually striking Shure 55SHT2 "skull" mic (Muldoon interview, 2020; Farrell interview 2020). Another "must have" item for up-and-coming bands was some sort of artificial "echo" unit, used to add a sense of space to the vocals. The most common model was the Binson "Echorec" magnetic drum-based echo but Watkins "Copycat" tape echo units were also popular, with an internet forum dedicated to the showbands (and containing a rich archive) noting 'many bands abused the reverb and sounded like they were singing from the bottom of a well' (Gallagher, 2004).

In the dance band and early showband days, effectively until the mid-1970s, there was no role of live sound engineer for the bands. With only a handful of microphones amplified via the PA system and guitarist and organists using their own amplifiers, the sound mix was often haphazard and secondary to concerns of volume. Each musician would usually take control of their own volume level, with the result that the sound mix was unbalanced and dominated by whoever's amp would go loudest. This also led to on-stage problems, as without monitors (an on-stage PA so musicians could monitor their own performance) the competing amplifiers would make it very difficult to hear anything clearly. This problem was somewhat addressed by the Simms Watt amplifiers which introduced an additional output for a stage monitor, but again this mix and positioning was subject to the whims of individual band members and the limitations of the equipment. Referring to their use in practice, Muldoon (2020) states 'it probably got better down the hall, but it got worse on stage... you couldn't hear your ears with these monitors'. Regarding the initial role of sound mixer:

generally, it would be the band leader, because he would have bought the PA, let him be good, bad or ugly at it. If there was band member who was a bit more technically minded it could fall to him, usually the band leader would be at the front of the stage and the amp at the back, so it didn't always suit him to be messing with it. Or you could go from that to everybody screwing with it! (Farrell interview, 2020).

Eventually as the size and complexity of the PA systems increased, the equipment was forced from the stage and off to one side, later further down the venue entirely as space near the stage was at a premium for dancing. Removing the equipment from the stage required someone in a supervisory role to ensure no interference from the public... or dissatisfied band members(!). Usually this would fall to the band's driver or roadie, should they be lucky enough to have one. 'The man drafted to do it was the man that drove the van, which was true in the vast majority of cases. All they had to do at that stage was control four mics, so basically all they had to do was make sure nobody pushed a button or turned a knob' (Farrell interview, 2020).

As the 1970s progressed, the dancehalls declined in popularity (Power, 1990), with the crowds moving to nightclubs or venues that also served alcohol and featuring DJ performances over live bands.

The whole thing changed when the discos came on the scene and the bands only played for 2 hours instead of 5. They went on stage at say 12 o'clock at a 2 o'clock dance and they had to blow the back wall off the thing because the disco was after playing loud music and they had to go on and play louder. This put the PA's way up in power as they had to compete (Muldoon interview, 2020).

This technological 'arms race' motivated bands to buy more professional gear, moving away from the DIY sound equipment of the early days. New bands focused more on the "beat" or "rock" scenes and fashions moved on. However, many bands continued to tour well into the 1980s and it remains a fondly remembered period for many. Ironically, in terms of DIY "scenes", the showbands in turn became emblematic of the orthodoxy and mainstream culture that the 'underground' raged against (MacLaughlin & Braniff, 2020), despite sharing many of the same issues of acceptance, access and infrastructure that the showbands had to overcome decades earlier. The showbands left in their wake an established local music industry and the infrastructure to support it, an outcome common of DIY music scenes (Bennett & Peterson, 2004). There is a lasting legacy of social and

economic impact in the expertise and businesses set up to support the bands (including PA building and supply), the opportunities created for musicians and the people who thronged to hear them.

Interviews

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