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Reissue & Revivalism: Uncovering Ireland's Lost DIY, Electronic and Post-Punk Histories

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Abstract

Reissues: a rediscovery of the past. This process of rediscovery is nowhere more evident than in the current output of the Dublin record label and shop, All City Records. Recently, its owner Olan O'Brien, has been delving into the unknown with a series of reintroduced gems from Ireland's musical past with its AllChival imprint. Whether it is *Quare Grooves*, a compilation of Irish-made Seventies groove and funk or the re-release of Dublin producer Stano's debut album of experimentalist new wave from 1983, the label has been playing a rival role in the recontextualising lost DIY (Do-it-Yourself), electronic and post punk music for new audiences, both at home and abroad, keen to snap up albums from artists previously unknown to all but a few. One key from AllChival re-release is Micheal O'Shea's *Mo Chara*, originally released on the UK post-punk group Wire's label in 1982. The reissue of this long-lost one-off debut album in 2019 has revived and reintroduced this singular Irish busking artist to audiences anew, attracted to O'Shea's mythical music untethered to a single period or place. Through reissue and revivalism, Michael O'Shea's singular music returns, its mystery wholly intact. This paper discusses what such reissues bring to the music consumer and considers how lost albums and music from the past, help raise the awareness of the activities that have contributed toward the sound of DIY, electronic and post punk music in Ireland today.

Introduction

Throughout the history of modern music making, songs are left behind, resigned to obscurity. There are numerous reasons for this, some of which shall be considered in this paper. In many art forms, there are countless numbers of works that

go unnoticed, only to become rediscovered generations later. This is certainly true in musical worlds; countless albums are released and (often by no process inherited by the musicians or artists themselves) the albums get no press on initial release and get lost in translation, shelved and forgotten about. The format of the reissues¹ brings a second life back into these forgotten artifacts and in many ways, this rediscovery of the past, brought back into the public sphere, often inspires a new generation of music makers and it connects them to a musical heritage that they can relate to.

Ireland today enjoys a rich mixture of music genres and this multitude of musical languages reflects a modern Ireland. Thanks to digital streaming and consumer-based music technology, this is even more evident within the music subcultures of Ireland's young music makers. Key to these subcultures is both the record shops and record labels that help facilitate such activities. The record shop has often been a place where these subcultures can gather, meet with like-minded individuals and discuss the current musical landscape, both in Ireland and elsewhere. The record labels then reflect and output this subculture through records that are released to the wider public. All in all, both contribute, culturally and economically, to the fabric of a city. One Dublin label and shop, All City Records, provides a pivotal role within this, allowing for young electronic music producers an outlet to sell their most current releases. More important is its owner, Olan O'Brien's, and his current focus is delving into past Irish music histories with a series of re-releases on its AllChival imprint.

The first of these came in *Quare Grooves* (2018), a compilation of Irish-made Seventies groove and funk. *Buntús Rince - Explorations in Irish Jazz, Fusion & Folk 1969-81* soon followed. Since then, the AllChival label has been recontextualising lost DIY, electronic and post punk music for new worldwide audiences,

¹ In the music industry, a reissue (also re-release, repackage or re-edition) is the release of an album or single which has been released at least once before, sometimes with alterations or additions.

keen to snap up deluxe reissues from artists previously unknown to all but a few.

This paper presents a historical overview of the establishment of unconventional musical histories in Ireland, considering the role of the state, socio and economic influences. Secondly, a number of the AllChival re-releases are discussed; Operating Theatre's *Miss Mauger* (1983), Micheal O'Shea's *Mo Chara* (1982) and Stano's *Content to Write in I Dine Weathercraft* (1983). Finally, this paper considers what uncovering music from the past means to the music consumer and how lost albums and music from the past, helps raise the awareness of the activities that have contributed toward the sound of music in Ireland today.

Background

Those who inhabit the worlds of art, folk, and rock music clearly do not constitute "appropriately knowledgeable listeners" when it comes to the music of the showbands. Or to put it another way, each of these different worlds has invested its cultural capital in significantly different stock, and as a consequence is ill-disposed to appreciate the value, or indeed the meaning, of each other's activities (Smith, 2005: 17).

People can and often do belong to many different genre communities and can and often do experience a variety of affinities in their aesthetic inclinations and what is interesting is that many of these musicians often play or support each other's work. Firstly, we must consider the background of where these musical communities grew from and view Ireland from afar, stuck between the rhetoric of tradition and modernity, the past and the future, the local and the global, questioning the culture and politics such musical beginnings caused.

In the 1960s, traditional music began to make its mark internationally. The nature of this feat is all the more commendable, considering how isolated and conservative the country still was in the middle of the last century. Unlike many other European countries, Ireland had not benefited from the cultural impact of immigration. Pioneering Irish musicians did not have access to the type of vibrant

music scenes ubiquitous in most European cities at that time. In many ways, Irish musicians had to cultivate and invent their own scenes.

Many notable occurrences took place between 1922 and 1926 the Irish civil war (1922-23), the introduction of sound films (1927) and the establishment of the national broadcasting service (1926). In this pre-electronic age, the music maker and composer was marginalized; this plight has long been documented and discussed by the composer Seán Ó Riada. A lack of infrastructure and support for western art music in Ireland added to this sense of non-aesthetic. He recognised that this failure to support both musical communities and indeed, the composer, had a long history. Ó Riada's European aesthetical and philosophical shifting of attitude, if only short lived, put in place a forum for thinking within younger generation of music makers and composers during the 1950 and 60s; towards an Irish art music, a variation of folklore and tradition, one that used modernism, and in some cases technology, as a mode of expression, beyond the classifications of traditional cultures within Ireland. Outside Ireland, momentous world events of the twentieth century were unfolding: the Great Depression of the 1930s, the growth of popular and jazz music, shifting attitudes towards women and the evolution of international political ideologies such as fascism and communism.

Much of what the relationship that the Irish state had with music and musical activity was informed by attempts to prevent changes from permeating the apparently traditional, and thereby inherently 'national', values of the Irish nation. The establishment of the free state brought many revivals including the expression of culture that was driven, primarily, to promote the Irish language. The conflicting ideals, between an Ireland caught in its bleak past and its contemporary image, allowed for some of the arts, in particular the literary ones, to flourish where writers like Brian O Nolan's (Flann O'Brien) reimagined of ideals in the new state, was refreshing and brought about an air of pessimism that existed towards the lack of musical cultures in Ireland. The establishment of the national broadcasting service in 1925 would prove, above all others, to be significant in terms of its effects on

the development of music and musical activity in Ireland. These developments were largely determined by the contemporary political climate. and more often, its growth was at the helm of the purse of government, as the diversity of range of musical styles and the particular musical interests, or lack thereof, was purely dependent on the relevant minister for posts and telegraphs. The nation's broadcaster, Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) had no real interest in this “new music” as its broadcast schedule was primarily focused on “light” music and entertainment.

The first documentation of experimental electronic music in Ireland came from the echoes of the aristocracy, during the late 1950's. Desmond Arthur Peter Leslie and the grounds of Castle Leslie, a 1,000-acre Estate adjacent to the village of Glaslough, County Monaghan, would be the site of Ireland's experimental music explorations and during January 1960, Leslie pressed a single acetate called *Music of the Future*. All of Leslie's recordings were later licensed to Joseph Weinberger and the recordings were pressed onto a short series of 78-rpm library discs, occasionally being put to use in science and mystery-based television programming, that included early episodes on the BBC's Dr. Who (c.1963).² The album would go on to have another lease of life 2005 when British record label, Trunk Records, re-released Desmond's 1960 acetate, never before released commercially.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, advances in computer technology and affordability became the platform for the next generation music makers. In Ireland, tired with the lack of support (both technically and financially), some looked towards Europe for direction, including the composer, Roger Doyle. A jazz drummer by trade, he began his career at the Royal Irish Academy and went on to study at the Institute of Sonology at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands and the Finnish Radio Experimental Music Studio. Doyle would become a seminal figure, particularly within the history of Irish electronic music and features again

² See liner notes of *Music of the Future*. Available at: <https://www.discogs.com/Desmond-Leslie-Music-Of-The-Future/release/4279662/image/SW1hZ2U6ODQ3NDk2OQ==>.

in this paper with the 2019 reissue of his act, Operating Theatre and their LP, *Miss Mauger* (1983).

Aside from technology, McLaughlin & McLoone (2012: 32) point towards a number of key movements that informed the music of the 1980s that included the 'Beat Scene, the Folk Revival and Northern Irish Punk'. Such a range of influences allowed for a whole new means of expression for Irish music makers and during the 1980s, a new generation of music makers began incorporating technology and other mechanisms (drum machines and synthesizers) into their work to produce a unique body of works, some of which are discussed within this paper.

Reissue & Revivalism: Context

Popular music illuminates place, either directly through lyrics and visuals, metaphorically through heightened perceptions, through sounds that are seen as symbolic of place and in performances that create spaces of sentiment (Connell, 2013: 88).

The re-releases discussed in this paper reflect some seminal and forgotten music produced in Ireland, particularly between the years of 1981-84 and attempts to that 'illuminates place' and in the liner notes of *Buntús Rince - Explorations in Irish Jazz, Fusion & Folk 1969-81*, Peter Currin discusses this very 'place'. He comments:

A jazz scene had begun to blossom in Dublin in the late 1950s. Self-taught players like Noel Kelehan and Louis Stewart emerged as the Irish standard-bearers. Their level of musicianship saw them play with some of the world's most renowned artists. The 1960s would see the emergence of the "beat" scene in Ireland, with groups like Granny's Intentions, Taste and Eire Apparent finally challenging the hegemony of Irish Showbands. Change was in the air. The late 1960s also saw many Irish emigrants returning home, bringing with them inspiration from the new styles and sounds of London and further afield. The arrival in the late 1960s of pirate radio stations like Radio Caroline, new music magazines and the availability of music on vinyl meant that different genres were now becoming more accessible. The musical landscape of the country began to transform and evolve, influencing a new generation of musicians in the process (Currin, 2019).

Currin goes on to point out that technology had a major impact on the development of this Irish musical landscape, in that: 'The 1970s saw advancements in studio technology. 8-track studios began appearing in Dublin, offering more opportunities for groups to record singles and albums. Synthesizers and other instruments were also becoming easier to acquire as the younger generation turned to electric jazz and fusion music' (*Ibid*, 2019). Considering the past begs the question if we have now become 'culturally conditioned' in that, is the music produced in the past more superior than current music making? Has the accessibility of such music, due to streaming and online record stores, allowed technology to drive this process? Such questions music consumers searching for music of the past when there is so much music being currently made, particularly in Ireland.

Simon Reynolds discusses such notions in *Retromania* and questions:

Is nostalgia stopping our culture's ability to surge forward, or are we nostalgic precisely because our culture has stopped moving forward, and so we inevitably look back to more momentous and dynamic times? Not only has there never been a society so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its immediate past, but there has never before been a society that is able to access the immediate past so easily and so copiously (Reynolds, 2012: 22).

This sense of immediacy is key to understanding how and why such releases seem to captivate music consumers in such a way. Reynolds points out that technology has once again uncovered the deleted and the obscure. In terms of what such contributions make to Ireland's current musical landscape is this; it is through the re-releases that these archaeological layers of musical history are once again in the public domain, constantly being rediscovered, circulated and filtered by current music makers and reproduced as (modern) music. In many ways, it is a postmodernist and referential way of music making and perhaps, all forms of music are produced this way. Through technology, this abundance of access to a nation's musical history, has a twofold dynamic: the accessibility (via streaming platforms)

to these histories could be the reasoning to why current music making sounds generic and that perhaps ‘the process of circulating and accessing music has become more exciting than the practice of listening to it’ (Shandu, 2011).

In many ways, the reissues by Operating Theatre, Micheal O'Shea and Stano discussed in this article, attempt to classify a period of music making that was its release with limited output options. Music making today, it would seem, contains recycled and pastiche elements from past musical outputs, due to the instant access to music catalogues of the past. Over the last decade, this has caused a large amount of unimaginative and static cultural artifacts to become generated and this paper proposes that perhaps, reissues and revivalism can help music consumers a piece of time, when music making was distant from our ever-expanding digital archives.

AllChival Records

Founded from his Dublin city centre record shop, All City Records is primarily known as a dance music outlet. Opened in 2001 by Olan O'Brien, All City is one of Dublin's heritage hubs for underground street culture. Recently, O'Brien created a subsidiary, AllChival with an aim to focus on re-releasing Irish music from the 1960s onward. Its first release, *Quare Groove Vol.1 - Sounds from the Irish Musical Underground from the 70s & 80s* (2018), was a compilation album consisting of Irish “groove” music from the various undergrounds of rock, soul and post-punk happening in the country. Olan comments on the Irish musical landscape of the 1980s:

There were lots of bands around at the time influenced by punk but they all had their own strands. Pockets of people doing their own thing. In Ireland, it wasn't really a group, as such. There were bands such as The Virgin Prunes. U2 was always in the shadows (O'Brien cited in Finnan, 2018).

O'Brien's AllChival project has exposed fresh perspectives, enabling a long-overdue re-evaluation of a kind of musical residuum in an Ireland still very much in the vice grip of the Catholic church, but also one in the midst of the coming of a new decade.

Operating Theatre - *Miss Mauger* (1982)

In September 2019 AllChival Records re-released Operating Theatre's *Miss Mauger*, originally released in 1982 on CBS Records. Led by the avant-garde composer, Roger Doyle, the group began its life as a proto synth-pop act and experimental theatre group. Its vocalist, future Hollywood actress Olwen Fouéré sat amongst pulsing synths, brass, a vocoder and the electro acoustic production talents of Doyle. The album also features the use of a Fairlight CMI synthesizer / sampler used, one he used for an array of both music and theatre work.³ The group's first single *Austrian* (1981) gave listeners a preview of the music that would come from the group, an alternative take on the new wave sound that came to dominate the charts soon after in both the UK and Ireland.

Miss Mauger and its impact on release in Ireland at the time, was minimal. In many ways, it was out of time, too futuristic for a musical landscape that was, until recently, dominated by showbands and traditional music. Further to this, without the support mechanisms like suitable music venues, press and publicity, this kind of album would have a difficult time gaining exposure. However, *Miss Mauger* presents is a heady snapshot of some early pop explorations in Ireland and a rare insight into an underground new wave sound that was bubbling up through Dublin during the late 70s and early 80s, with Roger Doyle being the core within this.

Early in his career, Doyle, tired with the lack of support - both technically and financially-, looked towards Europe for direction (as previously discussed). After the

³ See <https://www.rte.ie/archives/2021/0728/1237764-roger-doyle-synthesizing-sounds/>.

band disbanded in 1984, Doyle, would produce much of the body of work in experimental electronic and electro acoustic music produced in Ireland during the 1980s and is now a seminal figure in the history of Irish electro-acoustic music.

Doyle and Operating Theatre's music would go on to become the foundation of electronic music in Ireland and in many ways, due to social, political, and geographical factors, electronic music in Ireland still remains very much an underground genre with producers and musicians very much working, sustaining and nurturing 'under the radar' music.

Micheal O'Shea - *Mo Chara* (1982)

Micheal O'Shea is somewhat of a mythological figure within the Irish musical underground. His 1982 album, *Mo Chara*, represents a significant contribution to the lost histories of Ireland's DIY electronic, post-punk music histories. Re-released on AllChival Records in 2019, this seminal album represents a truly unique form of music in Ireland. Michael played a self-made instrument he named "Mo Chara" (my friend), made from part of an oak door he had rescued from a skip in Munich in 1978. The instrument was inspired by the hammered dulcimer. Amplification and effects were added, lending it a strong sense of uniqueness. Michael's music was ahead of its times and yet paradoxically completely of its time and he is the archetypal adventurous musician, which in many cases, is hard to classify.

It was O'Shea's move to London that spurred the recording and documentation of *Mo Chara*. In London, O'Shea performed on Medley Road, Covent Garden and on the underground tube passageways of the West End. He was spotted by Will Sproule, who worked for the well-known jazz club Ronnie Scott's and was given the opportunity to showcase.

However, it was his meeting with Graham Lewis and Bruce Gilbert, members of the post-punk band Wire, that would lead to the recording of his experimental

music on their Dome label in 1982. Lewis recalls his first encounter with O'Shea:

I'd stepped out of The White Lion on James Street (London) for a breath of fresh air, and I became aware of a beautiful noise that appeared to be emanating from down the street towards the old market. I followed it and found a figure in a shop's entrance, sitting on a portable amplifier, hunched over a multi-stringed box he was beating with a pair of sticks. This person had a white turban with a large emerald brooch, huge hooped gold earrings, a navy double-breasted blazer, a cream blouse and pleated knee-length shirt, matching stockings and a pair of black high-heeled shoes with large gold buckles. The shop's glass entrance produced an audio funnel which was channelling the sound into the open street where it was bouncing off the Opera House. I legged it back to the pub and insisted that Bruce came to ratify this vision! We loved the noise! (Lewis cited in McCafferty, 2019).

Mo Chara has a wealth of musical references: traditional Irish music, Indian music and experimental electronic music. Although it was made and produced in London, it would go on to have great effect and resonance within the DIY, electronic and post-punk scene in Dublin of the mid-1980s.

Indeed, Stano would be seminal in introducing O'Shea to wider audiences in Ireland, as he played on his 1983 album *Content to Write in I Dine Weathercraft*. O'Shea's contributions to the piece "Seance of a Kondalike" are surreal and unlike any music both documented and recorded at the time in Ireland. Ultimately, the album sales were poor and the album went largely unnoticed. His untimely death in 1991, meant the album would sink further into the unknown. The AllChival re-released the album in 2019, allowing a new generation of Irish music makers and producers to take influence from the past and to bring it into the current landscape, one that is both healthy, diverse and active.

Stano - *Content to Write in I Dine Weathercraft* (1983)

Under the moniker Stano, Vinny Murphy produced *Content to Write in I Dine Weathercraft* (1983). This is a widely forgotten and seminal album from the Irish

musical underground and has become a very significant contribution to the country's musical outputs. What is most significant is Murphy's, untrained and untutored musically. His technical training was made via home experiments with tape machines and primitive electronic equipment. Murphy's approach to recording was also non-traditional; his approach gathered a number of Dublin scenesters including audio engineer Terry Cromer, Jerome Rimson, guitarist Robbie Wogan, pianist Dave Murphy and Daniel Figgis on keyboards (ex-Virgin Prunes). Through a series of improvisational recordings, Murphy assembled edits and cuts that fitted the mood of tracks. This process was perhaps influenced by another seminal 'non-musician', Brian Eno, who incorporated such techniques on albums like *Another Green World* (1975) and *Before and After Science* (1977).

Eoin Murphy's review of the album in *The Quietus* following its 2018 re-release also points towards the album's novel production approaches and its authentic Dublin-centric sound:

This crude and joyously chaotic process ends up feeling like something in between early hip-hop production and abstract collage. But through it, Stano made an album that touched on something both beautiful and raucous, its lo-fi grit being accentuated and elevated by his distinctly North Dublin spoken drawl. Everything about it lovingly shouts "Dublin" – from its mumbled poeticism and unabashed dog-eared musicality to its grey, cold, magnificent atmosphere (Murray, 2019).

Murphy provides further analysis of his approach, which was undoubtedly influenced by the surrounding punk movement:

I didn't play an instrument on it, I don't play an instrument. The studio is my instrument really, I was doing stuff that would now be regarded as sampling. So I was sampling bits and pieces. I'd be sitting looking at guys jamming away and I'd be recording. I always thought that the jams were better, more interesting. I still work like that today, get people in and we're recording before they realise it almost. That's where I get my ingredients from (*Ibid*, 2019).

The resulting album is a fusion of collaborative, improvised, experimental music with spoken word-poetry and twenty-one albums later, Vinny Murphy is very much still active on the Irish music scene. Again, like both Operating Theatre and Micheal O'Shea's, the album did not translate into commercial success on its release in 1983 and it went out of print. With the re-release of *Content to Write in / Dine Weathercraft*, the album is now, as with the other two albums discussed in this paper, continuing to influence a new generation of musicians and producers in Ireland today.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to uncover one of Ireland's lost DIY, electronic and post-punk histories through the current wave of reissues via the Dublin record label. As Reynolds previously noted, we seem to be obsessed with our own past. There is an inherent nostalgia attached to the ways in which both music was both produced and consumed in the past. Currently, major record labels are making vast profits from re-releasing their old catalogues. How a major record label reissues its past releases and how an independent one does it is quite different. The former has, of course, a preservationist and profit perspective. On the other hand, reissues on independent labels take a revivalist approach.

At the time of writing this article, the composer Stano is currently recording on Micheal O'Shea's instrument, "Mo Chara", for a collection of new recordings due for release in 2021. It seems fitting that an instrument, a repurposed door, found in a skip in Munich during the 1970s, would go on to feature on what is now considered a lost treasure within Ireland's lost DIY, electronic and post-punk histories and in the recording studios. Perhaps, given our folkloric nature, we can continue to support this exploration of Irish musical pasts and inspire cur-

rent and future generations of Irish music makers as preservation culture is essential as, ultimately, every person's passing is an unquantifiable loss in their area of musical endeavour.

Because the re-releases in question received little attention on initial release in Ireland, AllChival has attempted to re-address the importance and cultural impact of these albums. It is quite remarkable how much musical activity took place and still takes place on this island. As record labels in AllChival continue to uncover music of the past, our rich musical past will continue to feed into the music of the present, influencing the sounds of today's and future Irish music makers. This is ultimately why the work of AllChival is so important; its cultural preservation and indeed its (re) preservation of Irish musical histories allows us to explore past worlds, worlds untouched by modern day music making.

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