

Reviews

Rites of Spontaneity: Communalism and Subjectivity in Traditional Irish Music Sessions. By Augusto Ferraiuolo. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019. Pp. 278, acknowledgements, introduction, footnotes, bibliography, illustrations, tables.

In 2006, I enjoyed American and Irish-sounding folkloric songs performed by Bruce Springsteen and his Seeger Sessions Band, replete with banjo, fiddle, guitar, accordion, percussion—seemingly the instruments of traditional Irish sessions bands. Springsteen’s title and sound paid homage to traditional Irish music. However, his use of horns and electric instruments, a front-facing live performance (lacking musicians’ verbal games), and pop-music structures violate many of the Irish sessions’ rules. Augusto Ferraiuolo examines in *Rites of Spontaneity*. The subject of his study is traditional Irish music sessions, akin to an urban pickup game of basketball (my comparison), where underlying transactional rules about humility, Irish musical knowledge, deference to group leaders, and varieties of verbal/musical discourse exist to establish a player’s acceptance and membership. Ferraiuolo argues that within the performers’ circle (musicians face each other on the patron’s floor), “[i]dentity, belonging, and power are continuously exercised and negotiated, suggesting at the same time an imagined cohesive” musical group (160). While Irish sessions bands exist across the world, and Irish ethnicity is not required, some essential traits of “Irishness are necessary to create an imagined Irish community” such as storytelling, slagging (teasing in

negative terms), gossiping, and musical knowledge, to name a few. Players must negotiate predictable sociability and musicality in quite structured ways. As enjoyable as Springsteen’s “Sessions Band” was, it did not reproduce the social and musical intricacies Ferraiuolo illustrates need be present for traditional Irish sessions music.

The Irish term “*ceol agus craic*” (“music and good times”) ties together Irish-themed pubs around the world where people gather to drink beer, make conversation, and play traditional Irish songs. Ferraiuolo’s central question considers what comprises the *subject* of a session, and he decides that a gestalt of the pub’s complex sensory, musical, and social situation does. He points out that the “*craic*” is a mid-20th century English neologism appealing almost exclusively to male Irish/English workers looking for “reciprocity between factual and symbolic kinsmen” (41). Ferraiuolo’s multi-faceted study orbits folklore’s and anthropology’s theoretical constellations, making this a rich book for ethnomusicians, anthropologists, and others interested in the intersectionality of ethnicity, music, and/or social dynamics.

Each of the book’s five sections handle different aspects of Irish sessions’ subjects. The first three chapters deal with social dynamics, describing what constitutes a session, and the roles that tradition, physicality, and identity play in the music’s social performance, respectively. The most intensive ethnomusical section is Chapter 4, which considers rhythmic and harmonic rules, song-structure, and live performance. More than a passing familiarity with music theory is helpful in

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navigating Ferraiuolo's details. In fact, the text would benefit from MP3 recordings, internet links, or even a glossary of terms. Chapter 5's conclusion, the headiest of the theory-rich chapters, waxes philosophically about how subjectivity influences identity and the musical community. Conceptually, the term "community" minimalizes the set of "structured rules and recognizable style, performed in rituals...even if the suggested cultural trait is a de-structured and free-to-do spontaneity" (240). Ferraiuolo thinks of the session as a *heterophonic community* (217-218). Musically, heterophony is a voice that parallels a melody at a constant tonal interval, such as the major third—defying the tonal structure of most scales. A session member (even those passively seeking membership) must negotiate the rules and dynamics of the group that allow for predictable individualized variability, intensified by the values and materials of Irish identity.

Ferraiuolo's previous ethnographies focused on Italian transnationalism (*Religious Festive Practices in Boston's North End*, 2009) and Southern Italy's folk tales and oral narratives (*La Storia, la Memoria e I Racconti*, 1982). As a native Italian educated in Boston, he views ethnicity from transnational and diasporic perspectives. He is a participatory scholar in his sessions research, playing bodhrán (one of Ireland's oldest percussive instruments) in pubs for several years. In his self-reflexive analysis, he finds that pubs become "third places" (ala Ray Oldenburg), where regulars meet for a sense of belonging, identity, and fun. Historically, diasporic Irishmen in search of a livable wage, went to England and America and found enough money to warrant camaraderie and leisure in ethno-Irish

pubs. Ferraiuolo emphasizes the masculinity of pub life, asserting that, though "[t]hings have certainly changed, ...the pub is still a man's place" (40). Because his direct experience lies at the heart of this study, Ferraiuolo's focus is strictly limited to masculinity.

Transnationalism and the Irish diaspora helped commodify traditional music not only through the "*ceol agus craic*" in pubs but also via recordings and radio in the Chicago, Boston, and New York markets. Ferraiuolo argues that live sessions exceed mere consumption because pubs and music contribute to a complex expression of subjective values, tastes, and identities. While the irrepressible demand to notate music and judge performances stymied melodic ornamentation, playing speed, rhythm, and even competitive playing, his emic view concludes that musical individualization brings "authenticity and pureness [to] traditional music" (210). Even slight, subjective variations in performance elements can create complexity strong enough to alter a song's identity, when "group and subject interact dynamically and constantly" (216). Consequently, Theodor Adorno's idea that popular music's strict harmonic structure strangles individuation cannot be sustained in considering the Irish session.

While the music chapter is astute in analysis, clearer illustrations in both print and explanation would be helpful. Much of the notation and tables are not crisply reproduced and are challenging to follow. While not essential to understanding the argument, these provide supportive details that enrich the analysis. Nevertheless, Ferraiuolo's point remains an important contribution to ethnomusicology.

“Irishness” requires identifiable elements, particularly verbal play, even in musical sessions. If regulation chokes the session’s *ceol* (music) and “craic” (fun), then essentially Irish-performative rituals and variations enliven the process, the event, and, ultimately, group identity. Even in Rome, where Italian owners recreate the Irish phenomenon, one need not *be* ethnically Irish to use the rites that form an imagined Irish community—one that is recognizably and viably Irish. Irish stylized communities may exist anywhere the rites of Irish music (*ceol*) and fun (“craic”) are reproduced.

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