



Provided by the author(s) and University of Galway in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite the published version when available.

Title	Confessions of a song junkie
Author(s)	Ó Laoire, Lillis
Publication Date	2006
Publication Information	Ó Laoire, Lillis (2006) 'Confessions of a Song Junkie' Irish Pages, 3 (2) :88-102.
Publisher	Irish Pages
Link to publisher's version	https://irishpages.org/
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/6692

Downloaded 2024-04-25T05:00:58Z

Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.



Confessions of a Song Junkie

Lillis Ó Laoire

*“...in singing we meet an outpouring
of articulation of affirmative power,
even when the song airs
the grief of suffering being.”*

William Desmond.

I

I am nervous, sitting on a chair turned toward the gathering audience. Some familiar faces in the crowd raise eyebrows and smile in warm greeting, acknowledgements that help settle my fluttering nerves. Sympathetic salutes suggest that the audience will be easy to work with; that they will give themselves over to the performance; that their listening will have an active quality to it, an expectancy that the rise and fall of my voice will satisfy with no insuperable difficulties. When this happens, I imagine I am on a trampoline and that the listeners' rapt concentration *is* that trampoline, tossing me repeatedly into the air. As I become more certain that I will not fall off, I am encouraged to perform somersaults and other turns as I soar and dip, rising and falling through the recurring contours of the melody, until I reach the song's end. Each ascending and dropping of the vocal line will be a repetition, but not an *exact* repetition, a variation unique to the moment, place and mood. If I am lucky, if the audience supports me, the variations will happen with ease, they will truly be “grace” notes, emerging almost casually, as if no great effort has been expended in their production. Often, however, fortune does favour the performance which becomes, by my own critical standards, lacklustre. The average listener may not be able to tell, but I am always certain of it. I know when the “grace” will not arrive, and nothing can conjure its appearance. Sometimes, enchantment is difficult. Audience is often a crucial factor. Just as those who are intent on a performance form a collective “trampoline” sustaining its success, those who are not of one mind, or among whom a sense of stillness and attention remains stubbornly absent, affect the singing in equal measure; whether or not the audience is aware of its role.

Today, however, they are with me; they hang on every word, making me want to give them more. I am singing a song that I learned from Teresa McClafferty, a mentor from Tory Island, now resident in Falcarragh, on the Donegal mainland. Teresa is steeped in the songs and singing of her family; her father and mother both singers. Patrick Duggan, her father, as he appears in official records, was a member of a family celebrated in Tory for their great musical gifts, both instrumental and vocal. Her mother, Hannah Meenan, although like many women of her generation, modest and shy of performing in public, often sang at the fireside for her own and her family's amusement. Teresa's maternal bachelor uncle, Jimmy Meenan, was a salient influence. His critical standards were high, his judgment often severe, discouraging to the point of reluctance and avoidance. Another source was her maternal cousin, John Tom Meenan, her Uncle Jimmy's great rival, a man regarded by almost all as the best singer in Tory in his day. As I sing, I am conscious of all of these overlapping strands of affinity, the accumulation of audiences and singers that forms a crucial part of the song's history and that continues to be reshaped in scarcely perceptible ways, with this performance and this audience.

I met Jimmy Meenan first in September 1984 and I was lucky enough to record songs from him. At that time, he was eighty seven years old, quite deaf, and had difficulty understanding anyone to whose voice he was unaccustomed. I visited him again early the following year. He wore a peaked cloth cap and a dark sweater on both occasions. His gaunt, pale, bony face with its wispy, snow-white brows and parchment skin remain strikingly clear in my memory. He was quite frail, although not sickly, but when he started singing his whole being seemed transmuted into the song. Despite his age-related limitations, he was obviously well cared for and his voice was loud, strong and clear, shedding decades in the transfiguring moment of performance. His unusual style employed more rhythmical and melodic variation than is common in Donegal singing. Sometimes he seemed to depart from or lose the regularity of the melody deliberately, as if trying to escape its circular, strophic pattern. Family stories confirm Jimmy's complete obsession with song, his endless repetition of the ones he knew to retain them in his memory. He must have known hundreds in Irish and in English – a language he did not speak all that fluently.

It was through Heinrich Wagner, one time professor of Celtic Studies at Queen's University, Belfast, and his student, Noel Hamilton, that I first became aware of Jimmy. He had acted as one of Wagner's informants for his *Linguistic Survey and Atlas of Irish Dialects*. Much of the material Wagner collected from him and others in Tory was used by Hamilton in his classic study *The Irish of Tory Island* (1974). Many of the items in this latter book are song texts, Jimmy's and others' versions of classic Gaelic songs, some of them well known to Irish speakers in different parts of Ireland, and indeed Scotland, in often widely differing, barely recognisable verbal and musical configurations. Before literacy, this was the commonly shared culture, in agonistic communities that imagined their own setting of a text to be the only right one, regardless of what anyone else might think. It was part of a *dúchas*, an understanding of belonging to a group of kinsfolk, to a landscape, to a place, evoked strongly in the Newfoundland question, "Where do you belong to?" which means "Where are you from?" Such intense partisanship was, indeed, part of what made the place what it was for its inhabitants.

Although John Tom, Jimmy Meenan's first cousin and his arch-rival, died in the 1960s, his voice was recorded so I have been able to learn what his singing was like and to study its salient, unique qualities. The song I am singing, however, does not come from the repertoire of Teresa's male relatives, but from a woman, Kit Meenan, sister of John and a noted singer in her own time. If her voice was recorded, I know of no extant copies. I have heard her praised for the strength and clarity of her singing, for the careful enunciation of the text, for her large repertoire of Gaelic songs, essentially the same qualities that are revered in her brother. She was considered very witty and fun loving, *greannmhar*, always having a ready rejoinder for the company to enhance the conversation. In her youth, she had travelled to Gortahork, to sing at the new Gaelic college established in 1906, Coláiste Uladh, a well known Gaelic college in Gortahork, my own village on the Donegal mainland. When about to sing, people began to crowd towards the front to be sure they would hear her. Speaking in Irish, the MC remarked that there was no need to crowd forward: "Wait till this one starts; you'll hear her all the way to the top of Errigal!" The mainlander replied, "Why wouldn't she, hasn't she eaten her fill of Tory's fresh fish!" This story is still told by Kit's relatives in Tory, a mark of their pride in her accomplishment.

I discovered from a niece of Kit's one of the songs she sang on that occasion. I had learned the song called “*Úna Bheag na hÁite*” from another mentor from Tory, Éamonn Ghráinne Mac Ruairí, and had been teaching it to Tory schoolchildren as part of an Arts’ Council of Ireland scheme to help revitalize singing among the younger generation. Róise Meenan, Mrs. Feilimí Duggan, told me that this was one of the songs sung by Kit that night at Coláiste Uladh. I was delighted with this scrap of information. It filled in a little more of the picture, added another link. The text seems to deal with the sea battle fought between the British and the French off the Donegal coast in October 1798. The battle is known as *Lá an Bhriste Mhóir*, The Day of the Great Defeat, in Donegal:

Úna Bheag na hÁite

*An dream sin a mbíonn an ball orthu nach beag a thig anall acu
Tá an baile seo gan cheannphort ó d’imigh Éamonn Óg
Bhí Éamonn Óg is na haicseáin ann is bhí Bónapárt ‘na sheasamh ann
Ar an quarter deck ‘na sheasamh bhí sé Lá an Bhriste Mhóir*

*Úna Bheag na háite nach tú fuair cliú agus áireamh
An lá sin in Rath Mealltáin ag aonach na Féil Eoin
Scilling is punt de dh’airnéis a fuair tú in do láimh dheis
Le cois an ghiní ghallta agus cárta le hól*

*An Mac sin Liam na Carraige nár umhlaigh riamh do fhear ar bith
In Éirinn nó in Albain nó in Sasain ó lár
Cabhlach mór na Fraince a bheas ag dúil le grandeur
Is gurb é a déarfadh ‘ach uile cheannphort, “Let down the Collar Mór”.*

*Tá eala ar chaol na tráighe ag gabháil thar sáile amárach
‘Na Fraince nó ‘na Spáinne nó go Pairlimint an Rí
Tá Úna ag gabháil thar sáile teacht na Féile Pádraig
Go scríobhaí sí don Bhanríon, “I will make you tea.”*

Translation:

Those affected by the spot, little comes from beyond to them
This townland has no leader sin Éamonn Óg has left
Éamonn Óg was in action and Bonaparte was standing there
Standing on the Quarterdeck the Day of The Great Defeat.

Little Úna of this place, didn't you get fame and recognition
That day in Ramelton at the fair of St. John's Feast (midsummer)
A shilling and a pound of luck money you got into your right hand
As well as the Protestant guinea and a quart to drink.

That son of Liam na Carraige who never yielded to any man
In Ireland, or in Scotland or in England to its very centre
The great navy of France who will be expecting grandeur
And what every commander would say is, "Let down the Collar Mór."

There is a swan on the narrow part of the shore going abroad tomorrow
To France or to Spain or to the Parliament of the King
Úna will go abroad when St. Patrick's Day comes
And she will write to the Queen, "I will make you tea."

The song is an interesting mix of whimsy and history and refers to events for which the context is lost, so that it is difficult to understand fully. Although it cannot be confirmed that the song was sung on that long ago occasion in Gortahork, it still provides an imaginative link with Kit Meenan, which augments the impression I have of her. Kit's mystique for me stems from that fact that, unlike her brother John, I have not been able to hear her voice. Stories of her vocal prowess and photographs alone do not provide a sufficiently whole picture. The trace of the voice possesses the body and the memory more cogently. Without it, the singer's identity remains elusive.

Kit was also fond of the great collector Séamus Ennis when he visited Tory in the nineteen forties and often sat on his knee, her jocular bawdiness a great source of amusement and repartee. The song I am singing now is neither funny nor bawdy. In the

eyes of some, it might not even be considered a proper song; only four verses, more of a fragment really, related to other versions found along the Gaelic coastlands to the west and south of Tory. And yet, I cherish this fragment, this four verse shard that, like the previous song allows me to connect, however tantalizingly, with a woman I have never met. I have decided to sing it although I have learned it properly only recently, from a recording I made of Teresa. I know it well enough, but it has not been seasoned by repeated performance. Hence, I am taking a risk; but the bond I feel with the assembled crowd encourages me, gives me confidence that I will succeed, that it will be a good choice, a good rendition. I am intrigued by the enigmatic lines in the song, wondering who the speaker or speakers are; impressed by their forthright, unforgiving toughness mixed with an unabashed erotic tenderness. The air, the melody, also draws the ear, containing the potentially difficult interval of an octave in the opening phrase soaring up and down, coalescing around the long stressed notes that fall on the accented syllables of the verse.

Tá íochtar mo chóta strótha go talamh liom síos

Is an té udaí a chuirfeadh dóigh gur éalaigh sí amach as an tír

Más ag fear eile a bhí sé i ndán mo ghrá-sa a bheith aige 'na lú

Go bhfeice mé an lá a mbeidh a thórramh ag gabháil an ród seo seal is giorra ná'n bhliain.

The hem of my coat is torn and it's trailing down to the ground

And the one who could repair it, she has vanished out of the country

If it is destined for another man to have my love in his bed

May I see his funeral procession on this road within the space of a year

The last line of the verse, also the last of the song in this version, contains six metrical feet, that upsets the five regular stresses of the line, and that requires the melody to stretch to overcome the difficulty. This stretched irregularity contains the strength of the song, for me, giving it a unique feel that distinguishes it from other versions. It is always a pleasure to sing, especially the last line with its unusual, but welcome departure from an accepted prosodic pattern. Other singers perform as part of this event, a celebration honouring the Feast of St. Bridget near the site of her church in Kildare. One of them is Áine bean Mhaitiú, a singer of exquisite nuance originally from Cois Fharraige in Co.

Galway. The audience is also attentive to her and the cliché “you could hear a pin drop” springs to mind. Just as they have done for me, the listeners lift the singer, allowing the transformation of breath, melody and articulate sound into a true “culmination of voice” as the scholar of orality Walter Ong so eloquently put it.

I remember other moments such as this. I am often asked when I was first exposed to traditional singing. I always maintain that I did not begin to learn properly until I was at college in Galway. The ideology that family is the proper and only true transmitter of the song tradition informs such questions. I am an impostor. My father sang at parties such popular pieces as “Carrickfergus” and “Finnegan’s Wake.” He also admitted once to knowing “The Maid from Cabra West” the Dublin comic ballad on hearing it sung by the late Frank Harte, a former classmate of his in Blackrock College. But I had heard him sing very little.

Most of my early exposure to Gaelic song came through school. Tuesdays and Thursdays were the singing days and Áine Nic Ghiolla Chearra took all the classes into one room and taught us new songs. We learned in half verses and wrote down two lines of a song each class until we finally had a whole song. We sang them in unison during the class and had to learn them at home. I heard old people sometimes sing at various gatherings. I remember the time when I heard “Níl sé ‘na Lá” sung by a local woman and how annoyed I was because it did not match the version I had learned at school. I thought my own version was wrong. Another time, a woman called out to sing at an old people’s party sang an English ballad. A friend’s father sang another Scottish ballad at his daughter’s wedding, “Down by the Midlands Green” was the title as far as my memory goes. Joe McCafferty from Derryconnor, between Gortahork and Cnoc Fola, took part in the Teilifis Scoile RTÉ Production of ‘Rotha Mór an tSaoil’ in the 1970s, based on the memoir by Micí MacGabhann, acting the part of a ballad singer at the rabble, or the hiring fair. I later came to know Joe very well. I used to visit him from time to time and collected songs from him on occasion, both in Irish and in English. One song he sang for me at least twice was the old ballad, ‘Barbara Allen,’ probably the commonest song in the English language. The two versions tell the same story but differ in many details. This was a revelation to me at the time, and I became ever more fascinated with the workings

of the orally grounded mind – a phenomenon I found very exotic and that I was inclined to romanticize.

It was Hugh Shields who brought Joe to the attention of people interested in folklore. He was an excellent storyteller as well as a singer and was alert and engaged when I would go to visit him. He struck me as a highly creative individual who would take the bones of what he heard and refashion it to his own and his audience's requirements. I got great insight into the variability of popular material from Joe. From this experience I realized that although some people behaved in a very conservative way towards tradition and frowned on any deliberate change, others saw the material as a way to play with it and to remake it. There were as many kinds, of song, of *seanchas*, of story as there were people who carried them. When such expressive forms are termed "folklore" they assume a status that separates them from lived reality; they become the domain of scholars and may take on an almost fossilized aspect. Scholars inhabit a specialized universe and often the main focus of their work is others like themselves, concerned with analytic concepts such as authenticity, tradition, change, regional distribution and other esoteric areas of inquiry. The career race also drives them trying to make a score highly on the quality rankings with their publications, leading them at times to orient the work towards particular areas of inquiry that may or may not be of interest to singers and to those who come to hear singers. Many good singers today are also scholars although they may not regard themselves as such. This is almost necessary since the material is often difficult to find and to access. These singers are careful and meticulous in searching out material and authenticating sources to ensure that what they sing is true to its original form. In the same way, however, by engaging in this practice, singers change the material, regardless of whether we see ourselves engaging in such a process or not.

By invoking the distinctive characters of Jimmy Meenan and Joe McCafferty, I mean to show that the dynamic of constancy and change was one that existed in their lives, in their society as well. They also dealt with such ideas although they had far less time and leisure to devote to them than do the scholars of the present generation. As they were faced with choices, as they made choices, so performers today are faced with choices in how we treat our material. This makes for interesting debates about the nature,

the extent, and the possibilities of change, and even whether or not change is necessarily a good thing. Change is a constant element of existence, of course, but our globalized, information society means change is more possible and occurs more rapidly today than ever before. Whereas Jimmy and Joe received their new material mainly from face to face communication, and also from printed chapbooks purchased at fairs or other gatherings, the internet today puts a world of knowledge at our immediate disposal. Sites such as mudcat.org can provide the lyrics to seemingly obscure Gaelic songs in a day or two, which can also give rise to engaged and frequently heated arguments about those same texts.

Personally, I am inclined to change things as little as possible, although that in itself is a dangerous generalization. Every time I so much as change a word in a song, or add a verse from a book to a version that comes from an oral source, I alter the text, and possibly change the chain of transmission. A casual one time listener to an item I perform cannot immediately know which parts of the song have come from the living singers and which have been changed by me. The silence of the change is part of the lie of performance, in two senses of that word, both *bréag* and *leagan*, an untruth and a setting, the way the song lies. In some ways, they mean the same thing, which is an illuminating confusion casting light on the singer's role. In performance, the singer, or at least the I that is at that moment a singer, presents an aspect of authenticity, based on other selves that are not singers, the self who is a university teacher and an academic writer, the self who develops connections with older singers and records and publishes their songs. Although these selves are in the background during the moment of performance, they are nevertheless present, providing a grounding and a context for the performance. They bolster the performing self, creating a space in which that self is more readily acceptable to the listeners, the trampoline holders that buoy up the illusion of reality essential to the success of the heightened expression embarked upon in singing a song.

That is the lie, the *bréag* of performance. The lie of the song, the way the song lies, the *leagan*, also depends on the contract between the audience and the singer. A few members will undoubtedly know the provenance of the songs sung, and listen with avid concentration to the changes I have introduced, however minute they may be. These will be discussed in great detail later on if there is time, if they are sympathetic to the changes.

Usually, negative criticism will be kept for later. Most listeners, in a tourist or summer school context, where the majority are not fluent Irish speakers, however, will not know, will not care so much that they are hearing something formed in the moment added to and taken from before the now of the event and fluctuating again after it, until the next one, when a newly configured set of circumstances, audience, time, space and place contribute to a differently realized performance.

II

Lying to get at truth may be a good definition of what art is. So where is the truth in all this subterfuge? That's a question that cannot easily be answered. How is one to control the reaction of each individual person who is listening? How can I know the assumptions and expectations of each person, and control how they will receive the songs, how they will add this experience to all the others they have had, and which have formed their personalities. I remember at Oideas Gael in Gleann Cholmcille, where at the invitation of Liam Ó Cuinneagáin and Professor Seosamh Watson, I began to teach a workshop in traditional Gaelic song in 1989, that a woman objected to a particular song I was teaching, because she thought it to be 'anti-woman.' She could never sing a song that would condone violence against women, as she believed this song did. Recently another feminist scholar has remarked that such items, although they are so called, are not really love songs at all, but texts and performances that detail the seduction and sexual assault of a woman (Nic Eoin 2000). The song was 'Dónall Ó Maoláine,' a pastourelle known all over Ireland in different versions. The *Pastourelle* or *Pastorela* derives its name from the shepherdesses who are central characters in the events alluded to in songs from the early Romance languages of Europe. They are found in many European cultures and describe the encounter between the eponymous shepherdess and a young man. The women are usually alone and in many of the Irish versions at least, there is an element of force involved against the woman, usually stopping short of rape but certainly in ambiguous territory. In 'Dónall Ó Maoláine,' the first verse runs as follows:

Idir Caiseal agus Úrchoill a casadh domh an chúileann

Is í ag teacht go ciúin céillí fá mo choinne insa ród

Rug mé greim cúil uirthi is leag mé ar an drúcht í

Is d'fhág mé an croí brúite aici is í ag sileadh na ndeor

Translation:

Between Caiseal and Úrchoill I met the fair one

Approaching me quietly and modestly in the road

I caught her by the hair and knocked her down on the dew

And I left her heart bruised and she shedding tears

It's difficult to defend such a text. Clearly, the woman, through no fault of her own, has been forced into a sexual encounter with the male narrator of the song, who has no remorse about the act he has committed. This is exactly the part my student was referring to, as condoning violence against women. I was brought up short by the statement and found it difficult to defend my choice, although I denied being a supporter of the actions reported or suggested in the song. Until then, I had, naively, and perhaps conveniently for myself, not really considered the song's import, beyond thinking of it in a detached way as a piece of oral 'poetry,' set in the past and not directly commenting on lived reality. Certainly, having studied the genre, I understood the text of the song. But as to its having a continuous application in modern life, that it might be viewed as anti-woman, I had not been willing or able to see this. The song's stylistic format, its rather archaic and formulaic language, its melody, and its popularity with singers (both men and women), its aesthetic pleasure in short, took precedence and contributed to the idea that the events were set in a 'distant' past that had no effect on our modern lives. A woman friend and, like myself, an avid aficionado of old songs, with whom I discussed the incident later said as much, snorting impatiently at what she perceived as gross over-sensitization. I was somewhat comforted by this at the time, but I wasn't sure I fully agreed with her.

This has remained a problem that, for me, has no real resolution. Surely, the songs are amazing and beautiful items of cultural production, rightly celebrated as a high point of Gaelic heritage, both textually and musically. On the other hand, the gender ideologies they reveal and allude to are not compatible with a modern, democratic, egalitarian perspective. So why continue to sing these pieces? What is the point of perpetuating such ideologies, by performing them as well as possible in front of audiences who may or not understand the tensions embodied both in the singer and the performance? Some listeners are, undoubtedly, merely seeking to be entertained in an unusual and perhaps exotic way

for an hour or so. Does the performer lyricize oppressive texts and by voicing them support their point of view?

Despite my student's legitimate objection in the class on that day, and my own lack of preparation to deal with her protest, despite the often unpalatable realities portrayed or alluded to in old songs, the answer for me has to be no. Regardless of the illusion of immediacy, in performances of all kinds, a certain detachment is implied between the present moment and the time of the text, chronology aside. Similarly, when one reads a book, one does not necessarily condone the content, be it factual or fictional. The engaged reader may feel involved to the extent that the events take on a quasi-realistic vibrancy, but the book can always be shut and put down. William Desmond has remarked such songs reiterate constant, commonplace passions that on one hand can seem banal, but on the other, that 'give lives their deepest and most intimate charge.' It is in the interstices between both poles that a singer performs; neither denying nor condoning but expressing the feeling of the text through music, whether that feeling is pleasant or disagreeable. To suppress such a text, such a history, would be worse than continuing to sing it. By bringing the text out in the open, by framing and discussing it, an essential dialogue is allowed to continue. If the exchange is at times acrimonious and almost intractable, then the artist and the performer have done their task. Discord must be an expected and even a welcome response to such items.

Although many similar sentiments are found in modern songs of all kinds, I have chosen old songs, because I am attracted to their melodies, the rich linguistic resources of the poetry in them and because they *were* the mainstay of popular music in Gaelic communities for a long time. For me old Gaelic songs represent a direct conduit to a past where the language was more robust. To that extent, I suppose I might be called a salvage performer. Neither have I ever chosen to make a full time profession of performance so that I have the luxury of being able to sing these songs in an unaccompanied style, similar to that in which they were formerly sung. I often sing for those who understand little Irish or who are beginners in the language, and who do not have familiarity with performance conventions, say, that an Irish speaking audience might have. That "*sean-nós*" has achieved a high prestige value in certain quarters and can still draw audiences is an interesting ancillary benefit, one that I take advantage of. However, complete

identification between the performer and the sentiments performed is problematic. Like all sequential verbal configurations, these texts were and are open for discussion and multiple interpretations, and might be read as protests against such misogynistic impulses as much as confirmation of them. Like local legends and other stories, these songs provided a way to approach and discuss taboo or difficult topics in an oblique and distanced manner. On just this topic, a contemporary from Tory remarked to me as we discussed a similar song that his grandmother had told him that in her time, it was sometimes unsafe for a woman to walk alone from one end of the island to the other, and this in a community where everyone was known.

As art, songs provided an escape valve and in some ways. I believe they continue to serve both performers and listeners in this way. They may be disturbing, as indeed all works of power are, but art's purpose often acts to unsettle us, while at the same time, giving us delight and pleasure. This contradictory impasse seems to me at the heart of what art is, and continues to give the songs I sing a unique and potent charge.

III

I am sitting in my sitting room on a bright April evening with two Scottish guests, before we go out to enjoy a meal together. The three of us are sipping Scotch whisky, a present brought from *An t-Eilean Sgitheanach*, The Isle of Skye. One of my guests is the Gaelic singer, Mary Smith, from Ness, in the Isle of Lewis, together with her fellow *Niseach*, Jo Mac Donald, an award-winning BBC Gaelic producer, and an avid follower of Gaelic song, both Irish and Scottish, herself. As the talk inevitably turns to song, I begin to play selections from my CD collection. After a while, I take out a recently published CD and play the first track. I do not tell them in advance who the singer is, but he is Joe Heaney and the album is titled *Say a Song*, a literal translation of *abair amhrán*, one way of saying 'sing a song' in Irish. The first song is not in Irish, although it uses a Gaelic melody for its text, a tune sometimes known as "Bruach na Carraige Báine". Instead, it is a rather unremarkable emigration ballad, composed around the turn of the twentieth century which, on paper, comes across as over-sentimental and maudlin. Combined with the tune and the performance however, it takes on a different character, capable in the right hands of packing quite an emotional punch. I put on the record, press play and wait...

A Stór mo chroí

When you're far away...

As the first words of Heaney's unique, gravelly burr flourish into the small room, unbidden tears start in the women's eyes. No one speaks as the song continues in the CD player

... you'll turn a stór to Erin's shore,

and the ones that you left behind you...

The moment passes, but all three of us remain silent until the song has finished. The women are impressed by the way the song unexpectedly moved them, and they focus principally on the immediacy and driving conviction in Heaney's voice, combined with his ineffable delivery. The recording was made only a few years before Heaney's death from emphysema at the age of sixty-four in Seattle. This recalls my own experience with Jimmy Meenan from Tory, whose forceful, convincing delivery likewise belied his weak physical condition. It is during this conversation that the term 'song junkie' emerges, given in the title of this essay, offered by Mary as a naming of the condition of being obsessed by songs and singing. All three of us confirm our unwavering dedication to this singular addiction.

Later a second song comes up for discussion, an item that Màiri has since recorded on her acclaimed CD, *Sgiath Airgid* – a song about a relationship between a man and a woman of different faiths, he a Catholic, and she a devout Presbyterian. Màiri believes the song comes from *Beinn a' Bhaoghla*, Benbecula, a Hebridean island with a religiously mixed population. In fact, she herself got the song from a Benbecula singer, Tormod Ruadh Mac a' Mhaoilein, Norman MacMillan.

The male lover sets the scene, bidding farewell to Ard na Srùban, where his *cruinneag chumhraidh*, his fragrant maiden, resides, claiming that they would be engaged were it not for their differences of faith. Changing the mood somewhat, he proudly proclaims his own allegiance to the Catholic religion, in rather boastful terms, reiterating the chauvinistic position that *Creideamh a' Phàp*, the Pope's faith, is the strongly founded one, the one that provides salvation to all its followers, unlike *na h-eaglaisean ùra*, the new churches established by Martin Luther. After that, he reissues his proposition, almost as a throwaway, "*Cha dean mi leat lùbadh, ach a rùn thig a-nall*". I

won't bend towards you, but, my love, you cross over (to my side). He returns to his praise of Catholicism in the following verse, claiming that it is no wonder that 'ise', she, the Church, is esteemed and renowned, being the only church established by Peter steadfastly on the rock, while all branches that left are like lost and straying sheep. He expresses the erotic charge in the next stanza, wishing them both to be in Rona, alone together. He would not take advantage and they would be in agreement. He would sleep with her in the heather despite the lack of clothes, and fold her thick dark locks in his hands. At this point, the narrator has certainly declared his suit in explicit terms. His lover then replies, taking up the *leabhar teagaisc*, "the teaching book," to bear witness, and rejects his invitation out of hand, preferring instead the dignity of marriage and the celebration of the union publicly and properly with a wedding with bagpipes providing dance music, where her lover will toast her, in contrast to the seduction he has planned, a *suan*, a dream, that will only result in scandal. The last verse is worth giving as an example of the whole:

<i>Mo mhìle mallachd dha'n t-suan sin</i>	A thousand curses on that dream
<i>Guma buan e 'nad cheann</i>	May it live eternal in your head
<i>'S mairg nighean bheir luaigh dhut</i>	A pity the girl who gives you love
<i>'S tu dol tuathal nam beann</i>	While you circle the mountains widdershins
<i>Tha thu briathrach 'nad bhruidhinn</i>	You are wordy in your speech
<i>'S tha do chridh' ann a' foill</i>	And your heart is treacherous
<i>'S tha mo mhallachd aig nighean</i>	And the girl who later gives you a promise
<i>A bheir a-rithist dhut geall</i>	Has earned my curse

She continues accusing him of insincere flattery, pitying the woman who, unlike herself, might not be able to see through it, and finally, cursing any woman who would promise him anything in future.

This unusual and interesting song, with its treatment of the complex themes of strong mutual attraction thwarted by religious differences, almost casts the Catholic church as a rival female in the courtship stakes. Although the word *creideamh* is masculine in gender, the feminine pronoun is used to refer to it. Furthermore, the male speaker's zealous praise of his faith may be read almost as a declaration of fidelity to another spiritual lover, who takes precedence over any human, temporal relationship. The

woman's repudiation emphasizes her strong faith – the teaching book invoked as a talisman to give her strength to overcome his appealing but deceptive invitation. Mary's performance of the song's compelling melody augments the text in a way that highlights the contradictions broached. Text, melody and performance, combine to give an insight into contextual enactment of powerful words, revealing the ways in which art, in this case, a song, expresses and mediates the muddled confusion of human dilemmas aesthetically, raising them above the mundane, in a memorably compact economy of communication. As William Desmond has remarked: "Listening to some old ballads we sometimes hear the elemental – so simple, so elegant, so powerful – yet without insistence – as if singers were more directly in touch with something irreducible."

The lone figure on the chair, the listening audience, the elastic trampoline of rapt attention, are salient conditions that enable a singer to find the 'places in his or her songs' as one singer remarked to A. L. Lloyd. Paradoxically, when these conditions are met and the contract fulfilled, simplicity, beauty and elegance may emerge, notwithstanding tensions engendered by genealogies of oppression, cultural displacement and mutual incomprehension. Against considerable odds, things sometimes go right, satisfying the junkie enough to keep the desire for that perfect, ineffable, moment of performance alluringly alive.

Further Reading and Listening

Cowdery, James, R. *The Melodic Tradition of Ireland*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1990.

Desmond, William. "Being Mindful: Thought Singing its Other". In *Philosophy and its Others: Ways of Being and Mind*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990, 259-282.

Foley, John Miles. *How to Read an Oral Poem*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

Hamilton, Noel. *The Irish of Tory Island*. Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1974.

Heaney, Joe. *Say a Song: Joe Heaney in the Pacific Northwest*. The Northwest Archives Series, NWASCD001. Washington: Northwest Folklife and The University of Washington Ethnomusicology Archives.

Lloyd, A.L. *Folksong in England*. New York, International 1967.

Nic Eoin, Máirín. “‘*Scéal ar an ngrá...*’ Na hamhráin ghrá agus an Smacht Sóisialta.” In *Saoi na hÉigse: Aistí in Ómós do Sheán Ó Tuama*. Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 2000, 233-260.

Shields, Hugh. *Lays Ballads Come-All-Yes and Other Songs: Narrative Singing in Ireland*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1993.

Ó Giolláin, Diarmaid. “The National and The Local: Practices of De- and Re-Traditionalization. In *FF Network: For the Folklore Fellows*, 28. 2005. 10-13, 16-18.

Ó Giolláin, Diarmaid. *An Dúchas agus an Domhan*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2005.

Ó Laoire Lillis. *On a Rock in the Middle of the Ocean: Songs and Singers in Tory Island*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2005.

Ong, Walter. “Introduction” in *Oral Poetry: An Introduction*. Paul Zumthor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Smith, Mary. *Sgiath Airgid*. Portree: Macmeanma Records, SKYECD 27, 2004.