

## Music on the Wind: Women Songwriters in the More Traditional Revival in Ireland

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*'gCluin tú mo ghlór 'tá 'a cur do thuairisc?  
mhaidin go nóin, is as sin go deireadh lae?  
Éist, a stór, tá ceol ar an ngaoth,  
Is casfar le cheile sinn roimh dhul faoi don ghrian.*

Do you hear my voice, calling for you,  
From dawn till noon, and again till day's end?  
Listen, love, there is music on the wind,  
And we will meet again before the sun sets.  
-Máire Breatnach, "Éist"

Late in my study of songwriting in the traditional idiom in Ireland's traditional song revival, I attended a festival in northern Donegal, where I was to interview a song writer who would later be featured in my dissertation. In the course of the interview, he made a comment that has stayed with me: "One of the things that I must say in all the years I've never met very many women songwriters...that is an amazing fact (Joe Mulhern, personal communication, March 27, 1999)."

And an amazing fact it is. Although women make up fully half of the audience members and at least 35% of the singers in the traditional singing sessions that have sprung up as part of the "more traditional revival (Shields, 1993)" in modern-day Ireland, they are strangely absent from the act of song-making that often accompanies these same sessions. This paper is intended partially to redress that balance, by highlighting some women songwriters who are active today or have been active recently, to explore the issues surrounding their full participation in the sessions, and to suggest ways in which this research might provide a springboard to a fuller and richer discussion of gender issues and gendered expression.

The study of revivalism in folk music has been the subject of study recently (Blaustein, 1993; Goertzen, 1998; Shields, 1993; Posen, 1993; Livingston, 1999). However, the participation of women in folk music revivals has only become a focus of study in the past five years (Whitely, 2000; Bernstien, 2004), and the participation of women in communities practising "traditional Celtic" music or its derivatives has been touched on

## Music on the Wind

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even less (Johnson, 2000; Sullivan, 1999). Feminist research tends to examine issues of gender consciousness, of identity, culture, and social positions, and of strategies developed by women to make their voices and unique perspectives heard in largely male-dominated spheres of expression. My particular interest was in examining these issues within the context of the Irish traditional song revival, which has its own specific set of circumstances and constraints. I was interested in finding out why a vibrant singing tradition, replete with songwriters creating new songs in the traditional idiom on practically every shore of the island, had few women songwriters to boast of.

Women are not commonly associated with the composition of songs in the traditional idiom in Ireland. Although women songwriters do exist in the Irish tradition, their songs seem to enter the repertoire of the singing sessions without much comment. This begs the question of how many songs popularly sung now in the singing sessions were written by women. Given the changes in Irish society in the last half-century and the advances women have made as a result, why do women songwriters in Ireland have such a low profile in traditional singing circles in Ireland, and what characterizes their songs?

### Explanation of terms

*More traditional revival:* A term first coined by Hugh Shields (1993), the "more traditional" revival refers to the second major revival of interest in Irish traditional song, which was influenced by the Folk Boom in Ireland. The ideology of the folk movement evolved as it spread across the English-speaking world, merging with home grown revivals in Ireland, so that its ideology carried strong ideals of song as an authentic voice of the people, nationalism, and pride in history and place.

*Traditional:* This word, already a loaded one with varied definitions in general terminology, is similarly so in Ireland. For the purposes of this discussion, however, I will use the definition that has gained common currency in the sessions of the "more traditional" singing revival. It has become synonymous with an ancient, undiluted (and anonymous) tradition which had been passed down orally through generations of a family and which was strongly rooted in locality (MacIsaac, 2001). The capacity to prove pedigree is important if the song or the singer is to be considered truly traditional. Tradition in this sense becomes a strongly localised, community-based concept, associated with notions of nationalism, identity, politics, and authenticity.

## Assumption

I approach this study from the assumption that a revival of traditional music took place in Ireland during the 1960s. Although the music had not died out, it had gone into serious decline by the 1940s and 1950s. However, it experienced a surge in popularity when the folk music movement in the United States reached Britain and Ireland. This popularity, coupled with increasingly available recording and mass media technology, caused the tradition to evolve in ways that could not have been predicted. Many of the singers active in the tradition today came out of the Folk Boom, and some are professional musicians with backgrounds in Irish folk groups.

## History

Traditional music and singing in Ireland experienced a period of fallow during the middle of the twentieth century; in the years following the establishment of the Irish republic, traditional music became associated with rural localities, with poverty, and with the lack of education. As a result, traditional musicians had to emigrate to Britain and the Americas in order to support themselves (Tubridy, 1994). At this time, the folk movement was gaining ground in the United States, with the popularity of such performers as Burl Ives, Woody Guthrie, and the Clancy Brothers.

The popularity of such groups as the Clancy Brothers in the US caused a huge surge in interest in the English-language ballad traditions and folksongs of the British Isles and North America. This popularity spread across the Atlantic to the UK and to Ireland where its ideology of folk song as an authentic expression of the voice of the people was adapted to a strongly nationalistic, even localised expression of pride (such as Ewan McColl's assertion that every man should sing the songs of his own nation).

In Ireland, as in the rest of the world, the popularity of folk singing attracted the young people of Ireland who flocked to the singing in droves. They found in it a voice of rebellion that was at once fresh and new while being deeply rooted in their past (MacIsaac, 2001). The popularity of Irish songs abroad and at home ignited strong notions of nationality, of pride of place, and of locality, as it had done in England (Woods, 1979). And for a generation that had grown up believing that their national music was to be abandoned as the music of the poor and the uneducated, they saw that musicians could make a comfortable living, and even become world famous, as a result of singing Irish *folk* songs (Doyle, 1963).

## Music on the Wind

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At the height of the Folk Boom in Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s, festival and session organizers, television and radio producers, and professional musicians and collectors took great pains to highlight the older people in localities across the Island as "tradition bearers (*Clare Champion*, 1960)." Young people took full advantage of the technology available to them at the time, taking tape recorders with them to the sessions and the *Fleadheanna* (festivals), and recording these singers.

However, as the popularity of folk singing waned, replaced in Ireland by a surge in the popularity of the instrumental tradition, singers began to fall away. The coffee shops and clubs began to close down, one by one, until there was virtually nowhere to sing. A group of singers got together and established a club of their own, to take place once a week, where they could gather and sing songs. From this session, a network of such sessions arose across Ireland, representing localities from virtually every shore of the Island, and attracting traditional singers of extremely high calibre. Today, 25 years later, these sessions are being recognized in Ireland as a long-standing tradition, and their long-time members are being recognized as tradition-bearers themselves.

Those singers who established the initial singing session in Dublin in the late 1970s were inevitably influenced by the ideology that surrounded Irish music by that date: *Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Éireann* had been established some 30 years previously and had been promoting their particularly conservative brand of preservation and dissemination through classes and the annual *Fleadh*; Sean Ó Riada had been promoting Irish music and singing through his creative ventures with *Ceoltoiri Chualann* and in his own compositions; even Ewan McColl, a prominent folk musician and collector in Britain during the 1960s, had been advocating that singers focus on the songs of their own country. Thus, while the sessions purported to be open to anyone interested in participating, the focus was primarily on promoting the traditional singing style. This tended to move the ideology of the sessions in the direction of purism; the definition of "tradition" became increasingly important as singers from folk sessions began to take part.

### The Sessions

The performance dynamics of the sessions themselves are an interesting combination of influences, from traditional *céilís* and pub singing to the coffee houses of the Folk Boom. The sessions are held weekly or monthly in a local pub. A master of ceremonies, called a "*Fear a Ti*" (man of the house, or host), begins the night by setting down basic rules of the session and introducing the first few singers. After this, singers

are expected to *jump in* when they feel the urge to sing, and see an opportunity to do so. The *Fear a Ti* encourages reticent singers in the crowd to perform, even to the point of shushing the rest of the group, in order to ensure that a few singers do not monopolize the evening.

The spoken house rules are generally designed to encourage as much participation from the gathered group as possible. They are generally as follows:

1. Respect for the song and the singer (i.e., no talking while someone else is singing)
2. No instruments allowed
3. There are no standards set (this is a club for participants, not a paid performance—everyone is expected to contribute)

As with all social interactions, however, there are unspoken expectations of the singers, in terms of how they behave, what songs they sing, and how these songs are sung that determines the level of acceptance that the singer experiences within the group. Indeed, the identity of the singer as a practitioner of tradition is intimately tied to the definition of tradition accepted by the group. A singer is judged on the basis of their knowledge of traditional song and the number of songs at their disposal; their ability to act as a tradition bearer for a locality, which influences their repertoire of song (a match of singer, song, and style being the most highly favoured); their ability to sing, stay in tune, execute vocal ornamentation, and maintain breath control while staying within the confines of their vocal style; and their ability to contribute to a musical discourse (create a theme) by linking one song to another during the session. Singers achieve this by jumping in after someone else has sung (for example, following a song about Van Dieman's Land with "We're Bound for South Australia").

These expectations are influenced by traditional precedent and by both indigenous revivals and by the folk movement. The singers involved in the sessions had grown up during the era of the Folk Boom and were active in coffee houses and in folk bands, as well as in festivals and the *Fleadh*, where they were being strongly encouraged to seek out tradition-bearers. On radio and television programmes, in printed collections and at festivals, Irish ballads and songs were depicted as meaningful expressions of the history of a locality (or of the nation) and the experiences of its people. A song's longevity in the oral tradition and its provenance from a tradition-bearer gave the song added authenticity as an example of Irish national expression and identity. This definition has led to a fairly strict set of unspoken rules governing what was considered acceptable repertoire and what was not.

## Music on the Wind

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Among the repertoire that meets with approval in the sessions, the most common is the Broadsheet ballads, and songs derived from old collections such as the Child ballad collection. With these songs, it is easy to demonstrate age, and the original audience for the song seems clear. Songs derived from parlour collections such as Thomas Moore are not as well-received, even though they are clearly old songs. Because their mode of transmission tended to be other than oral, the composer's influences were from a broader source than a purely traditional one, and they were written specifically for consumption by the middle or upper class.

Songs collected from source singers (or recordings of such in archives) are valued because such songs are considered to have passed into repertoire orally via a family member or a close associate. Of these, songs learned from one's own family or locality that are not already well-known are prized most highly. *Traditional* or folksongs from other cultures are also welcome; most especially if a representative of that culture sings them.

More recently composed songs are also commonly sung; many singers active today grew up with the influence of folk singers from Britain and the US. Contemporary songs that are rooted in an aspect of history are well-received as are those that afford an opportunity for group singing (an example is Cyril Tawney's "Grey Funnel Line"). Some of these songs fall in and out of favour due to overplay, such as "The Band Played Waltzing Matilda" by Eric Bogle.

This is not to say, however, that these unspoken rules are set in stone. In reality, they are constantly being challenged, renegotiated, and problematised. A story circulates of a singer in Donegal who, in collusion with a British folk singer, wrote a supposedly old but undiscovered song about the Inishowen region of Donegal, and had the British singer claim the finding of the song and perform it at the Inishowen Traditional Singers' Festival. Since the Donegal singing tradition is considered to be dying, the song was received with much excitement. It quickly entered into the oral tradition as enthusiasts and locals alike learned the song to add to their repertoire. No one knew that it had been composed only the week before until much later on.

### Songwriters

An interesting side effect of this network of sessions has been the rise of the songwriter in the traditional idiom. Their songs were seen as an alternative to older, more familiar songs, as novelty items that gained popularity for their acerbic humour, and as symbols for the continuing health of the practice of songwriting in the traditional

style. The sessions provided a venue for these songwriters to come and premiere and perform their work. These songwriters see themselves as maintaining an aspect of the tradition, while at the same time holding up a mirror to the tradition itself and the conceptual constructs that inform the sessions.

The ideology that now surrounds the traditional singing sessions has been evolving and growing for decades; but because it is rooted in the desire to preserve traditional musical practices, it is based in what information is known about the Irish tradition and on folkloric definitions of tradition. Our knowledge of song-making has tended to centre on practices grounded by history and lent authenticity by oral transmission, such as the practice of making and selling broadsheets, and the importation and manipulation of songs from other countries, such as Scotland and England.

Scholarly work on the song tradition and on composition of songs specifically has tended to create a specific image of the traditional songwriter based on cultural and historical evidence (Shields, 1993; Glassie, 1982). The songwriter of a traditional community is predominantly an older man with a reputation in the community for his ability to create satirical and poetic diatribes on aspects of community life. His work usually reveals a facility with traditional forms, styles, and the use of stock characters and poetic formulae that comes from a lifetime's exposure to Irish music and song. In addition, his songs are almost always set to a preexisting air, or are derived from a preexisting air, so that his songs are instantly recognisable as traditional in style and form. Although he is also capable of creating love songs or more sentimental songs, his upbringing prevents him from revealing emotions so close to his experience. Songs of this type, therefore, tend either to be sung by a friend or relative or are forgotten about.

Since songwriting in the traditional idiom is characterized by an emphasis on narrative and storytelling, the melody of a song can become secondary in importance to the words. That said, the use of a melody that is recognizably traditional in character is important if the song is to enter the oral tradition. There are two common approaches to creating the melodies for traditional idiom song: the use of an existing traditional tune, or the composition of a new tune that follows traditional forms closely enough to lead the listener to think that the songwriter *copied* another tune.

Of greater importance is the treatment of the text. Songwriters may use traditional song themes, such as expression of pride of place, or of love and loss, or even of emigration, but set in a modern context or treating a modern topic. The use of archaic poetic language or turns of phrase is common. The use of poetic formulae was a common means of writing a song that would have immediate resonance with the audience; they not only allowed the performer to give structure to his performance but

also served as aural markers to the audience during the performance (Rosenberg, 1991). For songwriters in the traditional idiom, these formulaic markers not only make rhyming easier, since there is already an established set of rhyming words and lines available for use, but also clearly delineate the songwriter's intention to create in the vein of older ballads.

While most songwriters that I interviewed expressed a desire to see their songs enter the oral tradition, they do not commonly write songs that so closely mimic traditional structures as to be indistinguishable from older songs. Rather, they use songwriting as a means to express an opinion about some aspect of modern Irish politics or society. Their songs consequently incorporate modern references and topics that would not be found in older songs. In this way, they see themselves as maintaining an activity that they see as belonging to the broadsheet and ballad songwriter of the past, while at the same time maintaining its relevance to the modern day. Songs written in this vein generally use humour as political or social commentary on issues facing Irish society today, such as abortion, the impact of tourism on the environment, and sectarian politics. O'Rourke (1992) refers to these types of songs as "jocoserious" songs.

In addition, new songs in the traditional idiom often hold up some aspect of the tradition itself for examination. For example, Tim Lyon's song "The Murder of Joe Frawley" (Lyons & Vallely, 1998) is rife with sly digs at aspects of modern Irish society, from the local pub as the centre of community and business activity, and pub sessions comprised of mostly *bodráns*, to feminism. At the same time, it is a tongue-in-cheek look at the murder ballad as a genre. That he pits a young feminist woman against a leering, grasping and bigoted publican, points to the constant battle between the conservative and progressive attitudes in Irish society. The song may also be viewed as an allegorical look at the evolution of the tradition as a whole.

Male songwriters often write songs precisely to elicit a reaction from the audience; they are either topical and humorous (which get a laugh, but often makes the song short-lived), or written to commemorate a person, place, or event. These songs can become a popular *hit*, a song that becomes indelibly associated with the songwriter and with his/her performance of it. He/she is then called on to sing it whenever attending a session. This positive response is often enough of an incentive to encourage songwriters to continue writing songs.

As with singers, songwriters are most successful when they can contribute to the discourse of the group as a whole. This discourse, which may be seen as a *debate* in song, discusses and highlights aspects of the tradition and reinforces the group's understanding of tradition, while leaving the door open to new or unfamiliar songs that

can enrich that understanding. The modern-day songwriter, then, is no longer simply a mouthpiece for the group or simply a preserver of an outmoded practice, but a creator who adds a fresh perspective to the ongoing debate about tradition.

However, the majority of songwriters in the traditional idiom are men. Even the men notice that there are few women songwriters. How are we to understand this fact? There is no reason to assume that women have nothing to contribute, no voice to add, for women take part in the sessions alongside the men. Neither is it reasonable to assume that women have no fresh perspective to bring to the debate, since women songwriters do exist.

### **Why do women songwriters have such a low profile?**

The relative absence of women songwriters from the public sphere is a misconception; they exist and their songs are sung. However, there have been several aspects of the singing tradition that have mitigated the contribution of women in songwriting, and even in traditional song in general in the past. These aspects include issues surrounding traditional singing in Ireland today, but centre primarily on the change of venue from home and hearth to the public sphere of the pub and hotel, the ideology that surrounds traditional singing, and the ways in which these combine to form constraints.

The women songwriters whom I interviewed have developed a number of approaches to the session situation that allow them to retain their standing as contributing members of the group while maintaining their creative integrity. Their songs display more varied musical influences, more varied approaches to the practice of songwriting, and different attitudes to the function and place of traditional song in modern society.

### **Venue**

Traditionally, singing could take place in any number of different venues, but only certain ones were open to women. House *céilís*, in which the company was made up of friends and family, was one venue in which women sang songs, passing the time while doing chores as another. By contrast, singing by men could take place in both the private and public spheres. The decline of traditional singing as a primary means of entertainment during the course of the twentieth century, the collection of songs from female tradition bearers, and the subsequent broadcast of those recordings on the radio

all helped contribute to the possibility of women performing in the public sphere. It was the opening of the pubs to women in the '60s, however, and the involvement of women in the folk scene that changed the context of women's singing from the home to the pub.

The stigma attached to women socialising in pubs had been progressively removed in Ireland since the '60s, when a combination of economic and social factors saw the beginning of mixed party pubs. The economic boom in the '60s, the arrival of the women's movement in Ireland, and the increasing number of women entering the workforce meant that pubs began to renovate, improving their images to attract young, *hip* clientele, including women. Yet, women still felt uncomfortable socialising in pubs (O'Brien, 1997). The fear of unwanted attention, both by men in the pub and by the wider community, led to an unspoken and implicit code of behaviour for women in pubs, which still holds true to some extent today. In singing sessions specifically, the women tended to feel they could not jump in with a song.

Deference about *creating a stage* is common among both men and women, but is particularly marked in women whose role in Irish society has traditionally been one of passivity and self-negation. In recent years, of course, this situation has altered. Women have taken a far more active role in society generally, and, as Mick Moloney notes, "the gap has lessened." One indication of this is the fact that more women now sing in public than was true only a few years ago when pubs were an exclusively male precinct. Bridget Fitzgerald recalls: "Women did more singing in the houses... You would only hear them at house parties—whereas the men you would hear in the pub." "Men," she says, "got more attention (Henigan, 1989, p. 28)."

Despite women being more comfortable with the idea of socialising in pubs, they were still being associated with certain preferences that tended to perpetuate their image as passive consumers and, in turn, perpetuated their implicit passivity in social interactions such as sessions. Certainly, by as late as 1989, women were seeking entertainment outside of the home but were still being placed in a specific consumer category. Lyons and Vallely (1989) note that "music as entertainment is now provided for [women in the pubs], sometimes the native stuff, more likely a cocktail of it and Country or Pop (p. 7)."

More fundamentally, the modern-day singing session presents a double-edged sword for women singers and songwriters. On the one hand, they are encouraged to sing, encouraged to get involved in the session, in order to make it truly open to all. On the other hand, several underlying expectations regarding conduct in a session still apply including the passivity associated with Irish women. In terms of the female songwriter specifically, her performance of her own songs is mitigated in part by the

reticence that is almost expected as a fundamental mode of polite behaviour in the sessions and by the very specific and conservative ideology that has grown up around the sessions.

### Performance

Although the establishment of an ideology surrounding traditional singing and songwriting may present women songwriters with constraints, these constraints are generally not regarded as such. Indeed, the traditional singing revival encourages women to sing and compose, and the tradition itself has furnished women with means by which they can make their opinions and attitudes known. These means range from the alteration of songs to suit the taste of the performer, the choice of repertoire at a specific point in the performance sequence in any given context, the choice of topic upon which to compose, the decision to engage in the promotion of one's work, and the production of a recording.

The choice of songs, in many cases, or an alteration to an existing song indicates agency on the part of the performer or composer and is often characterized in terms of personal identification with the song in question. Gleeson (1991) notes: "...the overriding feature is that they [the songs] tell stories...when a story particularly appeals to us, we too want to become the storyteller (p. 28)." Ní Uallacháin (1995) added to a song entitled "*Éirigh, a Shinéid*" (meaning, Rise Up, Jane) for her album *An Dara Craiceann* because she "enjoyed the spirit of the song in which various women humorously insist on doing their own thing despite pressure to do otherwise (p. 22)."

Those individuals who perpetuate a more purist interpretation of the traditional songwriter and those that cleave to their point of view affect the choices and actions of other individuals in the sessions. This does not mean that individuals who are uninterested in their point of view are blocked, but their path will change slightly to compensate. I see this in the choices composers make regarding what songs will be performed and in what context. For example, Ní Uallacháin notes that some of her songs need accompaniment, which is not appropriate to the festivals (personal communication, 1999). Although she is normally invited in her capacity as a *sean-nós* singer, any number of factors in the performance context itself can influence her choice of song. Thus, while she might not necessarily sing those songs that require accompaniment, she will readily sing some of her other songs rather than a traditional *sean-nós* song.

## Music on the Wind

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Having someone else sing the song on your behalf is another interesting way of making sure one's songs are sung, for example, Máire Breatnach's song, "*Éist*" (Listen), has been sung at funerals by a number of different singers. A regular at the Dublin session, Roisín Gaffney sings songs written by other women songwriters, and Niamh Parsons sings Brieghe Murphy's song "Cloghinne Winds" on her album *Loosen Up* (Parsons, 1997). Thus, someone considered a traditional singer can ensure a hearing of a song that otherwise might not be considered traditional under the definition promoted by a select few at the centre of the revival.

A third way of making one's songs known is by making a recording. This can completely circumvent the debate over what is traditional, simply because the songs are presented in a context that is more open-minded in its application of the label rather than in the more conservative setting of the sessions and festivals. The participants can then purchase the recordings and hear the songs in an unbiased context. Indeed, it should be remembered that although there is a loose network of sessions and festivals that make up the revival, these individual contexts differ quite widely in direction, scope, and openness to different styles.

Other strategies are also open to singers in a session setting in order to assert their own form of constraints on the session, and these involve the manipulation of the audience using the voice. What appears on the surface like a form of constraint that limits the female singer can, in fact, work in her favour. In the sessions, many female singers tend to prefer a soft vocal tone that is not strong enough to cut through the noise of the audience between songs. Because of this preference and because of their reluctance to create a *stage* for themselves, they often wait to be introduced. Someone else in the company usually gestures to them to sing next, they nod assent, and then hum softly to themselves while others draw the crowd's attention with a loud "ssshhh" or shouts of "Order!" and "*Ciúnas!*" (Silence!) Only then will the singer begin the song. Another tactic, and one favoured by more experienced and aggressive singers, is to begin singing softly and allow the talk to quieten naturally, spreading out from the singer like ripples in a pond.

These tactics seem meek to the outsider, seemingly based in a mode of cultural behaviour that limits the aggressiveness of women. In actual fact, these tactics are used to the women's advantage because of the perceptions and attitudes towards acceptable modes of behaviour in the sessions. Beginning to sing while people are talking, and having them quieten until the singing becomes more audible, is usually understood to be the mark of a quality singer, so that those singers who engage in this tactic in fact bolster their reputation. Further, the sessions are based in camaraderie and on a mutual

One of these discourses surrounds the label of "songwriter" itself; many women prefer not to call themselves songwriters because of the modern implications of this term as the continuance of tradition. Women tend to equate this epithet with songwriting workshops or other forms of ideology in which they would be forced to fit a mould conceived of by someone else, thereby curbing their creativity.

Nevertheless, rather than interpret women's creativity as a failure to change dominant discourses, I find it more interesting to examine O'Connor's first statement: that women treat creativity as a means of self-discovery. In terms of women songwriters, this means that, because they do not set out intentionally to write a song in a traditional vein, they are more reluctant to *throw away* songs dealing directly with their emotions or with personal events. Male songwriters often reject such songs out of hand or treat them as *practice runs*.

Songs written by women songwriters reveal a number of differences to those by men songwriters. Firstly, these songs demonstrate a larger number of stylistic influences from different sources than the songs of men songwriters do. This has to do with the way in which women approach the act of writing a song. Secondly, the songs cover a wider range of genres than do the men's. Interestingly, there are no humorous songs to be found amongst the women's songs that make up my sample, although there are other songs dealing with love, loss, family, childhood, and personal quests for spiritual and emotional discovery. Thirdly, because all these songs find their airing on recordings as opposed to in sessions and the possibility of having instrumental accompaniment increases, so too do the number of styles and types of accompaniment.

The three women whose songs comprise my sample for this paper each come from different musical and social backgrounds, and these influences have made a sizeable impact on their songs. Pádraigin Ní Uallacháin is heavily influenced by the *sean-nós* style and by Irish language politics in general. Yet, she is married to Len Graham, a well-known singer in the English language tradition and participates in the festival circuit with him. Briega Murphy is influenced primarily by the folk style, although her music shows influences from traditional sources, folk, and the country and western music popular in the South Armagh region. Máire Breatnach's style shows influences from classical music, in which she was trained, in addition to traditional music for which she is most well-known.

The airs written by women songwriters tend to be more varied than those written by their male counterparts. Thus, their song airs, and the accompaniments to which they are set, are as varied as are the songs themselves. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poem, *An Bád Sí* (The Fairy Boat), for example, is an evocative poem in which the specifically female

## Music on the Wind

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viewpoint is brought into stark focus; out of a mixed party of six, only the three women witness the supernatural boat pulling ashore at the cliffs below them. Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin (1995), impressed by the "mystery and otherworldliness of this strange event (p. 26)," created a song of *An Bad Sí*, a haunting modal melody evokes the supernatural atmosphere of the song. The accompaniment on the recording uses electronic piano and guitar, drawing parallels to the use of these instruments by contemporary Irish folk bands.

By contrast, Máire Breatnach's song, "*Aisling Samhna*," (Halloween Vision), is couched in music that is primarily classical in style, using the measured pace and rhythms common to the Baroque era, but couching the lyrics in terms of a traditional *aisling*. The song is scored for string quartet, voice, organ, and acoustic bass. Máire's performance adheres strongly to classical practice, maintaining a clear rhythm, and singing in head tones rather than with the pinched, nasal tone commonly associated with Irish-language traditional singing. Although both "*Aisling Samhna*" and "*An Bad Sí*" deal with supernatural themes, they make this association in their respective airs and arrangements differently. While "*An Bad Sí*" utilises open fifths, sliding notes, and drones to evoke a supernatural occurrence, "*Aisling Samhna*" relies on the western association between certain Baroque pieces such as Bach's *Toccatà and Fugue in D minor* and the macabre or the supernatural to achieve the same effect. It may be no accident, then, that "*Aisling Samhna*" is also scored in D minor and uses Baroque elements in its arrangement since the subject of the song is a vision received at midnight on Halloween night. In contrast with familiar songs of the *aisling* genre such as "*Sile Ní Ghaidhre*", however, in which the (male) narrator sees and describes a beautiful woman who represents Ireland, the narrator in this song sees an old woman who represents wisdom, wise counsel, and teaching. The *Cailleach na Ciniúna* (the Woman of Destiny) does not appeal to the narrator to defend her, but advises rather that she be "honest in acknowledging [her] aims and desires," saying that in doing so, the narrator alone will choose the quality of her own life (Breatnach, 1999).

As a further counterpoint, Briege Murphy's "*The Hills of South Armagh*" is strongly traditional in construction, but is scored using an accompaniment of guitar, reminiscent of the folk singing style common at coffee houses in the 1960s. Briege's interpretation of the emigration song genre is somewhat more conventional than Máire's song is of the *aisling* genre, including descriptions of nature in the area of which she reminisces and contrasts with the faceless, inhospitable atmosphere of her new home. Unlike some emigration songs, however, this song does not deal with the emigrant's reasons for leaving home; rather, it deals only with her experiences and difficulties in an unfamiliar

and large metropolis, in this case, New York City. Briege's performance of the song is simple, with relatively little ornamentation, and with a simple broken chord accompaniment in the guitar line. Although Briege sings the song in the key of B major, she stays within her lower range, from F below middle C, to E above middle C. This, in addition to the rhythm of the words, gives the melody a spoken quality. The effect this has is to prevent the overwrought sentiment sometimes found in emigration songs. "The Hills of South Armagh" rather has an air of quiet resignation about it. Briege draws on her experience abroad in writing this song, having moved to Spain for a time when her children were young, so that the sentiment in the song is genuine rather than maudlin (personal communication, 2000). It is worth noting that, of all Briege's songs, this particular one is generally regarded in the singing sessions as being her *most traditional* song.

Both male and female songwriters write about what concerns them; however, women songwriters provide a specifically female view of the world and of specific issues. Women and men both tend to select their songs so that they speak of their personal experience, and it is not uncommon to hear a woman sing a song whose narrator is male. The sessions try to level gender, encouraging women to sing as the men do and encouraging them to learn the big songs as the men do. Indeed, we know that, in traditional rural societies, the women were just as likely to know and perform long, big songs as the men were because they always sang them around the fire in their houses (Vallely & Pigott, 1998, p. 175). There are instances, however, when women's songs demonstrate an approach to life that clearly does not use the stereotypes commonly found in traditional song.

The desire to make traditional song relevant to modern life, apart from treating specific modern topics, surfaces in a reinterpretation of stock characters and common themes. Stock characters and themes allowed the composer and performer of folktale or song the opportunity to develop the plot line or action of the tale or song, as opposed to having to concentrate on character development. In the English-language tradition, stock characters, including female archetypes, are generally derived from a predominantly male point of view since men are believed to have written the vast majority of songs in the tradition. Shields (1993) notes, "as a traditional type, of course, the girl's song merely reminds us that new songs are subject to a conventionality of inherited types which may allow men or women to compose in perspectives appropriate to the opposite sex (p. 135)."

In more recent songs, the current practice of reinterpreting the function of older archetypes has allowed songwriters to achieve some freedom from the constraining

## Music on the Wind

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effect of using stock characters and poetic formulae. Briege Murphy's song, "Winter Woman," touches on an issue common in traditional songs—that of the single girl left pregnant—but approaches these elements from a completely different direction. In the song, the woman being described is already old and weary, toiling on a small patch of rocky slope high up on the mountain with her son. In flashbacks, she recounts her brief love affair with a stranger who arrived in town, and how he left her pregnant and unmarried, and how, with her father's support, she kept the child and raised it on her own. Traditional songs that deal with the theme of the single girl who gets pregnant by her rakish lover often end with the girl lamenting her fate and wondering what will become of her. Indeed, certain elements of the pregnant girl theme are never touched on in traditional songs, such as the birth itself. Briege answers these questions in "Winter Woman," by having the character look back on her life of hard work and on the experience of giving birth.

Where winter meets the western wind,  
You'll see her there upon the hill  
The weather-beaten woman of the soil,  
The people of the lower fields,  
They dimly watched her yoke and yield,  
And partner with the barest fields to feed and clothe her child.

Chorus:

*Come on, then, Johnny-boy, it's time we were gone,  
For the snow, it's on the mountain and it's fast moving down,  
There's ewes to be fathered and the cattle brought home,  
If we make it past this winter, we'll survive another ten.*

He was a driftin' man, a stealer of the heart,  
Innocent and mountain born, she lived a world apart.  
His stories they did charm her, and his passion so disarmed her  
Then he melted from her life just like an April fall of snow. *Chorus.*

Nine of months of burden led to nine long hours of pain,  
White-knuckled screaming pierced the stormy night of rain,  
Her father was the mid-wife to attend and wipe her brow,  
He was the rock that did secure her, if she only had him now. *Chorus.*

-Briege Murphy, "Winter Woman"

This song also demonstrates a clearly female viewpoint: the woman's concern in the song is for her survival and for the survival of her child. Thus, she tells us in the chorus what chores will ensure that survival. In the last line, her desire to have her father nearby is predicated less on his financial support than on his emotional support. In taking the place of mid-wife at her son's birth, he becomes a type of surrogate mother figure to her. These are strong departures from the traditional elements common to songs of this theme where the family often shuns the pregnant girl and her fate is never revealed.

The female voice in traditional and new songs is easier to identify, however. As with stock characters, the voice of the narrator is another element that, on the one hand, can be identified as a traditional characteristic in song and, on the other hand, can allow tremendous freedom to the songwriter. Just as stock characters allow the songwriter to concentrate on the story line, through the use of a predetermined perspective, so too does the narrative voice. Crowley (1999) is one commentator who identifies particularly female voices in songs from his native Cork:

The song "Salonika" provides a rare female perspective on the First World War, being a diatribe between a 'sepera woman' (receiving separation pay from the British Government) and a 'slacker woman' (married to the equivalent of a modern day draft dodger) (p. 357).

In this song, the voices of the two female characters are less important than the issue raised by their argument, namely, for whom the men of Ireland should fight.

The rarity of the female voice, in Crowley's estimation, is in a song's expression of opinion on a historical or political event. Yet such topics are not common among women songwriters. In songs written by women, there is a tendency to problematize an issue by reducing the scope of the argument to the individual or the personal level. "What Did You Do?" by Briega Murphy is a conscious reworking of the Child Ballad, "What put the Blood?" Interestingly, Crowley has also done an intentional rewrite of "What Put the Blood?" even making commentary on the same thing as Briega: war and its effects. Yet the two songs are very different even though they share the same source material. Crowley's commentary is criticism directed at the United States Army and its actions during the Gulf War, where Briega concentrates on the effects of war on a father and his son.

## Music on the Wind

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What put the blood on your hands, Uncle Sam?  
With your B-52s in the morning,  
The spectre of death o'er your shoulder hangs low,  
And the wild desert winds sweep in mourning.  
-Jimmy Crowley, "What Put the Blood?"

What did you do in the last war, Daddy?  
What did you do in the war?  
Where were you in the last war, Daddy?  
Where were you in the war?  
I'll tell you now, what I did in the war,  
Say it the best way I can,  
And when I tell you, I wonder, Sonny,  
Will you see your Daddy as the same man?  
-Briege Murphy, "What Did You Do?"

It is perhaps in consideration of women songwriters that we discover the session ideology at its most obvious; that the concept of tradition plays an integral part, not only in the songs themselves but also in the role and identity of the songwriter within the group. The cultural proximities of the women and the specific constraints that they experience as a result of their cultural, social, and situational surroundings act together to generate a body of song that, due to the ideology of the sessions, is often overlooked. Admittedly, my sample for use in this project is small; yet, this is an area that deserves further research, not only to broaden our knowledge of the Irish singing tradition in general, but also to examine the ways in which female expression is mitigated in modern day Ireland.

### Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

The methods women have developed for negotiating gendered discourse and contexts are a fairly common research subject. This paper was partially meant to broaden our knowledge of these contexts by discussing revivalism, the ideological parameters that define them, and the ways in which women and men alike negotiate them to their advantage.

Revivalism is a process by which enthusiasts of a particular cultural expression engage in activities designed to promote and protect the cultural expression in question.

In so doing, these enthusiasts engage in a process of definition and negotiation of concepts of tradition, of authenticity, and of identity. Studies done of revivals in the past have tended to focus on revivals in North America where enthusiasts may come from a wide variety of racial, cultural, and even linguistic backgrounds. Interestingly, although the *more traditional revival* in Ireland bears many of the hallmarks of a revival, the cultural expression it revives did not experience total extinction. As a result, practitioners of this style of singing are relatively homogenous in their backgrounds, in that they belong to the same cultural group and have recent (and living) historical and cultural data on how these songs were performed and transmitted in the past.

In some ways, this fact liberates the songwriter to reinterpret tradition, by applying traditional forms, structures, and performance practices to a modern context in order to make a point about modern society. However, the ideologies of authenticity and tradition that accompany this network of singing sessions also have a constraining effect on the overall output of singers and songwriters alike. The ideology associated with the revival means that there are widely divergent views as to what entails acceptable repertoire, subject matter, and song genre. However, both male and female songwriters frequently stretch or break the accepted definition by creating songs that are borne of their understanding of tradition. In fact, the concept of *tradition* is a famously fluid one in Ireland, able to encompass a wide range of musical influences and genres.

During the course of the project that informs this paper, I found that the total number of songs produced by songwriters (both male and female) in the Irish traditional singing revival have been quite varied, both in content and in intent. Although their songs span a wide range of compositional styles, many of the songwriters I interviewed censor their output at the point of performance, so that only those songs considered traditional in idiom tend to be performed publicly. This seems contrary to the findings of folklorists who studied the composition of songs within the North American folk revival, who suggested that songwriters in the Folk Boom chose to write only songs that *sound* traditional and that are traditional in context, content, and intent (Greenhill, 1993, p. 143-144).

However, much research is still required in the realm of revivals and on the role of women within them. Certainly, given that revivals are often accompanied by an ideology, an examination of the impact of revival ideology on gendered discourse and on the processes surrounding the negotiation of authenticity and identity would be worthwhile. Among these issues of authenticity and identity lies the influence of Irish language politics on the revival and on the output and intent of songwriters operating

## Music on the Wind

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within the revival. Further study of women performers and creators, both within the *more traditional* song revival in Ireland and in revivals elsewhere in the world, should prove extremely enlightening in this regard. As Máire Breatnach exhorts us, "Do you hear my voice calling you, from dawn till noon and until the day's end? Listen, there is music on the wind."

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