

## **'Music is my AK-47': performing resistance in Belfast's rebel music scene**

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# **‘Music is my AK-47’: Performing Resistance in Belfast’s Rebel Music Scene**

## **Abstract**

*This article examines how some Irish republicans have used ‘rebel songs’ as a means to resist the hegemonic power of the British state, and how militant republicanism is invoked musically, through sonic and physical references to gunfire. It explores how the use of rebel songs has changed, the inherent tensions within today’s scene, and how republicans attempt to co-opt other conflicts as a means to strengthen their claim as resistance fighters. The article also analyses more nuanced resistances within the rebel music scene, exploring how competing republican factions use the same music to express opposing political positions, and why some musicians ultimately leave the scene on account of the musical and political restrictions placed upon them. In so doing, the article connects with ongoing attempts to rethink, remap, and develop new approaches to resistance within anthropology, while contributing to the developing subfield of ‘ethnomusicology in times of trouble’.*

## **Introduction**

The signing of the Good Friday Agreement, on 10 April 1998, marked the beginning of a new era of peace and stability in Northern Ireland. Although there have been recent attempts to destabilize the Peace Process,<sup>1</sup> the public has overwhelmingly rejected a return to the violence experienced during the Troubles. Yet with the cessation of armed conflict, loyalist and republican groups have looked to other outlets to continue their struggle. Music has long been a marker of cultural identity in the North of Ireland, but the decline in physical conflict has imbued it with greater importance. From street parades to football chants, and from folk festivals to YouTube videos, music is used as a means of performing resistance within and against the British state: it facilitates pre-Agreement narratives in a ‘post-conflict’ era.

Although there have been many anthropological and ethnomusicological studies on music’s role in expressing a British loyalist and Irish republican identity,<sup>2</sup> most revolve around Northern Ireland’s popular public marches and parades.<sup>3</sup> This article examines how some Irish republicans have used ‘rebel songs’ as a means to resist the hegemonic power of the British state and how militant republicanism is invoked musically through sonic and physical references to gunfire. It explores how the use of such songs has changed, the inherent tensions within today’s rebel music scene, and how republicans attempt to co-opt other conflicts as a means to strengthen their claim as resistance fighters. The article also analyses

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<sup>1</sup> The political landscape has changed, markedly, but the situation in Northern Ireland is considerably less peaceful than compared with the rest of Europe. A recent Europol report revealed that 109 shooting and bombing incidents took place in Northern Ireland in 2014, more than every other EU member state combined (European Police Office 2015: 8).

<sup>2</sup> See especially Bryan (2000); Casserly (2013); de Rosa (1998); Jarman (1997); Radford (2001); Ramsey (2011); Rollins-McColgan (2012); and Witherow (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Notable exceptions include McCann (1985; 1995); Millar (2017); and Rollins-McColgan (2009). For a discussion of loyalist popular music in Northern Ireland, see Cairns (2000); Radford (2004); Rolston (1999); and Wilson (2005).

more nuanced resistances *within* the rebel music scene, exploring how competing republican factions use the same music to express opposing political positions, and why some musicians ultimately leave the scene on account of the musical and political restrictions placed upon them. In so doing, the article connects with ongoing attempts to ‘remap’ (Moore 1998), ‘rethink’ (R. Fletcher 2001), and develop new approaches to resistance within anthropology (Gledhill & Schell 2012), while contributing to the developing subfield of ‘ethnomusicology in times of trouble’ (Rice 2014).

### **Performing Resistance**

The 1980s witnessed an explosion in resistance studies where, following a triad of forces that included ‘the end of the Cold War, the atrophy of Marxism, and the supposed triumph of neoliberalism’ (Knight 2012: 326), discussion of large-scale social change was deemed ‘foolhardy, outdated, possibly suspect, and indubitably dangerous’ (Gutmann 2012: 307). The resultant political vacuum encouraged many anthropologists to refocus on other forms of resistance, such as Scott’s exemplary study of peasants in Malaysia (1985; 1990), where he argued that subalterns were not ‘mystified’ by the system that subjugated them but, rather, were highly aware of their position within it and deployed subversive tactics to resist domination during the course of their everyday lives.

Yet following waves of critique against a resistance studies that had grown to encompass everything from ‘revolutions to hairstyles’ (Hollander & Einwohner 2004: 534), some scholars have since sought to avoid the term owing to its ‘indiscriminate use’ as an analytical tool (M. Brown 1996: 733), which has resulted in its becoming ‘an analytic void, a catch-all category into which any practice may be manoeuvred’ (R. Fletcher 2001: 44). Others have adopted more modest concepts such as Tarrow’s ‘contentious politics’, which he defines as ‘collective activity on the part of claimants – or those who claim to represent them – relying at least in part on noninstitutional forms of interaction with elites, opponents, or the state’ (1996: 874), which Farrington uses in his description of the period that resulted in the outbreak of Northern Ireland’s Troubles (2010: 59).

While it is true that, within anthropological scholarship, ‘attention to resistance has [often] increased as revolutionary dreams have lost their luster’ (M. Brown 1996: 729), it is important to acknowledge that “‘resisting” is often what our research subjects say they are doing when they struggle, to defend their lands, culture, or religion’ (Gledhill 2012: 1-2). And although we should not ascribe the label of ‘resistance’ to an activity simply because our research participants purport to be doing so, there is a well-established tradition of using rebel

songs to resist British rule in Ireland, for which people were hanged (Curtis 1985), flogged (Johnson & Cloonan 2009), beaten (Zimmermann 1967), and imprisoned (Millar 2017).

Most of the songs performed within today's rebel music scene were written within the past century and are seen through the prism of Northern Ireland's Troubles (1968-98), an ethno-national conflict that began as a civil rights movement to attain equal treatment for Catholics under the law, but became a struggle over Northern Ireland's political position within the United Kingdom. During the conflict, the Provisional IRA (PIRA) positioned itself as the chief protector of Northern Ireland's oppressed, minority Catholic population and fought an armed campaign to sever the connection with Britain and create a united Ireland, fighting both Northern Ireland's highly militarized police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and the British Army, as well as loyalist paramilitaries, many of which were aided by the state. The Troubles saw some 3,500 people killed and almost 50,000 injured, the majority of whom were civilians, and ended with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 (McKittrick, Kelters, Feeney, Thornton & McVea 2007). As during previous conflicts, republicans used music as a means to resist the British state, writing ballads, recording albums, and publishing political songbooks.

Ortner argues that if we are to realize that those engaged in acts of resistance are doing more than opposing domination by 'simply producing a virtually mechanical *re-action*', then we must acknowledge they have their '*own politics*' [emphasis in original] (1995: 177). Bradley refers to this politics in his description of the rebel music scene as 'a quantifiably different version of the Irish-British colonial conflict from that which dominates throughout much of Britain' where 'mainly young men (but not solely) gather in venues where bands perform songs that remember and celebrate perceived patriots and "freedom advancing" events in Irish history' (2009: 195). As such, this article is concerned not with covert forms of everyday resistance (Scott 1985; 1990), or the oppositional practices of everyday life (de Certeau, 1984), but, conversely, with the conscious, specific, and highly performative. Unlike Sluka (1989) and Aretxaga (1997), who describe republican resistance in its covert forms and taking place when soldiers are present, the resistance I examine in my ethnography of the republican music scene in Belfast is much more overt and highly performative (often literally on stage), albeit taking place in the absence of state agents ('offstage').

My fieldwork took place between August 2012 and September 2016, during which time I regularly attended performances in various republican bars across Belfast, before being introduced to two key musicians through a personal contact. Once I established contact through a warm introduction, I would ask to be introduced to other key musicians I had identified during long-term participant observation; I found this technique to make for the best

interviews. This approach mirrors that of others conducting research into similar subcultures in Belfast (e.g. Coghlan 2011; Rollins-McColgan 2012). I interviewed a total of twenty-two musicians for this project, during recorded interviews that lasted between one and six hours, and held many more general discussions with audiences at the gigs I attended.

## **Music and Conflict**

Musical performance has a unique ability to make conflict audible, and songs in particular have been shown to have powerful agency in the negotiation of self and other in many cultures (Fast & Pegley 2012; Johnson & Cloonan, 2009; O'Connell & Castelo-Branco 2010). O'Connell finds that, within the field of ethnomusicology, music has often been viewed as 'a locus for resistance, a subaltern response to political hegemony and social injustice whereby asymmetrical power relations are critiqued in musical texts and performance styles' (2010: 10). Music and resistance have enjoyed a close and symbiotic relationship in conflicts the world over, and the connection between the two is of central concern for those who seek to understand political violence as a cultural and historical process (Kartomi 2010).

Fairley's work on the use of music in Pinochet's Chile has shown how *nueva canción* (new song) formed a central element of resistance against the regime and was 'a way of keeping the pre-coup alive in the present' (2014 [1989]: 31).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in 1970s Nicaragua, Pring-Mill demonstrates how revolutionary songs fulfilled a comparable propaganda role among guerrilla fighters, as well as functioning as a mnemonic to teach 'the maintenance of small-arms or the fabrication of "home-made explosives"' (1987: 179). In former Yugoslavia, songwriters used music in a similar fashion, with one Yugoslav songwriter stating, 'Isn't what we do politics? . . . My bullet is my song. It hurts Chetniks [Serbian nationalists]' (Homovec in Pettan 1998: 14). And in the contemporary Middle East, many Palestinians continue to use music and song as weapons against the larger and more militarily powerful Israel. Writing about Palestinian musicians' use of music as resistance, David McDonald quoted one intifada singer who stated: 'The first thing they [Israeli soldiers] do is arrest the musicians . . . What I do on stage and what martyrs do on the streets are one and the same, just with different instruments' (2009: 58).

In Northern Ireland, although the armed conflict is widely considered to be over, musicians performing within Belfast's rebel music scene continue to express themselves in a similar manner, often using guns as a metaphor for what they are doing with music. Although many of the songs performed within today's Irish rebel music scene promote and

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<sup>4</sup> Fairley underlines the connection between music, conflict, and resistance in Chile by pointing to the fact that graphic illustrations of the country's geographical outline were often stylized into those of a gun and a guitar (2014 [1989]: 30).

commemorate the IRA, militant republicanism is invoked through more than lyrical text. Overt musical references to guns and gunfire are utilized by both musicians and audiences alike. One Belfast musician affectionately refers to his guitar as his 'AK-47', stating, 'I free Ireland with this every week' (interview with Eóin, 2 September 2015), while others go further, playing guitars that are themselves built in the shape of firearms.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 1.** John poses with his 'gun-guitar', the strap for which is adorned with bullets. (Photo by the author.)

John took me to his home and proudly presented his 'gun-guitar',<sup>6</sup> which he had sourced from the Internet, feeling this would add to his performance of rebel music (Fig. 1). He stated:

With the gigs I do, I thought, 'This is going to be phenomenal – I'll be the only person in Ireland to have a gun guitar!' And it has been the most photographed guitar ever. Every gig you do, they're queuing up to get photographs with it – it's went down a treat (interview with John, 17 July 2015).

Yet when asked how the guitar is to play, John replied, 'Shite! Nah, it's not a great sound. There's a pickup in it, so you plug it in. But I only use it for about three songs, three of the

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<sup>5</sup> For contrasting examples on how guns and other weapons have been converted into guitars as 'instruments of peace', see K. Fletcher (2008).

<sup>6</sup> The names of all my interlocutors have been changed for this publication.

rebel rousers ... where you can fire it up in the air'. That John considers the guitar to be of poor sound quality, yet uses it to perform the more hard-edged repertoire in his set, demonstrates that its primary function is to serve as a spectacle that compounds music's connection to militant Irish republicanism. This is a useful microcosm of the rebel music scene more generally, where the more violent the songs become, the less they matter musically, supporting Cooper's claim that such music relies on an 'extraordinary power of signification . . . through association' more than 'any intrinsic properties of the music' (2010: 56).

Thus, when John uses his gun-guitar in this fashion, the music could perhaps be more fruitfully conceived of as 'noise', owing to the guitar's poor sound and instrumental quality, which is compounded through its being amplified via pickup. The conception of John's gun-guitar as producing 'noise' fits Attali's use of the term, as 'a concern of power' owing to 'its capacity to create social order [and] . . . its univocal monopoly of violence' (2003: 27). Unable to create their imagined Irish Republic outside the venues in which their music is housed, such acoustic and performative gestures serve to shore up republicans' power through sheer sonic force, offering a glimpse of their utopia through the creation of a 'reality under construction' (2003: 133).

Other bands further utilize technology by mapping machine-gun fire onto their synthesizers and keyboards.<sup>7</sup> Such schizophonic gunfire functions in three interconnecting ways: musically, it serves as a makeshift percussion instrument, mirroring how one would use a snare-drum; militarily, it evokes the literal 'belliphonic'<sup>8</sup> sounds experienced by those in the IRA, connecting the republican musicians on stage with those engaged in armed conflict; and mimetically, it enables the audience to simulate the firing of machine-guns (Fig. 2), which serves to draw them into a closer relationship with the band on stage, those IRA volunteers being commemorated, and other members of the audience.

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<sup>7</sup> There are parallels here with the contemporary narcocorrido scene, where songs are composed to pay tribute to those involved in drug trafficking between Mexico and the United States. Relatively unknown outside of its working-class Mexican base, narcocorridos often incorporate gunfire into their songs, making a direct connection between music and the dangers associated with the narcotics trade. For an authoritative account of narcocorrido, see Wald (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Daughtry introduces this portmanteau to explain the sounds associated with war, stretching from small-arms fire to the sounds of moving tanks and sirens, in his seminal study of sound during the American-led war in Iraq (2015: 4-5).



**Figure 2.** A fan mimics firing a gun in time with the music. (Photo by the author.)

In addition to the use of pre-recorded gunfire, musicians often trigger such mimicry by exaggerating particular rhythmic motifs and holding their instruments in a similar fashion to how one might fire a gun. These gestures frequently accompany strongly percussive semiquaver passages where no lyrics are sung, thus creating space for performative gestures from musicians and audiences alike. One example of this is Paddy McGuigan's 'Bring them home'.

Written in 1975, 'Bring them home' demands that two IRA Volunteers imprisoned in England be returned to Ireland, and is interesting in that it is one of the few popular rebel songs whose main protagonists are women. IRA Volunteers Marian and Dolours Price were imprisoned for their role in a London bombing campaign in 1973, and the song situates the two sisters alongside the republican icons and leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising, James Connolly and Patrick Pearse, its chorus asserting that 'Irish men will set them free'. When performed today, the chorus is changed to 'the IRA will set them free' and, as outlined above, invokes physical-force republicanism through the militaristic percussive sounds emulating gunfire. Through such actions, connections between rebel music and militant republican resistance become embodied via performance, creating a closer connection between musicians, audiences, and the events being remembered and (re)played. That the majority of these performances take place within venues located in strongly republican areas deeply affected by the conflict only heightens such feelings of embodiment.



Lastly, audiences also mimic gunfire by beating beer bottles off of tables in a sharp staccato fashion. The best-known example of this practice occurs during the chorus of 'Provo's lullaby', which borrows its melody from Woody Guthrie's 'Hobo's lullaby', where audience members strike the table with their beer bottles in repeated triplet semiquaver bursts, mimicking the supposed gunfire IRA Volunteers heard as they drifted off to sleep, in response to the line 'Oh, can't you hear the bullets humming?' Such examples serve to illustrate the literal and metaphorical connections between cultural and physical resistance, via republican music and the IRA.

In *Sonic warfare*, Goodman refers to music as being a way in which 'the colonized of the empire [can] strike back through rhythm and sound', and, drawing on Kodwo Eshun, describes it as 'frequencies fictionalized, synthesized and organized into escape routes' (2010: 1-2). Rebel music functions as a metaphysical escape route by offering republicans the ability to create their own reality, even if such a space only exists within the confines of the venue, and for the duration of the performance. Yet, rather than offering a route to emancipation, some argue that such music has served to trap republicans in a recurring cycle of violence.

Inverting the nineteenth-century nationalist Thomas Davis's statement that '[m]usic is the first faculty of the Irish, and scarcely any thing has such power for good over them' (Duffy 1845: vi), Kinsella points to poetry and song as being responsible for the recurring cycle of violence associated with Irish republicanism, urging that '[w]hat must be done to de-mystify the cult of violence is to place in juxtaposition every marching song and revolutionary eulogy with the cold truth of violence and the morbid abjection of the graveyard language of the gunman' (1994: 27). He continues by arguing that '[t]he words of the bard and the commissar must be placed in sharp contrast to one another so that the falseness of the one is revealed by the cruelty of the other' (1994: 27.). Given music's close historical ties to Irish republicanism, from the late eighteenth-century United Irishmen's *Paddy's resource* (1796) to Sinn Féin's *Songs of resistance* (1982), it is perhaps not surprising that Kinsella makes such connections. Yet, in my discussions with musicians and audience members within the rebel music scene, I received more mixed messages on how it was used. None of my interviewees said they joined the IRA, or any other paramilitary groups, after listening to rebel songs or going to a republican music night, nor did they know of anyone who did. That said, others identified music as a tool that was used to manipulate people and create a climate of support for the IRA.

## Music and Manipulation

For some of those operating within Belfast's rebel music scene, music is clearly used as a tool of resistance against the British state. Yet for others, such music is a liability which renders them powerless. By using music as a weapon, those performing it are themselves weaponized, reducing their capacity as both musicians and free individuals. Seeking to explain music's role in manipulating people, Steven Brown asserts that music 'serves as an adjunct to language to emotively reinforce group values, virtues, and normative behaviors' (2006: 4), and considers it 'a major tool for propagating group ideologies and identities' (2006: 2). As such, it is understandable why such a tool would be attractive to paramilitary groups trying to disseminate their message and consolidate their control.

Bobby grew up in West Belfast during the Troubles and, although not a musician himself, he described being 'surrounded by rebel music' in the clubs he went to as a teenager, despite rave's growing popularity in the 1990s. Not realizing it at the time, he now believes that rebel music was used to manipulate the young people who frequented these bars.

I'm aware of the power of music now, but didn't know I was being manipulated then. I knew it was manipulation when they could switch it on and off with the music. They would use music like that [rebel music] to get people to join certain [paramilitary] organizations, but it would be part of a wider culture of stuff, like republican newspapers. But when I was 17, I didn't really read them. Music though, music was the most powerful and got you all charged up. Sometimes they [paramilitaries] would come in and read political statements when bands were on and sometimes they'd have the guns out (interview with Bobby, 13 February 2015).

Bobby opined that had the audience encountered a foot patrol directly after it, there would have certainly been a riot, while other interviewees commented that, during the Troubles, rebel music's purpose was 'to rally people into a political fever' and 'to get people all riled up so they'll start throwing bricks at the Brits' (interview with Charlie, 26 March 2015, and interview with Liam, 24 February 2015). Like other cultural iterations of republicanism, such as murals of the time (Rolston 1991), rebel music can also be seen as a means to shore up group solidarity, mirroring broader strategies within the IRA which saw nationalists ceasing to try to integrate into Protestant-controlled spaces and begin to seal off their own areas to outside influence, strengthening the organization's grip on these areas (Jarman & Bryan 1998: 67-8).

Musicians who lived within republican areas who were not primarily rebel musicians spoke of being manipulated and coerced to play for republican functions.

A guy that I knew came into my house one night, I was still living with my parents at the time, and he said, 'There's such and such a thing on and you're gonna be playing at it' and I said, 'No, I'm sorry'. I wasn't aggressive; I just said, 'Sorry, I won't be playing

at it'. He said, 'I'm not *asking* you. I've just come to tell you you've to be there because we need you'. And I said, 'Hold on, you don't *own* me'. [He said], 'Well you live in our area, so you'll do what you're told'. It was a bad experience (interview with Liam, 24 February 2015).

Liam continued that musicians were made to feel that playing for republican events was part of their duty in resisting the British state, adding:

Different people had different *jobs* to do, had different ways to *fight* as it were – that's the way they would think. And my duty, as a musician in that area, was to do it this way – 'You're a musician, so you play the music, you play the songs that strengthen our people's will to go on with the war' and this sort of thing. This would be their thinking. 'You're betraying us, your betraying your community', I have had that said to me, because I said no – it's propaganda! You've got to fall in with the propaganda. You've got to sing the songs that they want, that the people want to hear. But who says what the people want to hear, who *are* 'the people'?

Charlie grew up in a republican area and used to perform rebel songs, yet spoke of feeling increasingly uncomfortable about having a role in persuading someone to enlist and eventually stopped playing such music, stating: 'It's not rebel music – it's manipulators' music' (interview with Charlie, 26 March 2015). Referring to his time as a musician during the Troubles he said, 'I was pulled by the 'IRA for not playing rebel songs in what were traditionally republican bars'. Charlie recounted how he would intersperse his set with pop songs that would have everyone up dancing, but that this would anger those controlling the area, who wanted him to stick to the more overtly political rebel songs. Any deviation from the more bloodthirsty 'war set' was met with disapproval, owing to its muddying of the musical language of resistance.

As with Liam, the local IRA leaned on Charlie and he was co-opted into playing at republican functions. He would often be told about events to mark a person being released from prison, where he was expected to perform. Yet he grew disillusioned with the music and how it was being used to recruit people, saying, 'If people want to volunteer that's fine, but I'm not going to convince them to do it'.

No matter what hurt or whatever I felt as being a North-Belfast Catholic, or a republican, or any of those labels, I didn't like anybody telling me what to do – especially when it comes to music. Imagine walking up to an avant-garde painter and saying, 'See if you use fuckin' blue ever again, I'm gonna shoot you'. But what was I actually *rejecting*? To use the vernacular: *fascism*. What is it, to turn around to a musician and say, 'Here's your agenda tonight, here's what you must play'? Now, you might be able to interview a [Seán] or a [Daniel] and they'll say, 'Oh, no, no. It was my *duty* for the community to play this' – completely different view from me.

However, it should also be stressed that Charlie, Liam, and Bobby were speaking of a music scene they have since left, their experiences being drawn from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

When asked the same question, Seán and Daniel expressed markedly different views on how music was used within republican areas during the Troubles. Seán stated:

I actually don't think there was a conscious decision by anybody to say: 'Right, here's what we need to do', y'know? I just think it was that upswing in the national consciousness up here, y'know up in the North. Particularly up and around the areas that were on the coalface of the conflict, who were on the receiving end of the state's brutality and violence. These people found the outlet, y'know, they had risen off their knees (interview with Seán, 15 May 2015).

Daniel was even stronger in his rebuttal, stating:

Nobody ever came up and stuck a gun or a guitar into my hand and said, 'You have to do that'. . . It wasn't a community duty, but it was a duty within myself, my own fuckin' psyche, that if I don't do that I'm an asshole – I need to do that. The people are being treated like shite, you need to fight back and do something about it (interview with Daniel, 12 March 2015).

In contrast to Bobby, Liam, and Charlie, Seán's and Daniel's answers suggest that the use of rebel music within republican communities was more of a grass-roots phenomenon, rather than a top-down edict imposed by the republican leadership. That said, as the two were active participants in the armed struggle, it should perhaps be expected that they would have no qualms in using music as a weapon for the cause, as the interchangeability of 'a gun or a guitar' in Daniel's statement suggests. Although believing rebel music to have been used as a tool to manipulate him in the past, Bobby reflected: 'If I had to get big numbers of people to agitate the authorities, I'd manipulate them using music, too' (interview with Bobby, 13 December 2015).

### **Hot Audiences and Cool Conflicts**

Although most republican musicians whom I interviewed were quick to situate rebel songs alongside acts of physical resistance carried out by IRA Volunteers, appropriating the cultural capital connected with such groups, the IRA's actions could have devastating effects on musicians and audiences of rebel music, not to mention those killed in their attacks.

In 1998, a car bomb exploded in Omagh killing thirty-one people, including a woman pregnant with twins, and injured a further 250 civilians. The bomb, planted by the Real IRA,<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Real IRA was formed in 1997 and comprised former members of the Provisional IRA who would not commit to the Peace Process, believing that the only way to achieve a United Ireland was through physical force.

was intended to detonate outside a local courthouse. Yet a series of errors, still shrouded in controversy, prevented the area from being properly evacuated.<sup>10</sup> Public revulsion helped propel the nascent Northern Ireland Peace Process, dealing the Real IRA a blow from which it never recovered, and, at the time, rebel music seemed set to follow such a fate.

I found republican music dropped off *big time* after the Omagh bomb in 1998 – especially up round the North. You were afraid to sing it. None of the pubs wanted it. I found that, for the band that I was in, the bookings just dropped [it was] colossal! And the first few gigs we had after the Omagh bombing, there was hardly anyone about them and when you were singing the songs people were sorta looking at you . . . It nearly wiped rebel music off this part of the island all together because we found nobody wanted to touch the band for a long time after that. Just because of the tragedy that happened, people classed this as republicans as a whole. But now it's back to its peak again (interview with Michael, 17 July 2015).

That audiences responded so negatively to rebel music following the Omagh bombing highlights the connection between cultural and physical resistance, where one is deemed to bear some responsibility for the other, this not being simply entertainment, but, rather, an articulation of what republicans hope to achieve politically. That audiences chose not to attend such concerts following that incident can be read as tacit disapproval of the Real IRA's actions. Thus, Michael's statement illustrates how rebel music remains contingent upon broader political events, disproving my initial assumption that republican music was likely to prove more popular when the conflict was 'hot'. This was confirmed by other musicians who stated:

Adam: I think the openness of bars helps now. There's The Rock Bar in Belfast where [Michael] and [Eóin] play – it's packed every weekend, it's accessible.

Joseph: It never used to be like that.

Adam: And there's no *danger of going* to those bars anymore, I think that was a big problem in the past.

Joseph: A lot of people were maybe scared because the *war* was still on, now it's a lot more peaceful.

Matt: Everybody was keeping their head below the parapet, now it's kinda safe to –

Adam: It's a lot more *open*, I think. It's not a huge deal to go to an Irish republican night now, for a lot of people. Whereas, like ten years ago, even fifteen, twenty years ago it was a huge deal and all that and your cards would be *marked* a lot of the time (interview with Adam, Joseph, and Matt, 17 September 2015).

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<sup>10</sup> In 2014, Northern Ireland's police ombudsman found that special branch withheld information from the police in relation to the upcoming attack, and some believe that the British Government could have prevented the attack but did not, so as to weaken public support for the nascent Real IRA (H. McDonald 2014).

The notion that the popularity of rebel music is directly related to Northern Ireland's relative peace was also confirmed by Charlie, who stated, flatly: 'You're dead right to see a relationship between how steep the anxiety was in the community and music' (interview with Charlie, 26 March 2015).

Nevertheless, rebel music's popularity has not been matched by the creation of fresh songs, as was the case during the Troubles, the composition of rebel songs being reliant upon physical conflict to provide new material. When asked about this specifically, Michael replied:

At the minute, there's not a lot of new stuff coming out in rebel music ... before the ceasefires, you had Volunteers getting killed ... [and] there was songs written about them. So there's a ceasefire now, so there's maybe not the casualties that you had, on the same scale. So people are just sticking to the same rebel rousers and some of the rebel rousers they're there a long time and they're *never* gonna go away because they're popular and it's great to see it. But, trend-wise, I do believe rebel music's more popular now than ever, y'know? I can see it in the work that I'm doing. Especially around Belfast, there's a big demand for it (interview with Michael, 17 July 2015).

Thus, while it is clear that music was used as a means of resistance during the Troubles, its use in contemporary Belfast, for many, has changed.

Rebel music is now seen as a relatively safe and benign means to offer tribute to the past, rather than support for continued paramilitary activity. In this sense, the performance of Irish rebel music as 'resistance' is similar to calypso music, which, although emerging in the seventeenth century as a means for West African slaves to endure the stresses of forced agricultural labour in the Caribbean, is now performed in 'calypso tents' in a highly performative fusion of musical resistance. In the present-day calypso scene, songs pay tribute to the past and provide a 'counter-narrative to colonial discourse and an emergent cultural identity' (Balliger 1995: 20). By being performed in front of an audience, such songs are, like those in the Irish rebel music scene, 'immediately validated or repudiated by the public, and the wit and creativity of the calypsonians [are] a source of cultural empowerment for all' (Balliger 1995: 20).

### **Changing Tastes**

As the Peace Process has moved forwards, there has been a political recalibration amongst republican groups, with Sinn Féin changing its image in an attempt to appeal to new voters in Northern Ireland and the Republic, the two jurisdictions in which it contests elections. The party has sought to annex performances of rebel music, confining them to peripheral, working-class republican areas wholly separate from its carefully crafted media image. Indeed, one

interlocutor explained how Sinn Féin had approached him to ask if they could book his non-aligned club to host a rebel night following the Party's Ard Fheis (annual conference) rather than use one of its own venues, on account of the audience such a night would likely attract.

Rebel songs have been out of favour since the ceasefire. The Shinnars [Sinn Féin] don't wanna know – they don't want anybody singing rebel songs *at all*. . . The element within the republican support who would want to *sing* the rebel songs are not wearing the suits, they're *way* down the food chain. They're at the bottom of it and to some degree they're almost regarded as *baggage* – they're the leftovers. They were the [IRA] Volunteers, they were the guys who went out and *done* the business. But they've become an embarrassment to the republican movement . . . You see when a big occasion will come up with the republicans and they *have to* provide some entertainment for the foot soldiers, they come round and ask *me* to do it – they wouldn't do it in any of their own bars (interview with Paul, 11 June 2015).

When I put this to Matt and Joseph, both of whom are staunch supporters of the party, they replied:

Matt: Sinn Féin have got their own venue now, they've got the Cultúrlann [in West Belfast].

Me: Correct me if I'm wrong, but you won't hear *rebel* bands playing in the Cultúrlann. You'll hear Corsican *folk* bands [a reference to a band that played there during the summer of 2015].

Joseph: Aye.

Matt: Maybe private functions ...

Joseph: If Sinn Féin ran a big function in Belfast city centre there wouldn't be a *republican* band on, because they would expect anybody and everybody to be in attendance and they wouldn't want to offend anybody.

Matt: But ... this is the whole thing about coming back to people feeling abandoned. I don't see why people should feel *abandoned*, they know what's going on. They know what has to happen here. They know what Sinn Féin have got to do to get their seat at the top of the table and put pressure on these bastards. They know what's got to be done. They can't continue to be a hard-core, fuckin', left-wing militia group that are fuckin' ... there's got to be concessions made (interview with Matt and Joseph, 17 September 2015).

Joseph's comment about Sinn Féin not wanting to 'offend anybody' by playing rebel music gets at the heart of the divisive nature of such songs when performed to those outside the closed confines of working-class republicanism. Matt's use of the word 'abandoned', which neither of us had used prior to that point, coupled with his exasperation, hints at the frustration of musicians who have spent their lives learning and performing rebel music, yet are kept at arm's length from the public image of the party in much the same way those attending the gigs would be, as described by Paul. Similar frustrations were expressed by others performing on the rebel music circuit, who were not as magnanimous about the effect Sinn Féin's shifting political position has had on their ability to ply their trade.

Whereas before, when you were doing Sinn Féin functions, rebel nights were the thing. We then noticed the trend that Sinn Féin were even starting to book *pop* bands and country bands, away from the Irish scene as if to say, 'We're more, now, a middle-of-the-road party' (interview with Patrick, 17 July 2015).

Publicly, Sinn Féin seeks to downplay this aspect of its base, focusing on more positive narratives around cultural nationalism and broader equality issues, such as its support of the 2015 vote on equal marriage in the Republic of Ireland. Yet, as it tries to straddle two audiences, the party risks being outflanked culturally by 'dissident' republicans who are unapologetic in embracing the violent sentiment of rebel songs, as the musical manifestation of what they wish to achieve politically and militarily. As such, mainstream republicans have tried to shore up their status as 'rebels' by co-opting other conflicts, such as aligning themselves with Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories who continue to struggle against the Israeli state.

### **The Song Remains the Same**

Irish republicans have a long history of co-operation and identification with Palestine, from the IRA's partnership with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) during the 1970s, to Sinn Féin's vocal support of Palestinian hunger-strikers and the party's current agitation for a Palestinian state. Republican groups frequently carry the Palestinian flag when out on parade, hold fundraisers to facilitate cultural exchanges between Palestine and Ireland, and invoke the Occupied Territories through numerous political murals across the Six Counties.

Palestine and its people are frequently invoked within the rebel music scene through flags, t-shirts, keffiyeh, and anti-imperialist rhetoric. Although Palestine has its own rich history of resistance music, such songs are not performed within the rebel music scene, presumably because of problems relating to translation or, harder still, singing in Arabic. Instead, references to Palestine and its people are sometimes inserted into popular pre-existing rebel songs, such as Jack Warshaw's 'No time for love', popularized by Christy Moore. When played today, performers often replace the song's original reference to 'Cape Town' with 'Palestine' in a list of conflicts being compared to that in Northern Ireland, this being situated alongside references to James Connolly, Patrick Pearse, Bobby Sands, and Patsy O'Hara, thus helping to connect Irish republicanism to the most hotly contested colonial struggle of our time. Such small adaptations have also been made to the *titles* of rebel songs, so as to invoke the Palestinian conflict.

In 2014, support for Palestine increased dramatically following Israel's launch of Operation Protective Edge, which killed 1,462 civilians and left some 100,000 Palestinians homeless (Amnesty International 2016: 3). In response, many organizations launched



humanitarian programmes to aid Gaza's suffering civilian population and, as part of these efforts, veteran Irish rebel band the Wolfe Tones released 'Song of liberty for Gaza', donating all proceeds to the Trócaire Gaza Fund. The song itself was a rerelease of 'Song of liberty', taken from the band's 2004 album *The Troubles*, whose only mention of Palestine was a two-word appendage to the original title. Although the band has never commented on it, 'Song of liberty (for Gaza)' is highly derivative of Nana Mouskouri's 1981 hit 'Je chante avec toi Liberté', sung in English as 'Song for liberty'. Both songs borrow the melody of the chorus from Act III of Verdi's *Nabucco*, often referred to as the composer's 'Jewish opera', where the original 'Va pensiero', or 'Chorus of the Hebrew slaves', was widely understood as a metaphor for Italian nationalists seeking to cast off the yoke of Austrian imperialism and control their own affairs.

In rebranding 'Song of liberty' as 'Song of liberty for Gaza', it is not clear if the Wolfe Tones were being cunningly satirical, subverting a song written about Hebrew slaves exiled from their homeland to be used in support of Palestinians exiled from the same territory, or if they were merely ignorant of the music's origins. Yet given Verdi's use of the song as a metaphor for Italian nationalism, coupled with the Wolfe Tones' using it as an anthem for Irish nationalism ten years before Operation Protective Edge was launched, the latter explanation seems more likely, further illustrating how the use of music can often be at odds with the complex nexus connecting culture, peoples, and politics.

The Wolfe Tones performed 'Song of liberty for Gaza' during West Belfast's 2014 Féile an Phobail ('Festival of the People'), where the band prefaced the song with an emotional appeal for those injured and displaced during the conflict, linking this to the long-standing suffering of those in the audience. In so doing, the Wolfe Tones identified West Belfast's republican community as one where conflict constitutes the core characteristic of a shared practice and where 'rebellion often reveals a greater commitment than does passive conformity' (Wenger 1998: 77). Yet this also chimes with the discourse of suffering deployed by Palestinians themselves, whereby those no longer living within the Occupied Territories use music to 're-enact suffering' so as to 'articulate their distinctive Palestinian identities' (D.A. McDonald 2009: 61). By invoking the Palestinian conflict within a rebel concert, performed to a large crowd drawn from the area worst affected by the Troubles and for whom conflict was – and often remains – central to their identity, the band could be accused of appropriating those Palestinians engaged in a hot conflict with a colonial power so as to rejuvenate, revivify, or simply 'shore up' the resistance culture amongst Irish nationalists and republicans in West Belfast.

The Wolfe Tones' music and political commentary were accompanied by an engaged audience, many of whom carried the Palestinian flag or wore bracelets comprising its colours,

which were all available for sale. Perhaps most interestingly, at least from a musical perspective, was that where one would expect to hear the audience close the Wolfe Tones' rendition of 'The ballad of Joe McDonnell' with long-drawn-out chants of 'THE I, THE I, THE I-R-A' – this following every performance I have seen since I began my fieldwork in 2012 – the audience responded with the chant 'FREE, FREE, PALESTINE'. In so doing, the audience further demonstrated its identification with, and performed support for, those engaged in the Palestinian conflict.

That same summer of 2014, I attended a charity concert held to raise funds for Palestinian children visiting Ireland as part of an international peace and development programme. Interestingly, the event was held in the Red Devil, a windowless bar located on the Falls Road that was popular with anti-Good Friday Agreement republicans.<sup>11</sup> <sup>11</sup> In most instances, audiences would be able to ascertain which republican group was involved with an event through the venue hosting it. However, the Red Devil's being somewhat unaffiliated, and the event's being organized by people outside of Belfast's republican scene for a cause all republican groups strongly support, likely caused some confusion.

Two local musicians provided the evening's entertainment, with both performing staples from the republican canon. However, as the evening progressed, it became increasingly obvious that the audience comprised different – and competing – republican groups. Given the peculiarities of the event in question, such an occurrence is not as unlikely as it might at first seem. As one musician explained:

You see, here they refer to them [the two competing republican groups] as the doves and the hawks: the doves are the people who are moving forward with the Peace Process and the hawks are those that want to maintain this war, or armed struggle. So, if you're gonna work for the doves, you're gonna be singing politics about things that happened years ago, that aren't happening any more. The *same music* would be used by the hawks, but they would see themselves as 'this is still happening'. If you get involved with the hawks, musically, you're gonna be in trouble with the doves, because they're gonna say 'you're not welcome here' ... if you're a musician who has played for *them* 'don't come to *this* bar looking for work', even though you'd be singing the *same music*. But they would be understanding the music in a different context; they'll be understanding the music as 'this is the music from when there was the Troubles, when there was the conflict', whereas the hawks will see it as 'we're still *in* the conflict, so this music is *today*' (Liam, 24 February 2015).

Liam's description of the hawks and the doves gets at republicans' different understanding and interpretations of Ireland's recent past and connects with Boym's notion of restorative and

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<sup>11</sup> It should be stressed that this does not necessarily mean that these groups are 'dissident republicans' continuing a military campaign against the British state. One republican group that often uses the Red Devil for its social events is the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP), which rejects the Good Friday Agreement politically, but respects the will of the electorate who voted for it in 1998. Its paramilitary wing, the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), declared a ceasefire in 1998 and has since decommissioned its weapons.

reflective nostalgia. Boym describes the former as taking itself 'dead seriously' and as being driven by 'anxiety about those who draw attention to historical incongruities between past and present' (2001: 49, 44). By contrast, she sees reflective nostalgia as 'a form of deep mourning that performs a labor of grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future' (2001: 54), while cherishing 'shattered fragments of memory and temporaliz[ed] space' (2001: 49). Although she finds that the two may overlap in their frames of reference, Boym stresses that their narratives and plots of identity remain separate and distinct. As with the hawks' and the doves' use of rebel music, restorative and reflective nostalgias 'can use the same triggers of memory and symbols . . . but tell different stories about it' (2001:49.). The hawks' anxieties are driven by the historical disparities between the conflict as it existed during the Troubles and the low-level conflict between small fringe groups and the security forces which persists today. By contrast, the doves are less concerned with drawing such continuities between the past and present, paying tribute to important historical events, while pointing to a future free from violence. Musically, Liam's explanation also chimes with Frith's finding that songs 'have a looseness of reference that makes them immediately accessible', where listeners, through responding to a song, 'are drawn, haphazardly, into emotional alliances with the performers and the performers' other fans' (1996: 121). Thus, it follows that the hawks' and the doves' differing interpretations of such songs would not be readily apparent to fellow audience members, unless accompanied by additional material.

Yet, in the absence of differing lyrics or tunes to denote the respective groups within the audience, coupled with the increasing effects of the alcohol consumed that evening, one group *created* such a signifier, chanting 'THE R, THE R, THE R-N-U' in between songs.<sup>12</sup> Responding to this provocation, another group began to chant 'THE I, THE I, THE I-R-A', causing the original group to increase the volume of their chant accordingly, each trying to assert their sociopolitical dominance through the forcefulness of their singing. This continued in a cyclical fashion until the organizers, alarmed by what was taking place, attempted to return the focus to the event's purpose by introducing a third chant, 'FREE, FREE PALESTINE', which eventually caused the sonic and social rivalry between the two to dissipate. It should be stressed that both groups fully participated in the performance of the songs and their disagreements were only revealed once they began chanting support for the organizations they aligned themselves with politically. This illustrates Liam's observation about the same music being able to transmit mutually exclusive meanings to competing groups of republicans, while echoing Cooper's

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<sup>12</sup> RNU is an abbreviation of Republican Network for Unity, a political group comprised of those who reject the Good Friday Agreement, which is widely believed to be the political wing of the dissident republican paramilitary group Óglaigh na hÉireann.

claim – discussed earlier – that such music relies on the extraordinary power of signification, through association (2010: 56), rather than any intrinsic qualities of the music itself.

## **Conclusion**

For decades, anthropologists have been at the forefront of locating and identifying both overt and covert forms of resistance. Yet, following a surge in resistance studies, which had grown to encompass everything from anti-colonial mass movements to styles of dress, some questioned its usefulness as an analytical tool. Current debates around the study of resistance argue over whether participants must conceive of what they are doing as ‘resistance’ and whether it is interpreted as such by those they are opposing (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004: 542). This article has shown how those participating in Belfast’s rebel music scene conceive of themselves as engaging in acts of resistance that they connect to broader historical traditions, which have been recognised by the authorities. Yet it has also shown how those operating within republican areas in Belfast resist within the rebel music scene itself.

From musicians playing gun-shaped guitars to ex-combatants referring to rebel music as their AK-47, and from beer bottles mimicking gun battles to synthesizers sampling literal gunfire, Belfast’s rebel music scene is replete with the imagery of resistance. In such actions and sounds, the relationship between rebel music and physical-force republicanism becomes embodied through performance, merging musicians, audiences, and the events being remembered and replayed. That these performances are housed within venues located in strongly republican areas deeply affected by the Troubles only heightens such spatial and temporal connections.

Yet in order to fulfil their function as resistance music, rebel songs require something to resist against. And while centuries of British oppression have created a rich vein of source material, such narratives are increasingly complicated given most republicans’ acceptance of the Peace Process and the necessity to frame physical violence in the past tense. Thus, today’s rebel scene remains split between the majority who enjoy rebel songs as a form of entertainment, celebrating Ireland’s rebellious history, and a minority who use such songs to articulate what they wish to create in the present, in continuity with the past. Although both groups continue to use rebel music to perform resistance, many of the musicians I interviewed, including those who have since left the scene, considered the latter as having more claim over republican music because they wish to carry out its message militarily. Thus, although they are a minority, the hawks’ hold over rebel music seems more secure than that of the doves, whose peaceful and constitutional methods make for an increasingly awkward fit with such a militant and militaristic scene.

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