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## Minerals and Memories: Ireland's Ballrooms of Romance

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# Minerals and Memories: Ireland's Ballrooms of Romance

By **Dr Tanya Dean**, Technological University Dublin Conservatoire

"I'm at this moment. I'm at the edge of what it is to be a woman. I look from the corner and see all that I'm stepping into, like I'm moving from the black and white to the Technicolor... And enter then... and all is bodies. Bodies stuck together by numbers sweat and music and beats and dance and cigarette smoke. And armless, legless bodies held up in a sea of skinny men in dark suits and young women's floral skirts. Already moving in a tide of badly suppressed sex... Oh, we move..."  
Clara, *The New Electric Ballroom*

If you were to turn left after exiting the front entrance of the Gate Theatre and walk for roughly 150 metres (almost to the entrance of the Garden of Remembrance), and then pivot to face the other side of the street, you would find yourself opposite 12 Parnell Square East. These days, there is little (bar a web of scaffolding) to distinguish Number 12 from the other nigh-identical Georgian buildings of Parnell Square, with their red bricks and fanlights. But once, this unassuming building was an oasis for the city's youth; the site of Ierne Hall, one of the hotspots of Ireland's ballroom scene, host to the showband greats. Parnell Square served as the heart of dancing in Dublin in 1960s, with the likes of the Ierne, the A.O.H Hall (Ancient Order of Hibernians) and National Ballroom all competing for the patronage of Dubliners and visitors from the country. Night after night, thousands of eager young men and women

queued up for the opportunity to dance to Hucklebuck or Loop de Loop, with the excitement often escalating to fever pitch; screaming fans grabbed at onstage performers like Dickie Rock, Joe Dolan and Brendan Bowyer (the "Irish Elvis" of the Royal Showband), sometimes even overexcitedly dragging them off the stage. Whilst the grim unemployment statistics and repressive cultural politics could weigh heavy on day-to-day life in 1960s Ireland, nights in the ballrooms offered a brief and heady escape for many young people; a glimmer of glamour, romance, and excitement.

The Irish showband movement gleefully borrowed much of its repertoire and brio from American and British youth culture—as Clara says in *The New Electric Ballroom*, "... a new confidence now. An American confidence!"—but amalgamated it with the traditions and mores of their homeland to create a uniquely Irish cultural phenomenon. Whilst the showbands were most associated with covers of American and British pop songs, often their sets would also integrate country and western songs, or ballads and folk songs from Irish tradition, adding a sprinkle of nostalgic appeal to their alluring modernity. And the "show" in showband came from the frequent integration of choreography or comedy elements (sometimes even variety sketches) as part of the performance; a legacy from the tradition of the Irish "fit-up" companies that travelled to small rural towns around the country to perform theatre and variety shows.

However, whilst the showbands borrowed some elements from traditional forms of Irish entertainment, others were determinedly rejected. Gone were the days of musicians staidly seated behind music stands at parish dances; performers now strutted across the stage, electrifying

audiences with their gyrations and crooning. Mildred Beirne—drummer in the only all-female showband, the Granada Girls—recalled in an interview with Rebecca S. Miller how they felt transformed by the adulation of their fans: “the people on the dance floor thought we were like angels. And we felt it. And they always made us feel so welcome and so good and that we were so different. You were taken from nothing to the most wonderful things that could happen to you.” The best showband performances vibrated with a dynamic connection between the performers and their audience, who were hungry not just for musical talent but for a dazzle of charisma which might temporarily refract a little Hollywood glamour into their own lives.

The glamour of the youthful culture of the ballrooms was still imbricated with the conservatism of Irish society; as well as dutifully shutting their doors for Lent, commercial dance halls were not licensed for the sale of alcohol. Dancers who might find themselves parched were left to cool off with either tea or a mineral (a soft drink). As the main refreshment on offer, minerals became the currency of romance for amorous ballroom hopefuls; in an interview with RTÉ about the history of the lerne hall, entertainer Paddy Cole (formerly of the Capitol Showband) recalled that, “The girls were over

here on this side and all the boys were over here on this side, and as soon as you started, there was a rush across the floor of the boys towards the girls...And if you bought a mineral for a girl, you hoped you were going to leave her home, because you'd only have the price of one mineral; and if she didn't go home with ye, you hadn't the price of a second mineral, you were in trouble!”

As Diarmaid Ferriter notes in *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, by 1961 there were over 2,000 licensed dance halls in Ireland, which equated to roughly one for every 1,500 people in the country. This insatiable appetite across the country for showbands was seized upon with entrepreneurial spirit by a young Albert Reynolds. Long before his days as Taoiseach, Reynolds opened a slew of ballrooms with his brother Jim in the late 1950s and 1960s, with glitzy names like Cloudland in Roosky, Fairyland in Roscommon, Dreamland in Athy, and Jetland in Limerick, to name but a few; all strategically located between two large towns, in order to attract a larger crowd. This also spiced up the ballroom's appeal by offering young hopefuls the opportunity to meet potential romantic partners from outside the finite social pool of their own parish. In the landscape of Enda Walsh's play, Breda's and Clara's disdain for the lecherous fishermen who prowl their



The Derek Joys Showband in action. Courtesy: Waterford Museum of Treasures



Brendan Bowyer and the Royal Showband perform at the Stardust Lounge, Las Vegas. Courtesy: Waterford Museum of Treasures

own town's inferior Sunshine Ballroom only amplifies the exotic appeal of The New Electric Ballroom in the neighbouring bigger town (not to mention the seductive draw of its headliner, the "Roller Royle"). Reynolds recalled in an interview with Rebecca S. Miller that it was "a social revolution in Ireland because it was a question of people moving out and meeting... you know, boy meets girl. And...the marriages that came out of the ballroom business...! We were very parochial, if we can call it that... But [the showbands] opened up the world for us, you know. It definitely changed the whole of Ireland, there's no question about it."

These days, little trace remains of Parnell Square's halcyon days of dancing. The arrival of discos and nightclubs signalled a slow but fatal decline in the ballrooms' popularity across Ireland in the late 1960s and 1970s. The A.O.H Hall shut for good in 1982, the National Ballroom followed suit in 1989, and the Ierne finally closed its doors in 1992 (despite an ambitious but doomed attempt to revive it in 2007). Today, the showband era is remembered nostalgically as a more innocent time, yet the impact of this social phenomenon on Ireland's nascent modernity was profound. It created the space for a generation to imagine themselves

as part of both a global youth culture and something uniquely Irish; a "wondrous place".

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