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Spring 2006

# Investigating the Ways the Irish Learn Music

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## Recommended Citation

Cawley, Jessica, "Investigating the Ways the Irish Learn Music" (2006). *Inquiry Journal*. 3.  
[https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry\\_2006/3](https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry_2006/3)

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research ARTICLE

## Investigating the Ways the Irish Learn Music

—Jessica Cawley

***"I started learning music sitting in the pubs and listening to the "trad" music, and I thought, hmm... I like that and I'm going to get me some of that.***

***So I decided to sit down and start playing the guitar."***

***—Guitar player from Galway, Ireland, June 7, 2005***

This summer I learned to be inconspicuous. For the first time in my life I was truly sensitive to the people around me because it was my job to study their culture. I tried as hard as I could to adapt to their culture and not to draw attention to myself. Because this trip had meaning to me, I wanted to be seen as a traveler with a purpose, not a mere tourist. My purpose was to investigate the informal learning experiences of Irish musicians.

Educators know that children learn most effectively when they are learning informally, and it is for this reason that I focused my research on the informal ways the Irish learn music. One of the most rewarding things I learned this summer was that there are some things that cannot be learned in books. In some situations we must just learn from observations and experiences.

I traveled to the city of Galway to listen and observe traditional Irish music sessions, and to interview the musicians who play in them. Having never done serious research or traveled to Ireland, I planned to observe the music sessions for a week in order to get a basic understanding of the music and to get accustomed to the city. I assumed I would be a passive observer during my first week in Ireland and talk to people the following week; I was mistaken. People do not keep to themselves in Irish pubs; in Ireland pubs are places to socialize, relax, and listen to music.

I quickly learned that taking notes and drinking Diet Coke in a pub attracts unwanted attention. At first I drank nothing but soda, thinking it would be unprofessional to study and drink. People actually questioned me about my behavior. I realized that the local community perceived me as an oddity because I was spending so much time at the sessions, never drinking or socializing. But once I ordered a glass of Guinness, people actually stopped gawking at me. The combination of drinking at a snail's pace and alternating Guinness and Diet Coke kept me professional at all times.

During that first week, I observed what was socially appropriate in the pubs. Although wardrobe may seem insignificant, I assure you that this topic weighed greatly on my mind. Young Irish girls dress very well,

although in the summer they dress somewhat risky. I dressed more conservatively than the Irish girls, but by doing so, I didn't blend in as a local. It bothered me, as a researcher interested in cultural observations and interactions, that I was an obvious outsider. Choosing what to wear became a surprisingly difficult balancing act.

In addition to learning the basics of Irish culture, I used the first week to scout the musicians. I observed their behavior and what they did during and after the sessions. I learned that the musicians are very approachable. They take many cigarette breaks, which makes for a convenient time to approach them. I learned about the intricacies of traditional Irish music, its instrumentation and the etiquette of music sessions.

The local people were very friendly, gave me advice, and passed on their knowledge of Irish culture and music. I learned where and when the music sessions were held, and when musical festivals and concerts would take place. The barman grew to know me as "the girl doing that Irish music research project." I got to know the session leaders and the well-respected musicians in Galway's music community. These strong musicians gave very thorough interviews and also introduced me to other interview subjects. As I grew to know more people, I felt incredibly safe in all the sessions. The people in the pubs came to be my surrogate family.

## **The Interviews**

Although I had not planned to start interviewing the musicians until my second week in Ireland, I did not pass up opportunities that were presented. After I spoke informally to a musician about my research, he said that he would be willing to take part in the study. My first interview established a trend I soon came to recognize. I did not have to approach many interview subjects, as the musicians would volunteer after finding out I was researching Irish music. During the sessions, I would tape record the music and chat with the locals who were out for the *craic*.

*Craic is an Irish Gaelic word that cannot easily be translated into English, but generally means "good times" with a connotation of drinking.*

Many of the people I met in the pubs were friends of the musicians, so they often introduced me and an interview would typically result. Sessions usually occurred from 5:30 p.m. to midnight with an hour break in the middle. Most of my interviews were done during the musician's breaks or right after a session. Sometimes an appointment would be made for the next day at a café. The interviews were on average ten to twenty minutes long, although one man spoke for an hour and one spoke for only five minutes. Oddly enough, the man who spoke for five minutes yielded just as much useful information as the gentleman who spoke for an hour.

My interview consisted of one all-encompassing question and a list of probing questions if the primary question did not yield enough information. By using open-ended questions my interview allowed the musicians to tell their story. Some musicians were very concise and some rambled off on tangents until they tired. Many were storytellers, while some stated just the facts.

Sometimes interacting with the musicians was challenging. I had assumed that all the musicians would be old men. I based this assumption on the stereotype that Irish music is for old Irish men, but in fact there are many

musicians my age. I felt more comfortable interviewing older musicians, so it took a little bit of work for me to approach my peers.

Another challenge I discovered was that occasionally a musician would be drinking Guinness and get so impassioned about Irish music that he would speak very emotionally instead of rationally answering my questions. One man stated that Ireland had good musicians because God had chosen them. Another man stated, "I didn't have to learn guitar, it's just in my blood." After a couple of weeks, I learned to start interviewing musicians earlier in the night, just so the interviews would be a little more focused.

The musicians I interviewed kept in touch with me throughout the summer. Since I was at nearly every session, they came to know me, and it was very nice seeing familiar faces. Towards the end of my trip, I rarely found a session where I did not know a musician or two.

### **Informal and Formal Learning: from Others**

The issue of learning formally or informally is not black and white. No musician learned one way or the other. Although I learned formally (in school), I do remember my dad singing me to sleep when I was a child, which is a form of informal learning. In the same respect, although many Irish musicians made statements illustrating informal learning experiences, there were some musicians who learned in formal settings.

Nearly all of the interview subjects mentioned their family when discussing their musical education. Learning music in the home can be compared to the informal process children experience when learning how to speak. Parents, although they may occasionally coach children, rarely ever lecture children to teach them new words. The same is true of learning music. The lack of music classes in Irish public schools would suggest the Irish people learn in places such as community centers or in the home.

Irish musicians are proud of a family heritage of music and describe their parents as "very musical," even if the parents neither played nor sang. However, nearly sixty percent of the musicians stated that they learned to play the Irish tunes from their family. For many musicians, their earliest memories of music were of singing along with their parents, and almost all the interview subjects remembered their parents as either playing instruments or singing. Over a third of the musicians had learned to play their instrument at home from a family member. What surprised me was that many of the musicians learned from their older siblings, where I had assumed the parents would be the primary teachers.

In addition to informal learning experiences in the home, many Irish musicians learned in other informal ways. About one third of the interviewees said they learned their instruments from a peer. Many times, when a musician upgraded his instrument, he would sell his old instrument to a friend. The seller would give musical advice to the buyer, creating an informal learning experience.

***"First I learned how to play the gramophone, then I learned to play a tape recorder, then I learned to play a CD player, then I learned to play the guitar.... That's a fact."***

***—Guitar player in Galway, Ireland, June 7, 2005***

## **Informal and Formal Learning: by Ear**

Learning music by listening to recordings or live sessions was a major informal learning method. To my surprise, most musicians said that listening to the sessions, records, and to the radio highly affected their musical education. First the musicians learned to sing a tune. By listening and singing it many times, they would commit the notes to memory. Then, by trial and error, they would try to reproduce the songs on their instruments.

All but two musicians stated they learned from recordings. Slightly fewer cited learning in the sessions probably because music sessions are not found in all communities throughout Ireland. Sessions were numerous in Galway, but not every town was blessed with such a thriving musical culture. A third of the musicians interviewed (primarily from Dublin and Waterford) stated that traditional music was not prevalent in their hometowns. The same musicians stated they bought and listened to Irish music albums in order to compensate for the lack of sessions in their communities. Interestingly, the musicians who lacked the session experience still played stylistically very well.

My interviews demonstrated that the Irish learn music aurally and informally. All session musicians played by memory, I realized, because they learned all the tunes by ear. More than half of the musicians interviewed said their school had a poor music program or none at all. Musicians who had music in their school stated they learned music by ear in classes. This is a fascinating situation because informal learning (learning by ear) is taking place in a formal setting. Even though these musicians learned in a formal setting, their teachers helped them to be independent by teaching them music informally. The musicians were somewhat prideful about not learning in school, often taking all the credit for their musical education. Only two, both from Dublin, stated they learned their instruments at school. Interestingly, the one woman who said she learned to play the tin whistle in school was also one of the only musicians not to reference her family as a source of her musical education.

A handful of musicians stated that they learned a lot about Irish music at traditional Irish dance class, a type of formal training. All the musicians who spoke of dance class said they hated it and that Irish moms force their children to go. Although no one liked the dancing, they said the rhythm needed to Irish step dance helped them to play Irish music in the correct style.

About half the musicians stated they learned from a lesson teacher, which is a formal learning experience. However, the teachers taught the musicians by ear (informally). Although these lessons have elements of informal learning, they are formal learning experiences. Most musicians were prideful about not taking lessons; about one third stated they had never taken lessons.

***"You give me an Irish melody on paper, and I'll have the tune for you in a couple days.  
You play an Irish melody for me, and I can play it back to you in about four minutes."  
—Mandolin player interviewed in Galway, Ireland, June 10, 2005***

A majority of the musicians said they could read "the dots," which was their way of saying "musical notation." First, I found it humorous that they referred to musical notation as "the dots." Second, I was surprised that so many said they could read music because most of them stated they play by ear (informally), and reading

notation is a formal way of learning. At the same time, the musicians indicated that reading was bad because it took away from the soul of the music. After a while I realized the Irish musicians could read music similar to the way I can read Spanish. That is to say, slowly and painfully because it is a skill not exercised or needed.

## **Informal and Formal Learning: a Summary**

All of my observations point to the fact that Irish musicians have diverse music learning experiences, learning from everyone including family and friends, lesson teachers, and other musicians at sessions and in recordings. There is an overall sense that the Irish learn Irish traditional music independently and informally. This is a general statement, and there are obviously exceptions to the rule. Irish musicians are individuals. Some people did learn in the schools, and some people's families didn't sing or play. The exceptions aside, Irish musicians tend to learn informally and aurally, through family, friends, and recording. When learning in formal situations (school and lessons) Irish musicians are still taught in an informal (aural) way. The aspect of informal learning in the home, in pubs, and with peers illustrates how music in Ireland is inherently social. The music culture itself is social, and it appears that most Irish musicians learn in social settings.

The informal learning that takes place in Ireland intrigues me because my education was so formal. I learned to play the saxophone in the New Hampshire public schools music program. I read lesson books. When I was a kid, I didn't listen to music. I didn't have a favorite band, or even a favorite genre. I didn't even own a saxophone CD (*my instrument of choice*) until high school. I took lessons and never played music with my friends or family. Because my learning was formal, I tend to view my saxophone as work or studying. Because I didn't learn my instrument casually, I didn't play it casually. I wish I had learned music in a similar way to the Irish musicians. The informality and social nature of Irish music tend to give Irish musicians the philosophy of music as a form of entertainment, whereas some classical musicians see music as a sacrifice and an artistic discipline.

## **Reflections**

My interest in Irish history, music and culture began in high school, and for years Ireland was this magical place of history and tradition. But when I landed in Dublin, I feared I was wrong about Ireland. The people were friendly enough, but Dublin is a busy, dirty metropolis similar to Boston. I felt very naïve and vulnerable. Reluctantly I boarded a train to Galway, which was to be my home for the summer. Within a day of exploring Galway city my fears had not only subsided, my opinion had completely changed. Galway is how I pictured Ireland, and what I expected to find. It amazed me how at home I felt in Galway, while having felt foreign in so many American cities. Upon my return home to Manchester, New Hampshire, I felt like a foreigner. Is it possible for someone to be homesick for a foreign land? I miss Galway's crowded streets and music. For years I have been reading about Ireland. I'm happy and grateful I was able to experience it firsthand.

My philosophy about music has changed drastically as a result of this trip. As a teacher I will use the different ways the Irish learned music to teach my own students. As a musician I am learning to apply what I've learned to my own practice and experience. I've always considered myself an academic musician. I am good at music theory and teaching. Although I was constantly performing, playing wasn't important to me. Playing was secondary to my studying. Since I've returned, I have been playing by ear and playing my saxophone because I

want to. Not only do I love playing Irish music, but I also love American folk music and jazz. In a sense, I rediscovered the joy behind all music. I envisioned myself as a teacher; now I see myself as a musician who wishes to transmit the art form that I love.

*Sincere thanks to my mentor, Dr. Susan Hatfield, for introducing me to research and the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP). She guided me through many processes and made my experience a great one. I would also like to recognize and thank the coordinator of IROP, Georgeann Murphy, for all her hard work and assistance. In addition, my deepest thanks go to the families who have donated to the IROP program. Without them, I might still be reading about Ireland instead of reflecting on my time spent there. Many thanks to my mentor from Limerick, Ireland, Mr. Niall Keegan, and the Irish musicians who participated in this research. Also, many thanks go to Brigid Carroll, for spending so much time helping me through the revision process. Lastly, I would like to thank my family for their continued love and support.*

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### ***Author Bio***

*Jessica Cawley, from Manchester, NH, is a senior music education major at UNH. About two years ago, Jessica's love for Ireland and for teaching music came together with the award of a grant by the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP). She describes her travel to Ireland as a very humbling experience: "I now realize why I love Irish music. It seems the more you learn about Irish music, the more you realize that you know very little about it. The intricacies of the tunes, history, emotions, and etiquette, are very overwhelming at first, but the kindness of the Irish people inspired me....It is true I learned much about Irish culture, but I continue to be humbled every day by the level of musicianship I witnessed in Ireland." Upon graduating in May 2006, Jessica will teach in the public school system, but she ultimately wishes to return to Ireland to pursue a master's degree in ethnomusicology.*

### ***Mentor Bio***

*Susan S. Hatfield, instructor of music education at UNH from 2003-2005, specializes in music development and music learning theory, and is currently a music learning consultant in New York City. After having Jessica as a student in several courses in music education, Dr. Hatfield was pleased to see her research proposal combine elements of her formal education with her independent self-education on Irish music and culture. "The depth of Jessica's informal research was unexpected to me," says Hatfield. "She knew so much about the culture before she even arrived in Ireland. Her enthusiasm for the project and for its implications for later research was genuine and contagious."*