A Popular Centenary:
Irish Popular Music's Re-Interpretation of the 1916 Rising

Michael Lydon

Introduction: A Popular Centenary

In this essay, I consider a re-interpretation of Ireland's 1916 Easter Rising and its aftermath by selected Irish popular musicians. I position these re-interpretations as either (state-)authorized acts of remembrance, or what I term as remembrance activism. This initially entails assessing performances by Irish popular musicians from *Centenary*, a concert for television produced by RTÉ to mark the 100-year anniversary of the Rising. A department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht spokesperson noted that *Centenary* was a "major flagship" event of the centenary remembrance (McManus). It is thus a (state-)authorized reflection on the Rising that prominently features Irish popular musicians. Fundamental to the assessment is a reflection on *Centenary*'s negotiation of the problematic politics of remembrance, particularly in terms of muting any glorification of violence and the Rising's socialist ambitions. Timothy J. White and Denis Marnane suggest that those who were responsible for organising the centenary of the Rising needed to balance the desire to celebrate Ireland's hard-won freedom with the need not to re-ignite the conflicts of the past (30). In looking to specific performances by Irish popular musicians during *Centenary*, I investigate their role as authorizing agents, employed as part of a state-mandated negotiation of the problematic politics of remembrance.

Next, I present two examples of what I consider remembrance activism by Irish popular musicians. The term remembrance activism constitutes re-interpretations of the Rising that seek to reassess and/or challenge (state-)authorized narratives. The first act of remembrance activism I consider is Damien Dempsey's independently funded project album *No Force on Earth* (2016) and his appearance at the #Reclaim1916 open air pageant and concert. The #Reclaim1916 event was the final event of the Reclaim 1916 programme, a "citizens' initiative" instigated to challenge state-mandated acts of remembrance (Trade Union TV). The chief patron of the event, Robert Ballagh, noted that the concert was about "reclaiming the bravery and sacrifice of the men and women who fought in 1916" (Trade Union TV). I position Dempsey's personal connection to the Rising as key to his remembrance, specifically as it relates to one of the principal agitators of the Rising, James Connolly. I then assess the electro-pop duo Zrazy's reflection on the Rising. I outline how the group responded to the Rising by creating what they termed an alternative national anthem, "Women of '16". This song not only highlights the women missing from (state-)authorized narratives of the Rising, but also repurposes the Rising's remembrance to give voice to the experiences of Irish lesbians. Ultimately, I reveal that for Dempsey and Zrazy selected ideals of

the Rising are still pertinent to them in their desire to address socio-political injustices evident in Ireland.

Irish Popular Music and a "New" Ireland

In commemorating the Rising, Irish state-authorizing agents needed to honour the Rising while negotiating the problematic politics of remembrance. In 2016, Ireland was entrenched in protests that railed against austerity measures such as the introduction of water charges; a peaceful protest movement led by Right2Water Ireland that campaigned against Irish Water's introduction of water charges in Ireland. Alison O'Malley-Younger observes that "national remembrance can be a powerful tool in constructing cultural identity but is fraught with contested legacies vying for representation" (456). In fact, commemorations of Ireland's revolutionary period (1912-1923) reveal much more about contemporary Ireland than about the actual history (Daly 48). Historians competed with journalists and politicians for control of the narratives surrounding the commemorations, aware of the possible dangers in repeating the "unrestrained triumphalism" of the 1966 commemoration – which possibly stoked sectarian violence in Northern Ireland (White and Marnane 32). Hence, any official programme marking the centenary needed to celebrate those involved in Ireland's revolutionary period, while also deflecting from some of the era's nationalist and socialist ideology. While the centenary celebrations achieved this goal in the main, some features of it gave rise to criticism. For example, the Abbey Theatre's 1916 commemorative programme "Waking the Nation" and the National Concert Hall's "Composing the Island" both drew widespread condemnation due to the lack of women represented in respective (state-)authorized programmes. This condemnation subsequently resulted in the formation of #WakingTheFeminists and Composing the Feminists, two grassroots campaigns that sought to advance equality for women in Irish theatre and music (Blake Knox; Kelly). Ann C. Averill suggests that "[t]he official 2016 Centenary Programme was launched in November 2014 in an ill-prepared manner. It was incomplete, with elements of the programme not in place, and there were errors in the Irish-language version." (212) She further writes: "The response to the programme launch was negative due to the fact that the accompanying video, *Ireland Inspires*, in fact neglected to mention the Rising at all, instead focusing on more recent entities such as Google, Bono, and Queen Elizabeth II." (214) The prominent historian Diarmaid Ferriter later dismissed the video as "embarrassing, unhistorical shit" (Dolan). The video was subsequently withdrawn from circulation.

For the purposes of this essay, it is notable that the U2 frontperson Bono received more prominence in the launch of the centenary programme than the actual Rising. Nonetheless, it does underscore the use of Irish popular musicians as (state-) authorizing agents, employed to deflect attention away from undesired narratives. In relation to U2, no Irish popular music band are loved and loathed in equal measures.

The group not only attract open hostility, especially towards lead singer Bono, but also apparent slavish devotion (McLaughlin and McLoone 144). For many, U2's imposing presence in popular culture serves to position them as an "icon of popular music imperialism" (McLaughlin and McLoone 145), a point that not only explains why the inclusion of Bono in *Ireland Inspires* was so divisive, but also indicates popular music's problematic use in authorizing heritage or remembrance discourse. Popular music has the potential to articulate or erase unofficial/vernacular histories (Cohen et al. 6), and for this reason it can potentially act as "authorised heritage discourse" (Cohen et al. 1). Popular music is now embedded firmly in the cultural memory of the baby-boomer generation (Bennett 20), thus granting popular musicians a semblance of power in forming political and public opinion. This alignment with authorizing discourse, and specifically state-authorizing discourse, is of course counter to popular music's embedded (albeit often imagined) association with counterculture and activism. Nonetheless, in Ireland popular music has become a "flagship industry of new Ireland" (Smyth 4), a cultural force often utilized effectively in (state-)authorized heritage and remembrance discourse. The *Centenary* concert is an example of Irish popular music's use in (state-)authorizing remembrance, and the presentation of a "new" Ireland that exists 100 years after the Rising.

Centenary

Directed by Cillian Fennell, *Centenary* was an eighty-five-minute-long show, broadcast live from the Bord Gáis Energy Theatre in Dublin, that told the story of Ireland's centenary in eighteen chapters of song, dance, and poetry. These chapters have titles such as "Awakening", "Myths", "Protesting", "Turbulence", "Building", and "Emigration". In the "Programme Notes" for the show, Theo Dorgan writes:

> Tonight we follow the course of Ireland's story, out of the rich past of legend and myth, through a cultural and political awakening, and into a renewed sense of who we could be. The heroism of the Easter Rising, the difficulty of building the republic, and the struggles our parents endured so that we could have our freedom, are all acknowledged and remembered.

The chapters thus present a broad linear narrative of Ireland's "story", with the Rising and more broadly the revolutionary period forming a central part of it. In total six hundred performers and eighty crew members were involved in the production, which had a budget in excess of €2.5 million (Finn). The show was a musical and choreographic climax to Rising-related commemorative activities (Ní Fhuartháin 326), and featured performances by popular musicians Imelda May, Jack L, Gavin James, Conor O'Brien, Danny O'Reilly of the Coronas, and Aoife Scott. As well as the main venue, there were musical performances from the historically significant locations of Kilmainham Gaol and the Garden of Remembrance. Méabh Ní Fhuartháin notes that in *Centenary*, "music [is] deployed as a vehicle for national identity" (325). Thereby, alongside musicians from the classical and traditional scene, popular musicians were equally charged with utilizing music for nationalistic purposes.

In all, the reception of the show was favourable with Aoife Barry writing that "it was deemed a massive, goosebump-inducing success". Darragh McManus remarked that it was "a tremendously entertaining, and genuinely affecting, 90 minutes". Nonetheless, despite praise which situated *Centenary* as a major cultural event, or a "new *Riverdance*" (RTÉ Entertainment), the show was not without its flaws. As noted, the linear narrative of the event is broken into specific chapters. The transition between these chapters is however rather abrupt, with each performance failing to reflect in any detail on the events being commemorated. To elucidate, the fourth chapter "Protesting" is presented as a theatrical experience, with the musician Jack L positioned as a diegetic element within the action. In his performance of Thomas Moore's popular song "The Minstrel Boy", Jack L is choreographed to move in tandem with other actors. Hence, he is a featured character representing pre-Rising protestors. However, in the next chapter "Foggy Dew", the musician Gavin James is situated front and centre, with a barricade of frozen/still performers behind him. James is thus a non-diegetic presence, with the Rising and the on-stage characters serving as a frame to his performance. Crucially, in each chapter the popular musicians fail to reflect on the nationalist and socialist ideologies of the period being commemorated. Instead, their performances are included in each chapter to filter the events of the period through a contemporary lens. The chapters are thereby not solely concerned with presenting Ireland's "story", but with presenting a "new" Ireland that exists 100 years after the Rising. As noted, several chapters are also not live or onstage performances, with musical videos from Kilmainham Gaol and the Garden of Remembrance inserted into the concert. This is evident in the chapter "Captivity", a section of the programme that remembers the "rebel leaders [who] were brought to the grim stone gaol of Kilmainham to be tried" (Dorgan). Featured in the chapter are three songs, notably with siblings Danny O'Reilly of the Coronas and Roisin O, along with their cousin Aoife Scott, performing a rendition of "Grace" – Frank and Seán O'Meara's song about Grace Gifford-Plunkett. In this performance, the use of Kilmainham as a location enhances the ability of the performers to deliver an authorized account of the period. However, from a storytelling perspective the offstage insertions into the concert feel disjointed, presenting an overly vague interpretation of the socio-political situation that surrounded the Rising and its aftermath.

A more striking issue in terms of *Centenary*'s role in remembrance pertains to some of the songs chosen as part of this commemoration. In her appraisal of the concert, Ní Fhuartháin writes that Sibéal Ní Chasaide's performance of "Mise Éire" is significant in that the song "articulates Ireland past and present, or a broad aspiration of an Ireland, suitably vague, to which all listeners can belong" (328). With its association with Pádraig Pearse and Seán Ó Riada's iconic film score *Mise Éire* (1959), "Mise Éire" serves as a sonic cultural container that was sufficiently filled with meaning in the nation's consciousness (Ní Fhuartháin 331). As one of several Irish-language songs performed as part of *Centenary*, the inclusion of "Mise Éire" is non-contentious. However, its ability to act as a sonic cultural container for Ireland's broad

and vague aspirations is notable when considered alongside more contentious songs selected as part of this (state-)authorized remembrance. A specific song of note is "Bein' Green", which follows the chapter "It Wasn't Easy". "It Wasn't Easy" was a powerful montage of newsreel footage inserted into the concert that referenced everything from the Anne Lovett tragedy to the Catholic Church's silencing of child sex abuse. Rather jarringly, this is followed by Imelda May singing a cover of Kermit the Frog's song "Bein' Green". At best this rather unusual transition can be construed as a moment of light-hearted revery, included in the programme to ease tensions. But it can just as easily be viewed as an affront, with this (state-)authorized reflection on the Rising glossing over state negligence to deliver such a flippant refute as "It's not easy bein' green." The choice of May as a performer is also of note, given her music's reliance on retro culture, with all the implicit "nostalgic" narratives. Kelly Davidson writes that "May's celebrity is constructed through a series of 'nostalgic' narratives that serve to normalize Irish austerity as a cultural experience" (78). As a cultural text May evokes traces of an older Irish popular memory of radical collective activism against limiting economic opportunities, yet also speaks to the passive normalization of austerity as communal experience in a contemporary context (Davidson 90). For this reason, May has become an important cultural ambassador for austerity Ireland, a (state-)authorized voice often employed to mute radical collective activism. This does not suggest May's performance is disingenuous. Indeed, ahead of her performance, May – whose grandparents were involved in the Rising – commented:

> To commemorate [the Rising] with music, art and poetry across our country is very fitting considering that the Rising was led, not by traditional soldiers, but by poets and artists fighting with passion and pride. It is no accident that the emblem of our free country is a harp; a musical instrument. I think of that and those men and women every time I look at my passport […] with gratitude and pride. (RTÉ Entertainment)

The Rising is thus an important event in May's construct of her Irish identity. Nonetheless, her (state-)authorized version of "Bein' Green" clearly served to pacify public discord at a time when normalizing austerity measures coincided with remembrance of the Rising.

As a major flagship event of the centenary remembrance, *Centenary* deployed selected performances by Irish popular musicians as vehicles for national identity. The "new" Ireland they presented made little reference to the nationalist and socialist ideologies that animated the actions of those involved in Ireland's revolutionary period. Hence, as a (state-)authorized act of remembrance it was successful in celebrating selected achievements of the period, while also enforcing (state-)approved narratives intended to pacify public discord.

"Missing from the Record": Remembrance Activism

Áine Mangaoang et al. write: "Solo singer-songwriters who emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s are perhaps best summarised in the two Damiens: indie-rock singer

Damien Rice and Damien Dempsey, who fuses traditional Irish with politically conscious lyrics and reggae inflections" (8). Dempsey is one of Irish popular music's most significant protesting voices. According to Aileen Dillane et al., Dempsey's

> repertoire has consistently championed working-class values and spoken out on the issues that affect the vulnerable in society […] his life experiences and upbringing in Donaghmede have ultimately instilled in him a desire to question/ protest against (through his artistic endeavour) what he considers to be an unequal social and political order. (460)

This questioning nature has seen Dempsey challenge numerous socio-political injustices, with him a regular feature at various anti-austerity campaigns throughout his career. In terms of his re-interpretation of the Rising, in 2016 Dempsey released the album *No Force On Earth.* Of the album, Dempsey notes that he "needed to commemorate the centenary of the 1916 Irish Rising in some way, to help people remember and hopefully think about and discuss the Ireland envisioned by its brave assassinated leaders […] Their vision has yet to be realised" (Sleeve Notes). The album features tracks commemorating the centenary, such as the traditional song "James Connolly" which Dempsey regularly sang at water charges protests during that time. *No Force On Earth* also features "Aunt Jenny", a song written by Dempsey to honour his great aunt Jennie Shanahan who took part in the Rising. As evident in the lyrics, the song affirms Dempsey's personal *lived* connection to the Rising: "Aunt Jenny, your gallant bravery gives me strength in this crazy world […] thank you for your example against the tyrants of this world" ("Damien Dempsey – Aunt Jenny" 00:01:38-00:02:09). On its initial release, the album was only available to buy at live concerts with a limited production run of 2016 copies. In this way, a purchase of *No Force On Earth* was aligned with "positive fetishism" (Bartmanski and Woodward 168), or a heightened sense of value associated with the tangible album. Dempsey also performed tracks from *No Force On Earth* as part of the #Reclaim1916 concert, which was the final event of the Reclaim 1916 programme. Reclaim the Vision of 1916 was a civil society group of artists, academics, trade unionists, community activists, journalists and other interested citizens who believed Ireland can be reinvigorated by the ideals of those involved in the Rising (Hayes). Before his performance of "James Connolly", Dempsey affirmed the group's message while also stressing his own personal lived connection:

> *A Chairde*, I'm going to try and sing this without crying […]. 100 years ago the man in this song he handed all the women in Liberty Hall revolvers and my Aunt Jenny Shanahan was one of them […]. They went on to fight the mightiest empire the world had ever seen and we never saw James Connolly again […]. We can visualise his dream of a thirty-two-county socialist Republic and work towards it […] where all the children are cherished. ("#Reclaim1916 Damien Dempsey sings 'James Connolly'" 00:01:03-00:01:50)

Thus, Dempsey clearly desired that any commemoration of the Rising would be intrinsically in line with the ideals of the signatories of the Proclamation and in particular the socialist values associated with Connolly. Connolly was central to the decade of centenaries, but his celebration of disparaged ways of thinking and being

received no attention in the (state-)authorized programme of commemorations (Laird 46). Indeed, Heather Laird observes a particular caustic use of Connolly's image in a window display at the Dublin branch of the upmarket clothing chain Brown Thomas to commemorate the Rising, noting that it "is responsible for arguably the single most ironic image produced by Ireland's decade of centenaries thus far" (43). In framing Dempsey's re-interpretation of the Rising as counter to the (state-)authorized acts of remembrance, these acts serve as a form of remembrance activism. Thereupon, the re-interpretations become lived ideals employed by Dempsey to negotiate his response to Ireland's ongoing socio-political injustices.

Since their formation in 1992, Zrazy have been a public, and often solitary, lesbian voice in the Irish popular music scene (Hanlon 67). Consisting of two principal members Carole Nelson and Maria Walsh, Zrazy have throughout their career used their music for various activist purposes, especially in the areas of women's and LGBTQ+ rights. Ann-Marie Hanlon notes that "Zrazy are icons for many lesbians, particularly those who grew up in Ireland when gay male homosexuality was illegal, and queer sexual identities were often shrouded in shame and secrecy." (67) She further writes that the group "are visible as lesbian rather than queer women" (68). Zrazy are consequently public representations of the double-othering of Irish lesbians (Hanlon 68). In their music and activism, they not only challenge the demoted position of women by Ireland's patriarchal structures of power, but also give voice to the experiences of Irish lesbians. McDonagh writes that since the formation of the Free State, being a homosexual in Ireland constituted as "being criminal, sinful, promiscuous, effeminate, mentally unwell and un-Irish" (9). In Ireland, a public acknowledgment of one's homosexuality was then a challenge to the specific (often unspoken) meanings of what constituted "Irishness" (McDonagh 4). Zrazy thus present an "alternative formulation of Irish identity within popular music, one that reflects a lesbian feminist sensibility within the sphere of an Irish musical heritage" (Hanlon 72). The group's recordings, music videos, and live performances crucially situate the Irish lesbian experience alongside dominant heteronormative representations of Irish identity.

As with Dempsey, Zrazy's artistic endeavours often challenge what they consider to be Ireland's unequal social and political order. For that reason, Hanlon suggests that Zrazy must be considered "cultural workers" (67). As cultural workers, Zrazy released "Women of '16" to coincide with the centenary of the Rising. The track is a "polemical song that accuses historians of sexism in their treatment of women's role in Irish history" (Hanlon 75). Zrazy describe "Women of '16" as a radical re-write of the Irish National Anthem ("Amhrán na bhFiann"), an attempt to retrieve the activist women who were erased from the history books (Zrazy Music). Specifically, the song pays homage to the forgotten women of 1916, while also lamenting the lost socialist ideals of the Rising. The track begins: "Here we are again, 100 years later […] Full of ideals. In 1916, believing in equality, equality […] when the fight was over, and new men stepped in and pushed aside the ideals of 16" ("Women of 16' Anthem in GPO,

Dublin 2016" 00:00:47-00:02:17). "Women of '16" is then an act of remembrance activism, as it highlights the demotion of women and socialist ideology by patriarchal structures of power. As with Dempsey, a central figure in Zrazy's remembrance activism is Connolly: "the song's narrative laments the fact that James Connolly's ideal of all Irish citizens being equal was forgotten once the fight was over and that this inequality has passed into the Irish educational system" (Hanlon 75). Zrazy challenge this inequality by highlighting the actions of Cumann na mBan (the Irish Women's Association), the Irish republican women's paramilitary organisation that played a crucial role in the Rising. In their alternative national anthem, they name specific members of Cumann na mBan such as Rose McNamara, who they sing was "in command of the female detachment of twenty-one women in Marrowbone Lane Distillery" ("Women of 16' Anthem in GPO, Dublin 2016" 00:03:15-00:03:20). As with Dempsey's "Aunt Jenny", "Women of '16" thus highlights specific women who have been marginalized in (state-)authorized narratives of the Rising.

Zrazy's debut performance of "Women of '16" was in the symbolic setting of the General Post Office (GPO), a building in Dublin that served as the headquarters of the leaders of the Rising. The performance took place on International Women's Day 2016 (March 8) and featured Nelson and Walsh dressed in military uniforms similar to those worn by women involved in the Rising. In using the GPO as a location, Zrazy placed the Irish lesbian experience, an alternative formulation of Irish identity, at the centre of Irish nationalism. The performance is thus a further act of remembrance activism, as the duo not only challenge the accepted narrative of the Rising, but crucially raise the question what individuals and organisations are legitimate custodians of the Rising's legacy. The chorus of "Women of '16" repeats the line "Cumann na mBan missing from the record" ("Women of 16' Anthem in GPO, Dublin 2016" 00:03: 28-00:03:36). As with Dempsey, Zrazy challenge the official remembrance of the Rising by highlighting salient people that were not acknowledged. As cultural workers in use of their artistic endeavours, Dempsey, Nelson, and Walsh responded to the (state-)authorized commemoration of the Rising with remembrance activism.

Conclusion

Commemoration is part of what defines a nation and its configuration. The considerable investment of the Irish state during 2016 in commemorating the Rising highlights the importance of commemoration in both defining and affirming the state itself and the role these organisations play in it. These acts of commemoration are subsequently rife with contradictions, unresolved tensions, and paradoxes (Crosson 41). In relation to Irish popular music, it is certain that any engagement with a commemoration of the Rising needed to navigate the problematic politics of remembrance.

As evident in the Irish popular musicians involved in *Centenary,* as well as with Damien Dempsey and Zrazy, the Rising's commemoration defines and affirms the state along conflicting lines. In the (state-)authorized *Centenary*, Irish popular musi-

cians are deployed as vehicles for national identity. The performances of Jack L, James, and May discussed in this essay made little reference to the nationalist and socialist ideologies that animated the actions of those involved in Ireland's revolutionary period. Thus, *Centenary* successfully celebrated specific achievements, yet also enforced (state-) approved narratives intended to pacify public discord. For Dempsey and Zrazy, the Rising is reinterpreted as a means of remembrance activism. As cultural workers, Dempsey, Nelson, and Walsh used their artistic endeavours to highlight those missing from the official accounts of the Rising. In doing so, they challenged (state-)authorized discourses surrounding the Rising, while also locating marginalized narrators of the Irish experience as pertinent custodians of some of the ideologies of Ireland's revolutionary period. Ultimately, the Irish popular musicians discussed in the essay each reinterpreted the Rising along different and often conflicting lines of execution. Yet, these re-interpretations show that Irish popular musicians offered illuminating insight into commemorating the (popular) centenary of Ireland's 1916 Easter Rising.

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