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# Ireland (Éire)

## ABSTRACT

*An overview of hip hop's historical emergence and contemporary performance cultures in Ireland with a focus on hip hop music and politics.*

Ireland is a country with a rich history of anti-colonial struggle and diasporic consciousness. It is also a nation in which music and poetry figure prominently in constructions of national identity. The national symbol, for instance, is the *cláirseach* ('Celtic harp') – icon of the ancient bards, the epic storytellers. For these reasons – and an undisputable love of 'having the *craic*' (Irish for 'fun') – hip hop was quickly localized as a cultural and political expression by Irish people, both in Ireland and in diaspora. Before the rise of hip hop, roots reggae and dancehall had a strong influence in Ireland having been introduced to the port cities of Cork, Belfast and Dublin by Caribbean sailors in the 1960s and 1970s. Hip hop music – the focus of this article – and its culture arrived in the early 1980s via personal diasporic links with US cities, the circulation of mixtapes and LPs, and the early cinematic explorations of the culture captured in *Wild Style* and *Beat Street*. By the early 1990s thriving scenes had formed in Cork, Belfast, Dublin, Limerick, Galway, Derry and the island's other urban centres.

The groundbreaking Irish hip hop crews ScaryÉire (formed in Dublin in 1990) and Marxman (formed in London in 1989) used the music to voice revolutionary critiques that focused on social and economic problems like substance abuse, income inequality and the sectarian violence resulting from

## KEYWORDS

Ireland  
hip hop  
Irish traditional music  
Black music  
postcolonialism  
epic poetry  
marxism  
diaspora  
tradtablism

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## STEVIE G'S IRISH HIP HOP SNAPSHOT

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7dvoeggKQbnWOXFORwnRsFz?si=jRm0iqreRuOB1gRbBSExA&nd=1>

## TOP IRISH HIP HOP INNOVATIONS

- Celtic funk
- Irish (Gaelic) language hip hop
- Tradtablism (a fusion of Irish traditional music and hip hop turntablism)
- *Bodhrán* Beats (pronounced 'bough-ron')

## BEST IRISH LINGO

- *Craic* ('fun', 'good time') (pronounced 'crack')
- *Biy* ('boy', 'bwoy', 'homie', 'mate', 'buddy') (pronounced 'baiy')
- *Gaff* ('crib', 'pad', 'apartment')
- *Sláinte* ('cheers', 'to your health') (pronounced 'slon-chuh')

## WEB RESOURCES

- <http://irishhiphop.com/>. Accessed 20 November 2022.
- <http://www.rapireland.com/>. Accessed 20 November 2022.
- <http://state.ie/features/beans-bodhrans-and-bloody-mayhem-the-story-of-scary-eire>. Accessed 20 November 2022.

the continuing British occupation of Northern Ireland – known euphemistically across the island as The Troubles. The most influential Irish hip hop group to this day, ScaryÉire used a mix of revolutionary lyrics and street reporting set to the soundtrack of Irish traditional music and Black Atlantic sounds, inventing their signature genre of 'Celtic funk'. Indeed, the crew's name is a play on the Irish (Gaelic) word for Ireland, *Éire*, linking this linguistic heritage and cultural pride with the perceived 'scary' anti-colonial threat that might come with the rising of such 'Knowledge of Self' (KoS).

The article 'ScaryÉire: Live in Barnstormers' from the February 1994 issue of *Hip Hop Connection*, captures the ethos, style and sound of this groundbreaking Irish rap crew at a 1990s Dublin hip hop show.

[T]he audience fills and gathers around the small two foot stage, simply adorned with a pair of decks and two mics [...]. They're an odd looking bunch – half street urchin, half b-boy – you wouldn't guess they were Ireland's premier rap crew if you passed them in the street.

It's a different story when they finally emerge on stage. They stride on like they own the place, deejays Mek and Dada Sloosh dropping immaculately clipped beats as rappers Rí-Rá and Mr. Browne get physical on the frontline. Rí-Rá has an engaging delivery. There's little recourse to accepted rap stylings, just full-on, hard rhyming in an accent as thick as the local Guinness. And what rhymes. There's an underlying aura of malcontent to ScaryÉire's material. It's more than evident in the ska-infused 'Truncheon Song', another take on the old rap staple of police brutality.

(Cowan 1994: 12)

As frontman RíRá recalls, the scene was a diverse and positive one: 'There were punks, bikers, b-boys, ska heads, fuckin' all sorts. Those gigs were like a release for everyone in there, the band, the crowd, the bouncers. But through all the madness. [...] It was always positive and well meaning' (Worrall 2008: 44).

Together, Rí-Rá's lyrical explorations of KoS and DJ Mek's Celtic funk sound had a profound effect on the Irish hip hop that would follow. As Galway's DJ Hazo put it:

The thing with ScaryÉire was that in the '80s, trad groups had tried to mess around with Black music and it didn't work, whereas here you had these gigs where Mek would start playing alongside a *bodhrán* (traditional Irish frame drum) and a flute and it wasn't gimmicky. It was of its time certainly. House of Pain was gimmicky: this wasn't.

(Worrall 2008: 46)

The reference to the noted Irish-American crew House of Pain is a common, but problematic one in discussions of Irish hip hop. While the Los Angeles crew did achieve some success in Ireland with their 1992 hit, 'Jump Around', reaching number six on the Irish charts, their music and videos portrayed a stereotyped version of Irish people, and thus may have painted Irish hip hop into a corner just as it was developing a voice of its own.

The most important diasporic Irish crew of the early years was a multiracial quartet with roots stretching from Jamaica to Dublin – the militant socialist

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Figure 1: Newspaper advert for an early 1990s ScaryÉire show (featuring the group's 'scary' name rendered as a Kalashnikov assault rifle). Reproduced by kind permission of the artists.

hip hop collective, Marxman. On their 1994 track, 'Ship Ahoy' – featuring a hook by a new superstar named Sinéad O'Connor – the Black Bristolian, Phrase D, and the Dublin-born Londoner, MC Hollis, rap about 'mind-forged' manacles, connecting African colonization and the transatlantic slave trade to Ireland's history of colonization, famine and forced dispersion as well as contemporary forms of religious, economic and political oppression. With the lyrics: 'Think you're not a slave, 'cause no whip marks your back / Now a bureaucrat wields the nine tails of the cat' and 'Search and look around, my birthplace is torn / But England has fallen, dusk negates dawn' they connect Ireland's particular colonial history to global histories of slavery and oppression. Ironically, their militancy earned them the twin honours of being banned by the BBC (for perceived IRA sympathies) and also featured on the BBC's flagship programme, *Top of the Pops* (for their groundbreaking domestic abuse track 'All about Eve').

Like ScaryÉire – and so much Irish hip hop over the past quarter century – Marxman employed both poetic and musical devices steeped in Black Atlantic culture as well as Irish culture and tradition, using the Indigenous sounds of the *bodhrán* ('frame drum') and tin whistle to craft a uniquely Irish hip hop. Indeed, the group's producer Oisín Lunny is the son of legendary Irish traditional musician Donal Lunny. While Marxman's lyrics and music were steeped in Irishness and although the group performed with ScaryÉire and toured with U2, the seminal group nonetheless had a complicated relationship with the label 'Irish hip hop'. In a 2015 interview, Lunny was asked about this point: 'It's very interesting to see two Englishmen of Jamaican heritage and two Irish lads joining efforts through hip hop. How did people react to that back then?'. Lunny replied:

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Good question. The political direction of the band came from the MCs Hollis and Phrase. Hollis had been very active as a teen (as an Irish lad in London), while Phrase grew up near the 'front line' in St. Paul's, Bristol. Both had seen a lot of social injustice first hand and were determined to make music that had a social impact.

(Murcia 2015: n.pag.)

The fact that both MCs had English accents complicated Marxman's relationship with their Irish fan base, despite their cultivation of insightful Irish KoS messages and trad-influenced beats. Lunny explains: 'Marxman were indeed never completely aligned with the "scenes" we were associated with, we did our own thing. Our identity was a reflection of the political and musical influences of the band' (Murcia 2015: n.pag.).

As in the United Kingdom, the commercial potential of hip hop in Ireland is limited by its competition with the exponentially larger number of English-speaking artists from the United States and their special relationship to hip hop art and culture. That said, the Irish hip hop landscape is rich and diverse, ranging from leftist militancy and Celtic mysticism to introverted psychological expressions, tales from the rugged street and the witty *craic* (pronounced: 'crack') of their storytelling forebears, the *seanchaí* ('storytellers').

Lethal Dialect is a mainstay of the Irish hip hop scene and is one of many who is carrying the torch of ScaryÉire, Marxman and the Celtic funk ethos. In 2015, he was tapped to create a track and video in support of Dublin's bid for European Capital of Culture in anticipation of the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising – the rebellion that sparked the Irish Revolution. The resultant track, titled 'New Dublin Saunter', takes its name from an old Dublin folk song and weaves a poetic ode to the city, asking 'why our own people hate to hear our own accent' when 'you've the same voice as James Joyce a WB Yeats on beat breaks' (Lethal Dialect 2015). Importantly, these stunningly ill KoS lines highlight two Irish greats of world literature that continue to inspire today's urban poets despite the 'inferiority complex or malignant shame' of 'an oppressed people treated inhumane' (Lethal Dialect 2015). Indeed, politically and historically oriented contemporary artists like Melodica Deathship and Cork's Spekulative Fiktion are also furthering the work of Urban Intelligence, a Ballymun crew featuring a brilliant young MC called Lunatic, who died in 2009 (Rollefson 2020). In a similar vein, the Dublin artist, Kojaque, has drawn media attention to the forgotten generation of youth affected by Ireland's post-'Celtic Tiger' austerity era.

Recent years have witnessed the breakout success of a number of Irish hip hop artists of African descent. The earliest standout among Black Irish MCs was Rejjie Snow who, though he sports an MF Doom tattoo, is more often compared to Tyler, The Creator because of his stream of consciousness flow, iconoclastic imagery and fresh, minimalist beats. In the 2010s, Limerick's Rusangano Family epitomized the best of an emergent polycultural Ireland, featuring the MCs God Knows and MuRli (of Zimbabwean and Togolese descent, respectively) and their ethnically Irish DJ and producer, MyNameisJohn. The crew holds bragging rights as the first Choice Music Prize nominees to bring home the hardware for Irish Album of the Year as hip hop artists with songs steeped in hip hop wisdom and KoS introspection on their *Let the Dead Bury the Dead* (2016).

Today, Ireland's most critically acclaimed rapper is, without a doubt, the Zambian-Irish MC, Denise Chaila, whose brilliant wordplay and socially

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Figure 2: Video still of 'Anseo' (Irish: 'here') featuring Denise Chaila playing with images of Irishness on the West coast of Ireland.

conscious intersectional critique offers a welcome update to what 'Irish hip hop' means in the twenty-first century. Her close collaborations with MuRli and GodKnows – as well as artists from their local Limerick Px crew of Hazy Haze, Strange Boy, DJ Replay and others – has pushed Irish hip hop to address pressing questions about race, class and cultural belonging. In particular, tracks like Chaila's 'Anseo' (Irish: 'here', 'present') have started conversations about racism in Ireland – highlighting the state-sponsored mistreatment of Black and Brown asylum seekers in the country and opening Irish minds to the possibility that they might be complicit in oppression, despite their own histories of subjugation and colonization. By unflinchingly flipping the script on *anseo* – the first word you learn in an Irish classroom – Chaila gains local voice and stakes her immigrant claim to the nation.

If Rejjie Snow is an Irish Tyler, then Sons Phonetic are Waterford's Wu Tang Clan – a crew that has been consistently making solid underground boom bap music over the years. Rob Kelly is Ireland's best-known hardcore rapper, drawing on his knowledge of boxing to shape his hard knock rhymes about street life and organized crime. There have been crossover successes from the likes of Dublin's Collie and viral hits from Cork's GMC, an established MC and producer who has been integral in developing the next generation of young artists though his acclaimed GMC Beats and Kabin Studio workshops. One of the most interesting and gifted MCs to come out of Ireland in the last fifteen years is Temper-Mental MissElayneous, a Dublin MC whose unique mix of working-class feminism and Celtic mythology has shed new light on age-old social problems.

Ophelia is another mainstay of Irish hip hop's politically conscious legacy, serving as the backbone of the nation's freestyle cipher scene with soulful verses in English and *seanfhocal* (Irish: 'proverb') laced Irish lyrics steeped in a pre-Christian and nature-centred mythos. Indeed, recent years have seen the first mainstream success for Irish-language rap with the rise of Kneecap, a West Belfast trio that takes its name 'from a form of torture that republican paramilitary groups would inflict on those they accused of drug dealing'



Figure 3: Video still of Temper-Mental MissElayneous performing her 'Cailín Rua' ('The Red-Haired Girl'), based on an Irish folk tune, with bodhrán in hand.

and offers a refreshingly playful take on the Gordian knot that is The Troubles (Mullaly 2022: n.pag.).

There are contemporary artists who create lyrically nuanced and sonically incisive hip hop tracks exploring the grey areas of socio-politics on the divided island, from Cork's Good Vibe Society in the South to the Belfast-born MC, Jun Tzu from the 'six counties' of Northern Ireland. MC Brosy of GVS explains his desire to explore the history of colonization on the island without the "'up the Ra!" type lyrics' of Irish nationalists and their paramilitary Irish Revolutionary Army (IRA) while Jun Tzu raps about his own personal no-man's land as the son of an Ulster Unionist paramilitary father who feels neither British nor Irish and lives in exile in Manchester (United Kingdom) to avoid The Troubles.

In recent years the drill scene has exploded in Ireland and many of the most successful artists have come from smaller towns and areas outside traditional rap strongholds. As just one example, Offica and the A92 collective from Drogheda recently played the main stage of Longitude, Ireland's foremost festival for hip hop. Sello, a Dubliner from Clondalkin pioneering a unique brand of Gaelic drill, is another artist doing big things. His style is very much a mixture of traditional Irish sonics combined with street edged hard hitting rhymes in his thick Dublin accent.

There have been some novelty hits too, most notably from the likes of the award-winning duo known as The Rubberbandits – the silver-tongued hip hop satirists from Limerick known for concealing their identities with plastic bags. The duo made headlines with their unlikely 2010 hit, 'Horse Outside' – a rollicking homage to a working-class segment of their 'hood that holds fast to the tradition of riding horses around Limerick instead of cars, despite the city having grown into Ireland's fourth largest metropolitan area. One half of The Rubberbandits, known as Blindboy, has gone on to an international career spanning critically acclaimed books of fiction and BBC documentaries on the back of his internationally popular, *The Blindboy Podcast*.

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Ireland also boasts thriving scenes across the elements, with active graff and breaking crews like Cork's Trouble Club writers and Limerick's Limerockers and Recession Squad Ninjas crews, featuring Ireland's finest breaker, the internationally acclaimed dancer, Tobi Omoteso. Further, Ireland has a thriving turntablism scene featuring the likes of DJs including Mek, Jus'Me, Danny Deepo, Mikey Fingers, Deviant, Naïve Ted, Jimmy Penguin and others. Indeed, together, Deepo, Fingers and Deviant, pioneered a fusion of Irish traditional music and hip hop turntablism known as 'Tradtablism' in this close-knit performance community. Each year the turntablism scene converges on Galway's annual Community Skratch Games, now in its seventeenth year.

While there is currently little space for hip hop stardom within the strictures of the Irish mediascape, hip hop remains a vibrant and diverse art form in Ireland. From politically conscious underground crews to locally committed hip hop activists conducting popular workshops, from MCs and DJs having the *craic* in small pub sessions to cutting edge artists pushing the future of the form and catching the imagination of the nation, hip hop is alive and well in Ireland. Indeed, the lid might be coming off the nationally bound scene as artists like Denise Chaila take on collaborations with Ed Sheeran and Kneecap's swaggering political critique captures the global anti-colonial imagination. To be sure, hip hop is playing an increasingly important cultural, social and political role as the nation commemorates its 'Decade of Centenaries' and celebrates 100 years of independence. Here's to the next 100. *Sláinte!*

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Stephen Grainger is an Irish DJ who works at Cork's RedFM and features regularly at music and arts festivals throughout the country. He is one of Ireland's best known DJs and has pioneered the spread of hip hop, soul and afrobeats in the country. Stevie is also a community activist who has worked at the Cork Migrant Centre in Nano Nagle Place, spearheading a number of music and arts projects with migrant teenagers from Direct Provision and the greater migrant community of Cork. He currently runs the New School, promoting new music talent, and Everybody Dance, a platform that aims to promote more inclusivity in the music scene for people with special needs and intellectual abilities. On RedFM, his *Black on Red* show has won best weekly music radio show at the nation's annual PPI awards and he has created documentaries on a number of musical figures, including Marvin Gaye, Aretha Franklin and A Tribe Called Quest. Stevie's weekly music column in the *Echolive* has run since 2003. He currently teaches music to young people with a number of different projects including Foróige, Cork ETB and Sample Studios.

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