

1972: The Year in Song.

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1972 was the most violent year of the Northern Ireland Troubles (1969-1998) with 467 deaths recorded from causes directly related to the conflict. (Cain archive) It was also the high water mark of engagement by public opinion in the Republic of Ireland with the cause of nationalists north of the border. (Hanley, 2018: pp.23-42)

This was reflected in popular music: the year began with Barleycorn's 'The Men Behind the Wire' at number one in the Irish charts (*New Spotlight*: January 1972) to be replaced, two weeks after Bloody Sunday, (30th January 1972) with Paul McCartney and Wings' 'Give Ireland Back to the Irish'. While the song did not explicitly mention events in Derry, a full page ad in *New Spotlight* magazine for the record showed 13 (the then known number of casualties) crosses inside 13 shamrocks in a triangular formation and the name of the band on a black background. (NS: February 1972) These are by far the best known songs related to the Troubles from that year, but there were many others: a proto-Band Aid type benefit record, featuring many top 'showband' stars, called 'Freedom, Peace and Unity' was released, with proceeds directed to displaced families. (Ibid.) Alongside this, and other 'ecumenical' records, there were many songs in the 'rebel' tradition, explicitly sympathetic to one or both wings of the IRA, and celebrating, sometimes in comic form, exploits such as the escape from Crumlin road jail of the 'Crumlin Kangaroos' ('Over the Wall' by Wolfhound, which reached # 8 on the *New Spotlight* Chart in July of 1972)

Taken together, songs about the northern conflict formed a significant segment of Irish chart music that year. By the following year, this tide had all but receded. In this paper, using media sources from the time, I look at how such songs were received and what political 'message' was taken from this brief flood: did such songs reinforce traditional nationalism or advance understanding of events north of the border? And did the almost total disappearance of such songs from the Irish charts in the years to come – with a few exceptions, usually by the Wolfe Tones – reflect the disengagement of opinion in the Republic, or did the a perceived mismatch between the rhetoric of the rebel song and the TV images from the streets of Belfast and Derry hasten that disengagement?

References:

Cain Archive – Conflict and Politics in Northern Ireland, hosted by the University of Ulster

<https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/sutton/>

Brian Hanley – *The Impact of the Troubles on the Republic of Ireland, 1968-79* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2018)

New Spotlight magazine (Dublin: Creation Group. monthly, then bi-weekly, 1966 -1975)

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