

“THAT’S A LOYALIST TUNE!” THE ENACTION OF IDENTITY IN INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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In Northern Ireland, marching bands are central to the political culture of British loyalism. There are over 600 such bands in the six counties of Northern Ireland and they participate in an intensive calendar of parades during the summer and concerts and contests during the winter which are central to social life in working-class loyalist neighbourhoods. A small percentage of the repertoire of these bands is derived from Orange songs dating to the 18th or 19th centuries, whilst another tranche of tunes are based on paramilitary songs mostly composed during the 1970s. It is these “singalong” tunes which most frequently attract media attention as well as allegations of “sectarianism” from political opponents of loyalism. Yet the vast majority of loyalist repertoires, including a number of the tunes regarded as most iconically and identifiably “loyalist”, consist of instrumental tunes with no lyrics whatsoever. Moreover, many of these tunes derive from precisely the same instrumental tradition as “Irish traditional music”, a genre which has played a significant role in the construction of Irish nationalist identities in opposition to loyalism. Furthermore, recent generations of loyalists have never learned the lyrics of most traditional Orange songs, which are widely seen as old-fashioned and anachronistic in today’s world. Consequently, it is as common to hear loyalist crowds lilting in support of bands as it is to hear them singing along to tunes.

This paper examines the historical processes by which certain instrumental tunes have come to be conceived, by both loyalists and others, as being distinctively “loyalist”, making them a basis for mutual recognition, solidarity or exclusion, whilst other tunes are understood as part of “shared cultures” which can be viewed in the broader contexts of both Britishness and Irishness.

BIOGRAPHY

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Gordon Ramsey became an anthropologist and ethnomusicologist after a varied career ranging from soldier to motorcycle mechanic and tourist guide. After completing a BA at Queen’s University he earned a PhD at Queen’s based on research into loyalist marching bands in Northern Ireland, completed in 2009. Since then, Ramsey has been teaching anthropology and ethnomusicology at Queen’s, also spending time during 2019 as a visiting lecturer in the Minzu University of China. His research has focused primarily upon traditional musics in Northern Ireland with a theoretical focus on the intersections of social class and ethnic identities in capitalist societies. He has published extensively on these and other topics and his monograph, *Music, Emotion and Identity in Ulster Marching Bands* was released in 2011. He is an active community musician playing in marching bands and traditional sessions.

