

Review: *Trouble Songs: Music and Conflict in Northern Ireland*

Stuart Baile

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Stuart Baile's *Trouble Songs: Music and Conflict in Northern Ireland* was published with limited financial backing by the British Council Northern Ireland, Eastside Arts and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, but interestingly additional funding was also achieved via a successful Kickstarter campaign. With 227 individual backers collectively contributing, in his appeal for Kickstarter backers, Baile writes, "This is a call to my community to help carry a vital story" (Kickstarter 2018), and in a way it is this sense of community that permeates much of this enjoyable and indeed vital book. Baile, as a long-established authority on Northern Ireland's music scenes, based upon decades of music journalism and broadcasting, utilises over sixty interviews with Bono, Christy Moore, the Undertones, Stiff Little Fingers, Terri Hooley, Dolores O'Riordan and the Miami Showband survivors among others, to produce a work that is both a communitive reflection on the part of the musicians involved, but equally on the part of those who experienced the Troubles. Central throughout is the role of songs.

Trouble Songs consists of an introduction and twenty-two chapters which focus on the music and musicians connected with the conflict in Northern Ireland since 1968 in closely chronological order (5). Chapter One, "Take a Look Where You're Living", acts as a framing chapter that explores the rather lofty premise that lives were saved in Northern Ireland as a consequence of music, or as Baile notes, "it's fair to suggest that scores of people in Northern Ireland owe their lives to a bunch of scratchy, shouty tunes" (9). A grand claim, but one that is demonstrated as possibly true as the book progresses. Significantly, Baile juxtaposes such claims by noting that music during and after the conflict was also used "to celebrate killings and endorse sectarian acts" (6).

The second chapter, "We are Not Afraid", looks at particular songs such as "We shall overcome", "I shall not be moved" and "The Internationale" and how they were used by groups like The Derry Housing Action Committee to position the social injustices endemic in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s, alongside other global social injustices. Through illuminating interviews with Bernadette Devlin, Eamonn McCann, Anne Devlin and others, Baile tracks the use of established protest songs by organisations growing increasingly aware of the importance of television to highlight political messages; as noted by Bernadette Devlin "By such seeming osmosis did television help transmit the radical contagion from place to place" (18). The chapter looks also at events such as the Long March of '69 and the establishment of Free Derry Radio offering a fascinating insight into a period McCann notes was transitional with the use of "We Shall Overcome" switching to "Soldier's Song", "Kevin Barry" and other rebel songs (28) indicative of violent elements coming to fore in Northern Ireland. Yet another chapter, "A Million Miles", is primarily focused on the Miami Showband massacre of 31 July 1975, drawing upon interviews with survivors Des Lee and Stephen Travers to examine the tragic events themselves but also the impact on other touring bands of the period. The chapter not only provides a harrowing image of the event itself, and the possible collusion of Captain Robert Nairac, but also importantly raises the impact of attendant trauma on Travers and countless others suffering in post-conflict environments (89-90).

The middle chapters of *Trouble Songs* look at the much-heralded punk rock scene active in Northern Ireland throughout the conflict with focus on groups such as The Clash, Stiff Little Fingers, The Undertones and The Outcasts. During these well-constructed chapters, Baile's

passion and knowledge comes to the fore with the reader given an insight into the significance of the punk scene, its spiritual home at the Harp Bar and the contribution of Terri Hooley and Good Vibrations. Within these chapters, Baile and his interviewees are forthcoming in indicating the social significance of the punk scene to young people in Northern Ireland. Equally, these contributions seek to challenge what Brian Young of the band Rubi regards as the “homogenised happy-clappy version of Northern Ireland punk music” (125), revealing overtly sectarian groups like Offensive Weapon, whose bass player was prominent Loyalist paramilitary Johnny Adair (179), and the dangers of sexual violence experienced by female punks. This noted, these chapters on Northern Ireland’s punk rock are amongst *Trouble Songs* best, elevating the book as a result.

Christy Moore’s relationship with the Northern Ireland conflict is explored in “A Rebel I Came”, using interviews with Moore to offer new insights into his perceived “rebel” persona and his association with nationalist political and sectarian groups. In another chapter, “We’ve got to Carry Each Other”, interviews with Bono, the Edge and Quintin Oliver of the Yes campaign for the Good Friday Agreement, looks at the fascinating use of the “Third Sector” removed from political and parliamentary interference to impact the Good Friday Agreement referendum in 1998. Of note is Bono’s description of “stage-managing” his encounter with David Trimble and John Hume at the Waterfront Hall, Belfast, on 19 May 1998 (232-234). All in all, this chapter is another highlight, offering a well balanced account of the use of music by the Yes campaign. *Trouble Songs* also include chapters that explore music by Juke Boy Bonner, John Lennon, Paul McCarthy, Sinéad O’Connor, Elvis Costello, and The Cranberries and their respective relationship with the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Stuart Baile’s *Trouble Songs* is a well-crafted, enjoyable, well-researched read, and a vital contribution to Popular Music Studies, Irish Studies and most importantly, Northern Irish Studies, that explores and expands our understanding of the role and importance of music in Northern Ireland’s most troubling of times.

Michael Lydon
NUI Galway

References

Kickstarter (2009) “Trouble Songs: a book about music and conflict in N. Ireland”. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1539271725/trouble-songs-a-book-about-music-and-conflict-in-n>