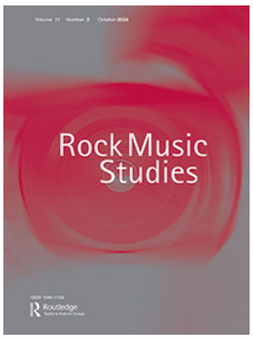

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From Celtic Rock Heyday to "Extended Family": Changing Legacies and Identities for Horslips and Their Fans

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ABSTRACT

This article interprets the legacy of Horslips in a review of key periods of the Irish rock band's activity and reception from the 1970s to the early 2020s. These comprise the band's heyday in the 1970s, their relative obscurity in the 1980s and '90s, two reunions as a live act in the early twenty-first century, and more recent fan-organized events. In tandem with an appraisal of the band's career and broader artistic contribution, the article examines interrelated constructions of cultural memory and heritage on the part of musicians, cultural commentators, aficionados, and fans. It finds a range of associated identities and legacies that differ according to media-driven or community-oriented initiatives and to changing experiences and perspectives over time.

KEYWORDS

Horslips; Celtic rock; fans; rock music legacies; collective identities; cultural heritage

Introduction

Horslips emerged in Dublin in 1970 and by 1972 became consolidated as a five-piece act comprising Eamon Carr (drums, bodhrán), Barry Devlin (bass, vocals), Johnny Fean (lead guitar, tenor banjo, vocals), Jim Lockhart (keyboards, wooden flute, tin whistle, pipes), and Charles O'Connor (fiddle, mandolin, guitars, concertina, vocals). Notwithstanding the outfit's Dublin origins and base, band members came from diverse backgrounds and geographical locations across the island of Ireland (and in O'Connor's case, England), with a range of prior—and subsequent—interests in music, media, and arts. Until their disbandment in 1980, they were highly active in Ireland (including Northern Ireland), carried out several tours in Europe, North America, and Britain, produced 12 albums on their Dublin-based Oats label, including one double album, and had numerous national and international media appearances.

Horslips' visibility and audibility waned considerably between 1980 and 2004, although their unique blend of rock, pop art, and Irish-Celtic cultural influences continued to have a presence in various national events over this period. Mostly, though, it was through Horslips' staunchly loyal fan base that their legacy was maintained, with two comeback periods (2004–2006 and 2009–2019) closely connected to that local base. From

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2018 several band members participated in an annual "Horslips Con" event during which the lines between original artists, tribute acts, and fans were blurred.

Horslips are credited with establishing the relatively distinct genre of Celtic rock (Prendergast, 79)—however problematic the apposition of Celtic might be for contemporary Irish musicians (O'Flynn, "Kalfou Danjere?"). There were two important contexts behind this development in Irish popular music history. The first was domestic musicians' involvement in a transnational "folk into rock" movement from the 1960s, particularly through the output of Sweeney's Men (Harper and Hodgett, 11–33). In the early 1970s, comparisons were drawn between Horslips and English groups Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span (Smyth 43) and with Breton and Iberian groups, including, respectively, Malicorne and Doa (García Salueña, 60). The second context was the flourishing of guitar-based blues rock among Irish bands from 1967 to the mid-1970s. This included such notable figures as Rory Gallagher, Phil Lynott/Thin Lizzy, and Van Morrison, in what has been interpreted as Irish rock's "first wave" (Cullen).

Within their creative milieu, Horslips merged Irish traditional and progressive and hard rock idioms. They referenced local place names and drew on ancient Gaelic mythology as well as Irish-language literature for their concept albums, sometimes combining these with ideas from American popular culture (Murphy, 134). They were arguably the first group in Ireland to invest creative energy in visual aspects of popular music performance, combining glam rock, popular culture, and pseudo-Celtic aesthetics in costuming, record sleeves, and other paraphernalia (McCormack and Swan, 69–73). This approach would have been quite provocative given their inclusion of traditional music sources that, at the time, were associated with conservative values and presentation modes (Murphy, 140; O'Connor, 124).

As well as developing a unique compositional approach to Irish rock hybridity, the band's theatricality and self-styled sex appeal and gesture—including moments of camp—introduced a live music performance style hitherto denied to Irish audiences. It was through these innovations and in specific (domestic) contexts that they negotiated what Auslander (9–11) interprets as a dialectical relationship between countercultural and post-countercultural aspects of rock politics and aesthetics at the time.

Commercially, Horslips was the only successful local band in the 1970s to base most aspects of its production in Dublin. This included founding and managing their profitable label, Oats with manager Michael Deeney. In this, the band interrupted a center-periphery hierarchy that dominated popular music production at that time, whereby the most high-profile Irish acts based their recording activities in London (O'Flynn, "Heard").

This article first interprets the original legacy of Horslips. It draws on *Horslips, Tall Tales*, the band's "official biography" from 2013 (Cunningham) that includes memoirs of band members, aficionados, and fans. Regarding "biography as just one element within a particular cultural field where meaning is negotiated and the collective memory constructed" (Strachan, 74), the article further consults a range of other print and media sources, including positions that challenge dominant narratives (some of which appear in the band's biography).

Other themes explored include the changing and primarily aging fan base for Horslips for over five decades and the band's reach across both political jurisdictions on the island. The article contemplates fan loyalty based on memories of gigs and recordings from 1972

to 1980, wider imaginings of Irish-Celtic rock symbolism that later became established, and new readings of their musical and broader cultural impact following two reunion periods in the early twenty-first century. It details how band reunions were accompanied by, if not stimulated by, various heritage initiatives and by get-togethers of fans and former band members at retrospective events. The conclusion appraises the band's legacy and associated collective identities a half-century after their heyday.

Origins, Inventions, Fusions

Reflecting how the band's name emerged—collapsing the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse into a single word after founding band members shared a couple of drinks—Horslips was partly the result of an early invention in Irish media history. Its original lineup included Dublin-based musicians from a variety of folk, beat, and rock backgrounds, several of whom worked in the city's advertising industry. Although their first gig planned for late 1970 was ultimately cancelled, in 1971 this "unknown group" was invited to appear as the featured live act for *Fonn*, a six-part music series broadcast by Teilifís Éireann, later renamed RTÉ 1 (see "RTÉ Series"). Notwithstanding the production's inclusion of established domestic genres (solo performers on traditional instruments or "Irish" repertoire performed by classical musicians), the dual meanings and ambiguity of its Irish-language title *Fonn* (tune or desire) suggested a self-conscious move by the national broadcaster to reflect a growing countercultural presence in Irish urban centers and its potential appeal for younger media audiences. For Horslips, it brought about national exposure prior to their meteoric rise later in 1971 that included a run of live gigs, an appearance at Sligo Sounds/Whit Weekend Festival alongside Fairport Convention, and the band's first studio recording experiences.

Their début single recording in 1972, an electric rendition of an Irish reel titled "Johnny's Wedding" was followed later that year by the release of their first album *Happy to Meet, Sorry to Part*, recorded by way of the Rolling Stones' mobile studio. This arguably represented a defining moment for Irish popular music, a successful fusion of styles characterized as the "invention" of Celtic rock, if regarded in less credible terms by aficionados of traditional music (McLaughlin and McLoone, 190; O'Connor, 124). Just as significant were the band's wider interests in Irish mythology, literature, and art—including the album's memorable concertina-like cover by Charles O'Connor, a qualified graphic designer. This broader cultural engagement accorded with a Zeitgeist that embraced contemporary re-imaginings of Celticity and with a new type of national consciousness that could for the first time accommodate domestic rock stars (Cunningham, 85–86), providing alternative inspiration from what were previously regarded as conservative cultural sources (O'Connor).

Irish literary interests came to the fore in their second album *The Táin* (1973). Its music was originally developed for a proposed theatrical adaptation of the ancient saga *Táin Bó Cuailgne* at Dublin's Abbey Theatre, following a modern translation of the text by Thomas Kinsella (Murphy 4). *The Táin* included the track "Dearg Doom," which contained what was to become one of the most enduring sonic markers in the canon of Irish popular music. With a title representing a conflation of Irish mythical and *Marvel* comic hero ideas, its most memorable aspect—Johnny Fean's guitar riff—is taken from the traditional "O'Neill's Cavalry March" that Fean had previously learned on tenor

banjo. Band members collaborated in deconstructing this source as a basis for their original song (Cunningham, 99–100), developing what became a characteristic approach to rhythmic counterpoint. According to lyricist and poet Eamon Carr, "Dealing with Irish myths . . . was firstly a useful device and secondly helped us, and our audience, to explore our own identity" (qtd. in Harper and Hodgett, 219). In the same interview, Carr goes on to link collective identity with concrete terms of engagement, suggesting that shared mythical ideas of Irish Celticity depended as much on local reception as on more high-profile album releases: "We started out just mucking around playing gigs in pubs, and somehow we became a 'people's band' – in a way that very few bands do" (qtd. in Harper and Hodgett, 219).

The Mid-1970s

The band's continued success, through to 1975, included album releases of *Dancehall Sweethearts* (1974), *The Unfortunate Cup of Tea!* (1975), and the acoustic trad collection *Drive the Cold Winter Away* (1975); TV appearances in Ireland and occasionally in Britain and Europe; recorded stadium concerts broadcast by RTÉ; concert tours in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Britain, West Germany, and Canada; and regular feature items in Ireland-based music magazines (notably *Spotlight*, *New Spotlight*, and *Hotpress*) and in the international music press. In 1974 and 1975, Horslips appeared on BBC2's *Old Grey Whistle Test* TV program, indicating how, while the band was connected to a new collective identity in Ireland and among Irish diasporic groups, its aesthetic output also held appeal for international communities of interest, specifically those invested in album-oriented rock (Bennett, "On the Programme").

The mid-1970s were also among the worst years of the Northern Ireland Troubles. A thriving cross-community and cross-border gig network effectively collapsed when members of the Dublin-based Miami Band were massacred by a Loyalist paramilitary unit in 1975. For the remainder of the decade, Horslips and Rory Gallagher were the only major acts to include Belfast in their annual tours of the island, and their gigs there were recalled as "thrillingly celebratory events" (Hodgett). This continued engagement with the Northern capital, along with Barry Devlin's background and connections in the region, undoubtedly helped maintain the loyalty of Ulster-based fans. More generally, Horslips understood the importance of local gigs in sustaining their Ireland-based fans, and like many of their contemporaries toured the innumerable halls and other small venues that had grown around the showband circuit from the late 1950s until its gradual decline in the 1970s.

Until recently, showbands tended to be denigrated in Irish rock histories (O'Flynn and Mangaoang 36; McLaughlin and McLoone, 188). This was largely because they replicated a range of Anglo-American genres for dance functions in rural and urban venues, with their material deemed insufficiently original or, for that matter, Irish. However, instead of interpreting the "moment" of Horslips as one that supplanted the dance functionality of showbands (see, for example, O'Connor, 124; Prendergast), it might be more useful to consider Horslips' facilitation of different modes of engaging with popular music through dance. They adapted to the existing showband network, including the "black economy" that was managed by local impresarios and presented lucrative opportunities for young musicians (see Miller). Within this context, they forged a new substyle with

alternative live performance conventions and visual representations. As Smyth observes, "One of Horslips' greatest legacies to subsequent generations . . . was to mitigate rock's urban inheritance and to make the music more available to people—fans and musicians—previously marginalized on account of their provincial location" (42).

A sense of what Smyth interprets above was strongly conveyed to me when researching this article at my local library in Phibsborough, Dublin. One of the assistant librarians there spoke of transformative experiences for her and her friends when Horslips played in rural Westmeath. Similar ideas emerge from separate accounts of the band's impact at the Red Island holiday resort in Skerries, North Dublin, as recorded in their 2013 biography. Attending a New Year's Eve gig there in 1975, lifelong fan Myles Lally recalled,

> Being too young at the age of 14 to be let in officially, I climbed in. I then tried to look like I belonged in this Temple of Magic . . . as I prepared to witness a life-changing moment. All the lights went out and everybody chanted "Hor-slips, cha-cha-cha!" . . . as they lurched forward in anticipation. With the opening strains of "Mad Pat," magic was in the air and my heart was fit to burst. (qtd. in Cunningham, 137)

Reminiscing on an event at Red Island eight months later, U2's the Edge (then a 15-year-old David Howell Evans) stated,

> The band were incredible! I never imagined so much excitement could be generated by musicians. . . . And they were all great players. . . . I could hardly take my eyes away from Johnny Fean for most of the gig. He had this big Marshall rig and was playing a gorgeous Les Paul that was the kind of thing I'd dreamt about. That first gig . . . helped me realise how badly I wanted to be in a band. (qtd in Cunningham, 144–45)

Both of the above accounts resonate with celebratory descriptions by fictitious characters in Irish literature (Murphy, 139). In John Kelly's *Sophisticated Boom Boom*, and based on that author's own experiences, a teenager from Enniskillen charts the importance of Horslips at various points of their young life as they negotiate male adolescence, cultural clashes of tradition and modernity, and sectarian and political divides in 1970s Ireland. A character of similar age in Patrick McCabe's *The Dead School* recounts a "Summer of Dreams" (58) that "reveals the intoxicating potential of rock music for Irish youth" (see Murphy, 139).

The year 1976 saw the release of *Horslips Live* and *The Book of Invasions: A Celtic Symphony*, with the latter widely acclaimed as the band's magnum opus. Campbell and Smyth appraise the timing of its release:

> By 1976 . . . with punk bubbling under and the whole idea of a "serious" rock music just about to go out of fashion, the band realized that they were never going to draw the material benefits that went with mainstream success, and the time had come for the definitive statement on the musical genre that they had patented and brought to ultimate expression. (58)

This statement echoes a consistent theme in interpretations of Horslips' legacy, whereby their oeuvre, however critically celebrated, was deemed as somehow discontinuous with contemporary directions in Irish popular music. However, as discussed below, ideas of the band's legacies and associated identities expanded considerably in the twenty-first century. Like *The Táin* before it, *The Book of Invasions* drew on Irish mythology for

inspiration and was especially successful in entering a national musical imaginary through the track "Trouble with a capital T." Similar to "Dearg Doom," released as a single three years earlier, "Trouble" contained a powerful and memorable riff (also in modal minor tonality) that in its case is initially heard on wooden flute (Lockhart) and electric guitar (Fean).

The Later Years: 1977–1980

The success of *The Book of Invasions* led to the 1977 compilation album *Tracks from the Vaults* (including producer Fritz Fryer's remix of "Dearg Doom"), ever-increasing radio play and press exposure, and continued national and international engagements. These included tours in Ireland, Britain, and West Germany, as well as Horslips' first major US tour during which they featured tracks from their soon-to-be-released album *Aliens*. Its theme of Irish emigration (and re-interpretations of existing folk songs) may have been intended to appeal to US rock DJs ahead of arena concerts (Cunningham, 161), but a commitment to exploring that social history also led to their 1978 album release, *The Man Who Built America*. It loosely drew on *Rotha Mór an tSaoil* (trans. The Big Wheel of Life), the Irish-language autobiography of the Klondike gold miner Micí Mac Gabhann. Notwithstanding this inspiration, the substantially different cover designs by Charles O'Connor for album release in domestic and international markets suggest a much more multicultural approach, indicating that the band was by then "reaching for a radically different form of visual and musical authority" (McCormack and Swan, 73). As with previous albums, band members drew influences from a wide range of cross-cultural sources and deconstructed traditional texts and tunes (including the creation of riffs) to produce original songs.

A significant fan-related development in 1979 was *The Horslips Funky Fun Club*, set up to contain the volume of mail managed by the band's administrator, Sue Calvert. Intentionally adopting a retro juvenile format, fans were issued with membership cards and numbers and received regular newsletters. According to Eamon Carr, it was an innovation that the band members enthusiastically embraced:

> . . . we put together very punky-looking, handmade supplements to go with the newsletters, that were like postcards from whichever tour we were on. . . . We were just geeking off, like most bands did, and that's what our fan base loved. It kept them in touch. (qtd. in Cunningham, 187)

As noted below, a folder of facsimiles from this initiative and earlier fan-oriented materials was published by the band in 2022.

The intensity of touring did not abate throughout 1979, at which point the band had all but abandoned their flamboyant style, hirsute prog-rock look, and mythical iconography. Whether or not this reflected an attempt to shake off the containment of the Celtic rock label that they once heralded (Smyth, 44–45) and prevailing stereotypes of Irish popular musicians in the international music press (O'Hagan, 47) or represented a pursuit of new artistic directions is a moot point. The lack of radio play for their final studio album, *Short Stories/Tall Tales*, arguably reflected a tension between folk and punk sensibilities within the group. At the same time, they continued to receive invitations to support or front stadium events, which they balanced with the local gigs that had

sustained their fan base from the outset. As Barry Devlin recalled, "We'd play in The Spectrum in Philadelphia which had a 13,500 capacity, and return to Ireland for the summer to play venues like the Astoria in Bundoran that were a fraction of the size. But we liked the contrast." (qtd. in Cunningham, 195).

Horslips' long-standing association with the Belfast scene was reflected in 1979 when they were the first featured band on B.B.C. Northern Ireland's *Green Rock* series of studio-recorded concerts. Later that year, theirs was the first televised concert to be broadcast on RTÉ's *Cork Opera House Gigs*. That series was introduced by Dave Fanning, a DJ for the newly established RTÉ Radio 2 who later had a significant influence in advocating new Irish rock acts in the 1980s and '90s. Radio 2 was the Republic of Ireland's first official popular music station; up to that point, domestic radio play for Horslips was limited to occasional slots on the more Reithian-oriented RTÉ Radio 1 or via the numerous pirate stations that operated from the mid '70s.

Horslips' biographer Mark Cunningham observes how the band began the year 1980 in the way that it finished for them—with gigs at Belfast's Ulster Hall. Reflecting on the final performance of "their original lifespan" on October 8, he summed up their achievement: "After 12 genre-defining albums and more than 1,000 gigs, the band parted company by mutual consent" (202). In between the Ulster Hall concerts was another Belfast performance, this time at the Whitla Hall. Tapes recorded at it were later mixed by producer Steve Katz, leading to the release of *The Belfast Gigs*. Fan reception of the April 30 performance at the Whitla is memorialized in an essay by the writer Paul Muldoon who reports a collective perception of five "gods" appearing on stage (140).

Towards the Twenty-First Century

Between 1980 and 1999 members of Horslips went on to form different bands and/or pursue diverse careers in various arts and media fields (Cunningham, 210–26). Some of these involved combinations of the lineup from 1972, notably, the Zen Alligators that included Johnny Fean and Eamon Carr. As later described, outputs from this time were subsequently included in retrospective narratives by the band (as a collective) and their followers.

Snapshots from 1990

A standout moment of Horslips' legacy from the late twentieth century occurred one decade after their breakup. This came by way of the Irish soccer squad's song for the 1990 World Cup in Italy, "Put 'Em Under Pressure" in which the "Dearg Doom" guitar riff took on another life when sampled in the single produced by U2's Larry Mullen. The track also included Clannad's Moya Brennan singing a slowed-down version of Irish soccer fans' "Olé Olé" chant and sampled a recorded interview extract of manager Jack Charlton's voice that gave the song its title. Although they had no direct involvement in its making, the track facilitated a revitalized interest in Horslips' sound, years after being regarded as passé in mainstream domestic popular music reception; for band members, it meant that they "were able to bask in a bit of retro glory" (Carr, qtd. in Cunningham, 223). At 13 weeks, "Put 'Em Under Pressure" was the longest-running No. 1 single in Ireland until the phenomenal success of "Riverdance" in 1994.

Though less spectacular, a more significant byroad for Horslips' legacy was a gig that took place at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) in 1990, billed as "Johnny Fean and the Spirit of Horslips." This was attended and captured on VHS by Colin Harper, then a recent QUB graduate, who noted how Fean was "fronting effectively his own tribute band—at that time quite a novel idea" (Harper). As well as describing the gig and the act that would, in Fean's words, "get a few more years out of it," Harper provides a rich insight into the appreciation (or lack thereof) for a 1970s band that by 1990 was, for some at least, a remote legend:

> When I was at university in the mid-to-late Eighties Horslips occupied a curious place for my generation . . . legendary but distant . . . the stuff of elder brothers' record collections. Curiously, the musical world of the Seventies seems a whole lot closer and certainly more acceptable today [2004] . . . as it did in the Eighties. (Harper and Hodgett, 211)

Harper's subsequent digital edit of the 1990 recording reveals a performance centered on Fean's guitar virtuosity, the first half comprising well-known Horslips hits, followed by covers of Irish and international rock standards. Bearing in mind the gig's function as a university rag ball, audience reception is positive and mostly engaged, though in no way emulating the energy of the original Horslips events.

Regaining Control

The low visibility and audibility of Horslips in the 1980s and '90s was further compounded by a dispute over ownership of master tapes from their heyday, one consequence of which was a lack of artistic control over the quality of reissue CD recordings during this period (Cunningham, 228–29). Echoing similar tales of complex and often troubled relations between authorship and ownership in popular music industries (Stahl), from the mid-1980s, Horslips were engaged in a legal action with the Belfast-based Outlet Recording Company to regain rights to their substantial catalogue. The case was finally settled in favor of the group in early 1999.

By 2000, Horslips established their own domain name and website (originally designed by Charles O'Connor) and began the process of digitally remastering all of their original albums at Abbey Road Studios, London (Cunningham, 231). The former represented the first "official" curation of a Horslips' legacy by band members since the 1979 newsletters, a move that was arguably linked to the joint artistic and business imperative of the latter. The most significant output following their digital remastering enterprise was the double CD *The Best of Horslips* (2002) along with the release of a four-track EP of "Dearg Doom." It combined the original 1973 version with three different remixes by domestic producers, thereby situating Horslips legacy within a vibrant contemporary dance scene that could reach new audiences.

Rewriting the Legacy: 2004–2006

The first Horslips comeback (as a live act) not only arose from their renewed business, website, and digitization activities, but also through the agency of fans from the time of their initial incarnation. Adopting a "DIY preservationism" approach to rock heritage (Bennett, "Heritage" 482), and contrasting with earlier legacy initiatives led by the band,

The History of Horslips exhibition in Derry, 2004, was organized by three longtime collectors of Horslips memorabilia from the 1970s and augmented by contributions from Ireland-based and international fans. The individuals concerned, Jim Nelis, Stephen Ferris, and Paul Callaghan, did not know each other during the band's heyday but became connected through Horslips' and individual band members' websites, as well as through real-time introductions made by Johnny Fean (see Clayton-Lea). The not-for-profit exhibition moved to Drogheda in 2005 and later to the Waterfront Hall, Belfast, in 2006, and to Ballinamore, Co. Leitrim, in 2008. It was significant that two of these locations were based in Northern Ireland, while the other two were close to the border with the Republic. By this, the exhibition bypassed Dublin, a location conventionally regarded as central to Irish rock narratives—as evidenced through various institutions, publications (notably, *Hotpress*), and initiatives celebrating popular music in the capital city (see O'Flynn and Mangaoang). Accordingly, the exhibition presented an example of "unauthorized" popular music heritage (Roberts and Cohen), that ironically facilitated Horslips' reentry as a live act into the mainstream of Irish popular culture. This occurred as all original band members "surprised" the exhibition organizers by turning up at its launch at the Orchard Gallery in Derry, where they performed an acoustic set. As Cunningham observed, "It proves to be the catalyst for all future band activities and events" (233). However, as discussed below, the decision to perform was in no small part influenced by plans to shoot a documentary film some months beforehand.

One of the first post-exhibition activities of the reformed band was the release of their acoustic *Roll Back* album in December 2004. It followed a six-week summer residency at Grouse Lodge recording studio in Co. Westmeath, where band members contributed to new arrangements of existing Horslips material. While representing a more mature approach, these new versions also resonated with earlier approaches to metric transformation, melodic and rhythmic counterpoint, and tune deconstruction. Reaction to the release of the album led Lora Lee Templeton (a lifelong fan and friend of the band) to create the (now defunct) website ComeBackHorslips.com.[1] Murphy comments on this early virtual fan community that was centered on a collectively constructed Horslips legacy:

> Here, electric and acoustic folk and rock musicians enlarge Horslips' invention of Irish *dúchas* [heritage] as fusion. CBH as social network links fans, broadcasts film and musical clips, and updates the *craic* [social fun]. Virtual and real lives merge. (140)

This commentary suggests how the band's legacy appeared in some respects to have broader appeal in an online forum combining contributions and reflections from musicians, fans, and aficionados, and at a time when cultural commentators and critics were less concerned about genre boundaries than in the 1970s. The first decade of the twenty-first century also saw the emergence of several Horslips tribute acts that typically played at album anniversaries or at exhibition launches after the inaugural event in Derry. Notable among these was Horslypse, whose 2005 playlist included a complete set from *The Book of Invasions* album (Cunningham, 242).

Another critical factor in augmenting a twenty-first century vision of the band's legacy was the 2005 screening on RTÉ of Maurice Linnane's feature-length documentary *Horslips: The Return of the Dancehall Sweethearts*. Linnane had been critical of an earlier documentary broadcast some years earlier on RTÉ, *Out of Ireland: From a Whisper to*

a Scream, in which "... Horslips seemed to be shoved to one side as if we should be embarrassed by their very existence" (qtd. in Cunningham 240). Informed by an ideology of rock authenticity, that production's overarching narrative disparaged popular genres not directly associated with countercultural movements, and effectively bypassed many acts in its hagiographic presentation of an Irish rock "hall of fame" (O'Flynn, "Other Voices", 157–58). The production of Linnane's documentary initially attracted no interest or investment from RTÉ, the same national broadcaster that in 1971 had facilitated the first iteration of the band through its TV series *Fonn*. Linnane's resolve to redress what he considered to be the rightful place of Horslips in Irish rock music history presents an example of how dominant narratives "are contested throughout differing cultural spaces of debate: in both 'official' textual sites within the culture industry (magazines, biography, film, etc.) and 'unofficial' textual sites outside it" (Strachan, 78).

Return of the Dancehall Sweethearts played a central role in encouraging the band to perform again. Complemented by archival footage, stills, memorabilia and interviews with well-known Irish rock and folk musicians, the documentary film featured recorded scenes from the 2004 exhibition opening in Derry. The following recollection by Linnane in Horslips' "official" biography presents a colorful account of how the decision was reached not only to re-form but also to perform:

> Barry [Devlin] insisted that the band would be just there but not play. I said, "So you'll be in a room with a couple of hundred of your most die-hard fans, and when they ask you to play a song, you'll tell them you can't? Is that the plan?" He thought about this for a few seconds and then mumbled, "Oh, fuck." (Linnane, qtd. in Cunningham, 240)

Return of the Dancehall Sweethearts was released in November 2024. The 2-DVD set comprised Linnane's documentary as well as full versions of the 20 video-recorded performances from the 1970s that provided footage material for the documentary feature.

Shortly afterwards, in December 2005, Horslips were featured at Other Voices, an annual indie festival in Dingle, Co. Kerry. Its program of small-venue concerts promotes an aura of liveness and immediacy that lead to a range of mediatized events, notably its gig series broadcast on RTÉ. Given the implied authenticity bestowed to established and emerging artists who are invited to that festival (O'Flynn, "Other Voices"), the inclusion of Horslips, playing their first electric set since 1980, to some degree redressed the band's relative neglect in earlier histories of Irish popular music. It was followed in 2006 by the recording of a "Horslips' Special" for the music series *Ardán* [Platform/Stage], broadcast on RTÉ's Irish-language TV station TG4 in 2007. In contrast to the more rock-oriented narrative interpreted in *Return of the Dancehall Sweethearts*, the featured testimonials and acts on *Ardán* celebrated the band's legacy in terms of their contributions to Irish traditional music, thereby suggesting a further blurring of genre distinctions between popular, folk, and traditional music(s) in post-revival discourses (Scahill, 2020).

Reunion and Retrospection: 2009–2013

In December 2009, Horslips returned to major live concerts in Belfast's Odyssey Arena and at the O2 in Dublin, preceded by "warm-up" performances at McHughs pub in Drogheda. As Eamon Carr was unavailable due to other work commitments, the band

now included Ray Fean on drums. According to his brother Johnny, Belfast was chosen for the first show as the original band had played their last one there in 1980 (Cunningham, 253). Carr attended his first Horslips concert as an audience member, recalling how "the first 10 minutes . . . were probably among the weirdest in my life" (qtd. in Cunningham, 253). From that vantage point, he further observed,

> I looked around and saw a number of the audience in tears. Maybe there was something going on that was beyond rock"n'roll; maybe something indicative of what they went through in Belfast during the "70s. Whatever it was, the emotion was dripping. (qtd. in Cunningham, 254)

The gig at Dublin's O2 was widely celebrated on social media platforms and in print media reviews (Cunningham, 254–59). Following the success of both concerts, a number of their original albums were reissued by Celtic Airs over the following years, during which time the band were interviewees or documentary subjects for many TV shows on B.B.C. Northern Ireland and RTÉ. This represented a level of national and regional media attention that considerably surpassed what the band experienced in the 1970s.

The most substantial audiovisual record from that time was the second feature-length documentary film about Horslips, *The Road to the O2* (2010). Released under the band's own label and subtitled *A Film about Getting to the Gig*, it brought together footage of rehearsals intercut with interview extracts from band members, collectively and individually. This self-archiving of a revised legacy was echoed in December that year when, prior to another headline show at the O2, Lora Lee Templeton hosted a Horslips History Walk around key Dublin sites connected to the band (Cunningham, 264).

Outside of Dublin, a 2011 January concert at Glasgow's Celtic Connections festival represented their first gig in Britain in over four decades. Later that year, their St. Patrick's Day concert at the Waterfront Hall in Belfast saw Horslips perform highlights from their concept albums based on Gaelic mythology, *The Táin* and *The Book of Invasions*. Accompanied by the Ulster Orchestra and with arrangements by film composer Brian Byrne, this live concert and simultaneous broadcast on B.B.C. Radio Ulster signaled an official endorsement of the band's music by a cultural institution. (The performance was subsequently released in CD format as *Live with the Ulster Orchestra*.) That it occurred in Northern Ireland also illustrated how Horslips' long-serving cross-community engagement in the province could accommodate non-divisive celebrations of Irish identity that had gone from strength to strength since the Good Friday Peace Agreement of 1998.

An international reach of sorts was represented by Barry Devlin and Jim Lockhart's featured involvement in *Rotha Mór an tSaoil*, a 4-part documentary broadcast on TG4. Larry Kirwan of US Celtic rock band Black 47 noted how Devlin and Lockhart employed Micí Mac Gabhann's autobiography in the series "as an analogy for Horslips' own music travels—and travails—to a fabled America" (qtd. in Cunningham, 267). This resonated with the theme of Horslips' 1978 album *The Man Who Built America*. In the same interview, Kirwan alluded to the band's North American legacy, with "echoes of Horslips in so much of today's Irish-American music" (qtd. in Cunningham, 267). In August 2011, a re-connection with transnational folk rock was heralded by Horslips' participation in the annual Fairport Cropredy Convention in Oxfordshire, England. A month later, and with

Eamon Carr back on drums, they headlined an Arthur's Day[2] concert at the Ulster Hall, Belfast (the same venue where the original band's final concert took place in 1980). Ensuing years saw the reformed band feature in prominent national music gatherings, among which was their headline act at the 2012 Rory Gallagher International Tribute Festival in Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal. They continued to enjoy numerous TV appearances, primarily as interview subjects combined with live performances. All of this suggests a second-life legacy for the band that was in large part sustained by national media. The publication of the band's official biography in 2013 coincided with the release of the double-CD compilation *Biography*, "in what appear[ed] to be a coordinated cross-industry commercial strategy" (Watson, 43).

Changing Collective Identities?

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, Horslips were re-inscribed into the canon of Irish rock, notwithstanding a pervasive view that their trajectory and output represented a creative cul-de-sac in that history. Barry Devlin considered the band's contribution as analogous with Debussy's uncomfortable fit in readings of music modernism (qtd. in Meagher), while Dave Fanning facetiously responded to the question of their Irish rock legacy in *The Road to the O2*: "Legacy? What Legacy? . . . . Who cares?" Although the number of concerts involving the full band gradually decreased, Horslips' national profile was sustained through a steady number of media appearances and/or features. Their status as a national myth was reinforced when they were parodied in the TG4 comedy-drama series *Fir Bolg*[3] (2015–2016), based on the reunion of a fictitious group of aging Irish rockers.

Well-known riffs or full tracks from their heyday continued to be used and, at times, appropriated to herald national events. While Horslips had incorporated literary, visual and musical aspects of Irish culture into their original rock output, "Dearg Doom" and "Trouble with a Capital T" were imbricated in more generic sonic articulations of Irishness (that, in turn, were likely inspired by the 1990 Irish soccer squad anthem). These ranged from national celebrations, as in sports events and annual St Patrick's Day parades/festivals, to political exploitation. Of the latter, the most high-profile was a failed effort to launch an "Irexit movement" at a conference held in Dublin, 2018, and featuring UK Brexit campaigner Nigel Farage as keynote speaker. A statement issued from the band's Facebook page objected to the organizers' use of "Dearg Doom" as a heralding soundtrack, emphasizing that they embraced "a hopeful, outward looking, inclusive vision of Ireland," and adding "that we wouldn't piss on them [Irexiters] if they were on fire" ("Horslips'Post").

By the late 2010s, Eamon Carr and Charles O'Connor had fully retired, at which time remaining band members occasionally performed under the moniker Johnny, Barry and Jim of Horslips. Ironically, this withdrawal and/or diminution of musicians' involvement led to a new fan-organized legacy project. While Horslips' second reunion from 2009 was closely associated with several media-driven initiatives, the 2018 establishment of Horslips Con was very much a community-oriented endeavor. From its inception, this annual event, organized by lifelong fan Rob Aiken, represented a pan-generational social reunion (Roy). It brought together a mix—as well as a blurring of lines—of/between

original band members, cover bands and lifelong fans. As Barry Devlin describes in an interview ahead of the 2019 Con:

> When the band came back together again in 2009, we were kind of revisiting a thing that had once been and so were the audience. In a way, we could nearly have sprung anyone from the audience and they could have got up with us and done a Horslips turn, but we were selecting ourselves as player/managers on the night. (Devlin, qtd. in Roy)

Moreover, as can be observed on amateur as well as professional concert videos from 2004 through to the early 2010s, the Con events of 2018 and 2019 attracted a significant number of younger fans. This could be interpreted as the result of family connections and performer networks, constituting what Devlin described as Horslips' "extended family" (Roy). The emergence of this new audience can also be linked to the growth of retro culture in an established digital age (Hogarty) and to the national media attention that Horslips enjoyed over the same period.

Covid-19 effectively brought an end to billed performances involving Horslips band members, although 2022 saw a revitalized Con event in Belfast during which Barry Devlin and Jim Lockhart performed alongside the Pat McManus band. It also featured the tribute band Swords of Light that based its name on one of Horslips' most celebrated tracks from *The Book of Invasions*. As noted by Rob Aiken on the band's website,

> The Swords have been fans of Horslips from the start and it just seemed logical that they should become a tribute band with support from Barry Devlin and Jim Lockhart (who are now fans of Swords!). (Aiken)

In October 2023, Horslips Con took place in Culdaff, Co. Donegal, a few months after the passing of the original band's guitar legend Johnny Fean.

Through the lockdown years of 2020–2021 a momentum for Horslips' legacy was maintained through the promised launch of the mega box set *All You Can Chew*. Curated by journalist and longtime Horslips aficionado Colin Harper and with artistic input from band members, it was eventually released in early 2022, 50 years after the lineup of Carr, Devlin, Fean, Lockhart, and O'Connor came together. The set comprised 33 CDS that included previously unreleased studio and live recorded material as well as albums by former band members from the 1980s, two DVDS, two books (a recording history by Mark Cunningham and a "lyricography") and facsimiles of fan club materials, posters and other paraphernalia. Significantly, the box set was released under Madfish, an alternative London-based record label that specializes in progressive rock through "limited-edition luxury box sets celebrating heroes of the 60s and 70s" ("Horslips Announce"). Given this international repositioning of Horslips' back catalogue, it is ironic perhaps that the box set launch was accompanied by the digital release of the single "Sure the Boy Was Green" on St. Patrick's Day, 2022 ("Horslips Announce"). The track was recorded during the final concerts at the Whitla Hall in 1980 but was not included on the subsequent *Belfast Gigs* album.

Conclusion

Throughout their career, Horslips were variously involved in the negotiation of complex collective identities. Most spectacularly, perhaps, mediations of Horslips'

best-known riffs brought about sonic markers that have endured in an Irish national imaginary, extending to media audiences far beyond the band's core fan base. However, if national identity is to be considered with regard to Horslips' output and overarching aesthetic, it might more usefully be described in terms of "cultural Irishness" (O'Flynn, *Irishness* 21–22). An eschewal of political nationalism can be interpreted as one of the factors that enabled Horslips to cross class and community divides, as well as political borders. Throughout their career, they put time and effort into touring the length and breadth of the island—and beyond—and later, to socializing and sometimes performing with aficionados and long-time followers.

Readings of the band's legacy in Irish rock history have changed considerably since their sidelining in grand narratives of the late twentieth century. Yet a theme that consistently reappears in Irish rock discourse is the uniqueness of Horslips' "invented" genre. Band members have themselves played with this dialectic of exclusion/inclusion, paralleling an extensive heritage creation that is at once "unauthorized" and "authorized" (Roberts and Cohen).

As the remaining members of Horslip aged, they increasingly turned to traditional music contexts and/or performed primarily acoustic arrangements of their original output. In addition to the material considerations of dealing with less gear as they grew older, this return to "acoustic" roots may have been reflective of "post-genre" trends in contemporary music scenes. It could further be interpreted as part of a trajectory of "cultural aging" (Katz). For wider society, a broader heritage emerged as Horslips' back catalogue came to constitute "a dominant artifact and focus for cultural consecration" (Bennett, "Heritage" 480). Such a process justifiably recognizes the band's musical and broader artistic contributions at a national level. At the same time, the canonization of their oeuvre fails to capture the impact of numerous transformative experiences recalled by performers and fans alike in the milieu of a culturally conservative and politically fraught Ireland during the 1970s. A collective memory of those more dynamic aspects of Horslips' legacy continues to be sustained through networks and events organized by life-long fans, contributing to, while also remaining independent of mainstream biographical accounts.

Notes

1. Archival items from Templeton's website are occasionally re-posted on Horslips' Facebook page.
2. Arthur's Day was a pseudo-national day contrived by drinks company Diageo to celebrate the founder of Dublin's Guinness brewery. Annual Arthur's Day festivals were held in Irish cities and abroad from 2009, but ceased after 2013 in the wake of criticism from musicians and public health campaigners.
3. A mythical tribe of ancient Ireland that are referenced in Horslips' *Book of Invasions* album.

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