

Forgetting to Remember

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I've spent most of my life writing music—Celtic and otherwise. At one time, I believed that creativity was divine, something doled out to the lucky ones by the gods. It took me many years to realize that most art springs from experience. And the overriding experience in my life has been emigration. Some people emigrate to forget, others to remember. It seemed that I had to forget in order to remember.

I was raised by my grandfather in Wexford town. Thomas Hughes was an Irish Republican. In other homes, the pictures of the twin Johns—the twenty-third and Kennedy—blithely gaped down from artless walls. The green-framed signatories of the 1916 Uprising, however, glared unrepentantly from ours. Pádraig Pearse was top center, and to his left, appropriately, James Connolly. Unconcerned with status, Sean MacDermott peered out from the bottom. Sixty years after his death, this secretive man—chief recruiter for the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the straw that stirred the

revolution's drink—was still a pivotal figure in my grandfather's life. Outsiders think of Republicanism as a political or armed movement. It's more like a religion, a spiritual path, even a cult, and my grandfather initiated me into it. On long winter nights before the coal fire, he loved to recall and thrash out the nuances of our long and painful national history. His firm belief was that we in the South had abandoned the Nationalist population of the Six Counties to a sectarian and politically repulsive state; and that it now behooved each following generation to resolve this matter.

All well and good, until I reached the age of fifteen or thereabouts, and discovered two other equally strong movements—sex and rock and roll. Being a good Jansenist Irish Catholic, Thomas Hughes didn't even acknowledge the first (although he had sired seven children); as for the second, he dismissed it as “auld English dance music” (Elvis and James Brown appear to have passed under his critical radar). Our house became tense and argumentative over these issues; meanwhile various other national and historical chickens were also coming home to roost. The Troubles had flared up again across the North, and with the will to resolve them absent in London, Dublin, and Belfast, the armed struggle resumed. Unwilling to relive my grandfather's past, I packed my guitar and emigrated.

I arrived in New York determined to put Republicanism and, indeed, many other forms of Irishism behind me. Hemingway rhapsodized about being young in Paris. He would have died for New York in the 1970s. The Lower East Side was a hedonistic republic unto itself with CBGB's as the center of world music. I formed a band that gained a following in the glass-strewn streets of Alphabet City, landed a record deal, and was well on my way, as I thought, to becoming another David Bowie. The best-laid schemes of mice and Irishmen, indeed! Still, the nights were long and the days short, rents miniscule, the ladies' dresses even shorter, and I even sported a green lightning streak in my hair. And yet, I could feel an odd emptiness rattling around inside of me: I didn't like what I'd become—didn't believe what I was singing. In short order, the band broke up; I went full-time into the theater and put music behind me. Again trying to forget, but with still so much to remember.

My grandfather died, and in the careless ways of youth and those times, I even missed his funeral. But the past has a way of catching up. Like many Irish Americans, I was deeply moved by the sacrifice of Bobby Sands and the other hunger strikers. Floundering around, looking for some purpose, I began to hear whispers of the old man's voice; while late at night, shards of our marathon fireside conversations began to prickle both my conscience and con-

sciousness. And so I wrote *Mister Parnell*, a musical drama about the life and divorce case of the Uncrowned King. This led me to research the music of the 1880–90s, and to my surprise, I knew all the parlor songs—courtesy of my grandfather—wonderful melodies most of them but calcified in a staid and static Victorianism. Yet when I stripped these tunes down and matched them with beats and contemporary lyrics, they soared as they must have when first written.

It was common knowledge that, in the middle of the nineteenth century, African American and native Irish musicians had played together in the “she-beens” of the Five Points. Charles Dickens himself had even cocked his nose at the sight of this unholy alliance. Irish melodies had once worked with black rhythms and beats—why couldn't they do so again? And so I mixed traditional and original Irish melodies with the rap of the Bronx and the reggae of Brooklyn. At that time, most Irish American musicians were getting cricks in their necks from gazing back sheepishly, and even reverently, at Irish players. To me, that was just another form of cultural colonialism. Why imitate outsiders? In New York City, we had the finest of rhythm sections, greasy to the core. We had the jazz, the funk, the blues, the rap, the reggae. We had Miles Davis, James Brown, Lou Reed, Public Enemy. We could take Irish music to a different plane, if only we dared. We could transform our Irish roots and make them truly palatable to American youth.

And so I formed Black 47 with Chris Byrne, a New York City policeman, and we set out to re-imagine Irish music—not as something that should be consigned to museums or sessions in back rooms of pubs, but as a vehicle that would alert young Irish Americans to their background, their political heritage, and their duty to effect a solution to the ongoing problems in the North of Ireland. We reintroduced them to heroes like James Connolly, discarding the mawkish ballad that misrepresented him and instead revving him up and showing him for what he was: an international socialist. We explored Michael Collins, Countess Markievicz, Bobby Sands, Father John Murphy, and on the way we exposed the youth to their own American heroes such as Paul Robeson, Bobby Kennedy, the San Patricio Brigade, Father Mychal Judge. We didn't lay down a party line—in fact we refused to endorse any politician; but we did ask Irish Americans to re-imagine their heritage, their perceptions, and their communal past. We demanded that they take control of their future by asking questions, not following leaders (including us), rejecting easy solutions, demanding answers both from themselves and those in authority. We also advised them not to get stuck in the past—Connolly, Sands,

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Robeson, Collins, Kennedy, et al. were all visionaries. Each one dreamed of changing the world for the betterment of those living in it.

The island of Ireland is fine. It can look after itself. True, its newfound wealth has cost it a part of its soul. But its writers, poets, and musicians will attend to that. That's what art is about. Anyway, it's really not my concern any more. I look out for the descendants of the Diaspora, be they in North or South America, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, or Europe. That's where the future lies. That's where my work is. That's what my re-imagining is all