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SOUNDS IRISH, ACTS GLOBAL: EXPLAINING THE SUCCESS OF IRELAND'S POPULAR MUSIC INDUSTRY

by Michael Murphy and Jim Rogers - Equinox Publishing



As U2 continue their residency inside the giant kaleidoscope Murphy touches on their earliest days in *Sounds Irish, Acts Global*. Tickets for the giant dome in Nevada will set you back a few hundred dollars but for 50p you could have seen the nascent businessmen ply their post-punk wares in Dublin's Dandelion Market. Such is the mythic status of those eight U2 gigs that by December more people will still claim to have been present at the Dandelion in 1979 than have actually attended their shows in Sin City.

"The Dandelion venue, thanks to its organiser, John Fisher, provided new Irish acts, from both sides of the border, with an opportunity to appear before a younger audience," writes Murphy.

Fisher is just one of a generation of entrepreneurs who, "found, market opportunities in rock music and youth." Many of this generation emerged from various Students' Unions around the country in the 70s and early 80s. Murphy dubs them the "Ents Entrepreneurs" and he argues that their groundwork laid the foundation for some of the biggest success stories in Irish music and in turn enabled Irish artists to succeed on a global stage. The stories of the five most significant pop managers are also outlined and how their early careers intersected with the "Ents Entrepreneurs". Fachtna O'Kelly (The Boomtown Rats and Sinéad O'Connor), Paul McGuinness (U2), Dave Kavanagh (Clannad), and Nicky and Roma Ryan (Enya) all played highly significant roles in taking Irish music global.

Murphy's narrative begins in the early 1900s. We go from T. P. O'Connor, the Irish

Politician in Westminster, behind the Musical Copyright Act of 1906 to the story of Leitrim native Ellen O'Byrne-DeWitt (subject of a recent episode of Cathal Funge's excellent RTÉ Radio 1 series *Label of Love*) who founded a label in New York to sell Irish traditional music to newly arrived immigrants. From here it's on through the decades - Horslips, The Corrs, Riverdance and Westlife are all featured. *Sounds Irish, Act Global* utilises face-to-face interviews with key players and rich secondary sources to weave an account of how the individuals behind the scenes used their different motivations, personalities and skills to ultimately change the face of the Irish music industry. On opening night in Vegas Bono thanked various big industry heavy-weights. That an Irish band are there at all is also thanks to loads of the do-it-yourself, community entrepreneurs mentioned in this great book.

Michael Murphy: Q&A

What's your aim with *Sounds Irish, Acts Global*?

To peel back the curtain on the global music industry and to show how it really works. When it works best, it is often thanks to the generosity, ingenuity, passion and skill of ordinary people. People associate punk with do-it-yourself, but I wanted to find other examples of that DIY. And it turns out the Irish are really good at it and have been doing it for over one hundred years. I felt that most of those people have never been acknowledged or celebrated.

The lessons from that history could be very effective now

Students' Unions in the 70s and 80s were a real training ground for future Irish music industry professionals, weren't they?

I think the "Ents Entrepreneurs" are the unsung architects of the Irish music industry. They came from the Students' Unions of the colleges and universities in the 1970s and 1980s. And they were young, often only in the role for a year, but their legacy is huge. Elvera Butler in Cork is a great example, but there are many other lesser known, but influential, examples. Many of them graduated into key cultural roles in Ireland, but I'd argue that their time in their student roles was pivotal in shaping Ireland's music culture.

What lessons could young bands, emerging independent promoters and prospective managers take from the stories of their predecessors?

For anyone entering the music industry, the big lesson is that innovation really works. That means you need to be agile and imaginative in your thinking. Don't do things the way other people are doing them, especially if they work for a large company. The music industry has historically been fuelled by innovation, and that can happen in small places like suburban houses, tiny venues and out of the way places. If you are spending a lot of money to grab attention, you're doing the wrong thing! And the lessons from Ireland's music industry history can work in any place and at any time.