

ARTICLE



THE IRISH SESSION - ORIGINS by Stewart Hendrickson

There is an Irish session at [Fadó](#), an Irish pub near Pioneer Square in Seattle. With its dark wood, old Irish pictures and artifacts, and a pint of dark Guinness, it evokes the feeling of a long tradition of making music in Ireland. How long has this been going on, and how did it evolve?

After talking to some native Irish, and some library and internet research, I understand that the traditional Irish pub session is a recent phenomenon, which became popular only after the folk craze of the 1960s, and may have had its origin earlier among Irish immigrants in America, not Ireland.

So how did the playing of traditional Irish music, as we know it today, evolve? Prior to the late 19th century, music was performed mostly by the professional or semi-professional musician. It was a career similar to being a professional beggar since they often played for tips at local fairs and other gatherings. Amateur musicians were rare in impoverished rural Ireland where hard work was the norm and there was little leisure time to play music or money to buy instruments. Only when socio-economic conditions improved in the late 1800s did ordinary people begin to play music as amateurs.

Irish music was traditionally played in a solo, unaccompanied form. There were few instruments available, few were able to play, and the number of tunes any musician knew was limited. Many professional musicians avoided playing in the presence of other musicians for fear their tunes and techniques would be stolen. Distinctive styles developed in different regions, and musical artistry depended to a large extent on variations and ornamentation of a few tunes rather than a large repertoire of tunes.

A few professional musicians were more generous and founded schools of playing. As people had more leisure time and could afford instruments, they would learn from these musicians. At céilí (social gathering, dance & music) houses people would gather around the kitchen fire to entertain themselves with music, dancing, singing and story-telling. Musicians would travel around the county to these places where they were always welcome. Here tunes, songs and stories would be exchanged. People would learn the music by an oral tradition, listening, watching and trying to imitate other players.

Dances were major occasions for music to be played. Often there were only one or two musicians available. If no musician was found, singers would use mouth music or lilted to imitate instruments and provide rhythm for the dancers. Music played by more than one instrument was played in unison with no harmony. Traditional instruments included the fiddle, pipes, the whistle, flute, and concertina. The guitar, bouzouki, and bodhrán are recent additions and are not considered traditional.

In the early 20th century, prior to the re-emergence of traditional Irish culture and music in the mid century, traditional music was considered to be a lower-class culture and people who aspired to a higher class were embarrassed to be associated with it. Speaking the Gaelic language was also discouraged and only persisted in a few isolated areas. You might see an older man on a street corner hiding his fiddle under his coat. He was not hiding an expensive instrument, but would be embarrassed if seen with it as a low-class peasant. Thus, a class consciousness hindered the practice of traditional Irish arts and culture.

Irish musicians who emigrated to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were less likely to be influenced and inhibited by these class prejudices. Professionals tended to gravitate towards stage performances where their music was more readily accepted. Amateurs were more likely to play for dances (céilís) and later in sessions. The session became the standard venue for the playing of Irish music, and perhaps was more an American innovation.

The session has changed the form of Irish music. The distinctive regional styles and amount of variation in the tunes has decreased considerably as the music has become more homogenized. The development of the recording industry, radio and TV, and popular touring Irish bands has spread the music to a much wider audience. The pub session is perhaps the last remaining venue for amateur musicians to get together and play their music. The gathering of local musicians in the farmhouse kitchen has given way to the noisy overcrowded pub amid smoke and drink.

Hammy Hamilton, a well-known Irish flute maker, [comments about the session](#) and non-solo playing: “I’ve been working in this area for some time and I believe that there is a strong connection between the improvement in social and economic conditions in Ireland at the end of the 19th century and the rise of amateur playing of traditional music. It seems that previously the vast majority of players were professional. Non-solo playing doesn’t really appear until the early recordings of the 78 rpm period in the States. The session as we know it today is a much later development, in the majority of cases not

being common until the 1950s! The earliest date that I can establish for a pub session is in the late 1930s and I think this would have been very unusual at the time.”

Margaret Steiner at Indiana University [also comments](#): “I can tell you about my experience in Newtownbutler, Co. Fermanagh. In 1978 virtually no instrumental music was heard in the pubs, although sometimes someone would get out his fiddle, or maybe there would be a fiddle and an accordion, but this was generally at Mrs. Connolly’s, a well-known céilí house. When I returned to Newtownbutler, in 1992, sessions had made their appearance. For most people it was background music. The session music, brought in through radio and records, while pleasant to listen to, did not bear the same meaning for the community.”

Caoimhín MacAoidh writes in *Between the Jigs & the Reels*: “The decade of the 1960s saw a strengthening revival in traditional music. During the period the format changed radically. The primary venue changed from what had been the cottage to the new one of the pub. The music was now solely for listening purposes rather than dancing.”

[Stewart Hendrickson](#)

Bibliography

- [The Irish "session"](#) - Traditional Irish music today is frequently encountered in the "session" (or even "seisiún"), a gathering of (usually) amateur musicians where tunes are played in unison by all the musicians who know the tune. Such events usually occur at regularly scheduled times, and usually take place in a establishment where dark foamy beverages are easily procured. The participants are generally not paid, except sometimes with free pints of dark foamy beverages, and for that reason they typically huddle in a dark corner rather than sitting on a stage. It's often assumed that like goings-on date back at least to the times of Brian Boru. But the evidence for the origin of the "session" tells a much different story.
- [Field Guide to the Irish Music Session](#) – Barry Foy
- [Traditional Music in Ireland](#) – Tomás Ó Canainn
- [Between the Jigs and the Reels](#) – Caoimhín MacAoidh
- [Exploring Irish Music and Dance](#) – Dianna Boullier
- [Last Night's Fun](#) – Ciaran Carson
- [Irish Traditional Music](#) – Ciaran Carson
- [Notes from the Heart, A Celebration of Traditional Irish Music](#) – PJ Curtis
- [The Rough Guide to Irish Music](#) – Geoff Wallis & Sue Wilson