

readers forum

Bob Lyons

Love of Country

Tom Deignan evaluated Ken Burns's documentary Country Music and its lack of focus on Irish influences.

Tom Deignan's insightful review of Ken Burns "Country Music" documentary identifies a significant flaw in the PBS presentation of America's Country Music tradition. He notes that "a film that runs over 16 hours...could have spent a bit more time focusing on distinctly Irish or Scot-Irish influences, rather than speaking so broadly about 'the British Isles.'" (Hibernia: Love of Country, IA October/November 2019). The documentary's short statement that "Bard of Armagh" became the country staple "The Streets of Laredo" was misleading by being incomplete. [\[Click video link: Bard of Armagh: Paddy Homan to Louis Armstrong\]](#)

The ballad of the Bard of Armagh, (1697) celebrates the exploits of Dr. Patrick Donnelly, a Catholic priest who took the name of a travelling harper, Phelim Brady during the time of Britain's Penal Laws in Ireland. He ministered and celebrated mass in South Armagh, Ireland in disguise of a wandering minstrel and became known as the Bard of Armagh. Irish immigrants fleeing famine and oppression carried the Bard of Armagh to America where it would evolve through a variety of lyrics and changed rhythms. One path led west to become The Streets of Laredo. Another path led to the Mississippi Delta and New Orleans rich musical tradition.

Lyrics were changed and time signature adapted from three to four beats per measure and Bard of Armagh became St. James Infirmary Blues, Louis Armstrong's signature jazz piece (1928). The three century history of this one song speaks volumes about the links between Irish and American folk and country music.

Another compelling example is demonstrated in the evolution of a late 16th century country dance tune, Irish Wash Woman (An Bhean Niochain Eireannach), 1st published 1785 in Dublin. Pete Seeger, one of America's leading folk singer describes: "When you speed up Rock My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham, you end up with the Irish Washerwoman". He speculates that plantation slaves may have heard a fiddler playing this jig in the slave master's mansion which they carried back to their slave quarters and transformed to its present form in their hoe downs.

Leroy Anderson made The Irish Washerwoman the first movement of his Irish Suite (1947). The other movements are well known Irish melodies: 2. The Minstrel Boy; 3. The Last Rose of Summer; 4. The Rakes of Mallow; 5. The Wearing of the Green; 6. The Girl I Left Behind Me.

Yo-Yo Ma, founder of the Silk Road Project Inc., commented on the global circulation of music: "I have had lots of extraordinary teachers in my life, among them the violinist and fiddler Mark O'Connor and bass player Edgar Meyer, both wonderful musicians. They introduced me to Appalachian music, which has been influenced by musical traditions from Ireland, from Scotland and from Scandinavia....One of

the most useful things that Mark taught me was the importance of oral traditions in which music is transmitted but also changed, through emigration and diaspora. For example, eighteenth and nineteenth century immigrants from Anglo-Celtic lands brought their jigs, reels and hornpipes to the New World, where successive generations of musicians transformed them into a range of different styles and repertoires. These days, there is little common ground between the repertoires of a Texas fiddler and a fiddler from Ireland, yet the two traditions reveal an unmistakable kinship." (Notes from 1998 conversation with Theodore Levin, Dartmouth College ethnomusicologist).

Ken Burns calls Country Music "a uniquely American art form". What makes it so rich and unique is that many of America's country musicians would harvest from Irish and Scottish settlers, beginning in the 18th century, the sounds and rhythms and techniques that speak of the experience of the people, their loves and losses. It is the sound of America.