**“A Uniting Force:” Irish Music on U.S. Radio**

The effect of ethnic music on popular music in the U.S. is well-documented, including African, Latin and Caribbean influences among many others (Criswell, 2004; Rubin and Melnick, 2007). Before the ethnic influences are digested and revealed in mainstream music, listeners and musicians hear them in a variety of ways, including radio broadcasting, which in turn plays a vital cultural role in the development of all forms of popular music. This pattern is certainly true of Irish music.

 “In the case of America, Irish traditional music and song merged on the Appalachian frontier with other indigenous music to form American folk music, and further south with the music of black slaves to influence the blues. Traditional dance tunes, airs and songs went into the melting pot,” observed Irish radio broadcaster and author Nuala O’Connor. “Radio brought these and many other styles into the home. The musical life of America was never the same. All music was grist to radio’s mill. On radio many musical influences came together — jazz, blues, ragtime, cowboy songs. … all looked to the traditional source for tunes and sounds ” (O’Connor, 2001, p. 22, 24). Today, in spite of newer forms of audio and video media, radio still reaches 92 percent of Americans each week, and so it remains important as a cultural and musical influence (“The State of the News Media,” 2013).

This article is a survey of Irish music broadcasting in the Nielsen Audio top 10 U.S. markets (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Dallas/Fort Worth, San Francisco/Oakland, Boston, Washington, D.C., Atlanta and Houston. Radio broadcasters on programs in the top 10 market responded in writing or in telephone interviews to a questionnaire. Only Los Angeles and Dallas-Fort Worth seem not to have an Irish-themed radio program as of now.

Programs featuring Irish and/or Celtic music in the top 10 U.S. markets include: “Ceol na nGael,” WFUV-FM and “A Thousand Welcomes,” New York; “Good Morning Ireland,” WCEV-AM, Chicago; “Ireland Tonight” and “Blarney on the Air,” WDCB-FM, Chicago; “Come West Along the Road,” (also known as “The Philadelphia Irish Radio Show”) WTMR-AM, Philadelphia; “Folk Music and Beyond,” KALW-FM, San Francisco; “A Celtic Sojourn,” WGBH-FM; “Irish Hit Parade,” WROL-AM, Boston; “The Irish Show with Pat Troy,” WUST-AM, Washington, D.C.; “The Celtic Show,” WRFG-FM, Atlanta; and “Irish Aires,” KPFT-FM, Houston.

Perhaps the most well-known program featuring Irish (also, Scottish and all-Celtic) music in the U.S. is “The Thistle and Shamrock,” a weekly program distributed by National Public Radio to its many non-commercial stations spread across the U.S.

An untold number of programs featuring Irish music have emerged in recent years with the rise in streaming, online media. This article will confine itself to programs broadcast on AM and FM radio stations, although most of these programs also are available via streaming audio or on-demand. The article will also address the effect of RTE Radio in Ireland and other streaming programs on the U.S. broadcasters of Irish music.

Irish music in the United States has been the sporadic topic of academic publications. The *Folklore Forum* published “An Historical Sketch of Traditional Irish Music in the U.S.” McCullough (1974, p. 177) noted: “Upon their arrival in America, [the Irish] clustered into the burgeoning Irish communities which began to appear in every major urban and industrial area of the U.S. The recent disastrous experience with agriculture was impressed indelibly upon their collective consciousness, and for this reason and others, the Irish experience in American became synonymous with the urban experience.” McCullough noted that the emergence of the commercial recording industry in the 1920s (also the early era of radio broadcasting) coincided with a “golden era” of Irish music in the U.S., but as Irish immigrants assimilated into American society, the popularity and influence of Irish music declined.

“Irish Traditional Music in the United States” appeared as a chapter in the proceedings of a bicentennial conference on the “Irish connection” in the U.S. (Williams, 1980). Monahan (1977) found that the music played and requested on a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Irish-music radio program reflected and influenced the perceptions of “Irishness” and ethnicity in the Irish community. Healy (1978) analyzed instrumental Irish music in the U.S. between 1900 and 1930.

Williams (1991) studied the images portrayed of Ireland and the Irish in Irish sheet music published in the U.S. between 1800 and 1920, and found that by 1920, the images had become overwhelmingly positive, but the images were largely “sentimental distortions” of the Irish experience. Moloney (1992, 2002) investigated the continuing change in all aspects of Irish music in the U.S. to understand how it has evolved, thrived, cross-fertilized, declined and even disappeared, and documented the immigrant experience in Irish-American songs. Grimes (1996) found that the Irish contribution to American music has been equal to or greater than any other ethnic group. Bracefield (1998) studied the Irish-American influence on traditional music in Ireland.

Crisell (2004) studied the influence of ethnic cultures on radio, and noted how radio helps ethnic and other cultural groups to retain their sense of identity. Wells and Smith (2010, p. 395) published a special issue of the *Journal of the Society for American Music* on Irish music and musicians in the U.S., and noted that, “Musical transmission between Ireland and the United States is very much a two-way street. … It is a story of both the development of an Irish layer within various genres of American music and of Irish American music as a form of ethnic music existing largely apart from the mainstream.” Connell (2013) analyzed the mythical figure of “Colleen,” the “pure and sweet Irish lass,” in Irish music heard in the U.S., and found that she has endured and flourished, as she represents tradition, rural Ireland and the past.

Two books on Irish music recently published in the U.S. have attracted considerable attention. *Wayfaring Strangers*, by Fiona Ritchie, the host of “The Thistle and Shamrock,” and Doug Orr, focuses on the merging of the Scottish and Irish music traditions in Ulster, before the immigration of the Scots-Irish to America. *Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music* by Barry Mazor, is a biography of the music producer and entrepreneur who discovered the early exponents of Scots-Irish music, the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, and made them known to the American public (Radosh, 2014).

**Questionnaire of U.S. Irish radio broadcasters**

A 13-question open-ended questionnaire, informed by the articles named above, was sent to the hosts or producers of all of the Irish-music radio programs that could be identified by online searches in the top 10 U.S. markets in November and January 2015. A total of 12 questionnaires were sent, and eight responses were received, a response rate of 66 percent. A summary of the responses appears below, organized by topics contained in the questionnaire (Responses, 2014).

**Balancing music, entertainment and information**

Broadcasters were asked, “How do you balance music, entertainment and information in the program? Is any one of these most important to your listeners?” AM broadcasters tend to emphasize community-oriented information more than the FM hosts.

Sean Ginnelly, the host of “Good Morning Ireland,” heard Saturdays on WCEV-AM in Chicago, was alone in saying the news is the most important segment of his show, with sports having a narrower appeal but of great importance to a major segment of the audience. “The music is probably the glue that keeps it all together,” Ginnelly said, “and it’s probably the music that is an aspect of the show that is most appealing to both the Irish and Irish Americans — in the sense that it appeals to the senses. Music is very much a uniting force — it brings people together.”

 Pat “The Living Legend” Troy has hosted the “The Irish Show with Pat Troy” on WUST-AM in Washington, D.C. for 43 years. As documented on his website pattroy.us, he’s enjoyed an audience with Pope Francis, hosted President Ronald Reagan at Troy’s own pub, and interviewed the legendary Maureen O’Hara on his program. Troy said music is most important to his program. However: “We have half-hour news headlines from Ireland, not too long, not sad stuff. I want it to be upbeat on a Sunday. We have a few interviews.”

 Brian O’Donovan, host of “A Celtic Sojourn” on WGBH-FM in Boston, said “A Celtic Sojourn” is primarily a music program. “But we regularly cover items of interest to that same listenership, such as literature, drama, film. I place a particular emphasis on live music and encourage people to support it. ‘Live music: It’s where it’s at’ is a mantra.”

Bob Campbell, the host of “Folk Music and Beyond,” heard from 3-5 p.m. Saturdays on KALW-FM in San Francisco, said music is most important to his listeners. “(It) deserves to be given a bit of context—who is performing, what is the background of this musician. Also, songs with challenging themes or some potential to awaken listeners to any level of social reality are much appreciated. Entertainment can mean anything from showgirls in ostrich plumes to a performance of *Antigone*. The best entertainment manages to communicate some deeper truth of the human condition.”

John Falstaff, the veteran host of “The Celtic Show” on WRFG-FM in Atlanta, heard Sundays from 5-7 p.m., said, while he considers his program primarily musical in nature, “We have a news segment that promotes anything Irish/Celtic related . . . movies, plays, book reading, dance, etc.  In the past, one of our programmers kept up news about the political situation on the Emerald Isle but we don’t do that anymore. I would say mostly our listeners are Americans who don’t really care what is happening in Ireland.”

**Traditional vs. Contemporary Irish Music**

U.S. Irish radio hosts were prompted: “Please discuss your philosophy in playing traditional vs. contemporary Irish music.” Here, while there was some significant support for contemporary music, most hosts, on AM and FM stations, favored the traditional. “Irish traditional music, then as now, was primarily dance music, jigs, reels and hornpipes, played by rural working people for communal celebrations and events, such as fairs, weddings, wakes and so on,” according to O’Connor (2001, p. 1).

Ginnelly of “Good Morning Ireland” in Chicago said he tries to balance the music based on demographics. “We try to honor requests but still understand that lots of people won’t request so we have to play what we think will appeal to them,” he said. “We feel it’s important to introduce new music that’s current in Ireland, be it the traditional genre or the contemporary. We also have to keep in mind the older demographics of the show and the necessity to include music familiar and appealing to them, so we essentially interlace a playlist of mainstream country & Irish music with an occasional contemporary tune. We do very little in the way of hard core traditional Irish music of the instrumental type. As far as possible, we like to keep it fresh and current. It’s important to introduce new music and current trends in music to our audience.”

Troy, the venerable host of “The Irish Show with Pat Troy” in Washington, D.C. favors traditional music. “I’m not very fond of new stuff, I don‘t understand it,” he said. “I like to go back to the songs of Ireland, about different counties and the people. My listeners want the trad music; you can hear U2 anywhere, although sometimes I’ll play a U2 number. I want people to hear the history of Ireland.”

Marianne McDonald, host of “Come West Along the Road” on WTMR-AM in Philadelphia, seeks a balance of the traditional and contemporary. “I don't play much in the realm of ‘Celtic rock’ such as Dropkick Murphys,” she said.  “That is just not my thing nor is it for my audience. I play some songs which might be called rebel songs, but they would tend to be the older, more traditional ones such as ‘James Connelly,’ ‘The Foggy Dew,’ etc. and I always do an Easter Rising special on Easter Sunday.”

O’Donovan, host of Boston’s “A Celtic Sojourn” said he follows no formula. “My instincts are for balance,” he said. “The show is not archival but it is conscious of the media reality of having to keep and audience interested. So when I play something maybe difficult or arcane — such as unaccompanied singing in Gaelic — I am conscious that it will not appeal to everyone and might sound very distant to many.” O’Donovan says he tries to put such pieces into context for the audience, and surround them with more accessible songs.

Campbell, host of “Folk Music and Beyond” in San Francisco: “Well, we treat the tradition as a living and evolving tradition (which is bound to pick up influences from outside), emphasizing its recent forms. But pronounced excursions into rock or hip-hop, for instance, are not our province. I know some beautifully expressive Irish jazz, though.”

Falstaff, the long-time host of “The Celtic Show” in Atlanta said no attempt is made to cover Irish rock or pop: “Either that which is famous enough to be on mainstream on alternative rock radio in the U.S. (e.g., U2, Hozier)— though exceptions are made for special occasions (e.g., relevant U2 songs in connection with Martin Luther King anniversaries). It’s strongly focused on ‘trad’ from mainstream performers (Clannad, Chieftains, Riverdance, Altan, Andy Irvine, etc.) to less well-known worthy artists with CDs available in the U.S. (David Munnelly, Sean Tyrrell, Sean Keane, Danu, Brock McGuire, etc.).”

Maura Monahan, producer of “Ceol na nGael” on WFUV-FM in New York, heard Sundays from 12 noon to 4 p.m., said her show makes a conscious effort to play equal amounts of each (traditional and contemporary music). “Families listen together so the younger generations can learn the traditional songs the adults already know and at the same time everyone can hear where contemporary music is headed now,” she said

Bill Galbraith, one of several hosts for the “Irish Aires” program on KPFT-FM in Houston, heard 6-7 p.m. Saturdays, said: “It’s all good.  If a case can be made for some sort of Irish/Celtic connection, it might get played. We play a lot of contemporary music performed by bands that have a bagpipe in them . . . or have at least one Irish musician. Our listeners like the more contemporary material.”

**Selection of songs**

American broadcasters of Irish programs were asked, “How do you select the particular songs you play?” Most of the American broadcasters rely on their knowledge of traditional Irish music and their audience, and are very independent in making their music selections.

Ginnelli said he takes a flexible approach: “Various ways: New releases that are popular in Ireland — often sent to us by our entertainment correspondent; songs requested by listeners; random songs that have been popular over the years; songs relevant to content, e.g. if we are interviewing an artist or they are performing locally; songs released by local musicians; and songs that we like ourselves!”

 O’Donovan: “I listen to a lot of music so my choices are fairly random and completely personal. I often compare the program to expanding the walls of my living room. I simply go, ‘Hey, I heard this great song or piece of music during the week, let’s take a listen to it.” I share my own passion for the content.”

Campbell: “I tend to start with a theme and build sets around some seeds of songs and tunes that I hope will advance that theme. I may listen for the most catchy or moving tracks on a CD as well as the ones that best fit in. Recent releases usually get a priority. We do have some favorite musicians whose CDs we may reach for first under pressure of time.”

Falstaff: “Some uptempo, some slow, some female vocals, some male, some old tunes, some new (e.g., Bua, Niamh ni Charra), classic (Christy Moore, Bothy Band, Clancys, Dubliners), some ‘obscure’ for educational purposes (Sean o Se, Leo Rowsome, John MacCormack).” Falstaff notes that his show highlights music from Scotland, Wales, and Cape Breton (Nova Scotia), among other regions. He said the Irish component varies week to week, ranging from an ideal of 50% to 100% on or around St. Patrick’s Day. Kiger, the acting host of the Atlanta program, commented, “I find Facebook to be immensely helpful in learning what is new in the industry.”

Galbraith: “We have three separate programmers and each approaches this task differently.  One is very familiar with a wide range of trad music, another will listen to various CDs, auditions tracks for appropriateness (how ‘Celtic’ does it sound, are there any bad words, etc.) and plays what she wants, the third has several go-to performers but is also more willing to play something he’s never heard before. Music ranges from purely trad to howling rock & roll.”

**Interaction with listeners**

We asked U.S. Irish broadcasters, “Please describe your interaction with listeners. What different forms does the interaction take?” The AM community-oriented broadcasters tend to report more interaction with listeners than the FM culturally oriented hosts, although the FM programs tend to be more successful in using social media.

Ginnelly of WCEV-AM in Chicago said he has lots of interaction with listeners during the course of a show “The lines are open and people call in — we also do weekly Irish trivia that generates large numbers of calls,” he said. “I personally wouldn’t have a whole lot of interaction with listeners during the show for obvious reasons — calls are handled by producers. Most of my interaction would take place at social events, often at events that we promote on the show. We also host our own Radio Show Party every year for all our listeners.”

Troy of WUST-AM in Washington D.C. said he works hard to engage his listeners on the air. “They don’t know what I’m going to say. I’ll say, ‘This one’s going out to Sean from Kerry — I don’t know who’d want to come from that county.’ That’s what makes the show. We rely a lot on the 40 Irish bars and restaurants in D.C., although we have one advertiser, Murphy’s, for the whole show. We get letters and they send messages to me on the phone.”

McDonald of WTMR-AM in Philadelphia: “I interact with my audience through Facebook, texts, phone calls, e-mails, having a table at different festivals in the area and appearances at local Irish events.  I often get asked to emcee events so that is another way that I interact with the audience. . . . I have about 1,500 fans of the Facebook page, coming from the U.S., Ireland, UK, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Spain and Belgium. The ages are largely from the 45-65 age range with the next largest segment being 35-45.”

O’Donovan of WGBH-FM in Boston said he interacts with listeners mostly through e-mail or live at shows. “I like to connect directly and I answer each e-mail personally,” he said. “At any (live performance) shows we present, I spend a lot of time interacting with audience and afterwards like to stand around and meet them in person.”

Campbell of KALW-FM in San Francisco said his program receives some calls and e-mail and he meets people at events. “Co-host JoAnn Mar sends e-mails to her list promoting specials and also interacts with some listeners through Facebook and Twitter. We have ticket giveaways. I have done all-request specials,” Campbell said.

Kiger of WRFG-FM in Atlanta: “We have over 200 people who like ‘The Celtic Show’ Facebook page. I post anything that is coming up on the show and any news between shows. Three times a year the station holds pledge drives (three weeks, each drive) — I offer CDs from participating groups/artists. That’s usually when I hear from listeners. They like the show and send us money to keep it and the station on the air. Many have been listening since its inception 25 years ago.”

Monahan of WFUV-FM in New York: “‘Ceol na nGael’ has a Facebook page, currently with 3,192 people 'liking' it. We receive emails and calls requesting specific songs and dedications to play each week.”

Galbraith of KPFT-FM Houston said his program does not have much interaction with listeners.  “At most we might get a call or two per show but even those tend to be nuisance callers,” he said. “Occasionally, a listener will call in to compliment the show or ask what was just played. Maybe even correct something we said. We are listener-supported so our listeners know they must pledge at least yearly to keep the show on air. We throw a few events each year where listeners can come and meet the programmers.”

**Numbers of listeners**

We asked the hosts of the Irish radio programs, “Is it possible to estimate the number of listeners you have on a weekly basis? If so, do you have demographic breakouts of the audience?”

Ginnelly said he has little specific statistical information on listeners. “Just anecdotal evidence from places we go and events that we attend and come across all kinds of people and all different ages who tune into the show,” he said.

Troy estimated that his show has 5-10,000 listeners per week, including the Internet. “Now that we have the Internet and telephone (apps), and lot listen on the computer to our archives. They can be out walking or jogging and listen to the show when they want to.” He said WUST is planning to increase its power to 50,000 watts, which he hopes will bring in new listeners.

O’Donovan: “We do about a 22,000 cume, meaning that number listened to 10 minutes or more of the program during the three-hour period. But it varies. As public radio, we are supported by listeners, and consistently we are amongst the top three programs in terms of fundraising at the station.”

Monahan: “I was able to talk with our station manager about audience numbers and we have 40,000 listeners weekly. As he put it, ‘...the 2014 average weekly cume radio audience for ‘Ceol n naGael’ was 40,000 listeners. It's derived from the monthly averages for Nielsen's 13 ‘books’ in 2014 . . . .That average has grown over the past couple of years (consistent with the station's overall growth in listening in that period).’”

(*NOTE: That “Ceol n naGael” [WFUV-FM, New York] reports a larger audience than “A Celtic Sojourn” [WGBH-FM, Boston] despite a much higher Nielsen Audio rating for WGBH is likely explained by the fact that the metro New York area has 19.9 million people and metro Boston has 4.5 million, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.)*

Galbraith said he has no statistical information, but doubts his Houston show has a large audience. ”Fortunately there are enough of them that we generally make or exceed our fundraising goals,” he said.  “A lot of our pledges come in from towns outside Houston, and some folks pledge from places like Pennsylvania. That’s the advantage of having the shows broadcast and archived on the ’net.”

Table 1 (attached) indicates the overall ratings of the top-10 market stations that carry locally produced Irish radio programs in Fall 2014 (Nielsen Audio Ratings, 2014).

**Effect of streaming radio**

The American broadcasters of Irish programs were asked, “How has the availability of RTE Radio and other Irish radio broadcasting on the Internet affected your program?” Overall, the American broadcasters report relatively little effect from RTE streaming radio, or others, on their audience. But several do believe streaming audio helps extend the audience for their own programs.

Ginnelly of WCEV-AM in Chicago, said people still like to hear a locally based program that is geared to a local audience. “But there’s no doubt that it has impacted listening — we’re no longer the single main source for their Irish programming. But on the other hand, it (the Internet) has made us accessible to a bigger audience through online streaming on phones, computers and other mobile devices.”

Troy of WUST-AM in Washington, D.C., commented that the streaming availability of RTE and other Irish radio broadcasters has had no appreciable effect on his audience. He said they may listen to RTE, but still also listen to his program, either live, on the radio, streaming or on-demand.

McDonald of WTMR-AM in Philadelphia said her show is streamed, but not podcasted.  “I don't think I've lost any listeners to RTE radio and I will always tell folks about other streaming programs, with Clare FM's ‘West Wind’ being one of my favorites, along with Brian O'Donovan's show in Boston.”

O’Donovan of WGBH-FM in Boston said streaming audio creates a healthier environment for radio. “I stream a lot (to listeners) from overseas,” he said. “I think it enhances awareness, and that helps locally based programming, such as mine. I was one of the early adopters of using this technology. Right now we have a lot of folks who listen from afar — live and to our archived streams.”

**Reinforcing “Irishness” or extending Irish culture**

The broadcasters were asked, “Do you see your program as primarily reinforcing a sense of ‘Irishness’ among people of Irish descent in the U.S.; or extending the influence of Irish culture to Americans with little or no connection to Ireland?  If both, which would you say is the primary mission of the program?” The approach tends to differ from the highly localized AM programs to the more culturally oriented FM programs, with the AM programs tending to more consciously embrace the notion of “Irishness.”

Ginnelly, the Chicago AM radio host, responded that his program is primarily geared towards people of Irish descent living in the U.S. “Much of the content is of interest to ex-pats — the Irish living in America — particularly the first hour’s content, news and sports,” he said. “The second hour often features segments that would appeal to the ‘American’ audience — things like political interviews in the run up to elections, musical segments on concerts coming to the area and that kind of stuff.” Ginnelly’s show, as others, broadcasts information concerning local wakes. “It’s quite common, yes. Again, it comes down to the local aspect of the program and its relevance and importance as a source of news and information for a local audience.”

O’Donovan represents the typical FM approach to promoting and preserving Irish consciousness. “There really is no ‘mission’ to the program,” he commented. “Rather, it explores a genre that is of interest to me personally and makes a connection between the Celtic Countries (it covers a lot more than Irish music.) But it doesn’t have a goal except that of WGBH ‘to enlighten, educate, and entertain.’” O’Donovan says Celtic music and appeals to many listeners not of Irish or Celtic descent.

**Irish identification in U.S. — increasing or declining**

Hosts were asked, “Do you see the sense of Irish identification increasing or declining in America?” They showed widely divergent views on this question.

Ginnelly said he sees Irish identification declining. “This, I think is primarily as a result of immigration policy in the U.S.,” he said. “The flow of immigration has slow to a trickle since 9/11 and there are far fewer Irish emigrants coming to the States.” The result, he said, is diminishing influences in public life and politics, areas in which the Irish have traditionally been very active. “The Irish have always been hard workers and strong entrepreneurs — so we are losing influence in that area, too, in terms of contribution to the local economy.”

O’Donovan agreed with Ginnelly that immigration from Ireland has declined. “But right now there is perhaps a more healthy sense of what being Irish or ‘of Irish descent’ is,” he said. “Access to information on-line, accessibility to affordable travel, education, and a healthy image projected from Ireland has erased the commercial ‘shamrockery’ often foisted on Irish-Americans in the past.”

**Countering stereotypical Irish images**

The U.S. Irish broadcasters were asked, “To what extent do you attempt to counter stereotypical images of the Irish?” This question aroused considerable passion among the hosts. The issue of excessive drinking is a sensitive subject to several hosts.

Troy, of WUST-AM in Washington, D.C. embraces the popular images of the Irish. “I’m actually proud of Notre Dame, the ‘Fighting Irish.’ It rolls off me like a sheet, ‘drunk and fighting.’ I don’t want them running it (the stereotypes) into the ground, but I’m proud of the contribution of 34 million Irish-Americans. We don’t brag enough about it, ‘the Fighting 69th’ (famed Irish infantry division in World War I). We’re a low-key group of people.”

On the other hand, McDonald of WTMR-AM in Philadelphia takes offense at the St. Patrick’s Day promotions targeted to what she calls “the green-beer ‘Oirish.’” “Especially the crap sold by Spencer's Gifts and other merchandisers of the same ilk. I've had people on the show to discuss this and I will share on my Facebook page any links pertaining to protests and petitions concerning the merchandise,” she said.  “I also play a great song by Eric Bogle (Scottish singer/songwriter living in Australia) called ‘Plastic Paddy’ and another song by Robbie O'Connell called ‘You're Not Irish.’ They're both very humorous and poke gentle fun at the green-beer folks. Who are oblivious...”

Falstaff of WRFG-FM in Atlanta: “Subtly, I definitely do this, by ignoring Irish media reports on things like binge drinking in Ireland, for instance, while slipping in brief mentions of positive unusual things, for example, Cork students winning the Euro science contest.” Kiger added, “I steer way clear of songs like ‘Danny Boy’ and others that seem stereotypical. I try to stay away from the rebel songs and songs about drinking.”

**Use of Gaelic**

The hosts of the U.S. Irish music programs were asked, “Does Gaelic (Irish language) have any part in your broadcasts?  Why or why not?” Relatively little speech in the Gaelic/Irish language occurs in the American programs, but considerable airplay is given to songs with lyrics in Gaelic.

**Discussion**

The Irish music programs on radio stations in the top 10 U.S. markets tend to be heard on weekends, Saturdays and Sundays, for a period of one or two hours (with a few exceptions). The stations tend to fall into one of two categories: small, ethnic-oriented AM commercial stations, or FM public (non-commercial) stations. The programs on the stations in the first category tend to be intensely local in nature, emphasizing news, sports, and information on Irish community events and activities (including the announcement of wakes), on an equal basis with traditional Irish music. The programs in the second category tend to focus more specifically on the music (also tending toward a broader definition of “Celtic” music), and tend to be more esoteric in tone. An exception to this rule is “Ceol na nGael,” on WFUV-FM in New York, which remains dedicated specifically to Irish music and features a considerable amount of community announcements and news from Ireland, and which runs four hours (12 noon-4 p.m.). “Blarney on the Air” and “Ireland Tonight” on WDCB-FM in Chicago are heard on Monday nights.

It is unlikely that most of these programs reach a wide audience. “A Celtic Sojourn” on WGBH-FM in Boston and “Ceol n na Gael” on WFUV-FM in Boston probably reach the largest audiences, based on their own estimates, but also WGBH’s 2.7 rating and WFUV’s 0.7 in fall 2014. WDCB-FM in Chicago (0.3), and KALW-FM in San Francisco (0.2) had measurable ratings, but the other stations in the top 10 markets are not rated, either indicating audiences too small to measure or that they do not participate with Nielsen Audio in the ratings system (Nielsen Audio Ratings, 2014). However, these programs are not designed for mass audiences. They are either designed to serve a very specific ethnic population, or to provide a cultural oasis of mostly traditional Irish/Celtic music on the U.S. airwaves. A 2012 report on the various formats in the U.S. radio market showed that “world ethnic music” generated a rating of 0.1 on 172 stations (“National Radio Format Shares, 2014).

If the ratings system does not show a large audience for the programs, the loyalty of the listeners is strong. In 2008, an article appeared on “Help Save Irish Radio in Philly,” stating that “Come West Along the Road” on WTMR was struggling financially due to declining ad sales, and organized listeners to prevent the show from leaving the air. Within weeks, listeners had pledged $11,000 to keep the show on the air, where it remains today (Foley, 2008; Meade, 2008).

It is notable that streaming audio from RTE Radio in Ireland seems to have had little effect on the audiences for the American AM and FM radio broadcasters, and most believe that Internet streaming is helpful to them in attracting new listeners. Statistics provided by RTE support the U.S. Irish broadcasters’ belief that RTE streaming radio has had little effect on U.S. listeners. RTE reports that between October 6, 2014 and January 4, 2015, a total of 1,567 streams were provided to U.S. listeners (“RTE Streaming Report,” 2015).

The producers and/or hosts of the programs are very independent in their musical selections. Only a handful of artists show up with more than one song (Table 2, attached). The only performers included in the playlists who were Irish Music Award winners for 2013 or nominees for 2014 are Francis Black, Moya Brennan, Cara Dillon, Full Set and Lumiere (“Irish Music Awards,” 2014).

The emphasis of the programs is strongly on traditional Irish and Celtic music, while some programs emphasize younger exponents of the music than others. Contemporary Irish performers U2, Van Morrison and Sinead O’Connor do not appear in the playlists, and no artists on the December playlist of RTE Radio appear on the show playlists (“RTE Playlist,” 2014).

Most if not all of the programs use Facebook and other social media to connect with listeners. “Ceol n naGael” (WFUV-FM, New York) had by far the most “likes” with more than 3,100, with “Come West Along the Road” (WTMR-AM, Philadelphia) and “Blarney on the Air” (WDCB-FM, Chicago) next at more than 1,400. Listener comments are few, and most of the comments are positive and innocuous, such as (responding to a post on an appearance by the group the “Dead Rabbits”), “Sure was fun to hear the Warren again!” on the “Irish Aires” Facebook page (KPFT, “Irish Aires,” 2015).

“The Thistle & Shamrock” exists in a separate category from the local programs in the top 10 U.S. markets. It began as a local program on WFAE-FM in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1981, and became a National Public Radio program in 1983 (Ritchie, 2005). The program is now heard on more than 300 public radio stations with an estimated 300,000 weekly listeners (Kennedy, 2015). “The Thistle and Shamrock” has claimed to be the most listened-to Celtic music program in the world (“About the Show,” 2006). “No one has spread the Celtic revival further than Fiona Ritchie,” according to a *Wall Street Journal* article quoted in publicity for “The Thistle & Shamrock” (“Press Clippings, 2015).

Adrian Flannelly is one of the best-known Irish broadcasters in the U.S. He first went on the New York airwaves in 1970, and continues to stream his program online weekly via “The Irish Radio Network USA.” (“Irish Radio Network,” 2015). Flannelly’s organization did not respond to inquiries for this article.

Traditional Irish and Celtic music, while not typically finding its way to the top of the pop charts, maintains a healthy presence on the U.S. radio airwaves, where it will continue to influence listeners and musicians as it has throughout history (O’Connor, 2001).

**NOTES**

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