ABSTRACT

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A Singing Space: Re-Contextualizing Tradition

Traditional singers in Ireland today gather in singing sessions to share traditional songs. A significant number of individuals involved in traditional singing in Ireland have expressed concern about the sustainability of the social life of traditional singing. For these individuals, the act of getting together to sing is deeply meaningful to their senses of identity and community. Therefore, this work investigates the vitality of social singing and its significance to modern life.

This thesis problematizes the sustainability of tradition in a modern world based on its practice in singing sessions. By exploring the social life of Irish traditional singing in the context of song sessions, this thesis demonstrates what individuals within the singing community are doing to ensure its sustainability. To fully understand the sociality which can emerge from traditional singing, research was conducted as an autoethnography. Critical themes that emerged include identity, participation, and community. This thesis looks at repertoire to understand the connection singers make with each other through songs. Through a series of case studies, this work reveals that singing sessions are a response to the perceived need for safe and inclusive spaces to sing, which in turn fulfills a need for a safe space in which to develop a feeling of community.

This thesis challenges the common assumption that traditional singing must be approached primarily as something to be safeguarded. Instead, it focuses on how and why individuals engender singing—creating and encouraging spaces for singing to take place. Stemming from this transition of approaches, ethnographic fieldwork reveals that social singing communities work to re-contextualize spaces in which to sing to ensure the integrity of the singing while making it relevant today. Through this study, this thesis illustrates proven strategies that continue to make tradition relevant to twenty-first century social life.
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is original material by the author. None of the material has been used before or published at the time of submission. Permission to conduct this research has been approved by the University of Limerick Ethics Committee. Informants gave permission to use their full names.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CCÉ—Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (also called Comhaltas)
ICH—Intangible Cultural Heritage
ICHC—Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention
ITMA—Irish Traditional Music Archive
UNESCO—United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WHC—World Heritage Convention
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

*It’s funny. When we all talk about singing and traditional music, there’s always this lament that something is happening now that didn’t happen before. I think that things are quite healthy. It doesn’t worry me and things have to change. Things have to. We can’t put ourselves in a bubble and stay there, because I think that’s when things will start to break down. I think it’s when you try and remove yourself too much from everything else that’s going on around you.*

- Grace Toland

Social singing and traditional song have long been a vital aspect of Irish musical life. Today in Ireland, much singing occurs in what are called singing sessions and singing weekends. These are events specifically designed with the intent to promote social singing of Irish traditional songs. This phenomenon is in large part a response to a perceived crisis facing the sustainable practice of traditional song that is worth examining and comparing with other approaches to sustaining tradition being taken throughout the world. Traditional singing in Ireland is a form of intangible cultural heritage.¹ “Traditional, contemporary and living at the same time: intangible cultural heritage does not only represent inherited traditions from the past but also contemporary rural and urban practices in which diverse cultural groups take part” (UNESCO 2016). Irish traditional singing can be considered one example of intangible cultural heritage; it is inherited and passed down from previous generations without a physical, tangible element such as a building or natural site.

This thesis investigates how traditional singing practices are being brought forward into the twenty-first century, within the context of the singing session. My two

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¹ ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage’ has become a common term because of its use by UNESCO. It is a key term in this study and will be thoroughly examined throughout this thesis.
primary questions of investigation were: “What are the forms of this practice?” and “What are its characteristics and distinctive features?” To address these questions, I conducted case studies of singing events in Ireland, including two monthly singing sessions, The Ennis Singers Club and The Night Before Larry Got Stretched, and two annual weekend festivals, The Clare Festival of Traditional Singing and the Inishowen Folk Song and Ballad Seminar. These events are prominently English-language gatherings—Irish-language gatherings could be the source of a completely different study with its own set of unique conclusions. Through a participant-observer approach to field research, interviews, and direct involvement in the events, I hoped to uncover how the Irish model for safeguarding and engendering traditional song might be relevant to an understanding of issues across the broader world of sustaining intangible cultural heritage.

This thesis is not, by choice and intent, a single-site ethnographic investigation of a singing session in its full complexity such as an in-depth analysis of one regularly occurring monthly meeting, nor is it a study of traditional song as it is transformed in the setting of the singing circles. By choosing two sessions that contrast with one another in key points, and supplementing these field sites with other occasions for Irish traditional social singing, it is designed as a micro-study focussed on the participants’ efforts to foster such singing, now and into the future. It is an issue-driven investigation of the singing session phenomenon as a clear instance of action aimed at sustainability of the practice of social singing. Therefore, leading activist figures in creating this phenomenon were interviewed extensively to reveal their motivations, their vision of what the sessions should be, and what they aim to accomplish. Two contrasting

2 ‘Folk song’ and ‘folksong’ are used interchangeably in literature. I use ‘folk song’ because it is spelled as two words in both the title of the Inishowen festival and among my informants. I use ‘folksong’ only when referencing specific literature that spells it as one word.
sessions and festivals were examined in more detail in order to understand how these different positions play out in practice, and several other related events provide a glimpse of the larger phenomenon and field of consciously promoted traditional social singing practice which comprises a larger scope than just that practiced within the sessions.

**Research Purpose**

The purpose of my research is to address how the social life of Irish traditional singing is evolving and examine where it is headed in the future. The goal of this inquiry is to ascertain the attitudes towards safeguarding and engendering spaces in which traditional singing can thrive. Its outcomes will, I hope, suggest ways to best ensure the sustainability of the social life of Irish traditional singing in a modern world.

The two themes of ‘safeguarding’ and ‘engendering’ are central to this thesis. ‘Safeguarding’ is a term in wide use in cultural policy discourse around the world today to mean ‘protecting,’ which, based on my research, I have found to be problematic, as it does not allow for the voice of the practitioner to prominently enter the discourse. Its adoption by UNESCO in its *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* ensured its use when discussing sustainability of cultural practices.

Safeguarding has thus come to dominate discourse of intangible cultural heritage (ICH for short) and what to do with ICH from a policy point of view. It is important to note that not all forms of expression that might be considered ICH are well covered by UNESCO, but this does not reduce their cultural value. In Chapter Six, I provide examples for arguments against such an assumption—particularly the concerns around creating lists and documentation and strategies to work around such concerns. For instance, not all songs and singers are recorded and archived but that does not reduce their value, and my informants suggest ways to acknowledge the value of non-
documented songs. I am aware that ICH and Irish singing are not necessarily the same phenomenon, but I use the extensive ICH discourse available to provide a scholarly foundation for my examination of what is happening at the local level. This thesis takes the discourse surrounding ICH as developed through UNESCO initiatives and explores the fit, or lack there-of, to this Irish case study.

While not much discourse exists regarding the social life of Irish traditional singing, there are practices quite similar to the Irish singing circles I investigate in closely related contexts such as the folk song revival movements in Scotland, England, and North America. I draw upon these examples in making comparisons that highlight the distinctive forms such efforts have taken in Ireland. After presenting critiques of common understandings of safeguarding, I look to the ways in which practitioners are safeguarding Irish traditional singing.

However, the concept of safeguarding does not necessarily best explain the mindset behind the Irish traditional singing session, so I suggest replacing it with the term engendering. I will argue that engendering, by which I am referring to strategies for fostering practice, is a better term to describe participants’ attitudes toward continuing the phenomenon of Irish traditional singing than safeguarding.

Through an examination of safeguarding approaches to cultural heritage, I can argue for a transition to engendering as a more effective approach to the phenomenon of Irish traditional singing. While I suggest that such a transition offers a new approach to sustainability, I ultimately conclude that a balance between both safeguarding and engendering, described more in detail in Chapter Seven, can help make social singing relevant in the twenty-first century while still maintaining its integrity in tradition.³

³ ‘Tradition’ is a problematic term which is fleshed out in Chapter Six.
Based on my reading of the now extensive discussion and critique of safeguarding around the world, I am led to conclude that in order to best ensure the continuation of the social life of Irish traditional singing, the traditional singing community must take a bottom-up approach in safeguarding and engendering efforts, creating and sustaining events for their own practice. Michael Hitchcock asks the question “Heritage for whom?” (Harrison and Hitchcock 2005). He asks, is the heritage concerned fabricated, crystallized, or a snapshot of an idealized past created for display? Or, is it meant for the bearers of the heritage, the community of traditional singers and enthusiasts, organically adapted into modern culture? In traditional singing contexts, what is often designated as heritage is practiced and sustained by members of the community from a grassroots approach, whereas much discourse on heritage is from the perspective of a top-down policy approach. However, similarities can be found concerning strategies regarding the reason for practicing the heritage, and the question “Heritage for whom?” is an important one to address.

Issues such as the crystallization of ICH against changes attributed to modernization are investigated further in Chapter Six. My research suggests that an example of a safeguarded culture is that which is practiced by a community, for the community, and is relevant to the experience of that community in today’s modern life.

While this initial hypothesis provided a direction for my research, the real answers to my research questions stem from the development of my ethnography, with attention to the individuals for whom and because of whom Ireland’s singing heritage may continue to thrive. Answers are understood in context with the social settings in which I observed, participated, and interviewed, and the research process as a whole.

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4 One kind of display of heritage is that which is presented for tourism. The topic of tourism, while large in the overall investigation of ICH, does not directly apply to Irish traditional singing sessions. For an exploration into Irish traditional music and tourism, see Adam R. Kaul, (2009), *Turning the Tune: Traditional Music, Tourism, and Social Change in an Irish Village* 3, New York: Berghahn Books.
The research question guides the methodology and is chosen to address a particularly important research problem of current and cutting edge interest in ethnomusicology and folkloristic studies, especially in relation to the move of these fields into so-called applied aspects of the discipline which prominently include recognizing the social value of traditional practices (Turino 2008). Research questions and methodology have been prompted by both disciplines of ethnomusicology and folkloristic engagement with the UNESCO process of articulating best practices in Intangible Cultural Heritage policy [Stefano et. al., 2012].

The Development of the Modern Traditional Singing Session

Defining and Problematizing Tradition

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, ‘Tradition’ is: “1. an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior . . . 2. the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction,” and “3. cultural continuity in social attitudes, customs, and institutions” (Merriam-Webster 2016). The UNESCO website elaborates upon these everyday meanings in relation to oral traditions in particular:

The oral traditions and expressions domain encompasses an enormous variety of spoken forms including proverbs, riddles, tales, nursery rhymes, legends, myths, epic songs and poems, charms, prayers, chants, songs, dramatic performances and more. Oral traditions and expressions are used to pass on knowledge, cultural and social values and collective memory. They play a crucial part in keeping cultures alive.

(UNESCO 2016)

The website provides a further definition of ‘living heritage’ as: “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills transmitted by communities from generation to generation” (Ibid.). Articulating a straightforward, conventional, and quite conservative definition of what is traditional music in Ireland, Sean Ó Riada writes, “By ‘traditional’ I mean the untouched, unWesternized [sic], orally-transmitted
music which is still, to the best of my knowledge, the most popular type of music in this country” (Ó Riada 1982, 19). I have learned that such definitions, especially Ó Riada’s, are dogmatic, and problematize the more fluid term according to what has emerged in the field in Chapter Six, which is an exploration of the use of so-called tradition in Irish traditional singing sessions.

‘Tradition’ is used by my informants to describe the kind of music they sing. It is the umbrella term used to categorize a particular musical style in Ireland. According to Fintan Vallely, ‘traditional,’ in terms of indigenous Irish music, implies:

1. A particular set of music and aesthetics with roots in all eras and strata of earlier Irish artistic life;
2. Evolution by reproduction, composition, borrowing and re-arrangement;
3. A product of intelligent minds and aesthetic sensibility, with much composition and preservation contributed by privileged classes;
4. A conscious and subconscious passing on by artistically driven, obsessive music lovers for the entertainment of people for whom it is familiar, meaningful, valuable and uplifting.

(Vallely 2011, 688)

The term ‘traditional singing’ is not simply defined. Nicholas Carolan, founder of the Irish Traditional Music Archive in Dublin, provides a general description of Irish traditional song in *Grove Music Online* (Carolan 2001). He describes it as an oral art of rural origin, which may be sung in Irish or English. The corpus of Irish traditional song includes narrative, lyric, and love songs, particularly in a strophic and ‘metrically uniform’ form. English language narrative songs are often referred to as ballads, which can be classified further by dissemination method or by the collections from which they are found. Two such ballad classifications are broadside ballads and the Child Ballads. Broadside, or broadsheet, ballads were narrative songs described by Fintan Vallely as, “A single sheet of paper upon one side of which was a printed ballad” (Vallely 2011, 40). They were sold and distributed in Ireland from the late sixteenth century to the twentieth century and “included already well-known ballads and popular song, and
more topical new material that was written by scribes hired by the printers” (Ibid., 41).

The Child Ballads were ballads predominantly from England and Scotland, but also including Irish and American variants, which were documented by Harvard Professor Francis James Child in the late nineteenth century. Child’s collection of 305 ballads was published from 1882 to 1898 in a five-volume series titled *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Ibid., 123-4).

Traditional songs are usually performed solo and unaccompanied, yet listeners may join in choruses or the final lines of verses. The singers may include embellishments or ornaments in their performances, and the rhythm is often free (Carolan 2001). However, this characterization is fairly broad and can be flexibly applied, such as to newly composed songs in a traditional style. The boundaries of traditional repertoire and style can also be more stringently set, such as is the case at competitions with strict rules for judging a performance.5

In Chapter Six, I explore the nuanced notion of tradition, leaning into Nicholas Carolan’s more dynamic definition that traditional music is “music of a living popular tradition” (Carolan 1991).6 Although understandings of the term are nuanced, I use ‘traditional’ as my informants use the term—to describe a specific singing practice and repertoire.

‘Tradition’ and ‘traditional singing’ are terms with nearly as many definitions as singers and scholars of traditional song. I learned through interviews and my observations that tradition is more of a ‘notion’ than an objective reality, a theme which will be developed upon further in Chapter Six. It seems necessary to problematize ‘tradition’ when laying out terms and definitions. Here, I provide general comments on

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5 See section on Heritage in Ireland later in this chapter.
what is traditional singing according to standard understandings of the term, based on Carolan’s definition provided above and my own observations in the field. However, after attending singing sessions and speaking to informants about tradition, I learned of the ‘notion,’ or ‘idea’ of tradition, instead. This conception of tradition emerged through my field research, and the peculiarities in usage of the term among my informants became clear after the transcription, coding, and analysis process of fieldwork data. Therefore, it can be best problematized after I investigate and analyze the ethnographic groundwork.

In my own experience with traditional songs, I have observed that they are usually sung unaccompanied at the singing sessions. In English language sessions, most songs are consistently metered and strophic, meaning they have several verses of different texts with the same tune. They may have repeated choruses or lines, but not necessarily. Singers tend to sing with their chest voices, or their speaking vocal register, but again this is not always the case (Hast and Scott 2004). I have observed that singers might modify meters by lengthening climaxes within lines rather than at the end of lines, though the degree of rubato\(^7\) varies depending on singers, regions, and languages. I notice that singers’ rhythmic or comedic songs tend to use less rubato, while singers of long ballads or slower songs use more rubato. Despite tempo adjustments by holding some notes longer than others, I also notice that singers generally keep an overall steady pulse, which keeps the song flowing (Ibid.). Slower tempo songs tend to give greater opportunity for ornamentation than faster songs. Singers may add virtuosic ornamentation in slower songs; alternatively, they may only sing ornaments that fit within the beat in faster songs (Ibid.). Classical vibrato and

\(^7\) Rubato is a manipulation of musical time. Musicians who use rubato may expand or shorten the timing of beats.
excessive dynamics are not favored (Ó Riada 1982, 20-22; see Chapter Four), though sometimes a vibrato is evident (Hast and Scott 2004).

**Traditional Singing Sessions**

When I speak of traditional singing sessions, I refer to the process of getting together to share songs rather than to specific repertoire. I move from an ‘item’ centered definition to a processual one. In this thesis, Irish traditional singing is understood as a participatory singing process that encourages the singing of what the singers understand to be traditional songs.⁸

The crux of my field research is a modern context for traditional singing called the singing session, one such participatory setting. Different types of gatherings with singing also exist in Ireland, which I outline below. For the purpose of my research, I investigated scheduled events called singing or singers’ sessions, circles, or clubs where people gather explicitly for song sharing.⁹ Singing sessions come with their own sets of rules, hierarchies, and organizational methods, which I describe in Chapter Three, where I delve more deeply into these specialized, structured contexts. Usually, gatherings with singing, whatever the context, have a concentration of solo, unaccompanied performances. Fintan Vallely writes about singing in social contexts:

> There is a communal sense of place and a shared sense of social history which often moves the listeners to utter words of approval and encouragement to the singer. . . . [Intimate feelings] create a strong emotion and form a bond of sympathy and affection between singer and listeners.

(Vallely 2011, 630)

If the songs are accompanied, the accompaniment is usually sparse. Listeners must be quiet for the singers, but they may sing along at the ends of phrases or during chorus refrains. The singers don’t perform the song on a stage, but instead usually stay where

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⁸ Repertoire will be investigated deeper in Chapter Four.
⁹ The word ‘singers’ is often presented in various forms in the titles of the clubs, i.e. singers, singer’s, or singers’ club. I present names in this thesis as they are presented by the clubs themselves—for instance, the ‘Ennis Singers Club.’
they are sitting or standing to share the song for quiet listeners. They might not engage with audience members with direct eye contact in a performative manner but instead often close their eyes or gaze softly to the ground (Williams 2010, 162-3).\textsuperscript{10} The humble body language allows “the meaning of the song to speak more directly and emphatically to [listeners]” (Ibid., 163). Here, I briefly outline a few different examples of what I consider to be the social settings for participatory singing in Ireland in order to clarify my research topic parameters.

According to informants for this thesis, organizers and singers in singing sessions,\textsuperscript{11} people originally gathered in house parties to sing and play traditional music in the context of the ‘house party’ or ‘kitchen session.’ The setting for a house party might have been at a farm house or barn at nighttime, when farmers and their families were finished working for the day. Neighbors gathered to spend time with each other in the kitchen, the main room of the house, next to a large open fire when the weather was cold, dark, and wet. Because Irish homes and communities in the nineteenth century and later did not have televisions, radios, concerts, shopping centers, and other technologies of media entertainment advances of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, neighbors instead would pass the time telling stories, singing, playing music, and dancing. Breandán Ó Madagáin recognized the vibrancy of music at the center of Irish social life in the nineteenth century (Ó Madagáin 1985, 132). Often, singing was viewed as the high point of the night, as all attention shifted from a mixture of entertainments to focus solely on the singer (Glassie 1982).

\textsuperscript{10} Exceptions exist to this performative style. Singers might stand up, give eye contact, or use large hand gestures, especially when performing different genres. For instance, humorous and bawdy songs are often performed in this extrovert style, as well as recitations, or spoken stories and poems (Williams 2010).

\textsuperscript{11} I introduce my informants later in this chapter.
Today, social singing gatherings are not limited to the home setting. They may occur during festivals, competitions, or concerts. House parties with singing still occur in Ireland (I have been to several, myself), but they are not as regular, or at least not as visible, in the traditional singing world. House gatherings with music are decreasing because of changes in entertainment, primarily modern technology. One major contributor to the demise of the house party in the early twentieth-century was the Public Dance Hall Act of 1935, which banned dances in private homes in rural Ireland. Formally organized dances were then held in public dance halls, run by local clergy who opposed dances previously organized for various occasions (Brennan 1999, 10).

Traditional singing may be heard during Irish traditional music sessions, predominantly instrumental, which occur all over Ireland. Listeners and musicians can find sessions nearly every day of the week, often multiple sessions a day in some towns and cities. Usually found in pubs but also in community centers, markets, restaurants, or private homes, sessions range from small country gatherings filled with farmers and other rural inhabitants to vibrant young city residents or university students—from two musicians tucked away in a quiet corner to twenty musicians filling the room. Almost any musician may play, as long as she or he is aware of session etiquette and knows the music (Fairbairn 1993). Sessions usually consist of instrumental tunes, but can also contain dancing, songs, and stories and are therefore a haven for Irish intangible cultural heritage. While most sessions are scheduled weekly—or nightly—events, spontaneous sessions can occur when a group of musician friends get together and the bar accommodates the music.

Instrumental sessions have been studied extensively, but for the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to say that a session is a “loose association of musicians who meet, generally, but not always, in a pub to play an unpredetermined selection, mainly
of dance music, but sometimes with solo pieces such as slow airs or songs” (Vallely 2011, 610). Although often believed to be a centuries-old tradition, instrumental pub sessions only became popular in the 1960s. Before the 1960s, Irish traditional music was played in private homes and kitchens in gatherings as described above and as dance accompaniment at house parties and dance halls. Irish emigration skyrocketed in the latter half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, particularly to urban areas such as London. Musicians could no longer play private sessions without disturbing their close neighbors, so they started playing more in public locations (Kaul 2007, 705). After World War II, pub sessions came to Ireland. Then, the Anglo-American folk music revival of the 1960s piqued global interest in Irish traditional music, and musical pilgrims flooded to Ireland for the music, raising demand for pub sessions (Ibid.).

Singing may be a welcome element of the instrumental session. For instance, if the session leader enjoys songs or is a singer him- or herself, he or she may provide a few songs or ask singers present to give songs. However, musicians or publicans may not want singing during instrumental sessions because the singing often brings down the tempo and energy of the socializing. If the session performances predominantly feature fast, energetic tunes or the bar is loud, singing is not possible. When a singer does sing, the clientele is expected to be quiet, at least those in close proximity to the singer. This is both because a singer is not as loud as the instruments and because singing in Ireland is usually treated as a central focus point. When a singer starts, listeners might hush their neighbors who are talking, whereas during instrumental sessions, other clientele can talk, move, and order drinks during the playing.

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12 The term ‘session’ likely came from jazz jam sessions. It only came into common use from the 1960s, so descriptions of house or kitchen sessions before that time are modern names for an older phenomenon (Vallely 2011, 611).
According to informants, although there might be singing if a singer is present at an instrumental session, this is not guaranteed. A singer cannot simply burst into song during an instrumental session unless that singer is a very prominent figure. Singing during instrumental sessions generally only happens when the musicians need a short break. The difficulties of singers finding appropriate places to sing is described more in detail in Chapter Three.

Traditional singers therefore need another outlet, so within the last thirty-five years, singers started gathering in sessions specifically developed for singing and song sharing called singing circles, singing sessions, or singers’ clubs, terms used interchangeably and decided upon by their respective groups. Sean Williams describes the difference between instrumental sessions and what she calls the folk club in Ireland:

Many of the ballad singers and singer-songwriters without an international profile have performed at local folk clubs, which are periodic gatherings of singers and their friends at a public venue—often in the back room of a pub. The difference between a folk club and a pub session is that a folk club assumes that singing will be an important part of the evening.

(Williams 2009, 206)

Folk clubs in particular were common around England and Scotland before the fully devoted singing session arrived in Ireland. Developed in response to the folk revival of the mid-twentieth century, folk clubs were places for amateur musicians and singers to share folk songs. In Singing from the Floor: A History of British Folk Clubs (Bean 2014), author J. P. Bean explains the origins of the British folk club and its relation to the British folk revival:

In 1953 the BBC Home Service broadcast Ballads and Blues, a six-part series of folk music. The seeds of a movement were beginning to germinate and each of these events contributed to what would become known as the folk revival. Then in late 1956 Lonnie Donegan, a banjo player in Chris Barber’s jazz band . . . took ‘Rock Island Line’ to the top of the British pop charts, selling three million copies. A new musical craze—skiffle—swept the country. Teenagers raided attics and junk shops for cheap guitars and banjos. Washboards were acquired and basses improvised out of tea chests. On street corners, in back yards, youth clubs and schools, skiffle groups formed overnight. . . Skiffle
clubs gradually became folk clubs... Topic Records began to issue recordings of folk music. The British folk revival was under way. (Ibid., 1-2)

Singing sessions began appearing in the 1970s in response to the perceived need for singers to have a platform to share their songs in an environment suitable for singing (An Góilín 2016). This means that attendees to folk clubs or singing sessions are requested to show their respect for the singers by silently listening, with minimal conversation between songs. Session leaders encourage all present to sing, either by requesting names for a list, moving in succession around the room, or opening the floor for volunteers. Singing sessions usually enforce sets of spoken or unspoken protocols, hierarchies, and customs which vary between sessions, (described more in detail in Chapter Three) (O’Shea 2008, 131). Song sessions can be found all over Ireland and vary in organizational styles, rules and regulations, lenience or austerity, size, and urban or rural locations, and can meet weekly, monthly, annually, or perhaps only once for a special occasion.

Singing sessions may meet independently, not associated with any other occasion. Likewise, sometimes singing sessions are scheduled as part of a larger event’s activities, such as the daily singing session that occurs at the Spanish Point Golf Club during the Willie Clancy Festival, or an organized post-concert ceilidh. Sometimes, they are unscheduled but occur because the singers and musicians are already gathered together for the scheduled event and choose to take advantage of the occasion in this way. In such cases, the singing may happen in nearby pubs or at the concert venue after the concert has finished. In these instances, instrumentalists and

13 An Góilín is a singing club based in Dublin. See Chapter Three for a full introduction and description of its relevance to this study.
15 Pronounced “kaylee,” the ceilidh has come to mean a gathering of music and dance. I use the spelling ceilidh, but the word can have multiple spellings. Henry Glassie uses the spelling ceili (1982; 2006).
singers may make music together for hours, only packing up their belongings by dawn of the next day.

**Festivals**

Traditional music festivals are events hosting dance, music, and singing. Musicians who gather at these festivals are a part each other’s social lives, forming communities and identifying themselves as members of the community—for example, as traditional musicians, or ‘traddies.’ Many annual festivals occur around the entire country throughout the year. Festival activities may last a day or weekend, to which a small number of interested visitors are invited. They may also span weeks, with thousands of participants crowding the streets and performance venues. Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, or ‘Festival of Irish Music’ is one such large event, probably the largest and best known. Hosted by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and usually held in mid-August, Fleadh Cheoil is the culmination of a series of smaller competitions. The first Fleadh Cheoil occurred in 1951 in Mullingar, County Westmeath. Each year, the Fleadh takes place in a different location. Informal music sessions, filled with players from all over Ireland and abroad, occur on the streets and in pubs, creating a carnival atmosphere. Families and friends support competitors, exposing more people to traditional music, and attention and respect stimulates the musicians (Henry 1989, 75). Singing is one element of both the competition and the extraneous activities during the Fleadh.

The Willie Clancy Summer School and Music Festival is another internationally acclaimed festival which takes place in mid-July in Miltown Malbay, County Clare. The first festival occurred in 1973 and continues in memory of Willie Clancy, a Clare-based *uilleann* piper.¹⁶ The Willie Clancy Festival is not a competition, but instead

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¹⁶ *Uilleann* meaning ‘elbow;’ players squeeze air into these Irish pipes with their elbows.
attracts visitors through its prestigious intensive music and dance lessons, sold-out concerts, countless music and song sessions, and *ceilidhs*. Music sessions can be either main or cursory events at festivals. Intimate festivals also decorate traditional music calendars, such as singing weekends hosted by song clubs or even non-music related heritage events like literary festivals. Timothy G. McMahon maintains that even the festivals from the Gaelic revival around the turn of the twentieth century provided a new aspect of social life in Irish communities (McMahon 2008, 175).

Singing weekends or festivals are usually hosted by local singing clubs and take place annually throughout Ireland. Often in honor of a singer from that area, such as the Joe Heaney Festival in Carna or the Frank Harte Festival in Dublin, these events feature a number of options for participation, including sessions, workshops, lectures, concerts, and walking tours. Participants attend these festivals from around the country. Local festivals might introduce their own singers, customs, songs, and other distinct practices to these visitors. They are distinct from other traditional music festivals because they focus on songs and singers rather than instrumental music, even though instrumental music may be present.

**My Role**

I am a classically trained singer with an extensive performance background. The collaborative foundations of both professional classical ensemble performance and a collective song-sharing gathering are essentially the same—the sense of community between singers seems to strengthen as the singers experience music together. However, fundamental differences are what piqued my interest in the social life of Irish traditional singing from the beginning of my stay in Ireland.

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17 See ‘Féile Chomórtha Joe Éinniú’ on Facebook.
19 See Chapter Two for a theoretical discussion on community.
Acceptance into the professional classical community involves years of intensive study and a strict screening process that selects only those singers whose voices fit specific guidelines for involvement in ensembles, which means that many singers are turned away. Ensembles meet for rehearsals to practice and perfect selected repertoire for the best performance possible. The role of notation is central in classical music. Ensembles rehearse to properly execute the notes written on the page. Then, the conductor adds his or her own creative interpretation of the notated music. He or she leads the group, while members of the ensemble watch and follow. Generally, the performer-audience relationship is a separated one—a performer sings from the stage, and an audience listens from the house (front of theatre and seats designated for audience members).  

Contrarily, I have observed in gatherings with traditional Irish singing that meetings are not about rehearsing for a future concert, but instead are chances for singers to share songs in the moment, no matter their voice type and singing history. In theory, all are welcome into the room and invited to sing.  

Although singers usually sing solo and songs are monophonic, meaning one unaccompanied line, performer-audience relationships are blurred as performers communicate with audiences and audiences sometimes encourage performers through words and singing along. Listeners joined in this way in every singing session I have attended. Singing along is a form of support. Song sharing, and participatory music making in general, is approached in a more egalitarian manner, rather than following the lead of one conductor (Turino

\[\text{Note that this is true for most, but not all cases. Interactive performer-audience relationships can happen when the performer breaks the ‘fourth wall’ and speaks directly to the audience. The division can also be fluid when audience members interact with performers, such as singing along to a rock concert. Community ensembles, such as community choirs, may not be as selective as I described here, but instead aim for community engagement.}\]

\[\text{Note that this is a simplistic introduction. Singing clubs have their own sets of unspoken rules, which I describe more in detail in Chapter Three.}\]

\[\text{Most singers sing solo, but a few times I have heard duets, trios, and quartets—sometimes in unison, and sometimes in harmony.}\]
This communal approach to music making inspired my studies initially—a curiosity about what was, for me, the unknown, the different, the exotic.

Because I enjoy singing, I take a participant-observer approach to my research. I learn English language traditional Irish songs to become closer to this tradition and, when prompted, I sing them in music gatherings. I take this approach not only for a more personal understanding of singing social life, but also to engage with other singers and to show my own appreciation for the practice by joining in song. Ian Russell described the importance of a participant-observer relationship with his study on carol singing in Sheffield, a field context similar to my own:

It was my intention at that time to remain detached from the subject of my research in order to observe as objectively as possible the phenomenon I was recording, but such a neutral stance became untenable when I first encountered the local tradition of carol singing. It is in the nature of this largely pub-based tradition that everyone present participates. As an incomer, I was at first gently quizzed concerning my background, then explicitly encouraged to join in, and even supplied with a set of words to enable me to do so. In such a situation it would have been churlish to have remained aloof. I decided that the best way to establish my credentials was to demonstrate a willingness to sing, and to learn the words and the tunes.

(Russell 2006, 15)

I take traditional voice lessons to expand my repertoire and learn techniques specific to traditional Irish singing, such as eliminating the classical vibrato and singing in my natural, spoken vocal range. I have learned through listening and conversations that songs must drive the singer. Rather than playing a role as required in classical music performance, I must sing the songs as myself, Carrie, allowing the songs to express themselves—a characteristic I am still trying to master (Williams 2010, 208). I sing American folk songs in sessions, too, applying what I learn in traditional Irish singing to songs from my home country, because I have observed that traditional Irish singers seem to appreciate and enjoy when people share songs from their own locale and personal experiences.
My role as a participant-observer is that of a singer participating in the field. Ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood coined the term “bi-musicality” to suggest that researchers learn new instruments to fully participate in the field in which they are observing (Hood 1960). I did not wish to create an image of a scientist with a labcoat and clipboard, but instead I wanted to participate to better learn what what happening in the singing events. Also, as Russell describes above, a lack of participation could even be seen as disrespectful. As I learned in my observations, much of traditional singing is about sharing and contributing to the gathering, so by singing, even as an outsider to the field, I was also able to respect the organizers and other participants of the gatherings and understand better what it is they do. Also through participation, I experienced personally the reality of the themes of identity, participation, and belonging, which I discuss throughout this thesis.

I reflect on my observations of the traditional singing gatherings of which I am a part, producing a partial autoethnography. An autoethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, et. al. 2011, www.qualitative-research.net). My personal experience in the field helps me understand the themes I am exploring such as community and belonging. As I also sing in the sessions, I can understand the excitement or nervousness that can occur among session participants, and when my informants speak about spaces which encourage or discourage singing, I can personally understand their sentiments.

Reflecting on personal experiences forms an informed method for explaining what is happening in the field. Timothy J. Cooley and Gregory Barz describe what they call “reflexive autoethnography,” which shifts “the emphasis away from representation (text) and toward experience” (Barz and Cooley 2008, 4). I reflect on my experiences in
my fieldnotes, which I use where applicable as primary source material throughout the ethnographical studies in this thesis. Autoethnographical accounts can risk becoming “self-indulgent and ‘confessional’” (Ibid., 20), so Barz and Cooley suggest for the researcher to focus on what is ethnographically relevant, adding, “Locating the reflexive moment in shared music performance is one method pioneered by ethnomusicologists for achieving understanding, but focused on meaningful activity” (Ibid.). I am aware also that my own perspective is necessarily informed by my pre-existing understandings and that my initial interpretations of behaviors in the moment might well be biased. To avoid this, I include fieldnotes which support or debate with topics that arise in interviews and secondary source material as objectively as possible. Where I do pose a strong opinion or speculation, I state this to ensure that what I say is not necessarily representative of my informants but is drawn from my own carefully formed analyses.

I frame my autoethnography according to Brydie-Leigh Bartleet’s model. She claims, “autoethnography can offer musicians a means to reflect on their creative work in culturally insightful ways” (Bartleet 2009, 713). Her experiences and challenges as a conductor led her to “begin thinking more deeply about [her] position and asking bigger and broader questions about the musical, performative, relational, and embodied nature of the experiences [she] was having” (Ibid., 715). She admired what has been labelled as ‘evocative’ autoethnographies, which are accounts of the writers’ engaging personal stories and lives (Ibid., 716).

As much as I tried to blend in, I understand that my presence affected the flow of the singing. For instance, once I attended a session in Miltown Malbay during the Willie Clancy Festival, and a man, learning I was American, performed a recitation about America for me. My informants Jerry and Rosie told me once that when session
attendees at the singers club An Góilín see me, a young American woman, come into the room, they feel a bit of self-imposed pressure because they want to sing well for me (musical aesthetics will be discussed in Chapter Four), help me feel welcome, and represent their songs and session well. I am a singer, a researcher, an interested visitor, and a learner, and my role in the sessions represent such.

I recognize that personal experience can depend on the personality of the researcher. I am outgoing, not shy in conversation (although if I am asked to sing in front of wonderful, highly esteemed traditional singers, I can be the shyest person in the room). I am genuinely interested in the personal stories of Irish singers sitting around me, and I find they are eager to share their stories with me. I read a study of An Góilín Singers Club, a singing circle in Dublin, which I will refer to often throughout this thesis, by Vanessa Thacker in which she said members took little interest in her until she sang:

While listening is given primary importance in the club’s rules, performing is also given equal importance in practice. For example, during my first evening at the club I only listened to other singers and sparingly socialized with those around me. Though I felt welcome, I didn’t feel like people took much interest in me. However, after singing a song during my second visit to the club, I found that people took an active interest in complimenting me on my song and talking to me about music. A shared interest in songs and singing brings people to the club and informs their interactions with one another in this setting. The emphasis on participation in the club leads me to believe that mutual tuning-in through song takes precedence over the establishment of relationships through conversation. This is demonstrated in my example: singers in the club needed to tune-in with me through song before they were willing to accept me into the social life of the club.

(Thacker 2012, 2)

According to Thacker’s experience, the listening and performing of songs is more important than the social life of the session. While I agree that the songs are the thread that holds together the social gathering and the purpose for the meeting, my own experience suggests that the social life is at least equal, if not more important than the actual songs. With a few exceptions that I explain where necessary, even when I did not
sing, the other attendees at An Góilín and other singing clubs are for the most part quick to strike a conversation with me. I therefore acknowledge that personal experience, partially influenced by personality, can in turn influence observations and outcomes of autoethnographies.

**Methodology**

To provide a representative sample of structured singing contexts, I conduct a qualitative study. According to the guide *Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector’s Field Guide* (Mack *et al* 2005), qualitative research “seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the local population it involves. Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations” (Ibid., 1). Because I am investigating human behaviors and social contexts, I found that an ethnographic qualitative study is the best approach.

To collect primary source material, I attended two regularly organized monthly singing sessions and two annual singing festivals throughout 2014 and 2015. I also focused on the individuals involved in these and other sessions throughout Ireland, particularly organizers and active figures in the singing community. Many singers may be regular attendees of particular sessions and sing elsewhere, and many other singers are not regular session members but often attend festivals or will drop in on sessions when they can. Singers from Dublin may now live in Clare, or vice versa, so their allegiances may be spread throughout the country. Also, an organization’s activities may cover multiple communities. I understand these people influence a broader spectrum of singing circle participants.

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23 When I discuss contexts, I mean the places, events, situations, and circumstances in which social singing events occur.
The first singing session that I study is the Ennis Singers Club, a session which meets the second Friday of every month and usually attracts between twenty and thirty people. A majority of attendees at the Ennis Singers Club are middle-aged to retired, the venue is quiet, and emphasis is on unaccompanied repertoire. However, the facilitators are open to new songs and styles that attendees may want to share, and occasional instrumental playing. The second session is The Night Before Larry Got Stretched, a session in Dublin which meets the first Sunday of every month, named after an Irish execution ballad from the early 1800s. The Night Before Larry Got Stretched is run by a group of young singers who encourage other young singers to gather and share songs. The session, although created by and for younger singers, attracts attendees from a variety of ages and backgrounds (See Chapter Three). Its venue, the Cobblestone, is a haven for traditional music more generally as well, hosting instrumental sessions and traditional and folk concerts every night of the week. It attracts singers from a variety of ages and backgrounds.

I also have attended two singing festivals—The Clare Festival of Traditional Singing in November 2014 and The Inishowen International Folk Song and Ballad Seminar in March 2015. These specific events are popular amongst the traditional singing community, attracting visitors from outside of their regions and abroad. About two to three hundred singers come to the Inishowen weekend, and much focus is on local songs and histories. The Clare Festival of Traditional Singing is more intimate, usually with around 100 singers throughout the weekend, and is in honor of the late song collector Tom Munnelly.24

Although this thesis focuses on two monthly sessions and two annual festivals in an attempt to explain the perceived ‘crisis’ of sustainable heritage, the world of the

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24 Tom Munnelly collected English language songs throughout Ireland until his death in 2007. He is described more in detail in Chapter Five. I interviewed his wife, Annette Munnelly, for this project.
singing sessions is fairly small—one reason why singers have expressed to me their concerns about the possibility of its loss and change. At each event I attended, whether the gatherings I studied specifically for this thesis or others throughout Ireland and abroad which I used for a greater perspective on traditional singing, many of the same prominent figures attended, participated, coordinated, and sang. As will be discussed in Chapter Five, these figures acted out several roles within the singing sessions, and these roles were not confined to just one session but a few or several, in some cases.

I understand that singing in Ireland is not homogenous and is quite varied between sessions and regions. Observations from this particular micro-study help answer what is being done among my informants regarding ensuring the perpetuation and practice of tradition in a modern world. I use the model for re-contextualized traditional singing in the form of the singing session, which emerged from field research and interviews, as one possible solution to the greater perceived ‘crisis’ to the loss of tradition in an increasingly modernized world. This global crisis is in part attended to by the people involved in the singing sessions and can be answered by how singers practice tradition within the scope of such sessions as The Ennis Singers Club and The Night Before Larry Got Stretched.

Most sessions and festivals have designated leaders from whom permission to conduct my research is obtained. I approached these people before embarking upon my research. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I approached other individuals in the singing circles whom I thought might contribute to my research to request their participation in interviews.

Informants

Through semi-structured, open-ended interviews and personal participation, I address who attends singing sessions, how they interact during and outside the events,
repertoire, and presentational styles. I asked informants to share stories of their past and their opinions concerning singing in our modern world. These interviews provide the majority of invaluable primary source material which contributes to new, exciting research and provides new perspectives into Irish social singing.

My informants are either singers themselves or are deeply appreciative of traditional singing. If I were to carry out this research further, I would interview more singers who are not necessarily proactive in the field. I am curious to know what the singers who simply show up to the sessions think about their development or possible problems, what their sustainability means to these people, and where might they like to see traditional singing in the future. However, due to financial and practical constraints, I could not interview more singers in the scope of this thesis. Thankfully, those I did interview provided a wealth of information, and too many more would have muddled this information and I may have lost the sense of direction. I wanted to know what can be done about the perceived ‘crisis’ of diminishing tradition, and these answers came from those directly involved and passionate in the field. I got to hear very detailed personal stories about their involvement in traditional singing. My goal was to listen to their stories, suggestions, and opinions, and observe how they are proactively involved in the sustainability of the singing. Their accounts provided rich primary material invaluable to the development of this thesis. I was careful not to select my informants based on my own biases, nor impose my previous assumptions onto them or the events which I researched. I was open to finding participants of varying opinions and ideas to produce a dynamic report and make new discoveries.

I observed, interviewed, and conversed with my main informants. Interviews were open-ended, meaning I had a few main topics I wanted to cover, but I formed questions based on information informants provided, hoping for more of an informative
conversation than question-answer format. While I did not intentionally seek a gender balance among my informants, I did proceed to interview four women and five men. I sought individuals who were proactive in the singing circle community. Such figures might differ in other Irish singing communities. My informants were mostly organizers, leaders, and scholars—people who actively promote Irish social singing. They are, in alphabetical order:

**Rosie Davis**: Singer from England living in Ireland, set and step dancer and teacher, string bass player. At the time of this thesis, she and Jerry O’Reilly, another informant mentioned below, were partners. They sing and dance together at many musical events throughout the week and month. Rosie’s insights revealed that of an outside-insider, someone raised in folk singing in England but relatively new to the singing session scene in Ireland. She was able to make comparisons and understands what it is like to share a part of herself as an Englishwoman in Irish gatherings.

**John Moulden**: Inishowen-based singer, scholar, writer, and lecturer of Irish traditional song. John has written extensively on traditional and folk singing in Ireland. He provided detailed information with an academic slant. As a past school teacher and sympathetic for academic studies, he was able to suggest different directions and slants for me to include in my paper and suggested ways to view the singing in Ireland. He problematized terms and challenged different methods for gatherings.

**Tom Mulligan**: The owner of the Cobblestone Bar in Dublin, the location of The Night Before Larry Got Stretched, traditional music pub. Tom was very helpful in helping direct my observations and findings. He was especially enthusiastic about the social life of the Cobblestone Bar, and continuously referred to this aspect of the music making happening in the bar and elsewhere. He introduced me to other regular visitors and employees of the bar, stressing the social atmosphere. Coming from a family of musicians, he is interested and supportive of the singing. His children also play traditional music. He attends as many traditional music festivals and events in Ireland as he can, and is often invited to perform abroad. I have observed that Tom, a prominent figure, seems to have a more central role in the traditional musical community than other publicans. Because he is partially responsible for the thriving traditional music scene in Dublin, his role is more directly relevant for this thesis than other publicans who host singing sessions.

**Annette Munnelly**: The widow of song collector Tom Munnelly, organizer of the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing. Annette’s first-hand accounts of Tom and his collecting endeavors were invaluable for the formation of this thesis, especially with regards to discussing the importance of collecting when it comes

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25 Step dancing is a solo dance style and set dancing is a group dance style.
to the perpetuation of traditional singing. However, Annette’s own personal involvement with the singing was also helpful for my research. She does not claim to be a strong singer, but she still participates in the sessions and festivals, so she stressed the importance allowing singers with smaller voices to equally participate with stronger singers. She was especially concerned about finding space suitable for singing and believes the sessions are a positive answer to diminishing spaces. Annette inspired me to continue this research into the PhD when I was working on my masters. I attended a singing session at her house in Miltown Malbay during the Willie Clancy Festival in 2012, and when I asked if I could write about this session in my project, she held my hand and urged me to write, saying that is why she invited me. She wants the voices of the singers to be heard.

Máire Ni Dhonnchadha: An organizer and chairperson of the Ennis Singers Club. Máire, like Annette, is concerned about decreasing space for singing. She is in the middle of a crisis of sorts with the Ennis Singers Club, working very hard with her cohorts to keep it running and attending other sessions throughout Clare for support. Currently, members of the Ennis Singers Club, herself included, are not completely happy with their location, which will be discussed more throughout this thesis and especially in Chapter Three. Because of this, she offered an interesting perspective on the importance of space for successful singing.

Mick O’Grady: Dublin-based singer. Mick is a regular attendee of the Cobblestone Bar and is featured on the CD produced by Tom Mulligan of music occurring at the bar. Unlike my other informants, he is not an organizer, or even a regular attendee of the singing sessions, although he does attend and is especially appreciative of The Night Before Larry Got Stretched. His perspective is that of a singer, a perspective of which I would like to see more in future studies. He picks his repertoire and musical events based on what he likes, and was inspired by past Dublin singers.

Jerry O’Reilly: An organizer of the Dublin singing club An Góilín, singer, set dancer and teacher, and lecturer of Irish song and singing. I discuss Jerry’s important role in the sustainability of social singing in Ireland in depth in Chapter Five. He was extremely helpful in the making of this thesis. While I use one official interview, we spoke with each other often and he was generous with sharing information about singing. He is a singer, leader, and enthusiastic listener, and is encouraging to other singers and researchers of traditional song. He, like his sister Annette Munnelly, wants the singers’ voices to be heard, and urges me to take pictures and write about the singing in Ireland in order to garner recognition and appreciation to help the singing continue.

Grace Toland: Director of the Irish Traditional Music Archive, an organizer of the Inishowen Traditional Singers’ Circle and the Inishowen International Folk Song and Ballad Seminar, singer. Grace’s perspective was that of an archivist and librarian, and she is also a singer and session organizer. She stresses the importance of collecting and archives and is excited when she sees proof of archived material shared online and available to the public in teaching others to sing. She wishes to promote the music of Inishowen along with protecting songs
and memories of singers. By promoting the music, she helps its sustainability as a living practice. Archived material is no longer a ‘crystallized’ item merely for preservation and memory, but is a tool in the digital age for furthering learning techniques and dissemination of traditional songs.

Macdara Yeates: An organizer of The Night Before Larry Got Stretched, singer, bodhrán player. A young singer in his mid-twenties, Macdara’s fresh new approach informed the ‘engendering’ portion of this thesis. As will be discussed, the creators of The Night Before Larry Got Stretched wanted a place to feel comfortable with each other to sing songs. He is particularly concerned with the perpetuation of traditional singing but believes that each generation has fewer singers. He rethinks dissemination methods, and stresses the importance of singers needing a space in which they feel comfortable, especially the younger singers like himself. He learns his songs in a digital age and hopes to bring more rare material to the sessions. He hopes that by providing space for the singers, as long as singers wish to sing, it might continue, despite the small numbers of younger singers. Because of these smaller numbers, he suggests new dissemination methods, such as workshops for school children to raise awareness of the songs and singing.

Lastly, but certainly just as important, were my countless conversations with visitors and participants at the singing sessions. Because they were not official interviewees, I do not mention their names, but their stories make up a large portion of this thesis. They volunteered their insight for me as I sat next to them and spoke with them. They shared stories of trials and errors and personal experiences and opinions of singing gatherings. They were genuinely interested in my work and wanted me to learn as much as possible what they believed to be important about traditional singing in Ireland.

Age is relevant in regards to discussion on The Night Before Larry Got Stretched, which will be expanded upon throughout this thesis. Most of the organizers of The Night Before Larry Got Stretched are in their mid-twenties and thirties. Their fresh new approaches to singing gatherings, particularly providing space where other younger singers can sing traditional songs in a younger environment, help bring in a larger demographic to the singing. Macdara Yeates, one of these organizers agreed to an interview, and his contribution to this thesis offered a perspective from an age of singers and organizers often underrepresented in the singing session. Other informants may sing in The Night Before Larry Got Stretched, but they organize and lead other sessions and festivals. All of these informants, except Grace Toland and Tom Mulligan, are retired. They represent the demographic of most traditional singing circles which I
have encountered. Grace is the director of the Irish Traditional Music Archive and Tom is the owner of the Cobblestone Bar, so their professional life is directly related to the field of traditional music and song.

Because of the social nature of my work, I use participants’ full names with their permission. Additionally, I use participants’ first names to portray the more personal connections through singing, whereas I present academic authors by their last names. I also use the full names of publicly announced singers, such as guest singers at sessions or stage performers, and the full names of singers who were mentioned by my informants. Singing in Ireland is personal and personable, and when discussing social connections, life stories, and meaning, I feel the best way to ethically reveal what I learn is by using real names. For informants who wish to remain anonymous, I use pseudonyms, and I never disclose personal details. I do not use names for informants with whom I have casually or informally spoken about my thesis. This process has been cleared by the ethics committee at the University of Limerick.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Layers of data analysis that reveal similarities and distinctive characteristics emerged from my fieldwork. To collect data in field research, I also took photographs and recorded audio and video of venues, settings, repertoires, and performances as non-participant and participant observer. After collecting data, which included a year’s worth of fieldnotes and audio recordings of interviews and singing sessions, I spent four months coding the data to be used directly in the core of my thesis. I wrote fieldnotes as journal entries which included all aspects of the sessions and festivals, including transportation, weather, and conversations, understanding that each of these aspects could affect my experience and findings. I then expanded on these notes, creating an analysis of my observations and developing on my findings. These
expanded notes are primary sources used in the thesis. They are my own first-person accounts, becoming the autoethnography portion of my observations. I then transcribed all of my interviews, using software which slowed down the sound so that I could type every word spoken. I also transcribed full audio recordings of every session. While a direct analysis of only two sessions is described in Chapter Four, my findings from these transcriptions form my opinions and findings. I color-coded the interviews, expanded fieldnotes, and session transcriptions based on recurring themes, particularly the themes of space, repertoire, individuals, and tradition, which then became the foundation for each chapter.

Fieldnotes and transcribed interviews are used to compile my ethnography. I include fieldnotes in my ethnography for a closer, personal view into singing sessions. These are presented in italics. Observing and interacting with the traditional singing social life in a range of activities aids in forming a balanced view of the facets that constitute the social life of traditional singing and its sustainability.

All of the data collected in the above methods forms the foundation and the bulk of the information provided in this thesis. The data, including interview transcriptions, extended fieldnotes, session transcriptions, photographs, videos, and audio recordings comprises the primary source material with which I engage the most. I use secondary sources, such as written literature, to either support my claims made from my observations and analyses of primary material. I also use the primary material to argue with previous literature and secondary sources. Each statement I make based on the primary sources, I support with secondary sources to strengthen my analyses and conclusions.
Benefits and Contribution

Ultimately, I develop conclusions concerning the current character of the social life of singing in Ireland; I hope to apply my findings to the broader, global context of ethnomusicology throughout my career. Although folklorists, song collectors, and anthropologists have analyzed Irish song and singing since the late nineteenth century, the study of participatory music making is only a recent research topic. Recognizing a void in studies on the process of singing traditional music, Ian Russell comments, “A number of folk-song studies in recent years have argued the relative importance of the text and the context; far less attention has been paid to the performance, the performer, and the listener in folk-song tradition.” (Russell 2003, 266). Instead of analyzing the product of the singing, the songs, researchers are now studying the people who sing these songs. I join this new era by reviewing literature, conducting fieldwork, and producing an ethnography on singers’ social relationships as exemplified by singing in Ireland. The topic of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage has increased rapidly in scholarly books and articles within the last decade, and I apply these findings specifically to the social life of Irish traditional singing. My specific research topic, as far as I am aware at the time of submitting this document, has not been explored before. I investigated safeguarding policy in action and developed a case for transitioning to thinking of sustainability in terms of engendering heritage. I used Irish traditional singing sessions as case studies, which will ideally be relevant to other fields of traditional practice.

One interesting aspect of the creation of this thesis is that sources are limited for traditional singing in Ireland, especially in the context of social gatherings and singing circles. Such an observation arose during my search for material, and is especially evident during my initial read through Fintan Vallely’s The Companion to Irish
Traditional Music (2011), in which several pages exist on song and ballad textual and melodic analysis, but only a few paragraphs on the singing of songs or the singing sessions. I spent my first full year in my PhD searching for written, secondary-source material, and continued to find material after embarking on my field research. I found sources by reviewing literature on Irish traditional music more generally, such as the Garland Encyclopedia of World Music (2000), Tomás Ó Canainn’s book Traditional Music in Ireland (1978), and Sean Williams’ text Focus: Irish Traditional Music (2009). I then checked the works cited and bibliography lists so I could conduct further research in the field. I also used databases such as JSTOR and Google Scholar, searching for key words relating to Irish traditional song and singing to find related articles. Although an extensive bibliography comprised of related literature forms the foundation of this thesis, this work contributes to the rare field of academic literature for traditional singing and song directly.

Limitations

Because this research project is carried out within the time and space constraints of a PhD, my scope must be small. I attended several events with singing throughout my year of field research, but I focused only on the two singing sessions, the two singing festivals, and occasional singular events. However, singing in Ireland is diverse, so these few samples only represent a fraction of the traditional singing contexts available.

I chose these events partly based upon their accessibility, since I do not have a car. For my field research, I chose Ennis and Dublin because they are easily accessible by bus and have nearby budget hostel accommodation. When I had difficulty attending certain events, I rode my bike, rented a car, or relied on lifts. These alternative transportation methods worked for ‘one-off’ instances, but were impractical for regular
attendance. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend singing sessions in remote areas in the country unless I knew someone driving there. Ennis and Dublin, I hope, were different enough to represent the diversity of sessions based on whether they are in the city or a small town, or from the East or West Coast. Additionally, under the time and funding restraints of the research process, I was only able to attend the Ennis Singers Club three times and The Night Before Larry Got Stretched five times. In future studies, I will focus more directly on singular events to have a very detailed understanding of what is happening in traditional singing at the more local level.

I only attended English language singing sessions. Irish language songs are in a minority at the events I have attended. Singers may sing sean-nós, or ‘old style’ Irish language songs at these sessions, but I do not seek out Irish language singing. The term sean-nós represents a broad repertoire and various styles of singing, areas of study that are beyond the scope of this thesis.²⁶ By focusing on a few English language social singing contexts, I hope my data analysis reveals at least some key examples of conscious efforts to provide time and space for traditional singing.

Theoretical Framework

Most early academic writings and efforts towards safeguarding heritage focused on built and ecological heritage. Built heritage includes monuments, city centers, and artifacts from the past that are in danger of being destroyed to make way for modern renovations. Ecological heritage includes nature areas such as forests, rivers, or rocks that risk being destroyed by building projects or forestation. Built and ecological heritage differ from intangible cultural heritage, which is constituted by a living organism rather than a structure.

²⁶ See Seán Ó Riada (1982), Éamonn Costello (2014), and Lillis Ó Laoire (1997; 2013) for problematizations of Irish language song.
UNESCO brought heritage recognition to a global, international level. Founded in 1945 in response to the devastation of the world wars in an effort to foster peace by promoting an understanding of other cultures, UNESCO aims to protect heritage. Built and ecological spaces in United Nations member states are selected for the UNESCO World Heritage List, a list of sites that UNESCO and member states recognize need financial support and publicity for protection. Other smaller-scale organizations also work on protecting heritage, and also usually with more of a focus on tangible items. International recognition for intangible heritage such as music and dance is only recognized in most scholarly material at the start of the twenty-first century, which will be discussed in detail in this thesis.

Discourse on Intangible Cultural Heritage

Since UNESCO produces or inspires most scholarly material on intangible cultural heritage, I use UNESCO’s definitions for ‘safeguarding’ and ‘heritage,’ which I use to explain what is happening in the Irish traditional singing circles. As stated earlier, I am not claiming that Irish traditional singing is or should be designated as ICH. I am drawing on the extensive discourse published around the topic of and development of UNESCO ICH concepts and policies to interrogate the practice of the singing circles, which are clearly operating within the sphere of intentional efforts to revive, preserve, safeguard, promote, and sustain certain practices conceptualized as ‘traditional’ within a culture and therefore of value to it. I am not comparing singing to other forms of ICH, in Ireland or elsewhere, whether successful or not in the highly political process of UNESCO designation.

The UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage is the most fully articulated policy statement regarding this kind of intervention that also summarizes and synthesizes the views of many academics. An examination of its
guidelines and implementations contributes to a broad understanding of the now worldwide efforts being made to achieve these ends for the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

A recognition of ‘heritage’ as natural and manmade monuments worth preserving provides a theoretical framework for the newer division of ICH. The 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention was ratified to address what the committee believed needed protection and how they would protect these sites. Articles One and Two of the 1972 Convention define what items are considered heritage and why they need protecting:

**Article 1** For the purpose of this Convention, the following shall be considered as ‘cultural heritage’:

- monuments: architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features, which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science; groups of buildings;

- groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science;

- sites: works of man or the combined works of nature and man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view.

**Article 2** For the purposes of this Convention, the following shall be considered as ‘natural heritage’:

- natural features consisting of physical and biological formations or groups of such formations, which are of outstanding universal value from the aesthetic or scientific point of view;

- geological and physiographical formations and precisely delineated areas which constitute the habitat of threatened species of animals and plants of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation;

- natural sites or precisely delineated natural areas of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science, conservation or natural beauty.

(UNESCO 1972, 2)
Recognizing a need for an expansion from protecting monuments and natural spaces, UNESCO developed the *Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity* in 1997. The pamphlet issued by the developers of the 1997 proclamation states that the 1972 *Convention* is not applicable to intangible heritage. The 1997 *Convention* specifically states that ICH is “internationally recognized as a vital factor for cultural identity, the promotion of creativity and the preservation of cultural diversity” (UNESCO 1998, 3).

UNESCO ratified a much revised and binding *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2003. This new convention addresses a further need to distinguish living from built and ecological heritage. Built and ecological heritage are physical places and monuments that can be shielded, reconstructed, and protected, but intangible cultural heritage, by focusing on living practices, requires a different set of terminology. Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa offer explanations of the fragile nature of intangible cultural heritage, its differences from the subjects of past UNESCO conventions, and the need for its unique treatment. They write that the physical and bounded nature and the sense of ‘pastness’ of items on the World Heritage List could make related cultural policy more manageable. They also declare that no heritage is removed from controversy, dissonance, and identity politics (Smith and Akagawa 2008, 5).

The Creators of the 2003 *Convention* carefully selected the phrase ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage’ in an effort to encompass all living, non-physical activities. It replaced older terms such as ‘traditional culture,’ ‘oral tradition,’ and ‘folklore’ (Ruggles and Silverman 2009, 9). State parties engaged in the process were acutely aware of their dwindling traditional cultures, languages, and performances. They perceived a need for sustaining not just natural or historical sites, but cultural,
intangible customs and practices, as well. Modernization, globalization, homogenization, and other such oft-noted processes, explained more in detail in Chapter Six, could affect the sustainability of tradition. Therefore, the assessment of endangered cultural heritage, according to Ruggles and Silverman, inspired the ratification of the 2003 Convention.

Ireland formally ratified the Convention for the Safeguarding of ICH in December of 2015. At the time of the writing of this thesis, Ireland is seeking recognition by UNESCO for hurling (ancient sport of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)), Na Piobairí Uileann or The Uillean Pipers Club, and the University College Dublin Archives.

Tradition or Heritage?

Definitions for ‘tradition’ and ‘heritage’ often seem quite similar, and the terms are often used synonymously. Owe Ronström outlines their likeness:

Both are produced from things past—memories, experiences, historical leftovers. Both promise things in danger of disappearing—they promise a second life as exhibits of themselves, by adding value through an evocation of pastness, exhibition, difference, or indigeneity (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 149-50). They operate on the same markets and are rationalized and legitimized in much the same way.

(Ronström 2014, 52)

He then clarifies that these two terms deal with “two different mindscapes of the past:”

To begin with, the ‘tradition’ mindscape centers around the rural, the ‘old peasant society’ of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, and is mainly geared to production of locality and regionality. ‘Heritage,’ on the other hand, is predominantly urban, even when located in the countryside, and is geared to the international or transnational.

(Ibid.)

He states that tradition evokes nostalgia for a local past, whereas heritage is “an answer to processes in the late or postmodern world that promote play and experience” (Ibid., 53) Tradition is a product of the local community, typically passed down through generations. Heritage is a presentation of these products, often at the international level,
shared for others to see and learn. Here in Ireland, organizations such as Shannon Heritage seek “to develop, manage and operate commercially sustainable products and related activities by providing heritage experiences to international standards utilising our natural and built environment” (Shannon Heritage 2016)—thus acting in line with Ronström’s characterization by presenting the local product, Irish traditional practices, for visitors in activities like medieval banquets and dance shows.

I delve into deeper definitions and problematizations in an investigation into what it means to safeguard intangible cultural heritage, particularly as it relates to singing in Ireland, more closely in Chapters Six and Seven. While many singers tend to refer to their own songs as ‘traditional,’ in my thesis I apply discourse around the term ‘heritage,’ particularly intangible cultural heritage, to illustrate the social life of traditional singing as a way to present traditional song as a living practice.

Transitioning from Revival Theory to Safeguarding Theory

Before the idea of safeguarding reached mainstream theory with the development of organizations such as UNESCO, activists approached the idea of saving or resurrecting that which is lost with revival theory. A popular, colloquial use of the term ‘revival’ is the popular Anglo-American ‘Second Revival,’ the rise of protest and hippy songs of the 1950s and 1960s—the rise of the popularized genre of folk music, headlined by singer-songwriters such as Billy Joel, Bob Dylan, and Pete Seeger.27 The ‘Second Revival’ defines what I call the ‘people’s view’ of revival. I enjoyed a very active and interactive year of working with performing groups at Disneyland in California in 2013. One aspect of this job was to meet and greet visitors on tour buses as they entered the Disneyland parking lot, though these days were often long and inactive as we whiled away the hours in a portable building in the middle of

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27 The ‘Second Revival’ of the mid-twentieth century follows the ‘First Revival,’ the turn of the twentieth century and the rise of folk song collecting, publishing, and arranging.
the lot. During one of these days, I was casually discussing my studies with the security
guards in the building, trying to use easy to digest, general terminology. When I said I
study folk music, one guard ask me which Carpenters song was my favorite. The broad
definition of folk music is often that of a music of the people distinct from high art
music, so I understood his assumption. Bob Dylan represented the public’s struggle
with politics through anti-war songs. Peter Paul and Mary spread public opinion via
acoustic guitar accompaniment. The security guard had this ‘people’s view’ of the
people’s music.

This folk music revival era, while of interest and worthy of study in its own
right, is not the focus of my thesis. I instead reference the academic sense of revival as
a phenomenon, that which is outlined in The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival
(Bithell and Hill, 2014). Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill define the academic uses of
‘revival:’

A music revival comprises an effort to perform and promote music that is valued as old or historical and is usually perceived to be threatened or
moribund. Generally speaking, revival efforts engage a number of intertwined processes and issues. First, revivals are almost always motivated by
dissatisfaction with some aspect of the present and a desire to effect some sort of cultural change. Second, identifying musical elements and practices as old, historical, or traditional, and determining their value, often involves selecting from or reinterpreting history and establishing new or revised historical narratives (a process implicating scholars as well as performers and promoters). Third, transferring musical elements from the past to the present (or from one cultural group perceived as preserving lifeways that are in direct continuity with the past to a cultural group that perceives itself as being more modern) entails a decontextualization and a recontextualization.

(Ibid., 3-4)

Theories of revival and safeguarding are, therefore, similar. Both deal with promoting
music which is seen as being in danger of disappearing. Both effect cultural change in
order to guarantee the survival of the music. Both, especially with UNESCO’s
tendency toward inventory, identify historical and traditional practices and determine
the value of these practices. Lastly, both involve de-contextualization and re-contextualization.

The overarching difference between revival and safeguarding theories, however, is the perceived status of that which is being revived or safeguarded. Sean Williams defines revival as, “Reviving from (alleged) death” (Williams 2014, 601). Revival thus resurrects music practices, whereas safeguarding rescues music practices. Both of these approaches assume a conscious effort to perpetuate such endangered practices.

Revival was not a subject of discussion among my informants or a term that I encountered much during my observations. Tamara Livingston observes the limitations surrounding the term because it does not “translate evenly or well across cultures” (Livingston 2014, 63). She argues for the usefulness of the term, however: “First, it provides a means for identifying and collating musical movements that share certain characteristics, and, second, it gives us a preliminary framework with which to analyze and discuss the ways in which these movements support or depart from the defined usage” (Ibid.). While revival was not a topic during my course of research, understanding the theory of revival is necessary for understanding the preliminary foundation for the theory of safeguarding. Safeguarding stems from revival, and the foundation of both is the perceived need for intervention to save a tradition or cultural heritage from disappearing.

The discourse around revival eventually transitions into discourse around safeguarding. Bithell and Hill remark on revival as ‘just a phase.’ However, they contend that this ‘phase’ became a significant shift in the late twentieth century which redefined folk music as the increasingly popular genre of world music. They continue:

[Revival theory] has its parallel in the realm of cultural policy and conservation where local traditions have been redefined as world heritage or, in UNESCO’s terms, the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. This particular shift—from an inward- to an outward-facing stance, and from local and national to global
frames of reference—is of cardinal significance. . . . In this context, post-revival sits within broader trends and processes . . . and enters into articulation with contemporary redefinitions of cosmopolitanism, globalization, and ethnicity as offered by these and other cultural theorists.

(Bithell and Hill 2014, 30)

Folk music is no longer left to the ground-level practitioners to either maintain or disband. Instead, folk music is understood as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity, one which a global organization such as UNESCO now works to sustain.

**Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage**

Expanding literature regarding the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage provides concepts critical for any discussion of the continuation of cultural traditions in contemporary society. It accounts for the extensive earlier literature concerning the disappearance, decline, preservation, and transformation of folklore, folk life, and folk song. For example, song collector and archivist Alan Lomax stated that the folklorist is concerned with what he called ‘The Cultural Grey-Out:’

The work was filled with a sense of urgency. To a folklorist the uprooting and destruction of traditional cultures and the consequent grey-out or disappearance of the human variety presents as serious a threat to the future happiness of mankind as poverty, overpopulation, and even war.

(Lomax 1968, 4)

Literature then situates those debates in a larger frame of reference and brings a critical perspective to bear on the social processes that have produced cultural heritage as a significant phenomenon (Howard 2012). In order for heritage to be sustainable, ‘safeguarding’ must be problematized, and instances of its application need to be examined critically.

Understanding strategies for safeguarding the social life of singing in Ireland requires a basic knowledge of what it means to safeguard intangible cultural heritage. Heritage consists of objects and performances that emerge through sustaining practices such as traditional customs with inherent value to the community that creates or
transmits the heritage (Gillman 2010, 196). Heritage might include valued ‘inherited’ buildings, ecological sites, or customs that its inheritors wish to keep (Hall and McArthur 1998, 4). Many heritages are in danger of becoming extinct for a variety of reasons, mostly due to the effects of globalization and modernization (See Chapter Six). One concern is that modern societies with better standards of living than their ancestors, a plethora of entertainment options including mass media, and a shift from work as tradespeople to work as businesspeople contribute to the loss of heritage. However, it can also be argued that heritage can be supported more as economies improve, which is apparent in the City of Culture and Capital of Culture incentives by the European Union, programs through which the EU funds cities to restore and clean buildings and streets, and develop cultural events such as festivals and concerts in an effort to bring in funds through increased tourism (Stevenson 2014). The worry from singers with whom I have spoken is that communities are no longer learning stories from their forefathers, dance moves in barn raising ceremonies, or fiddling techniques from neighbors, so efforts need now to be made to address changes in transmission and provide ways to continue traditional activities in a modern world (Sommers Smith 2001) (See Chapter Six). Organizations such as UNESCO, along with the individuals who make up the traditional communities, have struggled, fought, and managed different ways to help protect, revive, and sustain intangible cultural heritage (See Chapter Five).

The 2003 Convention clearly departs from both the 1998 Proclamation of Masterpieces and the 1972 World Heritage Convention in some key terms (Schmitt 28)

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28 While these forms of oral learning still exist, contexts for learning have changed radically, moving from the home and community to recordings and the internet. This change affects repertoire, style, and a sense of community. New learning methods are still based largely on orality rather than reading as in classical music contexts, but orality-based learning is re-contextualized. For more information, see Francis Ward, (2016), Processes of Transmission in Irish Traditional Music: Approaching a Virtual Orality, PhD Thesis, Limerick: University of Limerick.
2008, 102). The 2003 *Convention* avoids the term ‘masterpiece’ because it usually refers to a product rather than a tradition, and the key concept of the 1972 *Convention* is that protected items are of outstanding universal value, which the 2003 *Convention* does not require (Ibid.).

The ratification of the 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* required a transition in terms and definitions. What suits guidelines for the preservation of built and ecological heritage may not suit intangible cultural heritage protection because of nuances in subject matter. Harriet Deacon, in *The Subtle Power of Intangible Heritage: Legal and Financial Instruments for Safeguarding Intangible Heritage* (Deacon 2004) writes that national legislation relates mostly to places rather than to intangible heritage (Ibid., 1). She contends that separating the World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage conventions (WHC and ICHC) might prolong the idea that the West is tangible and civilized and is distinct from the developing world’s intangible heritage. The two conventions must not contradict each other, but instead must work closely together when dealing with administration and operational guidelines (Ibid., 2). Deacon states that intangible heritage definitions such as ‘traditional’ or ‘indigenous’ may prove problematic, characterizing the heritage as old, unchanging, or stable rather than as a living tradition found in a variety of communities, not just in developing communities or communities defined by ethnicity or region. Intangible heritage can be found in new cultural forms in the West as well as other world regions (Ibid., 30).

Smith and Akagawa also discuss the differences between the WHC and the ICHC, noting misconceptions preservationists might have without term clarification. They write that the 2003 *Convention* was considered by some as a counterpoint to the 1972 *Convention*, meant to acknowledge non-Western heritage practices. They state
that yes, the convention does aim to reinforce heritages from developing nations, but also desires to apply to all heritages, including those in Western states. However, they continue that “Whatever the innovations and/or limitations of the ICHC it marks a significant intervention into international debate about the nature and value of cultural heritage” (Smith and Akagawa 2008, 1).

Debates brought up during the drafting of the 2003 *Convention* regarding the differences between the ICHC and the WHC reveal conflicting philosophical and conceptual views for establishing a common understanding. Drafters thus needed an acceptable shared definition of ‘intangible heritage,’ which includes “questioning the legitimacy of the idea of ‘universal’ used in the WHC to refer to intangible heritage, and . . . concern about human rights, the cultural policies of identity and the mutability of intangible expressions as ‘living cultures’, to use a phrase often found in these debates” (Ibid., 4).

The ratification of the 2003 *Convention* helped provide a shift in conceptualizing heritage, leading to a flurry of scholarly contributions to and an increased awareness of the subject. Lourdes Arizpe, in “Intangible Cultural Heritage, Diversity and Coherence” (Arizpe 2004), described the convention’s contribution to this new paradigm:

One of the most valuable contributions of the *Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* is that it preserves the integrity of meaning of each activity selected. It is not only the objects used or the singular events that are recognized, but also their historical evolution and the agency of those who create, perform or display them. Such holistic recognition becomes a tribute to contemporary cultural agency in whichever particular cultural context it may be found. It leads the way, then, to building a new ‘cosmoculture’, that is, a global perspective of constantly evolving human creation and communication.

(Ibid., 130)

Intangible cultural heritage raises awareness of surviving historical practices relevant to modern society.
The effectiveness of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage relies heavily on the clarity of its main terminology. The frequently used term ‘culture’ has long been a subject of discussion, interpretation, and theory. Raymond Williams, in *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (Williams 1958) writes about culture from a sociological perspective. He traces the etymology of the term, from its original meaning referencing human training processes and continues by noting that this use:

. . . which had usually been a culture of something, was changed, in the nineteenth century, to culture as such, a thing in itself. It came to mean, first, ‘a general state or habit of the mind’, having close relation with the idea of human perfection. Second, it came to mean ‘the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole’. Third, it came to mean ‘the general body of the arts’. Fourth, later in the century it came to mean ‘a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual.’

(Ibid., xiv)

Williams proposes that the term culture denotes a way of life that cannot be reduced to artifacts as long as it is a lived experience (Ibid., 323). I refer to culture as this lived experience which evolves as factors change throughout time, practiced by those within the community in question, and relate it to the concept of intangible cultural heritage.

While the common understanding of ‘heritage’ refers to an object, custom, place, or quality passed down from previous generations with an inherited value, Smith and Akagawa establish that heritage is better used as a verb than a noun, denoting a body of knowledge and a political and cultural process for communication. They continue, arguing that heritage is an experience of “emotions, memories, and forgetting” and that it is created—not simply an existing item (Smith and Akagawa 2008, 6). The UNESCO website states that heritage “constitutes a source of identity and cohesion for communities disrupted by bewildering change and economic instability,” and that creativity “contributes to building open, inclusive and pluralistic societies. Both heritage and creativity lay the foundations for vibrant, innovative and
prosperous knowledge societies” (UNESCO 2016). What UNESCO calls ‘creative heritage’ therefore becomes a potent symbol and identifier for societies and cultures.

The intent behind adoption of the phrase ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage’ is to include all living heritages, no matter their location or ethnicity. Richard Kurin writes about its technical meaning and what it encompasses:

Intangible Cultural Heritage [ICH]—a loose English translation of the Japanese mukei bunkazi, is broadly defined in terms of oral traditions, expressive culture, the social practices, ephemeral aesthetic manifestations, and forms of knowledge carried and transmitted within cultural communities. It includes everything from stories and tales to music and celebration, folk medicine, craftsmanship, the culinary arts and vernacular architecture.

(Kurin 2007, 10)

By naming the convention in such a way, drafters clearly define an object for their safeguarding efforts. Kurin writes that the term replaces more ‘culturally charged’ terms such as ‘folklore,’ ‘traditional culture,’ ‘oral heritage,’ and ‘popular culture’ and the development of the convention brought a shift from emphasis on products and documentation to living, practiced heritage. He uses the case of song as ICH to illustrate this shift, clarifying its consequences for our understanding of song as heritage:

But it is not the songs sung in any recreated or imitative form—no matter how well meaning or how literally correct—by scholars, or performers, or members of some other community. It is the singing of the songs by the members of the very community who regard those songs as theirs, and indicative of their identity as a cultural group. It is the singing by the people who nurtured the traditions and who will, in all probability, transmit those songs to the next generation.

(Ibid., 12)

A key shift in this quote informs the entire orientation of this investigation—that from ‘songs sung’ to ‘singing.’ Intangible cultural heritage is more than folklore or oral heritage. It survives, carrying significance within the community and promoting cultural diversity and creativity (Ruggles and Silverman 2009, 2).
Lourdes Arizpe stresses the relationship between ICH and cultural diversity. She highlights that individuals do not work alone, but “work within sets of linguistic, cognitive and normative values that construct social and political contexts which influence their will and their capacity to create culture” (Arizpe 2004, 131). She continues to explain that the creativity that builds cultural heritage is “coupled to procedures of representation of cultures and their heritage in specific settings” (Ibid.). Heritage can represent cultural practice—for example, museums can display traditional clothing to represent dance practices within a specific community. Social and political contexts are therefore partially defined by their representation.

**Engendering Traditional Practice**

Following the transition from revival theory to safeguarding theory in a way foreshadows my proposed shift from safeguarding to engendering traditional practice, an arguably more effective way to ensure heritage sustainability as it applies to Irish singing. The transition from thinking about revival, to safeguarding, to engendering is supported by my ethnographic work and described in the analysis, Chapter Seven.

Engendering, then, is a major theme explored throughout this thesis. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, ‘Engender’ means, “to cause to exist or to develop” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). The Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives a short description of the term’s origin:29

When “engender” was first used in the 14th century, it meant “propagate” or “procreate,” but extended meanings soon developed. “Engender” comes from the Latin verb *generare*, which means “to generate” or “to beget.” “Generate,” “regenerate,” “degenerate,” and “generation” are of course related to the Latin verb as well. As you might suspect, the list of “engender” relatives does not end there. “Generare” comes from the Latin noun *genus*, meaning “birth,” “race,” or “kind.” From this source we have our own word *genus*, plus “gender,” “general,” and “generic,” among other words.

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29 The term ‘engendering’ can be used to suggest the act of ‘gendering’ a practice, a completely different use than my own.
When I use the term ‘engender,’ I use this extended description outlined here as it relates to living heritage. To engender the social life of traditional singing, for instance, means to give birth to, to generate, to develop it. Ultimately, I mean that practitioners of traditional singing “cause [the singing social life] to exist.” Given this definition, each subject I discuss in this thesis—from the singing session phenomenon, to its repertoire, to the individuals active in the singing field, to challenging what is considered ‘traditional’—is relevant to what it means to cause the phenomenon of the social life of singing.

The themes of safeguarding and engendering come up frequently in my ethnographic work. These terms were never used by my informants, but I found that my informants practiced them. I provide a detailed analysis of both safeguarding and engendering in action, tying these practices into my ethnographic work for an analytical review of my research.

**Heritage in Ireland**

My research focuses on the act of getting together to sing, the conversations and relationships that occur around and because of the singing, and the conscious efforts to sustain these acts and relationships. This differs from a more musicological or folkloristic analysis of songs and singing styles, biographies of singers, and history. I understand the importance of repertoire and practitioners in influencing what I call singing sociality, so when I write about these components, I do so in the context of the social framework of which they are a part.

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of heritage as understood in Ireland and what support or historical influences contextualize such initiatives. Such an overview therefore includes a brief discussion of the institutionalization of
traditional singing and the role of competition, because these organizations and events have shaped the social practices of Irish traditional singing.

Historical contextualization is important, as it usually comes into discussion on traditional music in Ireland, especially since the term ‘traditional music’ denotes the “older dance music and song in Ireland” (Vallely 2011, 687). Knowledge of history is necessary to understand what my informants wish to either perform, protect, or create. How does one maintain the integrity of traditional songs without knowledge of the songs’ origins? With a discussion of important historical periods relevant to Irish singing comes consideration of language, politics, and authenticity, which in turn merit discussion of their place in the Irish language revival. These are large topics discussed in theses, books, and articles—too much to barely graze the surface of a thorough academic problematization. However, I recognize that at least a cursory level of discussion here is necessary, to orient myself and my readers in the following discussion of the current phenomenon of singing in Ireland. It is necessary to explain the context of issues such as language, politics, and authenticity in Irish traditional singing as foundational knowledge and background for my own research. However, I am aware of the delimitations I have set for this investigation. I am only presenting here the very surface of these large topics.

Politics play a significant role in the singing culture of Ireland, ranging from influencing repertoire such as rebel songs, to the act of meeting for the singing in order to bond against political hardships. English repertoire may be a source of contention among traditional singers who disagree on whether or not the songs are regarded as traditional (Ó Laoire 2005) (see Chapters Two and Six). Use of the Irish language in song can be political, too (Costello 2015; Ó Laoire 2013). Irish language singing is host to its own wealth of issues and academic recognition beyond what I can discuss in my
thesis. English language song was considered not as valuable as Irish language song until 1971, when the Irish Department of Education authorized a scheme for collecting English language Irish traditional songs (Munnelly 1975). While singers may sing Irish language songs in the sessions I attend, I only attend predominantly English language sessions for the purpose of this project.

Authenticity is another problematic topic that I cannot fully address within the scope of my thesis. Vallely states:

> Authenticity is at the heart of what traditional music is about for a large number of its players, for its core material is the soundscape of the 19th century and beyond. The quality of ‘authenticity’ in the music is generally appreciated to be an indicator of worth, and potential for satisfaction, rather than a pompous label, for the music does not exist just to be looked at or to be presented to tourists (although both things may happen to it). It is most importantly there to be played—privately, publicly and commercially, taught, learned and performed, the objecting being satisfaction in the real world.

(Vallely 2005, 58)

In Chapter Six, I discuss the fluidity of supposed ‘tradition.’ While I do not have the space within this chapter to further problematize ‘authenticity,’ a search for authenticity underlies the theories presented in Chapter Six. Singing sessions are sometimes viewed as being ‘precious.’ Singers want their singing and songs to be authentic, respecting and reliving songs from the past—as Vallely states, “Reverence for earlier times is seen particularly in the obsession with ‘authenticity’ in musics from the past, for these continue to be actively played and continuously enjoyed” (Ibid., 51). This type of unwavering idealization of a strict protection of the past risks putting the songs behind glass doors in a museum, so to speak; its practice becoming irrelevant and thus lost. The opposite side of the argument for authenticity has its merits, too. A knowledge and recognition of past practice and in turn bringing this knowledge into

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30 For more information on authenticity, see Regina Bendix (2009), In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press; and Helen O’Shea (2008), The Making of Irish Traditional Music, Cork: Cork University Press.

31 See Chapter Six for more information.
current practice helps maintain the integrity of the singing. A quest for authenticity keeps the music from morphing into a different genre completely.

Irish organizations have been involved with supporting activities relating to ICH. I must note here that they can relate to what is described in UNESCO discourse, but are not necessarily designated as ICH. As described earlier, the singing circle movement is run and sustained from a ‘bottom-up’ grassroots approach. The proactive individuals within the field work toward ensuring singers have a space to sing. This is supported by my interviews and fieldwork, which is investigated more in Chapter Five. For instance, informant Macdara Yeates expressed that Grace Toland, another informant and the director of the Irish Traditional Music Archive, is doing “stellar work to catch what is now” (Yeates Feb 2015), and informant Annette Munnelly expressed that her brother Jerry O’Reilly, another informant, strives to encourage participation—he does not mind if the participants sing a song not considered Irish traditional, “so long as we know that they’re singing” (Munnelly May 2015).

During the course of my academic fieldwork, the people I interviewed generally felt that the traditional singing sessions develop from the grassroots level. Grace Toland, for example, noted that individuals must “manipulate” the singing sessions, meaning they must create gatherings for singing, in order to ensure that they occur (Toland Feb 2015). As mentioned in the research purpose of this thesis, I address the question “Heritage for whom?” which questions whether or not a so-called heritage is practiced and sustained by members of the community for the members of the community. This is not to say that organizations also cannot take a top-down approach also for the benefit of the community, or heritage bearers. As this is a recurring topic for how to engage member states of UNESCO-ICH, it is also practiced on the local
level in Ireland. This upcoming section addresses some of those Irish-based organizations and how they historically and currently approach sustainable culture.

Several organizations historically acted as centers for social music and dance events, providing space for scholars of traditional music to share their studies. These institutions continue to organize heritage appreciation for tourism, as well as offering funds to groups and individuals who wish to keep the music alive. A few key examples are the Gaelic League, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht,\(^{32}\) which I selected for their interaction historically with Irish traditional music.

**The Gaelic League**

Public organizations in Ireland have been active in the area of cultural sustainability for a long time, and many of these early initiatives continue today. The Gaelic League, or Conradh na Gaeilge, was established in 1893 to promote the Irish language. This first national cultural revival of the late nineteenth century saw the establishment of a standardized writing system for the Irish language implemented in school curricula, particularly in the Gaeltacht regions, areas in Ireland where school classes are conducted in the Irish language, encouraging Irish as a primary language. Patrick Mathews, in his book *The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, the Gaelic League and the Co-operative Movement* (Mathews 2003) states that the Gaelic League actively sought to revive the Irish language by not merely wishing to document the language before it died, as had earlier language antiquarians, but by pushing for its use in mass communication (Ibid., 23). Terrence Brown also discusses the influence that the Gaelic League had on Irish traditional music in his book, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural* \(^{32}\)The Gaeltacht refers to the areas in Ireland devoted to speaking Irish as a primary language in the schools and homes. See http://www.udaras.ie/en/an-ghaeilge-an-ghaeltacht/an-ghaeltacht/ for more information.
History 1922-2001 (Brown 1981). According to Brown, traditional music rose to “official esteem,” since it was seen to express Irish thought and “echoed Irish Ireland’s attachment to the Irish language” (Ibid., 147).

Brown’s and Matthews’ observations are problematic, however. Opposing arguments, that the Gaelic League did not succeed in reviving the Irish language, also exist. J. J. Lee, in his book Ireland, 1912-1985: Politics and Society (Lee 1989) argued:

[The government] offered pupils inducements like extra marks for answering subjects through Irish in examinations, and penalized schools by withholding subsidies for teachers lacking qualifications in Irish, irrespective of their quality in their own subjects. This approach did little to elevate Irish, but much to demean education. A knowledge of Irish was made compulsory for certain state posts, but no genuine attempt was made to gaelicise either politics or the civil service, prerequisites for the success of the revival. The results of all this fertilizing was a luxuriant crop of weeds, and a pervasive stench that offended all but the coarsest nostrils.

(Ibid., 135)

The incentives set by the Gaelic League were inconsistent, Lee argues, benefiting the government but not the Irish speakers, themselves.

The Gaelic League is still striving to bring the country’s original language back through its promotion of Irish language schools, learning centers, media, and special events, funded by the Irish government. The Gaelic League is also responsible for establishing Gaeltachts, regions in Ireland specifically set out to protect the language. The Oireachtas na Gaeilge was founded by the Gaelic League in 1897 as a competition for poetry, essays, and song compositions. The point of the Oireachtas, successful even today, was to give Irish language song and traditional dance styles a higher profile in Ireland. Today, it is a competition for what is known as sean-nós, or ‘old style,’ Irish language song and dance. By enforcing these parameters, sean-nós singing, and with that the Irish language, have a specific, protected place for practice.
Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann

Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann is another national organization. Comhaltas (CCÉ) has eight regional centers, 400 global branches, and 35,000 members. A non-profit organization, CCÉ is funded by membership fees, proceeds from its organized events, and grants from the Irish government Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. It offers lessons in traditional music, dance, and language and hosts instrumental and song sessions. It also hosts the Fleadh Cheoil, as described above, and has an archive, print library, and publications. CCÉ’s website describes its purpose and mission as follows:

Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann is the largest group involved in the preservation and promotion of Irish traditional music. We’re a non-profit cultural movement with hundreds of local branches around the world, and as you can read in our history we’ve been working for the cause of Irish music since the middle of the last century (1951 to be precise). Our efforts continue with increasing zeal as the movement launches itself into the 21st century.

(Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann 2000)

Edward O. Henry lists the goals of CCÉ according to their constitution—to promote Irish traditional music, to restore harp and uilleann pipe playing, to promote Irish traditional dancing, to create a bond “among all lovers of Irish music, to cooperate with bodies that restore Irish culture, to establish branches worldwide for the promotion of Irish music internationally, and to promote Irish language” (Henry 1989, 69). While the primary activity of CCÉ is running its classes and competitions, it also often hosts instrumental sessions (Ibid., 71). Henry relates, “Finally, people of different generations, families, and community groups were brought together in a cooperative endeavor and an atmosphere conducive to fun and creativity” (Ibid., 73), emphasizing the importance of a lively environment for music making.

CCÉ may promote Irish music and dance globally, but the organization is criticized for its essentially conservative mission within the idea of protecting
traditional culture. Fintan Vallely discussed the problems that can arise as CCÉ strives for authenticity:

CCÉ had traditional music revitilization as its primary objective—the raising of its status, provision of teaching and spaces for development, facilitation of peer consumption and approval. Dogmas unavoidably were the stuff of this: certain instruments were historically acceptable, not so others; age was critical too—the older players were highlighted as ‘bearers of tradition’ and/or as the stylists that they in most cases were. This created artistic confidence, just as did the way in which the young were praised for the virtuosity which they were now able to develop and display when provided with the new opportunity of environments dedicated to the music. The actual defensive strictures of ‘authenticity’ were more actively conditioning and controlling for non-players, and for those who were outside teenage years, for they had to be re-educated. By contrast those who were older could be regarded as eccentric if they deviated, and the younger performers were biddable anyway.

(Vallely 2005, 58)

It is the opinion of some, therefore, that intangible cultural heritage in Ireland is in danger of being retained according to the one model defined by CCÉ. Cathy Larson Sky expressed her concerns this way: “The All-Ireland competitions are at least partially responsible for a change in the old, community-based performance aesthetic, for moving it toward a solo performance aesthetic” (Sky 1997, 166). She worries about the effect competitions have on moving music and dance away from their original social function into solo performance—informants for this thesis have expressed similar concerns about the changing contexts of Irish social singing. Her observation problematizes competitions in general, mirroring Lillis Ó Laoire’s concerns with the Oireachtas Competitions (Ó Laoire 2013). My own informants have expressed similar concerns about the consequences of prescribing certain singing styles according to an overarching model. An example of this will be described further in Chapter Six—the case of a member of an Irish music and dance organization33 who did not consider the Traveller John Reilly a traditional singer, despite his ability to sing over 200 songs, and

33 Name kept anonymous.
therefore would not support a recording project proposed by song collector Tom Munnely to capture John Reilly’s songs.

Prescribing what is viewed as good singing can also apply to the rising standards of the singing session, a concern expressed by informants and described more in detail in Chapter Seven. On the surface, the singing session is a new approach to community-centered singing, open to various personal backgrounds and styles, but underneath, it can fall into the same pattern as previous efforts to revive and sustain traditional music.

The Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

The Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht sets out strategies for protecting Irish heritage at the larger government level, recognizing national heritage. Though mostly focused on built and ecological heritage, strategies presented can apply to the more complex approach to protecting intangible heritage. Because it is a government organization, it maintains high prestige and offers significant support.

Taoiseach Enda Kenny, Ireland’s current Prime Minister, reorganized government departments in 2011 to create the current version Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. The department has undergone many changes since its origin as the Department of the Gaeltacht in 1956. Each change requires different responsibilities from within the Irish government. The department’s website lists its roles and objectives:

The Department oversees the conservation, preservation, protection and presentation of Ireland’s heritage and cultural assets. The Department also seeks to promote the Irish language and to support the Gaeltacht. The key functions under its remit include:

34 Irish for ‘Leader,’ Taoiseach refers to the Prime Minister of Ireland.
35 At the time of writing this thesis in Summer of 2016, the department is transitioning to become the Department of Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts and the Gaeltacht. The name might even change again before the publishing of this thesis.
- Arts, Culture, Film and Music, as well as oversight of Ireland’s cultural institutions;
- Ireland’s Built and Natural Heritage;
- The Irish language, the Gaeltacht and the Islands; and
- North/South Co-operation insofar as it relates to Waterways Ireland, An Foras Teanga and the wider functions of the Department.

(The Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht 2016)

Organizations for promoting tourism by maintaining sites, building visitor centers, or producing performances include Discover Ireland, a website of events operated by Fáilte Ireland which aims “to guide and promote tourism as a significant driver of the Irish economy” (Discover Ireland 2016), and Tourism Ireland, which “is responsible for marketing the island of Ireland overseas as a holiday and business tourism destination” (Tourism Ireland 2007). These agencies provide funding for and promote Irish cultural events. For instance, the singing club An Góilín is listed under “Things to Do” on Discover Ireland’s website, ideally attracting interested visitors to their singing session who may not otherwise know about it.

The National Heritage Plan of 2002, a plan set out by the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands (the 1997-2002 version of the department), observes that increased focus on heritage protection is a reflection of Ireland’s increasingly educated and prosperous society. The plan states that the Irish government values heritage for contributions to tourism’s economic benefits, educational benefits, and cultural recreational benefits, as well as its intrinsic value. The government policy states “it is an objective of Government to ensure the protection of our heritage and to promote its enjoyment by all,” underscoring government recognition and providing “the impetus for the actions which are contained in the Plan” (National Heritage Plan 2002, 1). The Plan promotes heritage as a source of identity for Ireland:

While our heritage is inextricably intertwined with our sense of identity, it also affirms the historic, cultural and natural inheritance which is shared on the island of Ireland. For present and future generations who will live in Ireland that inheritance has the ability to enhance and enrich the context of everyday
existence. It has the capacity to vividly convey to visitors and those living in Ireland alike what it means to be Irish. In short, our heritage is a presence which physically expresses the essence and the heartbeat of our collective historical identity.

(Ibid., 5)

The National Heritage Plan and UNESCO use similar language. They both stress the importance of heritage to cultural identity. They also both aim to use heritage to increase understanding between cultures. The National Heritage Plan addresses tangible heritage as a source of conveying Irishness to visitors and residents. In this discussion of safeguarding policy in Ireland, a discussion of the National Heritage Plan shows what can be done at the national level, in contrast to the more global strategies implemented by UNESCO.

Independent and Local Sustaining Efforts

Despite the seeming antipathy between technology and heritage, especially as it relates to concerns that technology in the home is a leading cause for driving out social music making, activists in Ireland are using technology to protect and promote traditional music. Song collectors and archivists work intensively so that the songs of Ireland are recorded and shared, using technology as a tool for preservation. There are several important databases relevant to Irish song and singing. The Irish Traditional Music Archive (ITMA) in Dublin houses the largest collection of traditional music recordings and manuscripts in Ireland, filled with music catalogues, music collections, sound recordings, written manuscripts, photographs, and videos. The organization is constantly increasing its digital archive content with playlists, videos, and print materials, and making these more accessible through the internet. The Vaughan

36 The juxtaposition between modernity and heritage is explored in Chapter Six.
37 Some archivists of note are described more in detail in Chapter Five.
38 See www.itma.ie.
Williams Memorial Library, located in London, features a project by the English Folk Song and Dance Society called the Roud Folk Song Index. This index contains records for thousands of songs from the British Isles, including origin, source, date of composition, collection location, and other titles. Although recordings of songs are not available on this site, it is useful for researching song history and historical contexts, and offers possibilities for version comparisons.

Smaller, privately or semi-privately maintained sites also focus on song preservation. Examples of such projects include the Inishowen Song Project, created by members of the Inishowen Singers’ Circle and supported by the Irish Traditional Music Archive for promotion of Inishowen songs and singers; The Góilín Song Project, a catalogue sung, recorded, and released by members of An Góilín, also supported by the ITMA for the preservation and promotion of Góilín songs and singers; and the blog “Amhráin Árann—Aran Songs” by Deirdre Ní Chonghaile, which features stories, photographs, and song recordings from the Aran Islands, written in both Irish and English, used as a more historical source.

Appreciation and scholarly interest in Ireland’s intangible cultural heritage begins in the schools, dance studios, churches, and cultural centers, where young students learn Irish music and dance. Universities in Ireland offer ethnomusicology, ethnochoreology, and traditional music and dance performance degrees, elevating appreciation and awareness to a more academic level. Irish universities offering research in Irish traditional music include Ballyfermot College of Further Education, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Griffith College, National University of Ireland Maynooth, National University of Ireland Galway, 

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39 See vwml.org.
40 See http://www.itma.ie/inishowen.
41 See http://www.itma.ie/goilin.
42 See http://aransongs.blogspot.ie/.
Queen’s University Belfast, Trinity College Dublin, University College Cork, University College Dublin, University of Limerick, University of Ulster, and Waterford Institute of Technology.  

Within the UNESCO ICH discourse, it has been argued that both global and local legal and scholarly recognition of the social nature of traditional music is crucial to ensure its sustainability. Institutions should represent the music and its cultural context fairly and accurately. In Ireland, Anthony McCann, scholar of copyright in Irish traditional music suggests that “the challenge is to effect a paradigm shift from the dominant folklore-as-materials to folklore-as-practice” and to find supporting methods in education and community action (McCann 2001, 98). Focus is shifting to sustaining and promoting the music making contexts and processes, according to McCann. Marie McCarthy, who has written on music transmission in educational institutions in Ireland, accurately asserts that the role of music in the lives of the people and Irish history narrative is equally important as its more musicological components such as composers, compositions, and instruments. By understanding music in our social lives, we understand its current cultural value and functions (McCarthy 2004, 58). This more

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recent attention to the cultural value of music offers support for the value of my own research into the social phenomenon of traditional singing.

**Chapter Organization**

Chapter Two is an investigation into the social life of music with attention to uncovering meaning in Irish traditional singing. A general scientific exploration of social identity leads into a more focused study of Thomas Turino’s theorization of music as social life. Ethnomusicologists, sociologists, folklorists, and anthropologists such as Jane Sugarman, I. Sheldon Posen, Ian Russell, Martin Stokes, Lillis Ó Laoire, and Henry Glassie have set a foundation for the study into the social nature of humans through participation in music. The chapter focuses on the themes of singing sociality, identity, participation, community, and shared and lived experience, which sets the foundation for my own ethnographic studies.

Chapters Three to Six are my own ethnographic studies into the social life of singing in Ireland. Through these chapters I hope to reveal what the meaning of traditional singing is for Irish singers. By discovering the significance of traditional singing to its practitioners, I hope to provide support for sustainable cultural heritage as it affects the communities who participate in it. Chapter Three is an ethnography of the singing sessions I attended for my field research. Here, I look into the singing session as one solution to singers’ perceived need for a safe space for traditional singing. I then investigate the social relationships, or issues therein, which may occur within the singing sessions. Chapter Four delves deeper into the repertoire performed at singing sessions. Through repertoire I study the connections singers have with songs and make with other singers through singing the songs. Chapter Five is a study of individuals involved within the traditional singing community. While the focus of this thesis is on
the sociality within the Irish traditional singing community, the individuals within those social spheres are responsible for much of the success and sustainability of the singing.

Chapters Six and Seven combine my findings from the previous chapters. Chapter Six discusses the nuances of the notion of tradition and ways in which tradition and heritage are challenged. How do intergovernmental institutions approach challenges to heritage, and how are these approaches used at the local level of Irish traditional singing? In this chapter, I combine what I learn about the phenomenon of the sessions, the repertoire used, and the work of the individuals to de-construct definitions of traditional singing as they are used by my informants. I use these de-constructed definitions to reveal ways in which practitioners of Irish traditional singing can work with modernization. In Chapter Seven, I review what I have discovered in the ethnographies to investigate the difference between safeguarding and engendering and why intangible cultural heritage, particularly the singing social life, needs a balance of both to be truly sustainable.

Ultimately, I want to offer a new approach to the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage. Safeguarding is important as it ensures the integrity of the singing and the songs. Singers wish to gather and sing the songs today as they did in the past, as evidenced by my interviews. However, re-contextualizations are needed to bring singing into the twenty-first century. Therefore, I suggest singers and organizers engender the social life of Irish traditional singing to ensure the relevancy of their heritage to their modern lives.
CHAPTER TWO
UNCOVERING MEANING IN THE SOCIAL LIFE OF SINGING

Understanding the social life of Irish traditional singing requires an exploration into the role of meaning in musical social life. A further look into the theories developed by scholars of identity, community, and the wider world of social singing informs the foundation for a study into the social singing in Ireland. I utilize concepts borrowed from social identity theory, which provides a basis for a more focused analysis of social identity within singing communities. The topic of social singing in Ireland has not been much explored in existing literature, as noted in Chapter One. This area has many facets worthy of rigorous investigation, so instead of looking for existing literature on Irish social singing directly, which is limited, I instead searched for common themes and issues which tend to arise in social music making more generally and apply that to the field of Irish traditional singing. My own conclusions drawn from an analysis of this research can in turn contribute to the field of social singing in Ireland.

I focus on the social life of music and singing more generally, exploring the ideas of Thomas Turino, I. Sheldon Posen, Jane Sugarman, Martin Stokes, and Ian Russell, and then discuss Irish singing specifically as it is theorized by Lillis Ó Laoire and Henry Glassie. Much has been written on the social life of music and song by these and other scholars, who apply established models while also proposing innovative re-theorization, particularly in the domain of folk song and its singing. By reporting on personal experiences and carrying out detailed ethnographic investigations of social
singing events, ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, and folklorists offer theories of identity, participation, community, and shared, lived experience in terms of social music making. These concepts can then be applied directly to the Irish singing session.

I use concepts provided by these authors to answer questions about meaning in singing and song gatherings. An investigation into Thomas Turino’s concepts of participation, identity, and meaning in music provides the foundation for conceptualizing human connection through music. I am not only interested in the meaning of the repertoires, but even more so the experience of singing the songs. What happens to the people singing and listening to the songs? How do I analyze meaning from the process of singing? The deeper human connections discussed by Ó Laoire and Glassie inspire my research on the singers themselves. Glassie’s study of human connection through song most closely resembles my own study. He argues that song is one element within social gatherings that serves to bring like-minded people together to form relationships with one another. For a deeper insight into singing sociality in Ireland, I apply ideas from these scholars to my own ethnographic investigation to uncover meaning as experienced in the social life of Irish traditional singing.

**Singing Sociality**

‘Singing sociality’ is a recurring phrase in this thesis. Anthropologist Tim Ingold lists three definitions for ‘sociality:’ 1) ‘Sociality’ has biological roots, describing innate survival behaviors and may be applied across the animal kingdom. It explains the behaviors of pack animals working together to catch their prey or honey bees in their hives. 2) It is identified with moral accountability, explaining a recognition of rules and standards for judging actions of the self and others. Because morality, Ingold explains, is rooted in language, this definition usually applies to humans. 3) The concept of sociality refers to ‘relationships that bind people together as fellow
participants in a life process” (Ingold 1994, 735). When I write about ‘singing sociality,’ I refer to these binding relationships that are created among singers through their participation in social singing. Traditional singing in Ireland is an element of the overall social process in the sessions—through this process, singers can bond through what I call ‘singing sociality.’

The study of human sociality is rooted in social anthropology. Since social life is complex, spanning a huge range of activities and beliefs, one primary goal for social anthropologists is to discover meaningful patterns by searching for an implicit ‘underlying blueprint’ (Lewis 1985, 19). Such a blueprint can also reveal significance and purpose behind singing sociality for Irish traditional singers. Social anthropologist David Francis Pocock writes:

> The study of man was essentially the study of man as a social being, and this study, this social anthropology, was to be an empirical science. It was not to deal in conjecture, it was not to reconstruct history, it was not concerned with the evolution of institutions or with the diffusion of beliefs and artefacts [sic]. The social anthropologist was to take living societies as his objects. (Pocock 1998, 4).

Musicians therefore cannot merely be studied by their compositions or performances, but rather as living people in their living societies. In social anthropological studies, themes of communication, identity, and community commonly enter the foreground.

Certain contexts of cultural heritage in Ireland interweave with its traditional music. The ‘social fabric,’ according to Sally K. Sommers Smith, is bound to “the tune as it was played in the past” and is transmitted with the tune (Sommers Smith 2001, 112). Participation in social music making influences technique and repertoire, thus influencing innovation and evolutionary change while still retaining memory of practice in the past (See Chapter Six). Robert Clark writes that Irish intangible cultural expression focuses on the storyteller rather than the story, the act of performing the music rather than the music itself, or craftsmanship rather than the craft (Clark 2013).
In traditional singing, intangible cultural expression focuses on the singer and the singing—the people and the act of singing. The singing phenomenon, the cultural expression, is the focus of this thesis, rather than the product, or the songs.

Adam R. Kaul discusses the social nature of Irish music making in his book, *Turning the Tune: Traditional Music, Tourism, and Social Change in an Irish Village* (Kaul 2009), an ethnography of traditional music events in the small County Clare town of Doolin. Doolin has developed into a popular location for Irish traditional music, welcoming tourists from around Ireland and abroad to their many holiday homes, hotels, and hostels. Doolin hosts the annual Doolin Folk Festival along with daily sessions and performances. Kaul writes that the sessions in Doolin are social events as well as musical events. During these sessions, musicians chat, joke, and interact among themselves and their audience. He observes that boundaries between the session players and listeners are porous and that “the musical performance becomes one aspect of a larger social milieu” (Ibid., 1). Pubs are centers for social interaction (Ibid., 2). Sessions are different than concerts—while they are musical events, performers sit facing each other, often with their backs to the audience, and musicians often engage with the audiences. He illustrates the relaxed and open performance climate:

> Occasionally audience members come up to join the session to sing a song, and musicians may drop out of the session circle, perhaps even mid-tune, in order to have a conversation with someone in the audience. On quiet nights with a small crowd of known friends and few or no strangers around, the border between the audience and the musicians is very porous indeed.  

(Ibid., 131)

Dorothea E. Hast and Stanley Scott observe that sessions are not merely a place for music, but that “all the strands of Irish traditional culture—music, dancing, singing, 

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44 Doolin is also a center for critique on authenticity in Irish traditional music. Scholars such as Helen O’Shea argue that sessions in Doolin are performed for tourists. Regardless, Kaul’s discussion of sessions is relevant to the purposes of this section.
storytelling, poetry, and the art of entertaining conversation—are inextricably bound to one another in an evening’s entertainment” (Hast and Scott 2004, 15). They note that music entertains at social functions and informal pub sessions. Music is therefore an “essential part of a community,” and “the community surrounding the music—including people, place, and even physical locale—is a vital component in the overall musical experience” (Ibid., 15).

In a study of social life through song, I. Sheldon Posen investigates the song “The Chapeau Boys,” and its place in the life of a small Canadian logging town in the Ottawa Valley in his book For Singing and Dancing and all Sorts of Fun: The Story of the Ottawa Valley’s Most Famous Song The Chapeau Boys (Posen 1988). He writes that music in the Ottawa Valley is part of the “natural flow of sociability” in homes, much like drinking tea or telling stories. To illustrate the natural flow, he describes an older gentleman who visited his neighbors, chatted with his hosts, and sang songs. He also describes gatherings where guests would visit, eating meals or playing cards. Before leaving for the night, a guest might ask for a song, and eventually most of the guests would sing or play fiddle (Ibid., 11). This atmosphere, he continues, carried over into social life in public places, too, like hotels and taverns. In quiet areas without loud background music, on Saturday nights local singers filled the bars. “Every so often, a table or two would hush, a pocket of quiet attention in a room full of drinking, laughing, talking people, as someone finally acquiesced to coaxing, put down his beer glass, looked off into the middle distance, and sang” (Ibid., 11-12). They would usually

45 See Appendix B for a transcription of the song text. Since “The Chapeau Boys is the main focus of Posen’s book, For Singing and Dancing and All Sorts of Fun: The Story of the Ottawa Valley’s Most Famous Song The Chapeau Boys, discussion of this song will occur frequently throughout this thesis. This is not an Irish song, nor have I heard it in Irish singing sessions, but the theories around the connection between song and community are demonstrated clearly through Posen’s ethnography of this particular song. Many different variants exist of the text of “The Chapeau Boys,” which can be found in Posen’s appendix. The verse provided in this thesis is the first version provided in Posen’s appendix (Posen 1988).
sing unaccompanied songs about locale, often to do with logging and traveling down the Ottowa River.

Mary Ellen Cohane and Kenneth S. Goldstein wrote an ethnography of singing based on Patrick Kennedy’s collections from his musical childhood in the 1820s in their article, “Folksongs and the Ethnography of Singing in Patrick Kennedy's The Banks of the Boro” (Cohane and Goldstein 1996). The historical source Banks of the Boro supplies a foundation for studying the evolution of singing social life. It contains rare historical information on “the performance contexts of bawdy songs, the aesthetics of song choices, and conventional techniques for encouraging or silencing singers” (Ibid., 425).

Cohane and Goldstein elaborate on this observation noting that Kennedy’s accounts reveal ballad sessions as a “larger context of jokes, stories, and raillery; rarely were they special sessions exclusively for singing as they commonly are in 20th-century folksong revival sessions” (Ibid.). Singing may begin when attendees of the event are tired of the other activities. Then, a party member may call on a well-known singer to start the session, or the singer may try to start his or herself. From then on, each performer called on a new singer and might even request a particular song (Ibid.). Calling on singers is still practiced in singing sessions. Kennedy also illustrates the ways in which song performances in social situations determine the meanings they communicate. Cohane and Goldstein argue that “the ethnography of singing” is “indispensable in understanding what the songs meant for the community of people who took part in their performance” (Ibid.).

Kennedy’s collection reveals performance practices in the 1820s. Singing sessions today appear more consciously organized than the social occasions described in Kennedy’s accounts (See Chapter Three). Events with singing were frequently
interrupted, especially by new visitors entering. Singing continued until different manners and gestures, or a request for dancing, indicated that the singing should finish (Ibid., 431). During wedding parties, revelers would drink hot punch and tea and tell elaborate jokes. These jokes were usually overlooked by song collectors, even though they were common components of singing events (Ibid., 431).

Lillis Ó Laoire studies the relationships built through song, detailing the overall aura, evocativeness, and meaningfulness of social singing in Ireland. Ó Laoire’s book On a Rock in the Middle of the Ocean: Songs and Singers in Tory Island (Ó Laoire 2005) is an account of the integral elements of traditional song, particularly sean-nós (old style) and nua-nós (new style), in the lives of Tory Islanders. The inhabitants of Tory, an island off the Northwestern coast of Donegal, speak Irish as their first language and the island is possibly the last stronghold of the Irish language in the Ulster region. Ó Laoire concentrates on singing processes rather than analysis of specific songs. His goal is a documentation of distinctive practices of song transmission and performance from an anthropological perspective (Ibid., xii). The book is about the song practice in an area where song is integral to community socializing. He notes that the process of change affecting performance practices increased near the end of the twentieth century because of social and economic transformations, but singing “still retains some of its former vigor” (Ibid., 1).

Ó Laoire notes that people came to know most of their songs in homes, at dances in the schoolhouse on festive nights, during house parties, or while walking the road. Song transmission was carried on without formal schooling from other islanders, visitors, and printed sources. Transmission “occurred mostly within the domains of socialization and in domestic education outside of school” (Ibid., 49-50). He

46 The night’s progression through activities reflects the progression also described by Henry Glassie (1982; 2006).
emphasizes the use of both instrumental tunes and songs in the home. Early exposure to music in homes may also contribute to its centrality in adult life. He writes, “I believe the ideology that music, including both instrumental music and song, is important, and that the opportunities [one of his subjects] had in his youth to listen to it developed his subsequent dúil, or desire, for it until the present” (Ibid., 52). Musical talent was nurtured among children on Tory, and children were allowed to participate in vocal and instrumental musical practices (Ibid., 52). He discusses the importance of informal song exchange. This was a process of listening and absorbing songs and their stories in a social atmosphere, a quite different experience than learning by listening to recordings removed from their social contexts (Ibid., 53). Because Tory had no official pub, song was heard in dance halls and as a part of nighttime household visits (Ibid., 65). Singing thus took place as a part of other social events with other forms of entertainment, like dancing or simply visiting with neighbors, not as a distinct activity on its own.

Song styles which might not ordinarily be considered traditional become a part of Tory song repertoire through oral transmission (Ibid., 70). Song expertise is contested and competitive, with different individuals wishing to possess the highest degree of traditional knowledge. This creates rivalries, to the extent that some do not like hearing younger generations singing songs associated with others (Ibid., 74). No matter the conflicts and differing ideas of what constitutes traditional songs and processes, these apprehensions reveal that interest in song maintenance and transmission is integral to island life (Ibid., 75).

In small communities such as Tory, Ó Laoire recognizes that annual religious and agricultural festivals were vibrant with social life. Dances were organized during these festivals and became the climax of the events. The island’s community came
together during these festive nights, celebrating themselves as a community through
music and dance performance (Ibid., 135). During the dances, the elders who no longer
could dance would direct their attention to songs. Others present would listen very
intently, making no sound during the singing (Ibid., 150). Songs, he writes, “constituted
the highest summit of the night” (Ibid., 152). The formal setting of the dances thus
transitioned into song-sharing sessions, moments when the night became much more
intimate and the company more connected to one another, or perhaps connected in a
different way than through the dancing.

Other social activities besides dancing were also important, including ‘visiting
houses.’ The purpose of these gatherings varied depending on the interests of the
visitors to these houses (Ibid., 130). Storytelling, an important element of verbal art
practiced on Tory, was a part of the entertainment in these houses. Great singers were
also often storytellers with a wealth of local knowledge from which they drew their
stories (Ibid., 131). Ó Laoire’s illustration of singing in Tory helps form my own image
of singing within communities—using these images, I can better understand the role of
singing as a basis for the social life of participants in re-contextualized singing
sessions.

Frances Morton, in her article “Performing Ethnography: Irish Traditional
Music Sessions and New Methodological Spaces” (Morton 2005), stresses that
researchers look at the entire performance setting to develop insightful ethnographies
on traditional music sessions. Traditional sessions embody space, geographies, and
time, an overall socio-musical experience appealing to all the senses. She writes that
aspects of social life can never be fully theorized, including “encounters with external
forces, the passions and the senses, and non-verbal ways of communicating and
knowing through the senses and expression,” all interactions that have often been
neglected by scientific research (Ibid., 664). Morton suggests that researchers view their subject within its surrounding context, both immediate and globally, rather than viewing the world as an entity separate from the performance context, because “these forms of art and expression are what make us feel alive, that make our lives more enjoyable and pleasurable” (Ibid., 674). Intangible cultural heritage in Ireland is as much about its setting, context, and social experience as it is about the product itself. If we accept this assertion, these aspects of ICH then need to be brought to greater awareness to support more successful sustainability. I use Morton’s model for an ethnography, also exploring the overall socio-musical experience of the singing sessions to discover the singing sociality of the singers and situate traditional singing as a current, twenty-first century practice.

Identity

An important aspect of human sociality is that it provides for the formation of identity. Raymond Williams writes extensively on identity as the driving force behind deriving meaning from human experience. Humans receive and recreate some meanings and create and communicate other meanings. “The human crisis is always a crisis of understanding: what we genuinely understand we can do” (Williams 1958, 338). Anthropologist Clifford Geertz vividly describes the concept of culture as a human-spun “web of significance,” and that analysis of this web is “an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz 1973, 5). Cultural analysis exposes normality, common ideals among all members of the culture, without limiting individuality (Ibid., 14). Geertz goes on to explain that culture is not something that exists in addition to a complete human but is a central component of what creates that person (Ibid., 47). He

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47 Despite Morton’s comment, academic attention to musical social life is increasing, a subject that is addressed in more detail throughout this thesis.
writes, “Becoming human is becoming individual, and we become individual under the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning in terms of which we give form, order, point, and direction to our lives” (Ibid., 52). Culture, and the social life that creates culture, builds human identity.

According to Martin Stokes, music is socially meaningful because it helps establish an identity for practitioners (Stokes 1997, 5). Musical styles, he continues, can represent national identities in complex ways (Ibid., 13). The connection between music and identity gives meaning to musicians through a display of national pride or personal accomplishment. Identity in music can even break boundaries set up by social structures:

A sense of identity can be put into play through music by performing it, dancing to it, listening to it or even thinking about it. Depending upon how we are placed by other social facts it can confine and entrap us in a narrowly chauvinist or sexist scene. Depending upon how we are placed by other social facts, it can also leap across boundaries and put into play unexpected and expanding possibilities.

(Ibid., 24)

Community places humans within groups, adhering to biological needs to connect with others, and an individual’s sense of identity grows through those connections as community members can cling to unique characteristics, found within a set of social attributes, with which they feel whole. As Jane Sugarman revealed in her study of Prespa Albanian wedding singing, discussed further below, strengthened identity means strengthened community. The results are cyclical. Music fuels community and in turn identity.

Posen reveals that “The Chapeau Boys” provides identity for listeners and singers in the Ottawa Valley. He quotes the final two lines of the song:

Our cook’s getting sleepy, he’s nodding his head
So we’ll all say our prayers, boys, and roll into bed

(Posen 1988, 67)
By presenting these concrete images, the singer “brings the occasion of the singing and the world of the whole song, into sharp focus” (Ibid.) revealing the listeners, location, time of day, appearance, what the people from the song were doing before-hand, and their feelings. By addressing the real audience as the fictitious characters in the song, the singer brings the audience into the story. This exchange allows the audience to identify with the song, its world, and the values this world exemplifies.

“The Chapeau Boys” has become what Posen calls ‘popular folklore,’ a form of expressive culture that represents a community to other cultures (Ibid., 93). Representing Irishness in Irish traditional song can work the same way—images of farmland, wild seascapes, and traditional music represent Ireland in tourist paraphernalia (Kaul 2013). In turn, other cultures may come to view these images as “the key referent to that community’s folklore, and ultimately to the community itself” (Posen 1988, 94). “The Chapeau Boys” gives residents something to offer tourists (Ibid., 95). The song provides a source of identity for self-representation to others.

However, Posen argues that investing a single song or genre diminishes the overall essence of the representing culture to a few relics removed from their original contexts. He reference the images of leprechauns, shamrocks, and the Blarney Stone to illustrate cultural representation being reduced to relics (Ibid., 96). He maintains that fortunately this has not happened with “The Chapeau Boys:”

> Whatever has been its fate outside the village—icon, popular folklore, parody, plagiarism—*The Chapeau Boys* has never lost its centrality in village culture. The song stores, as it always has for the community, most of those elements—historic, occupational, mythic, temporal, familial, social—which serve to make up what might be called identity.

(Ibid., 98)
“The Chapeau Boys” reinforces the Chapeau community by storing the identity forming elements listed above in its text and also its participatory performance contexts. 

Social Identity Theory

A brief overview of the psychological perspective called social identity theory provides an established, theoretical groundwork to offer an explanation of the value of singing sociality to singers in Ireland. Social identity theory was developed by psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s and 1980s. They discuss identity in terms of group interaction. According to these theorists, a group is a collection of two or more people. The core of social identity theory is that identity is defined by highlighting differences from other groups and similarities within the group. It explains phenomena such as racism, prejudice, and discrimination, but also more positive aspects such as leadership, organizational behavior, and cohesiveness (Hogg 2006, 111). Theorist Michael Hogg argues that “collective phenomena cannot be adequately explained in terms of isolated individual processes or interpersonal interaction alone and that social psychology should place large-scale social phenomena near the top of its scientific agenda” (Ibid., 111). Hogg continues to explain that membership in groups is defined by relationships, and that relationships maintain one’s group membership (Ibid., 116).

Hogg writes that social categorization is the core of social identity, and to speak about groups is to speak about social categories, or prototypes, like feelings, behaviors, and attitudes. These categorizations “capture similarities within the group and differences between the group and other groups or people who are not in the group” (Ibid., 118). Irish traditional singers distinguish themselves in many ways, some of

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48 See Chapter Six for information on heritage as an agency of display.
which include being Irish, singers, traditional singers, bawdy singers, ballad singers, lilters, song session leaders or committee members, session attendees, from Country Dublin or County Clare, English language singers, sean-nós style singers, story tellers, and so on. Turino also discusses multiple distinguishing features which make a person whole (Turino 2008, 101). Each distinction reveals similarities with others who claim the same distinction, such as where they live or what style they sing. These similarities can then be used to differentiate themselves from others, since residents born in Dublin are not from Clare, or classical singers sing differently than traditional singers. Traditional singers identify themselves with other traditional singers through such social categories as these. Turino calls these kinds of groups ‘cohorts’ to distinguish his model from older, more static notions of collective identities, including that of ‘cultures’ (Turino 2008).

Social identity theory seeks to explain individual behavior through group association against, or even rejection of, status quo—how members of a particular group behave compared to a more general social sphere. Henri Tajfel describes attribution theory within social identity theory—group members explain the behavior of others and of themselves as perceived in various social interaction conditions (Tajfel 1982, 6). For instance, traditional singers could be understood as working against normal societal flow. They sing their songs, identifying with a past heritage. They hold to their practices, understanding their role in maintaining traditional heritage alongside the quickly increasing ease of travel, technology advancement, comfortable living, and other modern amenities.

John Turner, Tajfel’s contemporary, compares models for social cohesion and social identification. Turner explains that a group structure evolves through mutual interaction and influence. Groups are conceptualized as “a collection of individuals in
face-to-face relations of interaction, attraction and influence who may or may not stand in differentiated structural positions with respect to each other,” which he calls the social cohesion model (Turner 1982, 16). According to Turner, social cohesion differs from social identification for individual acceptance of membership in the group (Ibid., 16). The social cohesion model stresses that group membership is affective, meaning that attraction between group members and shared interests in group activities bind them together. The social identification model instead emphasizes that group membership is based on perception or cognition. He continues to elaborate that individuals structure self-perception through social categories as well, using these categories to explain their own self-concepts. These cognitive processes thus contribute to group behavior (Ibid., 16).

Turner describes that a need for positive self-esteem motivates differentiation from others through highly valued group characteristics and determines group behavior (Ibid., 17). He clarifies:

Mutual esteem within groups, too, is explained simply by the idea that individuals tend to evaluate themselves and others in terms of their common category membership. Prestige would be assigned to group members in the same way as any other criteria attribute. Evidence that the desire for positive self-esteem is as important in social as personal identity success that this is so. (Ibid., 30)

In other words, members develop increased positive identity through group membership because of various shared group characteristics that they personally value. This is why people may identify strongly with political parties, college clubs and societies, or sports teams, for instance. Fans of the University of Southern California football team bond together, believing that they are warriors, wearing cardinal and gold to games, chanting along with thousands of other spectators, cheering on their team, thus identifying and sharing positive characteristics with others, raising their own feeling of self worth. Members of the Irish traditional singing community tend to
identify with other members, admiring each other’s work in the field or singing skills, sharing songs and receiving emotional support, deriving a strong sense of worth as tradition bearers, therefore increasing their self-esteem.

Identities within social communities are formed as distinct from the identities of other social communities. Communities that form around music influence the identity of individual community members. Sara O’Sullivan, in *Contemporary Ireland: A Sociological Map* (O’Sullivan 2007), writes extensively on identity. Defining ‘identity’ requires an ‘other.’ A sense of identity depends on an understanding of a set of meanings and comparisons produced in social relations (Ibid., 351). Identity is formed by a reaffirmation of one group sharing sameness which in turn reinforces differences with other groups. This interaction results in inclusion amongst those who share identity and exclusion of others (Ibid., 352). She writes, “Society is both the product of individual interaction and that same individual interaction is structured by society” (Ibid.). This echoes the cyclical formation of identity as described in social identity theory.

Ian Russell tells the story of Haydn Thorp, a young singer who passed away in his early twenties. Thorp helped bring community through song to the people of his home in West Yorkshire. He established local social singing evenings and competitions. As a young singer himself, he opened traditional singing to other younger singers in the area (Russell 2003, 266). According to Russell, farming districts in Northern England feel commonality through social singing, especially among the people whose work is fairly isolated. Thorp sang while helping his father on the farm, and then when work finished, he sang at public gatherings. He revived the social evening at a venue called Shepherds’ Meet, which had faltered because of little support,
one which includes a competition followed by informal singing. Russell notes Thorp’s contribution to his community’s group identity:

By reinvigorating the social institutions within his district and by bringing quarrelsome parties together, he enabled them to celebrate their cultural traditions and look outward to face the real threat to their way of life, perceived as the proposed banning of hunting with hounds by Act of Parliament.

(Russell 2003, 274)

Distinct groups came together for song, focusing on sameness instead of differences, allowing them to better understand humanity and their place within the larger society and fueling them with confidence to speak up for their customs. As a community, they felt isolated by modern society, which was not seen to represent their values and needs. Therefore, they used song to bond, feeling a sense of identity within their social group. Russell examined “song as lived experience,” moving research emphasis toward recognizing singing as social discourse (Ibid., 278).

Jane Sugarman discusses identity formation through social singing in her ethnography of singing in Engendering Song: Singing and Subjectivity at Prespa Albanian Weddings (Sugarman 1997). Prespa is a region that lies between Albania, Greece, and Macedonia. Sugarman first encountered Prespa singing during a field research stay in Skopje, Macedonia. She later studied a Prespa Albanian family in Toronto, Canada who emigrated in the 1980s during Yugoslavia’s economic decline. Prespa Albanians in Toronto celebrated their weddings as they would if they were back in Prespa, maintaining their cultural roots despite facing discrimination (Ibid.).

Singing is a means of participation for Prespa wedding attendees, and is therefore crucial to social reproduction and renegotiation. Sugarman writes, “As a

49 Jeff Todd Titon uses the term ‘lived experience’ to explain music in its context. The problem with transcriptions and recordings is that they strip music of its living context. The role of an ethnomusicologist is to study the field in which the music is occurring—it’s ‘lived experience.’ See Titon’s contribution “Knowing Fieldwork in Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (2008), Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
polysemic social practice, singing allows individuals to convey a range of messages that they might wish to make about themselves as social beings” (Ibid., 3). Performances in turn provide images within the Prespa community as the singers “formulate their view of themselves and their social world” (Ibid.). Social identity theory explains this formulation. Sugarman studied participants’ relationships between musical and social considerations. Singers could not relate to questions on singing traditions and techniques, however. Singers grew up with the singing as a natural characteristic of the weddings. Rather, singers reacted to questions about their own experiences during specific events (Ibid., 20-21).

Ó Laoire notes that traditional music and dance are integral to heritage and sense of identity, serving to define its people both to themselves and the outside world. This is the same situation that Posen describes in the Chateau community. Ó Laoire continues, “Music, dance, song, and the events associated with them are symbols so entwined as to be virtually inseparable. They form part of islanders’ distinct repertoire of signifiers which enable them to express their own identity and, at the same time, to distinguish themselves from others and particularly from mainlanders” (Ó Laoire 2005, 168). Ó Laoire’s use of the term ‘signifiers’ here echoes Turino’s more fully developed semiotic perspective which will be discussed in the next section on participation, as well as the somewhat contrasting perspective of Sugarman and Stokes that singing processes which strengthen community also lead to a sense of identity. Ó Laoire believes that, despite rapidly changing life and dramatic improvement of material Irish life, there will always be a place and necessity for various interpretations of the concepts of ceart (right, or correct), bri (meaning), and misneach (courage), and the “heated sorrow of cumha” (thought) which the singing creates (Ibid., 285).
Participation

Discussing the importance of participation in fulfilling identity, Tamara Livingston writes in her article “An Expanded Theory for Revivals as Cosmopolitan Participatory Music Making” (Livingston 2014):

I suggest that the reason music revivals are so prevalent and engage so many people is that they provide multiple opportunities to fill basic social and individual needs for participants in a way that other cultural realms cannot. Among these basic needs are the desire for meaningful social interaction (without the burden of verbal communication), the desire for personal creative fulfillment, and the need to feel historically connected or grounded. As a process that relies on nonverbal communication, at least in the act of making music, music revivals are especially effective because they reach individuals through the senses at the level of emotion and association. Music revivals offer an open invitation to participate; without recruiting new converts, revivals soon wither and die. Revivals with a strong participatory component are especially invitational, leading to a wide spread of the music practice and the potential to last for decades, if not longer.

(Ibid., 65)

The participatory component of revivals could be seen to fulfill social and individual needs. Reintroducing a musical practice such as social singing in Ireland could be seen to provide a deeper level of social interaction beyond verbal communication for practitioners. This social interaction also connects singers with their common history, providing another link which heightens their bond—the ‘parallel tracks,’ a term used by informant Jerry O’Reilly to express the deep connection that can be felt between singers who might be complete strangers to one another otherwise. Since the participatory component fulfills such basic human needs, the social life of Irish traditional singing is more likely able to continue.

In the Ottowa Valley, singing was also a part of the day’s communication, as singers could relate with one another and tell stories through song. In the case of “The Chapeau Boys” and other local songs, Posen observes singers casting the narratives as factual, first-person accounts. He writes that through the singing of local songs like “The Chapeau Boys,” a relationship builds between singer and listener as the singer
tells the story and the “listening audience is understood to exist within the framework of the song, and to be within its world” (Posen 1988, 64). Posen asserts that achieving a sense of connectedness among participants is what makes for a successful informal singing session in Chapeau. Chapter Four is an exploration into the ways relationships can build through songs and singing in Ireland, relating to Posen’s discussion.

Thomas Turino writes about the social life of music, touching on personal experience to explain the significance of making music as a group activity. His book *Music as Social Life* (Turino 2008) is a response to questions that inform his teaching, including what he wants people to consider about the nature of musical meaning and the crucial roles music plays in social, spiritual, and political life. He develops conceptual tools for people to think through these problems and processes (Ibid., xvi). *Music as Social Life* explores the meaning of social music. The social life of music is “important to people’s understanding of themselves and their identities, to the formation and sustenance of social groups, to spiritual and emotional communication, to political movements, and to other fundamental aspects of social life” (Ibid., 1-2).

Turino argues that musical participation is valuable for personal and social integration, giving purpose to participants (Ibid., 1). He applies the concept of identity to participatory music by describing that these events unify people “in heightened physical-sonic ways that provide a powerful sense of identity and unity beyond normal social interactions” (Ibid., 188). Participatory music and dance are universal ways for humans to realize their needs to connect and identify with others (Ibid., 188); social identity theory also describes this need for human connection.

Turino uses a Peircian semiotic perspective to answer questions about meaning in participatory music making. In his essay “Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music,” Turino develops a “theory of
music, emotion, and identity based on the semiotics of the American philosopher and scientist Charles Sanders Pierce (1839-1914)” (Ibid., 222). Within Peircian semiotics, signs are used to represent human connection and experience. For instance, a sign, such as smoke, represents an object, such as fire. The observer then develops what Peirce calls an interpretant, which is “the effect the sign has in/on the observer, including feeling and sensation, physical reaction, as well as ideas articulated and processed in language” (Ibid., 223). Songs as signs of shared common experiences, in Turino’s terms, are therefore signs for the experiences, which are their objects. The interpretants are the reactions that stem from the experiences—the laughing, the crying, the connection.

According to Turino, human participation in group activities is the core of social life. Turino argues that musical participation is valuable for personal and social integration that contributes to making its participants whole (Ibid., 1). He distinguishes between participatory and presentational forms of musical practice. Generally, presentational practice divides performer and audience, while the participatory tends to be inclusionary group music making processes. Performance value in participatory styles is based on degree of participation rather than an assessment of music quality (Ibid., 33). He argues that presentational events can also connect individuals, but these contrasting practices differ in type of engagement and level of intimacy. An orchestral audience, for instance, listens to the performance. The conductor may speak to the audience and break the ‘fourth wall,’ the theatrical term to define division between performer and audience. The audience may also relate to the piece being performed—maybe it brings back a memory from childhood. However, participatory music making connects people more powerfully because of the shared interactive engagement in doing the activities together (Ibid., 61-62). The values underpinning participatory
activities are important because they inspire more people to be involved with life-enriching activities (Ibid., 35). He concludes that “Participatory performance provides a space for direct, intimate . . . social connection and experience and provides the potential for flow experience that is readily accessible to anyone” (Ibid., 234).

Social singing in Ireland, as a primarily solo performance but featuring a communicative flow from singer to listener, does not match Turino’s participatory aesthetic directly. Rather than singing all together at once for better social engagement, singers take turns singing performatively for one another. The participatory nature of the gathering remains strong however. Sessions, and their aim to include singers of all levels, active listening, engagement between listener and singer, and talking with neighbors, contribute to group participation and, subsequently, singing sociality.

Drawing from Turino’s theories, a sense of meaning can stem from participation in group musical activities. Social singing can be viewed as both presentational and participatory. One singer performs while others listen. The listeners may connect to the song’s story or place of origin. The mutual participation happens when members of the audience speak with the singer, call out “Good man!,” join the singer on chorus refrains, laugh at jokes, or otherwise interact with the singing and singer. The participation also happens in the event as a whole—most attendees will be asked to sing, or they will sing when inspired by hearing a previous song. As explained in Chapter One, the performer does not sing on a stage in front of an audience, divided by the fourth wall. Audience and performer are mixed in a room full of singers and listeners.

Organization of rooms for singing spaces as it influences feelings of acceptance and belonging is examined in Chapter Three. Although the set-up differs depending on the session, an aim is to encourage an inclusive, participatory atmosphere through the
arrangement of chairs and tables. I have observed sessions where the chairs are arranged in a circle and singers sing one by one around the circle. I have also seen rooms where tables and chairs seem to be packed tightly into the room or where attendees are standing with no visible circle; such an arrangement creates a feeling, at least to me, that all the singers and listeners are intermingling with each other intimately. Alternatively, I have seen rooms where tables and chairs are set up precisely, and the room may even feature a sort of ‘high table’ where the organizers, leader, and guest singers sit. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, organization methods can affect the feeling of acceptance and belonging, and each organizational method is meant to somehow encourage participation. Because of the set-up of the room, the singing session is oriented more towards participation than performance. The participatory aspect of the singing, according to Turino, is what heightens the potential to create and carry social meaning.

Musical participation can develop into a sense of community among participants. Etienne Wenger outlines the level of participation which provides meaning to community members:

Of course, in order to engage in practice, we must be alive in a world in which we can act and interact. We must have a body with a brain that is functioning well enough to participate in social communities. We must have ways to communicate with one another. But a focus on practice is not merely a functional perspective on human activities, even activities involving multiple individuals. It does not address simply the mechanics of getting something done, individually or in groups; it is not a mechanical perspective. It includes not just bodies (or even coordinated bodies) and not just brains (even coordinated ones), but moreover that which gives meaning to the motions of bodies and the workings of brains.

(Wenger 1998, 51)

Wenger then emphasizes that “Practice is about meaning as an experience of everyday life” (Ibid., 52). A practice, such as singing, is an experience. This shared experience within the community gives meaning to its practitioners.
Community

Seeking to define community, Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing note that definitions are broad because the term is used significantly in social science. In a most basic sense, ‘community’ can constitute either common interests, common ecology and locality, or a common social system or structure (Rapport and Overing 2007, 72).

Communities are often regarded as social organisms functioning apart from other such organisms. A community is a “bounded group of people” within a culture or locality with shared interests and social lives (Ibid., 73). However, the understanding of the nature of community is shifting. Community can also refer to a collective consciousness, a term coined by Émile Durkheim in 1893, which defines how an individual views him or herself as a member of a group. This notion of community could include societal customs such as fashion, or thoughts and actions based on the beliefs of a religious group as the basis for community (Theories of Media: University of Chicago 2004).

More usually, the term ‘community’ references the notion of a group in a shared space or containing shared characteristics, ideals, interests, or habits. Community fits within Turino’s definition of a cultural phenomenon. Community in this perspective has two subcategories—one meaning is physical with clear boundaries, such as the Los Angeles community or the college community; and one meaning is metaphysical, the sense or feeling of community, of togetherness and unity. Identification within community can stem from either type, but the more abstract idea of identity, the feeling that members of a community can identify with others in their group, leans on the more metaphysical definition. This sense of the term seems most in tune with the nature of the Irish traditional singing community.
Raymond Williams stresses community when seeking to understand culture as it relates to human sociality. A living culture, which Williams calls a good community, will encourage all members to contribute to an advance in consciousness, fulfilling their common need (Williams 1958, 334-335). He continues, “The idea of a common culture brings together, in a particular form of social relationship, at once the idea of natural growth and that of its tending” (Ibid., 337). As will be discussed further throughout this thesis, singers in the singing sessions can develop a sense of community as they share songs and experiences with each other.

Social Anthropologist I. M. Lewis gives a vivid picture of yet another view of social life in its relation to community:

Social life can thus be viewed as a kind of theatre, an image which, of course, has always appealed to dramatists and poets. From this perspective, we set out to discover the plot of the social drama which the members of a particular community are in effect engaged in presenting, the parts or ‘roles’ that its members assume, and their mutual-interaction as the play proceeds. (Lewis 1985, 20)

Members of communities play specific roles which help to make up the community as a whole, engaging with each other and thus giving the community vitality. Lewis calls these engagements ‘transactional,’ or transactions between specific roles within communities (Ibid., 21). Chapter Five, which focusses on individuals in the social life of singing, draws on this concept with an analysis of participant roles.

**Coaxing**

Coaxing is a means of encouragement in the singing community. Initial coaxing reveals support and confidence, and as the session progresses, the coaxing diminishes as the songs flow (Posen 1988, 89). Coaxing can be seen in Irish traditional singing when listeners encourage a singer to start a song. The organizer or another attendee might call on a singer and the singer politely refuses. Others in the room then say, “Come on!” and might offer requests for a particular song that singer is known for
singing. Eventually, the singer begins to sing. Coaxing can help during the song, too. Shouts from the audience, such as “Good girl!” or “Good man!” can relieve the singer’s nerves which may arise during performance.

Posen writes that singing and the coaxing that accompanies it “are about the tight weaving of bonds of hospitality and companionship among individuals in that session” (Ibid., 89). Likewise, the coaxing during singing sessions in Ireland contributes to session hospitality. He continues, stating “singers and listeners become part of a wider constituency than the individuals present” (Ibid., 90). He notes that the singing includes the whole village and region, creating a sense of belonging among the Chapeau community.

Encouraging Singing

Turino asserts, “in participatory contexts, the full range of the learning curve is audibly and visually present and provides reachable goals for people at all skill levels” (Turino 2008, 31). Posen also describes situations in which a singer with limited knowledge of the song can still participate in the performance. In social singing, the skill level of the singer is not as important as the benefits that come out of his or her performance. Turino explains more generally that the human need to be a part of a group reflects evolutionary benefits, stating, “belonging enhances the potential for survival.” This evolutionary process drives humans’ need to identify with others (Ibid., 106).

Community through song can be found at work in the Irish singing circles, but community needs to be carefully nurtured in this new environment. Posen observes that singers in the Ottowa Valley in Canada offer acceptance into their community through song. The older, revered singers do not see membership in the group as limited or closed. They recognize that younger singers may not share similar knowledge or
experience with the older generations, so they welcome strangers from all backgrounds and ages (Posen 1998, 82). Often expressed by participants for this thesis, the aim is to cultivate singing session participants’ experience of acceptance and belonging within the community.\(^5\)

Community among members with shared experience can alternatively be considered exclusionary, especially to those outside of the community. For instance, attendees who do not fit the definition of traditional singer, such as classical singers, may not feel able to participate in Irish traditional singing sessions. Additionally, visitors who are not regular attendees may be excluded because they have no way to relate with the members. I experienced this sense of exclusion myself in a singing session, which I describe in Chapter Three. The experience is not shared in these instances due to different backgrounds or different singing styles, and therefore the community, while encouraging to those within the community, may be exclusionary to those from elsewhere. Social identity theory also provides insight here because members of social groups can identify with each other, but they likewise identify as different from other social groups. In the case of the singing sessions, women or younger singers may not feel as comfortable to express themselves in the same way that older males can, particularly in sessions which exhibit hierachical unspoken rules, which are explained more in detail in Chapter Three.

Connections Through Song

Singers can connect with songs and with each other through their songs, a concept I discovered through fieldwork presented in Chapter Four. Breandan Ó Madagáin took folk song scholarship one step beyond musical or textual analysis by discussing singers’ relationships with their songs. He writes about Irish song and its

\(^5\) Acceptance and belonging are not always goals of the singing sessions, which will be problematized throughout this thesis.
place in society in his article, “Functions of Irish Song in the Nineteenth Century” (Ó Madagáin 1985) stating that singing is a universal cultural phenomenon that all anthropologists encounter in their studies. He adds, “We shall see that there was scarcely a form of human activity, literally from the cradle to the grave, into which song did not enter” (Ibid. 1985, 131). According to Ó Madagáin, song was a large aspect of life in nineteenth-century Ireland because it was a source of cultural pride and identification for the Irish. Song was an “instrument for the heightened expression of emotion” for the common people (Ibid., 134). He adopts a perspective conceptualizing the unity of words and music as a form of artistic expression. He examines the ways in which singers convey emotions to listeners and questions if these emotions are the same for the listeners as the performers.

Tom Munnelly connects singer, songs, and social contexts in his collection of songs from Tom Lenihan in *The Mount Callan Garland: Songs from the Repertoire of Tom Lenihan of Knockbrack, Miltown Malbay, County Clare* (Munnelly 1994). Lenihan was a farmer for whom singing was a part of daily life through early 1990 when he passed away. Munnelly’s collection contains texts and tunes along with detailed background stories of the songs and their contexts. Backgrounds include Lenihan’s association with the songs, including where he received them. Descriptions also include Munnelly’s own textual and comparative analyses. Lenihan never left Ireland, only venturing away from his hometown to other parts of Ireland when Munnelly’s collection and promotion of his songs made him famous. Munnelly writes:

> While Tom was a welcome guest at special gatherings like weddings and parties, he did not require such occasions in order to sing. Song was a part of his everyday life and he could be heard singing continually in the fields or cowhouse or doing chores about the house. As he got older and sleep became more evasive, he often said that he would pass the hours before dawn by ‘wording’ his songs to himself in bed.

(Ibid., xxii)
Singing for Lenihan was a social event. His neighbors encouraged him to sing, frequently inviting him to entertain during special occasions. Townspeople marveled at how he was always singing. This account reveals the important place song held in the community of Miltown Malbay by following one prominent local singer. In a sense, my own studies similarly led me to certain singers and organizers, albeit less extended, of whom I profile more in depth in Chapter Five.

James Porter delves deeper into an examination of the Scottish Travelling singer Jeannie Robertson and her songs, specifying the interconnection of the singer’s life experience and her performances of a particular song throughout that life. He developed a model based on analysis of performance dynamics to understand the meaning of song to the singer as conveyed to and understood by the audience in “Jeannie Robertson’s My Son David: A Conceptual Performance Model” (Porter 1976). He argues that an understanding of the song as conceptualized in the singer’s mind will help reveal the value of the song to the community. Understanding the singer’s own thoughts about the song gives a concrete example of the connection between song and singer. When singers talk about their songs in singing sessions, the same phenomenon occurs. Listeners hear how the singer connects with the song. They better understand the song’s meaning to the singer. Listeners then can apply this personal context of song and singer to their own experience hearing the song. They, too, can develop a connection to the song based on the singer’s experience, in a way empathizing with the singer. Through this empathy, singers connect more deeply with each other, and thus the song’s value to the community is heightened. The interrelationship between song and performer forms a complicated connection between singer, message, and community. Porter continues that the singer’s background
knowledge of the songs and the concomitant emotional connectedness of singer and song are influenced by learning, perception, experience, and response (Ibid., 21).

Ian Russell expressed the depth of the connection singers can have with songs:

A local song, greatly valued by previous generations of singers, taken up by a young talent with charismatic qualities and close kinship ties, becomes so closely identified with its new performer to the extent that the two become inseparable. Thus the singer personifies the song, while the song evokes the singer and his life

(Russell 2003, 278)

Song and the singer can become so closely related that songs can build the singer’s identity and the singer can make songs relevant for listeners. Russell continues, stressing the identity that can be established through song:

A considerable body of research exists into understanding how identity is established through song and instrumental music. The focus of this has largely been on the role of song/music in the context of ethnicity of the emerging nation states and the ways in which it provides an understanding of these societies in a depth which no other social activity can match. Although it is group identity that is examined in this study, many of the constructs used to determine national identity remain equally valid. Thus through this study of a singing tradition, notions of difference and social boundaries have emerged, alongside the use of style as an emblem of identity, the recognition of topography as a metaphor of integrity, the acknowledgement of singing as transformative experience, and the use of song as a theatre of expression for hotly contested ideologies.

(Ibid., 278)

Russell’s description of identity as developed through song relates to social identity theory. Singing brings participants together as a group, distinct from other social groups. Singing is a ‘transformative experience,’ and this lived experience provides meaning for the singers. Human connections through song strengthen the bonds of community.

**Shared and Lived Experience**

The experience of social singing is constituted by shared habits connecting singers to each other and creating ‘parallel tracks.’ Turino helpfully distinguishes between culture and society. He writes that we belong to social groups and are part of
society, whereas the habits shared among actual groups of people—cultural phenomena—are part of and belong within us. Habits, these cultural phenomena, have histories, create effects, and gain stability. They also continually change and result from circumstances and experiences. As a result, shared habits lead to the conceptualizing of self, identity, and culture (Ibid., 121). In the context of Irish singing circles, the habits shared among members of these groups facilitate the flow of social relations through singing sociality—a feature shared with many other participatory musical traditions, but at odds with the dominant society's norms. Turino writes that people in many parts of the world do not associate music with commodity, as Westernized global cultural formations tend to do. Instead, “in these places music and dance are very much about love, friendship, and spirituality, or in a word, about connecting” (Ibid., 225).

I. Sheldon Posen investigates the meanings created by shared experience in musical participation in Chapeau. Singing and fiddling were important elements of socializing in Chapeau, along with a custom of asking almost anyone present for “a song, a step, or a tune at appropriate times on social occasions” (Posen 1988, 11). He notes the centrality of “The Chapeau Boys” to any social event, comparing how a singing gathering without the song is like not inviting grandpa to a family party (Ibid., 13). Posen states, “The reason no one in the village knows The Chapeau Boys all the way through themselves is that they know that somebody somewhere stores the song for them; they also know that when they have to, they can even put it together themselves, if everyone helps” (Ibid., 87). Filling in forgotten lines—the participatory nature of the song—creates community. Singers work together for a successful presentation of the song. Singers in Irish singing sessions also work together, either by aiding singers with forgotten words, coaxing, or singing along in choruses. These shared experiences create meaning for the participants.
Social singing is a lived experience stemming from shared habits. Musical performance communicates social meaning, so musical performances convey lived experience by clarifying meaning in community music making (Sugarman 1997, 24). According to Jane Sugarman, musical performance is not just an expressive form that evokes many meanings found in other experience realms, but it actively constitutes those realms. She suggests viewing performance forms “as structured by a range of shared meanings, and as structuring in their capacity to shape ongoing social formations” (Ibid., 27).

Sugarman investigates the strengthening of what I call the metaphysical community through singing during Prespa weddings in Toronto. Through interviewing practitioners about their musical experience, she learned that the sense of community among the Prespa members is strong—members are modern without being North American, firmly holding onto their roots and replicating aspects of the old village life in their new surroundings. She observes, “The community’s singing may yet present itself to them as a means of instilling a sense of heritage, of community solidarity, and of aesthetic challenge and satisfaction” (Ibid., 343). Social identity theory is relevant here—a shared understanding of singing rituals during Prespa wedding activities strengthens identity, thus strengthening community.

Martin Stokes also discusses the theory of community in his book, *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* (Stokes 1997). He writes that a music community can be conceptualized in a broader context of lived experience as musical heritage is passed to newer generations (Ibid., 2). One’s experience of community is intimate and real. He argues that a meaningful analysis investigates what musics do rather than what they represent—musical events bring people together through social alignments and provide an embodied social identity experience,
mirroring Sugarman’s view. Relationships are “activated through music,” thus involving the community (Ibid., 12).

Turino relates the embodiment of identity to his personal experience of playing participatory music, feeling a sense of oneness with the other musicians. Multiple differences among participants vanish as the players focus on an activity emphasizing ‘sameness,’ or common goals and thought patterns. During the musical performance, nothing matters except this sameness and thus the identification feels complete. To explain the workings of this phenomenon, he references Victor Turner’s theory of *communitas* (Turner 1974), a collective state where personal differences disappear, “allowing people to temporarily merge through their basic humanity” (Turino 2008, 18).

At least two differing theoretical perspectives contribute to this discussion on music participation as shared, lived experience—Turino’s musical semiotics and Sugarman’s, Stokes’ and Posen’s perspective on practice as experience. Both perspectives direct me toward the same conclusions about the kind of community developed in Irish traditional singing sessions. Music making, a series of habits shared with others in the musical community, binds together those involved. An understanding of the above discourse on connecting through music helps explains the connection traditional singers describe having with each other. Because of similar habits, they exhibit a cultural phenomenon—the traditional singing culture. Singers within this culture, then, are indeed on ‘parallel tracks.’

**Irish Song and Meaning: Henry Glassie**

Henry Glassie investigates singing context and singers’ expression through song in his studies *Passing the Time in Ballymenone* (Glassie 1982), and *The Stars of Ballymenone* (Glassie 2006). His exploration into personal connections most closely
mirrors my own desire to learn about social relationships through singing. Therefore, my field research and analyses are deeply informed by his model. His investigation reveals a culmination of the themes discussed in this chapter and likewise throughout the thesis—the significance of identity, participation, community, and shared lived experience in the context of Irish social singing.

Glassie conducts his case study on the ‘Stars,’ the storytellers and musicians who hold central roles in their small County Fermanagh town of Ballymenone in Northern Ireland. Glassie focuses on the social life of singing and music as sources of community and identity and as a coping mechanism during political turmoil in the midst of the Troubles of the latter half of the twentieth century for this predominantly Catholic area. He reminisces in his latter book about a time when storytelling and singing remained a part of daily life. He records the stories of ‘The Stars,’ the tradition bearers, so that they are remembered (Glassie 2006, book cover flap). “Passing the time,” writes Glassie, “is what the people who live there say they are doing when they work by day—following the cows up the grassy damp slopes, sweeping their kitchens clean—and it is what they say they are doing when they fill the night’s length with stories that hold the mind away from danger” (Glassie 1982, xiii).

Glassie explains the community stars as including people who turn interviews into conversations that may not be philosophical, but “will emerge as recurrent actions recognized to compress most richly the essence of right thinking” (Glassie 1982, 14). He observes people in their element, studying the extent to which music, stories, and laughter fuel the evenings. The ceili is the climax of the evening, centered on storytelling, music, and making personal connections. Glassie explains that, “The tale in the ceili is central, situationally, contextually, philosophically. It emerges in the

51 Glassie’s spelling of ceilidh.
middle of the nighttime’s conversations. It draws widely from life to make itself meaningful. Its meanings lead into confrontation with fundamental values” (Ibid., 33). He calls the *ceili* a “moment of exchange” that comes from a brief visit which creates social connections (Glassie 2006, 25). He writes:

> The shape of Ballymenone’s concept of sound can be imagined as a terraced sequence leading upward from silence to music and from separation to social accord. Silence, talk, chat, crack,\(^{52}\) story, poetry, song, music: with each step, entertainment increases, sound becomes more beautiful, and the intention of the creator of sound becomes more clearly to please the listener. Individual creations and whole events feel as though they shift from plateau to plateau along a flight of steps that lift people simultaneously toward aesthetic perfection and social union. Central and crucial to this rising sequence is the story. (Glassie 1982, 37)

All elements of the night, from silence, to talk, to music, contribute to this social union, binding the people in the room. During the night, “Turf burns. Tea goes in, talk comes out,” and hospitality is repaid through conversation which progresses to entertainment (Glassie 2006, 24). Glassie calls the moment when different kinds of entertainment come together the “perfect social moment,” which is essentially an exchange of gifts in the form of stories and music (Glassie 1982, 41).

Glassie writes that most *ceilis* are spontaneous, unplanned events. When company forms in a kitchen and wit turns conversation into chat, the *ceili* forms (Ibid., 71). According to Glassie, in the past, *ceilis* were planned as events that swiftly lead from story to song. Currently, Ireland’s early twenty-first century song sessions are also events that feature the telling of stories and singing of songs. However, Glassie clarifies a crucial difference, although the *ceilis* from his studies included songs and stories, they were not storytelling or singing sessions *per se* (Ibid., 72). These gatherings were spontaneous. Neighbors who met in the road told each other where to find the best singing that evening, often because a certain singer would be present (Ibid., 72). While

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\(^{52}\) Also called *craic*, the term constitutes a combination of conversation, wit, banter, and laughter.
the events were not predetermined song sessions, singers met at these spontaneous gatherings and nights naturally progressed to a climax of songs and stories.

Glassie notes that during the night, “people are ceiliers, part of a company. Tomorrow they will be neighbors, people who work together and count on one another when troubles come. In other scenes they have other identities, other performances” (Ibid., 77). The singers identify with each other through song, but during other times they identify with their normal routines. Today, singers may not be farmers working heavy labor in the fields and passing the evenings in small country homes—they can be students, businesspeople, tradespeople, professors, or any other of our diverse contemporary identities, who trade their identities to become singers during social gatherings. Nevertheless, the singing circle participants can similarly trade these other identities for a shared sense of belonging to a cohort of singers.

A sense of atmosphere generated from the character of the space and the quality of inclusion from its organization can combine to create a sense of community among singers. Henry Glassie writes about ceilis in their social context, making observations that can be applied directly to the singing sessions. Ceilis, he writes, are “the night’s way to connect people” (Ibid., 149). Glassie explains that associations develop among neighbors beyond physical borders in this small Northern Ireland town of Ballymenone affected during The Troubles of the latter half of the twentieth century. The daily community is different than the kind developed through evening events. The community is built through will, not government, and comes together in the ceili (Ibid., 149). The ceili is “not our place but ‘our side,’” where social consequences are altered from daily social accord (Ibid., 150).

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The period of political conflict in Northern Ireland from 1968 until the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, and largely conceptualized to have been between Irish republicans and British loyalists, was often referred to as The Troubles (McKittrich and McVea 2002).
Glassie explains that the *ceili* is “a locus for art and a force for social cohesion” (Ibid., 696). Passing the time in entertainment is not just a distraction—it is “an epitome of connectivity” (Ibid.). Through the night, the mood rises and those present gravitate toward each other asking for songs to bring them into unity. Glassie describes one public house event in detail, highlighting community forming through song:

Songs will unify the night. The door bangs open and shut, open and shut, the crowd thickens in the smoke, and the patternless racket increases until the right request meets the right mood in a man who has come to sing. Then one of the companies will unfold opening to reel the man among them who will take a step toward the middle of the floor. “Good man,” they say in encouragement. He stands straight, without expression or gesture, gazing beyond. His voice rises, fighting with the noise, finding flight and winging to sudden descent. A scatter of claps follows him back to his company, where he lifts his glass and drains it. His comrades close around him, complimenting his effort. “Good man, good man yourself.” The general din swells up again and prevails. Then another steps out, and another. The companies break open to form an audience that curls around the shop. On the bar, among the accumulation of undrunk drinks, offered with a nod and a wink, my recorder spins its wheels while its microphone passes around, up and down, from hand to hand, and the courage to sing is pressed on new men. Slowly the crowd pulls behind its leaders toward the unity of song.

(Ibid., 398)

A *ceili*, as Glassie describes, is a model for society, a center for meaning (Ibid., 472). It is not surprising then that finding spaces that can be so configured in which to gather is a key issue that came up in my interviews, particularly the arguments presented earlier in this chapter. Such spaces are ideally conducive to an atmosphere where singers can feel belonging and acceptance, despite differences in vocation, age, or singing ability. Acceptance and belonging lead to a sense of community with others in their shared singing space. This in turn provides meaning for the singers.

**Conclusion**

The particular studies addressing social singing and music making in a variety of settings reviewed in this chapter thus make a strong case that song is an effective way to provide meaning for singers. The social life of their singing has value and
significance to its community and its individual members, providing reasons not only to attend singing sessions, but to connect with others and develop a social circle with which they can identify. These studies provide the groundwork for my own research into the social life of singing in Ireland. I use the above studies to formulate my questions which inform my fieldwork. They help me understand the complexities behind Irish social singing and guide me towards where I should explore further in the field. The subjects of identity, participation, community, and shared lived experience provide the groundwork for the following ethnographic sections of this thesis, informing my investigation into how to best approach safeguarding and engendering the social life of Irish traditional singing.

I was able to draw on the themes listed above in my own research and engagement with the singing community. These themes are explored throughout the field data analyses that follow, forming a foundation from which I can make my own discoveries. Singing sociality seems to be an important subject amongst my informants and emerging from my fieldwork. Informants stressed the importance of singing as being one component of the gathering—while participants gather for song, they also gather to socialize, possibly tell jokes, drink alcoholic or non-alcoholic beverages alike, laugh, and overall share an experience with each other, which heightens senses of meaning, or worth, and a sense of belonging among a group of like-minded participants. Singers shared their stories with me about the importance of the social aspect of gatherings and the connections they can build with each other through the singing of Irish traditional songs. Other singers likewise stressed the importance of keeping true to repertoire, that maybe the songs themselves are the driving factor behind the gathering and the importance of maintaining what is considered traditional. Whether or not the goal is singing sociality, or the ability to continue singing traditional
songs in an organized gathering, the emphasis is on the process, the singing phenomenon, rather than listening to concerts or recordings. This is not discounting the importance of such performative styles of singing and listening, but adding to this list the importance of participatory gatherings for, or with song.

The sources analyzed above engage with the participatory aspects of singing and song sharing and topics raised are directly applicable to what happens in the Irish traditional singing circles. Drawing from these secondary sources, I could more efficiently engage with the common themes discovered throughout my review of relevant literature in order to draw out commonalities and provide cohesive arguments based on the primary source material taken directly from the field.
CHAPTER THREE
THE PHENOMENON OF THE IRISH TRADITIONAL SINGING SESSION

Starting in the autumn of 2014 and continuing until spring of the following year, I had the pleasure of conducting detailed studies of the singing sessions The Ennis Singer’s Club and the Night Before Larry Got Stretched, and the singing festivals The Clare Festival of Traditional Singing and the Inishowen International Folk Song and Ballad Seminar.

This chapter investigates the social phenomenon of singing sociality in the context of these sessions. Having established a theoretical perspective that recognizes the importance of human social life to the affective power, meaning, and significance of Irish traditional singing, I now investigate the social processes of singing in several ‘singing sessions,’ sometimes also called ‘singing circles’ among my informants. A common theme upon discussion with the singers and organizers whom I introduced in Chapter One is the challenge they face to find a place to gather that will be conducive to traditional singing. Their concerns inform my analysis of these places in terms of the criteria that guide them. I then analyze social interactions within these spaces as a key to understanding the meaning and significance of singing to those who participate so passionately in singing sessions throughout Ireland today. From our initial conversations, my informants drew my attention to the importance of finding appropriate places in which to meet and sing.
The Need for Space

The singers at sessions with whom I spoke have almost all expressed the opinion that since the mid-twentieth century, modern day technology such as television and the internet has become the focal point of entertainment and much social life in homes. Therefore, they argue, the home was no longer the central gathering point for local instrumentalists, dancers, and singers to gather after a day’s work. As discussed previously, instrumental sessions moved into public bars and seem to thrive in such settings. However, among my informants, the vast majority expressed that they found it difficult to sing during instrumental sessions, providing several reasons.

Singing was one component of many activities during social gatherings, contributing to the singing sociality of participants. Sally K. Sommers Smith described that the social fabric of the past is bound to the tune (Sommers Smith 2001, 112). The social nature of the tune, from its oral dissemination to its historical performance context, survives through its playing today, a process I have experienced personally. I. Sheldon Posen’s depiction of The Chapeau Boys also illustrates this link between song and sociality (Posen 1988). Now, singing is separating from instrumental playing. Song scholar Hugh Shields notes the separation of songs and tunes during the move from homes to pubs or more generally from private venues to public spaces:

Traditional singing may appear to have been similarly revived [as was instrumental music]; but in reality music is far more popular than singing. Indeed, the number of musicians, besides the fact that they can come together much more easily than in the past, excludes the practice of singing from many ‘music’ venues. Formerly they intermingled, as the participants in the event did; but today’s participants, who often include a lot of performers, have become incongruously specialized, expecting music at any sessions and songs at a few, but preferably not both.

(Shields 2010, 181-182)

Shields observes, “Irish singing is a more private, less dynamic, activity (and so more vulnerable today?)” (Ibid., 182). He proposes vulnerability in Irish traditional singing
as a result of its more private nature, but only as a question to reveal a suggestion rather than a solid answer. His observations recognize the struggle that Irish traditional singers experience as they try to continue singing in changing musical contexts.

Singing can and does happen in the instrumental session setting, for instance when instrumentalists need a break, a singer may be able to sing a song during the pause. Such opportunities are relatively infrequent and, as singing can be seen as only a subsidiary activity, it might not receive attention or appreciation. I have participated in these sessions, particularly when a group member knows me or knows that I enjoy singing. I have also watched singers asked to sing in instrumental sessions. The response varies from the instrumentalists, from fully embracing the singer and actively listening, to the singer truly being treated as a chance for a break, such as one session in which I sang when the guitarist tuned his instrument as I attempted a song. Likewise, many times guitarists at sessions will also be singers who will accompany herself or himself singing during the session. Moreover, only certain types of voices, usually strong, loud, higher pitched, and audible over pub’s background noise, can perform effectively in this type of setting, especially if the bar is noisy. In any case, absolute silence is usually demanded for unaccompanied singing during otherwise instrumental sessions (Fairbairn 1993, 28).

Generally, non-performing participants will talk during instrumental session performance (Fairbairn 1993, 26), whereas, in order for an audience to listen appropriately, a much quieter environment is needed for singing. As a measure of the seriousness of this challenge, Macdara Yeates contends that sometimes there is so much noise at the bar that even the instrumentalists cannot hear each other; a problem, regardless of whether or not someone is singing. When singers are present, the clientele
at many bars are unwilling to be quiet during a song, particularly at those which provide with background music, energetic instrumental sessions, or sports viewings.

Another significant difference between instrumental music and singing often noted by singers is that music at instrumental sessions is performed in ensembles while singing is primarily a solo performance. As a consequence, singers who are shy may feel nervous when thrust as individuals into the spotlight of attention during what is usually a more dispersed engagement of the audience with a group of instrumentalists. Macdara believes that Irish musicians would “like to be a part of the group as opposed to singling themselves out” (Yeates Feb 2015). The participatory nature of Irish traditional singing distinguishes this form of singing from more presentational styles (Turino 2008). Despite this distinction, singers still perform solo while instrumentalists in session settings perform with the group—thus more closely mirroring Thomas Turino’s description of participatory music making (Ibid.). The solo, presentational aspect of traditional singing may intimidate singers.

Macdara thinks Irish people are perhaps more shy than other groups, so the inclusive atmosphere of instrumental sessions is more conducive to collective participation than singing, which is a singular activity. He continues that “with the Irish music, there’s a feeling that you can talk when a tune is going, but when someone is singing everyone has to shut up, so I assume how that’s sort of a pressure” (Yeates Feb 2015). By pressure, he means the pressure of performing for attentive listeners as opposed to the less focused attention of listeners’ characteristic in instrumental sessions. Some singers report that they can indeed feel intimidated by the sudden silence which falls in these situations when the tunes stop and the song begins.54

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54 Tunes and songs are colloquial terms in Irish traditional music but are important to use in my thesis as a description of musical styles. When Irish traditional musicians refer to tunes, they mean the complete instrumental or dance pieces. When they refer to songs, they refer to sung vocal pieces (Vallely 2011).
I have also experienced that the immediacy of the silence and undivided attention in contrast to the seemingly more relaxed nature of the space during instrumental playing can indeed be intimidating.

Annette Munnelly described her own opinion for why singers needed a new singing context separated from the instrumental sessions:

If you get a group of musicians who are primarily musicians, their idea of having songs would be, when they want to go to the toilet somebody would be asked to sing. Singers don’t get a chance really. . . . There’s nothing wrong with that, it’s because it’s not everybody is into singing! But the ones who do, they have to find a place for themselves. . . . In general, unless you have a very loud voice [referring to a man who silenced O’Donoghue’s in Dublin with his strong voice], it’s not everyone has that kind of a voice.\textsuperscript{55}

(Munnelly May 2015)

Annette’s reaction mirrors that of several singers with whom I have spoken, and reveals a driving force behind why singers are consistently looking for and creating new spaces.

Máire Ní Dhonnchadha and Annette Munnelly both stressed the importance of all singers regardless of voice quality desiring a space to sing. Máire spoke about the variety of voices at the Ennis Singers Club, stating, “And all the different voices, and we’re all, a part, usually our guest is a very good singer, the rest of us are mediocre, and [. . .] and it’s lovely because normally . . . we wouldn’t have a platform to sing. We’d never make it as soloists” (Ní Dhonnchadha Mar 2015). Annette commented, “for ordinary people who want to sing, that’s the root. Of course the cream will always rise to the top and you’d always get the very good singers, but it’s not everybody” (Munnelly May 2015).

Participants express the common concern that their voices are perhaps mediocre, at least in comparison to stage performers, so they believe they do not

\textsuperscript{55} In interview quotes, I use ellipses in brackets to signify a vocal pause. I use ellipses without brackets to signify skipped text.
otherwise have platforms or contexts in which to sing. Annette added that she was encouraged by the singing sessions because, while many notable singers do attend the sessions, attendees who may not consider themselves the best singers also have the opportunity to share songs. At ideal singing sessions, singers of different abilities and backgrounds can encourage each other to participate (Posen 1988). Posen noted that in Chapeau, participants who may not consider themselves good singers would ask others to sing, adding to the inclusive atmosphere (Ibid., 11). Such inclusivity between singers of varying degrees of abilities contributes to the sense of community within the sessions, supporting Turino’s concepts of inclusivity when the full range of the learning curve is present in participatory music making events (Turino 2008). The singing sessions which I studied specifically for this project developed in direct response to the desire for comfortable and inclusive spaces in which to sing.

**Current Places for Singing Sessions**

The choices to be made when considering possible locations and the concomitant accessibility of a singing session are not always clear cut. When a session is in a private or semi-private facility, singers and coordinators have more control over their environment. Attendees come to the facility specifically for the session, so attention is focused and distractions or uninterested clientele are minimized. When a session is in a more publicly accessible location, as in a bar in the center of town, attendees can enjoy more activities. Newcomers, old-comers, and pedestrians may stroll in at any time, and the session might see more variety from month to month. However, the chance for distraction may be higher with interruptions from curious passers-by. Personally, I rather enjoy the gatherings in more publically available spaces

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56 Singing sessions are not always open for all singing voices, and I have even been told by traditional song enthusiasts that singing voices have to be good for the session to succeed. These discussions will be problematized throughout this thesis.
because, to me, they feel more informal and free, and exciting because of the level of unpredictability. In this section, I examine the place and space in sessions and festivals I attended regularly for the duration of my field research.

An Góilín

An Góilín, founded in 1979, is likely the oldest continuously running event where singers gather every Friday evening explicitly for songs. Jerry O’Reilly, one of the organizers, recalls visiting different singers clubs in the 1960s which have since faded. These ephemeral gatherings have proved difficult to document, and oral history and memory were my primary sources of information when attempting to document these events. Jerry said that the first singing sessions seemed to have emerged organically. “We think the first singers club was the Góilín. . . . And then it seemed to sort out, and then Cork were the next singers club as such, and then, in the last ten, twelve years, there’s a proliferation of them, just being everywhere. Just the song sessions” (Davis and O’Reilly May 2015). I do not use An Góilín, often referred to as The Góilín, as a case study. However, I include information about An Góilín here because the club is in a way viewed as the ‘mother ship’ of singing sessions, a model from which all others around the country and abroad are based. It is a good source of comparison for the organization of other sessions. A core group of singers from An Góilín, including Jerry and Rosie, visits singing sessions and festivals throughout Ireland and abroad, exhibiting strong support and encouragement for anyone interested in traditional singing.

The Ennis Singers Club

The Ennis Singers Club is one result of such proliferation. Founded in 1994 by late singer Peadar McNamara, the Ennis Singers Club meets on the second Friday of every month from 9:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. or later and is currently located at the Grove
Bar and Restaurant, a short drive but over a thirty minute walk from the center of town. The members of the Ennis Singers Club will sing through the night if they are able—singers and listeners sitting next to me said that even when the venue closes, some singers might go back to their hotel or homes to continue singing. The guest singer of the March 2015 session, Niamh Parsons, expressed her amazement when the singers broke for their interval as late as 11:30 p.m. The first half went nearly as long as would some full sessions.

The Grove Bar and Restaurant is run by relatives of one of the organizers and stays open late for the singers. In the past, the Ennis Singers Club met at the Cois na hAbhna, the County Clare regional center for Comhaltas (Vallely 2011), which provides lessons in traditional music and dance, competitions, sessions, and ceilidhs. The members of the Ennis Singers Club liked the Cois na hAbhna because they could meet explicitly for the singing session without negotiating through distractions typical with a central bar. In theory, the Grove Bar is also suitable for the singing because the club can reserve a spacious side room and stay through late hours. However, issues arise at that location, illustrated later in this chapter. I recorded my first impressions of the venue when I visited on October 17th, 2014:

The venue, the Grove Bar and Restaurant, is outside of Ennis a little further than comfortable walking distance. We [my friends whose house is where I stayed] drove there in five minutes, but according to my GPS it would have taken me 40 minutes to walk. At night and in this rain, I was not interested in walking. The restaurant is large, spacious, and airy. Though dim lights and illuminated by candles on the tables, the restaurant felt bright because of the light colored wall paint and light wood panels. . . . The room was bright and spacious. People sat along chairs and booths set among the periphery, looking into a circle on the closed side of the room, and on the side that opened to the rest of the restaurant, people stood clustered in open spaces. Some people, particularly the Ennis and Kildare hosts [The Kildare Singers Club was visiting tonight], sat in the seats in the middle of the room, but still at a place where they were not obstructing views. The room felt crowded but not stuffy. The session started with about 40 people, many from Kildare, and as the evening went on more people arrived, making about 60 total. . . . Just before the break, Anne, the Ennis Singers Club PR, announced other singing sessions and
festivals occurring throughout Clare in the near future. The Ennis Singers were very enthusiastic about promoting these other sessions. Rather than being closed and secluded, they welcome singers and encourage singers to visit other places. The break was at 11:30pm! I thought it was finished, it was so late, but I spoke with a bus driver sitting a few seats from me. He said the night has only just begun, and the people staying in the hotel will return after the session and continue singing. They have more energy and stamina than me! My eyes started to close near the end of the first and second halves of the session. At least when my eyes are closed I can pretend I am listening, even though I am sleeping.

(Ennis Oct 2014)

It is important to note in my writing the distance of the session. It was not too far out of town for drivers, and, as I learned later from my interview with Máire, that many attendees drove from different locations in Clare altogether, so the proximity to town is not necessarily a priority.

In our interview, Máire Ní Dhonnchadha, one of the organizers, shared where several attendees on the night of March 13th, 2015 were based:

There were four people from Ruan tonight, that’s a village about six miles from here. There were two men from Crusheen, . . . the man who came to talk to me during the break, he’s from Kilmurry, . . . [another man] is East Clare? No, Kilmurry, Kilmurry, [another man] is West Clare, Kilmurry is East Clare. Michael, the man who emcees [the Ennis Singers Club], Michael is [. . .] oh where does he live? . . . it’s a few miles out of here. I don’t think there was anybody from town.

(Ní Dhonnchadha)

She did not know of any singer coming directly from Ennis, so members likely drive to the session regardless of its location. Máire also mentioned that she likes the quieter, more confined sessions not interrupted by passer-by which often visit singing gatherings in more public spaces.

Most of the members appear to be aged fifty years and older, except for the occasional daughter, son, or grandchild that might accompany them. Not only are numerous songs shared throughout the night, but many members of the Ennis Singers Club give recitations, or stories, mostly comical but which can have a variety of
topics. They continue to meet in Peadar McNamara’s honor, who passed away in 2012.

Máire said that many of the attendees in Ennis are from nearby Clare towns and other singing sessions. Organizers and several members from the Clare sessions attend the other local sessions, showing strong support for any singing occurring in their county. During the interval, Anne, another organizer, announces all of the other sessions happening in the upcoming weeks so that attendees can go if they are able.

Members of the Ennis Singers Club participate in a shared support system with members of other clubs in Clare. Although they are members of varying sessions, they practice the shared habits described in Chapter Two. Because of these shared habits, they each work towards the same goal of mutual support. By attending different sessions, they participate with one another, strengthening community bonds not just within one particular session, but among session participants throughout Ireland (Turino 2008).

57 In Chapter Four, I provide a more detailed study of the songs shared at the Ennis Singers Club.
Image 3.1: The Ennis Singers Club

Image 3.2: The Ennis Singers Club
The Night Before Larry Got Stretched

The Night Before Larry Got Stretched is a singer’s club that meets at the Cobblestone Bar in Dublin on the first Sunday of every month. The unusual name comes from the title of an Irish execution ballad. This session was founded quite recently in 2012, by a group of comparably young singers in their twenties and thirties. The age of the organizers sets what is colloquially called Larry apart from the majority of singing sessions in Ireland, which are organized mostly by singers who are middle-aged to retired. While participants of any age are welcome in any singing session, the fact that the Larry organizers are in their twenties is a new phenomenon. Macdara Yeates, one of the organizers, explains Larry’s roots:

[The original founder] just had the vision. She was just singing songs around the place and had been to the Góilín as well, but noticed that at these sessions every now and then she’d meet another young person . . . and she figured it would be great to find somewhere that all these young people could meet together. . . . Not to be exclusive or anything like that, just a younger environment or a younger sensibility. I think over the years that she had the idea, just noticed how many young people at the time were singing songs in Dublin. . . . The first Larry here was the first time I met [two organizers]. . . . I had been doing it for a year or two around Dublin and there was no young people doing it, except my friends may only have a song or two. And then, in one night it was just some people and then the next session there was ten more, and then it was a scene for people who were completely disjointed beforehand, with no kind of epicenter. They might come along to an event here or there, but there was nothing . . . concrete really that all would at least enjoy to come to all the time and delegate themselves to them. [At the beginning] there was about twenty people, smaller than usual, but not small, I don’t think. Jerry O’Reilly was there, and so was Niamh Parsons, and they were super encouraging and helped us along the way. . . . It didn’t take any time to grow. . . . There was a hankering, a silent hankering for something like this and then as soon as it was there, people just went to it.

(Yeates Feb 2015)

Young singers had visited various singing events throughout Dublin before Larry’s founding, but there was no central meeting place for these singers. Therefore, a core group of younger singers was motivated to create a new venue for themselves and their peers that has grown into a significant event within its few years of existence. They
started Larry because of their desire to gather with other like-minded young singers regularly.

Larry only meets monthly, like the Ennis Singers Club, because the attendees are unable to commit to more meetings. When the club meets just once a month, singers are excited to attend the next session. Larry meets on Sundays to attract the younger singers. On a Friday and Saturday they are, as Macdara said “hard-wired to just be out in a noisy night club or somewhere terrible . . . instead of listening to the good singing” (Ibid.). Sunday does not work as a meeting time for everybody because some young people complain that they cannot stay out late due to work commitments the following morning, but otherwise there is not much competition from other singing events. By finding an evening which suits most young singers’ schedules, Larry organizers encourage participation. Singers find one evening per month where they can gather for songs, strengthening community ties (Turino 2008). Therefore, Larry is consistently well attended.

Macdara explains why a session like Larry exists:

I suppose that’s half the reason why we’re here. Not that there’s anything wrong with the Góilin and Howth and Malahide [other sessions in the Dublin area], these are all places with champions of the singing tradition. Wonderful singers. The lot of them the standard is so high. But I suppose just when you are a young person and you’re a bit shy, going into a room with such a big age gap is . . . It’s fun, I’ve come to them. It’s not daunting. They’re more than welcoming and friendly. I suppose you wish that you could have the reigns yourself and create an atmosphere that would be welcoming to young people. Not that it’s for young people, but that a young person could walk in and feel, I dunno. [laughs]. I am asked a lot, “is it a young person’s session?” No, it’s not. It was certainly set up in mind that it would be suitable for young people, and young people would be totally comfortable in it. That said, in the sessions we make every effort to be welcoming. . . . If you set it up yourself and by young people, there’s a younger sensibility. . . . Not to say that I prefer it or one or the other, it’s just that it’s more comfortable.

(Ibid.)

The ‘younger sensibility’ of which Macdara speaks does not mean that Larry is only for younger singers, but that the presence of young organizers and their friends can draw
other younger singers. Considered a ‘young person’ myself, and also an outsider to Irish traditional singing, I understand Macdara’s sentiments. I am very welcome in longer established sessions such as An Góilín and encouraged to sing in such spaces, but I feel somewhat intimidated surrounded by prolific singers who have dedicated decades to traditional song. Larry is an answer to this possible intimidation which might be felt.

Larry is not an exclusive gathering, adhering to the value of inclusiveness for all singers who wish to attend. Therefore, an even spread of ages, backgrounds, and personalities fills the room. Despite the presence of the older, more established singers, many of whom come from An Góilín, the core organizing team keeps the session ‘young.’ Many of the older singers enjoy listening to the young singers and appreciate the organizers’ work. They offer support through attendance and contributing a few songs, but they take a more passive role than they would at their own sessions. They leave leadership to the younger singers and encourage younger singers to share their own songs. I have heard some older singers argue with Larry organizers about the structure of the session and musical innovations carried out by its founding members outside of the session, but these arguments were met with strong resistance from supporters.

The ‘younger sensibility’ of The Night Before Larry Got Stretched contributes to social identity. Other Irish singing sessions welcome young singers, but since Larry is organized by younger singers, younger participants can identify with more singers in the room in more ways than they can the other sessions. They may have jobs or young families, they may be attending college, or they may hope to meet romantic partners at sessions (Rosie Davis said this was the case in the English folk clubs when she was younger). They identify with each other in the greater society beyond the small singing
circle community thus share life experiences. These greater social relationships then contribute to stronger senses of identity within the community (Hogg 2006).

The Cobblestone Pub, home of The Night Before Larry Got Stretched, is a traditional music bar located in one of the oldest areas of Dublin called Smithfield, next to the Jameson Distillery and only a short walk from the center of the city. It accommodates concerts, dancing, sessions, and lessons in Irish traditional music and other musical styles such as bluegrass, country, and singer-songwriter every night of the week. The owner, tall and friendly Tom Mulligan, is enthusiastic about traditional music and plays all over the country and abroad with his family. When Tom purchased the bar in about 1992, he removed all the televisions and ‘canned music,’ encouraging visitors to interact with each other.

Tom built sociality into the pub, proud of all the relationships that the Cobblestone has fostered over the years. He said that even a couple took their wedding photos at the pub because they met there and it was such an integral part of their lives together. Tom said, “We just provide the facility” (Mulligan Feb 2015) for all the events and social interactions. He is not a publican in the sense of being “the guy that runs the pub” (Ibid.) (See Chapter Five), but instead invites teachers, students, practitioners, and appreciators of music and dance to manage their own activities. Celebrities and international travel programs have visited the pub, including American actor and comedian Steve Martin. Despite the Cobblestone’s international popularity, it still retains its local character. Music is not displayed for tourism or a commodity, but for the players and appreciators of the music. Tom has stated that he is not interested in wealth, but simply in providing a space for singers, dancers, and instrumentalists. Tom inspires participation in this welcoming musical place—the singing sociality described in Chapter Two stems from such participatory encouragement.
When the original organizers of The Night Before Larry Got Stretched approached Tom about the session, Tom enthusiastically agreed to host them. They receive funding from the Irish Arts Council for expenses such as sandwiches, tea and coffee, and guest singers. They hope to expand their guest field. When they want to save some money, they will ask local Dublin singers to be the guest since they do not need accommodation. They can then spend surplus on singers outside of the area or the country.58

When I arrived on my first visit on September 7th, 2014, I made some observations about the Cobblestone and the physical place reserved for the singing:

*I was surprised by how empty the room was, because the front of the bar was packed full, a traditional music session up in the front, people yelling over each other. I had to push my way through a sea of bodies to get to the back, which then I realized had a separate entrance door to help avoid the crowd negotiating. I arrived early, partly because I wanted to meet the organizers and ask their permission to study their session, and partly because I am still trying to get used to the Irish start times. If a session begins at 9:00 p.m., it might actually start at 9:30 or even later. The Cobblestone Bar is divided into the front or main bar and the back room. The back room has its own bar but no bartender today, and a small stage that maybe could fit two to four people at the far end of the room. The room was filled with small circular tables surrounded by chairs. I sat at one of these tables along the periphery. The leaders lit tea candles on each table, creating a cozy atmosphere. The lights were on, but not bright, and a few songs into the session they dimmed the lights a bit more so that the room was dark and still. . . . I noticed immediately how quiet this session was. Whereas last week [at a book launch in Miltown Malbay] people chatted excitedly between songs and had to be hushed when someone else would start . . . In this session, nobody except for the guests spoke about their songs. They just started singing. . . . The age of the people present varied drastically. I came in believing it would be mostly people in their twenties, but actually that was not the case. Yes, more young people were present here than in other sessions, and it was led by people who appeared in their twenties. But in a room filled with maybe fifty people, many standing on the side closest to the door, the age was an even spread from college aged to retired. They were all just as welcome and friendly, each sharing songs. The session ended about ten minutes past midnight [Larry typically runs between two and a half and three hours].

(Dublin Sep 2014)

58 The process which the organizers of Larry take to find and fund international guest singers is developed in Chapter Five.
I wrote more about the other people in the room on my second visit on October 5th as I warmed up to my surroundings and talked to more people:

*I’d say by this time about 45 people were in the room. The average age varied again from early twenties through to the 70s or so. I met people from different backgrounds, including students, a museum curator, musicians, and others who just come to listen to the singing. The people with whom I spoke mentioned that they like to come to this session because it is a nice way to spend a Sunday evening. The room, though full, was never crowded. Anybody who wanted to sit could sit, and others dropped in briefly from the front bar, curious about what was happening here. Only a few people drank more than a pint or two, and I noticed many, like myself, drinking water or juice.*

(Dublin Oct 2014)

Even though The Night Before Larry Got Stretched is a space for young singers to feel comfortable sitting on an equal level among peers and more seasoned singers, the emphasis is still on the singing, not a wild night of drink and parties. In fact, the songs during the evening seem, at least to me, to be approached even more seriously than at sessions with older singers who excitedly talk to each other between songs or talk about their songs to the group. Singers do not talk much between songs during Larry. My own preconceived notions were challenged. The guest singer on the first night of my attendance pointed out this difference to me. We speculated that perhaps Larry wants to establish itself as a serious, prestigious gathering despite the age demographics. The younger generation also might be more accustomed to ‘performative’ music making, not so naturally slipping into the fully participatory exchange mode of the classic song gathering exhibited by the older singers. Regardless, Larry participants still enjoy *craic*, examples of which will be described throughout this chapter. The *craic* of singing sessions, whether exhibited by lively chat as in the sessions with older singers or by stories of visitors to the Cobblestone Bar, contribute to a sense of inclusivity and belonging (Glassie 1982).
The Inishowen International Folk Song and Ballad Seminar

The Inishowen International Folk Song and Ballad Seminar, also referred to as the Inishowen Singing Weekend or Festival, was founded in 1990 by the Inishowen Traditional Singers Circle, which itself was formed in 1988 “to encourage, foster and perpetuate the folk song & ballad tradition of the Inishowen Peninsula” (inishowensinging.ie). The singing weekend meets every March at the Northern tip of Ireland. For most attendees, travel to Inishowen can take a full day along small country roads. Buses, while they do exist, are infrequent and the bus ride to get there is lengthy. When visitors come to the festival, they stay in centrally located accommodation, living and breathing songs, for the entire weekend. Contrarily, in more easily accessible or populous places, inhabitants can go home to their normal daily lives during meal breaks or when the day’s activities are done. This difference contributes to the lively atmosphere of the festival. Despite its remote location, the Inishowen Festival is well attended by as many as three hundred people, both locals and visitors, throughout the weekend.

The activities of the Inishowen International Folk Song and Ballad Seminar occur in different venues around the Ballyliffin area of Inishowen, County Donegal. The headquarters is the Ballyliffin Hotel where the talks, presentations, Big Concert, evening sessions, and meals take place. The concert, seminars, and meals occur in the conference room, which was set up with a stage, rows of chairs facing the stage, and circular tables with white tablecloths around the back of the room. The flow between dining and seminars or performances was therefore seamless, as festival attendees could meander from the tables to the audience chairs, not rushing to finish eating and not missing any activity. Other session locations are a short drive away—McFeely’s Bar and the Market House in Clonmany, the North Pole Bar in Dumfries, and the Rusty

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Nail Pub in Crossconnell. Singers either drive to these sessions or take a shuttle bus provided by the festival.

The organizers of the festival encourage wide participation despite its remote location and costs. They offer student bursaries funded by donations, which provide housing, food, and a weekend festival ticket. Students live together in holiday homes. My home for the weekend overlooked the ocean—a stunning view to open each day and close each night. They also provided materials and recordings to the bursary students, fulfilling their mission to “foster, encourage and perpetuate the folk song and ballad tradition of the Inishowen peninsula,” according to the singers’ circle website (Inishowen Traditional Singers’ Circle 2015). Through their encouragement of participation from students such as myself, international visitors, and frequent session attendees, organizers contribute to a sense of inclusivity within the traditional singing community (Turino 2008).

On top of the official festival events, the Inishowen festival also worked on a children’s song recording project during the 2015 festival and offered workshops for children. Local school children sang during The Big Concert, which subsequently filled the audience with their families. Although many families left when their children finished singing, the ones who stayed to watch the rest of the concert learned more about the traditional singing of Inishowen. This project thus passed the singing on to younger generations, introducing the festival to a wider audience than the singers who regularly attend these events.

The atmosphere at each location during the festival differed. The hotel was bright and airy and provided seating for all the attendees. About 150 to 200 people attended the Saturday evening session after the concert, which began dwindling after 1:00a.m. and which I heard finished around 7:00a.m. the next morning. Each attendee
sat comfortably, but the large crowd size contributed to a loss of intimacy. McFeely’s Bar had a different vibe. Packed full with both festival attendees and locals watching sports during the singing, most attendees stood, nearly touching each other. Time between songs was filled with the sounds of rustling, movement, and talking, and often several moments passed as attendees quieted when singers started singing. Often, attention was divided as Ireland’s sports team scored points on the television screen. Even though this session felt cramped, it was easy to speak to neighbors.

The session at the North Pole Bar differed from that at both the hotel and McFeely’s. All of the people in the room were official festival attendees, but the atmosphere felt much more cozy to me, replicating the comforts of the home than the session in the hotel. I arrived late because I missed the shuttle after an extended walk by the sea, but luckily I was picked up by a camper-van full of younger singers from Dublin who were also going to the session, some of whom I recognized from The Night Before Larry Got Stretched:

We went inside to an already packed room. Most people were sitting except for those on the periphery. . . . This session differed from the one in McFeely’s Bar yesterday. One major difference is everyone was there specifically for the session, no sports playing in the background. Because most people were sitting, the session felt a bit more relaxed, too. It felt more casual than a regular meeting singing session or circle such as the Ennis Singers Club or The Night Before Larry Got Stretched. There was a little bit of conversation between songs, some whispering, ordering drinks, and such movement that is not usually at the monthly sessions. I really enjoyed myself (despite being somewhat terrified when I had to sing). I talked to my new friends who were also standing along the bar. The Fear an Ti called on singers individually. He saw me earlier in the day asking my name and saying that he would call on me, so I made sure to be prepared with a song, but that still didn’t help my nerves! . . . The session officially lasted for about three hours, but I learned later that it unofficially continued past its official end-time. During the break, we were served sandwiches, sausage rolls, and a nice homemade banana bread. The atmosphere was lively, energetic. People sang a variety of songs, some introductions before the songs, some not, one guitar and one accordion, singers and songs from Scotland and England, some stories, a lot of laughing.

(Inishowen Mar 2015)
Because of the intimate atmosphere, this session felt welcoming and enjoyable. The array of food during the break, the drinks, and the friendly neighborliness all contributed to a comfortable session. The Fear an Tí was effective the whole weekend seeking out visitors and ensuring everyone was included. Grace mentioned this job of the organizers during our interview, that their goal is for all festival participants to be asked to sing at least one song. The social atmosphere of the room, including conversation, laughter, and food, contributed to the singing sociality and brought a piece of the home to the public space.

The Sunday evening session at the Inishowen Festival felt relaxed and open. Tired and content after a successful weekend, the Sunday session felt devoid of stress, moving at a comfortable speed with plenty of time for conversation. During this session, traditional musicians played instrumental tunes and Jerry O’Reilly and Rosie Davis led some attendees in set dances. Song was one part of the overall evening of dancing, tunes, and talk. Participants in the Sunday evening session experienced singing sociality as singing was an element of an overall social evening.
Image 3.5: The Inishowen International Folk Song and Ballad Seminar, McFeely’s Bar

Image 3.6: The Inishowen International Folk Song and Ballad Seminar: The North Pole Bar
The Clare Festival of Traditional Singing

The Clare Festival of Traditional Singing, or Féile Amhránaíochta an Chláir, is a comparatively small festival. Unlike the Inishowen Festival, the Clare Festival is not hosted by a monthly session but rather is hosted independently by a small group of organizers. Located in the remote West Clare town of Miltown Malbay in the seaside village Spanish Point, the feeling at this festival is predominantly one of intimacy. Miltown Malbay is vibrant with traditional music and the home of the annual traditional music event The Willie Clancy Summer School and Music Festival. Occurring annually in November, weather during this time becomes increasingly wild at its seaside location. The longer nights and rough weather bring singers together under one roof at the Bellbridge Hotel. Attendees open up towards each other throughout the weekend, and may well develop deep connections with one another.

Annette Munnelly, the director of the festival, explained the value of smaller guest numbers:

> It’s a small festival and it’s intimate. You only get about eighty people or so would come to it. There might be a hundred people at the opening and then it would settle down between sixty and eighty for the weekend. It’s lovely because everybody who comes, if they sing songs, they’d be asked to sing. There’s no question of anybody being ignored or anything like that because it’s a small gathering. And that’s lovely. I love that.

(Munnelly May 2015)

As demonstrated in Jane Sugarman’s study of Prespa weddings in Canada, members of such small groups, “point out the interconnectedness that community members feel as a small and distinctive social group” (Sugarman 1997, 180). The intimacy of the Clare Festival contributes to a strong sense of community among participants. Because of its intimacy, participants are able to get to know each other on a deeper level than the larger gatherings—at least this was my own experience and what I personally gained from the festival.
Annette discussed the genesis of the festival and its connection with her deceased husband, song collector Tom Munnelly:

Annette: [Anthony and Maureen from Ennistymon] wanted to have something, a small festival for Ennistymon. They wanted something for Ennistymon. And they asked Tom. They came together, the two of them, and they thought that they needed somebody who knew more about traditional singing. So they brought him on board, and he was the first chairman. It just took off, really. . . . It was funny sometimes. It was on the June weekend, and on the . . . Sunday morning of the June weekend there was always . . . a country fair in the grounds of the Falls Hotel. So on the Sunday morning we’d be having our open air music session . . . We used to put up a microphone outside of the library and people would stand up on the steps and sing. And of course all the traffic was going down for the fair!

Carrie: You have a great audience!

Annette: It was really funny! . . . Mrs Haran’s pub was the big gathering place . . . and she loved people to come in and talk Irish to her. Ó hEagrán was the name on the door outside, and she was a wonderful woman altogether. We used to go in there on . . . the Friday night. We’d have the opening and then everyone would go down to Mrs. Hartan’s afterwards and there would be the singing session down there. There was a lecture on the Friday night. Then on the Saturday morning there would be another lecture and then back up at Mrs. Haran’s again. As time went on it spread out into other places around the town, but hers was really the headquarters. . . . It was small and intimate and it was the right setting for it. Then we discovered that there were an awful lot of people who would stand up and jump in with songs and the people who sang in Irish didn’t get a chance because they wouldn’t be cheeky enough to jump in like that, so Tom decided that the first hour on Saturday should be devoted to singing As Gaelige. It was great. Simple thing. . . . His idea was that you would have [. . .] a geographical spread so you have people from all parts of the island as guests and you would have a gender balance which means you would have men and women, you’d have a language balance which would be Irish and English. And you would have a three year moratorium on singers, so if you sang at the festival at this year, you wouldn’t be asked for another three years, . . . which meant that there was a constant turnover of new singers and new blood. . . . It was very successful.

(Ibid.)

Due to sicknesses, deteriorating health, and deaths among the original organizers, the festival was no longer able to take place in Enistymon. The organizers had a final meeting with Mrs. Haran, in which she stated, as Annette recounted, “In all the time those people, the singers that were coming into this pub there was never a glass broken.
There was never a harsh word. They were the best of people to have in the place because all they wanted to do was sing” (Ibid.).

Tom founded The Clare Festival of Traditional singing on the principle of inclusivity. He and the other organizers actively involved singers from around Ireland and provided space for participation in both English and Irish by both men and women. The publican appreciated the character of this gathering, not a wild and rowdy group but a respectable group dedicated to song.

Even though the Clare festival had seen its last days in Ennistymon, Tom and Annette were determined for it to continue. They had money remaining from the previous festival, so they decided to hold a smaller festival at the Bellbridge Hotel in Spanish Point, Miltown Malbay, the following two years. Unfortunately, Tom’s health deteriorated drastically until he passed away in 2007, so he and Annette had to cancel the festival. After a year of mourning, Annette and Tom’s friends published a CD that Tom had recorded of the first ten years of the festival and restarted the event at the Bellbridge Hotel:

The first thing we did was bring out the CD. We thought that was so important. We brought that out a year later. . . . I often said I felt someone pushing me, pushing my elbow, come on you can do it, you can do it. We got [the festival] going again and it’s been going ever since then. That was 2007 he died and it was probably 2008 when we started up again, and we’ve been going ever since. (Ibid.)

The festival continues today and is attended by many of Tom Munnelly’s friends and family.

The headquarters for the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing is the Bellbridge Hotel. Situated directly overlooking the sea about two miles outside of the small West Clare town Miltown Malbay, the scenery is stunning. West Clare has a rich history of singing, stories, and music. Annette moved to Miltown Malbay with Tom Munnelly in the 1980s as he was collecting songs because of the expanse of singers right on their
doorstep. She even said that when she moved there, rambling houses, or what Lillis Ó Laoire called ‘visiting houses,’ were still in the area. These private homes were gathering places for songs, stories, and tunes, in which great singers may also have been story tellers with local knowledge, and singing was one component of a social evening (Ó Laoire 2005).

Most visitors to the Clare festival stay at the Bellbridge, which offers a special hotel package that includes two nights stay, entry to all the weekend activities, and the festival dinner. I, a mere student with a limited budget, stayed in a hostel in town, somewhat to the surprise of the other festival attendees because this was an unusual choice. I had to walk at about thirty minutes to the hotel, much on tight roads with no footpath, so a few times festival attendees offered me a lift to and from my accommodation. Most of the activities took place in the hotel ballroom, where there was a small stage, tables, and space for chairs to move around depending on where they are needed:

I walked into the Bellbridge Hotel on Friday night at 8:10 p.m., afraid I was late for its 8:00 p.m. start, but instead was one of the first to arrive, forgetting yet again about Irish start times. I met Jerry O’Reilly and Rosie Davis sitting at a table with two friends. . . . At about 8:30 the main room for the festival opened up and we moved in and mingled. I paid my €30 weekend ticket price. The room was full of round tables with white table cloths. A room to the side, separated by curtain partitions, had a small stage and about 100 chairs in rows. I sat in regal looking chairs with some people I recognized and engaged in small talk. . . . The hotel provided finger foods such as little chicken fingers, sausages, sandwiches, and wine. When about forty people were mingling about, Annette Munnelly politely asked us if we could move into the room with the stage for the official opening. I’d say it was now about 9:00 p.m.

(Miltown Malbay Nov 2014)

Attendees were made to feel comfortable, starting the festival with conversation and food. After the official opening and lecture, we moved to the bar to wait for the singing session. The official session then launched organically in the bar, which Annette commented to the participants sitting at my table:
It was about 10:30 now, and Annette told us we will reconvene in the bistro in an hour for the evening session. I sat quietly in a booth, and a woman came and sat next to me and talked to me for a bit. She pointed out some well-known singers to me. The session finally took off when a group of four men sang in four part harmony, standing in the middle of the room, and gaining all the attention of the people in the room. Their music was not traditional, but it was fun, energetic, and the session started rolling. Annette went with it, eventually not asking us to ever move into the bistro, commenting about the organic nature of the singing.

(Ibid.)

Although most of the sessions occured in the Bellbridge Hotel, the Sunday session takes place in a pub in town called The Market House on the main street, which serves sandwiches and finger foods. This session is open to the public, free of charge. A woman who worked in one of the bakeries in town told me she especially enjoyed The Market House session because it was quiet, relaxed, and open for the locals who might not have the time or money to dedicate an entire weekend to the festival. By holding the session at The Market House, Clare Festival organizers open singing up to the wider Miltown Malbay community, thus contributing to and strengthening the singing sociality of local residents.

Jerry said that while Tom was ill, he told his family and friends not to name a festival after him or he would come back to haunt them. The Clare festival is now lovingly called, “The Not Tom Munnelly Festival.”
Image 3.7: The Clare Festival of Traditional Singing

Image 3.8: The Clare Festival of Traditional Singing
Suitable Space for Singing Sessions

Participants for this thesis identified different types of spaces that they believe constitute the best environments for singing. Despite some differing opinions discussed in this chapter about the best kinds of sessions, I found a common and consistent set of criteria by which they judge the quality and appropriateness of possible venues. These criteria are shared among virtually all my informants and can be catalogued to explore the collective values of the singing community.

The spatial organization, and concomitant structuring of social relations within that space, needs to facilitate the full engagement between singers and listeners. This allows for socially successful performances that build the participants’ sense of connection with one another. Often the rooms will be organized with chairs or tables around a circle, candles, dimmed lights, or any other set-up that creates a relaxed, convivial atmosphere. The circle allows the participants to comfortably see all singers and feel a part of the group (Fairbairn 1993, 216). The tables allow participants to set down glasses or rest their arms. The candles and dimmed lights are soothing, inviting the guests to settle for the evening. The room set-up can encourage participation, which heightens social meaning (Turino 2008). Participants have stated to me that the goal is for the public space to feel like a private home as the organizers recreate, as best as they can, an original kitchen gathering. With the addition of candlelight, tea, and food, I have personally felt a sense of the home within the public space.

Singing sessions come with sets of unspoken rules, which contribute to what is perceived as a safe space for singing. Each session is different, but general rules I have observed at the sessions I have attended over the course of my study seem to be consistent for each session. Attendees typically sing traditional repertoire. Singers do

59 For more information on repertoire in singing sessions, see Chapter Four.
not burst into song. The only organizational style that allows singers to sing when they feel inspired is the open style organization, in which the leader ‘opens the floor’ to the singers. Usually, though, the open floor has its own place in the structure of the session. The leader announces when the floor is open, often after he or she has called on a couple of singers to start the session.\textsuperscript{60}

Hierarchy and turn-taking within the session is also strictly constrained by unspoken rules and underlying values (Fairbairn 1993, 309). I have observed that older, male singers carry the highest status. They tell their stories, sing their songs, and command the most respect (Ibid., 218). As problematized in Chapter Two, such hierarchy can be intimidating for newcomers or women and can thus be seen as exclusionary. If a regular singer who is known for a specific song is present, other singers do not sing that song, a difficult rule to follow for visitors new to the session, unaware of song ownership. For instance, the late Robbie MacMahon, the founder of the Spancilhill Singers Club in Clare, was known for the song “Spancilhill.” Therefore, no other attendee at that session could sing “Spancilhill.”\textsuperscript{61}

Arguably the most important unspoken rule is that spaces must be quiet—also the main factor driving singers’ desires to find suitable places to sing. By requiring silent spaces which emphasize listening, sessions ensure that each singer is respected and heard (An Góilín 2016; Williams 2010, 11). Attendees do not talk or make noises when someone is singing. If they must move, they do so silently. Usually they wait to walk in or out of the room after the ends of songs. Emphasis must be on listening to songs, bar tenders must keep clattering to a minimum, and the room should not have other distractions such as a television.

\textsuperscript{60} See section on organization later in this chapter.
\textsuperscript{61} For more information on song ownership, see Chapter Four.
Grace Toland emphasized the importance of listening, which she believes is one of the most vital components of a successful session:

[Listening] is hugely, hugely important . . . that whole relationship between people in the rooms, a sense of creating this quietness around each other and the supporting people when they’re singing. It’s very emotional. We don’t really like to say it, but we are all really emotional people. And even, especially men who are working men suddenly standing and singing something very tender or something very funny. I’m always gobsmacked and I’m sitting there going it’s a great thing that people allow themselves to be that vulnerable and to sing. So the listener, you’ve got to feel comfortable with the people around you, that they’re not judging you, because not every night’s the same. . . . A night like that where people know each other and there’s a social element to it, and it’s much more forgiving than going up on a stage and doing a concert. Listening for me has been, I would say, the most important thing I’ve done as a singer, I think, I really do, and I’d encourage anybody, and listen to anything.

(Toland Feb 2015)

Listeners help singers feel comfortable. They ease the feeling of vulnerability a singer might have. Attendees ideally should be sympathetic listeners, open to hearing all the singers in the room, encouraging singers who might feel shy or intimidated by the quality of singing throughout the event (Williams 2010, 14). A singer can sing a good song well, but if the song is not heard by an attentive listener, a connection is not made. A conversation requires a giver and receiver. In the conversation that is song sharing, the listener receives the song. Without this dialogue, a reciprocity is not made and the social circle is not completed (Porter 1976).

Problematic Spaces

Because the combination of characteristic features conducive to a good session environment is rather constrained, session organizers may have trouble finding a suitable space for singing. As Máire Ní Dhomnchadha expressed, the owners and managers of pubs and clubhouses might not want a singing session to take over once a month because of conflicting interests. Pubs are run as businesses and their owners or managers may not want to give up a night for a crowd that may not spend enough money on drinks. They may not want to require silence from their patrons, especially
when silence risks driving out a regular, more noisy clientele. They may not want to reserve corners or rooms, taking that space away from other guests (Ni Dhonnchadha Mar 2015). On the other hand, venues that do allow, or even welcome, singing might not be particularly well suited to meet the needs of a singing circle. The Ennis Singers Club provides a good example here.

The location of the Ennis Singers Club is a current topic of interest among its singers and organizers. Máire viewed the Cois na hAbhna as the perfect venue for the Ennis Singers Club. Not too far out of town but still central enough for pedestrian access, they met in this private building reserved specifically for the session once a month, with a committee that served tea and biscuits during the interval. Although a private social club venue, the facility partially supports itself by selling drinks to patrons. Therefore, the venue staff did not feel they were getting much in return when hosting the Ennis Singers Club. The singers were not drinkers, maybe only having one pint per person if not fewer, and the venue managers complained. As a result the session committee searched for a new home at the end of 2013, asking at many different locations; unfortunately they were often turned away. As suggested above, Máire said that these pubs were uninterested in forfeiting a lucrative evening of normal clientele for singers requesting space and quiet.

Finally the Ennis Singers Club relaunched for the twenty-year anniversary in February 2014 at the Grove Bar and Restaurant two miles out of town, which remained open late and allowed the singers to use a back room. However, this back room also provided the passageway to the toilets, and the door loudly opened and closed every few minutes. Restaurant patrons passing through were unaware of the unspoken rules guiding the behavior of the gathering being held there. They did not know to wait before moving until a break between songs. They were not listening to the songs and
did not stop talking during the singing, the rule requested of most singers clubs (Williams 2010, 19). I observed the noisy distractions. The members of the Ennis Singers Club were gracious and kind to the people who walked through, and sometimes these people stayed to hear a few songs, but I can understand why such distractions are unwanted as they disrupt the flow of the singing.

The session was also required to relocate out of the back room whenever the restaurant hosted a party. This was the case when I came to the session on 12 December 2014:

\[ I \text{ arrived to the session a little bit early so I bought myself tea and took a seat in the front because a large party was in the normal space in a back room adjacent to the restaurant. . . . Some coordinators recognized me, telling me that the session will be in the front this time because of the party. We waited until a small crowd formed and the coordinators called us to the front of the restaurant in a nice cubby just inside the front doors. They set up candles, which I quite liked. The session, though small, felt very cozy. I sat against the wall, in the middle/end of the oval ring of people, next to a table where I could put my tea. About twenty to twenty-five people attended, tonight. . . . } \]

\[ \text{During the second half of the session, the party in the back room became increasingly loud as the night wore on. At one moment, the guests, a quintet this night, tried to start a song but could not because a man at the neighboring party started singing, in full voice, \textit{Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair}. After a few false starts by our guests, they decided to stop and wait for the singer to stop. He didn't stop, but kept going and going, so finally our group sang along, with much laughing. I must add. It was an interesting moment of 'social correction' in which a strategy was found to temporarily accommodate otherwise unacceptable singing behavior without destroying the comradery of the group. For me, the strangest part of this event is that the other singer kept on going with no change in his voice that showed he recognized others were singing along! Clearly different values were at work in the other room.} \]

(Ennis Dec 2014)

The other party did sound enjoyable, and the Ennis singers did not seem upset with the party itself by any means. The singers gracefully took a frustrating situation and had some fun with it, which I admired. I assume they must have been upset that they were pushed aside by the restaurant, like a second class activity, to be moved when a higher paying party desired space. After a few meetings, the space at first so promising proved
not to be appropriate for a session because of all the competing noise. Máire told me that session attendees often approach her now, saying that they must find a new location. Her concerns seem to echo those of regular session attendees, and I personally observed why the current location is problematic. The question is, how will they find this new place?

**Session Organization**

While the organization of singing sessions may be considered a part of the framing physical space and structure, it also contributes more directly to singers’ feelings of acceptance and comfort, fostering their sense of belonging. Singers stress the importance of inclusivity, which is often dependent on the organizers or the Fear an Ti (man of the house) or Bean an Ti (woman of the house), the leader or host. The host must know his or her audience well, always scanning the room, ready to call on singers. The committee is responsible for creating such an inviting atmosphere. Sessions are organized in many ways, which the Fear or Bean an Ti usually states at the beginning of each session. Organization methods that work for some sessions might not work for other sessions. For instance, many organizers say that ideally, they would open the floor to whomever feels inspired to jump in with song. This setting allows for a natural development throughout the session and limits fabrication caused by too much control.

However, in sessions with many visitors, younger singers, or shyer singers, singers might need some more coaxing to give a song. This style of coaxing relates to that of the Ottowa Valley described by I. Sheldon Posen, where singers in the room required some coaxing to start their songs (Posen 1988). Grace Toland expressed her own concern about the open floor organization, stating, “I always found that really really difficult because we came out of this thing of being asked to sing. I think people thought I was an awful snobby one. She’s always waiting! But I could never do that
jump in bit. It just wasn’t in my psyche as a singer. I wasn’t comfortable” (Toland Feb 2015). This has been a concern relayed to me by several singers, and even the members of such clubs as An Góilín where the open-floor method is most widely practiced recognize that this method can be intimidating. When I expressed this concern during a session at An Góilín, the singer next to me encouraged me. It felt like jumping off a high rock—I was nervous just before the jump, but after I started, I enjoyed the free sensation of singing when I had the urge.

The host, then, can call on singers. He or she may call on a few singers or one singer at a time. He or she may compile a list before the start of the session from singers interested in singing, or may scan the room looking for familiar or new faces. The host may quietly ask someone to give a song while the previous person is singing, then introduce the singer to the crowd, or the host may ask the singer out loud. Another option is what Grace Toland called ‘The Noble Call,’ where the singer who just finished his or her song calls on the next singer. Each of these methods are equally effective in creating a sense of inclusivity and belonging depending on the kind of session and the singers involved.

Organization at Individual Sessions

The organization, guided by the Fear an Tí or Bean an Tí, varies from session to session, but is carefully decided by considering who regularly attends, understanding what worked or did not work in the past, and valuing inclusivity. During the Night Before Larry Got Stretched, for instance, Macdara or another organizer will walk the room before the session begins and collect names of attendees. He will then call on three singers at a time. If singers arrive late, he invites them to talk to him during break so that he can add their names to the list for the second half. Each half of the session will continue in this manner for forty-five minutes to an hour, then he will ask his guest
singer, someone who the committee asked to be featured for the night, to sing for about fifteen to twenty minutes.

Singing at the Ennis Singers Club is structured slightly differently. Michael O’Brien, the host, also collects names before the session begins and again during break, but he calls on singers individually. If he recognizes a new face in the crowd with whom he has not spoken, he will ask that singer during the session if he or she would like to sing. Singers might decline, but with enough encouragement, even the shyest singers may be convinced to sing. After a few songs from the crowd, he will ask the guest to sing one or two songs, then ask a few more attendees, then ask the guest again. The night continues in this manner until everybody has a chance to sing at least once, sometimes twice depending on the number of attendees present. At the end of the night, every attendee sings “So Here’s to You (The Parting Glass)”\(^{62}\) in honor of the session’s founder Peadar McNamaara, who used to sing the song frequently.\(^{63}\)

Since the festivals host multiple sessions, organization may differ between each session depending on their purpose. The busier sessions during the Clare Festival were more free-form, with a little aiding by Annette or other attendees for shyer singers. The daytime sessions were quieter. During the Saturday morning workshop, the attendees sat in a circle. Jerry, the leader, asked us each one by one around the circle to share a song. Grace, during a presentation, said this method seemed effective because it cleared any anxiety a singer might have when he or she does not know when he or she might be asked to sing. The songs are passed from person to person around the room, giving each singer time to prepare a song, or quietly decline and pass the song to the next person. The Sunday afternoon session was also relaxed. The *Fear an Tí* knew most

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\(^{62}\) Known as either “So Here’s to You” or “So Here’s to You (The Parting Glass);” not to be confused with a different, well-known traditional song called “The Parting Glass.” See Appendix C for a transcription of the text.

\(^{63}\) See Chapter Four on song ownership.
people in the room so he did not collect names, but he announced that the people he did not know could either talk to him privately or jump in if they would like, or he simply asked during the session.

The organization of each session during the Inishowen Festival varied depending on the session. A group of organizers, including Grace, shared hosting responsibilities. They worked the rooms, standing in the middle and calling on singers individually, sometimes allowing time for conversation between songs, leading to a casual atmosphere. Since we were together the entire weekend, they found singers throughout each day, asking if they would like to sing. The host of the session at the North Pole Bar found me as I was eating lunch earlier that day and asked if I would like to be called on during the session a few hours later. This gave me plenty of time to think of a few songs and relieved the anxiety of not knowing whether or not I might be called on to sing. Grace hosted the Sunday evening session, which was extremely relaxed and included dancing and instrumental music. The session casually segued from dinner, to conversation, to tunes, to a few songs, back to a few tunes. Grace came to my table asking if I would sing the song after the next performance, then when it came to my turn she introduced me to the group. Again, this method of asking privately before publicly eases any anxiety that might come from being put on the spot.

Organization for Flow

Macdara said the host of a session is responsible for maintaining flow of social interaction through song: “In some degree the host as well should kind of look around and go, okay well if I just called a bunch of singers who sang really long dreary songs, maybe I should get someone who I know is going to sing a funny one or an upbeat one or a short one” (Yeates Feb 2015). The organizer must know the singers to ensure the
Session is varied and interesting while also including as many singers, old and new, as possible.

Singers and the theorists outlined in Chapter Two both argue that songs should be treated as conversation, and session organization can contribute to this. A conversation can flow through performances even when the host calls on each singer.

The following notes are from my observations at the Ennis Singers Club:

*Michael, the Fear an Ti, asked me to sing third. I sang The Hare’s Lament, which was then followed by two more hare hunt songs, first by the guest group seven songs later, then another man just after that. Another singer talked to me briefly during break about how I started a roll of hunting songs. What is notable about this succession is that people are listening to songs, their words, and their meanings. Singers have told me that songs should be treated as a conversation. There can be a natural flow from song to song depending on how each singer feels inspired by the previous singer. Here, Michael called on each singer one by one, rather than the open-session style practiced at the Góilín, but the Ennis Singers still chose songs based on other songs.*

(Ennis Dec 2014)

Again, one notable aspect of this flow of songs as conversation is the importance of listening. As several singers and organizers have mentioned, the success of sessions is down to the number of listeners in the room. Songs flow one into the other because singers are listening to one end of the conversation and responding, contributing to the conversation, regardless if the session organization is open or constructed in some way.

Even when the organizational flow is carefully plotted to best suit individual session peculiarities, the leader might not have total control, and the session can move in awkward, less successful directions. Consider these five minutes at The Night Before Larry Got Stretched:

*One moment tonight seemed especially notable, when I see how the flow is disturbed and something may not run as smoothly as the attendees would like. Near the end of the session, just around midnight, Macdara called on three singers. The first sang a hilarious song the singer must have written about Star Wars in traditional song style, and it even included an ode to the Cobblestone! I was in stitches laughing. After he sang, the group took a few moments to quiet down, which usually is the case after a funny performance, and another man sang after his performance. Macdara had announced the singer Barry Gleeson*
as the third in the set. However, before Barry could start, a man from the crowd standing by the door very enthusiastically introduced his song and began to sing in a Germanic language—Norwegian? Danish? Nobody could understand him, of course, so when he stopped once the listeners did not know what happened. It sounded like he stopped mid song, and a drunk woman sitting in the middle of the room called out, “Keep singing, you sound great!” and everyone laughed awkwardly. The man in the spotlight paid no notice to her, because he was apparently rambling on, was it about the song? He was speaking in English but it was such an odd flow that I couldn’t understand. Then when he finished speaking, we all thought he was done for good—we thought maybe he was explaining the end of the song? The crowd began clapping, and then he started up singing again! When he was for sure finished, Macdara called out, “Is the Irish Barry Gleeson there?” after which the real Barry sang his song “Adieu, Adieu.”

(Dublin Feb 2014)

The atmosphere of the room was tense when the visitor was seemingly unaware of the session’s unwritten rules. The extra encouragement of the drunk woman contributed to the tense atmosphere. Encouragement and coaxing is an important component of singing sessions, as I. Sheldon Posen had discussed, but the coaxing must be tactfully placed in times that would not distract the singer nor listeners. Macdara handled a slightly uncomfortable situation well when he called on “The Irish Barry Gleeson,” bringing back flow to the session and maintaining control without exploiting the mystery singer.

Inclusivity, Belonging, and Community

The most comfortable singing spaces, according to Grace, bring a piece of the home to the session. Each of the sessions and festivals presented in this thesis brought a bit of home in various ways, all attempting to fulfill the goal to provide a welcoming space for singers. Jerry O’Reilly and Rosie Davis discussed what they believed make a good singing session, emphasizing atmosphere, venue, and inclusivity. Jerry said, “Inclusivity is so important. The feeling that ‘this is really nice’” (Davis and O’Reilly May 2015). The leader and listeners are responsible for helping attendees feel welcome,
contributing to the shared and lived experience among the singers which develops into a sense of community (Turino 2008).

Creating Inclusivity

Jerry mentioned how much of the organizer’s job is to ensure the atmosphere is suitable for singing. Macdara also mentioned the importance of the host in providing a positive environment. He believes the welcoming format at An Góilín comes down to the committee. When people walk into An Góilín, the organizers will ask how they are doing and help them feel included. Especially since the session is in a semi-private location, not a public bar, they have “done well by having a lot of spirit and morale” (Davis and O’Reilly May 2015).

I laughed during the Ennis Singers Club the evening they shared their session with the Kildare Singers Club from across the country. After introducing the visitors, Michael, the Fear an Tí added, “But your trip was nothing. In the corner we have a girl who came all the way from California!” All the attendees clapped and cheered. That small sentence had a huge impact on my own sense of inclusion. Members of the Ennis Singers Club sing, tell stories, talk, and laugh throughout the evening. They meet for the songs and continue singing not when the venue closes, but when they decide they are finished for the night. The organizers ensure that everybody who wants to sing, sings, and with limited time restraints and a willingness to sing well past midnight, they are able to do so.

The organization of sessions such as the Ennis Singers Club recognizes the importance of a balance between stability and change among visitors and regulars to maintain existence. Etienne Wenger, in Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity (Wenger 1998), states:

The existence of a community of practice does not depend on a fixed membership. People move in and out. An essential aspect of any long-lived
practice is the arrival of new generations of members. As long as membership changes progressively enough to allow for sustained generational encounters, newcomers can be integrated into the community, engage in its practice, and then—in their own way—perpetuate it.

(Ibid., 99)

Some larger, more populated sessions are not necessarily organized to attract newcomers, per se, but new people are nevertheless welcomed and regular attendees look forward to shared connections with old friends and new visitors alike. An Góilín, for instance, is busy every Friday night because of its regular attendees, singers who have known each other for their entire lives. However, they advertise the session in the local newspaper, hire guest singers, and strive to make newcomers feel comfortable through conversation and encouragement (Fairbairn 1993, 34).

Macdara described his role as the leader as contributing to a sense of inclusion. He said he sees new people enter the room often, so as he walks around the room collecting names of singers before the session begins, he will ask newcomers, “How are you doing? Is this your first time? Are you a singer or a listener?” (Yeates Feb 2015). Then the newcomer can politely agree to sing or pass without the stress of answering in front of all the others in the room.

Macdara has heard complaints about different sessions in which the members were not friendly or open to conversation. He said that what makes a friendly atmosphere in any situation, whether at a singing session or elsewhere, is to talk to and encourage new people. He personally asks each attendee before each session whether or not they would like to sing. He contends that this form of organization contributes to inclusion:

Larry is a place with lots of newcomers who come and it has worked best for us to [call on singers]. Now, we’ve had some revolts to that. We’ve got some people from the Góilín who for example for whom an open session really works because they’re people who are very familiar with the kind of thing, as with great spontaneity. We’ve tried that, and it doesn’t work as well because we’ve got so many newcomers here who wouldn’t be as comfortable with it.
Grace also spoke about the role of the host in creating a sense of inclusivity, especially by ensuring that each attendee has been asked to sing:

In our session [the monthly Inishowen Singers Circle] Kevin [McGonigle] would call singers. You’d never know when you’re going to be asked to sing, but it’s so that it’s inclusive, that’s the main thing, so that nobody feels [they were not] asked. So that sense of including everybody and watching out, it’s a really good skill to have and to be able to look around the room and maybe noticing new faces and to make sure that they’re asked, and give them . . . the opportunity. Everybody should be asked, do you want to participate.

(Toland Feb 2015)

The host talks to the people in the room, introduces them to the crowd, comments on their songs, and makes an effort to ask each attendee to sing. He or she knows the singers and their songs well enough to maintain order and flow, and invites newcomers with friendly conversation.

Grace stresses the importance of having a core group of organizers at every main activity at the Inishowen Festival to ensure inclusivity. The organizers’ main goal is to help the vast number of visitors feel included by asking each person to sing at least once. Grace explains:

We, as a group, decided that we didn’t want to run loads of parallel events, so at everything you’ll always see myself, Kevin, Brian, Jim, the core group, the organizers. We go to everything, we’re at everything, and we take part in everything. But it does mean that . . . on the Friday night you could walk into a room and there could be one hundred and fifty singers and what do you do? The only thing we can do, we say at the very beginning, we tell people take your opportunity to sing anywhere you can. All we hope to do is during the weekend that we will call you for one song. That’s all we can basically fit in . . . because we just can’t get around the amount of singers who turn up. . . . We would have about one hundred and fifty people who would travel to the event, but our concert on the Saturday night would get an awful lot more local people, so you might have two-fifty, three hundred people at the concert. But the sessions, then, are just ginormous [sic]. They are ginormous, you know, and some people find it really frustrating because they come all this way and they’re only getting one song . . . But, people want to stay to hear all the other singers, hear the different voices. For a lot of us it’s the one time of the year that we might see people that we don’t see ‘til the next festival. . . . It has a good momentum and we try to be as inclusive as we can. We try, that’s the whole point of it. . . . [After the organized events] we just let people go, so then that’s when all the
unorganized things happen. Literally you get people who, if you’re getting up
for your breakfast at 9 in the morning, there may be people still there from the
night before. . . . There’s a lot of very late sessions. People really love staying up
very late. . . . We have a seminar dinner. We have all these things that draw
people together so that you feel that you’re in the group. . . . It’s the loyalty and I
suppose the ethos of the weekend. . . . We [the organizers] want to enjoy
ourselves, and that’s why it’s successful. I think we’re open and people always
react to a sense of openness about things.

(Toland Feb 2015)

The sense of community in Inishowen is strong because the organizers are actively
involved, making an effort to include the large numbers of participants. Grace added
that the visitors of the festival have nowhere else to go for the weekend, a unique
characteristic because of Inishowen’s remote location, so they sing through each night.
They contribute to their shared experience, thus strengthening their singing sociality.

The Clare Festival of Traditional Singing is still running according to Tom
Munnell’s original vision. It is small, intimate, and inclusive. Annette, her brother
Jerry, and the other organizers ensure that everyone who wants to sing is asked to sing.
I personally was quite touched when, on the first night and I was intimidated by a
roomful of strangers, Annette grabbed my hand, walked me out to the middle of the
room, introduced me, and helped me feel comfortable before I sang my first song of the
weekend. 64 Her leadership contributed to the aura of community and belonging in the
room.

Exclusivity in Sessions

My experiences at most of the singing events I attended were positive.
However, I have also encountered negative incidents relating to exclusivity in the field.
Singing sessions in which the values of inclusivity have not been sufficiently
prioritized in making the choices needed among venue, organization, listening, and
encouragement are likely to not be so successful according to my informants. A term I

64 This story is also relevant to my discussion on the role of the leader in singing sessions in Chapter
Five.
heard used to describe such failures was that some sessions were ‘stilted,’ meaning no room for growth or change, which will be investigated in Chapter Six. Singers in these sessions are too concerned with their presentation. They give an unnatural performance, distancing themselves from the song and their listeners, hoping instead to sound profound. Songs are what singers have termed ‘precious,’ treated as if they are not to be tampered, their integrity compromised by a performance from unsuitable singers. Newcomers are ignored and there is minimal interaction among singers, whether in conversation or in the give and return between singers and listeners, the sharing, receiving, and support during songs. Singers have described these kinds of sessions to me, and I have observed different elements of such forms of exclusivity in practice at some sessions. These kinds of sessions can be intimidating for anyone from outside of their intimate circle. Alternatively, the members within the circle may feel a sense of comfort amongst each other and wish to hold onto their songs, looking out for self preservation. By portraying the more negative attributes of social identity theory which involve defining oneself as distinct or even against the defining features of members of other groups and expanded upon in Chapter Two, members of this kind of gathering disengage themselves from the broader traditional singing community.

Unspoken rules or too hierarchical a social organization can stilt singing sessions. Once, I experienced such an exclusion personally. Unfortunately, my experience soured my opinion of a singing club in such a way that I would not want to return:

_We broke for sandwiches, donations, and stretching at about 11:00 p.m. I began speaking with one of the members. We were talking and obviously engaged in a conversation, and a man came over, looked right at me saying “Sorry,” and talked to the other member for the remainder of the break! I sat in silence for nearly ten minutes before another member spoke to me. I was very upset about_

\[65\] This aspect of social identity has lead to cases of discrimination, racism, or prejudice against other groups. See Tajfel (1979) for more information.
this—I can, and have, put my own implications onto this instance which does not come from anyone but myself so I could be very wrong, but I felt I was the losing party in a battle of gender and age discrimination or hierarchy. I was clearly an outsider, younger, female, and I had to step aside for this older man. I saw the member with whom I was speaking trying to stop him and acknowledge me to him, now sitting by myself, but he did not stop and kept going until the second half started. This member with whom I was speaking was caught so was not at fault, but the man had all but physically pushed me aside. (Session Anonymous)

By excluding me, the older gentleman pushed out new interest in a group. It has been expressed to me that this group is in danger of disbanding, despite the abundance of other singing clubs in the country. Not all sessions are sufficiently inclusive; in this example, hierarchy discouraged the participation so valued by Thomas Turino. Posen wrote that in Chapeau, older singers know that younger singers from varying backgrounds must participate to learn the practice and feel a part of the community (Posen 82, 1988), but in this session, such encouragement was clearly not a concern for the older singer. I wonder if this instance is not uncommon. Rather than allow for a small bit of change, this man maintained hierarchy at the risk of excluding new members.

Helen O’Shea provides similar examples of exclusivity at instrumental music sessions. As a foreigner, she felt that the status of foreigners changed from ‘welcome guest’ to ‘stranger’ after the summer festival season finished. She wrote that ideas of cultural territory “can lead insiders to defend their territory by stigmatizing strangers, marking them as inherently different and so justifying their permanent exclusion” (O’Shea 2008, 119-120). At exclusionary singing sessions, singers may be defending their territory against new singers, songs, and ideas that they believe might hurt the tradition (See Chapter Six).

A few singing sessions have been accused of having become increasingly too intimidating for some locals who may have attended for many years. Other contributers
to exclusivity can be bigger crowds, which could distance singer and listener and lose intimacy; bigger voices, which outshine smaller counterparts; and international prestige, which could attract major singers globally and leave neither time, space, nor interest for lesser known singers. John Moulden, for instance, expressed this concern about the Inishowen Singing Weekend, stating:

There’s a high amount of evidence that there’s numbers and numbers and numbers of singers in this area who would still sing traditional songs, and who would never dare or . . . would find this too heavy. And they wouldn’t arrive. They wouldn’t come. Never, never would. But more seriously, there’s a degree of evidence of at least three people who previously sang and have sung for a long time in this context and now because of the number of strange faces, big voices and big personalities, being scared off.

(Moulden Mar 2015)

His concern for the heaviness of some singing at the festival relates to the importance of *craic*, conversation, wit, and an ease of flow as expressed by Henry Glassie (Glassie 1995). His worry for bigger voices and personalities scaring away shier singers is shared by other informants and will be discussed more in Chapter Seven.

The criteria described above for creating space for all singers may not apply to all singing sessions. For example, Seán Ó Riada stated, “[The singer] must . . . have a vocal technique above and beyond that of the average European singer” (Ó Riada 1982, 25). His sentiments are for the singing quality of *sean-nós* singing in particular, but I have heard similar opinions for the singing at English language sessions. An argument has been made that singing quality does affect the success of the sessions, but amongst my informants, these factors risk squeezing out the quieter, less confident singers who may well be longtime participants or who only perform locally for their familiars.

Solutions for Suitable Space

John defined what makes a good atmosphere for singing, and why finding a suitable place is important to encourage even the less confident singers to continue
singing. He described singers to me who no longer sing in the large context of the Inishowen Festival:

This would be my argument, that context shapes performance and I do know that there are at least three singers who regularly have sung at sessions a while back in this earlier, who, although they come to these sessions, won’t sing most of the time. May sing on Monday, but won’t sing in the big room context, they won’t sing being intimidated by the number of, say its in the presence of Americans, English, Scots, big voices. They don’t have the confidence . . . because the local place in, certainly in Ireland, tends to value self effacement. And therefore people, you find, people in the past who make remarks on singers only singing with their faces turned to the wall, or singers hiding their faces with caps from the rest of the companions.

(Moulden Mar 2015)

To not intimidate singers, he suggests that sessions must be in smaller rooms and have other sympathetic people who would rather listen than sing. “And that’s not often, not often in these gatherings. Most people have a lot of ego. And some are quite destructive.” He speculated, mirroring Máire Ní Dhonnchadha’s sentiments regarding finding a place for the Ennis Singers Club, “I just think that singing will not die as long as there’s a place for singing. And again that’s the problem—Where are the places?” (Ibid.).

Ideal Atmosphere for Community

When singers express what makes an ideal singing session, they talk about atmosphere, community, and **craic** (a mix of conversation, laughter, and a way of passing the time) more than the quality of the singing or the choice of the songs. Singing participants have said that they can be vulnerable and emotional, so they need to feel comfortable among the surrounding supporting listeners. In an ideal session, there is no judgement and there is a social element, a friendliness in the room. If possible, everyone should be asked to sing at least once during the event, they must be given the chance to participate. A successful gathering may include a group of people who have known each other for a long time, with good neighborliness. The night
includes more than just singing; it includes conversation, teasing, jokes, maybe drinks, maybe instrumental music. The songs are important—they are the fabric for the session, the reason why the people are gathering. Some ego might be present, especially because, as Rosie Davis stated, people want to perform their song well. However, the attendees are more interested in bringing something to the session, contributing a song, warm words, warm smiles, even if the presentation is not at the highest standard.

The individual can influence feelings of acceptance and belonging in the traditional singing community. Russell noted that young Haydn Thorpe was accepted into the Pennine singing community because of his respect and love of ‘old songs.’ The community recognized his love for the songs, and he experienced a feeling of belonging not just through singing, but through his overall demeanor and actions within the community. He continues, “It would be ingenuous to note that just as Haydn was determined to be a force for good in his short life, so others around him felt compelled by this expediencey and gave him their full support” (Russell 2003, 277). Thorpe made a genuine effort within the singing community, bringing conflicting groups together, organizing events, and singing and respecting the songs, that the community appreciated him and thus accepted him. Likewise, in the Irish singing sessions, singers wanting to participate, who show an interest and respect for the songs and the other singers, will, ideally, be accepted into the community.

Why go out to a singing session? Why not listen to an album at home or listen to a concert on a stage? Tom Mulligan commented on what makes a music gathering exciting. “Music and singing are branded in their own respect, but what makes a night of music is the chat that goes on between say, sets of music or song. You just sit, you sit and talk common denominiators, the common denominator in your case is singing” (Mulligan Feb 2015). This common denominator heightens participants’ senses of
identification with like-minded individuals—a key element in generating the power of Social Identity Theory. As noted in my discussion of the ways in which singing sociality has been theorized, Jane Sugarman in particular describes these kinds of social bonds, which unify singers with a common interest (Sugarman 1997). Rosie said that the organizers of singing sessions “want people to join in. They want people to be a part of it. It’s very nice and I think they just enjoy that together. Do people play cards at home? No, they go out to play bridge with a bridge club” (Davis and O’Reilly May 2015).

Singers want a community of singers. She added, “I would see singing circles as a way of getting together. But also because I was interested in singing, when do you get the opportunity to sing, really? We don’t, really. [. . .] Meeting with like-minded people you know” (Ibid.). She noted the importance of finding space to sing with others, otherwise some singers at these sessions would never have this chance. Today, this space is the singing session, which is made up of much more than just songs.

Grace said that a social atmosphere is the foundation of the session. Again she emphasized listening, and also banter, chat, and fun. She explained what she liked about the singing sessions she attended growing up, and what drew her to them:

I just loved their attitude to singing and it wasn’t precious, and it was generous. They’re not prima donnas at all, the limelight isn’t about them, so you know, they’re more interested in listening to you than that you listen to them. So I just loved the fun. I really loved the fun, I loved the chat. . . . We did sing, there was a lot of good songs, but we talked an awful lot, so it wasn’t like a singing session as in, song song song song song song, there was good telling jokes, laughter, there was all banter and chat going on. I think that’s what really drew me into it. You can have wonderful singers in the room and no atmosphere. I think it needs to be social. For me, it has to have a social element to it. And a friendliness and that kind of thing, and that’s one of the things that attracted me to stay with the whole thing.

(Toland Feb 2015)

Friendliness attracted her to singing. A session with just songs and no social element lacks atmosphere, but she continued attending sessions because of the friendliness around her. She said she made good friends with the others in the sessions.
over the years, and often, especially while organizing the Inishowen Festival, she sees them more than her own family. Hazel Fairbairn also expressed the importance of enjoyment in the music gatherings: “Enjoyment of the process of playing is as, if not more important than the quality of the musical result. In general the two go hand in hand, the music being the product of the totality of interaction between the individuals involved” (Fairbairn 1993, 30). Therefore, the social nature of the singing must be pleasurable.

The feeling of community through song stems from lived experience theorized by Thomas Turino. Russell also discussed song as it relates to lived experience within the community. Through his ethnography on Haydn Thorpe, Russell “indicated the need for further fieldwork on song as lived experience, especially at such occasions as birthdays, weddings and family reunions, as well as the get-togethers of social clubs or other organizations” (Russell 2003, 278). He suggests a move away from fieldwork based on repertoire to “research that fore-grounded the role of the singer in the community and identified song (or singing) as social discourse” (Ibid.). He observed through his investigation into the impact the young singer had on the singing community, who unfortunately passed away at age twenty-two, “the dynamics of an active singing tradition and its significance for the community in which it flourishes—not singing in context but singing as context” (Ibid.). The social singing community in Ireland also meets for singing as context, its members realizing identity with their strengthening community using song as a lived experience.

Conversation contributes to the overal _craic_ of the singing session. During the singing sessions that I visited, I got to know my neighbors. Usually, recognizing a new person, they approached me first, then when they learned that I was here to study, they generously offered me their insights about the singing or the singers at the sessions. I
enjoyed learning about the singers and listeners around me, hearing about their
interests, their hobbies, and why they are at the session. Here is a small description of
conversations at the Ennis Singers Club:

> I chatted throughout the evening with the people next to me, a woman sitting to
> my right who was very excited that I was from California and constantly asked
> me if I can understand people’s accents as they sing. My answer to her:
sometimes! I also chatted with two men who said they were in their early 80s to
> my left. I was sitting in the corner, and they were on the perpendicular wall. . . .
> I enjoyed speaking with these people—they were very kind.

(Ennis Oct 2014)

The songs were interesting and the recitations exciting. The guest singer that evening
sounded pleasant to my own ears. Music concerts, with featured performers on a stage
and a division between performer and audience, are enjoyable. What distinguishes
these sessions from a performance, however, is the conversation between songs with
the other singers, the lowered barrier between performer and audience.\(^\text{66}\)

John described what makes the perfect gathering for singing. His answer
included the actual singing as only a small component. Most of what makes a perfect
gathering includes many elements, such as comradery and a willing to share with the
community:

> A group of people who have known one another for a long time, with [. . .]
> mainly good neighborliness rather than stress. Meeting and enjoying sociability
of a various kind with conversation, with teasing, with jokes, with wit, with tea,
with a little food or a lot of food, a little drink, no drink, whatever. And perhaps
a bit of music. Maybe a bit of singing, maybe a bit of dancing, maybe these
things, but, you see, behind that possibility the people have to have had, they
have to bring resources with them, that is, I have to bring my song with me, I
have to bring my musical ability with me into the gathering. But that musical
ability has to be developed within a broad context of the community because it,
unless I, unless I’m prepared to give it back to the community. . . . People have
to bring their resources, and they have to bring their willingness to be part of it.
It has to be, community is where it begins. And as community alters, and as in
fact even as I say space [. . .] the spaces in which we live alter.

(Moulden Mar 2015)

\(^{66}\) For a look into the conversations in sessions about songs, see Chapter Four.
The community, the sense of inclusiveness and belonging, the collection of people with similar interests, make up the space which allows for successful singing. The gathering, and with it the singing sociality, is the most important aspect, and within that space, the singing can occur.

Commenting on singing as a lived experience, Tom Mulligan remarked that singers “like to sit down, have a few songs. It’s the social end of music is probably more important to people than the actual music itself. It’s a very pleasant way to spend a couple of hours, you meet nice people, you don’t have to take them home with you. It’s a lovely thing. You say, well wasn’t that a lovely night. And that’s what memories are made of” (Mulligan Feb 2015).

Conclusion

Contemporary singing sessions in Ireland have developed in response to the need for a safe space to sing—for a community of like-minded individuals to gather and share their songs, listen to each other, and enjoy a social evening together. Singers express different ideas concerning what constitutes a safe space conductive for successful social singing, both physically and metaphysically, but the bottom line is clear. Finding and creating quality space is imperative for the continuing vibrancy of the community, the social life of traditional singing.

Social singing in Ireland requires space for singers to gather and share songs. Without a place such as a home, clubhouse, or bar, singers have nowhere to gather together as singers and listeners. Therefore, the quality of the venue affects the quality of social singing gatherings. In many of my interviews, singers express the desire for finding safe, appropriate venues and identify different criteria that contribute to successful singing sessions. The physical space in which they gather, construed as a certain kind of place, creates an atmosphere for the singing. The people who fill these
spaces, the organizers, singers, and listeners, contribute and present in their particular ways to combine in the overall experience at sessions. Success in creating the central characteristic of inclusivity stems from organization, that is, how committee members or leaders structure singing sessions and how singers interact with each other. An atmosphere of inclusiveness then leads to a metaphysical sense of community that may be experienced at singing sessions and which is often identified as the most desired outcome of these gatherings. Singers desire a space to sing, to be heard, and to connect with like-minded individuals. Space, its construction as cultural place, and its metaphysical qualities therefore are important factors in sustaining the social life of Irish traditional singing.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE SONGS

Songs are the crux of singing sessions. Chapter Three, which examined the phenomenon of singing sessions, illustrates the characteristics of the ideal sessions as safe and inclusive spaces for songs and singers. This chapter investigates these traditional songs and their uses within the contexts of singing sessions, and why session participants sing them. I searched for connections singers have with songs and observed relationships between singing session participants that may occur through songs and singing. In this study, I hope to discover the meaning of songs to singers and listeners and the connections that can be made among participants through the lived experience of song sharing.

Singing Styles

Throughout this thesis, I state that a common goal of organizers of and participants in singing sessions is to allow anyone to sing, regardless of vocal quality. Such a statement is contested, however. I have heard several contrasting opinions on the matter of singing aesthetics including: 1) all attendees should be able to sing in the session gatherings, 2) singers with bigger voices intimidate the smaller voices, 3) the necessity of guest singers with good voices to heighten the draw to the session, and 4) sessions needing strong singers in order to survive. When addressing repertoire performance in the singing sessions, it is necessary to acknowledge presentational styles of songs, understand the importance of song locale and origin, and know the

I recognize that song choices and meanings can change in different performance contexts.
meaning the song has to the singer. This section reveals ways in which songs are presented and opinions regarding song performances in the singing sessions, revealing both verbalized and non-verbalized rules on what is considered appropriate and acceptable singing aesthetics for singing session participation.

In my experience, Irish traditional singers usually call attention to the songs shared during sessions rather than the quality of the singing. After performing a song, the singer might hear, “That was a nice song,” but usually not “That was nice singing.” John Moulden claims that the best compliment a person can give him when he sings is one for the song, not for his own performance of it. He takes this idea further, stating:

If you think you can listen to the song and forget the singer, . . . they have done a really good job. They’ve done a wonderful thing. And it’s not that they’ve taken themselves out of the equation, it’s that all the piled experience and thinking and practice is there . . . but it’s all serving the song.

(Moulden Mar 2015)

According to John, the singer brings his or her own experience and interpretation to the song. He continues, mentioning that “quantity equals quality:” “The man who has a lot of songs isn’t necessarily a great singer except in the very very odd place. But, mostly, this is a good rule” (Ibid.). John describes the general rule that a notable singer may have many songs without necessarily having what is considered a good voice. In this way of thinking, the number of songs is more important than the singing quality.

Song scholar Hugh Shields observered, “singers are judged mainly on the quality and apparent size of repertory and on the verbal—not the musical—part of songs” (Shields 2010, 149). In this comment, however, Shields does not acknowledge the place of singers who may have one party piece only or mention those singers who may have comparably small repertoires but who are recognized as notable by other singing session attendees. I have observed in sessions even when a singer is known for having multiple songs, he or she may be asked by a participant in the crowd to sing a
certain song, which is often this singer’s party piece—a song for which he or she is known to sing often. Despite a knowledge of a vast repertoire, what is important to the listeners is for that singer to sing something they know and appreciate.

Shields would seem to largely disregard singers and listeners who may first be attracted to the tune rather than the text. For instance, I took an Irish language song class with a singer who said that she is first drawn to the melody for her song choice, not the text. Singer Mick O’Grady also shared with me that he is drawn to a song stating, “I like the air and I like the story” (O’Grady Feb 2015). His mention of the air, or tune, preceded his mention of the story, but this reveals his interest in both of these components of a song. I, too, am drawn to the melody before the text, and I often hear the melody first, forgetting even to listen to the words the singer is singing. Through my fieldwork process, I have learned to better tune into the text.

A distinction can be made between Irish traditional songs that tell a story, “in which the story is the most important element, and songs with words that express emotion about a situation or story, that are not meant to tell a story” (Blacking 1982, 19). Fintan Vallely also makes this distinction, stating that singers of lyric song “often give the narrative background of a song . . . before singing it, even when they can assume that the audience is already familiar with the story” (Vallely 2011, 630). Generally, sean-nós is often regarded as lyric song and English language balladry as narrative (Ibid.). Exceptions abound, of course, and both English and Irish language songs have many themes and styles of verse. Because often songs such as lyric songs do not narrate a story in its entirety, perhaps more emphasis is placed on the vocal quality and melody in their performance—alternatively, because the singers may feel the need to inform listeners of the background of the song, the story may indeed be
more important than the performance quality. Likewise, English language ballads tell a story, so the texts may likely be more important than the air or singing quality.

Singing in English language sessions generally proceeds according to a set of aesthetic norms. Irish traditional voice quality is mentioned but not much examined in previous literature. For example, Tomás Ó Canaínn devotes twenty-three pages to textual analysis of song, eight on musical characteristics, and only three on performance style—and much of those last three pages are more about audience reception to what they believe is good singing. He stresses that the singer is “giving expression to the shared experiences and hopes of the audience” rather than performing, again placing higher importance to the shared experience of the singing than the presentation (Ó Canaínn 1978, 80). Although he characterizes sean-nós song, his descriptions are representative of most analyses that I have found. His description leans into the participatory nature of Irish song performance, and that the audience, or who I am referring to as the listeners, are drawn to the performance and are thus a part of it.

Studies focus on features of song style such as structure, phrasing, ornamentation, and text, as with Ó Canaínn’s example, but not much is written on how a singer is expected to perform the piece vocally. Much of what I mention here is therefore based on what other singers have relayed to me about voice quality over the course of my research. Sean Williams, in Focus: Irish Traditional Music (Williams 2009) writes briefly on aesthetics in Irish traditional singing. She writes that internationally, Irish singers have a high reputation of quality singing because of film scores and groups like ‘Three Irish Tenors,’ but clarifies that “most singers in Ireland use their normal speaking voices to sing. In other words, listening to someone speak is not very different from hearing that same person sing in terms of overall vocal timbre.
It sounds natural because it is natural” (Ibid., 208-9). This has been a strong part of my own experience learning traditional songs so that I can more naturally participate with and relate to other singers in the sessions.

John Moulden and I were discussing the difference between learning and performing classical song and traditional song, further helping me understand and delimitate traditional performance characteristics:

[On classical singing] The expectation, and the intensity which, and also suitably the physical demands on all involved, and the fact that you’re practicing elements as well as repertory, and that, for a singer the repertoire is probably more important musically than the singers’ own imagination, unless they’re quite extraordinary themselves. So it is a completely different thing because a singer in a traditional song context hears a song [. . .] learns the song [. . .] the song teaches them how to sing it as well as hearing what they heard because some people can’t reproduce precisely what they did here, and some people don’t want to. In fact in the past, because everyone in traditional circles, singers were to sing slightly differently each time, what happened was that when I heard a song in my community, I heard it slightly differently each time, and it gave me covert fruition to do the same myself.

(Moulden Mar 2015)

The emphasis of learning classical song is to master several elements regarding the melody and production of that melody. The melody in Irish song is not so emphasized and rehearsed, especially because it may change with every performance of it. Singers have told me and I have observed that musical expression in Irish song comes from these changes in the melody. Williams continues that expressiveness is not performed with grandiose gestures and dramatic dynamics, but is instead communicated through slight melodic and ornament variations between verses (Ibid., 162). Hast and Scott write in *Music in Ireland* that vocal timbre can be nasal, following the trend of high profile singers such as Joe Heaney, but in reality “it ranges through a full spectrum including even pure, open tones that would be appropriate in Italian opera” (Hast and Scott 2004, 100).
While Hast and Scott mention aesthetics, they do not discuss this aspect of social singing in further detail. Aesthetics are instead one aspect of a large list of values that characterize singing sessions. Hugh Shields adds that “appreciation of the musical part obviously colours evaluation even though it is more difficult to comment on and reference to it is rarely made” (Shields 1993, 149). The musical elements are only part of the overall aesthetics of singing. From what I have drawn in my observations, a list of aesthetics can be seemingly infinite, which can include vocal timbre, use of vibrato, breath support, nasality, vocal placement, and the size and strength of the voice.

Generally, traditional singers have expressed to me that, in English language traditional singing, singers should sing without vibrato and in their chest voices as if they are talking, and unaccompanied if singing in a song session in order to bring focus to the song. They should sing in their natural, untrained voices. Encouraging singers to sing with their natural voices is a way of ensuring that the focus is on the story, not the voice telling it. Hugh Shields expands on vocal style as it serves or distracts from song stories:

> Emotion is not avoided in performance, whereas specifically musical expression is. This is to say that singers with a good sense of musical intonation and capacity to realize it in practice generally understand the music, and in respect of sonority as well as rhythm they prefer parlando quality to a powerfully or self-consciously controlled voice. Too much volume would of course distract from the decorative subtlety of the more florid styles. . . . Vocal styles are relaxed, yet singing demands effort which some singers translate into subdued but tense and strikingly expressive commitment to the task.

(Ibid., 150)

Shields also notes, “Though traditional singers generally make no claim to be the best, some are secretly and others more plainly convinced that they are” (Ibid., 149). Despite traditional singers commenting that voice quality does not matter, Shields’ statement reveals that unspoken competition and judgment of vocal quality can and does exist in the singing sessions.
Singers are usually encouraged to bring their own voices into sessions, regardless of preferred singing aesthetics. However, I question what exactly is considered a singer’s own voice. Applying an untrained, so-called ‘natural’ voice, similar to the singer’s speaking voice is considered ideal, but how can session attendees judge what is a singer’s natural voice? What about traditional singers who are trained, either in other styles such as classical or even in traditional song, which is now offered in music schools and colleges? What about untrained singers who listen to jazz, pop, musical theater, or opera whose voices mimic what they hear? Are singers considered better traditional singers if they mimic other so-called good traditional singers, or if they disregard the good singers in favor of singing in their own ways? Are singers who use their head voice considered inferior quality?

At one event, a singer asked me about my own background, to which I answered that I am trained classically. He then proceeded to tell me that classical singers cannot sing Irish traditional songs because the emotion is not internalized but is instead overacted, accusing classical singers of being unable to connect with their songs. He did not allow for the fact that singing voices can be malleable, so singers with different backgrounds such as myself can at least try to learn singing styles appropriate for traditional singing sessions. In my own experience, I took Irish traditional voice lessons to learn more acceptable ways to sing in sessions. I attended sessions and recorded the singing, trying to match my voice to what I heard was the general singing style. I listened to CD recordings of women who are considered great singers which other singers have recommended to me. I, a classical singer by training and profession, can learn to sing Irish traditional songs.⁶⁸

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⁶⁸ Even his statement accusing classical singers of not internalizing their emotions nor connecting to their songs is misguided. One exercise I had in my classical singing was to sing to my cat—the very purpose of this exercise was to make the song personal and intimate.
Finding the right pitch in which to sing a song is an element of performance aesthetics. A few times, unfavorable pitches are recognized by listeners. I once heard a session attendee comment in disfavor of a girl with a very high singing voice. One man at the Ennis Singers Club spoke to me during a session about an incident he found embarrassing because he believed he failed in a performance due to the vocal quality of his own singing:

*During the break, I spoke a bit more with the men next to me. I asked them if they came from musical families, and one man told me about how he had sisters who played piano or violin. He said that piano never worked for him, but now he wishes he could read music. Even though I tried to encourage him by saying that the ability to read music is not necessary and can even be detrimental to learning these songs, he told me a story of his visit to the Jerusalem where his friends asked him to sing the song the “Holy Land.” Because he did not know a starting note, he accidentally sang the song too high because it has a high range, and he couldn’t reach the high notes, and he found it embarrassing! I assured him he probably sounded great, but he objected, wishing he could have avoided that situation with an ability to read.*

Had this man not started his song so high, he believes he would have performed better. I tried to convince him otherwise, knowing full well that we are our own worst critics, but he stressed that he wished he was able to know the right pitches. Because singing in sessions is typically unaccompanied, singers must decide on a starting pitch. If singers start too high or too low, which they usually discover midway through the first verse when the song reaches its full pitch range, they might stop the song and start again at a more suitable pitch. After I pitched a song uncomfortably high in one session due to nerves, I spoke with a singer next to me, and he said that he also pitches songs too high when he is nervous.

One man in the Friday night session during the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing sang “How Do I Live on Top of a Mountain,” which he pitched too high. When he reached the highest point of the song, he stopped to start again at a lower pitch, and, acknowledging an awareness of this shared challenge, another singer in the
room humorously shouted, “High mountain!” He recognized that he pitched the song too high and, after some comedic banter, restarted the song in a more comfortable key. The banter also eased any tension he or sympathetic listeners might have had regarding the false start. While not all singers stop and start over again, those who do restart reveal their own aim to sing songs to the best of their abilities. The instances highlighted above reveal that aesthetic critique does make its way into the singing sessions, despite efforts to provide an environment fully inclusive and free from judgement.

**What the Singers Sing**

To better understand what songs are currently being sung at sessions, I asked my informants what they themselves like to sing and hear, and their answers varied greatly. Some singers say they like to hear familiar songs that may remind them of their childhood, family, or history (Williams 2010, 188), but other singers also like to hear new or unknown songs found hidden deep in a collection or archive. Many singers like songs they with which they can sing along in choruses (Shields 1993, 35) and songs to which they can close their eyes, sit back, and listen. Listeners may like hearing established singers sing their regular songs, songs for which these singers are known, and they may like hearing new singers try new songs. Annette mentioned that during long car rides, her kids wanted their parents to sing the song “with all the blood in it,” referring to the ballad “Long Lankin.” She added that her children “always loved songs with stories and that was the big thing. A song with a story” (Munnelly May 2015), thus bringing the emphasis back to the importance of the text of songs.

Macdara Yeates strives to learn new and exciting songs that may be unfamiliar to the common session crowd:
When I started singing songs my scope was much narrower than it was now. The only folk or traditional singing that I knew was the Dubliners or the Clancy Brothers. I liked ballads. Really slow, powerful songs, stories of war, generally verging on hard hitting emotional stuff. There was more, there was loads of funny songs that I really liked. The first time that I heard Barry Gleeson, I heard the CD “The Bird of Dawn.” I just wanted to learn every song because each one was so funny. Then, I suppose, now-a-days I, it’s just kind of anything I’ll do. The pool I would pick from is less popular songs. I don’t really like singing the Wild Rover or the Fields of Athenry, and not because they’re not good songs, but just, they’ve been done to death and they’re in every tourist bar you go by. And I think as well I’ve had issues with some people might have, you sing a traditional song that someone doesn’t know and they’d get angry that they don’t know it. I think that’s a good thing because there are so many songs that no one has heard of, so many songs that maybe one person left on the planet still sings. They’re all great material out there. And material that is so much better than some of the 40s stock songs. [It] would be a shame to resort to the same songs over and over again.

(Yeates Feb 2015)

Macdara also likes “hard-hitting songs, harrowing songs, songs with needs, I feel that have a message that really translates to the song. It’s not just dreary, it’s sad, and it gets through to people and it might have an effect on them. And if it’s a funny song, I want it to be really funny and almost a bit uncomfortable” (Ibid.). Macdara made it clear to me through our interview and his chosen repertoire at sessions that he prefers rare songs that tug at emotional extremes.

Macdara notes that attendees at The Night Before Larry Got Stretched want to hear interesting, unfamiliar songs. He warns to be careful of such songs, though:

If there’s a presumably dreary night and you’re singing songs that are really obscure and probably obscure for a reason, it’s just not good. There are some songs that are obscure because the story is not in any way original, the melody isn’t good, and maybe the people wouldn’t like that, but that’s just a bad song. . . . Maybe some nights . . . people want to hear a song with a chorus or a bit of humor or something.

(Ibid.)

While he is an advocate for unfamiliar songs, he understands that listeners in the room may want some fun, singing along to choruses or laughing at comedic texts.

He adds that the character of the songs preferred depends on the mood of the room that night, but the general response among the attendees of The Night Before
Larry Got Stretched, and himself in particular, to a popular song might be ‘a sigh,’ although he is quick to comment that he is often surprised by good performances of popular songs. Overall, “The response at this session is very much in favor of rare material, very much in favor of unheard material. But everyone likes a chorus, as well” (Ibid.).

As Macdara talked about the reception of rare songs with emotional extremes at sessions such as The Night Before Larry Got Stretched, somehow the conversation turned to what I have heard called seedy, uncomfortable songs. The following excerpt from our discussion reveals the different reactions of singers in Ireland, and just how effective songs can be at triggering a wide variety of emotional responses. Macdara clearly described the importance of repertoire choice, song performance and acceptance, and what happens when a performance goes awry:

I have some songs, some seedy songs, but I suppose the reaction hasn’t been that dramatic because I definitely don’t have the seediest ones. There’s people who can do much worse than me. But it’s all supportive. I don’t like a song that hits below the belt as such . . . One night [a regular attendee] was here, and [he] is an extremely funny man, his humor is just . . . it was just the atmosphere, maybe the night, but he sang, ehhm [clears throat] his great grandad’s version of the Jolly Tinker which is . . . a song about a Traveller who came in to mend a pot in a house but the woman has different ideas, she wants to take him upstairs for his services there. And then there’s a line at the end which the Clancy Brothers cleaned up in their version, which is, “I’ve been a Jolly Tinker for 40 years or more, but such a lovely job as that I’ve never done before.” And the actual version, or at least [the singer’s] great grandad’s version is, “I’ve been a Jolly tinker for 40 years or more, but such a rusty hole was that I’ve never filled before.” Ehmm, you know, which is slightly different. It makes the other ones even funnier, I think. It makes the polite version even funnier, “Such a lovely job I’ve never done before.” So he sang that one night and it just didn’t go down well! And [this singer’s] a really funny guy and has so many funny songs . . . just everyone didn’t know how to react, it’s just kind of “ffffffffff riiiiight, yeaaahhh” . . .

(Ibid.)

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69 This example is one instance where performance quality is as important as the songs. Macdara would rather not hear popular songs, but he enjoys good performances of popular songs.
Macdara shared later that in a smaller, more intimate and private group, a singer performed a bawdy arrangement of a song and they were enjoying the performance immensely, even singing along to the chorus. In this more public setting of The Night Before Larry Got Stretched, however, listeners reacted to the performance with a higher sense of unease. This could be because singers and organizers to not know everyone in the room and do not know whether or not a performance might offend a listener. They might be tense because they want all participants to enjoy the evening, but a performance with risque material could make some listeners uncomfortable and thus unwilling to return.

Macdara continued with his discussion on bawdy music:

Do you know “Whiskey-o-roudulum?” It’s in Irish but it’s super dirty, so much so that people in Connemara I’ve heard don’t like the song to be associated with Connemara in those towns because it’s very rude and very vulgar and below the belt. I suppose here [Dublin] it hasn’t happened that someone’s gone super below the belt. Like at that stage I’d say with [the previous singer] was kind of the worst. But even that, we got over it, it was fine. People are open to it. I think that everybody, all the Góilín people, they’re not conservative folk. . . . I think that would kind of defeat the purpose. There is a conservative ring of traditional singing in the country. There is conservative minds that are at the reigns of some traditional singing, but they’re not from here. And eh, you know, certainly the greater, and by greater I don’t mean better but I kind of do, the greater bunch of traditional singers that, in Dublín or in Ireland, that come to Larry and do the sessions, they’re all up for a bit of fun. And it’s only if the song that’s reeeaally filthy that they, now they won’t be annoyed about it, but it’s only if a song is really filthy they might just not risk it.

(Ibid.)

The performance of bawdy material can generate a range of reactions from listeners, but overall, participants are “all up for a bit of fun.” Barre Tolken stated that such reception is due to the many interpretations and experiences of such performances by listeners:

Folksongs, dependent as they are on the styles, colorations, nuances, and ambiguities of spoken language and ongoing creative variations of musical expression, thrive on suggestiveness and multiplicity of possibilities inherent in culturally shared arenas of vernacular performance, negotiation, and discourse. Because so many levels of perception are simultaneously engaged, a folksong is
worth a thousand pictures, for it expands our engagement with meaning beyond the visual plane. And yet, for this to be perceived and experienced in its unique reality—while it is being sung.

(Toelken 1995, 20)

Songs provide imagery for the listeners, and this vivid imagery can affect their reception of the performance. As Macdara states, singers may be open to more bawdy repertoire, even if the songs might challenge what some listeners deem appropriate. 70

Jerry O’Reilly learns songs today from recordings. He grew up with songs in his family, but he often turned to LPs, even in the sixties, to acquire new songs. He took it upon himself to bring songs that may be sitting on a recording somewhere back to their intended purpose, performance. Rosie added that, thanks to recordings, singers are not reliant on the same few songs but instead have access to thousands. Rosie and Jerry are addressing the transformation of transmission processes by learning from recordings—see Chapter Six for ways practitioners can work with new transmission methods.

Jerry wants to learn from singers who had never been recorded but also to whom he has limited access—perhaps the singer lives in a different part of the country. He uses an LP series as a source for learning songs; although he does not have access to these singers personally, he can still learn their songs. Listeners would then remark, “he has that song from Tom Lenihan,” regardless of whether he learned the song directly from Lenihan or from a recording of Lenihan singing. Now, Jerry learns new songs as he needs them. He says he has “A list as long as my arm of songs that I have to learn but never get around to learning” (Davis and O’Reilly May 2015). He explains how he learned one particular song:

70 I have witness bawdy behavior in actions as well as repertoire choice in singing sessions and weekends. One component of the Frank Harte Festival hosted by An Góilín was a walking tour through the Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin. During the tour, our guide brought us to the grave of a poet who died of cirrhosis of the liver. Placed very gently on top of the tombstone was a freshly pulled pint of Guinness. The guide proceeded to stand directly on the grave and guzzle the pint.
I woke up at about half past five one morning and I had a little radio beside me. I turned it on and I heard Liam Weldon singing “Black Horse on the Wind” and I’d been meaning to learn that song for years. I knew where to get the words of it, because it’s on the album. I went and I learned the song. That’s the sort of thing that happens. But there’s other songs. What I’d really like to do would be to do my ballad talk and do all the songs [that he explains in his talk] myself because I can sing them and I know them all. Not like I’d be a better singer than the sourcing, I’m the same. It’d be just me singing these songs to show that they’re still alive.

(Jbid.)

Jerry’s and Rosie’s philosophy for choosing songs mirrors that of Macdara, which is to introduce listeners to songs that may not be heard often instead of recycling a small number of popular tunes, fulfilling a self-claimed responsibility to keep the songs alive.

Diving into the raison d’être for repertoire selection reveals singers’ motivations, but it is important not to leave out one of the most basic processes— learning a song because the singer likes it. When I asked Dublin-based singer Mick O’Grady how he chooses the songs he learns, he answered with, “Oh, if I like them” (O’Grady Feb 2015). He commented, “Over the years I’ve gone out of my way if there was a song that I’ve liked, I’ve gone out of my way to get the words and local songs, too, from around my own area” (Ibid.). He then explained that he does not like the Connemara style of sean-nós singing but instead was possibly influenced by his father. His father was in turn influenced by John McCormack style songs, the Irish-American tenor from the early twentieth century famous for such songs as “When Irish Eyes are Smiling” and “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary.” He added, as if his answer needed validation, that, “Nothin’ wrong with that.” Mick sang “Caroline of Edinburgh Town” for the CD produced at the Cobblestone Bar, and when I asked what he liked about that song, he answered, “I like the air” and I like the story” (Ibid.). His singing influences are straightforward, his selection processes simple and clear; his answers likely represent a large number of so-called non-academic singers.

\textsuperscript{71} ‘Air’ refers to the melody.
Song and Place

The significance of place is evident in song repertoire included in singing sessions. As Mick stated above, singers may be inspired to learn local repertoire. Sessions in Dublin may feature songs about Dublin or written by Dublin residents, for instance. Additionally, Rosie Davis discussed that session attendees enjoy hearing songs from where their singers grew up or reside. Originally from Liverpool, England, Rosie sings English and American songs in Irish sessions. She is known for her American songs, and others request them of her, but she has especially enjoyed exploring songs from her home country since moving to Ireland. Many Irish singers appreciate when foreign singers contribute songs from their own countries. They often ask me to sing songs from America, so I, too, have explored more American songs since moving to Ireland.

Connection to place in song relates to the shared experience participatory aspects of social singing because listeners can connect with a singer’s sentiments about their homeland, whether or not the listeners have been to that location. Place, therefore, affects repertoire choice. I have heard songs from Brazil, Sweden, France, Scotland, England, America, Norway, Wales, Taiwan, and India by people from those countries, encouraged by the other singers at the session. During the Ennis Singers Club, when visiting singers from Kildare filled the room, place was a prominent subject among the songs that evening:

An element that seemed unique to me as opposed to sessions in other counties was the emphasis on songs from and about Clare. Most of the songs that mentioned place were about Clare, its residents, its landscapes, its festivals, and its homes and pubs. Some Clare songs were funny, others evocative, others sad, others romantic. Overall, the people in this session seemed especially interested in place. The coordinators constantly referred to the drive that different people made, thanking the group from Kildare for coming this evening, pointing out different people who came from different parts of Clare and beyond.

(Ennis Oct 2014)
The Ennis singers in turn shared their location with the Kildare singers through song, evocatively bringing images and memories to the room. Some of the Clare-based songs that the Ennis singers and members of neighboring clubs sang were “Around the Chapel Gates in Cooraclare,” “The Famous Faha Sports,” and “Freemantle Bay.” A song about Kildare included “The Roads of Kildare,” along with which all the Kildare singers sang.

During the farewell session at The Clare Festival of Traditional Singing, Annette Munnelly sang “Farewell to Miltown Malbay.” She introduced the song because we were all leaving Miltown Malbay that day, off to our normal lives after a weekend at the festival. She connected the song to a location and an event through her introduction, providing a point of reference for the listeners in the room.

John Moulden related song subjects to location. He mentioned that in Inishowen, drowning songs are prevalent. “Everybody here can relate to drowning songs. . . . There are five or six songs about drowning . . . from the 1840s on, to one as recently as the 1970s. And there are songs about that, as well. And the widows of the men who were drowned are still alive and their children, too. So it’s fairly immediate” (Moulden Mar 2015). Songs about drowning directly connect with those living in or from seaside towns. John also mentioned the concentration of political songs in the North of Ireland, mentioning a session attended by both Catholics and Protestants. The participants “obviously did not share full repertory because there were political songs on either side which would not have been heard properly, but they were intensely good neighbors” (Ibid.). Despite political differences among singers, they continued to meet for singing. Members of the gatherings were aware of more partisan repertoire on both
sides of the political spectrum that may have been inappropriate to share at this singing context, being careful not to create more tension through song.  

Grace Toland also spoke about songs from Inishowen and the North of Ireland. She contends that songs trigger memories of time and place:

That idea of talking about things to older people, that was happening at that time when they were younger, it’s really, really powerful. Really powerful to talk that way because the songs are wee triggers about time. . . . Songs seem to do that for people. You remember where you were, when you heard it.

(Toland Feb 2015)

Grace adds that song choice “can be very much influenced by the people around you. . . . I even noticed how you have to be sensitive” (Ibid.). Grace visited the University of Limerick in 2015 to promote the Inishowen Song Project, for which a team of collectors and organizers is loading videos and sound clips from singing in Inishowen onto the Irish Traditional Music Archive. During a singing session at the Scholars Club and Bar on campus that evening, the use of place in song touched a listener. A man originally from Inishowen but now working at the university heard about the event and came into the session to listen. The Inishowen singers recognized him, so they sang songs from their home county for him. Songs of place were attached to memory and sentiment. Song location and origin influenced repertoire choice for the singers in this session. As is drawn from this example and in other sessions throughout Ireland, song choice in particular settings is linked to the setting’s immediate context. The people present and the singers’ relations to them is a powerful determinant of song

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72 Politicization of song, especially in the North of Ireland, is a complex area too great for the confines of this thesis. For more information, see Politics and Performance in Contemporary Northern Ireland, edited by John P. Harrington and Elizabeth J. Mitchell, eds. (1999), Politics and Performance in Contemporary Northern Ireland, Amherst: University of Massachussetts Press. Also for a brief discussion on politicization between English and Irish language song in Northern Ireland, see Sean Williams (2009), Focus: Irish Traditional Music, New York: Routledge Press, 188.

73 The Inishowen Song Project is a collection of over 2000 items on the Irish Traditional Music Archive website available for public access. It includes audio and visual recordings and singer profiles. The Inishowen Project is discussed often throughout this thesis. See www.itma.ie/inishowen.
choice. Likewise, the location of a singing session will almost always provoke the
singing of songs about that place and its associations.

Song Ownership

Singers will often attribute songs they know to whomever they first heard
perform the song. They might say, “I got this song from Mary.” Mick O’Grady sang a
song for me during our interview, and when he finished he said, “I got that from Frank
Harte, a recording of his” (Ibid.). Singers, particularly well-established or long-time
session members, can be known for singing specific songs. For instance, a song will be
‘Mick’s song,’ or ‘Laura’s song.’ The late singer and leader of the Spancilhill Singers
Club Robbie McMahon, for example, frequently sang “Spancilhill,” and therefore that
song was attributed to him. Consider this exchange with Dublin-based guest singer

Niamh Parsons during the Ennis Singers Club:

Anne gave Niamh a sheet with the words to “Peadar’s Song,” “So Here’s to
You (The Parting Glass).” Peadar was the late Fear an Ti who passed away in
2012. This song is usually sung at the end of each session in honor of Peadar.
Niamh saw the song and says, “That’s not Peadar’s Song! I gave it to him!”
Then she clarified that in Clare, it’s Peadar’s song and will always be the case.
The Ennis Singers Club honors Peadar by singing his song. Niamh often
mentioned her “Daddy,” how she went to sessions to accompany him, and how
the songs and recordings make singers miss those who originally sang these
songs.

(Ennis Mar 2015)

With song ownership comes a respect for those who sing these songs. Location also
played a role in song ownership in this example—although “So Here’s to You” is sung
throughout Ireland, in Ennis, it is attributed to Peadar, who sang it often. Grace Toland
stated in a presentation at the University of Limerick in November 2015 that a general
unspoken rule when attending sessions is not to sing another person’s song, especially
if that person is there in the room. If the person is not present, a singer may sing the
song if he or she acknowledges the singer to which the song belongs.
Macdara’s favorite songs to sing are songs he has discovered himself, not ones he heard from other singers. He will even perform songs that listeners might not recognize, which he says upsets some listeners. He instead finds them in books or archives. He explained to me how he found the rare song “Donal Kenny.” The singer Tom McCarthy sang “Donal Kenny,” but Macdara learned the song through his own research. He sang it at the Inishowen Singing Festival one year and said that most of the other singers had never heard that song and wondered where he had learned it. A handful of singers present did know the song and asked him if he got it from Tom McCarthy, “which proves that there’s only one of the source that they know” (Ibid.). What is intriguing about this story is that the listeners asked Macdara from whom did he learn his song, which version, what was the main source. This again relates to the importance of song origin and locale, and the importance of connecting to the songs, which will be discussed further. Generally, singers are interested in song origins and oral transmission tracing back to previous singers.  

Talking about Songs

An important component of traditional singing sessions in Ireland is talk, not just in the sense of conversation as *craic*, or the chatter and wit which accompany the singing that has been mentioned in the previous chapter, but talking about a song a singer is about to sing or just sang. Singers may introduce their songs before they sing, providing a background story, context, meaning to the singer, translation, and so on. Rosie Davis added that talking about the songs, “brings the songs to life” (Davis and O’Reilly May 2015). In a session, singers might preface a song with a few words, such as, “I got this song from John Doe in Galway,” or, “This is an Appalachian song.” Such

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74 See the Irish Traditional Music Archive definition of ‘Tradition’ by Nicholas Carolan, which is developed upon in Chapter Six.
statements before a song performance reveal the importance of place and ownership as described above. Singers may feel the need to connect their songs to a location or a previous singer before they perform the songs, which in turn draws listeners into the performance and heightens social bonds. Steve Coleman, in his article “Joe Heaney and Style in Sean-nós Song” (Coleman 1997) wrote about the way singer Joe Heaney contextualizes his songs by talking about them. Because Heaney, an Irish language singer from Connemara, lived in New York for much of his life, he felt a need to explain his songs in order for his listeners to understand them. Coleman states that “talk is the first step in transforming an ordinary occasion into an occasion of performance” (Ibid., 44).

In my own fieldwork experience, I observed numerous instances where singers draw listeners into their performance by first talking about the song. Singers might tell a full story about the song or paraphrase its narrative, particularly if it is in Irish and the singers are helping the audience to understand the text. Singers will provide an explanation of the song if it carries special significance to the them. Additionally, a singer will provide background to the song if he or she feels the audience needs to know more information to appreciate it. After a singer shares a song, the host or other listeners and singers may discuss the song out loud. The host might add what he or she knows about a different version of the song or explain some of its historical context, or ask the singer for more information on where he or she acquired the song or the song’s topic.

The amount of talking about songs fluctuates greatly from session to session. I have observed that singers in The Night Before Larry Got Stretched, for instance, usually jump right into their songs when they are called, and each subsequent singer jumps in immediately afterwards. The most talking about songs usually comes from the
guest, in which case the talking varies depending on the guest. Barry Gleeson, December 2014 guest, talked more than he sang. He strung his songs together through stories coinciding with the Christmas season. When two sisters were guests in September 2014, they explained each song in detail. They sang in Irish, so they provided synopses of their stories, explained origins, and described where the songs might be sung. They even commented privately to me that they were surprised by how little talking occurred during Larry. They compared it to sessions in Connemara with much fewer attendees and much more talking. I attended a song gathering in Aberdeen, Scotland, with only six people in attendance at the first meeting and four at the second meeting. We each sang three times but the session lasted for over two hours each time because we talked extensively about our songs. The small numbers at the session in Aberdeen could have contributed to a relaxed atmosphere conducive for conversations around songs, whereas organizers at sessions with more attendees might be aware of the need to ask more singers to sing in a limited amount of time, thus restricting conversation.

During the Ennis Singers Club, I wondered why the session ran for so long, despite there being fewer singers than in Larry, and came to the conclusion that singers in Ennis either talk more about their songs, their songs are often significantly longer than those sung in Larry, or the many recitations performed in Ennis could lengthen the meeting time:

*Even though this session had just about twenty people, much smaller than the Larry session, and despite some of us singing twice, this session is much longer than Larry. . . . I believe this is because in Ennis, singers often introduce their songs and there is some banter and conversation between each song. Michael [Fear an Tí] called each person individually, leaving room for some talk. These singers appeared relaxed, at ease, comfortable with their surroundings, friends, and songs.*

(Ennis Dec 2014)
When Niamh Parsons was the guest at the Ennis Singers Club, she spoke extensively about the origins and personal meaning of her songs:

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\text{When he first introduced Niamh, she said, “Singing circles are where I’m at. My joy.” She explained a bit about each song, her connection with it and any research she might have done, and some background of the song or its history. I appreciate when the guests talk about their songs. To me, this brings the songs to life.}
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(Ennis Mar 2015)

Talking about the songs can be as much a part of the performance as the songs themselves. The talking and the singing can come together in a full package.

**Repertoire In Situ**

Because repertoire is a central component to the singing session, this section is a study of the songs shared in the sessions I attended. I analyze one session with The Night Before Larry Got Stretched on November 2, 2014, which I compare with The Ennis Singers Club in October 17, 2014. I hope to answer questions such as how are song types manifest in the singing sessions? Which are more common? Which carry the most emotional weight? Which are sung by males and which are sung by females? The Larry session especially demonstrates the variety of material heard at singing sessions. Larry is notable to include here because it seems to feature strongly the songs which are considered suitable for traditional singing sessions, sung unaccompanied and drawn from Irish traditional repertoire. Such songs include ballads (songs that tell a story), slow airs (slower songs which express emotion or describe a part of a story in detail in which the air, or tune, is important), chorus songs (songs with a repeated refrain to which the audience can sing along), and international songs (songs not of Irish origin, such as American folk songs). Additionally, a few singers sang newly composed songs in what is considered a traditional style (Shields 1993, 84), which will be described more in detail in this analysis.
Beginning the Singing Session

The room at the back of the Cobblestone Bar was full of listeners who came to hear the guest singer Rita Gallagher without singing themselves.

I was very excited upon my arrival in Dublin today. Since I have attended the Night Before Larry Got Stretched twice now, I felt less like a stranger walking into someone else’s private gathering, as if entering the middle of a conversation, and more settled, accepted, anxious to say hi to other singers I met before. I entered the back room at about 9:25 p.m., a time I am learning is late enough so that I do not sit around awkwardly by myself as the coordinators set up, but early enough to still catch attendees ambling through the doors, say hello to the coordinators and others I might recognize, and set up my camera and recorder.

(Dublin Nov 2014)

Most singing sessions begin later than their published start time. The Night Before Larry Got Stretched and the Ennis Singers Club begin at 9:00 p.m., but usually the only people who arrive at that time are the coordinators and the guest singer. Larry and Ennis usually begin at about 9:30 p.m. with a twenty-minute break. However, Larry finishes around midnight whereas Ennis can finish after 1:00 a.m. The time difference contributes to the range of the number of songs that can be heard between each session.

The guest tonight was renowned traditional singer Rita Gallagher. About thirty attendees were present at the start of the session, but more trickled in until the crowd grew to about fifty or sixty. Most came to hear Rita. This was especially evident because the evening was actually short on singers. A room full of people and not enough singers to fill the night! So Macdara, the coordinator for the evening, asked two older gentlemen to sing twice.

(Dublin Nov 2014)

I do not know why he asked the older gentlemen to perform more songs, but I assume, based on my observations and interviews, that the older singers may be considered to have more songs or more status in session hierarchy.

The room filled quickly before the session began. Macdara walked the room, asking attendees whether or not they would like to sing:
I sat towards the center so that I could have a clear view of most of the singers. However, my view was not that clear at all! While I thought I could see most of the room, the people in my direct line of vision did not sing, but their friends, hidden behind them, did sing. Someone sat directly in my line of vision to Rita, so I was unable to get any but one decent photograph of her. I was bummed about this, but I was packed into my seat and could not move.

Before the session began, Macdara collected names of singers. He approached me, apologizing for not remembering my name, “Even though you’ve been here many times before.” “You were the one who was chatting with Saileog [the guest two months prior], right?” Yes, that was me! He likened my name to the scary movie Carrie, which I hear often.

Macdara was making an effort to help me feel welcome.

I chatted briefly with the people sitting around me before the session started, including two older gentlemen who were both sitting by themselves.

To get the session started, Macdara rang his new bell, stating that he still does not have a hang of it. He acknowledged all the faces in the room, telling us what to expect of the session structure. He will call on names from the list, and if he hasn’t spoken to someone yet who wants to sing, he asked if they would talk to him during the break.

(Dublin Nov 2014)

The bell was gifted to Larry from members of An Góilín. This detail is important because it reveals a type of endorsement from the long-established session to the new session. Members of An Góilín mentioned to me that they appreciate Larry for providing a place for younger singers to participate in a singing session.

Announcing structure to the attendees is common in the singing sessions. The leader Michael O’Brien in Ennis also announced the structure for us. Whereas Macdara called about three or four singers at a time, Michael called on each individually. As discussed in Chapter Three, structure and organization are important components of singing sessions which contribute to flow and inclusivity.

Macdara made one entertaining, acute observation as he called on singers. This session was only two days after Halloween. For one set, he said, “Now it being just after Halloween, I am delighted to announce a singer named Carrie and a singer named Chuckie.” The crowd laughed before Chuckie and I sang our songs. By announcing
structure, calling on the singers, and using humor, he was able to introduce us, and the other singers, to the group. Macdara did well making us both feel included and welcome, and, at least I can speak for myself, smoothed the transition and eased my nerves.\textsuperscript{75}

The following is a retelling of the songs performed at The Night Before Larry Got Stretched. For privacy, I will not use names here except for the guest Rita Gallagher, because her performance was advertised and published. Instead, I state whether the singer is a male or female. The age of the singers cannot be determined from the recordings, but I observed that day, and all the other days at Larry, that all ages were equally represented, ranging from the early twenties to possibly the eighties, and just as many inbetween. For a transcript of the music performed during this session see Appendix I.

Thirty-three songs were performed at the Night Before Larry Got Stretched that night. Of those thirty-three, thirteen were sung by males, eleven by females, and nine by the guest, also a female. For comparison, fifty-two songs were performed at the Ennis Singers Club. Of those, thirty were by males, fourteen by females, and eight by the female guest singer. The female guest singer at Larry performed the final song, whereas the entire Ennis Singers Club sang the final song, “So Here’s to You (The Parting Glass),” together.

\textbf{Gender and Repertoire Choice}

The Night Before Larry Got Stretched was much more gender balanced in terms of who participated than the Ennis Singers Club. However, females serve on the Ennis committee, the club featured a female guest, and listeners were supportive of the females who sang, so this session was not exclusionary. Helen O’Shea argues that

\begin{flushright}\footnotesize\textsuperscript{75} The role of the organizer in helping attendees feel comfortable is discussed in Chapter Three.\end{flushright}
gender can be problematic in Irish traditional music. She historically contextualizes why males predominate in instrumental sessions, stating, “As in most cultures, playing musical instruments and performing any kind of music in public spaces have been regarded as male prerogatives. This was the case in rural Ireland before social change in the late-nineteenth century saw the demise of the professional (and male) artisan musician and the emergence of amateur domestic music making and dancing” (O’Shea 2008, 56). The Ennis Singers Club, with mostly older singers, tends to also have mostly male singers. O’Shea adds, “If it was inappropriate for women to leave the house and travel around the countryside at night with male musicians, it was unthinkable for them to enter a pub. This proved to be a major barrier to women’s musical participation and another reason why older women musicians are absent from today’s pub sessions” (Ibid., 57). Men still sing more than women in sessions, as illustrated in these analyses, but women are increasingly involved. This is particularly true of younger-generation singers.

Nineteen of the performances in Ennis were recitations, which are poems, stories, and jokes, as distinct from the songs, whereas no recitations were performed in Larry. All but one of the recitations in Ennis were performed by men, and of those men, three presented two or more recitations in a row. In Larry, males sang the most upbeat or moderate and humorous songs, with eight each. Only four songs performed by females were upbeat and one was humorous. Sixteen of the songs performed by women were slow, and only five by men. Ten of the songs performed by women were sad, compared to only one by a man. In Ennis, virtually all of the comedic songs and recitations were performed by males, except those performed by the guest singer. My

76 Gender in traditional music performance is a large topic beyond the scope of this thesis. For more information, see Helen O’Shea (2008), ‘Good Man, Mary!’ Women Musicians and the Fraternity of Irish Traditional Music, *Journal of Gender Studies* 17 (1), 55-70.
performance of “Unclouded Day,” an American folk song, was the most upbeat of the songs performed by women, again except for the guest. O’Shea discusses the acceptance of bawdy behavior of men versus women in Irish pubs, which could illustrate why comical or upbeat songs were mostly performed by male singers:

Where 50 years earlier, a woman entering a public house was scorned as ‘the dregs from the gutter’, in the early twenty-first century, nothing will stem the tide of Irish women who drink in pubs. Yet in a pub session, a woman musician who is loud or drunk is generally regarded with disapproval, while similar behaviour is not only acceptable in men but often regarded as an essential part of ‘the crack.’

(Ibid., 59)

O’Shea writes about drunken behavior as opposed to bawdy singing, but parallels can be made for what is considered acceptable performance behavior of a female in contrast to that of a male.77

Performing New Songs

The opening performance at The Night Before Larry Got Stretched was an interesting example of song’s place in the singing session. The male singer introduced his song, “The Coalowner and the Pitman’s Wife,” with, “This is a new one so I might, I guess not completely new because that would be against the rules [laughter from the crowd]. It’s a new one” Listeners sang along a little bit at the end of the song. It was upbeat with a steady pulse. The singer felt the need to say this song was new to him, perhaps to apologize if he messed up. This could be because humility is an encouraged characteristic of singers, whereas “eagerness may be translated into competitiveness” (Shields 1993, 147). At the end, he forgot the words so he finished with singing, “Somethin’ somethin’ somethin’” and everyone laughed. What interests me is his joke

about singing a new song being against the rules. What is against the rules? Singing a song he does not know? A newly composed song at a traditional song session? His presentation was strong and humorous. Rita also sang a song she had only recently learned, and she also mentioned before the song that she had not yet performed it. She said, “I’m going to attempt something you should never do. Sing a new song, a song you never sang before. This one I just learned recently. I’ll give it a go.” She was almost apologetic about her song choice, even though her performance of it seemed flawless.

Humorous Performances

Later, humorous or upbeat songs included “The Pride of Pimlico,” “Madam I’m a Darling,” and “The Limerick Rake.” A notable portion of the evening was a performance by an older male, his first time attending this session. He sang a piece he had composed, called “Would You Like Your Name on My Bus Pass,” about dating pensioners. Macdara spoke about this performance more in detail during our interview when he mentioned singers who amaze him, to be described in Chapter Five. This man sang another piece of his own composition during the second half of the evening. He introduced his song, “She’s the Beautiful Margaret O’Brien,” with, “If anybody recognizes the lady from this song, please don’t tell her.” He forgot some words, so he slurred through them, to which the listeners laughed.

I enjoyed one especially comical, strong performance by a male in the second half. His performance broke up the heaviness that became the mood of the second half with performances of deep, sorrowful songs. He told a joke, then introduced his song “The Irish Soldier.” He poked fun at the Irish government taxing certain drinks, but not one particular drink, continuing, “This is a song about drinking aforementioned alcoholic beverage.” The song started with an “Ohhhh.” He asked all the listeners to
sing with him at this part. During the song, people stomped along. It also featured a nonsense chorus. What I enjoyed about this song and the man’s performance of it was its inclusivity. The singer was the center of attention, but he tried to make it a group performance, bringing us all into its story and almost rowdy inclination.

Emotional Performances

Slower, more melancholy sounding songs included “Peggy Gordon,” “What Would You Do, Love?,” “Via Extasia” and “The Yellow Handkerchief.” Before the guest performed in the first half, only males performed except for one trio of women, who sang a song which sounded of sadness and longing. The trio performance is also significant because most songs are performed solo unaccompanied; these women instead sang in three-part harmony. More women sang in the second half. The subject of at least nine or ten songs, which account for nearly one third, was a longing for something that could not happen, whether a lost love or an old home. The songs about missing home either are about changing landscapes, the protagonist leaving for war, or missing Ireland.

I also observed that most of Rita’s songs were slow and moving. She sang with ornamentation, more so than any of the other singers that night. One of her songs in the second half must have been particularly touching for a woman sitting about five seats away from her, on the opposite wall from myself—another younger attendee was hugging this woman as she started to tear up during Rita’s performance.

In Larry, the women, particularly the guest singer, seemed to capture the most intense emotion. Rita even brought listeners to tears. She did not act out or impose emotions onto her songs; rather, her expression showed through her ornamentation and delicate phrasing. This observation contradicts the common idea that the singing voice is less important than the song. Attendees came to hear Rita, a well-known singer. The
guest is an important part of most singing sessions. She or he is usually someone with great standing in traditional singing, a status that could have been gained because she or he is a public stage performer, has sold recordings of him or herself singing, or, in Rita’s case, is highly regarded as a source singer. These singers usually appeal to the general singing community because of strong and attractive singing voices. Session organizers will hire guests to draw audiences or to add variety to their sessions. Therefore, singing quality is important in this case.

The experience of focusing my attention on an analysis of one specific session, and a second for comparison and contextualization, revealed to me special nuances to singing practice in traditional song circles. No matter the session or the singer, each performance received the same undivided attention by attentive listeners. Their voices were heard, regardless of singing quality of repertoire choice, and even regardless of possible varying opinions of the performances among attendees. One strongly stated reason for the re-contextualization of traditional singing in the setting of these circles was for singers to have a place where they can sing the kind of Irish repertoire that they grew up with, know, and love. The majority of the songs performed in these sessions were considered Irish traditional, despite organizers urging participants to sing what they like. While methods for obtaining these songs may be changing and the degree of familiarity for the songs performed may vary, this repertoire has a place to be heard.

Connection between Singer, Singing, and Song

Traditional singers are encouraged to find personal meaning through their performance. Through discussions with others on song, I have learned that listeners can even find different personal meanings of the songs than the performers. For instance, at the Ennis Singers Club in October 2014, the room was filled with visiting singers from

78 Source singers are singers who acquired their songs and performance style orally.
Kildare. As a reaction to this combining of singers clubs, the singers from Clare presented more local Clare songs for the Kildare singers, and vice versa. Members of the Chapel Gates Singers walked into the session as one man sang the song “Around the Gates in Cooraclare.” One listener commented that it was his favorite song. The singer connected with his local song and presented it to the visitors who would not connect with it in the same manner as the newly arrived guests from Cooraclare. While the visitors may not have connected to the song by direct association with the place, they may have connected to the song’s sentiment—if I hear a song connecting singer to her or his home, I often think of my own home in California. By understanding emotions connecting song and singer, Breandan Ó Madagáin seeks to discover the functions of song in society, and his observation in turn aids my own investigation into the functions of song in the singing sessions. He questions if singers’ emotions are conveyed to listeners and if these emotions are the same for the audience as the performer, thus seeking to discover the functions of song in society (Ó Madagáin 1985). Regarding the extent of the connection between song and singer, Ó Madagáin continues, “We shall see that there was scarcely a form of human activity, literally from the cradle to the grave, into which song did not enter” (Ó Ibid., 131). Song is engrained in human life; therefore, singers and listeners can connect songs to personal experiences.

Singers’ song choices depend on the current atmosphere of the room, what other singers have previously sung, and a lifetime of experience that led the singer to learn the song in the first place. The songs are bigger than any particular singing of them; singers are servants to the songs, a vessel for their repertoire. However, the singers are not just an empty disconnected megaphone stuck onto a record for listeners to hear. The

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79 The Chapel Gates Singers meet monthly at O’Keefe’s Pub in Cooraclare, County Clare.
following section builds upon the discussion of connection between singers through song as theorized by Tom Munnelly, James Porter, Breandan Ó Madagáin, and Ian Russell in Chapter Two. The repertoire speaks to the singers, creating a bond between singer and song and contributing to singing sociality. Among an almost infinite list of motivations, singers may sing because it brings them pleasure, it gives them a voice, it provides entertainment, it reminds them of the past, or it helps them cope with tough situations. The singers can share their connection to the song with listeners through their performance, thus inviting listeners into their lived experience of the song. As theorized by I. Sheldon Posen in Chapter Two, the listening audience becomes part of the song, contributing to connection and community among singers in the room (Posen 1988, 64).

As discussed in my section review of human connections through Irish traditional song in Chapter Two, ethnomusicologists and folklorists such as Henry Glassie and Lillis Ó Laoire focus on song as a socio-musical phenomenon. Ballad collectors and scholars such as Hugh Shields and Tom Munnelly provide stories about the singers, histories of the songs, and the processes of collecting songs as a part of their song collections. I am interested in the stories behind the learning and performance of songs and the social interactions around songs in my own work, developing from the research of such collectors and folklorists. The orientation of my own studies stems from this transition in scholarship from the study of traditional song as separate from song performance context to the examination of social connection with and through song.

Connection to Songs

Singers can be gateways to songs. They hold songs and share them, servicing them. I. Sheldon Posen discusses the singing of traditional songs in a modern
community, emphasizing the song’s significance to its singers. The song is not merely an artifact or an “item in a book,” nor is it a “relic or a nostalgia-drenched bygone” belonging in the past, but instead it stores the past in a continuing lived present (Posen 1988, 100). Henry Glassie also contends that a search for old societies can “die into thrills and souvenirs” (Glassie 1982, 12). Instead, he suggests experiencing living culture. Singing is a lived experience, as developed upon in Chapter Two. In this sense, I approach traditional song as the focal point from which the social life of traditional singing circles is formed today. Thus, the connection between song and singer is the focus of this section.

Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin writes about connections between singers and songs in the Irish language community of Oriel in her song collection *A Hidden Ulster: People, Songs and Traditions of Oriel* (Ní Uallacháin 2003). She tells the story of the singing traditions and the life around the songs. She notes that songs reveal the values of social life. She includes many photographs to “put flesh and bone on the many men and women whose names [she] came across on this journey of song” (Ibid., 39). Her vivid descriptions can be considered romanticized, a theme more fully developed in Chapter Six; regardless, they are relevant here as they reveal what I have learned in my own interviews and observations regarding the connections singers have with songs.

In her opening paragraph of *A Hidden Ulster*, Ní Uallacháin writes:

This book is about people who have gone before, their lives and their longings, their struggles and accomplishments. It is a celebration of traditions past and a fragile survival into the present. It is a story of the gradual decimation of aspects of traditional cultural life in southeast Ulster and an ensuing collective loss of ancestral memory. But it is also a heart-warming story of cultural sensitivity and a belief, frequently against all odds, that some of the wealth of this cultural inheritance might endure.

(Ibid., 15)

Ní Uallacháin articulated that she wishes to make the songs accessible in order to be understood and appreciated by a wider community. She writes that “[the songs] tell us a
wealth about the human heart, about the people who made them, the times in which they lived and the traditions of their communities” (Ibid., 16). Admitting that the songs are “no longer heard in the context of local community life, as they once were,” she places them in context in order to reawaken the memory of a past people, who “held fast to their individual and collective voice through song” (Ibid.). She stresses that Irish song and dance music “should be evaluated as a unit in the context of the social life of a community” to provide an encompassing account of the traditional singing practice (Ibid., 38). Ní Uallacháin discusses songs as they relate to the social contexts of those who create and sing the songs. The following anecdotes further support her ideas.

Irish traditional singers with whom I have spoken stress the personal connections with songs. Máire Ní Dhonnchadha from the Ennis Singers Club shared what she likes about the session, saying, “It’s a lovely evening, and they’re all songs, most of the songs tell a story. It’s the oral history really. The peasants I think wrote the songs but they’re all love lost and longing and sad auld songs” (Ní Dhonnchadha Mar 2015). She found importance in the oral history of the songs. Once during the Ennis Singers Club, a woman sang about her childhood in West Clare. Máire leaned over to me and commented, “You’ve just witnessed living history.” The woman who sang had written the song several years earlier and sings it to recall the simpler days of her youth in rural Clare. Histories, stories, places, and images come together to give songs life, meaning, and a special connection with the singers.80

Tom Mulligan told the story behind the composition of a comedic song, “The Man that Shot My Dog,”81 by Mick Quinn from County Armagh, Northern Ireland. His discussion gives context to the song, making it even more humorous:

80 See Chapter Seven for a discussion into ways to use an imagined past and memory to bring integrity to traditional singing today.
81 See Appendix D for a transcription of the text.
It’s a great song. [Mick Quinn] would come from a village in the hills of south Armagh. He was a sheep farmer, he kept sheep, and he had this sheep dog. And there was a lot of people, yuppies, moving into the area, people from Newry moved into new bungalow homes, gentrified area. This one particular guy that arrived, he had some pure bread bitches that he was going to breed pure bred. Anyway, Mick’s dog got in, and that stopped the whole thing. . . . She had a load of pups and there was a row over [what] his dog shouldn’t be doing. So she come into heat again. Sheep dog paid a noble visit and your man shot him. . . . The dog when he was found, he was found on a weekday. He was still alive but he had gone kind of septic and he was got in the back around the hip area. So the dog’s name was Ned. . . . Kind of a family nickname and there’s so many Quinns up there that they all have family nicknames. They’re the Ned Quinns. So the dog was called Ned. But anyway, he found the dog and he restored him to health, but in the meantime he had thought about confronting this guy and fighting him, teach him a lesson. Physical. So in the tradition of the old bards he sat down and he wrote this song six months later, your man summed up. . . . That was the way of the old bards, ya know? (Mulligan Feb 2015)

When Tom mentions the old bards, he is referring to the professional, educated poets and musicians of ancient and medieval Ireland who composed for the nobility.\(^{82}\) A notable event happened to Mick Quinn that needed resolving. Instead of starting a physical fight with the man who shot his dog, he wrote a humorous song about it, and the man will always be remembered for his actions. Historically, satirical song was used for social commentary. Edward D. “Sandy” Ives writes about the use of satirical song in his book, \textit{Drive Dull Care Away: Folksongs from Prince Edward Island} (Ives 1999). The subject of the book Larry Gorman, a lumberjack, composed comedic folk songs about local people and present situations. His approach to using satirical song as commentary mirrored Mick Quinn’s perspective to use song as revenge against the man who shot his dog.

As the above examples suggest, personal stories can influence song composition; as a result, the composer, who is also the singer in this case, is directly connected with the song. Singers can likewise connect with songs which they did not

compose or which may be from an anonymous origin. Connections with songs are theorized in Chapter Two, where I present James Porter’s model for understanding this connection. Porter examines Jeannie Robertson’s performance of the song “My Son David” by asking the singer to share her own interpretation and experience with the song. I draw upon Porter’s model for my own analysis into connections singers may have with song, and in turn their connections with each other, in the following study of a singing session workshop.

Connections through Songs:

Saturday Morning at the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing

The Saturday morning workshop at the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing, organized by Jerry O’Reilly, is a strong example for understanding the bonds that may exist between singer, singing, and song. About fifteen singers sat in a circle. Jerry asked singers in clockwise order around the room to explain why they sing and to sing a song that particularly resonated with them. Generally, each singer is unique within a set common motivators. Motivators such as singer influences, connections to the songs, connections through song to family, and the strengthening of community through song drive these singers to learn songs. Family was a common topic among singers in the workshop—family can either be a strong motivator for singing, or family can be a deterrent, as will be discussed. Quickly, the workshop nearly turned into a group therapy session, a focus group, complete with tears and hugs. The singers brought out deep stories about how they are touched by music, why they feel they must sing. Each singer or listener sitting in the room told a story, and each story contributed equally to the communal atmosphere, but for the sake of space, only a few stories are presented here.
Participants in the workshop expressed their attraction to singers as a primary motivator to learn songs. While informants have stressed that the focus should be on the songs, not the singers, we cannot ignore that some people are drawn to songs because of other singers. One singer in the workshop described a visit by two male singers to his grandmother’s house when he was young, and he has been inspired to sing ever since then. He did not sing their songs when they were alive, but now he is delighted to find their performances on the Góílín Song Project in the Irish Traditional Music Archive, which allows him to access and learn their songs even after their passing. He then sang his first public performance of the song, “The Builder.”

Later, a concertina student from the University of Limerick said that if she hears a performance by what she considers a good singer, she wants to learn that singer’s song. Her two main sources of inspiration were two well known female traditional singers who both happened to attend this year’s festival. She participates in instrumental traditional music, but meanwhile developed an interest in traditional singing. She sang for us a song about a battle on Griffin Hill. When she finished singing, Jerry added that he associates that song with singer Frank Bryson, good friends with Frank Harte. When Frank Bryson died, Frank Harte said, “That bollocks went off and died, and I have nobody to hang out with.” His attitude exhibited both a respect and a witty humor regarding passed loved ones, and was a way to further engage with the woman’s performance.

About half of the singers sitting around the workshop circle were motivated to sing because of an attraction to, or connection with, a particular song. Rosie Davis sang

83 The Góílín Song Project is a site with access to over 700 recordings from An Góílín. See http://www.itma.ie/goilin.
84 Frank Bryson was a traditional singer from Dublin.
85 ‘Bollocks,’ meaning a bull’s testicles, is a slang term used in Ireland to describe nonsense or an expression of annoyance.
a ballad called “I’ll Be All Smiles Tonight” for our session. She said she sings “because the songs basically fall off the shelf.” She is interested in American songs, but the song she performed today was found in Australia in the late nineteenth century. She added that this is one of the songs a singer can contribute if he or she is in a crowded or noisy place if he or she wants to be heard. The song is about a strong woman, a subject she particularly likes. This song “stood [her] in the face,” by which she meant it had an impact on her. When she sang, the others sang along to the chorus. Her song selection is representative of her character and shows a leaning toward choosing repertoire that makes a bold statement with which she can connect.

As an example of family being deterrent to singing, one woman in the circle said her mother and father were both singers, but she never sang in public. She remembers taking a music course when she was in her mid fifties, and at the end of the course, she was finally ready to sing a song. She informed us that her father never passed on his songs except to one nephew. Her father’s music passed away when he died, she remarked. Sally K. Sommers Smith argues that traditional music connects modern audiences to the social life of the past (Sommers Smith 2001, 112)—the woman in the circle, however, did not feel this connection, believing that her father’s lived experience with the music died since he did not pass it on. The significance of such a comment is that this woman believes music does not survive with each subsequent generation, at least in this particular case. In her story, song, a family heirloom, was in a sense buried with its owner. Her daughters arranged a 60th birthday party for her and her brothers shared songs, which surprised her because she never knew they could sing. She never sang until she heard one particular song, “A Cottage by the Lee”—since then, she has never stopped singing. She regretted that her mother and father did not give her confidence for singing. Annette replied that this was
unfortunately common in her era. The woman added that her father had eleven sons but only passed singing on to his nephew. Jerry wondered if she never sang as she was working around the house, but she exclaimed that she did not. She then sang “A Cottage by the Lee” for us.

This woman’s story was especially intriguing. Unlike others in the workshop, her family was not her motivator. Contrarily, she was almost resentful of her family’s role, or lack thereof, in song sharing. She thought her parents should have encouraged her to sing, but instead she lacked confidence. Her sentiments signify an emphasis on generational transmission of songs, something this woman did not experience and as a result affected her ability to learn and perform songs. Annette and Jerry both offered words of support. I wondered if her resentment of her father shadowed a deeper family conflict. Instead of finding motivation to sing through her family, she found motivation through the song.

Another woman in the workshop asked, “Why do I sing songs? Because I have to.” At first, her exclamation seemed to me that her motivation to sing is because singing is a necessity. She wants to sing, so she sings. However, as her explanation developed, her real reason for singing is a connection with the songs. She sings because songs “jump up and grab [her] by the throat, saying ‘sing me.’” She then decides if she is capable of learning the song. She especially likes to sing a particular Irish-language song, about which she apologizes for being “over-the-top pastoral.” As she finished singing, Jerry asked us if we knew the origins of the song. A different woman in the group remembered another origin than did the singer. Participants discussed who possibly wrote it. Her performance sparked a discussion about the song, a common occurrence in singing sessions.
Songs can connect singers to their families through memory. A singer from County Kildare recounted when, in his ‘early years,’ he would hear a recording of his uncle Anthony. His great grandfather, Patrick Burn, was a piper who played in Glasnevin and died in 1940 at age 104. All of his family sang and played music. His father loved singing. “He would be digging out spuds and singing, milking the cows and singing.” This man sang “Charity Cassidy” for the workshop, which he learned from his father, who in turn learned it in County Down. “Charity Cassidy” told the story of a ‘lad’ who was discouraged from having extracurricular activities with the ladies because he would then have to get married. The singer grew up surrounded by music. His family and their legacy were his main motivators.

Jerry asked one woman if she would sing a particular song that he associates with her father, who he knew by reputation. During parties, her father would just sit and listen to all the songs, and just before he would leave the room, he would sing something. The singer at the workshop said her father not only loved to sing, but was a great dancer, as well. He was probably well into his eighties at the time being referenced. He loved watching other people dance and hearing other people sing. Here, she stressed that he enjoyed watching and listening as much as performing, drawing on the emphasis of listeners to complete the circle of participation described in Chapter Three. He always had his singing voice and even sang for the nurses at the hospital just before he died. This woman then discussed the vitality of singing. She questioned the future of traditional singing, stating that discussion about its survival is nonsense. The singing is there, and the singing always will be there. When she was growing up, people sang because they could. They did not analyze it. She then sang “Adieu to Lovely Garrison” for us. This woman’s strong connection to her family through song encouraged her that singing will always happen if people are willing to sing. Her story
is opposite in message than the story of the woman who regretted that her parents did not pass their music on to her. While the previous woman concerned herself with songs dying with their singers, the current singer viewed the life of songs more optimistically.

The final motivator in Jerry’s workshop at the Clare Festival is song’s connection to and creation of community. The following woman, a prolific singer, spoke about her family as a community. She emphasized the experience of gathering through song, and in this instance her family constituted the group gathering. All of her family sang, so her original motivator was her family, and her family represents her community. Her comments bring together a number of recollections and associations which reinforce her emphasis on the particularities of her family identity, at the same time tying these into larger shared themes in Irish experience. Growing up in the mid-twentieth century, her family did not have a television, to which she replied, “Thank God.” She lived in a small community. All her brothers and sisters had a party piece. They would gather at private homes for family events without any alcohol but instead with tea and maybe cheese, bread, and jam, and they would invite guests to their house. Each visitor would contribute five shillings to pay for the food. Everyone at these gatherings would be asked to sing. She learned a song about not drinking, which she then sang for us. Song was a part of the family and community gathering, and thus a contributor to singing sociality.

As a final segment illustrating family and community motivators to sing as expressed at Jerry’s workshop, I will include my own fieldnotes about my personal experience with these singers. I begin my story with a family connection:

At this point it was my turn. The crowd joked about my PhD project briefly. I spoke about how singing brings me joy. My original focus was classical and choral singing, but I explained how I began learning Irish songs when I moved to Ireland. One of my favorite songs to sing is the American folk song “Fly Away.” This song is very dear to my heart and I accidentally got emotional during this session because of the song’s connection to recent events. I lost the
song and could not continue singing. Other people in the room started to cry. I might be able to say that this moment was the turning point in my involvement with Irish traditional singing sessions. I felt a deep support amongst these singers. At this point the session changed, too, and we started hearing deep stories about the relationship between singer and song.

I was near the beginning of the session, and for the remaining hour and a half, the stories became deep and meaningful as singers spoke about their personal connections through song. When the workshop finished, Annette asked me if I would like to try my song again:

The workshop was finishing now, almost two hours later. The people around the circle asked me if I would like to sing “Fly Away” again, so I did, completely refreshed and able to finish. At this moment I truly felt a part of the group. I was encouraged, but at a more deep level than the common shouts of, “Come on!” I felt an emotional connection with the other singers and listeners in the room developed through an emotional connection with song. During the Grand Concert this same evening, one of the guest groups closed the concert with “Fly Away.” The audience members who were at the morning’s workshop turned to me, laughing, commenting how they got “Two for the price of one,” and giving me the feeling now that this was my own song, one that will always be associated with me.

My relationship with my informants has been quite strong since this day. I was vulnerable. No longer a student with a clipboard studying a group of people, I now felt like a welcome part of the community. I can imagine that this feeling is what keeps traditional singers motivated to continue gathering for song.

Annette passionately explained to me that the love for singing and songs surpasses any singing ability:

Annette: Tom, he loved singing himself, but Tom wasn’t a great singer, either. He knew he wasn’t, but he still loved . . . when he started off singing he used to be singing some of those big Scots Ballads. When he started off singing he used to be singing, and we’d still, I can still remember the first time I heard Ewan MacColl sing “Sir Patrick Spens,” I thought, Oh my god, this is wonderful.
Carrie: Wow. Still loving singing, that’s most of the battle anyways. It takes somebody to come out with the heart, and that’s one thing that I enjoy about listening to traditional singing, is it’s just, it’s from here, you know? [hand on chest]
Annette: It comes from inside out, that’s right. Yeah.
Carrie: No matter what the sound is, or anything. It’s a very moving experience.
Annette: It always is because it’s a moving experience for, like, I remember the only song I sing in Irish . . . and I remember learning to sing that and nearly crying singing it because it’s a very sad song and about Dónal Óg, nice man that he was going off and leaving her, ya know?

(Munnelly May 2015)

Both Annette and Tom loved songs and singing. Annette admits that Tom was, at least as she believes, not a great singer, but his love for the songs inspired his drive to collect from and maintain relationships with singers. She believes herself that she does not have a voice for singing, but that does not stop her from connecting to the songs and singing from her heart.

**Conclusion**

Irish traditional singing session attendees meet to share songs. The songs bring singers to the session, and the connection with song creates a connection between singers. The workshop at the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing provided insight directly into the motivations among a room full of singers. Experiences of singers, airs, stories, memories, and families draw singers to repertoire. The quantity of songs a singer possesses and the ability to use the body as a vessel for the song are often more important than the singing quality, although quality is more highly esteemed by some singers. Talking about songs during sessions can bring a deeper element to the session that helps draw the other singers into the song so that they understand the connection the singer has with that song. Singers acquire their repertoire in a variety of ways, from methodical searching through obscure archives to a simple chance enjoyment of text and air. Singers can be associated with certain songs and songs can be associated with certain singers. These elements of association and connection were all present in the workshop at the Clare Festival and provided insight into the connections between songs and singers in singing sessions throughout Ireland. The traditional singing community
exists because of the songs and the meanings derived from them—the songs survive through living singers.
CHAPTER FIVE
THE INDIVIDUALS

The sustainability of Irish traditional singing in social contexts relies on the power of individuals working directly in the field to listen to, promote, and perform traditional songs. This chapter is an investigation of the individuals who collect, promote, and sing the songs detailed in the previous chapter as well as those who organize singing sessions. Individuals might contribute simply by attending and singing at sessions, or they might be more actively involved—giving talks, organizing sessions, or building spaces. The individuals highlighted in this chapter represent a range of proactive personalities needed to ensure that the social life of Irish traditional singing continues; they introduce new and restore old contexts. They help to create safe atmospheres identified as necessary for singing. While academic discourse about intangible cultural heritage tends to lean towards the value of the community in heritage practice (Smith and Akagawa 2008; Blake 2008), it is individuals who make up and shape that community, a relationship which Thomas Turino expands upon in *Music as Social Life* (Turino 2008).

In this chapter, I profile proactive individuals within the Irish social singing community. Many of these individuals are the tradition bearers, those who share and transmit their songs (Veblen 1991). I represent key roles in which the individuals work within the community—the Participant, the Collector, the Archivist, the Publican, and
the Leader. Each person mentioned in this chapter crosses between these different roles, working as leaders, collectors, archivists, and singers. Likewise, I have observed countless other ways individuals work within the singing session community. For the scope of this thesis, however, I have chosen to highlight five of these roles—they portray the types of individuals I have come across participating in or supporting the singing sessions.

The idea of community in which the individuals in this chapter identify is developed in Chapter Two. Like-minded individuals make up the community of singers and supporters of traditional song. It is their shared habits, as argued by Thomas Turino, that unify them into a community. Because of a vested interest in their shared habits, the songs, and their lived experience—gathering to sing—they develop a sense of meaning for themselves within the singing community (Sugarman 1997, 24). The members within the community then have their own social roles, given to them by the greater society in which they live and within the singing session context (Turino 2008, 110). The social roles in this case are those involved in sustaining a living heritage in a modern world and ensuring this heritage remains a relevant part of social life. Singing sociality does not stem from a separate process, developing as an independant institution unaffected by outside influences, but instead is intertwined with the larger patterns of twenty-first century society’s sociality. As Frances Morten explains, traditional music is a socio-musical experience, reacting to social identities both from within the community and globally (Morton 2005, 664). In this way, members of traditional communities can be involved in safeguarding and engendering strategies. Their unified sense of meaning resulting from shared habits ensures that the heritage is being practiced for the benefit of the community.

I suggest that individuals within the community must take action to make a difference in the sustainability of the singing sessions. One problem that can arise in safeguarding initiatives is if such initiatives come from outside the community of practice and are implemented through institutional policy. Complications can occur with a ‘top-down’ approach to safeguarding implied by the Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention, such as attributing preconceived ideas or labels onto the practitioners within the community (See Chapter 6), so policy makers develop arguments for outside initiatives to engage the community. Janet Blake discussed the importance for involving the community in safeguarding initiatives:

One of the most significant aspects of this Convention . . . is the central role it gives to the cultural communities (and groups and, in some cases, individuals) associated with ICH that is unprecedented in this area of international law. This is a response to the very specific character of ICH that exists only in its enactment by practitioners and, therefore, whose continued practice depends wholly on the ability and willingness of the cultural group and/or community concerned.

(Blake 2008, 45-46)

While engagement with the community is an effective component of UNESCO ICH in regards to ensuring that the heritage is practiced by and for the community, what this means is that the stakeholders within the community need to agree with and follow the safeguarding policy, thus conceding to this ‘top-down’ approach.

In the Irish traditional singing sessions, I observed that policy is not implemented externally by organizations such as UNESCO, but rather, the individuals within the singing community are motivated by each other to work towards creating spaces for singing. The notion of engendering carries with it a further shift of emphasis away from external interests and values towards the internal dynamics of community action. Even on the greater scale of Irish cultural revival in the early twentieth-century, Harry White writes, “If the state remained impassive, individual musicians did not” (White 1998, 129). I suggest a shift in attention from involving the community in a
safeguarding initiative implemented from the outside, to focusing on the desire to engender contexts for the practice of their heritage among the proactive individuals within that community through a variety of actions. In the case of the Irish singing circles, these actions are fulfilled by social actors in the roles that I illustrate in this chapter—those of the Participant, Collector, Archivist, Publican, and Leader.\footnote{I focus on individuals who make a positive contribution to the social life of Irish traditional singing. Unfortunately, individuals can also be destructive, so many negative or obstructive roles can likewise be played.}

Identity of the individual is interlinked with societal structure both within and beyond the community. Éamonn Costello discussed these societal relationships further in his PhD *Sean-nós Singing and Oireachtas na Gaeilge: Identity, Romantic Nationalism, and the Agency of the Gaeltacht Community Nexus* (Costello 2015), stating that musical culture overlaps with other cultural spheres. He continues, “Consequently, there need not be a correspondence between the structural relationship of members of a performing group and their structural relations outside musical contexts, because different social structures can also be created for the purpose of music making” (Ibid., 6). Individuals in the singing community have multiple identities, and their roles overlap towards the common goal of meeting or creating space for song. They also overlap with the bigger picture of society outside of traditional singing, not existing in a vaccuum, but consistently influenced by outside factors (See Chapter Six). Costello explains further that the individuals can choose their identities within the music community, and these choices can change over time (Ibid., 7). The singers and enthusiasts have consciously chosen their roles and developed into them through consistent participation. Jane Sugarman theorized about the identity of Prespa families within the Prespa immigrant communities:
Young people are marrying largely within the community and are agreeing to uphold its slowly changing ‘system’ to a great degree. And they continue to participate in cultural forms that play a central role in the ongoing formulation of this altered ‘system,’ whether by exploring new song repertoires and styles of singing or by dancing avidly to the new electric bands.

(Sugarman 1997, 345)

The individuals within the Prespa community make a choice to be a part of it, but they are also adapting to and influenced by outside systems, allowing for flexibility and change within the community. According to Harry White, identity and purpose are complementary. When the individuals work toward a common goal, such as that of revival as portrayed in White’s book *The Keeper’s Recital* (White 1998) or the sustainability of Irish singing sociality in this thesis, individuals find identity and purpose (Ibid., 129). As explained by social identity theory, individuals develop their sense of identity within the social group—in the case of this thesis, the singing circles.

**The Participant**

Proactive individuals working towards the promotion and sustainability of Irish traditional singing do not necessarily see themselves as involved in a safeguarding effort, nor are they necessarily aware of or involved in its debates (as I discussed in Chapter One in relation to safeguarding discourse in Ireland). Each of the individuals mentioned in this chapter are motivated independently.

At the root of these proactive individuals is the Participant. Without the Participant, there would be no singing at the singing sessions. Turino discusses the role of the Participant as a complicated phenomenon:

There is a common idea in the United States that participatory music must be uniformly simple so that everyone can join in, as, for example, with the singing of campfire songs. In places where participator music making is the mainstay this is not the case. If there were only simple roles, people who are deeply engaged with music and dance would likely become bored and not want to participate. If everyone is to be attracted, a participatory tradition will have a variety of roles that differ in difficulty and degrees of specialization required.

(Turino 2008, 30)
Along with varying degrees of difficulty, participants carry a number of roles which contribute to the vibrancy of the singing session. Under the broad designation of the Participant, I include the roles of singer and listener, which, as has been discussed throughout this thesis, are of equal importance. Singers searched for spaces with sympathetic listeners. Therefore, the Participant is a role which can cover the singer, listener, and others working within and for the singing community and can thus relate the singers and listeners to the recurring themes of participation. A core group of participants attends many sessions every week. According to Jerry O’Reilly, these people comprise what he called a support circle which is necessary for the continuing success of any particular session. Frequent participants comprise a foundation of support, and even on days with fewer visitors, session organizers know these people will attend.

Grace Toland said that participation is what drew her into the singing community:

Anybody could sing. It wasn’t a select few. I heard there wasn’t a lot of criticism of singers in terms of whether they were in tune or out of tune or very bad or very good. You would remark if somebody was very very good, but at the same time you wouldn’t. It didn’t exclude people who weren’t that great, as long as you could do something, and that was that sense of participation, was always very very big. You’d do something and it might be singing, might be a recitation.

(Toland Feb 2015)

The ideas of “anybody could sing” and singing quality are problematized throughout this thesis, but the emphasis here is in the participation. Grace does not limit participation to singing but also includes recitations, and to this I add the listener, a sentiment drawn upon Grace’s interview and presentations.

Theorizing the role of the participant in Irish traditional music, Hazel Fairbairn writes that the nature of interaction among the participants depends on “social and musical relationships within the group and the environment and situation in which they
are meeting” (Fairbairn 1993, 1). Although the focus of her research is instrumental playing, participatory interaction in singing sessions is also dependant on social relationships and the environment. Jerry and Rosie said that songs have deeper meanings to them when sung by people they know, because they may know the social context in which the singers may be living. The singer may have just celebrated a birthday, for instance, or be suffering a grievance (Davis and O’Reilly May 2015). Singing is a lived experience reflecting the singer’s participation in the greater society beyond the singing circle. Fairbairn also stresses the balance between individuality and community:

The balance of individuality and style with adaptation and group cohesion in sessions is different in every event. The fundamental objection expressed toward group playing is that it demands conformity, the lowest common denominator, conversely the magic of the session is described as the enjoyment of rich diversity and cooperation.

(Fairbairn 1993, 33)

The participant, the individual within the singing community, contributes to the diversity of the sessions. Listeners, singers, coaxers—they are all different identities and personalities, but they all share the same lived experience.

Support for a singing session could also come down to one individual singer. For example, Máire Ní Dhonnchadha praised the commitment of the Public Relations Manager, Anne, to the Ennis Singers Club as it struggles to survive: “I would have given up and just gone to the other singing sessions from time to time, but Anne is very tenacious and she’s very hard working. And, you know we rarely make enough to pay the guest and pay for the sandwiches, and much of it is coming out of her pocket” (Ní Dhonnchadha Mar 2015). Anne’s presence as a participant is that of a social facilitator as much as it is a singer. She, and other individuals who attend and support different singers clubs, create a core of support. The members of the Ennis Singers Club attend the other clubs in Clare, and each club is successful partially because of the support of
the neighboring clubs. The Ennis Singers Club survives also because of invested members such as Anne who provide both financial and moral support.

The Singers

As stated previously, singers and listeners fall under the umbrella term of ‘Participant’ (Williams 2010). They comprise the crux of the singing circle. Singers, attendees, and informants consistently mention other singers in conversation. Singers appreciate each other for their knowledge of songs and their commitment to the singing. Singers often mention other singers as the source of their songs, and some songs are attributed to certain singers. Songs are the central explicit focus of the gatherings, so songs and singers comprise the majority of topics. Hence, it is natural that the songs and their singers are the focus of attention and the topic of most conversations. In fact, each of my informants mentioned other singers in our interviews. The following vignettes are stories I heard in conversation or interviews where other participants spoke about individual singers.

Members within communities play social roles which in turn drive the community. Such roles comprise the social drama as described by social anthropologist I. M. Lewis in Chapter Two. These players each carry their own identity as known within the community. Social identity theory explains participants’ chosen identities within their communities as they relate to greater social roles—in singing sessions, participants identify with the singing community and certain roles favoring the community which may also function outside of the community. For instance, those outside the singing community may also identify members within as singers. The singers mentioned here are based on a list I compiled from my informants of whom

88 While the singing community members be identified as ‘singers,’ they may not identify themselves as ‘traditional singers.’ As seen in Chapter Six, ‘Traditional Singer’ is sometimes a role prescribed to a member of the traditional singing community from the outside.
they believed were notable singers. They project the identity of good or notable singer onto the singer her- or himself, and such an identity is accepted by the singer. As singers, they are individual participants who make up the traditional singing community, and thus are the reason for the gathering.

Participation in a singing session happens when both singer and listener are present, having a conversation with each other through song. The singer sings, the listener listens and perhaps adds comments of coaxing or approval. Tomás Ó Canainn describes this relationship further:

A good singer will feel the sympathy and encouragement of the audience right through the song, for the audience here does not feel bound to the artificial silence that is so much a part of a performance of classical music. Any particularly clever turn receives its share of vocal encouragement from the audience, and in between verses there is a regular litany of good wishes.

(Ó Canainn 1978, 78)

This characterization describes precisely the singing’s participatory nature, as Turino worked out this concept. A give and response between singer and listener differs from norms within performative music fields of classical singing. Ó Canainn continues to describe the relationship between singer and listener: “The performer is generally seated among his audience since there is no question of a formal recital requiring a large volume of sound. He may be reticent and require cajoling before he will begin, but this is all regarded as part of the recital” (Ibid., 79). Ó Canainn describes the set-up of the room as it effects the participatory nature of singing. As discussed in Chapters Two and Three, room organization can contribute to feelings of inclusivity. Drawing from my own fieldwork, I observed that chairs and tables organized in a circle contribute to egalitarian atmosphere, candles can calm the participants, and tea and sandwiches bring a sense of the home to the public location. The people present in the

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89 As a classical singer, I disagree with his statement that the silence in such performative styles is artificial.
room are participants. The singer is sharing or giving the song, the listeners receive the conversation, and the cajolers give back as part of the conversation. Such an atmosphere can in turn contribute to the sense of belonging.

John Moulden expressed his view of what makes a good singer. He revealed the high esteem in which he held one particular singer he once heard:

It’s a rare singer who can recreate in the minds. I’ve only seen one person do it, an old man called John Maguire from Fermanagh who sat on the stage of the . . . University Concert Hall in Queens, [Belfast]. Sat on the stage there alone and sang, and he sang out naturally and calmly and confidently as if he had been at his own fireside, and he brought us in there with him. . . . It was just a total, quiet, completeness of man and song and where it came from that he, whenever he moved, never went out of it. . . . But it takes an extraordinary performer who can do that. It’s a performer who isn’t a performer at all but is yet so great a performer that you don’t know that they’ve just, they are it.

(Moulden Mar 2015)

John recounted a stage performance, but his story can equally apply to the more participatory singing sessions. As expanded upon in Chapter Four, to John, great singing is about the ability to represent the song organically, not about the quality of the singing voice (Shields 2010). The song conveys its message through the singer. Such singers garner the interest of other listeners. Appreciation for the following singers is based on John’s model that a great singer can transport listeners to the fireside.

Singers at the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing

Annette Munnelly mentioned individual singers during our interview. She was proud of the talent she and the other organizers of the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing hired in 2014, despite the high prices they paid for it. She gave a special recognition for the singer John Lyons:

It was lovely because we had John Lyons who has been presented [an award] because his eightieth birthday had passed and nobody had done anything for him so we thought that a man who had been involved in singing all his life that he deserved to have something. So we presented him with a piece of bronze of
the Cúchulainn, you know the Cúchulainn figure? So he was given that as a gift at the festival.  
(Munnelly May 2015)

As a gesture of support, the organizers presented John with a gift. They thought he was a great singer and contributor to traditional song over the years who had not received enough recognition, so they honored him to thank him for his work within the singing community. They recognize the influence of individuals in traditional song, and through their support, they encourage such work to continue. The individual contributes to the community, and the community honors the individual. She also mentioned the other guests’ names, and exclaimed at the end, “We had to run a table quiz to make up the money!” (Ibid.). Annette noted that this festival in particular was especially expensive because of all the international visitors. Thankfully, they also had enough support internally to make up for the difference as they understood the contribution the individual participants, despite the high price, had on the success of that year.

Singers at the Cobblestone Bar

Organizers expressed surprise at the quality of singing they sometimes hear at their sessions. Tom Mulligan is especially interested in musical individuals and is in awe at the talent that comes through The Cobblestone Bar:

You never know where any of these people come from. People surprise you. They open their mouth and then there’s a common denominator there. . . . I’m telling you this now without fear of contradiction. There isn’t a week goes by that I am not wowed by someone. You say to yourself, “Where the f*ck did they come out of?” There was a time when I used to know all the musicians in Ireland. All the good singers. But now-a-days the quality of the music you have, the quality of the teaching that’s going around this country is amazing. My own kids surprise me.

(Mulligan Feb 2015)

He described several living singers who he has met at the Cobblestone. “The singers that pass through all have something to throw into the pot” (Ibid.). They each

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90 Cúchulainn is an Irish mythological hero.
contribute to the broader scope of singing in Ireland. Each singer is unique, bringing their own style and personality to traditional song and music. He informed me, “There’s great music everywhere. Surprise you sometimes” (Ibid.). He was enthusiastic about singers and introducing me to them because he believes each singer has a story that must be heard, each singer has an important role in the tradition.

Macdara also expressed his interest in different singers who have visited The Night Before Larry Got Stretched. Part of his role as an organizer is selecting guests. Each organizer meets to discuss singers that they like not only for their voices, but for their ability to entertain the audience. The guest singers especially need to be interesting for other singers. Attendance can often be based on the popularity of the guest singer, and the guest singer can affect the success of the session. Finances also influence the selection process. Macdara mentioned how before Larry had funding, the guest singing was “purely on a favor basis,” and continued:

We might ask for a voluntary contribution during the session and then that one would go towards paying the next guest. But this year we got Arts Council funding. We all get together, talk about the singers we like, who we’d like to bring down and try to get a good variety, then we make up a list and then every month we’ll say “oh we’ll have this guy and this guy and this guy in, and then we can pay them with the Arts Council’s funding, and put them up if they’re from out of town. We have even found people from Germany, from England. . . . If it’s a Dublin singer they’re not going to be very expensive. So then you’ll have some money left over. You can bring Tom McCarthy from the UK, you can bring Andreas Schultz from Berlin. We want to extend it further. We’ve tried to get people from Scotland and we want to be able to get people over from the States at some point.

(Yeates Feb 2015)

Larry’s financial situation can affect the quality of singers that the organizers want to bring to the session. He mentioned particular names of notable singers they were able to invite in the past, names that raised Larry’s profile. He said that many great singers live ‘further afield’ and bringing them in is more ambitious. Macdara admits, though, that he is frequently amazed by the quality of the singing from Dublin, as well.
Macdara discussed the process of picking guest singers. Simply stated, they pick who they think is good. Then he delves deeper into the selection process:

There’s some singers we mightn’t have heard of until we go to the festival, or we mightn’t have heard enough of them. And there are some people who could come to a session and you aren’t really sure if they are good guests. You say, “well they’re a great singer” but you say, “would [the audience] like four, five, six songs in a row and would they even enjoy that?” But then you go to a festival and you see them, or maybe you see them do a set on their own, and you say, “oh yes that person would be great.” . . . there will be a lot of correspondence going around and on facebook and sometimes we’ll put a name forward and go, “yeah yeah I like that person, too.” Then someone might get in touch with us and say, “Oh I’m in Dublin at this time, would you be interested in having me in?” . . . There’s no one way. It depends. (Ibid.)

The organizers of Larry pay close attention to their selection process for guests because they want to raise the prestige of the session. I saw Larry packed with fifty or sixty attendees multiple times due to guest billing, and I learned that many attendees came just to hear that singer. Attendees might even come for more sessions if they know they can rely on consistently good guest singers. Likewise, if guest singers are not as engaging, entertaining, or intriguing in their performance, persona, or other criteria, the atmosphere of the room could dim and attendees might not return.

Organizers are consistently inspired by singers who enter through their doors. Macdara and Tom both said that unknown singers often amaze them. Macdara explained:

As far as coming in, people walking off the street and wowing us, yeah. That happens a lot. And it’s just so encouraging. Because it’s a small scene, I think there’s a tendancy to believe that you’ve seen all there is to see. . . . (Ibid.)

Macdara acknowledged that in Dublin alone, there is an expanse of singers he has never heard, but because numbers of active members of the singing community are comparatively small compared to numbers of participants in other musical practices such as involvement in instrumental sessions, he often thinks he has heard them all. He
admits though that he and other organizers are continuously surprised by singers that walk through the door. The following example is of one of these surprising new visitors:

There was a guy, I don’t know his surname, but his name is Christy. And he’s this really lovely, polite, shy old man, and he came in a few sessions ago, and he’d never been in before, and he just sat there calmly. We told him to come in. He had apparently sung for us before. I had never met him. He came in and sang when we called him. I thought he was a bit shy but he just sat up and said this big introduction about how he had written a song that was a romantic song for pensioners and the song was called, “Would you like your name on my bus pass.” Because in Ireland you get a bus pass when you get to a certain age to ride the bus for free. Your travel companion, then, would have your name on the bus pass, so it was this proposition to a woman, “Would you like your name on my bus pass?” [laughing]. That was brilliant. He just came out with that one and we were “What the hell!”

(Ibid.)

Macdara and other session attendees and organizers express amazement at the wealth of singing in Ireland, and admit that they are often surprised, especially because, as Macdara explained, places like Dublin are already filled with good singers. The new singer Christy came into the session, did not bring much attention to himself, and sat quietly, but he wrote a humorous song that amused his listeners, many who had never seen him before this night.91

Andreas Schultz

No fewer than three informants mentioned the German singer Andreas Schultz officially in interviews, and more singers mentioned him in casual conversation. For that reason, he deserves a mention here as an influential individual within the Irish traditional singing community. Andreas, from Berlin, sings traditional songs and regularly attends the Inishowen Singing Festival. He attends other singing sessions throughout Ireland, too, and has developed friendships with Irish singers throughout the years. Tom first introduced him to me:

91 Christy’s performance of “Would You Like Your Name on My Bus Pass” is described in Chapter Four.
Tom: There’s a lovely guy that comes in here. He comes in from Berlin about four times a year, Andreas Schultz. What a singer, ya know, what a singer, ya know?
Carrie: And what does he come for?
Tom: To sing! To sing! He learned all his singing on YouTube but he’s an excellent singer. But he sings a lot of the big songs that are difficult for anyone to sing. But Andreas comes over. His heart is in Inishowen. That’s where. He came up before Christmas for a singing session, the monthly singing session in Inishowen, then went back to Germany for Christmas. That’s his buzz. He’s a graphic designer. Gorgeous fella. (Ibid.)

When I told Mick O’Grady that I was going to Inishowen for the festival, he also told me about Andreas. He informed me that it is unusual to have a German in traditional Irish singing. Many Germans are into fiddling and accordion playing, but not many foreigners are “interested in the singing” (O’Grady Feb 2015).

Grace Toland spoke highly of Andreas. We spoke about lasting friendships that begin from singing, when the conversation turned to the man from Berlin:

Grace: I’ve had friends that I met at singing events twenty, thirty years ago, they’re still my friends, and we go off and we do things. Like Andreas, our German friend, who arrived two years ago and is part of the whole thing now, and now we’re all going to Berlin. It’s brilliant!
Carrie: That’s funny. I was in Dublin a few weeks ago, talking to Tom Mulligan.
Grace: Oh yeah, Tom.
Carrie: He had mentioned, he said there’s this German guy from Berlin. So he must be famous somehow.
Grace: Yes, he is!
Carrie: Amongst the singers.
Grace: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. Ahh, it’s hilarious. We love him. Everybody in our session knows him now. The whole fact that there are now twenty-five people from Inishowen going to Berlin.
Carrie: Wow.
Grace: We’re going to present the song project.92 We’re doing one official thing in an arts center, and then we’re going to have a singing session, and we want to hear other singers. There’s no point in a bunch of Inishowen people going to Berlin just to hear each other. We could just stay home and do that. So, we’re setting up links with other groups to meet up with, and that’s the whole thing. It’s lovely to go somewhere and hear different voices, different language, different songs. That’s just as important to us, and that’s a lovely bit of craic along the way.
Carrie: So would he come in with songs from Berlin?

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92 The Inishowen Song Project.
Grace: No, he only sings songs, well, for us, he’s learning them all off the song project. I’ve never heard him sing in German at all, but we’ve visited him in Berlin and I’ve met German friends who’ve sung in German, but he’s just besotted with Inishown and the project, and Ireland. He’s learning the songs, singing them, and it’s great. He’s a great sense of humor and a sense of fun as well. We’ve a strange kind of relationship that’s developed.

(Toland Feb 2015)

Grace and the other members of the Inishowen Singing Circle developed a relationship with Andreas because of the Inishowen Song Project. One reason Grace promoted the project is so that others outside of the tradition could learn songs performed in Inishowen, and in this instance the project is successful. Andreas learned the songs, came to Ireland to sing them, and has now become friends with the people in Inishowen. Now, a group of Inishowen singers travel to Berlin for singing. Andreas learned his music from digital sources, not the traditional method of passing down through generations, but the traditional singing community in Ireland appreciates and respects him.

Andreas sang at the North Pole Bar and was a guest singer in Inishowen when I attended, so I personally heard how he shares his songs. If I did not know he was German, I would have thought he was Irish. He adapts an Irish singing style to his songs—for instance slightly nasal, straight toned, closed eyes—and presents them well according to these performative guidelines. He is also friendly and pleasant. Just as Costello wrote about musicians having multiple identities within the music community and in the greater society, Andreas Schultz has his own sets of identities. To the Irish traditional singers, he is German, but he is also an Irish traditional singer. He exhibits Turino’s shared habits with other Irish traditional singers, and his shared lived experience of singing identifies him with the social singing community.

The Participant, whether singing or listening, is at the crux of the singing session. For Turino, participation fuses relationships and develops identity. He states:
For me, good music making or dancing is a realization of ideal—Possible—human relationships where the identification with others is so direct and so intense that we feel, for those best moments, as if our selves had merged. It is the sounds we are making, our art, that continually let us know that we have done so or that we are failing to achieve this ideal. Being in seamless synchrony with others feels wonderful, and it is one of the main experiences that attracts me to musical performance again and again.

(Turino 2008, 19)

Participation in music, for Turino, achieves a pinnacle of human realization and a sense of self identity. Participants in the singing sessions include listeners and supporters alongside singers. My informants conveyed their interest in different singers. They mentioned particular singers during our interviews who they believed merit special attention. Such singers can transport listeners to the fireside, according to John’s description—they can entertain a crowd, they can compose clever songs, they can represent international interest in Irish traditional singing. Through the singing, listening, and social interaction of the participants, the experience of singing sociality within the singing session is vividly lived.

The Collector

The Participant and her or his multiple activities may be the obvious center of attention in singing sessions, but other roles are also significant in sustaining social singing; that of the Collector, for example, can effectively shape the public perception of singers. Appreciation for the role of the collector is expressed by Ríonach Uí Ógáin in her forward to the collection of Tom Munnelly’s lectures and essays The Singing Will Never Be Done (Clune 2014). She writes, “Folklore studies and folkloristics are products of the academic world but it must not be forgotten that ethnographic fieldwork is essential to both spheres. It is valid to undertake collecting work for its own sake but evidence of immeasurable insight is to the fore in the case of some collectors” (Uí Ógáin 2014, viii). As Éamonn Costello also expressed, collectors are a part of a larger
sphere beyond academia (Costello 2015). The balance between identification with tradition and flexibility of its usage also can be likened to Sugarman’s discussion of honoring tradition while maintaining a balance with the outside world. Ó Ógáin contends that one role of the collector is revealing “the complexity and interrelationships of folklore and the human experience” (Ibid., ix). In *Dear Far-Voiced Veteran*, Séamas Ó Catháin writes that the relationship between collector and singer must be ongoing to ensure the collections are accurate, valuable representations of not only singers’ songs, but also the role of the songs in the singer’s life (Ó Catháin 2007). Collecting is a window into the lived experience of the singers from whom the songs were collected.

The late Tom Munnelly is possibly one of the most revered song collectors in Ireland (Clune 2007). Annette Munnelly’s husband and Jerry O’Reilly’s brother in law, Tom not only worked closely with the singing community but was embedded in it, building relationships, sharing stories, and participating in the singing over many years. Tom has avid admirers who study his collections and speak fondly of him and his work. Born in 1944 in Dublin and died in 2007 in Miltown Malbay, he met countless singers and scholars and traveled extensively around Ireland throughout his career.

Annette spoke extensively about Tom’s life and career during our interview. Her love and admiration for him shone through in the interview, so to honor her words and personal account of her husband’s story, I will provide the transcript of this portion of our interview in full:

You know Tom’s history. Most people who have studied his work know about him. He never did a formal degree, but he was taking on—well maybe I’ll start at the beginning, will I?

...
When I met him he was mad into folk music. Particularly ballads, he came across ballads. This was when I was [. . .] twenty. Well, when I started going out with him. I met him when I was 19 and I was over in England studying nursing at that stage. I met him and he was going with somebody and I had a different boyfriend. The following year we were both free, we had split up with our respective partners and we met up and started going out together. I discovered that I [. . .] ballads and [. . .] everything to do with classic ballads was what he was about, what he loved, you know? Now, he would listen to other stuff, but when we’d go to a fleadh, all he wanted to know was where was the singing.

He met John Reilly and that was his Road to Damascus. John Reilly was a Traveller who lived in a derelict house in Boyle in County Roscommon. He met John and he heard John singing “The Well Below the Valley,” and he said, “My God,” he said “That’s a fabulous song, and that’s certainly out of the ordinary and it must be very ancient.” So he started doing a bit of research into it and he discovered anyway that it was a Medieval ballad. That the well below the valley, Jesus meets the woman at the well, the “Maid and the Palmer” is the official name of the song.

He had got to know Breandán Breathnach. He was a music collector and he was a civil servant in the department of education. But Breandán was very anxious to find out about song because after talking to people like Tommy, and he knew other people as well who were singers and who were interested and there seemed to be a big interest in singing. He would approach the department of education and asked them would they set up a pilot project to investigate different parts of the country and see if there was anything to be collected, because up to then, people had been concentrating on the stuff As Gaeilge because it was in danger of dying out altogether, you see. He was approached about the project and he got to know him quite well at that stage. And Breandán said that they were going to set up a three-month pilot project. He wanted to know, would he think of coming onto it? He was working in a knitting factory at the time, and he told me about it. We had three small children at the time. Very small, like babies. The factory had been put on a three-day week, so he said, “I don’t know what to do,” he said, “because if I give up the job and the other thing is over after three months,” and I said, “well you have to take a chance! That job would be gone in three months anyhow if they put you on three.” And I said, “You should take a chance, you know.” So he took a chance and he never stopped working with the collecting. That’s where he started collecting. He had to go buy himself a car because he had to be able to get around. So he had to get together a couple of hundred, I think it was two hundred pounds at the time, for the car. He bought the car and he didn’t know how to drive it, but he used to do kangaroo starts and all sorts of things.

94 “In Irish.”
He met a guy called McMorrow and he was asking him what he did and he said what he was going to do, and he said, “you’ll have to meet my father.” His father was an eel fisherman on Lough Neagh, and he brought him up to meet his father, Charlie McMorrow. He got some wonderful songs from Charlie McMorrow and he was the first man he officially collected from. Now he had been collecting from John Reilly and different people down through the time, but this was the first time he was doing it on an official basis. Then he started going around different- he went to Boyle because he knew John Reilly and he knew that there were other singers around there, so he did some collecting around there. 

He met all these people and of course he had to come down to Clare because he knew that there were people. He started off with Willie Clancy and Willie Clancy told him to go and see Nora Cleary, and Nora Cleary said you have to see Tom Lenihan, and Tom Lenihan became his great friend. He always loved old guys.

[Later I asked Annette about the book, Dear Far-Voiced Veteran: Essays in Honour of Tom Munnelly]

Those essays were published. We got a fright about two or three years before Tom died where somebody told him that they thought he had growths on his liver. It turned out that he didn’t. He had three polyps which of course eventually turned cancerous. But at this stage now he had three polyps and Anne [Clune] got quite upset about the fact that nothing had ever happened for Tommy. He had tried several times to do a degree but had been blocked by various people in charge. So he wasn’t allowed to do what he wanted to do. She decided anyhow she was going to do this festschrift. She came to me and we sat down and I just plucked out of my head all the people I knew that he had worked with over the years, and people from the folklore department and people from various parts of the country and all that. She got in touch with them and asked them would they like to contribute an article for that. We’d have these conversations when we’d meet on a Saturday night in Mary Fahey’s pub and he’d be going to the toilet and I’ll say, “Well how’s it going?” “Grand, I heard from so and so, and I didn’t hear from this other person but I’m waiting.” We’d have the chat and he’d be coming back and I’d say, “And what did you pay for the dress, anyway?”

[At the book launch] People bought copies of the book and Jerry, my brother, was going around in the background saying, now, Gerry Cullen, one of the people from the Voice Squad [a traditional singing trio], he said, “Now Gerry you start it off,” so Gerry pulled and sat up and said, “I’m going to sing a song,” and he launched into a song. After that, one after another they all sang, and it was a fabulous night, it really was. We were so thrilled and delighted for him.

95 A festschrift is a German word meaning “a volume of writings by different authors presented as a tribute or memorial especially to a scholar” (Merriam-Webster 2015).
And still, I’m getting a bit emotional talking about it. [...] So that happened, and we were delighted, he was delighted, and then a few weeks later they presented him, the committee of the Kilford boys society had gotten a copy of the book bound in leather, so that was given to him, a special copy. So we have that and then before he died I had got the Tom Lenihan book that had come out, there was a book and two cassettes at the time, but we got it done with two CDs, and I got that bound in leather for our anniversary which was going to be our fortieth anniversary, and that was about three weeks ... after he died. That arrived the day before he died, and I showed it to him.

(Munnelly May 2015)

Annette’s stories paint a picture of the role of the Collector. She or he is not disengaged, recording singers from behind a machine, but interacts with the singers. Tom built friendships, particularly with singers such as John Reilly and Tom Lenihan, published books, founded festivals, and shared personal stories along with the songs from the singers or of his own experiences collecting. Through collecting, and all the engagement around it, Tom contributed to the sustainability of traditional singing.

The Collector, as an individual with the help of other individuals willing to sing or direct her or him to others who sing (Lee 1899), contributes to the preservation of Irish traditional songs through her or his collections. Tom was greatly involved with his collecting project with Breandán Breathnach. He also enjoyed connecting with other like-minded singers and song scholars, which is apparent in the posthumous collection of his essays The Singing Will Never Be Done: Collected Essays and Lectures; 1990-2007 (Clune 2014). His wife Annette supported his endeavors from the beginning, encouraging him to quit his day job in order to have the time and energy to spend his

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96 John Reilly was an Irish Traveller singer from Boyle, County Roscommon. Tom Munnelly, Roly Brown, and Tony Engle brought out a posthumous collection of Reilly’s songs called The Bonny Green Tree in 1978 by Topic Records.

97 Tom Lenihan was an Irish traditional singer from Miltown Malbay, County Clare. More information can be found about Lenihan in Tom Munnelly (1994), The Mount Callan Garland: Songs from the Repertoire of Tom Lenihan of Knockbrack, Miltown Malbay, County Clare, Dublin: Comhairle Bhéaloideas Eireann.

98 Tom Munnelly’s specific role in safeguarding and engendering Irish traditional singing will be expanded upon in Chapter Seven.
life collecting songs. At the end of his life, the singing and academic community
thanked him for his dedication to finding and protecting their songs by writing Dear
Far-Voiced Veteran, and The Singing Will Never Be Done. Even the title of the latter
book reveals Tom’s and his followers’ motive, to sustain traditional singing in Ireland.
The individual—the Collector—worked with the community, and the community in
turn honored the individual for his impact within the community, closing a circle
between individual and community (Turino 2008).

Tom influenced the structures of both the Clare and Inishowen singing
weekends. While Tom launched the Clare festival and it continues in his memory, he
also regularly attended the Inishowen festival. Grace Toland mentioned that, per Tom’s
influence and his interest in both songs and academia, the Inishowen festival features a
wide variety of activities besides singing sessions. Both the Inishowen and Clare
festivals include academic talks and research presentations, and the organizers make
sure “there’s always that element of [research] and we like the workshop element of it,
too” (Toland Feb 2015). She said attendees come for different reasons. Some attendees
come for the lectures, some come just for the singing. She continued:

[The Inishowen festival] is quite structured, but people feeling they’re not being
shoved around everywhere, keep it kind of loose, but it’s loose but organized.
You hear people talk song all weekend. They’re talking about who they’ve met,
songs, where they got it from, do you know this one, I have a version of that.
It’s a great place to come and talk song.

(Ibid.)

Tom directly influenced this festival structure, implementing his desire to raise the
prestige of traditional song so it would be recognized by other individuals,
communities, and organizations as a tradition worthy of attention.99

99 Tom Munnelly’s collections are now becoming available on the Irish Traditional Music Archive
website at www.itma.ie and the University College Dublin Folk Music Section of the Department of Irish
Rionach Úi Ógáin praised Munnelly’s influence on the traditional singing community: “Few collectors in the latter part of the twentieth and early part of the twenty-first century spent as much time in the field as did Tom Munnelly. A rich harvest was reaped” (Úi Ógáin 2014, viii). For Tom, collecting was as much about the stories and the personalities of the singers as it was the songs. Songs were a part of the greater lived experience of the singers. Tom shared his many interests which spanned from song in the past to song in the present:

He shared his wisdom in relation to all his areas of interest, of the seventeenth century ballad tradition, of twentieth-century folklore collecting or of twenty-first century academic research in folkloristics, with enthusiasm and ease. Tom’s vocation in life was multi-faceted. At the core of his output as collector, lecturer and scholar was his passion for song.

(Uí Ógáin 2014, viii)

This relationship Tom had with songs, their singing, and their folklore revealed his identity as collector and as a member of society, within the traditional singing community and outside of it. He was a lecturer, collector, scholar, and most importantly an enthusiast for Irish traditional song. The passion he brought to this interest provided a common ground with the singers from whom he collected. As a collector, he was a participant within the community. Úi Ógáin continued, stating, “His reflection on the role of the aesthetic in the song tradition underlines his firm belief in the close identity of singer to song and of the song within the community” (Ibid., ix). Such a relationship with song and through song, as discussed in Chapter Four, reveals the connection that singers have with songs and the role of song in the singing community. A sense of identity stems from this participation, the singing of the songs. Their relationships stem from the social identity that the singers hold with each other through the singing of the songs and their roles in the community. Tom Munnelly helped draw out these identities and relationships.
The Collector is invaluable when it comes to finding songs and sharing stories of singers. Almost a decade after Tom Munnelly’s death, participants in singing sessions still talk about his influence on their appreciation of traditional songs. They often sing his collected songs in sessions which in turn means that he, and other collectors, have helped engender the singing.

Image 5.1: Annette Munnelly at the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing

The Archivist

The Archivist catalogues collected songs and makes the songs and their texts, melodies, and histories available for access, either publicly or privately (Porter 1974). The Irish Traditional Music Archive is the largest and most accessible source of such information in Ireland (www.itma.ie). Its collections are publicly available, either through appointment, drop-in, or online. One of the contributions of music archives is that, like museums, they protect and catalogue recordings and manuscripts. The
Collector finds the music and donates it to the archive, and the Archivist stores the music. Tom Munnelly, for instance, gave many of his collected songs to the University College Dublin National Folklore Collection, where they are now available for review (http://www.ucd.ie/irishfolklore/en/irishfolkmusic/).

Archives have many roles, of which Fintan Vallely lists several: “memory (and memorial), record, roll of achievement, catalogue of development, active resource, aesthetic centre, and repository for valuable holdings” (Vallely 2011, 18). Likewise, the archivist also has many diverse roles. Her or his identity as an archivist develops out of these roles. Vallely writes that archives are representative of the mind and goal of the individual:

Since archives are formed by individuals or, at the public level, groups of like-minded individuals, they are reflective of particular ways of thinking, and all archives will not be the same. They are seen as vital resources in all aspects of culture and, for this reason, have been included as one of the objectives of various individuals, organisations and institutions in traditional music since the beginning of conscious revival in the 1950s. The consensus involved in the policy and operation of state-funded archives is inevitably broader than the view of any one initiating participant and thus archives become vital, all-embracing institutions. (Ibid.)

Even so, archives are the work and creation of individuals. Even if these individuals work under the umbrella of state funding, the individual still influences the material held at the archives. Archivists have a vested interest in keeping and making available the material which comes into their care (Ibid.). In this way, they are participants in the community for which they archive.

The Collector and Archivist roles are often combined in the same person. Grace spoke about the work of one of the organizers of the Inishowen Singing Festival and a forerunner for the Inishowen Song Project, Jimmy McBride. Tom Munnelly visited Inishowen and was amazed by “the amount of singers that had big repertoires, and people who were quite willing to sing” (Toland Feb 2015). Tom suggested Jimmy
allow others to hear about the singing in Inishowen, inspiring him to begin collecting and sharing the music. Grace continued:

> It would be a great idea to bring more people along. It was basically an idea of just a way of focusing people’s attention on Inishowen and what was there because that would encourage people locally to keep the traditional going. I suppose that’s one thing that it does. People supporting you, coming to hear, raises everybody- “Oh God, we must be doing something!”

(Ibid.)

Increased awareness of the singing in Inishowen excited organizers, encouraging their productive work. Jimmy traveled around the Inishowen area, recording singers and developing the foundation for what would be the Inishowen Song Project. Grace described the role of herself and Jimmy as collectors and archivists promoting the Inishowen Song Project:

> Jimmy McBride, his collection was so strong, we knew about it, he copied tapes for me. He made a lot of radio programs. He would talk at events himself . . . Sometimes you would be asked as the Inishowen group to go to a festival in England or whatever, and he would take one or two singers with him and he’d talk about the project . . . But there was still very little access to those recordings and that was just the restrictions of technology.

Jimmy engaged with both the Inishowen singing community and internationally, sharing the songs and singers of his locale.

Grace also spoke about the voluntary aspect of this collecting and archiving work. In order to archive and disseminate the material, she and her colleagues needed to apply for funding from various sources:

> Jimmy was a full time teacher. In all of this, . . . it’s all voluntary. So there’s no job in any of this, and that’s really important. We’re not art administrators running a festival. It’s all done on our own time. But we love it, so that’s why we do it. So for Jimmy, we had always decided that he would give the collection to the Irish Traditional Music Archive. . . . I just had one lightbulb moment . . . I approached Nicholas [the original director of ITMA] and said is there any way this could happen and he said yeah but you’re going to have to find some money because we can’t do it out of our own resources. So that’s when we went back to a local development agency and told them what we wanted to do. . . . It was a European funded project so they were wonderful. They really came on board. . . . We went back to Nicholas and said, Nicholas we’ve got the money, you’ve got the technology, we have the collection. It was
over two years that we worked on the project, and it was a first for the staff. It was a great sense of location when we got the project launched.

(Ibid.)

Grace, Jimmy, and the other organizers were not looking for funds except those required to collect and archive the songs. They were fueled by their dedication to sharing the wealth of material in Inishowen with the greater public. The Inishowen Song Project is now available digitally on the Irish Traditional Music Archive website for free public listening at http://www.itma.ie/inishowen. Now, the archive holds about 2000 items, is still growing, and Grace and her team are traveling in Ireland and abroad promoting the project.

Grace herself is responsible for much of the archival contribution to the perpetuation of Irish traditional songs and singing. A coordinator of both the monthly singing session and the annual singing festival in Inishowen, Grace takes the four-hour journey home from her current residence in Dublin at least once a month for the session. Grace is the current director of the Irish Traditional Music Archive, a prominent post for Irish singers and women in Irish traditional music. She is a librarian by trade and started with ITMA as the librarian. She knew Nicholas Carolan “socially through music. He would have been quite a regular attendee of the festivals in the 80s or into the 90s” (Ibid.). She worked in academic and research libraries but when her children were young she wanted to work at home. “I did a lot of freelance work at home and I just rang Nicholas and said, ‘Look, I’m at home, is there anything I could do?’” (Ibid.). She began by cataloging material from home until ITMA moved to its current location in a restored Georgian house on Marrion Square. She continuously asked Nicholas for more work until she eventually worked full-time for the archive. “I came at the right time. There had never been a librarian on the staff, so I threw myself
into the middle of it” (Ibid.). Perseverance paid off, until she was elected as director in July of 2015.

Grace actively promotes singing in Inishowen through public talks and her position in ITMA. She said she wants the songs to be available to the public so visitors to the website can remember the singers and learn the songs. The material is easily accessible on the archive, and Grace encourages visitors to the site to learn the songs. I have even been encouraged to learn songs through what is available on the ITMA by other singers. Many memories are sparked when watching and listening to the many video and audio recordings. She mentioned that several singers who recorded for the Inishowen Song Project are now deceased, but their families have access to their performances and the singers can survive through their songs. Songs now can reach singers in unusual places who might not otherwise know the music, such as Andreas Schultz, and through that connection the curators are promoting their project in more countries. All of this promotion is not for financial gain, but for raising more awareness of the traditional singing in Ireland. Archivists such as Grace are making a significant contribution to engendering the practice of traditional social singing.
Publicans, as the owners of bars where public traditional music sessions and gatherings may take place, are largely responsible for creating spaces suitable for traditional music (O’Shea 2007). As the owners, they can facilitate or discourage the sort of atmospheres described in Chapter Three which allow singers and instrumentalists to gather. Because the publican is concerned with building space in which traditional musicians like to gather, the role of a proactive and supportive publican can be seen as that of engendering rather than safeguarding.

Publican Tom Mulligan has an extremely influential personality. Tom owns and runs the Cobblestone Bar in Smithfield, Dublin, where The Night Before Larry Got Stretched takes place. A statuesque man with a pleasant, hearty personality, Tom is the ultimate people person. He befriends visitors to his bar and makes an effort to
remember faces. He is readily willing to help students. Even while I interviewed him, he took a phone call from a Dublin student and made plans for an interview with her the following day. He is genuinely interested in traditional musicians and what they have to offer to music in Ireland. Although he is the owner, he is often seen at the floor of the Cobblestone, hustling alongside his employees, meeting clientele, serving drinks, and managing from a personal level.

Much of the interest in a practice such as Irish traditional music comes down to the personalities of people like Tom driving that interest. He, and other driving personalities, are partially influential because of their charisma. Max Weber discusses the concept of charisma in his book, *On Charisma and Institution Building* (Weber 1968). Charisma, according to Weber, is “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional qualities” (Ibid., xviii). Weber states that charismatic individuals are motivated by their inner determination (Ibid., 20). Tom Mulligan, an influential publican, is a natural boss, friendly, non-authoritative as his people skills reveal, yet he is still followed and admired for his charismatic leadership.

Tom comes from a family of singers and instrumentalists himself, and he is so proud of the music at The Cobblestone that he produced a CD and gifted one to me. He introduced me to others in the bar, including singers, dancers, and bartenders, and prompted me to speak to them about the social life in the bar. His enthusiasm promotes musicians and might even help them become better known in the traditional music community.

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100 Max Weber’s theories about charismatic leadership apply here. However, he further theorizes charismatic leaders as authoritative and demanding of their followers—too large and problematic of a topic for the scope of this thesis.
Tom agreed to meet me in the Generator Hostel lobby where I was staying since it is very clean and comfortable, we could have tea, and it was quiet enough for an interview. We spoke for about an hour and he was very enthusiastic. He took me back to his car to give me about ten CDs to borrow, very trusting! . . . He then took me into the bar to show me pictures that adorn the walls, including a picture of Joe Heaney’s funeral, which was also the last picture of Tom’s father. He gave me a shirt with the Cobblestone on the front and on the back the phrase: “A drinking pub with a music problem.” Admiring that tag, I asked him who came up with it, and he said that the poet Brendan Behan had said he was “A drinker with a writing problem.”

(Dublin Feb 2015)

After our interview, Tom suggested I meet Mick O’Grady, a regular singer and fiddler at the Cobblestone. He drove me to Mick’s house that day and dropped me off for an impromptu interview. Mick spoke highly of Tom and The Cobblestone and the role he plays in the traditional music world. I asked him what was special about The Cobblestone, to which he replied:

Mick: The best music in Dublin can be found there. That all comes from Tom Mulligan, whose family were steeped in music. I remember his father was a fiddle player, and his brother a piper, two brothers. Tom is interested in music and musicians and singers and it comes down the line for that. Doing a terrific business.
Carrie: Yeah. Seems like it. Everybody knows about The Cobblestone.
Mick: Yes, they do.
Carrie: All around Ireland.
Mick: Yeah. Even in America, I think.
Carrie: Yeah, I think some of us, Tom was saying there are travel shows that have come down to broadcast in America.
Mick: Is that so?
Carrie: Yeah!
Mick: Well, a lot of it has to do with who he is. He’s from a musical family going way back, and he has interest in musicians and how they’re getting on and that’s a lot to do with it. And it’s an old fashioned pub, too. There’s no television. That’s a big thing. It took a while, ya know, it took a while. In the area there’s not many people coming in. . . . Lots of pubs over the years have tried the music because they see the success of a place like The Cobblestone. And a lot have tried it but it hasn’t worked for them.
Carrie: Do you know why?
Mick: See, some of it has to do with Tom Mulligan, again. He loves the music and he’s playing a lot now, himself. Flute. Others just try it to make
money, and they have no interest in the music, it’s just to make money. I think that’s why.

(O’Grady Feb 2015)

Tom brought global interest to local music by allowing travel program film crews to create pieces about The Cobblestone. Micheál Ó Súilleabháin,\(^\text{101}\) in his lecture about Irish traditional musician and composer Seán Ó Riada, said that Seán, too, was an individual who brought global interest to local music. He commented, “The desire, passion, and ambition behind his work was an early example of linking the local to the global, a catch cry which was to gain increasing attention as the century progressed, reaching a high point in the 1990’s” (Ó Súilleabháin 2004, 4). Ó Súilleabháin recognizes the importance of the individual on gaining recognition for traditional music. In much the same way, it could be said that Tom Mulligan’s desire, passion, and ambition is what draws musicians and singers, locally and internationally, to his bar.

Tom mentioned that he is not a publican in the sense that he is not trying to make money by running the pub. He said that if he wanted to make money, he would not be in the pub business. Weber contends that charismatic leaders are not always interested in money (Weber 1968, 21). Likewise, Tom Mulligan is more interested in the success of his musical pub with its clientele than he is in making extraneous profit. He commented:

It’s a community more than anything. It’s not about money or anything. We make a bit, I’ve tried to be a millionaire a couple of times and failed dismally, so, I just think now that there’s a bigger legacy there.

(Mulligan Feb 2015)

Instead of profit, he simply wants to create a place where people can come and enjoy themselves, play music, dance, give and take lessons, and socialize (Mulligan Feb 2015). The pub itself exhibits its own identity as a ‘traditional music pub,’ setting it apart from other Dublin pubs.

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\(^{101}\) Professor Emeritus at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick.
Instrumentalists and singers at the bar have conveyed to me that by removing the televisions and introducing clientele to each other, Tom has been successful with his goal. Tom added that a couple took their wedding photos at The Cobblestone because they first met there. He reiterated often how The Cobblestone and the traditional music that comes through it is about the social aspect, and he is responsible for helping that come to fruition. Tom does not sing, but he supports and promotes traditional singing. He even showed me a photograph on his wall of his father playing pipes for Connemara singer Joe Heaney’s funeral. He appreciates and encourages The Night Before Larry Got Stretched, giving them the back room for their session, away from the normal noise of the main bar. Likewise, he promotes singing at the instrumental sessions which occur daily in the front bar. Other publicans may encourage singing in their bars, but I have observed Tom to be more prominent than other publicans, exhibiting a more central role in fostering space for singing.

The Leader

The Leader is vitally important for sustaining tradition. He or she is responsible not just for guiding the session and ensuring that attendees who wish to sing can sing, but for helping visitors feel welcome and encouraging relationships among singers (Williams 2013). During the session, the Leader constantly scans the room, looking for familiar and unfamiliar faces, saying hello, making jokes, guiding the night along, jobs previously mentioned in the chapter on space. Outside of the session, good leaders still check up on regular attendees, invite them for dinner or drinks, remember faces from other sessions, encourage attendance to other sessions and concerts, and are strong social networkers. In my experience, Grace Toland, for instance, is a leader as well as an archivist and singer, and her interest in the singing from Inishowen helps singers feel confident about sharing their songs.
The Leader encourages the development of shared habits in his or her group.

Turino writes:

Thinking about the self and personality in terms of constellations of habits is both realistic and analytically useful in that habits, like human life, are processes. The repetitiousness of habits offers a high degree of stability and continuity to living, yet as in the process of life, with each repetition there is the potential for growth or change.

(Turino 2008, 101)

What I consider an influential leader fosters this growth and change of habits, and in turn fosters ideas of the self and personality. Turino clarifies that the self is the total number of habits which determine how humans think and feel, but identity “involves the partial and variable selection of habits and attributes that we use to represent ourselves to ourselves and to others, as well as those aspects that are perceived by ourselves and by others as salient” (Ibid., 102). The charismatic leader attracts those who have developed senses of identity through selecting habits, such as in the way they attract singers to singing circles, organize the event, and ask attendees to sing.

Traditional singers may be drawn to sessions and gatherings because of the leader present. While Weber theorized charisma as a form of leadership as stated above, Turino continues by theorizing charisma as a factor in the success of performers. The performer in this context is not a singer on the stage, but the performing leader, a participatory role. Turino states:

In a related phenomenon, some performers attract audiences through special personal qualities often referred to as charisma. Charismatic individuals have the ability to make the people they interact with feel special about themselves and feel an intimate connection—through body language, tone of voice, and other physical signs as much as by what is overtly said and done. Some people can project charisma when interacting with groups and even crowds of people; the careers of politicians, salespeople, and performers are greatly enhanced by this ability.

(Ibid., 64)
The effectiveness of the host’s leadership is also enhanced by this ability. Those who attend their sessions may feel special, raising the level of their sense of purpose. They feel a connection with the Leader, and as a result, with each other.

My first visit to the Ennis Singers Club for doctoral research was nearly two years after I last visited Ennis and Miltown Malbay. Imagine my pleasant surprise when the leader, Michael O’Brien, remembered me:

_The Fear an Tí, Michael O’Brien, said hello to me, asking my name. He then asked me where he met me before. We figured out that we both met in Miltown Malbay for the Willie Clancy Festival in 2012, and when I went to Ennis for my ethnography project for the MA in 2011. He knew right away, “Aren’t you here studying? Where have I seen you before?” Good memory!_  
(Ennis Oct 2014)

Michael, the Leader, remembered me, the visitor, drawing connections to past projects to make the session more inviting. This small gesture helped me feel like a member of the group rather than a stranger. The Leader contributed to the overall sense of belonging of members within the group.

Different coordinators led each session at the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing. Annette led the first session on Friday night. The structure of the session was loose, as people sang when they felt inspired, bursting out in song without having to be asked and therefore maintaining the flow. However, Annette still encouraged quieter singers to sing, and stepped in to make sure a handful of singers did not monopolize the night. I appreciated the way in which she asked me to sing during that session:

_Annette sat down at the table where I was sitting and made some light and quiet conversation during and between the singing. She asked me my name, where I am from, and if I am a singer myself. When I told her that I am a student studying singing in Limerick, she nodded and left our table. A few songs later, I was standing in the outer rim of the room. Annette came up to me, grabbed my hand, and drew me to the center of the room. She introduced me, telling the crowd that I am a student and I will now sing a song. Because of this kind and gentle introduction, I was able to sing. Had I not been encouraged quietly, I felt too intimidated among all the great singers in that room and most likely would not have burst into a song._  
(Miltown Malbay Nov 2014)
I have analyzed space and atmosphere and its contribution to intimidation or comfort, and particularly the role of the organizer to manage and control the space. Annette’s actions relate directly to what was addressed earlier. She, the Leader, encouraged singing by shyer singers among the periphery such as myself, and thus contributed to the success of the evening.

Months later, I brought this situation up during my interview with Jerry O’Reilly and Rosie Davis:

Carrie: I think what Annette did, touched me, I think at that festival, on the first night of singing, she came out and held my hand.
Jerry: Yeah. Come on in, like.
Carrie: Rather than just someone from far.
Jerry: No, she’s very, she’s very-
Rosie: Very sensitive in that way.
Jerry: As somebody who was organizing something, that’s what you aim for. We try to do it at the Frank Harte Festival, but that, I think, the Frankie Harte festival is much bigger. It really is. I mean we had singers last year, were you at the Frank Harte Festival?
Carrie: A couple years ago.
Jerry: So you know how big it is. On the Friday night I think we had 120 in there. And then the singing and walking tour in excess of two-hundred people. It’s much bigger. It’s quite difficult to generate that sort of convivial inclusive atmosphere that you get in Clare. And you put your finger on it, Carrie, on the fact that it is inclusive. . . .That’s the idea of it. That’s pretty much the thing and Annette, the one who runs it, that’s her reign. That’s hers. . . .
Rosie: Since you know the people who go into these things, there’s very much determination to be open and kind and friendly. That’s been my experience. So long as you don’t abuse that, you’re okay. If you are really annoying and when they get you up to sing will monopolize. It happens all the time. But generally speaking everyone is really wanting to make a nice time of it.

(Davis and O’Reilly May 2015)

The individual is responsible for creating a sense of inclusivity, and the Leader is a major figure who maintains an inclusive atmosphere in the session (Fairbairn 1993). Jerry and Rosie speak about the role of the organizer, that it is a job to make attendees feel included, though this job is much deeper than simply reading inclusive words from a script. The individual in this case, Annette, seemed to genuinely care.
about the people in the session and wanted them to enjoy themselves and feel comfortable to sing. She, as the Leader and the individual, worked the room, guiding the community and encouraging the music, thus engendering singing.

Jerry is a well-known, charismatic leader, and as an individual, is connected extensively with traditional singing and dancing throughout Ireland and abroad. As with Tom Mulligan, Jerry’s influence as a leader is can be partially attributed to his charisma (Weber 1968) in a friendly way that attracts singers to him and encourages participation (Turino 2008).

Jerry identifies as a singer, an organizer, a lecturer, and a dancer, and all these identities work together to define his role within the singing community. Each of these roles are chosen and developed upon by the self (Turino 2008). Jerry involves himself almost every night of the week with music and dance, teaching set dancing, leading sessions, organizing festivals, giving lectures, and singing. He even taught Irish set dancing and sang traditional songs in Aberdeen, Scotland for the Button Boxes and Moothies festival, a weekend dedicated to button accordions, harmonicas, and mouth organs, spreading his love for singing and dancing to other countries. Jerry believes the perfect night combines singing, dancing, instrumental music, stories, jokes, conversations, games, and overall enjoyable socializing and music making. Singing sessions, Jerry contends, are good because they are one of the few current contexts in which traditional singing still thrives, but they remove songs from their true place in an evening full of various activities. He actively works to keep the social music and dance together, singing songs during instrumental sessions and dancing with Rosie, who is also a step and set dancer.

This is an example of social identity theory, described in Chapter Two.
As the leader, Jerry gives himself the job of helping singers feel welcome and drawing in listeners and attendees to the sessions. He believes Irish social singing is alive and healthy, understanding that contexts continually change, but as long as people are singing, he has no worry about the songs dying. As an individual, he personally makes sure that singers are singing and songs are remembered and shared. I can think of countless ways in which I personally felt a sense of belonging with Jerry and his friends—only a few of which can fit in the confines of this thesis. Each of these paragraphs represents separate occasions on which I have interacted with Jerry:

--I visited The Night Before Larry Got Stretched the following week [after the book launch of The Singing Will Never Be Done (Clune 2014)]. I went early, sitting on my own, and by 9:15 p.m., a few more people filed into the room, included Jerry. He saw me and laughed, saying “There was a girl who looked just like you in Miltown Malbay last week!” We talked about the book launch of a little bit and he told me about the nightmares of going through the final editing stages of the book.

(Dublin Sep 2014)

--I met Jerry O’Reilly sitting at a table with Rosie and two friends. He greeted me with the friendliest hello, asking how I got here this time. No bicycle! He asked me to tell my travel story from the book launch to his friends, when, because public transportation to Miltown Malbay is scarce, I took a bus to Lahinch instead and cycled for nearly ten miles to the Spanish Point Golf Club so that I could attend the launch. Jerry found this story quite amusing and retells it often.

(Miltown Malbay Nov 2014)

--The next month, I arrived to the Cobblestone at about 9:20 and took a seat by Jerry and Rosie. More people piled in, squeezing in where they could, including the floor. I talked with Jerry and Rosie about the Sheffield Festival of Carols, run by Professor Emeritus Ian Russell from the University of Aberdeen, which I attended the week prior. Jerry and Ian are close friends, and Jerry has been to the festival in the past, though not this year. We also talked about the Clare festival.

(Dublin Dec 2014)

--Jerry came to speak at the University of Limerick a couple of times during my time there. Each time I saw him there, he teased about how he runs into me everywhere, and I say the same about him!

(Unofficial Notes: Limerick Feb 2015)

--About three weeks after the Song Symposium at the University of Limerick, for which Jerry was an invited guest, was the Button Boxes and Moothies Festival.
in Aberdeen. I happened to be in Aberdeen during that time for my studies, and I found out during the symposium that Jerry and Rosie were coming too. As they came to check in for the festival, they saw me and gave me hugs. Jerry teased, “Fancy meeting you here! Weren’t you in Limerick a couple weeks ago? Are you following me?”

(Unofficial Notes: Aberdeen Nov 2015)

--My parents visited Ireland for Christmas in 2015 and spent a few days in Dublin. On the Friday we were there, we stepped into O’Donoghues near Marrion Square and saw Jerry and Rosie sitting in an instrumental session. Jerry recognized me right away and made room for us to sit in the already packed room. My parents appreciated this gesture, especially since they never met him before. Although an instrumental session, Jerry and another man sitting with us sang some songs and Rosie danced. I told the two of them that I was coming to the ‘Puddin’ Night,’ the special Christmas session, at An Góilín that evening. When we arrived at the Teacher’s Club, we enter a room of about fifty people, and Rosie and Jerry found us, bringing us straight to their table where they saved us seats. This table happened to be the head table, where the Fear an Tí of the night and the guest singers and their families sat. The guests this evening were two members of the traditional singing ensemble The Voice Squad, Gerry Cullen and Phil Callery. Other organizers and family members of the guests also sat at the table. My parents were delighted to be sitting with such esteemed singers and especially appreciative that Jerry and Rosie made us feel welcome instantly by saving us those seats.

(Unofficial Notes: Dublin Dec 2015)

Each of these vignettes are about my own interactions with Jerry; they also represent his engagement with the singing community in Ireland and abroad. His warm gestures and open personality are attractive to me. He promotes the singing because of his own genuine interest in songs, sessions, and singers. He and Rosie were especially kind in the final example above when they invited us to sit with them at An Góilín. My parents, complete outsiders to Irish singing sessions, felt welcome and comfortable. Hazel Fairbairn discusses the hierarchy of spatial arrangement in instrumental sessions, describing, “spatial arrangement, the proximity of a player to the nucleus of the session, is the first level of organisation. Unless there is an unoccupied and unreserved chair, a newcomer would probably expect to occupy a chair on the outer edge of the session circle, and may be subsequently invited into the group” (Fairbairn 1993, 34). While she describes instrumental sessions, the same can be true of singing sessions. This is why
Rosie and Jerry inviting my family to the organizer’s table was so significant. We were fully welcomed into the session. For my own personal experience, Jerry exhibits the characteristics of an organizer detailed in Chapter Three which are needed to contribute to successful singing sessions.

Jerry and Rosie spoke about the role of the Leader and the importance of such an individual for the success of singing sessions:

Jerry: There’s a huge amount of stuff that goes on casually. Particularly in An Góilín. But, eye contact. You wouldn’t just look over at somebody when somebody else is singing and that’s like saying you should sing next. And I’d be watching, if I’m doing Fear an Tí, M.C., I’d be watching who hasn’t sung and I’d be trying to encourage them, and sometimes you’ll have to say, “Come on Rosie.”

Rosie: But part of what you are able to do is you know the songs people have got.

Jerry: Yes.

Rosie: And if it was, if we had a whole load of murders or something, you will look at somebody, and they will know that you want them to come in and break this of stuff.

Jerry: Or of drowning tragedies. And, say, you know that they would have a comic song about somebody falling into the water, so that will break the whole cycle of the downward spiral.

[laughing]

Rosie: Because it’s the job of the Fear an Tí is to make an evening of it. He’s the Father of the House.

Carrie: I actually really appreciate when you’re the Fear an Tí because you seem to bring everybody in the room in.

Jerry: I think that’s your job. I say, “Look, we’re all here to enjoy ourselves and to enjoy the songs so let’s do it.” Sometimes you succeed and sometimes you don’t, Carrie, I have to tell you that. Sometimes I’ve been doing Fear an Tí and the work would be very, very hard.

Rosie: Sometimes the mood of the room needs that. It’s not always about being happy and joy. Sometimes the things you meet in people was, you get involved in their lives in a way that is very hard to do. So, you go to a singing club . . . and some people have known each other for ages. You’ve known them since they were teenagers. They’ve seen all of each other’s lives. It’s not just you’ll sing now [snaps her fingers].

(Ibid.)

The Fear an Tí or Bean an Tí is a form of leadership. He or she knows the singers in the room very well, what songs they have, what stories they tell, why they sing certain songs. When the Fear or Bean an Tí does not know a singer, he or she
asks. Jerry walks the room, taking time to talk to almost everybody who comes in. He leads, but he also welcomes. He appreciates what singers have to offer. Because of his genuine interest in singers and thorough, pleasant leadership, he helps to ensure that the social life of traditional singing in Ireland continues. Because the singing thrives around him thanks to his personal investment, he is optimistic about the health of traditional singing in the future—a statement he has made in interviews, conversations, and publically in a discussion at the University of Limerick Traditional Song Symposium in October 2015.

Conclusion

Grace Toland was a key informant for describing the power of individuals within the singing community. She pointed out to me that while traditional singing in Ireland is a broad area of study, it was the individuals I was to meet throughout my
studies who would inform the direction I took for further research—and she was right. I was guided by my informants in choosing the aspects of the singing session scene in Ireland on which to focus. Grace said that the individuals are involved in a number of activities and are responsible for traditional song’s transmission:

I think that’s always been the way within the tradition that individual groups, individual people, can have huge influences because they do something. It’s not all organic and some sort of a social thing. . . . Individuals play a huge role in transmitting song, transmitting music, teaching. That’s the same with songs, and in Inishowen 103 . . . that idea that you have to do something. You have to. (Toland Feb 2015)

Grace continued speaking about the influence of individuals within the community of singing:

It’s all about individuals. It’s all characters just coming in. We all have very different roles, and I would say that my whole life is bound up with all these people. I mean, they’re my friends. They’re not just singers I meet, they’re my friends. I must say that sense of wherever you go and you search out singers, you’ll always find the common kind of attitude and sometimes I think people who are involved in this have an attitude to life as well, and that’s just filled up our lives. And people have been really kind to us in good times and bad times. It’s really the most important social network I have. . . . We see each other probably more than we see our own families. (Ibid.)

Individuals make up the fabric underlying the social life of Irish traditional singing. In this chapter I have explored the multiple roles played by individuals as both a part of the traditional singing community and as active individuals responsible, whether consciously or not, for the sustainability of the singing. They may not be mediators or policy makers for larger organizations, but their participation within the community, from singing to leading to archiving, contributes to the overall success of the singing social life.

The roles of the Participant, the Publican, the Collector, the Archivist, and the Leader are each important in the sustainability of the social life of Irish traditional singing.

103 Referring to the active promotion of Inishowen songs through the festival, monthly session, and the archival Inishowen Song Project.
singing. Participation within the singing community develops a sense of identity, shared habits, and lived experience. The proactive individuals who fulfill these roles strengthen the traditional singing community through their individual efforts in safeguarding or engendering singing. By creating inclusive social spaces, inviting singing, and promoting songs, they play key roles for engendering the social singing community.

The driving motivations of particular individuals are of course as diverse as their individual life experience, but across the board the shared goal that has evolved among them is better thought of as a feeling that they must work together with shared ideals to actively create conditions conducive to social singing (Turino 2008). I have observed that they tend to engender singing practice by opening spaces suitable for traditional song or encouraging singers within the sessions. They maintain continuity with the song tradition’s past, strengthened through collecting and archiving, while accommodating changing contexts and content, which will be investigated further in Chapter Six. Not only are the individuals responsible for ensuring the sustainability of social singing, but they are fully invested in the music, often becoming close friends, as Grace described, because of their shared habits and lived experience which stem from their participation (Turino 2008). My assessment of these observations on the individuals in the field support what Thomas Turino, I. Sheldon Posen, and Jane Sugarman discuss regarding identity, participation, and belonging. According to my observations, these individuals seem to support each other most of the time, despite some fundamental differences in opinion about how singing should continue and how it is approached (see Chapter Seven). Through the enthusiastic accounts they shared with me in interviews, they have highlighted the importance of each personality for the success of the singing sessions.
CHAPTER SIX
THE NOTION OF TRADITION IN SAFEGUARDING AND ENGENDERING

The first portion of this thesis investigated the singing session as a current context for traditional singing in Ireland. Among the many features of these sessions, I looked closely at the songs, discussed in Chapter Four, and the individuals involved in session formation and sustainability, discussed in Chapter Five. My examination of the phenomena of the sessions, the songs, and the individuals provides the foundation here for an investigation into what is meant by the term ‘tradition’ in the context of the singing sessions. I have chosen to leave the potentially problematic exploration of the term ‘tradition’ until after my investigation of sessions and the individuals involved because this discussion utilizes the information discovered about songs, singing, and the work of the individuals within the scope of the sessions. Definitions and problematizations stem from what is happening in the singing sessions. The term ‘tradition’ as it is commonly defined and used colloquially is employed by singers in Irish singing sessions—singing sessions are made up of what could be called traditional songs and traditional singers.

In this chapter, I apply ideas for working with risks that might arise when safeguarding heritage to risks that can occur to traditional singing when the notion of tradition is treated as unchanging. Suggestions for working with perceived risks to the sustainability of heritage more generally, can apply directly to the work that can be done within singing sessions. The de-construction and re-construction of ideas of tradition used by my informants reveals the importance of allowing for flexibility
within the singing tradition so that the singing can be relevant to singers living in a modern society, today. This chapter engages much with secondary source material. Findings developed upon in this chapter are in response to what I have observed and expanded upon in the singing sessions throughout the previous three chapters. Therefore, I use the secondary source material to embark on previously established and critiqued discussion on tradition as a secure foundation to explain and further delimit the themes which have emerged in my ethnographies.

Nicholas Carolan delves deeper into the complexities of defining Irish traditional music in his pamphlet for the Irish Traditional Music Archive called, “What is Irish Traditional Music?” (Carolan 1991). He writes

> It is music of a living popular tradition. While it incorporates a large body of material inherited from the past, this does not form a static repertory but is constantly changing through the shedding of material, the reintroduction of neglected items, the composition of new material, and the creative altering in performance of the established repertory.

(Carolan 1991)

He suggests that traditional music is constantly evolving with each performance. A close examination of the usages of the term ‘tradition’ in my conversations with singing session participants reveals a difference between what singers say they do at sessions, such as sing traditional songs, and what they actually do. As well as de-constructing the meaning of ‘tradition’ in this chapter, I also will explore the way it is used by practitioners I have interviewed and draw conclusions based on my own involvement and observations in the field.

In this chapter, I investigate perceived risks to tradition identified by scholars of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, which include its inventory, revival, globalization, and modernization. Within those themes, I discuss ways in which tradition may become crystallized, which I define as a stagnant representation of how music or dance may have been practiced in a romanticized notion of the past.
Romanticizing the past can stem from holding on to or maintaining ideas of what it means to be traditional. Examples of crystallized heritage in Ireland might include the folk village and dinner shows at Bunratty Castle or staged instrumental sessions in Temple Bar in Dublin, for instance. Then I review ways in which these scholars suggest creatively working with modernization by re-contextualizing traditional practices. I apply these more global strategies to the specific context of singing sessions. Safeguarding, while it avoids the problems associated with notions of preservation, comes with its own risks that are discussed in this chapter. Engendering, on the other hand, may better emphasize the productive capacity of such a nuanced term as ‘tradition’ to address a community’s present and future. Interventions aimed at engendering such expression are the best approach, in my opinion, to achieving sustainability now and in times to come.

Addressing the topics of safeguarding and engendering the social life of Irish traditional singing requires addressing what is being safeguarded or engendered. What is meant by tradition, and how is its safety and perpetuation secured? How does an individual or organization approach tradition, a word that is used so often yet is so difficult to define? Discourse concerning UNESCO’s *Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention* addresses strategies for approaching fragile, living cultural practices. Irish traditional singing sessions and festivals demonstrate the strategies discussed in ICH literature, mainly through examples of fluid interpretations of traditional singing while still honoring the integrity of the tradition.

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This chapter challenges the notion of tradition, aiming to reveal interpretations of the term as applicable to its varied practice in singing sessions. I explore ways in which tradition is practiced in the singing sessions I attended and ways its portrayal may challenge conventional definitions of the term. By holding fast onto a fixed idea of tradition in singing sessions, we risk the same perceived challenges to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage as conveyed by UNESCO scholars. Exploring discourse about these challenges in the greater realm of ICH provides framework for what is said about risks to sustaining Irish traditional singing sessions. I suggest working with changes in traditional song and singing due to perceived twenty-first century challenges by allowing adaptability and flexibility into its practice. I argue that tradition, whatever that may be, should be made relevant within people’s lives today.

**Defining ‘Tradition’**

My own findings in the field are contrary to the simple definitions of ‘tradition’ presented in Chapter One. While traditional song is, by name and common practice, a knowledge or skill that has been handed down orally through generations, and while it represents so-called “cultural-continuity,” to use the phrasing found in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, I have discovered that the actual practice of tradition is far more nuanced. Drawing from UNESCO’s definition, ‘tradition’ may best be used to define a certain classification of song, but my own findings through fieldwork and interviews discount Sean Ó Riada’s definition that what is labeled as ‘traditional’ is untouched by the western world. The following analysis, where I engage with both established literary sources concerning tradition and draw upon my own field research to support or oppose such writings, develops upon my informed belief that tradition can coincide with modernity, and that modernity can permeate tradition, contributing to a maleable, changing, but relevant and living concept.
I asked traditional singers and enthusiasts to share their own definitions of Irish traditional song and their answers reveal how difficult the concept is to clarify. Answers may have started with a seemingly straightforward and clear characterization, as in the following examples of statements from Annette Munnelly, Grace Toland, and Macdara Yeates, but then answers became increasingly nuanced.

Annette described a time when Tom was collecting songs from a singer named John Reilly from the Travelling community: “John, who hadn’t two ha’pence roped together, but he had this wonderful wealth of material, and he had hundreds of songs” (Munnelly May 2015). She continued, saying that when her husband had looked for funding to help record John, he was told by one man from an established traditional music organization, “Well, he doesn’t sing traditionally. He’s not a traditional singer. He doesn’t have any decorated style or anything like that. He’s not a singer” (Ibid.). Answering the question of what she thought was traditional singing, she replied, “Well to me a traditional singer is somebody who has songs that have been handed down from one generation to another. That’s a traditional singer for me” (Ibid.). To Annette, traditional singing is not about the style of the singing, as it was for that unnamed ‘authority’, but is instead about its transmission. John Reilly had a wealth of songs that he acquired through the years, therefore making him a traditional singer.

Grace tried to explain exactly what constitutes traditional singing, but admitted that she did not have a clear and specific answer. She listed characteristics of Inishowen singing in a presentation, such as taking a breath in the middle of the line instead of the end. But, she then added, “I’m very conscious of Kevin and Jim [other Inishowen Festival organizers] besides me going, ‘What did she just say? Did we? No we didn’t!’” (Toland Feb 2015). While Inishowen singers did not comment on her presentation of

105 She requested I not write the name.
singing characteristics, she was worried about falsely prescribing such characteristics. There is not one set of rules that defines traditional singing, including the general guidelines for traditional singing aesthetics as discussed in Chapter Four. Rules which define one person’s or one community’s singing practice may not apply consistently or clearly to another.

Macdara began defining traditional singing comparatively:

There’s a difference between traditional singing and folk singing. I can tell you what, traditional singing is not folk singing. The word ‘folk’ seems to apply to anything with an acoustic instrument involved. You can literally do anything with no relevance to folk, as in the music of the people, the old, kind of native music and rural music of certain countries. So [traditional singing], it’s not folk singing.

(Yeates Feb 2015)

He then described common traditional singing styles as defining features:

The traditional singing, if I had to define it, and it’s very very tough. Singing, as far as singing styles, is something that went on in Ireland from anywhere after the fifteenth century in the English language, is a particular style. In Ireland, people say it’s nasal although we know there’s plenty of exceptions to that.

(Ibid.)

Macdara’s definition of tradition evolved into a concept with rather porous boundaries:

My definition of traditional song or traditional singing is fairly loose. I don’t think there’s really an overarching set of themes that you can apply to traditional song to make it work. Sometimes someone is singing a song that is a loose interpretation of traditional song. Whatever. But you know, they can make it relevent. Someone will come in and sing a song that’s in no way traditional but the way they sing it or the way they put it kind of works.

(Ibid.)

He refers his characterization to the act of singing at The Night Before Larry Got Stretched. What matters to him here, more than whether a song is traditional in origin or transmission, the defining feature in this case is the way the song is sung. He uses the term “relevant,” meaning that the singers must present the song in the session so that its performance is appropriate for the current context, regardless of the origins of the song.
At this point, Macdara’s more concrete definition stops, and he speaks of traditional singing more as a feeling:

There’s nothing really you can define by it, other than a good feeling. You can listen to it and go, “That’s not traditional,” and if someone asks you to say why, you’ll start contradicting yourself. It’s a good thing. And I think everyone mostly who comes to this session will agree. You’ll hear something and go, “Ah that’s not traditional.” Once again, there’s not a problem with that. I mean, if someone’s gonna sing a traditional song, maybe, but not have a traditional style, that’s perfectly welcome in this. But yeah, what is traditional singing? I don’t know.

(Ibid.)

Contributing to a recurring theme throughout this thesis, Macdara states that songs that may not be considered traditional are still welcome in the singing sessions. Regardless, this statement reveals the internal dialogue that may occur when someone sings a so-called non-traditional song, and by knowing what is not traditional, one knows better what is traditional.

As a final commentary, encompassing all the varying answers and perspectives to which the ongoing question of “What is tradition?” is answered, Macdara escapes the contradictions and frequent exceptions to definitions by asserting, “Traditional singing, I suppose, is just whatever we say it is” (Ibid.). This small sentence is possibly the most telling quote from all my observations and interviews about the nature of the singing sessions and the practice of traditional singing. Practitioners are humans with opinions, and their practice is going to reflect and perpetuate their personal understandings of what it is they are singing. Indeed in the context of singing circle participants’ discourse that is exactly what it is: a flexible and sometimes contested term around which participants array their multiple and complex understandings of what brings them together.106

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106 Pierre Bourdieu wrote that within any community, particular values usually have both an orthodox and heterodox dimension—the two together, which mutually constitute one another, he terms ‘doxa’. See Pierre Bourdieu (1994), Structure, Habitus, Power: Basis for a Theory of Symbolic Power, *Culture/*
Based on these conversations about the meaning of tradition and my own observations, I would characterize traditional singing as practiced and generally understood in the Irish singing session community as traditional singing, which I discussed briefly in Chapter One. Traditional songs are usually learned aurally, whether through the singing of previous generations, or increasingly today through audio recordings. They often have an anonymous composer, and singers I have heard like to debate on anonymous song origins. The country of origin is usually Irish, but often songs cross borders between Scotland and England as well, as is evident in the Child Ballads. The performance style, as discussed in Chapter Four, tends to be straight-toned, solo unaccompanied, and placed in the chest voice, but I have heard exceptions. Traditional songs are often strophic, meaning they have several verses. English language songs are often ballads, or narratives. Song composers today may compose in the traditional style, following these guidelines. However, an adherence to traditional style in modern composition has been contested, which will be discussed in this chapter.

**Challenges to Safeguarding Tradition**

The discussion of problems that can arise when safeguarding heritage shows how traditional cultures and practices are challenged externally by factors that accompany modernization. From this larger perspective, a connection can be made with the Irish singing sessions. As described in Chapter One, heritage is a display—not a display in the sense of portraying the singing to others as on a performance stage for tourists, but a display of what has been transmitted from previous generations—of the songs these people sing in the setting of the singing session (Ronström 2014).

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Therefore, the discussion of issues revolving around safeguarding heritage here can apply to an investigation into how tradition is challenged in Irish singing sessions.

Scholars have discussed the concerns involving safeguarding in a modern world, and the risks they identify imply particular kinds of counter-strategies. Modernization and globalization are often viewed as threats to heritage by UNESCO scholars, but scholars with whom I engage throughout this chapter provide suggestions for ways to address these concerns in order to minimize or reverse the diminution of heritage. Scholars also provide different perspectives on these so-called risks, which can lead to creative new ways of approaching the material (Bannerman 2003).

Inventories, Collections, and Archives

UNESCO inventories heritages that it supports. The creation of lists was an idea met with much apprehension during the drafting of the 2003 Convention, but UNESCO ultimately decided lists are necessary for managing safeguarding endeavors. Richard Kurin writes that convention creators saw inventories as a management tool, arguing that they are the most efficient way for countries to know what they are safeguarding. Inventories are also a primary step toward defining the ICH of particular communities so that they might claim intellectual property rights over their practices. However, several creators of the convention thought the construction of inventories was a waste of time and money that would not contribute to actually safeguarding ICH (Kurin 2007, 16).

Creating lists can be exclusionary (Smith and Akagawa 2009). When making a list, heritage is measured against a set of criteria, which impose particular meanings and values onto that heritage (Ibid., 4). In his article “Intangible Heritage as a List: From Masterpieces to Representation” (Hafstein 2009), Valdimar Tr. Hafstein writes that the most controversial subject in drafting the Convention involved “the creation,
designation, and purpose of its lists” (Ibid., 93). He adds that intangible cultural heritage is “an official seal of approval,” and that whatever is not recognized “ends instead in the dustbin of history” (Ibid., 105). Lists, he continues, are distinguished by boundaries and discontinuity of their contents from everything excluded (Ibid.).

The difficulties raised by the use of selective inventories apply as well to the collection and archiving of Irish traditional songs. To avoid investing too much authority in the archived repertoire, collectors might acknowledge that their collections are relatively small representations of a huge wealth of songs in Ireland. Collecting can also be a prescriptive practice, whether or not that is the collector’s intention, as collectors decide from whom they collect songs. Alternatively, collecting can be a useful way to protect a representative sample of songs and to share them with greater audiences. In this way, collectors and archivists working with modern archives such as the Irish Traditional Music Archive can be said to utilize some of the tools of globalization such as technology to share their music.

One strategy to avoid the problems of prescription and omission when collecting is to allow the singers to record themselves. Grace spoke about a recording project launched by English singer Sam Lee through which singers archive themselves. They therefore do not have to wait for a collector to discover them or decide to use their songs:

He set up a project as well, that he wants people to archive themselves, so he’s providing the platform. I think it’s wonderful that people not wait for a collector, but people can archive very immediately in your own community. I really like that idea. There’s lots of interesting things, so I’m hoping that’s safe for that. We can start to identify in the archive that if we have weaknesses in there that we can be truly representative of singing communities right across the island. Because, you need to be sensitive in how you do these things and get the right people to do it, because some people are better at collecting than others. (Toland Feb 2015)
Sam Lee is a folk music artist from London who apprenticed with Scottish Traveller singer Stanley Robertson, nephew of well-known singer Jeannie Robertson. His recording project, called the Song Collectors Collective, can be found at songcollectors.org. Singers from around the United Kingdom and Ireland have utilized the project, and their recordings can be found on the website (Song Collectors Collective 2016). Because recording devices, such as smart phones, have become so accessible and easy to use, the recording of songs and singers can now be open to participation throughout the traditional singing community. The roles of the collector and archivist are much less distinct from that of the singer than in previous times. As a result, song collections are now becoming more representative of the singing community as a whole, not just the community as heard through the filtering mind and ears of one collector.

Changing cultural practice does not necessarily involve decreased significance, as change is often necessary to preserve significance (Deacon 2004). Thus, change should be documented and managed to prevent the loss of significance to the culture bearers (Ibid., 39). Changing contexts for traditional singing should be documented as well as the traditional ones in order to capture its continuing significance to the traditional singers. Singing sessions themselves have become important sites for collectors and archivists working to document contemporary singing life and to increase wider awareness of, and perhaps increase the significance of, singing in people’s lives.

107 I met Stanley’s son Anthony Robertson in Aberdeen. The Elphinstone Institute at the University of Aberdeen released a CD of Stanley Robertson’s songs and stories (See https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/oct/07/stanley-robertson-obituary).

Stemming from my interview with Grace Toland and interactions with other singers who have spoken about collecting and archives, such inventories can bring attention and an increased public awareness to traditional singing. As well as facilitating a broader spectrum of representation among collectors, the increased access to digital recording devices and the easy access to internet sites are making collections and archives more popular and immediately relevant to contemporary singing practice today (Vallely 2011, 568). For example, Grace Toland’s work with the Irish Traditional Music Archive and the Inishowen Project is invaluable in promoting and increasing awareness of traditional songs and singing. Collecting and archiving today are effective forms of inventory of traditional songs.

Revivalism

The critical study of revival has provided a foundation for developments within safeguarding theory and practice, a theory expanded upon in Chapter One. Revival theory is particularly relevant to understanding problems which may arise when trying to save a practice viewed as in danger of dying. Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill, in their introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* (Bithell and Hill 2014), survey a variety of motivations for revival; these include dissatisfaction with modernization, commercialization, consumerism, capitalism, mass media, or institutionalization. Revivalists often reference the negative consequences of what they call “alienation and confusion” produced by modernization rather than seeing modernization as a positive means to bring global awareness to local traditions (Ibid., 11). Revivalists, they write, may also be motivated by concerns with ethnic, minority, national, or local identity. Processes of westernization and globalization risk washing out unique local characteristics; revivalists often seek to reduce homogenization by
reviving local traditions. Such revival movements can appear as reactions against new transmission methods or other features of these processes (Ibid., 12).

Revivalism reinvents the past, often becoming an expression of national identity. Richard Kearney addresses the concept of national identity as represented through revival. He also outlines the changes to national identity brought on by modernity. He writes that Irish culture is founded on characteristics of plurality rather than uniformity. Revivalism and modernism, two seemingly opposite paradigms, occurred simultaneously in Ireland. Ireland is a dynamic society, with constant and continuous shifts in ideals and interests. He concludes that revivalism can be viewed as a modernist approach to bringing back a lost tradition. Revived traditions are performed out of their original contexts and are consequently given new contexts and meanings (Kearney 1988, 269). This supports my own observations. Singing sessions are an example of this re-contextualization of a revived tradition. As discussed in Chapter Three, sessions are traditional singers’ response to a perceived loss of space conducive for singing; thus, singers created new contexts specifically for singing.

Social singing in Ireland is now heard in several new contexts, one of those being the singing session, a relatively new phenomenon. As Grace Toland noted in her presentation at the University of Limerick in October 2015, many singers may be trying to recreate the home in a public setting by providing tea and sandwiches, inviting chat, and providing a comfortable environment as best as they can. The recreation of the home is a recurring theme which arises in discussions and observations on space for singing, and has been teased out further in previous chapters. Singers also want to meet with like-minded individuals interested in traditional song and create spaces suitable for what they feel constitutes a good gathering, such as providing space for all singers to sing (this is problematized in Chapter Three).
These new reasons for gathering in singing sessions may be reactions to changing social contexts due to modernization. They could thus be seen as revivalist efforts. Kearney argues that tensions between tradition and modern developments combine to make change inevitable. Every cultural narrative, he contends, is a reinterpretation of history, retelling the past in relation to the present as “imagination interweaves with the context of history,” providing “a point of transit between past and future” (Ibid., 10). He eloquently proposes, “every culture invents its future by reinventing its past” (Ibid., 270). Singing sessions reinvent their past despite changing contexts. Now no longer a gathering of friends that includes singing, they are a gathering of friends and strangers specifically for singing. In an attempt to safeguard singing practice from the past, session attendees have reinvented their own contemporary context for it.

Lillis Ó Laoire contends that traditional singing cannot be seen as a “backward looking oppositional atavism alone,” but instead as a way to unite community and connect local singers with others around the world interested in carrying on tradition (Ó Laoire 1997, 167-8). He suggests a rethinking of traditional song and music for a more creative approach to music than is possible within the idea of tradition developed by the original revivalists of song as an expression of national identity. New approaches would affect attitudes on traditional song relevance today (Ibid., 168). He suggests to heal the line dividing tradition and modernity by focusing on the space between the two: “The truth is always more complex and lies between these poles, which is an idea we must become better acquainted with as we carry the legacy of traditional music and song with us into the twenty first century” (Ibid., 168). My own findings support those of Ó Laoire. Traditional song, and tradition in general, should be addressed with new
approaches that acknowledge the malleable space between tradition and modernity. The following discussion expands on ideas for finding new approaches.

**Globalization and Modernization**

Globalization and modernization are frequently identified as primary factors contributing to the loss of traditional heritage. Along with globalization comes cultural relocation, as cultures develop new spaces to occupy within the expanding political world (Arizpe 2004, 132). Amanda Kearney discusses the effects of globalization on culture in her contribution to *Intangible Heritage*, “Intangible Cultural Heritage: Global Awareness and Local Interest” (Kearney 2008). She recognizes an international interest in sustainable practices and ideologies considered as indigenous or alternative systems (Ibid., 209). International legislation reinforces the value and future of heritage, safeguarding of cultural diversity, and promotion of sustainable living practices (Ibid., 211). She notes that globalization is sometimes seen as “the ‘devil’ of the twenty-first century,” threatening communities’ own unique characteristics. On the other hand, it also raises the wider world’s awareness of the marginal community (Ibid., 212). The dualism between the Western, colonial, developed systems and the indigenous, local, marginalized, colonized systems is continually reinforced (Ibid., 212). Globalization is seen to threaten local distinctiveness, so a global willingness to engage with indigenous communities therefore must be approached cautiously and met with critique (Ibid., 213).

Safeguarding the Irish traditional singing social life, especially when approached by individuals or organizations outside of the singing community, comes with its own risks alongside those of globalization. If outside organizations such as UNESCO wish to safeguard traditional singing, they need to be careful not to eliminate local, unique characteristics. Susan Motherway, in her book *Globalization of Irish
Traditional Song Performance (Motherway 2013), describes the relationship between the global and local as characterized by a “flow of culture from the local, to the regional, to the national, international and virtual fields. On its journey, local culture collides with other global cultures and spheres” (Ibid., 5). She explains that this phenomenon redefines cultural boundaries while creating greater distinctions between different cultural music, places, and identities (Ibid.).

Homogenization of the world’s cultures has long been seen as a risk posed by the power of global media outlets to dominate local expression. However, a counter trend also exists. Local communities are presented with the possibilities for reaching out through more egalitarian media forms to a global audience. Marie McCarthy highlights consequences of the multiple features of modernization for local music, noting that socio-political, economic, and technological realities introduce musical diversity (McCarthy 2004, 51). Global communication brings world cultures to Ireland and exposes others abroad to Irish culture. She asserts, “No longer is Irish identity circumscribed by narrowly defined ideas about what it means to be Irish; no longer is there a single dominant cultural ideology of the nation; and no longer is there an ethnically homogeneous population creating and participating in, and thus defining, cultural practices in Ireland” (Ibid., 53). Indeed, it would seem that practitioners of vernacular practices are often increasingly interested in the local when faced with globalization, holding fast to their own customs and sharing their special world with global audiences (Appadurai 2011).

Turino argues that devoted practitioners may continue to practice regardless of the global cultural onslaught. He writes, “From the basis of a different value system, small-scale local activities, organizations, and movements might be deemed more prestigious and valuable because of their effects on the places and people one knows
firsthand” (Turino 2008, 230). Overall, critical scholars exhibit minimal concern that modernization will cause the demise of tradition. Traditional singers can work with modernization, recognizing challenges and adapting to modern contexts for their singing to continue. Tradition in Ireland has creatively interacted with agents of globalization and modernization, examples which are presented, here.

Re-contextualizing Tradition with Modernity

Representations of the past are “often romanticized, sometimes imaginary, and always selective,” evoking positive images of participatory community relationships, music not commercialized or infiltrated from outside sources, pre-modern innocence, “pastoral tranquility,” and an idealistic view of peasant life (Bithell and Hill 2014, 11). This dichotomy between modernization and tradition is an area of concern for Irish traditional music. Kearney writes that Irish culture must mediate between images of the past and future and “avoid petrification of tradition and the alienation of modernity,” avoiding extremes on either side (Kearney 1988, 16).

Ireland, and its quest for Irishness, meets modernization in what Graham defines as “deferred utopianism.” This utopianism accommodates modernization, industrialism, the mystical, and the visionary without a full commitment to any one of these, but rather through their redefinition. What he means by deferring a solution to modernization’s conflicts is that a utopian state is always somewhere in the future—achievable, but never fully achieved, as characteristics are consistently redefined. Graham states, “it is this capacity, to outstrip all that [utopianism] contains, which makes Ireland enthralling as a concept and as object of study” (Graham 2001, 24). By continuously re-contextualizing traditional singing in a quest to create the best kind of gathering, practitioners could be described as deferring utopianism. Outstripping features of what create an idealized society means letting go of strict preconceptions
and allowing flexibility into the idea of perfection. Singers should remember their past. Yes, imagining, or in a sense re-imagining the past, comes with possible consequences such as crystallization and lack of flexibility in the singing sessions, but imagining the past through singing today helps ensure that their heritage is still practiced despite modernization. As traditionality is subject to ongoing renegotiation, singing sessions can then be seen as examples of deferred utopianism. Deferred utopianism answers why traditional singing is constantly re-contextualized. The individuals within the singing community work to protect and promote traditional singing—by creating spaces such as the Cobblestone or recording projects such as The Inishowen Song Project, they are adapting to modernity in ways that the singing can continue.

Susan Motherway also addresses the dichotomy between a desire to preserve Irish traditional song performance and allowing it to change with modernization:

The fact that society is conscious of such changes provokes the articulation of resistance, rejecting modernism in preference for an idealized society. Hence, the dialectic emerges between traditionalists aiming to preserve the tradition, and innovators who explore and refashion the tradition. The dialectical concepts of authenticity and change became focal points in debating the stability of the tradition within a temporal framework. Communities that reject change place their beliefs on idealized models of tradition that contradict modern realities and insist on relegating folk music to the past. This viewpoint sees the traditional singer as a culture bearer whose role is to receive and transmit the tradition in its authentic form to subsequent generations. While this viewpoint serves to purify the tradition, it also runs the risk of leading the tradition to stagnation and possible decline. On the other hand, performers attempting to be innovative are seen to favour the individual over the communal, and creativity over representation. The contemporary performer is also conscious of consumer interests and may feel the pressure to popularize their music.

(Motherway 2013, 36)

Problems that can arise when sustaining traditional music have received critical attention from scholars as the form adapts with the modern age. Sommers Smith, in *Irish Traditional Music in a Modern World* (Sommers Smith 2001), observes that the title of her book might sound like an oxymoron. The marrying of the two terms is uneasy as each is associated with corrupting one another (Ibid., 111). Questioning the
survival of traditional music in a modern world, Sommers Smith asks, “How much change can traditional music absorb without compromising its ability to encapsulate a time, a place, a national identity?” (Ibid.). Luke Gibbons defines Ireland as a first world country with a third world memory—a country with cultural practices which bring about paradoxes such as periphery versus center, country versus city, and tradition versus modernity (Gibbons 1996, 3). Tradition represents order, stability, and inherited wisdom. It seemingly evolves in polarity with modernization, which represents progress and enlightenment.

If a heritage is alive, it will be subject to outside influences and development, including those resulting from the forces of globalization and modernization. UNESCO’s publications contain a variety of responses to challenges presented by this inevitable process from European member states, each with their own complexity, including concerns about safeguarding their own cultural heritages in modern society—legal protection of minority cultures, protection and promotion of local languages, revival of traditional and popular forms of expression, use of new technologies, and the evolution of culture and its future (UNESCO 2001, 267). Likewise, singing in Ireland can be seen as one interpretation of a vernacular form of expression that must be understood in the context of a modernizing, globalizing Ireland. The foundation for such expression rests on interpretations of self-identity and self-worth.

The theme of the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing in November 2014 was “The Rock and Roll We Gave You” to highlight ways in which traditional singers influence and are influenced by different musical genres. This theme reveals that the notion of tradition is flexible among the festival organizers. Speakers on the theme presented their own musical influences. Each singer grew up with their parents’ records, songs they enjoyed with friends, and favorite contemporary bands. Also
recognizing that no tradition exists without outside influences, Bithell and Hill illustrate ways tradition develops alongside and within other concurrent events and developments:

The notion of a continuum . . . is suggestive of a quasi-evolutionary process that might be construed as a straight line leading from past to future and this, too, is misleading. Often, . . . different individual identities, stances toward tradition, and ways of being with music co-exist . . . In some cases, we see the same musicians behaving in different ways in different contexts and maintaining seemingly divergent styles and repertoires in parallel. In others, we see different individuals or lineages drawing from the same musical well but operating in different contexts, or interpreting and taking forward the same traditions in different ways, and some of these pathways may be contemporaneous from the outset.

(Bithell and Hill 2014, 16)

The presentation of tradition does not exist in a cultural vacuum, but is the result of competing interpretations of tradition in a greater, modern world.

Modernization does not necessarily conflict with tradition. As discussed earlier, perceived obstacles or threats to continuing heritage practices can be approached in ways that work with such obstacles. Tradition and modernity, while seemingly diametrically opposed, can be combined to keep traditions relevant in our ever changing society (Sommers Smith 2001). New methods for the transmission and sharing of traditional songs need not be destructive but can be used to sustain tradition; the growing use of digital archives is one example (Veblen 1991; Sommers Smith 2001). Heritage activists can work with modernization and globalization in this way. Likewise, participants in Irish traditional singing sessions can utilize modernization to help sustain their practice in ways that are relevant today based on their conceptualization of tradition.

Prescribing Tradition

One perceived danger in safeguarding initiatives is that of prescribing an external idea of ‘tradition’ onto practitioners. Prescribing ideas of ‘tradition’ onto
performances can lead to manipulated or fabricated performances or crystallized heritage. The new enemy to cultural preservation, according to Lourdes Arizpe, is cultural trivialization, a term she uses to describe the situation in which aspects of cultural actions are “extracted and emptied of meaning” (Arizpe 2004, 133). She asks if cultures can be reduced to the number of their components. People do not live in one social world at a time, she continues, but in many worlds simultaneously, connecting in some part to all of them. By working with modernization, individuals within the traditional singing community can adapt to changing ideas of what it means to be ‘traditional’ so as not to prescribe definitions which may imply romantic notions of the past onto singing sessions and singers.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that the phenomenon of heritage ‘regenerating’ into spectacle, a process she characterizes as an instance of objectifying culture, is not new. Even today, representations of heritage such as at festivals, no matter how carefully constructed, may still objectify the performers. She contends that spectacle reclassifies performances from their original contexts to on-stage representations (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 73). Festivals, she says, often appeal to an appetite for wonder, promoting the exotic for tourists. They present heritage according to audience expectations for a good show (Ibid., 72).

Anthony McCann discusses the dangers associated with the prescription of cultural activity that often plays a part in the production of tourist display. He advises that cultural presentations “assert the contemporary validity of traditional practices as a contemporary response to contemporary conditions” and “carefully examine the registers of social interaction within which traditional practices occur” (McCann 2001., 98). Heritage performance and representation should not be manipulated to appeal to tourist audiences or adhere to governmental guidelines if one wishes to promote their
own integrity. If heritage is reduced to its components, emptied of meaning and sold as a commodity, it loses its cultural value and is no longer being safeguarded for the community of practitioners.

These concepts of prescribing tradition can be applied to singing sessions. Jerry O’Reilly and Rosie Davis explain the variety of songs they hear in the context of the singing clubs. While they encourage Irish traditional songs, they would rather hear songs that visitors bring with them without manipulating the songs to fit a perceived accepted style:

Rosie: Singers clubs tend to be, certainly in Ireland, unaccompanied. And England as well. You might get a concertina playing or something but it’s more just singing, and it’s traditional singing, kind of the songs that you carry and you would sing. . . . I would sing Irish things, which I have done on occasion. I would tend to sing English songs because that’s where I’m from. It’s nice when you can do that. And also it’s new when you can bring something from where you’re from. I’m not surrounded by people who are singing those songs. If I want to hear them, I’ll have to play a recording or I’ll have to sing them myself. I have to bring the songs with me.

Carrie: It’s almost been the same for me, I’ve been learning more American songs since I moved to Ireland than I was at home.109

Rosie: That’s as I was saying, you need to bring it with you.

Jerry: They’re identifying you, they are. It’s your identity.

Rosie: And I heard people singing English songs here and they don’t realize they are English songs at times. Or they sing it in a way, they sound like Irishifying. No! Don’t do that! Somebody sang one the other night and missed the point of the song totally, because it’s big notes in the song, and everybody harmonizes it. But here nobody harmonizes the notes in the same way. So, yeah, it’s interesting. I honestly think it’s neat when people who are from out of town and they sing their songs. And they can talk about the songs.

(Davis and O’Reilly May 2015)

Rosie’s notion of ‘Irishifying’ encapsulates the situation in which some singers manipulate the songs so that they fit their preconceived idea of what is appropriate for Irish traditional singing clubs. To her, this manipulation, whether or not self-conscious or intentional, sounds strange and should not be practiced. She prefers that singers

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109 See Chapter Four for a discussion on song and place.
perform the songs as they would normally perform them rather than forcing themselves to sound like what current singers believe should be a traditional sound.

The topic of tradition arose frequently during conversations at the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing, due to the theme “The Rock and Roll We Gave You.” The singer Con ‘Fada’ O Driscoll writes many of his own songs. He spoke at the round table discussion about the first song he composed:

*And the funny thing is that its a song that I never sing now because when I look back I realize that I was trying desperately hard to be one of the lads. I was trying desperately hard to be proletarian, referring to losing every ‘wob of your drill.’ I was trying very hard to be traditional. . . . Sing as yourself. And I think most of us, it takes us years, and we go through all the influences and all these things we want to imitate . . . and with any luck we go around to being yourself. . . . In the 1970s I wouldn’t have dared think of writing a song based on Shakespearean tragedy or on Hollywood Epics like Ben Hur, the unthinkable, because it wouldn’t be traditional. And I wanted to be a traditional boy.*

(Miltown Malbay Nov 2014)

O Driscoll wanted to be a traditional singer and songwriter, but he was not entirely satisfied with his initial efforts; they seemed artificially ‘traditional’. Only when he started singing and writing as himself without attempting to fulfill a perceived notion of the traditional, did he start to receive recognition for his compositions amongst traditional song practitioners.

Macdara thinks that the preoccupation with labelling singers as sean-nós or traditional arises from outside the traditional singing community:

Traditional singing is in the Irish language as well, it’s just people tend to call it sean-nós, which is funny as well, because they don’t normally as sean nós singers call it sean-nós, they just call it ‘singing.’ . . . There’s people who’ve adopted the phrase, but I don’t think it’s a natural thing. I think it’s more of an academic phrase that was then applied to the session and then became used within it.

(Yeates Feb 2015)

110 Documentation of O Driscoll’s presentation comes from my fieldnotes, so I present it in italics, even though it is a direct quote.
He continued to explain how a friend of his from Carna, Connemara said that during local Irish language singing sessions, the singers just sing songs, not sean-nós songs.

John Moulden spoke similarly about his own singing. When asked what he calls himself, he replied:

Singer. Not a folk singer, not a traditional singer. I’m a singer. I choose to sing particular kinds of songs but that’s my choice. . . . What I sing depends on what I have access to. If I can make songs myself then I make them, but I still make them in the pattern of the songs that I’m used to generally, or I imagine one would. It’s a matter of, we build on our experience, and so it would be that I don’t particularly call myself anything.

(Moulden Mar 2015)

Singers build on their experiences. They sing traditional songs because they want to sing these songs, but most likely as part of a larger more diverse repertoire; their manner of singing likewise need not be constrained by an artificial rendition of an idea of traditionality but rather emerges from the full range of their musical experience.

John stated that, when he grew up, he heard various styles of singing of in homes, including the contemporary popular music, singing games, or skipping rhymes. He only became aware of a distinct song category called ‘folk song’ when he was about eighteen years old. He contributed an essay to Dear Far Voiced Veteran entitled, “What Did We Sing Before There Were Folk Songs?” (Moulden 2007, 135-158). He explained to me that the title “represents, if you like, a question that there were all these contexts for singing, but singers, when they discovered the word ‘folk song,’ left those communities and built a new community of singers, solely of singers” (Moulden Mar 2015). He referred to these songs as being sung in “this somewhat divorced context,” acknowledging the changes always concomitant on such re-contextualizations but also appreciative of this new context. During the period when he started hearing “just the songs,” he began searching for songs, himself. “When I heard the wonderful songs, amazing songs that spoke to me with such clarity and it was identified that these were
folk songs, then I was absolutely sold. It was those [. . .] I was [. . .] I was open . . . I was motivated and then I was stirred by beauty and relevance” (Moulden Mar 2015).

John described an event that revealed to him a difference between folk songs and simply *songs*. When he was in mountaineering clubs, the club would go to the local pubs where there was singing:

Two or three people would have sung and there were one or two songs. . . . There were singers there, and that was where one of the absolutely seminal things was said to me. One of the local men, they didn’t mean to say it, everybody was singing and everybody was singing songs and they asked one another for song. When it came to my turn they asked me for a folk song. Now, what’s the difference? They were singing folk songs. I was singing songs in my view, so what caused the difference and apprehension? I was the outsider. So folk song, folk is always outside. Folk is normally something away from you. I’m not folk, I’m observing these folk and they’re singing folk songs. If I’m one of you, then I’m singing songs like you.

(Ibid.)

John, the outsider, was understood to sing a special category, that of folk songs.

Paradoxically, the local clientele of the bars where John visited and sang may be construed as ‘the folk’, and so amongst themselves, they were simply singing songs, not folk songs.¹¹¹

Grace Toland problematized the term ‘tradition’ because it is selective and exclusionary in her view. While without the imposition of criteria external to the immediate context of social singing, a situation in which singers sang repertoire chosen in a relatively un-self conscious way, now they are expected to sing in what is considered a traditional style in a world of increasing singing standards:

[Tradition] did . . . exclude people because there certainly was the terms like folk singers, traditional, was brought to people’s lives that they never really

¹¹¹ A distinction must be made. Macdara and John both speak about folk song. Macdara defines traditional singing as distinctive to folk song. However, John is from Northern Ireland where the term folk song is often used interchangeably with traditional song. Folk song, for Macdara, is usually performed with acoustic instrumental accompaniment and can be removed from local practice. For John, folk song is the song of the folk, and may be sung unaccompanied, just like the traditional songs of the sessions in the Republic of Ireland. This distinction can be found in further discourse regarding folk singing in the North of Ireland. For more information, see David Cooper (2009), *The Musical Traditions of Northern Ireland and Its Diaspora: Community and Conflict*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
hadn’t used those terms about themselves, so some people just stayed away from the organized events. And that’s still the case. (Toland Feb 2015)

Enforcing an idea of what is traditional onto traditional singing can cause the music to be irrelevant to today’s singers. Singers feeling they must sing traditional songs or sing in a traditonal style may limit their flexibility and creativity. The general tendency of thinking this way is to idealize a romanticized past, as discussed previously, which singers should approach cautiously. When O Driscoll moved away from this limiting idea that he wanted to be a ‘traditional boy,’ he was able to find his own compositional voice and write humorous songs about Julius Caesar and alcoholic rhyming games which, despite their subject matter, were enthusiastically accepted by the traditional singing comunity. Rather than trying to display what might be considered a traditional song within a particular perspective, singers like O Driscoll are not trying to match a certain standard. The songs and singing are relevant for the singers and their modern lives, now, and not serving as the kind of crystallized heritage or ‘agency of display’ identified by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 1).

Traditional singers must be aware of the dangers involved in prescribing sets of rules for what constitutes ‘traditional’ to their heritage. Turning singing into a snapshot of an idealized life on a rural farm in 1880s Ireland seems to be a direct reaction to modernization. Idealizing a more perfect past can make traditional singing irrelevant today. It puts the songs behind glass museum doors, to be admired but not disturbed. The practice of a ‘living tradition,’ as is often said, cannot be unchanging.

Adapting to Change

An investigation into the impact of safeguarding traditional cultures can reveal problems likely to occur when romanticizing an imagined past or an imagined Ireland
in singing sessions. If not managed carefully, too much protection can lead to the crystallization of heritage. Instead of prescribing an idea of an unchanging tradition onto singing sessions, singers and organizers should adapt to change brought on by modernization. Crystallized heritage is removed from its regular, living context. Organizers and singers of sessions must be wary of becoming agencies of display. Agencies of display can represent a facet of Irish identity for listeners, but as I. Sheldon Posen warned, such representations should not be removed from their context within the singing community (Posen 1988, 98). Singers in sessions are not performing with flashy costumes and ‘paddywackery’ images, but a search for too much imagined authenticity can distort the singing itself. There will be singers for whom a romanticized image of traditional singing in the past remains an important touchstone, but its defining characteristics represent only one contributor to singing practices in the circles which is much more varied and nuanced in its multiplicity than these singers may acknowledge or convey.

Contexts for singing are evolving as we progress further into the twenty-first century, so practitioners are learning how to adapt to such changes. Con ‘Fada’ O Driscoll questioned the meaning of tradition as it applies to stagnant sessions during his presentation at the Clare festival:

*You go into the tradition and you’re beginning to see what’s wrong with the tradition. What its limitations are. And you begin to realize, like I’ll go to song sessions and we had a lovely session in there today and there was marvelous singers turned up and sang great songs, but some song sessions and some singers clubs as you know can be, I shouldn’t be saying this to this audience, but can be dreary because the singing clubs are very, very [stilted]. It’s a marvelous thing that people who want to sing, sing, but if they’re going to the same singers’ club every week for years, you’re hearing the same bad singers singing the same songs, and you’ll realize this isn’t a reflection of singing sessions in general.*

(Miltown Malbay Nov 2014)

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112 I could not understand what he said here in my recording, but the gist was that some sessions are not open for change.
O Driscoll recognizes that sessions and singers of varying quality exist throughout Ireland. Singers who only attend one session might not be aware of the wealth of singing to be found. They might not acknowledge or accept influences from the world outside of the session, so as a result the session is crystallized, fixed in an idea of a romantic past. He references these ‘dreary’ sessions to show that strictly adhering to a received idea of tradition can lead to a lack of the excitement and creativity to be found in sessions with more liberal outlooks on tradition.

Marilena Alivizatou questions why a living past that is appropriated and renegotiated in the present needs to be safeguarded, writing that safeguarding intangible heritage can serve to make “permanent the impermanent” by freezing something that appears, disappears, and reappears (Alivizatou 2012, 10). She reveals challenges that may arise when protecting historical practices in contemporary culture:

Rather than defining intangible heritage as pre-colonial traditions that need to be archived and documented, contemporary heritage-work offers more fluid and nuanced understandings as practices that are inherited from the past, but significantly reworked and renewed in the present. This then suggests that alternative processes of cultural transmission bound up in ecological principles of erasure, impermanence and renewal enable a closer interaction between past and present. Intangible heritage emerges therefore not as the subject of archives that needs to be written down and preserved for an indefinite future but rather as cultural practices that are renegotiated by practicing communities. Although . . . the 2003 Convention recognises that intangible heritage is ‘constantly recreated’, the strong emphasis on safeguarding through inventory identification and national and international list-making places it in the context of cultural preservation that leaves little room for change and adaptation. The challenge for UNESCO will be to engage in new ways of thinking and working around intangible heritage as a living process that is not comprised of forgotten or abandoned practices but reflective of contemporary complex and changing identities.

(Ibid., 18-19)

John Moulden stressed that the singing of traditional songs is continuously in flux. In his description, song is personified as the teacher, and the learner has the freedom to learn a song and perform it in his or her own way:
A singer in a traditional song context hears a song [...] learns the song [...] the song teaches them if you like, how to sing it as well as hearing what they heard because some people can’t reproduce precisely what they did hear, and some people don’t want to. In fact in the past, because everyone in traditional circles singers were to sing slightly differently each time, what happened was that when I heard a song in my community, I heard it slightly differently each time, and it gave me [...] covert permission to do the same myself. It’s an intentional non-exactitude, and I’m borrowing that from somebody else but I can’t remember what it is. Variation on intentional non-exactitude. It’s not a study, it’s that somebody has given permission in the community. And this is why I am interested in the community. [...] But the thing is, that this is why I am interested in the context because I believe that context shapes performance.

(Moulden Mar 2015)

Context is what shapes tradition, and in turn, the evolving traditions shape context.

New singing contexts develop from older singing contexts. New songs are shared alongside older songs. As the definitions presented above suggest, the term ‘tradition’ is a nuanced one. Therefore, crystallizing traditional singing according to a notion of ‘tradition’ as a reaction against modernization is an ineffective way to bring the singing forward into the twenty-first century. Singing sessions in Ireland however are now bringing traditional singing into the twenty-first century by introducing new environments for song and challenging overly conservative attitudes toward tradition.

**The Benefit of Limitations**

Organizers of traditional singing sessions with whom I have spoken try to allow for flexibility in what is shared in the sessions. Regardless of their acceptance of new singing styles, though, parameters intended to limit too much variety are still encouraged. Jerry and Rosie describe the variety of music that they hear at An Góilín:

Rosie: People still sing songs that you would normally accompany on guitar or something, but because it’s unaccompanied it comes out different. It has a different flavor. We don’t have to sit around while somebody tunes a guitar. And that’s always a bit, people get, “Oh we don’t have a guitar in here.” But the Goilin isn’t going to fight that.

Jerry: No it’s not.

Rosie: It’s not a fight. They don’t mind people thinking it is!

(Davis and O’Reilly May 2015)
An Góilín, while flexible and open to different styles, do not mind if outsiders think they are only allowed to sing one song style, because that ensures a more streamlined evening of traditional songs. However, they might invite guest singers who accompany themselves with instruments, revealing that they are open and accepting of different styles, so far as seeking out those singers who use instruments. Jerry described some guests at An Góilín:

We’ve had guests who have played instruments like Tim Bailey, he’s an English singer. He came, he sings and plays melodeon and sings. And Sarah Graham, she’s an American singer and she brought her banjo and she’s a fantastic singer, really lovely. Ballads and old time songs. Christy Moore was a guest at the Góilín, and he brought his guitar with him, and that was nice. It’s fine. But, it is a traditional singers club. You can look at the website and it will say, if you sing, if you do play we prefer you sing as well. . . . Although having said that we’ve had Desi Wilkinson, Desi sings and plays. But Desi was a guest and Desi came that night and he sang, and he played airs on the flute.

(Ibid.)

As Jerry said, An Góilín is a traditional singers club, so even though they may allow instruments, they want to hear the singers’ own voices.

Too much deviance from the shared notion of tradition can disrupt the flow of the sessions. Macdara described one such instance at The Night Before Larry Got Stretched, caused by a visitor’s lack of familiarity with session norms:

One of our first sessions was, and I’m not, I dunno if I’m against the guy, I don’t know if he really knew what was going on. Actually this is a strange story. The session was kind of full and a particular bunch had come in, and I suppose if you saw us from outside it probably looked like loads of fun. A big crowded room, everyone listening, maybe people are laughing at a funny song. So this group came in and there was a clearing in the middle of the floor, and this guy stepped into the middle of the floor in the circle and just stood there. So, I suppose he’s gonna sing a song. We just sat there, what is he gonna do? And then nothing. Then someone said, “Ah, you’re gonna sing a song?” And I sh*t you not. He looked around and said, “Is everyone else on pills?” So that was really strange. And then he started to sing a Rod Stewart song. Which was kind of more surreal, and no one knew what to do or what to say. It is hilarious in hindsight. One of the funniest things that’s ever happened at the session, in hindsight. And then it was actually funny because it was right after that, Jerry O’Reilly hopped in with a song about some strange man walking into a session, which was brilliant. He just completed—I suppose those are the moments that those singers are waiting for. Just to have these songs that they could probably
never use. They are never relevant. And then boom, the perfect opportunity. It was just brilliant. It’s rare, but sometimes someone just might have the wrong idea. They just don’t know that it’s a traditional singing session and they just might, and whatever it’s fine. No one would get offended by that, really. We like to keep it to traditional songs, but someone wants to try a new sound. But I think they understood as soon as they sang their song what was the grave mistake they’ve made. It’s rare, anyway.

(Yeates Feb 2015)

The sequence of events was not accepted in the traditional circle, and the visitor did not know how to react to the situation. The visitor arrived and could not read the situation. He tried to understand the context but his response was still askew. When the new arrival asked about the crowd being on pills, it was his effort to make sense of an unfamiliar situation. Imagine stumbling into a bar, expecting a party, but instead finding unaccompanied singing and silent listening. Jerry eased an otherwise awkward situation with his impeccable timing on his next song. His use of the song in this situation is also telling of repertoire choice in singing sessions—he might not sing this song often because it is not relevant to the singing context, but when the situation offered him the opportunity, he restarted the flow of the session with humor.113

Overall, Macdara notes that singers in Dublin are not too conservative about their songs. The singers at Larry were not overly put off by the unusual song choice of a Rod Stewart piece. What matters more than the unknowing visitor’s contributing a non-traditional song is more how the visitor was able to assess or handle the new environment. As this context shows, the singers, Macdara says, are “all up for a bit of fun.”

What tends to happen in these situations is that singers who do not find a comfortable place within the sessions will not return; likewise songs that are met with puzzlement might not be repeated. Grace Toland illustrated the possible contrast between expectation and practice. She began by explaining that organizers do not

113 See Chapter Three for a discussion on organizational flow.
discourage attendees if they sing different repertoire, then described a cycle in which
the practitioners, through their singing alone, prescribe singing for future sessions:

Nobody stops anybody, and we wouldn’t say to someone you have to sing this
type of song or anything. You could get somebody come in doing Frank Sinatra
in the middle of it all, and that’s grand and away you go. But it’s funny I think
when eventually because I suppose our session’s been going such a long time,
people realize what they’re getting into when they come along, so you might get
somebody who comes once and thinks this is just awful, and we never see them
again.

(Toland Feb 2015)

Singers who do not enjoy the sessions or are not sympathetic towards traditional songs
remove themselves, in a sense, which helps maintain the integrity of the traditional
practice without explicit rules and an overt enforcement of them. She continued:

We never mind if people want to back themselves [with musical instruments],
but I think once you have enough people who are not doing that, people can
almost give themselves the freedom then just to sing their own voice, their own
acts, their own words, and don’t need all those props, because we have become
[. . .] socially removed from the idea of singing on your own because
performance has had such an effect on, and I think personally on a lot of
younger women singers. This idea of singing with a band, with backing. I think
it kind of brings a kind of sameness to approaches to songs and so I think for
somebody has to find your own voice and then bring that with you somewhere.
I think if you start off thinking, I want to be a performer, that’s what I’m going
to do, for me I think it’s about the song, that’s about the apprenticeship of
sitting and listening, hearing as many and getting involved and doing, being part
of something, but that’s all hindsight now, and looking back over—geez I’m not
ancient, but you know what I mean?

(Ibid.)

To Grace, the ability to sing with just one’s voice, not as a performer for whom their
presence is paramount but rather to sing as an apprentice to the songs, is freeing.
Singers learn at the sessions that they do not need instruments to supplement, or
perhaps hide, the idiosyncratic sound of their own distinctive voice. Unaccompanied
session singing is therefore felt not as limiting but rather as liberating—offering a kind
of freedom that is appealing to many singers, and to others who once they encounter
this experience may come to share its associated aesthetic. Sustained by a collectively
shared set of values, what constitutes traditional singing at the sessions comes to seem natural.

**Challenging the Notion of Tradition**

In the following section, I analyze the ways in which participants in sessions and festivals I attended for study challenged notions of tradition, and ways in which such challenges bring singing into the twenty-first century.

The Ennis Singers Club is regarded as a generally conventional session. Conventional sessions in this sense are sessions in which songs are predominantly sung solo and unaccompanied, and the unspoken rules and hierarchies discussed in Chapter Three appear important and followed. Unconventional sessions may be sessions that allow for more performances that include instruments, a wider variety of song types and singing styles, or otherwise move beyond the more conservative boundaries of ‘traditional singing.’ The variety of song styles I heard in Ennis, I was surprised to find is greater than that of The Night Before Larry Got Stretched. Consider this interaction I had with a gentleman sitting next to me one evening:

*The man asked me what songs I know, and when I said not too many but I’m learning, he tried to help me by bringing out a notebook of printed out lyrics to some more popular songs by such singers as Patsy Cline. I admired his concern for helping me come up with a song to sing, but I assured him I was set for tonight.*

(Ennis Oct 2014)

This man was less concerned with the type or origin of a song that I could sing and more concerned that I would be able to participate in the session—a clear mark of the participatory musical values described in Chapter Two. Songs which may not be considered traditional by most participants at the singing sessions such as the Patsy Cline song can become a part of a singing tradition. Although, boundary-push ing such
as this does come with and may sometimes provoke conflict and disagreements on what constitutes traditional songs and processes (Ó Laoire 2005, 70).

The Christmas session at the Ennis Singers Club was especially interesting in this regard. The guests for this evening formed a quintet of singers consisting of four men and one woman from England and Ireland. They sang all their songs with harmonies, including Irish and some English traditional pieces. They also sang the Latin Christmas song “Gaudete,” American spirituals, and the Norman Greenbaum rock and roll hit “Spirit in the Sky.” The performance of Christmas songs by regular session attendees also challenged what might on other occasions have been considered traditional and appropriate:

During the second half, a man wearing a Santa cap was asked to sing and he pulled out cards with the Twelve Days of Christmas words on them, ie, “A Partridge in a Pear Tree” and “Five Golden Rings.” He passed them around the room in order, then instructed the people to sing what was on their card. He started with, “On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me,” and the first person had to sing “A partridge in a pear tree.” This became increasingly funny as the song went on, as people kept changing keys and getting mixed up. The man leading the song was engaging and enthusiastic.

(Ennis Dec 2014)

The members of the Ennis Singers Club were interested in participation, engagement, and laughter more than traditional repertoire. The gathering was the most important aspect of the night as opposed to the particular songs or the way they were presented.
The Clare Festival of Traditional Singing challenged the conventional notion of tradition throughout the entire weekend. While the majority of songs shared at the festival would be considered as Irish traditional songs, much of the repertoire challenged my perceived boundaries of what constitutes traditional music. The festival organizers hired a vast array of singers and musicians for the Saturday evening concert, revealing their openness to the variety of music acceptable for a traditional singing weekend. The Noble Family is a family of English folk singers who performed mostly English folk songs by standing proudly and projecting strongly. A three-person band opened and closed the concert. They performed Irish traditional songs alongside American folk songs, using guitars for accompaniment, which are not usually used in singing circles. Con ‘Fada’ O Driscoll sang two songs he composed, teenaged students performed sets of tunes on harp, concertina, and uillean pipes, and traditional singers sang more established unaccompanied traditional songs.
Friday Night at the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing

The Friday night singing session was especially intriguing because of the expanse of singing styles interspersed with talking, laughing, joking, and all around good *craic*. This session highlighted the ways in which singers and organizers work with challenges to what is considered traditional, maintaining flexible guidelines while still singing mostly traditional songs. It started casually with a couple of scattered songs at a table with a few of the guest singers. Then, the session officially launched not with an announcement by the *Bean an Tí* Annette, but by a quartet of men who dove directly into a song and engaged all the people in the room. They sang “The Auld Triangle,” which they performed in harmonies. A few songs later, they sang the 1960s hit song by The Drifters “Under the Boardwalk”—definitely not an Irish traditional song according to anyone’s definition. These men admitted to me later that they had no idea what to expect of this festival. They came from Dublin just because of a flyer advertising the weekend and have never been to a traditional singing circle or festival before this night. When we were a few songs into the official session, Annette was sitting near me and tells those of us at the table, “You know what, it’s starting off really nice. This is just grown organically here. We were supposed to go down to the bistro but this is actually lovely here. It’s just happening organically.”

The Friday night session felt special to me, and other participants buzzed about it for the entire weekend. Curious to know why it was special, I asked singers what they thought of it. Annette commented:

The Friday night one is special because people have just arrived. They’re raring to go. . . . By the time the talk is over, they’re all dying to sing a song. Everybody wants to sing. So that’s why you have the buzz on the Friday night. (Munnelly May 2015)

John Moulden added his own answer for what distinguished the Friday night session from others he has attended. He appreciated the session immensely, exclaiming:
It was lovely. It was absolutely wonderful because of some reason, well, because of the existence of those guys who didn’t know what it was about, and who brought their own context into it, brought their own enjoyment into it, brought their own kind of license and unbridleness into it, other people got unbuttoned as well. And, and they, and it was delightful. It was lovely. It was, it was super. Nobody, nobody cared a damn at the end of it. No. Ego, somehow or other, got put aside and enjoyment was substituted.

(Moulden Mar 2015)

The singing quartet at the Clare Festival differed from the situation at Larry noted above—the men in the quartet assessed the situation, warmed to the crowd, and engaged the listeners. Although they did not know what to expect of a traditional singing weekend, they contributed their songs tastefully and appropriately. The rest of the attendees at the Clare Festival enjoyed their performances and attribute the vibrancy of the evening partly to their contribution.

John used the Friday night session to illustrate how he thinks tradition might best be defined and practiced. He argues that a determination of what is traditional should be left to the individual. Conventional definitions state that tradition is created by the community, but in John’s view, one that I have come to share, tradition is instead constituted by what the individual hears and interprets as traditional within that community; a sense of traditionality that is then presented back to that community. Each individual’s interpretation may, and probably will, vary; tradition is defined by how the community responds collectively to what is sung. Without community, singing sociality cannot exist. A night like Friday’s session embodied community. The social process that generated such a strong feeling of community was much more than simply participants singing their best songs all in a row. John wrote later in an email:

I define tradition as a process. Harry Levin in his intro to one of the editions of The Singer of Tales [by Albert Lord] said that it should be redefined not as a corpus but as ‘an organic habit of recreating what has been received and is handed on.’ Thus origins, orality and the condition of the usual definition become superfluous.

(Ibid., email correspondence)
The influence of the individual in shaping the sound of the community is an element of discussion. Chapter Two investigated community in participation and traditional singing and Chapter Five investigated the individuals involved within the community, but here the emphasis on the individual is slightly different than that of Chapter Five. Here I portray the individual within the musical group as informing a shared aesthetic of performance style. For instance, Hazel Fairbairn writes, “bands have attracted attention on the strength of their constituent solo performers; recognition and popularity are also based on the value of the tunes they present” (Fairbairn 1993, 118). Her argument is made about the role of the individual in performance bands, but her point mirrors that of John’s. She continued, “Altan [an Irish performing band] have achieved recognition for the musicianship of the individual members of the group rather than for innovation or originality in the organisation of the group” (Ibid. 119). The performance status of the group as a collective entity relies on its individual players. In the same way, individual participants’ performances in the singing sessions inform the definition of tradition adapted by the community as a whole.

As John conveyed, what constitutes traditional singing is interpreted by the individual, who sings songs that may or may not be accepted by the singing community. What is considered ‘traditional’ is thus constantly open to change. Locating the quality of ‘traditional’ in the process rather than the product of singing allows Irish traditional singing to maintain its relevance to individuals’ contemporary life experience and in turn to the singing community collectively. The Friday night session at the Clare Festival effectively manifested the powerful quality of tradition as process rather than as a strict adherence to repertoire and style. Traditional expression is usually thought of as connecting a community to its past through the content of that tradition, which is a part of what happened this particular night in Clare. What also
happened that night was an engendering of singing in which traditional songs naturally flowed into a modern, enjoyable singing context. John continued, remarking, “It’s restrictions that harm the tradition. They shape it too.” Whether inviting a positive, negative, or neutral response, recognizing change as a part of tradition in process involves a paradigm shift in the definition of tradition; changing contexts change the tradition, and in turn, the changing tradition changes the contexts in which it is practiced.

![Humorous Quartet at the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing](Image 6.2)

**Conclusion**

Participants at singing sessions, while focusing on traditional song sharing, can feature songs and performance styles of varying genres. The majority of songs are expected to be of traditional origin or manner of performance, but if repertoire choice moves away from that, session participants generally will not mind the change, and
may, in fact, embrace it. Jerry and Rosie, for instance, said that the members of An Góilín accept instrumental accompaniment even though they do not advertise it, thus the members do not mind the variety. Likewise, the four men at the Clare Festival or the quintet of guests at the Christmas session in Ennis were not only accepted but celebrated. A few instances, though, might suggest that traditional songs really are the only acceptable song type, regardless of attendees tolerating different styles. When the clueless visitors at Larry sang Rod Stewart, it provoked a surreal sense of broken expectations. I once gave a presentation on the inclusive atmosphere being the most important aspect of the singing session, to which a member of the audience responded that the songs are vitally important because without them, the sessions will become free-for-all sing-songs. As Grace suggested, while non-traditional song performances are acceptable within most singing session contexts, those whose contributions tend toward this end of the spectrum remove themselves from the session when they realize that their singing does not necessarily match that of those around them. If this is the case, explicit and overtly enforced barriers to boundary-pushing may not be necessary and indeed would generally be counterproductive.

The safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage comes with concerns involving the impacts of inventories, revivalism, globalization, modernization, romanticizing an ideallized past, crystallizing heritage, and prescribing perceived values of tradition onto practitioners. These concerns apply to the singing session, because singing sessions are twenty-first century contexts in which singers generally perform Irish traditional songs. Discourse on safeguarding heritage suggests ways to work with the seeming dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Such strategies can be found at the local level of particular traditional singing sessions.
Traditional singing is not delimited by a list of characteristics but instead should be understood in context with the practitioners, repertoire, reactions, and especially the *craic*, the conversations, the laughter, the jokes, meeting other singers, getting to know their stories, learning what they sing and why. Tradition is practiced at the singing sessions through the type of gathering—sessions, concerts, and workshops revolving around Irish traditional songs—through the repertoire, and through the performance practice—mostly unaccompanied, solo voice, with perhaps some joining in at the end of lines or on choruses. However, what felt more important than specific songs and singing styles, according to participants, was the *craic* and sense of acceptance, friendliness, and a feeling of community. Individuals define tradition through their practice. The performance by the quartet of men at the Clare Festival and other similarly humorous moments provide leeway for a variety of styles and a jovial atmosphere—good humored sociality is itself a strategy to cope with and manage pressures on tradition. International singers bring their own styles. Organizers such as Grace and Jerry warmly accept and encourage all singers, regardless of background and singing style. Therefore, a static notion of tradition at these sessions is successfully challenged and the singing has the freedom to grow and continue in ways relevant to practitioners today.
CHAPTER SEVEN
THE VITALITY OF THE SOCIAL LIFE OF IRISH TRADITIONAL SINGING

Many singers with whom I have spoken for this thesis have demonstrated that the sustainability of tradition requires some work on the part of the individuals involved. These efforts might either be defined as ‘safeguarding,’ conscious protection of the tradition, or ‘engendering,’ creating singing gatherings without necessarily thinking of protecting traditional song and its singing. Both approaches are important for bringing tradition into the twenty-first century. One interpretation, and the interpretation used for this thesis, is that safeguarding ensures the integrity of traditional singing and engendering makes the singing relevant to modern society.

A recurrent topic that has surfaced in my interviews and observations is concern about the future of Irish traditional singing. Singers have expressed a desire to protect the singing they remember from the past. For instance, as discussed in Chapter Three, singers wanted a place to share the ‘old songs’ as Macdara Yeates referred to them. Annette Munnelly and John Moulden shared their concern over the loss of such places and the difficulty of singing their songs in new musical spaces such as instrumental sessions. As discussed in Chapter Four and Six, while repertoire at singing sessions can diverge from what are considered traditional songs, traditional songs are still at the center of the sessions. In Chapter Five, I characterized the roles played by individuals that are needed to ensure the sustainability of social singing contexts. These individuals both safeguard and engender traditional singing. They recognize when contexts may need a change—a re-contextualization—to give singers the chance to sing traditional
songs in new settings such as singing sessions. Chapter Six investigated the nuances of
the term ‘tradition’ and offered new, effective ways to approach tradition based upon
what is practiced in singing sessions. What might be termed as tradition is still honored
in the sessions despite changing contexts—participants generally tell me that they
gather to share Irish traditional songs.

I have observed both safeguarding and engendering in the singing sessions I
attended. This chapter uses what I learned in interviews and observations to highlight
the balance between the two approaches to singing sessions. An American singer at the
Clare Festival of Traditional Singing described to me the situation of traditional
singers: they stand with one foot in the past, honoring history, contexts, and people
from previous eras, and with one foot looking toward the future to ensure that the
singing continues. Meanwhile their voices emerge in the present, doing what they can
do to sing today.

Social singing in Ireland is still widely practiced, although not necessarily as
was once common in contexts such as house parties (Brennan 2001). Singing sessions
and clubs foster traditional song and singing and provide an outlet for singers to gather,
share their songs, and commune with other like-minded singers. Dorothea E. Hast and
Stanley Scott, in *Music in Ireland: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (Hast and
Scott 2004) write that because of small numbers of practitioners, Irish traditional
singers comprise what they call a “mobile affinity group” drawn from the far reaches of
Ireland and beyond (Ibid., 87). This idea ties into Jerry O’Reilly’s description of
singers as living on ‘parallel tracks’—their particular interests are what bring them
together, elevating their self-esteem as they relate to others involved in the practice.
Singers with whom I have spoken stress the importance of needing a place to sing
where they feel comfortable and accepted. This desired atmosphere is fulfilled for
many by the modern singing session. Therefore, they have a vested interest in sustaining the social life of traditional singing through their participation in singing sessions.

Many Irish traditional singers appear to feel the need to protect traditional singing. Informants are aware of the wealth of high quality performing groups and audio recordings for sale in Ireland and abroad, but many express an underlying worry of the loss of the act of gathering for song. Alternatively, many singers, including Grace Toland and Jerry O’Reilly, say they are not worried, observing that the singing tradition is constantly in flux but is as healthy as ever (Toland Mar 2015; Davis and O’Reilly May 2015).

Even these more optimistic singers actively work to ensure that their belief in the future of singing is fulfilled, however. Actively shaping and molding new singing contexts results in safeguarding the music of the past. As described in Chapter Five, proactive individuals bring awareness to the songs. They present the songs and singing tradition to new audiences, and those new audiences have the freedom to use the songs in new, changing contexts.

**Re-Contextualizing Singing**

The concern for dying traditions is not new. Books, music arrangements, and studies from over a century ago illustrate a strong desire to protect songs and rural life in Ireland. Consider my visit to the Irish Traditional Music Archive, where I was able to review only a few of the hundreds of books available:

*I successfully visited the ITMA on Monday. I glanced through several books—shelves held hundreds of books and I wanted to read them all! As I looked over the titles, I saw a pattern, with titles such as Ireland in the Rare Auld Times, The Golden Years, Rural Traditions, and so on. I picked up a book called Family and Community in Ireland, and the first page had a photograph of a thatched roof house, man and woman in the door, man wearing a golf cap, and*
It seems as if this perceived fear of dying tradition has been prevalent in Ireland since Edward Bunting wrote about similar themes in 1796 in *A General Collection of Ancient Irish Music* (Bunting 1796), and yet traditional music has not died. There is memory of the past, but life moves forward, and traditional practices move forward with it.

The desire to safeguard traditional singing may be steeped in nostalgia. Hast and Scott write that although change and innovation are important for maintaining tradition in contemporary culture, “Musicians feel linked both to the rich repertory of songs and tunes and the social world that surrounded performance—the people, places, historic and political events, and way of life that gave life to the music” (Hast and Scott 2004, 135). They address the issue of dwindling traditional practice, suggesting that social singing will survive if the past is brought into the present:

> If we take the term *sean-nós* broadly, to mean the old styles of Irish unaccompanied singing in both Irish and English, how is the *sean-nós* managing to survive in twenty-first century Ireland? In singing clubs like the Góilín, and in the performing of singers like Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin and Len Graham [traditional singers], the answer is that the old styles survive by being brought into new musical contexts.

> (Ibid., 119)

Singing clubs offer a place and time for singers to share their unaccompanied songs. As discussed in Chapter Three, singers comment that they often cannot sing at instrumental sessions for a variety of reasons, such as volume of noise, the active expression of social energy, and the interests of clientele in bar settings, thus creating the need for places exclusively for unaccompanied singing. However, Hast and Scott

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114 Edward Bunting (1773-1843) “was the first systematic collector of Irish folk songs and a leading musician in Belfast. Of particular significance was the meeting of harpers in Belfast in July 1792 at which he acted as scribe, notating the performances of traditional players” (Inside Cover of Bunting, *The Ancient Music of Ireland: Arranged for Piano* in the 2000 Dover Publication reprint of his original 1840 collection).
observe that even the strictest of the Irish traditional singers may begin singing what they call ‘non-authentic’ repertoire, by which they mean not Irish traditional songs, later in the session—when observing An Góilín, they heard an American chain gang song and Las Vegas crooning after the session officially ended (Ibid., 93). Such flexibility of repertoire and style was discussed in detail in Chapter Six and represents the constantly fluctuating contexts for singing.

Jerry O’Reilly and Rosie Davis described An Góilín and other singing circles as re-contextualizations of the house parties from the past:

Rosie: The Friday night at the Góilín is lovely. It’s a weekly thing, we meet everybody once a week and it’s a social thing and there’s time to talk.
Jerry: And a lot of people think it’s almost fulfilling the function that rambling houses and ceilidh houses in the North fulfilled for those houses. In West Clare, for instance, [the singer Tom] Lenihan was always known for the rambling house. People would ramble in and there would be songs, people would sing songs and they’d have yarn and they’d tell stories and all this, and a bit of music. But that would be the thing, but I think the Góilín and the other clubs as well are fulfilling this function. And the singing circles, particularly the ones that happen once a month or I’m thinking of the ones like in Cooraclare.

(Davis and O’Reilly May 2015)

John Moulden also discussed changing contexts for singing. As discussed in Chapter Six, he argued that “restrictions harm the tradition” but “they shape it, too” (Moulden Mar 2015). The restrictions, such as not allowing instruments in the singing session, redefine singing in new contexts; the restriction redefines the singing as a separate entity from other means of performance. This same restriction then shapes the new singing session context. Therefore, the act of singing in a social setting is not dying, but is instead constantly being redefined and re-contextualized.

A Current Shift in Re-Contextualization

Singing used to be a “single element in a larger contextual milieu of interdependent social entertainments,” and was not usually heard out of context of the social gathering (Kaul 2009, 33). Len Graham contributed the article “Meeting Child
on the Road,” in *Dear Far-Voiced Veteran: Essays in Honour of Tom Munnelly* (Graham 2007), in which he wrote that the best sessions were those with musicians who appreciated song and shared company with singers (Ibid., 106). He writes of a time he visited a farm and helped collect potatoes until sunset, and after dinner, people began set dancing in the kitchen to music from accordions, fiddles, and whistles, with songs interspersed throughout (Ibid., 109). Barry Taylor also contributed the article “A Problem for the Public—Seán Ó Riada and Irish Traditional Music,” describing that an improvement in living conditions in nineteenth century rural Ireland brought larger living rooms that allowed for ensemble dancing and instrumental playing (Taylor 2007, 336). Music playing developed as a family pastime, he continues, increasing opportunities for ensemble playing in family homes (Ibid., 336). Clune writes that these were informal occasions in which family members and neighbors gathered for private house dances (Ibid., 337).

It was during these private house parties that singing would be heard as one component in a variety of activities (Cohane and Goldstein 1996, 426). Cohane and Goldstein describe the situation in the early twentieth century, at which time many schoolmasters spent the evening in different houses each night, their visits motivating story-telling and singing by the fireside (Ibid., 427). They continue by noting that music gatherings today occur at wakes, harvest home festivals, or wedding receptions, during which singing is one of many performances along with others such as jokes or storytelling. When the company grows tired of one type of entertainment or when the host wishes to calm down the night, the attention may focus predominantly on songs (Ibid., 430).

Informants with whom I have interacted during the course of my research have also told me that traditional singing was a part of a number of activities throughout the
social gatherings of the past. Farmers sang as they worked in the fields or tended their sheep, and houseguests offered their gratitude by sharing a song with the hosts. Nights progressed with tunes, dance, stories, jokes, and songs, interspersed casually with conversation and laughter. Participants in the evening gatherings experienced the singing sociality described in Chapter Two. Hast and Scott write that the “ancient Irish tradition of gathering to enjoy all kinds of homemade entertainment, including singing, storytelling instrumental music and dancing, lives on in informal gatherings in particular homes and pubs, but they can be difficult to find” (Ibid., 1997). While the tradition of mixed entertainment survives, it is not as widespread as it once was, an element of concern among singers. Jerry O’Reilly and Rosie Davis have especially expressed such concern. They noted that dancers might dance during instrumental sessions, an activity absent from singing sessions. Jerry tries to counter this imbalance and is often heard singing two or three songs during instrumental sessions, particularly at the weekly Friday lunchtime session in O’Donoghue’s Pub in Dublin.

In today’s song sessions, singers gather explicitly for song sharing. As a result, singing becomes its own context. John Moulden commented that previously “the singing was about the event rather than the event being about the singing . . . The gathering, the occasion, was the reason and the context for the singing” (Moulden Mar 2015). When people gathered for a night of craic, they might sing. Now, singers at sessions seem to gather specifically for singing, although events such as what John described still occur.

Some singers are now hoping to re-contextualize singing sessions. Several informants have shared with me that they want singing to be one aspect of an evening’s activities. Both Rosie and Jerry dance and sing, and I often see them at instrumental sessions or traditional music festivals, enjoying the various types of performance. We
discussed their strong desire for nights of singing, dancing, playing, and talking. They want to create places where all of these activities can be enjoyed and represented. They even think that singing sessions partially remove songs from their intended place in the house party. By engendering these activities, they safeguard the way they used to pass the time. Rosie and Jerry work together to bring these activities to new places, dancing during instrumental sessions, teaching dance, and singing whenever they have a chance—whether or not they are in a session specifically for singing.

We began a conversation about song’s place amongst a variety of activities when I mentioned the Sunday night session at the Inishowen festival, which alternated between instrumental music and singing. Jerry and Rosie danced while the instrumentalists played:

Carrie: Okay. One thing I noticed in Inishowen, remember the session that was, I think it was on the last night in the bar, there was songs.
Jerry: Yes, singing.
Carrie: Dancing, you were dancing, ah that was so much fun to watch, too.
Jerry: That’s the whole, that’s the whole, that’s the—that’s the essence of it.
Rosie: Things I have been involved with in England, and I’ve been involved in loads of things, have always had those elements in it. And so I quite miss that in the singing circles because it stops me from doing most of what I do. I don’t dance there. Some people there wouldn’t know I dance. Very little do, or they are quite shocked to hear that I play double bass. They don’t know. And it’s like, I wonder how many other people leave a part of themselves at the door because they play instruments and sing as well. So, I certainly feel at those singing circles I leave a part of me outside.
Carrie: Hmm. Are there places where you would feel that you bring all of you? Rosie: Here, actually. [O’ Donoghue’s, the location of our interview]. This, and I play double bass at the American session at the Cobblestone. And at the Cobblestone on the Sunday night I play at the traditional Irish one, and I always dance there. Jerry, much more, that’s much more what I like doing. More personally, rather than Góilín. I enjoy Góilín for what it is, but I prefer, because we both dance, and it’s lovely when it brings—there’s a band playing and they could have a set in the pub and it’s like, some of those sessions in Miltown are fantastic because you get a set up, people can’t stay still, it’s great music, great sound, I just love that. That’s what I really, really like.
Jerry: It’s more like the house party that used to go on.
Carrie: The house party but it’s just now removed.
Jerry: It’s just removed. And this now, this is the thing about the singing circles as well. I think that they have been removed from the house and the parlor sitting room element into bars now, and it’s probably, in an awful lot of singing circles, they’re in country areas, and people don’t sing because you can’t drink and drive. I’ve been to a good few of them now, and it’s very small. They don’t-
Rosie: But they can’t drink and sing.
[laughing]
Carrie: Always telling people they can’t drink and sing!
Rosie: I think there is [a desire] for this kind of thing. Because one thing that I was involved in in England was looked as encouraging step dancers, certainly there was step dancing and we had a session that was loads of step dancers. And the musicians came because they were happy to play, but we step danced all night. And I’m very keen, hopefully that someone will be able to do something for that in Ireland because we had, that was a good way. . . . So I want to do what I can do and get other people to do it. You need to be able to do it all evening, and the musicians would do it, it’s like having a spoons player rattling away. We would have it all. We’d sing at times, and so it would soon be the way. So there was room for all sorts of things. But my idea, and I think yours Jerry, is to get someplace with set dancing in there.

(Davis and O’Reilly May 2015)

Rosie and Jerry long for a place into which they can bring their full selves—their playing, dancing, entertaining, story-telling, laughing selves. They recognize a desire for the cumulative quality of entertainment, the kind of night they enjoyed in their youth. Henry Glassie observed just this kind of mix and characterized the cumulative effect as one that leads the participants to ever increasing expression of their shared social world. But, they know if this is to happen, they must make the space themselves. It is possible that singing sessions might be seeing another shift as a result of this effort to bring the house party to the public session. Because of the work of proactive individuals such as Jerry and Rosie, this shift is already under way.

**Imagined Past and Relevance**

I begin my analysis into ways safeguarding and engendering are practiced in singing sessions with a discussion around the idea of an ‘imagined past.’ I choose to begin with the concept of an imagined past because, while this concept has its
complications, knowledge of past performance contexts is needed in order to understand what activities to safeguard or engender. I suggest using an imagined past to maintain the integrity of traditional singing (Ó Riada 1982, 20) while re-contextualizing the singing for relevancy in the twenty-first century. I distinguish an imagined past from a romanticized, idealized recreation of the past. I have argued that such romanticizing can make songs too ‘precious,’ placing the singing within the glass cabinets of a museum, preserved but not to be altered or adulterated—the crystallization that I discussed in Chapter Six. The tendency to romanticize an ideal, pastoral past is often demonized in safeguarding literature. Regardless of how potentially problematic nostalgia can be, traditional singers and song session organizers frequently reminisce about the days of yore, and such comments cannot be ignored and should not be too quickly dismissed. I will refer to a more optimistic approach to sometimes romanticized talk about the past as serving to perpetuate an imagined past.

Revival theory provides a foundation for my argument for the transition from safeguarding to engendering and the balance between the two. As discussed in Chapter Six, Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill remark that representations of the past are often romanticized. They continue to explain that these representations “frequently evoke positive images of community-oriented interpersonal relationships, unmediated and noncommercial musical expression, pre-modern simplicity or innocence, pastoral tranquility, or the nobility of the peasant”(Bithell and Hill 2014, 11). If such images can inspire activists to maintain the integrity of their sustainable heritage, then they should continue recreating current contexts according to their memories of the ways their heritage was practiced in the past. However, the trouble lies in defining the fine line between using an imagined past for flexible re-contextualizations of the heritage in a

115 See discussion on romanticizing and ideal past in Chapter Six.
modern world, and crystalizing the heritage so much that it will eventually shatter and soon be replaced by more relevant activities.

Tamara Livingston, in her article “An Expanded Theory for Revivals as Cosmopolitan Participatory Music Making” (Livingston 2014), compares what she calls ‘fidelity’ to creativity in revival, and discusses the importance of balancing an imagined past and change:

Closely examining the nature and role of participatory aspects of revivals has the potential to shed light on a number of interesting questions, including the tension between fidelity to authoritative historical sources and musical innovation and creativity. In revivals with both participatory and presentational components, . . . I suggest that fidelity to a historical style reference may serve to invite or facilitate participation by limiting the social pressure or concern for musical innovation.

(Ibid., 68)

The musical practice maintains its integrity through retaining historical style, paradoxically providing a somewhat less risky space for expression of the participants’ creativity within those bounds. While her discussion refers more to fidelity to a particular performance style, her logic is relevant to the argument for finding balance with retaining past practices for modern contexts.

Bithell and Hill argue for using memories of the past as “effective means of activism,” stating, “The answer lies in part in the recognition that the past is not only a source of inspiration, but also a source of legitimacy (or occasional healing)” (Bithell and Hill 2014, 12). They continue:

Revivals, by definition, depend on some kind of relationship with the past. Most often they seek to reintroduce forgotten, abandoned, neglected, suppressed, or otherwise interrupted practices from the past into the present. They may also stem from a desire to restore the integrity of present practices that are seen to have lost some defining aspect of their original form of meaning.

(Ibid.)

The careful application of an imagined past to traditional singing can thus be used effectively in bringing the singing into the twenty-first century.
Annette frequently reminisced during our interview, particularly when remembering her late husband Tom. Her reminiscing can be used similarly to the way revivalists utilize imagined pasts for maintaining the integrity of Irish traditional singing gatherings. She enjoyed meeting with the staff at University College Dublin on her most recent visit because she and they reminisced about Tom: “They were great friends of Tommy’s. . . . I met them all that time and we went for lunch and we all laughed and cried when we thought about all the memories” (Munnelly May 2015). Annette also reminisced about her experiences at rambling houses116 in West Clare when she and her young family first moved to Miltown Malbay in the 1980s:

You’d go in, there was a woman down near us here, Mary Hartan, and my son used to go down to her house every evening. There’d be all the locals would be gathered there, so it was still going on at that stage. I don’t know of anyone who does it now. But that was a lovely thing for us to find out that it was still actually there. She was a lovely woman and she had a welcome for everybody. (Ibid.)

Annette reminisced often—in conversation, during our formal interview, and during song performance through her repertoire choice. When she sang, she would usually precede the song with a story about her husband.

Lillis Ó Laoire discussed the dichotomy between romanticizing Irish music of the past and the relevancy to traditional music performance today. In his article “Traditional Song in Ireland: Living Fossil or Dynamic Resource?” (Ó Laoire 1997), he explores the concern that singers and other traditional musicians convey about the relevance of traditional music in Ireland (Ibid., 1997). He notes that George Petrie, in his manuscript Ancient Music of Ireland from 1855, places the singer centrally in the process of song transmission. Petrie believed that because singers gave the most accurate rendition of the airs, songs were pure, authentic, and central to Irish

116 The ‘visiting houses’ described by Lillis Ó Laoire and referenced in Chapter Two, which were homes open for visitors, musicians, story-tellers, and singers (Ó Laoire 2005).

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Ó Laoire analyzes this statement, revealing the concepts of purity and authenticity as “high on the collector’s agenda.” He argues that these two perspectives still inform Irish music attitudes, creating a divide between tradition and innovation in Ireland (Ibid., 162). This divide affects ideas of what constitutes Irish traditional music and song and makes it difficult for traditional music to be made relevant to social lives within modern society. Organizations such as The Gaelic League and CCÉ develop performance rules to preserve the integrity of Irish songs, but Ó Laoire argues, “This type of scrutiny developed into a codification of the rules of traditional song which eventually became prescriptive and normative and which have a tendency towards standardization, the very thing called for by some of the early critics of traditional song” (Ibid., 165). Beyond the rules set up by organizations, communities may have an idealized view of traditional song that is evocative of a romanticized past (Ibid., 166).

Ó Laoire specifically describes re-imagining the past as it relates to traditional song. Although specifically about The Gaelic League, his assertions apply to modern-day sustaining efforts, as well. He writes, “[The Gaelic League] based its vision on the past glory of the Irish people and adopted song in Irish as a contemporary symbol (among others) of that imagined former greatness” (Ó Laoire 2013, 162). Martin Stokes writes that music helps its practitioners relocate themselves:

> The musical event, from collective dances to the act of putting a cassette or CD into a machine, evokes and organises collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity. The ‘places’ constructed through music involve notions of difference and social boundaries.

(Stokes 1997, 3).

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Irish song is flooded with reminiscing images, providing singers with a fond sense of an ideal past as they apply their ideas of the past in twenty-first century contexts such as singing sessions.

Annette not only reminisced, but she used her memory to re-imagine the past. Rather than simply remembering the past, as reminiscing suggests, she applied her memories to today’s approaches to singing, thus actively safeguarding past singing practices:

Tom [Munnelly] always said that, you see, in the Gaeltacht\textsuperscript{118} they teach singing. They teach the kids in school *sean-nós*. […] Singing in Irish is very healthy in the Gaeltacht. But he would have said that the singing in English would not be as healthy in the community. Now […] I have to qualify that by saying that it has changed. What happened of course was that people used to sing around the fireside and they used to sing in the home. And that doesn’t happen anymore, really. Particularly since television came in. It doesn’t happen. So now what you get is gatherings. You have singing, like there are so many singing circles around the country, it’s just not true. They’re in Leitrim, Galway, all over the place, Wexford. And you know this Bird Song Project has been a huge success and it has gone all around the country.\textsuperscript{119}

(Ibid.)

Singers can remember songs and singing contexts of the past to respect the singing tradition while approaching song today. Gatherings can also remember singers—for example, as previously detailed in Chapter Four, participants at the Ennis Singers Club always finish the evening by singing ‘Peadar’s Song,’ “So Here’s to You (The Parting Glass).” The club members sing this song in honor of their original founder, clinking empty glasses during the chorus. This new custom remembers their leader, who has passed away, by keeping his song alive. Session attendees reinvent the singing around the fireside, and they attempt to bring a piece of past contexts to the modern public session (Munnelly 1994, xxviii). Instead of trying to reinvent an imagined past,

\textsuperscript{118} Areas in Ireland where Irish is the main language.
\textsuperscript{119} The Bird Song Project was an initiative created by Michael Fortune and Aileen Lambert in May 2015 for singers at sessions and concerts to sing songs that mention birds. More information can be found at thebirdsongproject.com.
organizers and singers re-contextualize the kind of singing that happened in the past in new settings such as the singing circles.

**Safeguarding**

While my research proposes an approach to thinking of engendering for the sustainability of traditional practices, safeguarding is still an important perspective undertaken by practitioners of traditional singing today. How do informants view the need to protect their heritage, if they believe it needs protecting? How do traditional singing sessions exemplify safeguarding practices? This section reviews the various ways in which the singing session activities seem to be directed at safeguarding traditional song and singing.

Safeguarding is a more dynamic action than simply preserving. Richard Kurin describes this aspect of safeguarding as follows:

> If the tradition is still alive, vital and sustainable in the community, it is safeguarded. If it exists just as a documentary record of a song, a videotape of a celebration, a multi-volume monographic treatment of folk knowledge, or as ritual artifacts in the finest museums in the country, it is not safeguarded. (Kurin 2007, 12)

Kurin’s definition encompasses the analysis of safeguarding used throughout this thesis. As Kurin contends, safeguarding is meant to ensure protection of a custom within its living context, adaptable to modern life and not as an archaic representation historical practice. The following examples reveal ways in which my informants and members of singing circles safeguard traditional singing according to Kurin’s definition.

Jerry O’Reilly safeguards singing by giving presentations about previously collected material such as the Child Ballads for colleges and special events. He hopes to learn all the songs in his presentations so he can sing them live for audiences rather than play recordings. As discussed in Chapter Four, he wants to sing these songs to
show that they are alive (Davis and O’Reilly May 2015). His goal to learn songs for his presentations reflects Kurin’s argument that the act of singing the songs keeps them alive, and also reflects the importance of the recordings for allowing singers to use digital material for new transmission methods.120

While contending that heritage must live through practice, Kurin’s statements do not fully acknowledge the influence documentary records of songs have on sustaining the traditional singing culture in Ireland. According to UNESCO, ‘safeguarding’ “means ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, that is ensuring its continuous recreation and transmission” (UNESCO 2016). Therefore, collectors and archivists, and in turn any other individual or group who works to ensure the recreation and transmission of traditional singing, are safeguarding the singing and songs. As described in Chapter Five, collectors such as Tom Munnelly keep stories and performances of older singers alive through written records and audio-visual recordings. Recordings are then available through archives for public access. Archivists such as Grace Toland work closely with living singers through recording projects. Grace provides recordings for the public to provide families with documentation for remembering performances of loved ones, to promote the music of a location rich with singing such as Inishowen, and to allow wider audiences to hear and learn the songs—as with Andreas Schultz, the singer from Berlin. Therefore, the documentary records are contributing to an active safeguarding of tradition.

The title of Tom Munnelly’s collections and essays The Singing Will Never Be Done (Clune 2014) demonstrates an awareness of and desire to sustain Irish traditional singing. Annette explained Tom’s motives for collecting English language songs, discussed in more detail in Chapter Five. At the onset of his collecting career, Tom

120 See Chapter Four for Jerry’s discussion about learning songs from recordings.
observed that Irish language songs were already being collected and archived because they “were in danger of dying out altogether” (Munnelly May 2015). Irish language songs were already actively safeguarded because of a perceived imminent loss. Tom recognized that song collectors and archivists were not attending to English language songs similarly, so he began collecting them, himself. He since collected “the largest field-collection of Irish traditional song ever compiled by any individual,” according to an article in the online journal, Journal of Music (Journal of Music 2016). Whether or not the above statement is true, Tom did record English language Irish songs extensively. By collecting English language songs which he believed were in danger of disappearing, Tom Munnelly’s actions illustrate the mindset of safeguarding as defined by UNESCO and outlined in Chapter One.

Transmission to Future Generations

Macdara is aware of the work he and other singers and organizers must do to ensure that the singing continues. He would like to see a movement within singing circles such as introducing more songs to children, thus continuing to pass on the music to future generations. He also recognizes the importance of archives alongside the importance of live singing. He is optimistic about the immediate future of traditional singing but skeptical about the next generation:

I mean, I don’t feel like [traditional singing] is getting worse or anything over time. I think at the moment there’s plenty of course going on, the numbers, it’s definitely not as strong as the instrumental tradition, nowhere near, like, it’s a drop in the ocean by comparison. The amount of brilliant singing going on and continues going on. But like I say, if the strongest age group is sixty, sixty plus, in twenty years, what’s gonna be there? I don’t know the answer. Maybe it will just work itself out. But if you consider the amount of young people in this day and age that actually know many traditional songs is quite less, even less than it was twenty years ago, even less than it was twenty years before that. I don’t want to end as a cynic, but we’re definitely doing our best and we’re enjoying it. But I’d like to see some kind of movement within the traditional singers circles maybe go one step further. Like we’re talking about running children’s workshops. . . . Not classes or anything, nothing like competing or competitive singing. But you know, maybe, there’s nothing for kids. There’s stuff for
teenagers and twenty somethings like us, and there’s something for sixty plus and fifty plus. But there’s nothing for really young people who are actually the next generation of singers. I’d like to see more for initiatives like that. Because there is plenty of archival stuff. Plenty. Grace is catching the singers who are around now. What happens when they’re gone? You’ll still have the archives, which is invaluable. You’ll see the archives are so great, they are doing such great work and people that are putting on the events are doing f*cking stellar work to catch what is now, but I do kind of worry, not that I feel sort of responsible, not sure that it’s down to me, but I do kind of worry and think in twenty years, what happens then?

(Yeates Feb 2015)

Macdara recognizes the importance of archives and Grace’s work with them, even when worrying about the future of traditional singing (Ibid.). Macdara is skeptical about the continued viability of live social gatherings in twenty years because of the seemingly decreased interest from Irish youth. He suggests involving children in traditional singing through workshops and other similar initiatives.

When younger generations are not interested in traditional singing, older generations might worry about the loss of dissemination. For instance, Máire Ní Dhonnchadhá is worried that singing clubs are unsustainable because of a lack of interest from younger generations. She would like to safeguard the singing by passing it down to her college-aged children, but her children do not enjoy the Ennis Singers Club:

I have a son and a daughter who sing very well. . . . [My daughter] has a beautiful voice. I wish she would do more. Now she guested on a couple of occasions when she was a teenager, but she does not like the singing club. Oh mammy, please! And if she happens to be home a weekend that there’s a session and I say come with me, and No momma I can’t.

(Ní Dhonnchadhá Mar 2015)

Without an appeal for the younger generations, at least in Máire’s case, unfortunately the singing clubs have little future. One goal of session participants such as Macdara and Máire is to garner the interest of younger generations to safeguard the singing. The Inishowen International Folk Song and Ballad Seminar does implement children’s activities into the festival, as Macdara suggests, for more efficient
transmission to future generations. The theme of the 2015 Inishowen International Folk
Song and Ballad Seminar was “Children’s Songs.” Visitors to the festival were
encouraged to record children’s songs for an archival project:

My fellow housemates told me the next morning that one of the coordinators of
the festival strongly urged all bursary students to record a song for the
Inishowen recording project. The theme of the weekend was children’s music,
so we were encouraged to sing a children’s song. I hadn’t thought of this at all,
so I decided to sing Stephen Foster’s “Polly Wolly Doodle,” which felt a little
ridiculous compared to songs others sang. The recording studio was set up in
the bedroom of an empty house. I sat on a chair facing a video camera, set
behind a bed. It was a funny set up that made us laugh.

Recording children’s songs shows an attention to the youth. The coordinators of the
Inishowen festival recognize that the youth must be introduced to songs and
encouraged to sing. Local primary and secondary school choirs are featured in The Big
Concert, for example. They perform traditional songs for the festival participants.

After people finished eating, they started making their way to the seats set up
facing the stage for The Big Concert. The room by this time was packed because
the concert featured local school children and their families came to watch.
Grace Toland hosted the concert. Two children’s groups performed, a younger
group of maybe seven to nine year-olds and older group of maybe ten to twelve
year-olds or teenagers. They sang two songs each, and sometimes the audience
sang along for the choruses. They sang about Inishowen, and because there are
many verses in the songs, I heard students mumbling through some words and
unintentional harmonies. After they sang, and especially at the break, the room
cleared out drastically as the students and their families went home.

Such incentives involving the local school group helps to ensure that traditional songs
are passed on to the younger generations (Veblen 1994).

Lillis Ó Laoire notes that new methods of teaching traditional song, such as
classroom training, can be new manifestations of song transmission, representing an
adjustment to modern conditions. Some song community members meet these new
teaching methods with dissent because this practice is different than in the past.
However, he argues that such methods are not untraditional but are adapted for
contemporary life. He also writes that adults are affected by transmission changes as
much as students, learning from workshops, symposia, and festivals. He states that these festivals create a focus for a spontaneous song community gathering, so transmission and practice traditions are still present in the realm of more modern social events (Ibid., 166). Adapting to new transmission methods is a way to ensure traditional singing is passed on to future generations; as a result, songs and singing are safeguarded.

Recording and Archiving

Archives and recordings can promote traditional songs and raise awareness of singing practices. Archivists capture “the singers who are around now” (Yeates Feb 2015) so that their legacy remains (Vallely 2011, 18). For example, the material available in the Inishowen Song Project revives performances of the past for new, more global audiences. Grace explained:

The main thing was that people would be able to learn the songs, and to give the singers’ families access to those recordings, because very few of them would have had copies of the recordings themselves. That was a really important reason, you know, for locally we would make the material available again. And then it’s a point. It draws attention to what we’re doing as a group, so it’s the Inishowen Traditional Singers Circle now. Because of the projects that we’ve done, it helps getting more funding for other projects. . . At least you can say to people like if, what kind of songs do you sing at Inishowen, you just log on and you can see it, so it’s tangible, and it’s there, and that’s I suppose that sense that we’ve made something that was really in a lot of people’s memories because, like singing events and like that you’d walk away thinking God that’s great, but if somebody has recorded it and you can go back again to it, it’s caught, you know, that moment in time is caught. And Jimmy [McBride] did that, he caught a moment in time with those recordings, and that’s incredible, especially for me, I look at myself in those videos and you know I can’t remember what I was like when I was 20 and I go, that’s what I sounded like. . . . It’s funny when you’re looking at them, especially the videos, you’re not just looking at the singer and just listening, you’re looking at all the people in the room and you’re remembering, like the one we showed yesterday of the older man singing in the door.

(Toland Mar 2015)

Grace gave a lecture about the Inishowen Song Project at the University of Limerick the day preceding our interview. She showed a video clip from the Inishowen Song
Project of an older gentleman singing in an informal singing session. Capturing singer and context are equally as important as capturing the songs themselves. The man in the video has since passed away, but his performance was recorded and is now shared with newer audiences—his family and friends can look back on his singing, and thus his memory survives and his songs are safeguarded.

Tom Mulligan recorded singers and donated his recordings to the University College Dublin Archives, where he completed a folklore degree. He also made a CD of music performed the Cobblestone Bar, stating, “It was done within the pub there, just when you walk through the door on the left. We did it over a period of two days. But this time I—there’s so many musicians there I have decided to take one night and just record all the music, musicians, that are on that night” (Mulligan Feb 2015). He contributed to safeguarding music at the Cobblestone through his ongoing recording projects. Annette Munnelly stressed the importance of creating a CD of the first ten years of the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing: “[The festival] ended and then the following year there was money still in the kitty and there were two things [Tom Munnelly] wanted to do. One was to bring out a CD of the first ten years of the festival. Which he did, I have it there and I’ll give you both a copy before you go” (Munnelly May 2015). By giving me the CD, she was passing on the traditional singing captured by her husband using modern transmission methods, safeguarding the performances from his involvement at the festival and preserving his memory.

Archives can promote the songs so that they are still continuously performed in an age with increased access to the internet and digital sources. If collectors have suitable facilities, Grace suggests that collectors and archivists actively promote songs

121 Another University of Limerick student was with me to observe my interview.
they find. She contends that otherwise “there’s no osmosis going on,” (Vallely 2011, 534) as transmission through electronic means increases:

But even on a much more local level within Inishowen itself, drawing attention to songs, that people . . . just really haven’t been aware that there was a kind of an almost a break in younger singers because they weren’t able to access this material. They just didn’t know it was there, or maybe they weren’t at houses where people were singing or whatever, so now it’s all up, it’s all available . . . that’s why we do these. You have to promote it. There’s no osmosis going on.

(Toland Mar 2015)

Grace urges archivists to promote their songs so that audiences not aware of the wealth of songs from certain areas are able to access those songs and learn them.

Grace discussed the Inishowen Song Project as both an incentive to not only archive, but share the traditional singing and playing in Inishowen. Local song collector Jimmy McBride is donating his recordings to the ITMA “for the use of individuals, schools, universities, public libraries, etc.” (ITMA 2016) to learn the songs and remember the singers of Inishowen. This project therefore safeguards Inishowen singing through promotion of songs and performances. Grace promoted the project during The Big Concert at the Inishowen Festival:

In the second half of the concert after about 25 minutes of instrumental playing, Grace talked about the Inishown Song Project. She then introduced a man from Boston and the man from Berlin, two international singers who learn from and support the Inishown Song Project, singing circle, and festival. The man from Boston saw the project come up online, recorded thirty of the songs from the project, and sent his recordings to Grace and crew.

(Inishowen Mar 2015)

The man from Berlin, Andreas Schultz, and the man from Boston learned their songs from the Inishown Song Project and were recognized for their contributions by the organizers of the Inishowen Festival. The songs in Inishowen were thus safeguarded and now are practiced by singers globally.

Presenters at the Inishowen Festival concerts and lectures also exhibited attention to safeguarding efforts. On Saturday morning, singers of the Man, Woman
and Child Project\textsuperscript{122} sang a song from the project, preceded by an extensive description of the song. Jerry O’Reilly then talked about the work Tom Munnelly and Hugh Shields did to bring the Child Ballads back to the forefront of traditional singing in Ireland. The performances and lectures promoting Man, Woman and Child were thus promoting safeguarding, and Jerry recognized the work of previous individuals involved in safeguarding Irish traditional song in his presentation.

**Engendering**

Safeguarding is vital to ensuring the survival of traditional songs. Not only are the songs being safeguarded, but so are the memories of performances, singers, and places of these songs. As Macdara said, archives are invaluable. Without them, we have none of the foundation from which to reference and learn. In my view, however, safeguarding should be balanced with engendering initiatives. The singing being engendered for today can contribute to safeguarding the singing of the past; but it does more than this. It is not just the ‘old songs’ that are the focus of singing circle activity. My informants seem to prioritize the singing, and the singing sociality in particular, over the songs. The repertoire of songs that can facilitate production of singing sociality today is wider and more diverse than just the singing of old songs. This section suggests ways in which social singing is being engendered in singing sessions.

Safeguarding and engendering are not divided, opposite approaches to the singing, but instead work together in a cycle. Safeguarding may lead to engendering, engendering may lead to safeguarding, or both safeguarding and engendering may be present in the same act, performance, or event. Annette, for instance, continued the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing in memory of her husband. A year after his death,

\textsuperscript{122} A project promoting the Child Ballads, managed by the Irish Traditional Music Archive. See www.manwomanandchild.ie.
she and his friends brought out the CD of the first ten years of the festival. This act safeguarded Tom Munnelly’s voice and inspiration. Annette continued, “I often said I felt someone pushing me, pushing my elbow, come on you can do it, you can do it. And we got [the festival] going again and it’s been going on ever since then” (Munnelly May 2015). She restarted the festival so that Tom’s friends and family could continue to gather for songs—therefore she engendered social singing by recreating the singing weekend.

Engendering is practiced in singing sessions today. While informants do not necessarily use the term, I have observed the influence of an attitude and actions aimed more at the creation of singing events as occasions to sing and socialize with like-minded individuals than at insuring the perpetuation of songs. Organizers and singers may not be creating singing events and their concomitant spaces in order to preserve such songs. The desire to instigate social singing today is less about preserving than it is about engendering. Within this context, traditional songs and singing are safeguarded—but this is in service of engendering a social practice of singing that is valued, and which is perceived as under threat. Therefore, engendering social singing events may contribute to the sustainability of social singing.

**Space for Singing**

As explained in Chapter Three, space can be created explicitly for singing. Annette stated that such spaces, in the form of the singing circles, are important because they provide a place for relaxed and friendly gatherings. According to Annette, they exist because people want to sing:

> They have a place to do it. That’s the thing about the Góillín is there for a long time. It’s there for the best part of forty years, I’d say. The other singing circles, the reason they’re there is that people want to sing and . . . a singing circle is a more informal . . . venue. More informal, just a place for a gathering, where people can just be relaxed about it, you know? 
> (Munnelly May 2015)
Annette values those spaces where singing can be informal. She emphasizes that clubs such as An Góilín are “just a place for a gathering,” for people who want to sing. The space, in this case An Góilín, was therefore created to engender informal singing.

Rosie also mentioned that singing circles are a means for gathering, commenting, “I would see singing circles as a way of getting together. But also because I was interested in singing, you know, when do you get the opportunity to sing, really? We don’t, really” (Davis and O’Reilly May 2015). Rosie speaks of singing sessions in terms of engendering—spaces today are created to give traditional singers the opportunity to sing.

While engendering space for singing seems like an effective way to think about sustaining the singing, it still can be problematic at times. Singers can learn to adapt to such problems that may arise to ensure more successful singing sessions. Consider my personal experience one busy night at The Night Before Larry Got Stretched. Singing sessions were created to give traditional singers a comfortable and inviting space to sing songs. However, the Christmas session at Larry was so busy that not everybody who wanted to sing was given that chance:

*The session started just around 9:30 p.m. Macdara opened the session introducing the guest singer, Barry Gleeson from the Góilín Singers. By this time I think the room was full with at least sixty people. I had given my name to Macdara, but I learned in the second half that not everybody would have a chance to sing tonight. I had worked on a new song for tonight, “The Hare’s Lament,” so it was a little bit of a letdown not to be able to sing it, but at least that means I can save it for another time. I had mixed feelings about not being able to sing even though I put down my name. Personally, I have many chances to sing and was not upset after the initial letdown. However, I wondered who else might not have had a chance who may have wanted to sing, and who may not have many other chances elsewhere. Today was a special day, too, since it was the session before Christmas. On the flip side, I like that the session has a time limit. The bar closes at a certain hour, the employees want to go home, and the session, running at usually 2.5 hours, is just the right length. Myself, as a younger singer, may get bored or overwhelmed with too much singing. The Night Before Larry Got Stretched leaves us wanting more rather than wanting less, usually the formula for what I believe is a good event. When I considered*
Singing and space were created in such a way that attracted many visitors. The festive atmosphere and prolific guest singer drew so many attendees that not everybody could sing. Brave regulars took the spotlight, while the shyer singers were pushed to the sidelines. In an effort to please the major supporting crowd who came for the guest, other singers interested in singing may have been overlooked. As I stated in my field notes, I personally was not upset about this and was glad for the early closing time. However, maybe other singers, whose presence might be needed to attract or increase interest to this style of song gathering—particularly younger, newer singers—might have felt left out. While I am speculating here, my assertion is grounded from personal experience and conversations. Larry was so populated this night possibly because it was a celebration of a major holiday and therefore more festive than the usual sessions. The session could also have been so well attended because the guest was a prolific, humorous, and charismatic singer. Larry organizers attracted so many singers that not everybody could sing, but by creating such an inviting atmosphere for participants, they engendered the social singing.

Manufacturing Sessions

Grace used the term ‘manufacturing’ to describe that singing sessions and the spaces for them are created intentionally for the singing. She stresses the importance of proactivity to ensure these spaces exist, stating, “You’ve got to create the places. And if they don’t exist, you manufacture them” (Toland Feb 2015). Grace wanted to participate in the music making, so she manufactured space for her own, personal involvement.
Jerry O’Reilly also recognized a need to actively manufacture space for singing sessions. He described the creation of Marrinan’s Pub in Miltown Malbay as a strictly singer’s pub during the Willie Clancy Festival. He contends that singers must know what they want, be assertive, and create their singing space:

It’s interesting why people felt the need to have singing clubs or singing circles, and that’s interesting in the context of the revival of traditional music, song, and dance in Ireland. People would argue that Ireland did not need a revival because traditional music, song, and dance was always alive. But, in actual fact, you analyze it and you think, why was Ceoltóirí Éireann started in 1951? Because the perception then was a lot of the music was in danger of dying at that time. They were simultaneously in Europe and in the United States, the folk song revival started. Again, people will always say, in Appalachians they would say, we just always sang these songs. . . . The United Kingdom folk song revival started, and that was reciprocated by the Skiffle revival and Lonnie Donegan. A lot of stuff from the United States comes from here, and in Ireland what happened then was that it is, to a degree, it’s still true in Ireland that, well, you know Carrie, that sometimes you’ll go to a music session and the musicians do not want to listen to the singers. They just want to churn out, in Clare for instance, it would be reels all night. You would hardly ever hear a jig or a hornpipe, or any other type of dance style. It’s predominately just reels churning out. Now you would occasionally get them. But that’s my perception of it. I think singers then have decided that we’re not getting a fair go at it. So, they decided then that, and I remember, the first sign the singing sessions started in the Willie Clancy Summer School, it was on the Friday of the week, we were there all week, and Frank Harte was the man who went into Marrinan’s and he said, “There is going to be singing here today.” Any musician would come in and he said, “You’re welcome to play a tune but we’re going to be singing here. And there’s going to be singing.” And that was sort of the reason, and people like [instrumentalists who are singers], they were singers themselves and they were fine. But some of the musicians who don’t sing and have no time for singing, they just went out again. Then Marrinan’s became the pub for singing in Miltown Malbay.

(Davis and O’Reilly May 2015)

Jerry refers to the Skiffle movement and folk song revival in the United Kingdom in the mid-twentieth century (See Chapter One). Revival movement provided inspiration for the creators of the singing session at Marrinan’s Pub. Again, the importance of listening is stressed here. Singers must have listeners because without them, there is no receiving end for the songs. Singers did not have a fair, equal chance during the Willie Clancy

123 Lonnie Donegan was a Skiffle singer.
Festival to sing with the instrumentalists, and they did not have listeners. Therefore, proactive individuals engendered the official festival singing pub.\footnote{Unfortunately, Marrinan’s closed in 2012 due to family illness and bereavement. This happened to be my first year at the Willie Clancy Festival, so I never had the chance to experience the singing there.}

**Age and Gender**

One reason singing circles were created was to bring singers together. Grace stressed the importance of proactively organizing singing gatherings to encourage singers on the periphery, such as older singers and women, who may not normally come to the pub (O’Shea 2008):

Well I suppose what really happened was that the generation of singers that I would have met then [in my late teens] sometimes I think with singing you get a bit of a bug about it. I became, not obsessed, but, probably a bit obsessed. I went to a lot of events or a lot of sessions and things but a lot of the older singers weren’t coming out anymore because they were getting older, the singing as they would have, to actually get those sort of group of older people out together, it had to be organized. They weren’t coming out casually to the pub. You also, I think, have to remember that a lot of the women wouldn’t come out at night. It wouldn’t be a natural thing to be in the pub at all. That was one of the things, one of my earliest memories was not hearing women singing because it was men were going to the pubs, so that was a factor.

(Toland Feb 2015)

By creating the monthly Inishowen Singers Circle, Grace and other organizers gave older singers and women an opportunity to sing. She also featured the “Ladies of the Inishowen Singers” at The Big Concert during the festival to represent the women singers in Inishowen, in which six women sang unaccompanied songs on stage. The Inishowen Singers Circle likewise was created to encourage older singers to participate with a listening audience. One of Grace’s aims for the circle and festival was to represent Inishowen to visitors from different Irish counties and abroad:

You meet other people and a lot of people would have traveled to Inishowen to hear Inishowen singing from other countries, and then as it would happen you were maybe asked then to go somewhere else to sing and represent Inishowen, so a whole lot of things came together. The singing circle was really manufactured to get a place so that the older singers would come out again and would have an audience.
Grace and the other organizers of the Inishowen Singers Circle and Festival engendered a place in which international visitors, women, and older singers alike could participate in singing.

On the opposite side of the age spectrum, the founders of The Night Before Larry Got Stretched created the singing club specifically as a place where younger singers can feel comfortable with one another to share traditional songs, as described in Chapter Three. Young singers might be shy in a room with a large age gap. The Larry organizers wanted “an atmosphere that would be welcoming to young people” (Yeates Feb 2015). Larry was set up to be suitable to young singers, but the organizers strove to welcome singers of all ages. This inclusivity is shown by varying the demographics of the guest singers and calling on younger and older singers, and women and men, alike. Macdara had a can-do, build it attitude. He said, “If you want a place where you can feel comfortable, make it.” He explained the genesis of Larry, commenting, “I suppose there was a hankering, a silent hankering for something like this and then as soon as it was there people just went to it” (Ibid.). By creating The Night Before Larry Got Stretched, the club’s founders engendered space in which younger singers felt comfortable to participate with like-minded young individuals.

Engendering Sociality

The story of the creation of the Cobblestone Bar is a solid example of the engendering perspective in action. To use the oft quoted phrase in popular culture, “If you build it, they will come,” Tom Mulligan built the space, and the musicians came.

125 Origins of this quote are contested. It may be a misquote from the 1982 novel Shoeless Joe by W. B. Kinsella, which later was made into the film 1989 Field of Dreams starring Kevin Costner. I have also heard the phrase attributed to early twentieth century American president Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt, referencing the construction of the Panama Canal. Regardless of its origins, the phrase is adapted into
He cleared out the pool tables, dart boards, loud audio, and televisions. “We just provide the facility,” he said. He stressed the importance of the social occasion attracting the music, and the musicians gathering for social music making. He told a story about his daughters and her friends playing traditional music on Christmas Eve for charity, surprised by the money they raised in one night:

Five and a half grand! Now there was more than my daughter involved like as I said there was over twenty people. They have a generosity of spirit, and they have an ability to bring sweet music to the world. And all they’re into a bit of a friendship. And again, it’s the same thing again. It’s not all about music. You see, she started playing music when she was six, and she’s still hangin’ around these kids. It’s the conversation and the *craic* that they have in between that makes it all fun. I remember growin’ up, I never talked to a girl ‘til I was nearly twenty. I didn’t get married ‘til I was 36. These ones are, there is no inhibitions with, there’s no, there’s no gender difference. They’re all friends. My other daughter, she’s 22 this month, and she was in the house last Friday and these four or five lads who have their own girlfriends, they called up other friends and it was just a music night. They were just sittin’ eatin’ pizza and watching a video, and it was lovely. They all have their own boyfriends and girlfriends. They all come up, there was six or eight of them Friday night havin’ pizza, watchin’ movies and so on. And they do that once a month or once a fortnight or something, in different houses. But it’s great. And, then, I’ve met some amazing musicians through my kids. I would never have expected, I thought I was kind of an authority on it. They come along encouraging music. . . . It’s amazin’. Amazin’!

(Mulligan Feb 2015)

Traditional musicians are friends because of the music. They engender the spaces, comfort, and social life—created in a way that fosters music playing.

At most of the sessions I attended, I spoke with the people around me about singing and sessions. At The Night Before Larry Got Stretched, I informally spoke with a singer about his own experience with singing as a social activity. He told me he goes on a big annual trip somewhere in Ireland with his golfing friends. He said they are terrible at golf, but the pinnacle of the trip is when they take over a bar and start their own singing session. They even try to include anyone in the bar who may want to join

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modern popular culture and its use sums up what Tom Mulligan has done for traditional music by opening the Cobblestone Bar.
the festivities. I asked him what they look for in a bar, and he said they try to find one that does not already have music so that they do not have any competition. In some smaller towns, this task is more difficult because they might find music in nearly all the bars. I asked about the group members’ singing backgrounds. He said they are not professional singers, but many have grown up with singing in the family. He told me the evening’s highlight is this social gathering that revolves around singing. These golfers are not interested in safeguarding traditional singing. However, when they are together as a group of friends on their weekend excursion, their mood is festive and so they sing together after a day of golf. In this way, they engender space for traditional singing.

The social life of the singing sessions, and traditional music in general, is arguably the most important aspect of the session, which I have discussed throughout this thesis. Hazel Fairbairn, in *Group Playing in Traditional Irish Music* (Fairbairn 1993), wrote:

> Interaction keeps the music alive and creates the vitality associated with a good session, and with the Irish music tradition as a whole. The human needs that generate traditional music, the crack, sociability and community and the reconciliation of ultimately isolated individuals are all answered by the session, communal activity which respects the individuals within it.

(Ibid., 310)

The vitality of traditional singing relies on its sociality. Engendering the “crack,” or *craic*, therein helps keep the music alive.

Creating a safe space to sing, in which participants feel they can enjoy the *craic* with each other and share their songs without worrying about the concerns that were outlined above regarding spaces inconducive to singing, is the pinnacle of engendering efforts. Safeguarding can be generally seen to sustain a certain kind of repertoire sung within these spaces, and engendering can help to create the spaces in which this
repertoire can be sung. The sociality that becomes possible within such a space, then, is the ultimate goal of engendering these spaces for singing.

**The Vitality of the Social Life of Irish Traditional Singing**

My central question driving my research for this thesis has been, “What is the vitality of the social life of Irish traditional singing?” Is the singing dying or thriving? Is it constant or evolving? Each informant shared differing opinions and concerns, describing her or his predictions.

**Increasing Prestige**

Annette is concerned that traditional singing is turning into a performance opportunity for strong singers. She states the importance of encouraging younger or newer singers for keeping the focus on ‘ordinary people:’

That’s the sad part about it. You have people like—I think it’s wonderful that we have so many. [Names some singers]. And, you know, and I’m just picking out a couple there, I mean, there are people, but they are great performers. But what about the people who just love singing? And I suppose singer circles do [. .] to a certain extent they are fulfilling that role now, because if you want to sing a song and you go along to your local singing circle and you become part of that and you do it, but it has changed so much. Travellers by and large don’t sing those songs anymore, either. Occasionally you meet somebody who does, but not very often. So, that’s my take on it. I’m sorry to be so pessimistic, but that’s the way it is, ya know? I mean, I love, love, love going to a concert and hearing a fabulous singer singing a song, don’t get me wrong. I love it. But I think it’s very sad that ordinary people don’t feel that they have a role to play in singing anymore because they feel that, “I’m not a singer,” and if you go into a gathering of singers, it would be all the people, the big names would be asked, and the people who don’t have a big name would probably be left aside. So I don’t know what you can do about that or how it can be. The only thing I know is that in the Góilín, they always encourage young people. Like if they get somebody of your age or younger, they will make sure that person gets asked to sing.

(Munnelly May 2015)

Annette is worried that larger voices marginalize smaller voices. Fortunately, she believes the singing sessions can answer this dilemma. When asked about the future of traditional singing in Ireland, she answered, “I suppose it all depends on how much
interest people have in singing, but I’m very encouraged by the singing circles now. I
think that ordinary people who want to sing, that’s the root.” To Annette, singing
circles can answer the dilemma about too many star singers dominating the traditional
scene. Her idea of a good singing circle, which other informants also expressed, is one
that gives space for any singer, regardless of vocal ability, to sing.

John is also concerned about the increasingly performance-oriented traditional
singing. He alludes to glee clubs in the past and states the dangers of exclusion:

I really have little idea where it’s going. But I do know that it’s probably going
to become more and more restricted. It’s going to be subsumed into a [...] the
kind of glee club that gentlemen had in the past [...] and everyone’s a good
singer, it’s here for our sport, other people are excluded, most people don’t sing,
or most people were told that they can’t sing or whatever.

(Moulden Mar 2015)

John defines traditional singing contexts as places where everybody could sing.
He commented on singers with nearly no voice because of cancer or missing teeth,
exclaiming, “He’s awful! He’s dreadful!” He continued, “In the context of these
gatherings, and yet, in the context of singing [the singers with no voices teach] us an
enormous lesson that the aesthetic is not the song, is not the performance, it’s the
singing! Because he sings, he is valued” (Moulden Mar 2015). An argument developed
upon in Chapter Four, John stresses the importance of the songs, not the aesthetics, in
the singing sessions. He worries that with changing, increasingly performative singing
contexts with stricter rules and parameters, singers will lose the freedom to sing despite
voice quality. These new contexts drift away from the character of traditional
gatherings and are harmful to the phenomenon of traditional singing. He describes
further, “There are other permissions which are inherent in the oldest traditional way. If
singing was the aesthetic, then people with bad voices or no voices were allowed to
sing. The society gave permission for all kinds of things, which it no longer does.”
John’s argument mirrors my argument in Chapter Six. Singing contexts are constantly
fluctuating, but the most important part to remember is to emphasize the act of singing, not the maintenance of tight prescriptions on what is considered traditional singing.

The Size of the Singing Community

Macdara Yeates is not so encouraged by the future prospects for traditional singing in Ireland. Visitors to The Night Before Larry Got Stretched marvel at the room full of young singers, relieved by the evidence that the singing will not die with the more mature singers. However, Macdara shared his concern:

I was chatting to a friend about Larry, I’m not sure why this is, but he was talking to me about Larry about how great it was and about how he loved it and he talked about how it’s great because the song tradition would be saved, because this younger generation of singers that were doing it. And I’ve definitely heard a few of the older singers saying how great this is, the song tradition is in safe hands. It’s always very flattering. I’ve been saying recently I’m not sure I think it’s in safe hands because really there’s only ten or twelve of us who are still of this generation, this in Dublin, anyway that are doing it, and the numbers are sparse across the country. We got the strongest age group that are singing songs is probably sixty plus, so you give it twenty years, is it just going to be us? So what I was saying is I think, is this what we do? Larry is great, it’s great fun and everything. I suppose I am a little concerned as to what happens next. Maybe in a few years Larry isn’t really what we want to do anymore. Maybe we just want to express our love for song in a different way or maybe some people move away or do something else. People are going to get on with their lives at some stage. They’re not going to be able to do this. I suppose it’s very flattering to hear that we are the saviors of the Irish song tradition but I’m not so convinced myself.

(Yeates Feb 2015)

Are the organizers of The Night Before Larry Got Stretched the “saviors of the Irish song tradition?” We cannot know the answer to this question now, but young singers such as Macdara are aware that ‘saving’ the singing involves active work and dedication by individuals within the singing community. Currently they gather because they want to sing, and that is enough of a motivation to keep the music going for now. Macdara admits that his views are fairly pessimistic, and own observations have revealed to me that traditional social singing in Ireland has a more positive future, but I do understand his sentiments about the small numbers of involved younger singers. If
he continues to be active, organizing workshops and inviting like-minded singers to participate as much as possible, these younger singers could very well be responsible for not only sustaining, but possibly regrowing the singing tradition.

Rosie asks her own questions about the vitality of singing circles. While the number of singing circles is high, she notices that the community is small:

I’ll mention something about you asking about the importance of the singing circles, really what happens to them, you know, will they continue? Will they implode? . . . We could go all sorts of them, you know, all the different singing circles. They’re still a very small community. Singing circles.

(Davis and O’Reilly May 2015)

Despite the small singing community, singing sessions survive much because of their regularly attending participants. Macdara acknowledged that one important reason for creating a session specifically to attract younger singers is because attendance among the younger singers is inconsistent. Due to this inconsistency, he found it difficult to create a core group of participants:

I suppose it’s kind of because young people are a bit more fickle. You might have people who come for ten months and then don’t come for four. And that’s just what the younger crowd are like. You have to have this open all the time because I think if you tried to create a core group I think young people are too unreliable for that. There’s too much better things to be doing.

(Yeates Feb 2015)

An Góilín’s core group of singers attend Larry often. Macdara recognizes that An Góilín could be successful because of such a consistent core group of singers:

The Góilín is a massively successful session, now it’s been going for 35 years. I suppose their success is on harvesting their own members and building up a scene and tradition and this big wealth of singers within themselves. And they’re always open to new people. I could be wrong but I think the Góilín core group has been the same for a very long time.

(Ibid.)

By “harvesting their own members,” members of An Góilín create a committed core of singers within session space. These singers then spread their support to other singing sessions such as Larry.
Positive Outlook

Grace acknowledges concerns for the future of Irish singing. She also recognizes that the tradition is evolving. She believes this evolution is a natural part of the cycle and does not affect the health of the singing:

I think that it’s funny. Every time people, when we all talk about singing and traditional music, there’s always this lament that something is happening now that didn’t happen before. I really think that things are quite healthy. It doesn’t worry me, and things have to change. Things have to. We can’t put ourselves in a bubble and stay there and go, because I think that’s when things will start to break down, I think it’s when you try and remove yourself too much from everything else that’s going on around you. I think Inishowen definitely, I mean, we can’t see an end.

(Toland Feb 2015)

Grace, a librarian and archivist by trade, actively seeks ways to do what she says is to ‘manufacture’ singing contexts. By creating such contexts, she is engendering the singing social life, and through such engendering efforts and despite its inevitable ups and downs, the practice continues, today.

Annette hopes people continue singing. She mentioned that Jerry ultimately does not care what songs session attendees sing as long as they participate: “And my brother Jerry has said it doesn’t matter if they sing ‘Puppet on a String’,126 so long as we know that they’re singing. And then they sing the other songs and they’ll start learning them” (Munnelly May 2015). Even if people come into the session singing songs that may not be considered traditional, they may learn to adapt. A discussion in Chapter Six revealed that singers who do not identify with traditional singing tend to remove themselves from the sessions. Likewise, so-called non-traditional singers can try to contribute to the session by learning traditional songs, encouraged by session organizers.

126 The winning song in the European annual singing competition ‘Eurovision’ in 1967, performed by pop singer Sandie Shaw.
While I have no formal statement from Jerry to quote concerning his view of the future of traditional singing, his outlook is the most optimistic. He will be the first person to say that he thinks the singing is not only safe, but vibrant. He acknowledges that singing contexts may be changing and does not necessarily personally like some ways traditional song is being represented, but he recognizes that singing is not in danger of dying and, thanks to the work of individuals who ensure it is kept alive, Irish traditional singing has a healthy future.

Tom Mulligan is not only positive that traditional singing has a lively future; he is amazed at how lively it is today. Tom is delighted by the rise of prolific traditional singers and bands in the country. He remarked on the organizers of The Night Before Larry Got Stretched, exclaiming, “They’re going to be the singers of the future. They’re going to be the marker that you will be aiming for.” He shared with me the names of traditional music bands such as Lynched, the Bonny Men, and Skipper’s Alley, stating, “These are all young fellas that are coming up, young ones that have been around. They’re all excellent musicians, they’re all excellent singers. And sometimes you get the combination right, sometimes these bands fall aside, but these three particular bands are going to be—they’re worth listening to because they have somethin’ to offer.” He believes traditional singing is healthy due to the young singers adding new, engaging material to traditional song.

Based on my own observations, I agree with Jerry, Grace, and Tom that while the context for singing may change, social gatherings around singing will continue as long as singers and listeners want to sing and hear songs, and they will continue to strive toward creating the spaces that allow them to do so. They will laugh, drink tea or alcohol, maybe dance, maybe tell a story, maybe tease their friends. They will enjoy *craic*. They will socialize, and they will sing.
Conclusion

This chapter combined findings throughout the process of writing this thesis to explore ways in which the social life of Irish traditional singing is safeguarded or engendered. The themes raised throughout this thesis were: the perceived need for times and places suitable for traditional singing, to which the singing session is a current answer; the connection between singing and song; the work of proactive individuals to promote and sustain traditional singing; and the need for a flexible, fluid, and evolving approach to what is considered traditional. These themes contributed to an analysis of the use of safeguarding and engendering in traditional singing circles.

Safeguarding strategies aim to protect the ways in which singing was practiced in the past, while engendering focuses on the means for creating new contexts for traditional singing. As my observations and interviews have revealed, the sustainability of traditional singing needs a balance of both safeguarding and engendering to retain the integrity of the tradition while re-contextualizing singing so that it is relevant today.

Rather than fighting challenges to safeguarding efforts, traditional singers and enthusiasts should work with these challenges. They should adapt their heritage, adjusting for contemporary society to attract and keep practitioners. And they need to continue singing, engendering occasions and spaces for gatherings, and inviting interest in the songs. Gone are the days of single-room homes and rough winters on the farm, so intangible cultural heritage must accommodate to modern living and societal standards. The challenge is to figure out how to sustain Irish traditional singing in a modern world.
CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

One question was of primary importance in guiding my research throughout my fieldwork into the social life of Irish traditional singing: “How is the social life of Irish traditional singing made relevant in the twenty-first century?” Using what I learned within the context of singing sessions, I hoped to answer another pressing question, “What might be the best way to ensure the sustainability of the social life of Irish traditional singing in a modern world?” To answer the latter question, I investigated the ways the social life of Irish traditional singing is evolving and where traditional singers and other key participants in singing circles think social singing is headed in the future. I focused specifically on two monthly singing sessions—The Night Before Larry Got Stretched in Dublin and the Ennis Singers Club in Ennis, County Clare—and two annual singing weekends—the Inishowen International Folk Song and Ballad Seminar in Ballyliffin, Inishowen, and the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing in Miltown Malbay, County Clare. These micro-studies vary in size, location, and demographics. Because participants often participate in multiple singing events, observations from fieldwork can resonate with other sessions in Ireland. The monthly sessions were regular occurrences with returning participants and well-establish organizational systems. The annual weekends were festive occasions, attracting visitors from around the country and the world. Singing sessions and singing weekends are the predominant current contexts for social singing gatherings, so I investigated these events to
understand the ways in which singers, organizers, and other participants work to ensure the sustainability of social singing in Ireland.

I sought to investigate how this Irish model for safeguarding and engendering traditional singing is relevant to an understanding of issues across the broader world of sustaining intangible cultural heritage. To understand a global approach to safeguarding strategies, I looked closely into UNESCO safeguarding strategies, problematizing these strategies and applying the terms of UNESCO discourse to my own field research. UNESCO is currently not involved with traditional singing in Ireland, but I found its strategies and the extensive literature—both critical and prescriptive—particularly applicable to my research. In response, I offer my own suggestions for ensuring sustainable intangible cultural heritage, calling for a balance between what I have called ‘engendering’ and ‘safeguarding,’ so that the ICH is not only continually practiced, but is made relevant to today’s society.

The title of this thesis, “A Singing Space: Re-Contextualizing Tradition” is a reaction to field research from Autumn 2014 to Summer 2015 into the sustainability of the singing social life in Ireland. I chose to problematize the term ‘safeguarding’ because traditional singers expressed to me their desire to protect the singing social life. ‘Safeguarding’ seemed the most dynamic and widely recognized term to address the sustainability of heritage, due to the widespread use of this term as disseminated by UNESCO. According to UNESCO’s dynamic definition, to safeguard intangible cultural heritage means to keep the heritage alive and relevant to its community. However, ‘safeguarding’ is not without challenges. How does one safeguard a living practice without removing it from its performance context? How does one keep the living practice from becoming a museum piece to be admired from afar? As I conducted research, I realized that ‘safeguarding’ as an attitude and strategy only
partially reveals what is going on in the social singing world in Ireland. Singers also create singing, without necessarily thinking of protecting it, which led me to investigate the way practitioners might engender the Irish social singing.

I traced the development from safeguarding to engendering approaches to the sustainability of social singing practices and discovered a prominent theme regarding the notion of space and the importance of finding and creating spaces conducive for traditional singing. Singing sessions are one answer to the quest for space, formed by active individuals within the singing community, and even these sessions and individuals are now experiencing another shift in the re-contextualization of space for the Irish singing tradition.

The responsibility of sustaining the social life of Irish traditional singing often falls to the proactive individuals within the community who work hard to ensure traditional singing sustainability. These individuals both safeguard and engender social singing. They collect and archive songs, they share their archives, they lead sessions, they manage facilities, and they sing. The individuals who participated in this thesis are passionate about songs and singing. Their lives revolve around singing, and they stress the importance of the social dimension of song performance. They promote their songs to greater audiences beyond the singing circle community and welcome singers to their sessions. The efforts of these individuals are crucial to sustaining the sociality, and thus the longevity, of Irish traditional song and singing.

I studied singing sessions because they are a contemporary solution to the perceived loss of places suitable for traditional singing. People no longer meet in the privacy of their own homes for kitchen sessions as frequently as they did up through the end of the twentieth century, a phenomenon that Annette Munnelly described to me which was still being practiced when she first moved to Miltown Malbay in the 1980s.
She still does occasionally host singing events at her home, such as an annual gathering of her late husband Tom’s friends during the Willie Clancy Festival. Instrumental sessions, gatherings of musicians who play sets of tunes in public places such as pubs, are increasingly quicker paced in noisy venues and typically are not conducive for performances by unaccompanied singers. Singers, on the other hand, tend to want attentive listeners who will be receptive to the songs and stories they share. Singers of traditional song have created the traditional singing session as a haven for the practice they cherish.

According to my informants, examples of successful sessions are events in which listening is as important as singing, the atmosphere is inclusive, and anyone can sing regardless of their experience, background, or quality of voice. These communal events are participatory. To use Turino’s definition of participatory music making, singing sessions are inclusionary group music making processes with shared interactive engagement (Turino 2008, 61-62). A conversation of sorts occurs between singer and listener, as singers exchange songs as if they are exchanging gifts, to borrow Henry Glassie’s analogy (Glassie 1982, 41). Songs may be interrupted with words of encouragement, such as “Good girl!” or “Good man!” Singers may talk about the songs with each other. They may sing along at the choruses or the ends of phrases. Listeners may laugh at jokes or engage in conversation between songs. Sessions that appear successful are inclusive, fun, and relaxed, and the participants are open to new ideas and change.

Sessions that my informants consider unsuccessful are often deemed so due to the overbearing participation of singers with insatiable egos. Proud singers may want to be heard, but not want to listen to others. Sessions can be precious, as songs or

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127 As clarified in Chapter One, instrumental tunes are usually dance pieces with no text, whereas songs have texts which are sung.
prescribed singing styles are protected from possible infiltrations from other musical styles or modern technology. Sessions can become intimidating if bigger, braver voices push out those which are smaller and shyer. Often when sessions are considered endangered, their participants have lost sight of the original purpose of the sessions, which was to provide a new, inviting safe space for singing. These sessions often succeed in protecting songs and contexts temporarily yet fail to welcome the necessary innovation or invite the participation of the new voices needed to sustain the session’s longevity. Revivals of all types need an influx of new recruits to succeed, a theme developed upon in Chapter Six (Bithell and Hill 2014).

In order to maintain the integrity of the singing sessions, participants should be knowledgeable of the repertoire, understanding what is ‘acceptable’ for the sessions. Knowledge of repertoire is important because the recognition of traditional songs—keeping one foot in the imagined past—helps to reinforce the goals of the sessions. The space must be safe, but so must the songs. Otherwise, as informants continually expressed throughout my research, traditional songs lose their place in social lives. Traditional songs are the central focus of the session, but along with this adherence to particular norms in repertoire choice, participants should find balance between enforcing rules and allowing for flexibility in repertoire choice and singing styles.

**Balance Between Past and Present**

Only when social singing is relevant in the present day lives of its singers and listeners is it truly sustainable. The integrity of the cultural practice is ensured through the process of safeguarding by proactive individuals concerned with maintaining the practice, while relevance in today’s fast-paced, constantly changing world is ensured through engendering by organizers and singers.
To understand what is being safeguarded or engendered in traditional singing sessions, we must consider the countless interpretations of what ‘traditional singing’ means to individuals. To address challenges to tradition, strategies and suggestions applied to the more global world of safeguarding are applied to strategies within the traditional singing community. Problematizing the term ‘tradition’ revealed the nuances of the term—there are as many definitions for traditional singing as there are singers. As Macdara Yeates stated, “Tradition, I suppose, is whatever we say it is” (Yeates Feb 2015). Because definitions of tradition are consistently changing, practitioners of traditional cultures should also be open for change.

The very notion of ‘tradition’ invokes a looking back, a turning to the past for answers in the present, thus tradition and modernity may seem to contradict each other. Modernization suggests a ‘going with the times,’ whereas tradition suggests a life tucked away remotely, removed from modern society. How do we combine tradition and modernity? How do we bring tradition into the twenty-first century? ‘Tradition’ is in constant flux—music changes, instruments change, contexts change. An imagined past of nineteenth-century Irish peasant life is just that—imagined; it is an image of a romanticized past. Singers can certainly draw upon these images to maintain the integrity of the songs and singing, but these participants must also adapt to changing contexts.

This balance between tradition and modernization was clearly demonstrated during the Friday night session at the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing. The session performances began organically, without dictation from Annette Munnely, the Bean an Ti, initiated by a male quartet of singers who had no idea of what constituted a traditional singing weekend. They sang songs such as “Nowhere Man” and “Under the Boardwalk” in four-part harmony. Those present, however, did not object or react
negatively to this seeming afront to a commitment to tradition. Rather, the listeners welcomed the participation of the new-comers, maintaining the lively atmosphere of social interaction. The value of tradition within the session was conveyed by the character of the songs and singing that followed throughout the evening. The atmosphere was lively. Most of the songs shared that evening were traditional songs—that was the nature of the weekend, after all. But, as John Moulden described, ego was gone and singers felt relaxed. Participants enjoyed the *craic*. Singing will still continue if it is re-contextualized for today’s singers. The Friday night session was re-contextualized for the present crowd. Singing just *happened*.

Continuity in safeguarding is important for maintaining the foundation of traditional singing. For instance, archiving traditional songs ensures that the songs will survive in some form. Archivists such as Grace Toland exemplify safeguarding activity. Not only does Grace archive the songs, she also shares them and invites others to learn the songs, their singers, and the singers’ stories. I refer to engendering as the transition that is happening to ensure traditional singing’s relevance, today. To engender means to produce, to create, to kindle, to foster, to promote. Engendering traditional singing—creating safe spaces to house it and promoting such singing beyond the already committed—ensures its continued relevancy. To engender the singing, I suggest:

1) Let the singing happen with a high degree of freedom, as at the Clare session,

2) Create the space as Tom Mulligan created the Cobblestone Bar,

3) Promote the songs and manufacture the sessions as Grace Toland promotes and manufactures the singing in Inishowen,

4) Develop warm relationships with other singers, as I did with so many of my informants and others within the singing-circle community,

5) Help singing session participants feel welcome the way Jerry O’Reilly welcomes singers with his genuine, friendly personality.
Both safeguarding and engendering the social life of traditional singing are vital to its sustainability. Look to past social singing contexts. Archive traditional songs, but then sing them. Use modern contexts. Why is The Night Before Larry Got Stretched such a bustling singing session? Why do singers all around Ireland praise Larry? The organizers wanted a place to sing traditional songs. They wanted a place where they felt comfortable with each other. At the same time, they honor the songs, treating them seriously and presenting them respectfully. The organizers are young, bringing a refreshing youthful nature to the songs. They are engenderers. The supporters of the session are the original creators of Irish singing sessions, who recognized in the 1970s and 1980s that they needed new contexts for singing. They believe traditional singing is safe with The Night Before Larry Got Stretched.

**Further Research**

Understandably, there were some practical limitations to this research and inquiry. Given additional time, resources, and access to transportation, I would have liked to interview more singers who were not invested in the organizing and promotion of the singing sessions. How do these individuals view the sessions or the vitality of the social life of singing in Ireland in general? What do the sessions or other singing contexts mean to the singers who show up to the events that others create?

I would also have liked to extend this research to the more remote areas of Ireland. When circumstances allowed, I occasionally attended sessions in smaller towns, such as the marvelous session in June 2016 with the Chapel Gates Singers in Cooraclare, County Clare. As part of the organizing team of the International Ballad Conference (which was hosted in Limerick in 2016), I organized an excursion to Cooraclare to attend a session with the Chapel Gates Singers. I had never attended this
particular event, due to transportation limitations, but singers urged me to visit. The response from the conference participants was exemplary.

The pub, O’Keefe’s, was snug and intimate, packed with attendees standing shoulder to shoulder, photographs of clients at the pub covering every inch of the walls. The Chapel Gates Singers shared local stories and songs. The energy was so vibrant that it was difficult to leave—we only left when the bus driver urged us, stating that he would soon be over his legal working time limit. Apparently the session, which started at 6:30 p.m., continued after we left at about 9:30 p.m. to well past midnight. If given the opportunity, I would have liked to study the dynamics of such small-town sessions more in depth.

If I could continue this research, I would be interested in investigating three different kinds of singing contexts that my informants have mentioned throughout the course of my research. The first is the house or kitchen session. Kitchen sessions may not be as common as they were in the past, but these events do exist, and I have been to several. An example of an organized house session is the gathering that Annette hosts every year during the Willie Clancy Festival. I would like to study what kind of people attend these sessions, why the hosts plan them, and what these sessions mean to the singers. Other house sessions may be more spontaneous. Musicians or singers might invite guests for birthdays, family reunions, weddings, or funerals, or they might have been out with friends in pubs and invite friends to their homes when the pubs close. Guests at these gatherings may then begin sharing songs. What inspires these visitors to begin singing? Do they gather at the house for songs, or do they sing as a result of the gathering? What kind of songs do they sing, and in what ways?

The second context I would be interested in investigating further are sessions which include instrumental music, singing, and dancing. Informants have expressed
that these gatherings are also not as regular as they were in the past, but that they do still occur. Jerry and Rosie are both dancers, and they are often seen singing and dancing at instrumental sessions. In many instrumental sessions that I have observed the guitarist may sing and play during the session. While this is an interesting dynamic, I am more interested in when singers in the room or sitting in the session begin to sing, either by being asked from a member of the session, or by feeling comfortable or supported enough from the instrumentalists and other pub patrons to sing.

The third context I would like to investigate is the spontaneous singing session, either private or public. I have also witnessed these occurrences. A group of singers may already be gathered for a special occasion, such as a christening or concert. Then sometime during the night, a singer might share a song. I have heard traditional, jazz, American Standards, and show tunes in these contexts. Unfortunately, such spontaneous events would have been too difficult to document in the parameters of my thesis because, as the word ‘spontaneous’ suggests, they are unplanned and thus I would need sufficient time to encounter them opportunistically. Ensuring the sustainability of these spontaneous, unmanufactured events relies mostly on engendering efforts. Create and invite the singing when the atmosphere or mood is open for it, and the singing will occur.

One session that I enjoyed immensely happened spontaneously with a mix of songs and tunes during the Willie Clancy Festival in 2014. I went to a pub with friends—a flute player, guitarist, accordion player, and fiddler—in a nearby Clare village called the Crosses of Annagh. The instrumentalists set up immediately when the pub opened so that the session could be theirs (another topic worth investigation). As a member of the group but not a traditional instrumentalist, the players asked me to sing several times throughout the session. The pub slowly filled with local residents and
farmers who came to listen to the music. It appeared that the majority of individuals packed into the room were most likely locals just there to listen, not musician visitors to the festival. Because the musicians were friendly, and because I was singing often, eventually one man sitting nearby asked if he could share a song. The instrumentalists were delighted to hear him. They then played a few more sets, and someone else in the crowd sang a song. Soon the instrumentalists started to ask the crowd if there were more songs, opening the floor to anyone who would like to contribute to the session. The singing at the session occurred organically. The people in the room displayed an inclusive and encouraging attitude towards the singers, and the singing occurred alongside the instrumental music. Further study in contexts like this could provide particularly interesting insight into the kinds of places where singing is welcome and encouraged and the sense of meaning that could come from this level of participation and interaction.

Meaning through Participation, Identity, and Community

The sustainability of the social life of Irish traditional singing is important to traditional singers. I listened to their stories and personal experiences with singing. While opinions regarding the future of traditional singing varied, each participant emphasized the personal value of singing and the sense of community garnered through song and connection with other singers. Singers with whom I have spoken make friends through traditional singing, traveling on ‘parallel tracks,’ to quote informant Jerry O'Reilly, with other traditional singers. They look forward to sharing songs with others, to hearing other singers, and to the *craic* they experienced when together. Songs and singing have meaning to the singers. Songs about Clare sung at the Ennis Singers Club may represent shared experiences for listeners. Raymond Williams argued that communication is a process of reception and response, and it is this reception and
response that tightens the social bonds between singer and listener in the singing session. To Williams, a living culture which encourages participation within that culture is a good community (Williams 1958). In the same way, a successful singing session encourages participation among its singers.

Thomas Turino developed a model of musical semiotics to investigate the meaning of musical social life to musicians. He extended the model developed by Peirce, who saw ‘signs’ as representing human connection and experience. Viewed through this semiotic lens, songs can be considered signs for shared common experiences. The interpretants—the reactions from the shared experiences—are used to measure meaning. Interpretants at the singing clubs can include the physical display of emotions through laughter or crying, revealing the intimate connection between singer and listener.

The semiotics of musical experience also offers insight into the ways singers talk about their songs and their singing. Personal stories interested me—by hearing personal stories, I learned about interactions between singers at singing sessions. My examination of the Saturday morning workshop with Jerry O’Reilly at the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing is an example of using personal stories to gauge song meaning to singer and listener. By understanding the meanings expressed by individual singers, I came to understand a shared meaning; the shared musical experience that only comes with participatory music making. Singers shared their personal stories about singing and song, and others in the room could learn the singers’ perspectives. Hearing personal stories through interviews also opened up connections and revealed meaning. Informants stressed the importance of the social life of the singing—they get together, they spend time with one another, and they develop deep relationships.
through song. I also observed such interactions first-hand, participating in the sessions and making my own connections with other singers through song.

A sense of individual identity within the singing community stems from connection through songs. These connections highlight for me the influence of sociality on the human’s full potential for developing an identity, and shared meaning, with others on those ‘parallel tracks.’ Discussions of social identity theory by Henry Tajfel and John Turner highlight the importance of having a sense of identity within a particular social community (Tajfel 1982; Turner 1982). Members of the singing clubs identify with each other because of their participation—their shared experience—within the clubs.

Social participation through Irish traditional singing is a means of enjoyment within a community of supportive, like-minded people. As Turino noted, “musical participation and experience are valuable for the process of personal and social integration that make us whole” (Turino 2008, 1). Shared habits are binding. Jane Sugarman and I. Sheldon Posen emphasised the meaning generated in participation with others within Prespa and Ottowa Valley communities. By sharing songs with each other, these communities tighten social bonds. Their songs represent their communities and they relate to each other while singing these songs. The models of these scholars for understanding community and meaning through singing apply as well to understanding meaning in the singing sessions.

The social life of Irish traditional singing, whatever form it may take, gives meaning to its participants. Henry Glassie describes traditional singing as artistic expression, bringing humans to their full potential:

Call it art or call it folklore, but this is what it is: a realization of human potential that enables, at once, personal expression and social consequence. We are born alone, we die alone: we are, each one of us, individuals. We are born, we live, we die among others: we are, all of us, members of society. That
Inescapable complexity, the unity in being of the personal and the social, is, at its peak, made sensate in creative acts that allow us to be ourselves, to communicate, to connect with others and build with them social alliances of mutual benefit. Call it art, call it folklore, but that is what it is: a momentary fulfillment of what it is to be human.

(Glassie 2006, 415)

Glassie concludes that traditional singing will continue because of its ‘stars,’ the bearers of songs and stories: “The star is the community’s memory and the community’s creative force, its mind, the center through which local time pulses into continuity. When the community holds intact, the next generation remembers what the star preserved and what he created” (Ibid., 708).

**Final Thoughts**

What is the future of the social life of Irish traditional singing? I have no doubt the singing will always be here. While contexts will continue to change, as long as people want to sing, they will sing. Inevitably, some will resist or contest these changing contexts. Change also comes with its own challenges that require careful treatment. I am confident that social singing will continue to occur, but I cannot predict the upcoming challenges it may face. While each of my informants has a different idea about the current and future vitality of singing, it appears that the overall consensus is positive. Are singing sessions here to stay, or will they evolve into a new type of gathering? Will dancing and instrumental music rejoin with singing, or will they remain separate? Will the *craic* endure? Can tradition work side by side with modernity? I believe it can, as long as the concerns raised in this thesis are addressed and traditional singing is constantly reworked, re-contextualized, and re-imagined as times change.

The singing will never be done, as the title of the most recent book of Tom Munnelly’s essays suggests (Clune 2014), because the social interaction around the singing gives meaning and purpose to singers’ lives. As contexts evolve and situations
change, as long as singers continue to crave social interaction and shared experience, they will make space for singing. A deep connection with the people who created the past brings memories forward to the present, thus successfully sustaining the social life of Irish traditional singing.

Image 8.1: Sunset at the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing

Singers told me that one thing that makes the singing community so great is the depth of support. I finally felt one with these people, my own deep connection.

-The Clare Festival of Traditional Singing,
November 22, 2014
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Mulligan, Tom. 2 February 2015, 11:00 a.m. The Generater Hostel, Dublin.

Munnelly, Annette. 20 May 2015, 12:00 p.m. Inside Her Home, Miltown Malbay, Clare.

Ni Dhonnchadha, Máire. 13 March 2015, 12:45 a.m. Inside Her Car, Ennis, Clare.

O’Grady, Mick. 2 February 2015, 12:30 p.m. Inside His House, Dublin.

Toland, Grace. 26 February 2015, 2:00 p.m. The Pavilion Bar, University of Limerick, Limerick.

Yeates, Macdara. 1 February 2015, 7:30 p.m. The Cobblestone Bar, Dublin.

Field Notes

The Ennis Singers Club
The Grove Bar and Restaurant, 9:00 p.m. for the following dates:

- 17 October 2014
- 12 December 2014
- 13 March 2015

The Night Before Larry Got Stretched
The Cobblestone Bar, Dublin, 9:00 p.m. for the following dates:

- 7 September 2014
- 5 October 2014
- 2 November 2014
- 7 December 2014
- 1 February 2014

The Clare Festival of Traditional Singing
The Bellbridge Hotel, The Market House
21-23 November 2014
The Inishowen International Folk Song and Ballad Seminar
The Ballyliffin Hotel, McFeely’s Bar, The Northpole Bar
20-23 March 2015

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APPENDIX A

SINGING SESSION TRANSCRIPT

The Night Before Larry Got Stretched, November 2, 2014

0:21:0-3:38
Male
“This is a new one so I might, I guess not completely new because that would be against the rules [laughter] it’s a new one.”
The Coalowner and the Pitman’s Wife
[Some singing along at end. This song is upbeat, with a steady pulse. He felt the need to say this song was new to him, maybe to apologize if he messed up? At the end he forgot the words so he finished with singing, ‘Somethin’ somethin’ somethin’ and everyone laughed. What interests me is his joke about singing a new song being against the rules. What is against the rules? Him singing a song he doesn’t know? A newly composed song? His presentation was strong and humorous.]

3:39-8:52
Male
Dobbin’s Flowry Vale
[Slow air/ ballad. The text is lyrical longing. He sings with a little bit of ornamentation.]

8:52-8:54
Male
As Soon as the War is O’er
[Slow air. Heavy subject matter about going off to war. Some ornamentation.]

12:53-15:20
Male
“Okeedokee”
The Pride of Pimlico
[Jig. A Come-all-ye. Strong pulse. He pauses at the end of each verse before starting the next verse. Humorous song about the lost love.]

15:29-17:19
Male
Madam I’m a Darling
[Upbeat with nonsense chorus. Steady beat with some held notes in the middle of phrases. Some foot stamping. Begins “As I roved out.” Comical song about meeting a “nice young girl.”]
17:27-19:25
Three females in three part harmony
Title N/A
[Slow, but with a steady pulse.]

19:38-23:34
Male
The Limerick Rake
[A Rake is a man with questionable morals with women. Steady pulse, with quick rhythm. Funny song about meeting the local ladies in Limerick County. The final line is Irish, to which the listeners sing along.]

23:39-25:56
Male
Title N/A
[Nonsense chorus, to which listeners sing along. Upbeat, with a steady pulse.]

26:00-29:27
Male
Pretty Crowin’ Chicken
[This is an American country/folk song. The singer sings with an American accent and adds some American-sounding characteristics, such as flipping into head-voice when changing notes. A slow song.]

29:39-32:55
Male
“Eh, this song is for the ladies.” Then talks about bus passes.
[A song he wrote]
First line: “Would you like your name on my bus pass.”
[Funny. Macdara spoke about this song more in detail, which I include later in this chapter. He is older and by himself, one aspect that contributes to the comedic flirtatious element. He makes the song relatable to the listeners by singing, “At the Cobblestone on a Sunday Night.” The song is steady and a moderate tempo. He gets a great response.]

32:56-35:20
Female
[Introduces the song. Welsh, slow.]

35:20
Macdara: “That’s a very good segue to our guest. Everyone give a round of applause for Rita Gallagher. [Introduces Rita]. For anyone who doesn’t know her, you’re in for a treat.”

35:46-39:40
Rita: “Thanks very much, I want to say thanks to Sinead and everybody who asked me to come here tonight, thank you very much. I’ll start off with a song called Dark is the color and I picked it up from [I cannot understand the recording, here] Len Graham who apparently there’s a version Willie Clancy had, so.”
Dark is the Color
[A slow love song with many ornaments]

39:40-42:20
“I’ll sing a version of [I cannot understand, but I assume she introduced The Croppy Boy]. I got this from the singer Miss Patty Tunney.
The Croppy Boy
[A moderate, steady beat. Ornamentation]

42:20-48:20
“Right I want to sing a song now called, there’s one called Sweet Iniscarra. I got it from Desi O’Halloran.”
Sweet Iniscarra
[A slow song, many ornaments. Free meter. A song of longing for the home of the singer’s childhood, which he or she will never see again.]

48:20-52:04
“Right, we’ll finish off with one, another one I learned singing with the Tunneys. I think it was from Karan that I learned it [Cannot understand].
She moved through the fair
[A different tune than the one I know, which I assume is the better known version. A sad, slow air. Much ornamentation, long slow pulse.]

52:05
Macdara: “That song was great. We’ll hear a little bit more from her later on. Now for 10 or 15 minute there are sandwiches provided by Ruth and Sinead, round of applause for them.
Then he announces if you want to sing come to him at break.”

Break.

[New Recording, so the time stamps start over]

00:00-3:25 [recording started mid song]
Male
Peggy Gordon
[Slow and steady. A love song, missing his love.]

3:25-7:29
Male
Title N/A
[Some hushing at the beginning of the song. The man messed up at the beginning and started over. Slow, a love song. The woman accuses the man of being a rake, but the man denies it. This could be in response to the Limerick Rake.]

7:29-10:34
Female
Ballyronan Maid
[Steady moderate beat. Some light singing along. A love song.]
[I sang during the second half. Halloween was just on Friday, so when Macdara introduced me he announced:]

Macdara: “Now it being just after Halloween, I am delighted to announce a singer named Carrie and a singer named Chuckie.”

[Lots of laughter]

10:46-13:42
Me
Bonnie Blue Eyed Lassie
[I pitched it slightly too low, but I keep going! A light attempt at some ornamentation. Some singing along at the third and fourth verses. Very kind words of encouragement.]

13:43-16:50
Chuckie
Four Green Fields
[Slow song, singing along at the ends of verses.]

17:07-20:59
Female
What Would You Do, Love?
[Slow song, moving away from a love.]

21:00-23:39
Female
Mad Tom of Bedlam
[Upbeat tempo, with a chorus to which others sing along. She speeds up for the chorus and slows down for the verses.]

23:42-27:18
Male
[Some little joke right before. Then he introduces it, with some joking from the listeners. He makes fun of the government. I cannot understand him word for word]
“This is a song about drinking aforementioned alcoholic beverage.”
Irish Soldier
[Song starts with an “Ohhhh.” He asks all the listeners to sing that with him. Upbeat song, stomping along, a nonsense chorus. Comical.]

27:41-30:25
Male
[Introduces song briefly, makes it funny]
“If anybody recognizes the lady from this song, please don’t tell her.”
[I think he wrote this one too]
She’s the Beautiful Margaret O’Brien
[Moderate and steady tempo. The same man as the Bus Pass singer. He forgets a couple of words and slurs through them. The listeners laugh. This presentation is also strong and comical.]
30:25-35:04
Female
[Some shushing as she starts to sing]
Via Extasia
[Slow air. Some ornaments. A more melancholy song. Some singing along at the ends of phrases.]

35:13-38:45
Female
Smile in Your Sleep
[A Scottish Lullaby. A steady, relaxing tempo, like a rocking song. Some stomping to the strong beat.]

38:48-42:29
Female
Willie Taylor?
[It might be the song Willie Taylor, but she does not sing nonsense choruses which are in the version I found online. Some hushing during her singing. Slow, with a free meter.]

42:30-45:58
Female
The Yellow Handkerchief
[Slow air. A song of longing and loss.]

45:58
Macdara: So that takes us back to Rita Gallagher, and we’re gonna finish up [Cannot understand]

[When Rita sang in the second half, one song must have been particularly touching for a woman sitting about five seats away from her, on the opposite wall as myself. Another coordinator was hugging this woman as she started to tear up.]

46:15-52:06
Rita,
[Introduces song, “All the way from Derry.”]
Old Ardboe
[Slow song but with a steady long underlying pulse, many ornaments. A sad song of missing home.]

52:06-55:04
“Thanks very much. I’ll sing a wee Donegal song this time. It’s a translation of [An Irish word].
The Mermaid.
[Slow song, some ornaments. A sad song of someone seeing a mermaid but searching for her in vain.]
55:04-59:23
“I’m going to attempt something you should never ever do. Sing a new song, a song you never sang before. This one I just learned recently, I’ll give it a go.” [Some laughing]
The Banks of the Bann
[Moderate tempo, steady beat. Many ornaments. A love song.]

59:23-1:02:16
“I’ll do two more songs, the first one is When My Love and I Parted. Don’t know where I got it from, back at home I’m collecting songs.”
When My Love and I Parted
[Also slow and sad. Many ornaments.]

1:02:16 – 1:07:34
“Thanks very much.” [She introduces a song one of the listeners requested]
“I learned this from [Cannot understand, talking about the origin of the tune.]”
The Wounded Hussar
[Slow, steady, and sad.]

1:07:34
Macdara: “So, thank you everyone for coming. Huge thanks to Rita [and the organizing team]. I’ll see you next month, thanks very much.”
APPENDIX B

THE CHAPEAU BOYS

The text for this song is included in the appendix because of the extent of engagement with I. Sheldon Posen’s book *For Singing and Dancing and all Sorts of Fun* (1988) throughout this thesis.

This text is from Appendix B of the book, pages 107-108.

As sung by O. J. Abbott

Posen’s notes preceding the text:
“Edith Fowke recorded Ottawa Valley singer O. J. Abbott singing *The Chapeau Boys* in Hull, Quebec, in August 1957. She has printed it twice, in *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods* and *More Folk Songs of Canada*. For a discussion on her notes to the song, see Chapter One of this book” (Posen 1988, 107).

I’m a jolly good fellow, Pat Gregg is my name.
I come from the Chapeau, that village of fame.
For singing and dancing and all other fun
Thee boys from the Chapeau cannot be outdone.

On your patience I beg to intrude.
We hired with Fitzgerald who was agent for Booth
To go up the Black River so far, far away,
To the old Caldwell Farm for to cut the hay.

Joe Humphry, Bob Orme, Ned Murphy, and I,
We packed up our duds on the eleventh of July.
Away up to Pembroke our luggage did take,
We boarded the *Empress* and sailed up the lake.

When we came to Fort William, the place you all know
We tuned up our fiddle and rosined our bow.
Our silver strings rang out with a clear merry noise,
And Oiseau Rock echoed, “Well done, chapeau boys!”

We headed for Des Joachims and got there all right.
We had sixteen miles to walk to Reddy’s that night,
Where we were made welcome. The truth for to speak,
It was our desire to stay there a week.
But we left the next morning with good wishes and smiles,
And the route to the Caldwell was forty-six miles.
North over the mountains Bob showed us the route,
And when we got there we were nearly played out.

Now the board at the Caldwell, the truth for to tell,
Could not be surpassed in the Russell Hotel.
We had good beef and fresh mutton, our tea sweet and strong.
And great early roses full six inches long.

We had custard, rice pudding, and sweet apple pie,
Good bread and fresh butter that would you surprise.
We had cabbage, cucumbers, boiled, pickled and raw,
And the leg of a beaver we stole from a squaw.

Haying being over, we packed up our duds,
Shouldered our turkey and off to the woods
To fall the tall pine with our axes and saws,
To terrify the animals, the Indians, and squaws.

I hope we’ll have luck, and on that we rely.
I hope the drive will be out by the eleventh of July,
And if we’re all spared to get down in the spring,
We’ll make the old hall at the Chapeau to ring.

I think I’ll conclude and finish my song.
I hope you won’t mind me for keeping you so long,
But our cook’s getting sleepy, he’s nodding his head,
So we’ll all say our prayers and we’ll roll into bed.
APPENDIX C

SO HERE’S TO YOU (THE PARTING GLASS)

This song is discussed in the thesis because of its connection with the singers at the Ennis Singers Club, so its text is included here.

Text as sung by members of the Ennis Singers Club.

When first we met, complete awkward strangers
We did not know that we could be friends
How soon we’ve come for to know each other
And now I know we will meet again

[Chorus]

So here’s to you and our time together
I will share with you a parting glass
And I’ll bid adieu with some smiles and laughter
Our time apart will be short and pass

We’ve talked of dreams and of new tomorrows
Of yesterday and its dark despair
We’ve had our share of love and sorrow
And now we part as friends who care

A long, long road, it lies before us
And fate will meet me where it will
But through the valleys and o’er the mountains
I’ll not forget, but remember you still
APPENDIX D

THE MAN THAT SHOT MY DOG

This text is an example of a well-known, newly composed song in a style that is considered traditional among Irish singers.

Composed by Mick Quinn

Text from the Irish Traditional Music Archive:
http://www.itma.ie/digitallibrary/video/man_that_shot_my_dog_mick_quinn

This text accompanies a video which is part of the Inishowen Song Project

I was born a collie sheepdog with a white ring around my neck
And for nine days my eyes were closed and I couldn’t see a speck
I had four lovely sisters me being the only boy
And for six weeks we played around my mother’s pride and joy.

‘Til a gentleman from Mullaghbawn to me a liking took
He held me in his arms then my master’s hand he shook
He put me in the motorcar and we started for the road
And in less than twenty minutes I was in my new abode.

Well the first thing my family did was look for me a name
And they called me this and they called me that but it sounded all the same
‘Til my master he came around the house and this to me he said
Consider now yourself a dog henceforth your name is Ned.

My one great distinction was I had a bunty tail
And I wagged it for my master as we walked o’er hill and dale
I rounded sheep and cattle and sometimes the nanny goat
And my master often threatened that he’d cut my flaming throat.

The months went by and I grew up and learned to do my chore
I growled at postmen and soldiers and likewise the man next door
They loved to see me working oh they said I was a treat
And before we got into the car I always washed my feet.

But sometimes dogs grow lonesome and I longed to have a pal
So I met a great big labrador and she said her name was Sal
She said that she was lonesome too that she had a pedigree
I said that ain’t a problem Sal you just leave that to me.
When her master overheard the news and found out with her I slept
We didn’t use protection so out across the fence he leapt
Saying you bunty tailed black so-and-so from beyond in Conway Park
I’ll stop your gallivanting around my house after dark.

With his gun up top his shoulder a careful aim he took
And the noise that came out of it sure the valley round it shook
It felt me hide a-burning as the bullet tore me head
And the woman said he shot that dog that belongs to Michael Ned.

When me master he did hear the shots and it happened just by luck
He stepped up to that gunman and he said you Newry Knuck
Then he let him have the one two three up in the ould phisogue
Saying that’s the medicine I dish out to any man would shoot me dog.

Then he brought me to my kennel and now on the straw I lie
And I hear the neighbours asking will poor Ned live or die
I’m getting great attention for my body’s full of lead
And for the first time in me life I get my breakfast here in bed.

But me master’s all forlorn as he sits and strokes my head
And he searches round my body for those little balls of lead
He’s using awful language as he sits there on the log
And these are some of the things he says about the man that shot his dog.

May scabs like crabs grow up in flabs round everything he feels
And snoters flow down to his toes and hacks come on his heels
May his hair fall out and his woman pout may his farts smell like a hog
And the devil’s luck fall on that Newry knuck the man that shot the dog.

May piles surround his big backside like strawberries on their stalk
And every time he lifts his gun that his stomach it may baulk
And as he goes a hunting over heather hill or bog
May the diarrhea skite with all it’s might from the man that shot the dog.

Now to conclude and finish I’m on all fours once more
And I feel that urge coming over me that did one day before
And I’ll slip out some dark evening in mist or the thick fog
And leave another half a dozen pups with the man that shot the dog.