Countercultural Conditions

How unconformity and alternative politics in the setting of London was translated for Limerick 1966–1973.

International Time – a finality that binds things together by communication.
THE INTERNATIONAL TIMES, FEBRUARY 1968.

Nothing is more instructive than a confusion of time frames.
JOACHIM KOESTER, 2009.

Between 1966 and 1973 a generation of Limerick Youth was presented with a set of new social and cultural aspirations. It allowed them to a question the Church-regulated authority that surrounded the post-war programme to re-imagine the nation. As this programme of industrial modernism was undertaken according to the guidelines of a Catholic-defined traditionalism, it created cultural conditions very distinct from those being engaged by the youth in England. In an Irish context, the dominant moral authority monitored suggested political agendas seen delivered via 'foreign' youth culture. The rationale of the moral authority attempted to normalise social conditions under Catholic guidelines to provide society with young adults instead of unregulated autonomous teenagers.[4] This was intended to guarantee an uncomplicated transition of youth to adulthood to assist the national project of economic growth. Such a Catholic project was political, in that by regulating activity to maintain normative conditions, it foregrounded what it saw in the permissive nature that surrounded foreign youth culture.[5]

In 1966, those who sought to resist generational rules and explore unconformity for a culture that gave a voice to the youth looked towards the English Mod scene. Rebellious agendas manifested initially by established Mod and then 'hippie' culture celebrated unconformity, and as a generational protest, this allowed a cohort of Limerick Youth to register anti-authoritarian intentions locally as countercultural resistance. The emergence of an aesthetic in countercultural strategies in the sixties defined what constitutes this definition of resistance. The search for authenticity was key and encouraged the ideal of self-management and an ethos of, what Chantel Mouffe called, 'an anti-hierarchical exigency' (Mouffe, year p.).

When the set condition of the Irish young adult was questioned by those engaging with Mod culture it drew from the 'collective expressions of the "underground," or an "alternative" identity as distinct from the "mainstream," boundaries which had been defined by the UK Mod scene' (Bennet, 2004 p.). Mod was recognised as an ideology that 'made a statement about what looking good should *mean*' (Mason, 2014 p.33). By 1966, disruption associated with the English Mod's resistance to the dominant order meant as a generational statement caused, what Stanley Cohen registered as, 'moral panics' (1972 p.). This allowed authorities to contain youth activities under the banner of public disorder; this necessitated in some cases a suspension of civil liberties (Cohen, 1972).

As a generational mission, there was a unique character in how Irish Mod culture established itself. Practicing to be a classless Mod was a generational response that had political overtones as it required one to engage with a community of one's peers by creating a relational space. The conditions of this would be determined by Mod's self-

4 Due to the influence of the Church in youth matters, the authority of the Irish Establishment is referred throughout as the Church State.

5 This narrative can be primarily mapped in the licensing laws for dancehalls.

determining ideology. This required imagining an inclusive urban environment instead of just inheriting a space left to them. In 1966, this ideal would never be fully realised in Limerick (or other Irish urban areas) but the potential of it was played out on the street and in various outposts.

As the nation sought to implement the version of modernity that accompanied the official re-imagining of the state it was contested by an alternative version contained in the ambition for the young to design a space to congregate as themselves. A fantastical element remains in the design of this ambition as it meant channelling foreign examples. All Irish Mod activity augmented the absent space of London. The imagined alternative space was speculatively mapped on an Irish urban environment that was transitioning from post-war conditions much slower than its English neighbour.

However, this activity, real and imagined, was never to attain full recognition within the international Mod culture of its day. Nor is its presence in terms of defining cultural boundaries for Limerick Youth fully recognised outside what is usually packaged as an Irish strand of the 'Swinging Sixties.' There remains no general reference or go-to central source that collates the Mod and Hippie activity in the period 1966–1973 or acknowledges them as a transformative chapter in the city's history. Nor is there any official agenda promoting the city that positions that activity as being significant for a contemporary public.[6]

An exploration of Limerick's beat music scene circa 1966 positions unconformist directions as acts of cultural resistance and generational resistance. The term 'beat' applies to the community that formed around Mod influenced bands that played 'a rhythm heavy music by young people *for* young people' (O'Halloran, 2006 p.). This activity mapped the city as youth practiced protest style by seeking social spaces to meet and practice music, which is, engaging in the socio-political responsibilities of an underground movement.

By 1966 in England there was a sophistication and complexity in regards to how the Mod ideology was developing as an independent classless social movement. (Savage) But as Irish youth explored the self-reliant attitude associated with Mod culture this alone resonated enough in an Irish context enough to constitute resistance. The beginnings of a national conversation on what would be described as the 'generation gap' existed by 1966 but the concept of a standalone youth-led voice to feature as part of the programme of re-imagining was not accepted.

In reading both the English and Irish press, Irish adults were aware of the moral panics associated with some of the activity by the English youth, but their teenage offspring in urban areas processed the same information in magazines that, in the language of the day, celebrated the same activity. By 1966, Mods were the most identifiable English youth subculture. They were the post-war generation who had decided that they 'wanted to enter into manhood using a different set of semiotics' (Townsend, 2011 p.62). As Irish Modernists they accelerated the language of popular culture and encouraged an ideology that was internationally led and practiced a rapid turnover. This was communicated to their Irish peers in Limerick via pirate radio and London-based magazines; FAB 208 and RAVE in particular were essential blueprints. The

6 Something akin to how the history of Carnaby Street is edited for a commercial agenda that portrays the style-led practice of British youth of the period as being solely consumerist orientated (Equally a sanitised hippie history of Height Asbury, playing on an exotic image of resistance is inserted into the general identity of San Francisco).

‘pop’ attitudes of defiance found in these magazines circa 1966 may have seemed innocent or quaint by English standards but they resonated deeper when considered as generational blueprints in an Irish context. In 1966 there was a political agency for the youth in the length of hair and skirts as Irish youth continued to negotiate the social guidelines laid down by the Catholic Church.

This surveillance was a continuation of an anti-jazz agenda instigated by the church and conservative politicians of the 1930s who were concerned about ‘loose’ morals they saw imported in foreign popular culture. An agenda of censorship created the Catholic-led adult boundaries and generational guidelines that were challenged in the sixties. The anti-jazz agenda focused on the necessary supervision required to contain any threat to the ‘settled conditions’ that followed the end of the Irish Civil War. An unpublished report from 1931, called the Carrigan report, operating under the remit of monitoring secular morality, mentions that:

> There is a loss of parental control and responsibility during a period of general upheaval which has not been recovered since the revival of settled conditions. This is due largely to the introduction of new phases of popular amusements which being carried out in the Saorstát in the absence of supervision, and of the restrictions found necessary and enforced by law in other countries, are the occasions of many abuses baneful in their effect upon the community generally and are the cause of the ruin of hundreds of young girls, of whom many are found in the streets of London, Liverpool and other cities and towns in England. The “commercialised” dance halls, picture houses of sorts, and the opportunities afforded by the misuse of motor cars for luring girls, are the chief causes alleged for the present looseness of morals (Kennedy, 2000 p.354).

An attempt to regulate foreign cultural product by setting Catholic guidelines for social congregation in cinemas and dancehalls resulted in the government passing of the 1935 Dancehall Act.[7] Commenting on this in 2011, Cathal Brennan (2011) comments that instead of dealing with the real underlying factors leading to sexual immorality in Ireland, in passing this act, the state preferred to use the church as an agent of social control.

As there were no indigenous forms of Irish versions of progress to make the case for a separate youth culture, it stood to reason that after 1931, Catholic-led authorities built on the idea of youth culture as a foreign threat. To counter this, the authorities instead managed chaste versions of the youth agenda that they regarded as acceptable in the form of the Irish showband, whose clean image sanitised, or even neutralised, the rebelliousness that could be found in foreign music.

A traditional Irish fiddle player from County Clare, Junior Crehan, comments that the beginning of Irish dancehall culture was tied to heavy-handed monitoring of the Gardai of the traditional dance in the house. Crehan calls the death of this dance a key factor in emigration, ‘the country house dance was gone, and the country-man did not fit in with the jazz and the Foxtrot, so it died away. And a world of fellas left for England. They

7 The Anti-Jazz Campaign of 1934 was undertaken by a coalition of cultural nationalists the Catholic Church.

had no social activity at all, nothing here for them and they got fed up, so they went off' (Crehan, 1996 p.149).

After conceding that a controlled social space for the youth could be a solution to unregulated house dances, the dancehalls remained a fixation amongst the Catholic hierarchy in regard to how they were to be controlled. They were identified on several occasions as the 'most dangerous source of corruption in the country' (Gibbons, 1996). In 1925, the bishops' statement on the evils of dancing was read quarterly from the pulpit and the sentiment was echoed in the conservative media (Bourke, 2002). As such, the replacement of the Temperance Hall with a dance hall, independent of church control and influence, was considered an institutional challenge.

From 1935, the territory of any social space facilitating the congregation of youth was one that was to be to all extents monitored. There was a special focus on the preservation of Chastity. In this context any sixties Irish youth who professed allegiance to The Rolling Stones, whose manager once publicly proclaimed his band to be the Anti-Christ, could not but be pertaining of a revolutionary act.

By the sixties, dancehalls monitored by the 1935 act were recognised as acceptable spaces for youths to congregate with entertainment being provided by showbands. With their unthreatening adaption of acceptable elements of country and western, folk, and traditional Irish songs (and comedy), a (mainly rural) culture associated with the showbands and the dancehall arose. As a successful product, showband culture was seen as facilitating the transitioning of the state as part in upholding the ideal of the responsible young adult and operating as an industry in itself as the nation moved forward. As distinct from Mod culture, the chaste culture of the showbands represented the desired international image of 'Irishness' sought by the national programme of industrial modernism.[8] The musicologist Gerry Smyth describes how 'the success of the Royal Showband in this could be seen as a "cultural counterpart" of the government's economic policies' (Holohan, year p.395).

By 1966, the moral environment regulated by the church state in regards to how popular culture featured in the programme for re-imagining, accentuated generational boundaries to the extent that the alternative codes found in Mod culture operated outside an acceptable definition of Irish cultural space. The introduction of a national TV station in 1961 symbolically opened up the possibility of exposure to the international cultural avenues already being broadcast on pirate radio.[9] Jim Lockhart of Irish psychedelic rockers *Horslips*, describes how listening to pirate radio in the sixties fed into a desire by his band to clarify a cultural space for themselves based on the overlap presented to his generation, 'We had absorbed Radio Luxemburg and we had also absorbed the traditional music surrounding us. So we were living in overlapping cultural universes which did not have any meeting point and we were trying to find some solid ground, somewhere in the overlap between these two cultural constructs' (Lockhart, 2012 p.53).

Irish Mod culture, with its core generational beliefs, was never destined to be accepted as mainstream. Throughout the sixties it remained committed to a concept of personal freedom that was to resist the constraints of what was expected from

8 In what they described as the Culture Industry. Adorno and Horkheimer, pop culture as an instrument of economic and political control, enforcing conformity behind a permissive screen. This offered the freedom to choose what is always the same' (author, year p.).

9 Significantly Pirate Radio played records sometimes banned by Establishment Radio.

the church-family matrix. As an outsider movement, any examples that reinforced generational boundaries were seized upon as threating the stability of the 'settled conditions' the Establishment sought to process for Ireland to take its place internationally. In a 1966 interview with Pete Townsend of the profile Mod band *The Who*, Townsend told an Irish magazine that to smoke marijuana or take 'pills' was 'like having a glass of bitter to the bloke down the road.' The impact of this type of generational statement was much more inflammatory in an Irish context suggestive as it was of unregulated behaviour and the hint of a normalisation far removed from a culture where the male hierarchy held in the Irish pub moderated social ability. The threat held in the statement by *The Who*, speaking to an Irish audience is an example of how the generational issues were foregrounded in the Mod agenda, Townsend (1966) said, 'There was a great Establishment energy, a negative energy that tried to contain us. Adults thought, this shouldn't be allowed, young long haired fellows with make-up and taking pills." They were completely impotent. And we were dealing in the language of impotence, with disenfranchisement.'

By 1966 the UK version of this conversation had progressed politically to the extent that the likes of profile members of the culture, such as Mick Jagger of *The Rolling Stones* were being interviewed as cultural representatives of a generation who questioned participation in agendas often seen to be obsolete. In the 1950s similar engagements for praxis referencing international directions by the youth, that is, the revolutionary contours of continental existentialism in the 1950s, would have been discussed mainly in academic circles as it related solely to philosophy. There would have been no concrete avenues for praxis through Irish politics, culture, or popular culture. Also, the 1950s youth would also not have been the economic actors that their peers in the 1960s were. The European crossover between the high and low ends of a populist culture led by an avant-garde and tested by the likes of an underground beat movement did not come automatically or at the same pace as the English model,[10] While it was possible to access alternative material locally, its application and ability to generate conversation when facilitated through the arts or popular culture was not a given. To properly process social issues pertinent as loclly generational conditions they needed to confirm the ethos that would drive resistance by experiencing it abroad. The obvious destination for this was the nearest source of counterculture. London allowed them to draw upon a range of otherness then associated with the ideal of a city that held alternative communities. By 1966 some Irish youth rejected the forced auspices of emigration, which had become the norm alongside the post-war process of industrialisation. They modified the temporary leave instead to accommodate their presence in a city that suggested that perhaps the politics of a psychedelic experience should feature in the definition of an urban space.[11] How the Irish youth processed this experience and sought to contextualise it for their return recognises that a particular conduit between the two nations existed. It was based on a rejection of the norm of emigration active between Limerick and London from 1966–1973.

10 In 1950, Sean O'Riada was described, not as a Catholic, but as 'a follower of Sartre and a believer of black French existentialism who claimed that the absurd was at the heart of everything' (1950 p.14).

11 By 1969 the question posed by the culture was how much control the youth actually had regarding the culture they believed they owned.