Fall 2010

Out of Conflict Comes Creation: A New Era for Contemporary Music in Belfast

Martha Slenker

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Out of Conflict Comes Creation: A New Era for Contemporary Music in Belfast

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School for International Training (SIT) Ireland Fall 2010

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1 Image: Compilation of photos from BandWidthFilm’s Oh Yeah Music Centre video
“This change that is going on is a period of growth. Yes, it is a new era but it is not forgetting where Belfast has been. It is growing and progressing to a whole new level where it has never been before.”

---

2 Ben Craig
Abstract

This report is the outcome of a month-long exploratory study on growth of the contemporary music scene in Belfast, United Kingdom. Data was obtained by way of qualitative methods using focused interviews with five musicians and one music organization’s executive, and participant observations came from attending concert venues and music organizations in Belfast. Through these methods, it can be concluded that this is a new era for the current contemporary music scene. Despite Belfast’s reputation as a chaotic and dangerous city after decades worth of political and social unrest, the musicians have broken free from the chains of their past, take pride in the progress of the present scene, and look forward to a creative and promising future. Recommendations for potential further studies include interviews with more musicians, radio stations, journalists, record executives, venue managers, and members of the public. Additional time would also benefit potential further studies.
A big THANK-YOU, THANK-YOU, THANK-YOU to…

Elizabeth Welty.
Without whom, this project that grew from the seedling of an idea that she passed on to me at the Corrymeela Reconciliation Centre, would have not been possible. Her guidance, her support, her laugh, her calmness, her circle of friends, and her all around “coolness” made this project and this process a joyful and memorable journey.

Katie Richardson.
My muse from day one up until the morning I left Belfast. Katie is one of those people who ten years from now, when I look back on my time in Ireland and Northern Ireland, her face will pop into my vision, her voice will echo in my ears, and her style will continue to inspire me. She is probably the most connected musician in the city of Belfast, the most talented and hardworking person in Belfast’s contemporary music industry, and one of the most genuine people I have ever met. I plan on seeing her name splashed across international music charts and her voice infiltrating international sound waves because she deserves it more than anyone.

Various musicians and acquaintances I came about in Belfast that showed interest in, encouragement for, and words of wisdom to help me carry out my study. Through them I learned that despite their history, the city, the culture, the music, and the people of Belfast have risen. Most significantly the following:
Charlotte Dryden
Peter Wilson
Jonny Black
Ben Craig
Kris Telford
The Oh Yeah Music Centre

The unending support all the way from Dublin thanks to Aeveen Kerrisk, Clodagh Colleran, Keith Hughes, and Lidia Yaniz.

Stranmillis University College

My family and friends from home and abroad. Most especially my fellow SIT Ireland explorers.
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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the growth of Belfast’s contemporary music scene. Because this is a broad topic to analyze, I focused my project on the growth of the contemporary music scene from the perspective of the local musician. I spoke primarily with Belfast-based musicians and immediately identified common themes each musician addressed. This report looks at the history of Belfast’s contemporary music scene, how today’s musicians became involved, the growth of the industry, the characterization of the current scene, the impact of organizations, venues, and festivals, the role of politics, the community of musicians, the career restrictions, and goals for the future. These themes eventually formed the outline for my report and cover the past, the present, and the future of contemporary music in Belfast.

I was intimidated and overwhelmed by the prospects that I had one month to find an idea, a topic, a group of people, and a city to discover and study in order to produce a multipage field study report. I had to keep reassuring myself with motivational words of wisdom leading up to my departure time from Dublin due North to Belfast: “If past students can do it, I can too,” and “this is nothing new, Martha, you have done major projects like this before.” Only at the end of my three-week research period did I realize that I, in fact, had never completed a task of this stature before in terms of freedom, complexity, and personal passion.

As a fan of music and a regular concert attendant at home in New York, at college in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and in various cities throughout the United States, the idea of doing a month-long study on music sparked my curiosity but stayed put in the back of my mind. Despite my interest and love for music, doing a report on contemporary music was unchartered territory for a political science major like myself. I came to Ireland to
study the transformation of social and political conflict, why would I want to do a project on music in the end? Even though I was set on taking a much different approach on this project upon traveling to Ireland, my mind consistently reverted back to music in the weeks leading up to my arrival in Belfast. I was up for a new challenge, new entertainment, new friends, and a new experience that came along with studying Belfast’s contemporary music scene.

I felt more excited than exhausted by the end of my time in Belfast, which surprises me considering it was an eventful and productive couple of weeks. I was proactive in approaching this study because I had a lot of ground to cover in a short amount of time. I sought to learn the history of contemporary music, to observe the people involved in contemporary music, to listen to the music itself, to attend the gigs, and to familiarize myself with a city that I had some unsubstantiated preconceived notions and qualms about, all of which were proven inconsequential and simply untrue.
Methodology

Assumptions & Location

Before starting this project, I thought of myself as an open-minded person, careful not to make assumptions about anyone, anywhere, or anything. While I would like to think that this continues to hold true for me, it turned out not to be the case for this particular project topic and location. Not only did I wrongfully assume things about the city of Belfast and the topic as a whole, but I subconsciously did so too about the people of Belfast. I previously spent ten days studying in Belfast, but those days were packed with Belfast’s dense history of war, politics, conflict management and mediation, including tours throughout the Shankill Road and Falls Road areas of town that are characterized by their political murals and peace walls. Because I had only examined Belfast under a political and sectarian microscope, I had this image in my head of the people of Belfast as a hardened and desensitized population as a result of decades worth of sheer anxiety. Only after talking to Elizabeth Welty, a former SIT Ireland student who now resides in Belfast and was my advisor throughout this study, did I start to really see Belfast as a city rising above the ashes of its past and reemerging as a city of young talent and growing creation. I was expecting more hesitation and sensitivity when discussing the role of the past, the politics, and the renaissance of the city when interviewing musicians but I quickly found out that that would not be the case. They stressed the importance of music as an outlet for expression and how now the contemporary music of Belfast is an entirely separate entity to the history and politics of Belfast.
Making connections and following people up on offers turned out to be the most beneficial methods in gathering information regarding contemporary music in Belfast. When looking to understand a person or a group of people or a city or a topic, talking directly to people and hearing their stories and their accounts and what they have to say, yields significantly more information than any book or website or e-mail could ever say. To get to that point, conversely, it was essential to see what outside sources, if any, had to say about the topic I was to immerse myself in.

Before I set out to explore Belfast’s contemporary music industry, I did hours of online research and took note of countless venues, organizations, bands, musicians, and radio stations that in one way or another deal with contemporary music in and throughout Belfast. The list was unending and I was overwhelmed with my findings so I quickly realized I needed to narrow my vision. I was satisfied, however, that I had a wealth of knowledge and sources presented in front of me that I could work off of as opposed to the fearful possibility of dead ends in my research by not having enough sources. Previously written sources, on the contrary, were few and far between. Through my findings I found few works that would be of use to this particular study because most sources either dealt with different music styles like traditional Irish, parade bands, or Punk. Those that discussed contemporary music provided the history of it but failed to discuss the current and ongoing changes occurring in Belfast’s contemporary music. One day I had an interview at Belfast’s Oh Yeah Music Centre and the co-founder and Chief Executive of the centre, Stuart Bailie, suggested an essay he wrote for the Ulster Museum that would be of assistance to my work. The essay was worth searching for because it ended up...
being most helpful in understanding the bigger historical context in which contemporary music now fits. The following is a booklet made for the Ulster Museum by Stuart Bailie and funded by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland:

- **Popular Music and the Conflict in Northern Ireland; A Troubles Archive Essay**

  I kept reverting back to a concept that Elizabeth Welty used during my initial conversation with her several weeks earlier. The word *renaissance* echoed in my ear as she used it to explain the noticeable cultural changes and growth currently going on in Belfast. Ultimately, I decided to focus my project on the **growth of the contemporary music scene through the perspective of the musician**. I easily could have taken several different approaches when tackling contemporary music, including attempting to understand it through the perspectives of the media, the record companies, or the public. I chose to represent the views of the musicians because they are the foremost responsible for creating this music and this art.

  Now that I had pinpointed my subjects, the musicians, it was necessary to see them in their natural habitats, the stage. Attending different events and gigs contributed immensely to my study because I was able to have first-hand experience with the audience, the venues, and the musicians. While I have experience with this at home in New York and at college in Pennsylvania, as I am an avid concert-attendant and music listener, the gigs I attended in Belfast are unlike any I have attended at home. At home, I would go to shows where I would know the music beforehand, the venues were larger, and other than the music they sang, the musicians were otherwise strangers to me. In Belfast though, I was unfamiliar with the songs and the lyrics, the locations were more intimate, and I felt personally connected to many of the musicians. I was looking at and
experiencing these gigs through an academic lens in addition to a personal interest lens. In many instances, I was attending the performances of musicians I had interviewed so everything said in the interview flooded my thoughts while watching them perform. I chose the shows based on availability and suggestions from my contacts. Listed below are the shows that I attended and the different musical experiences I had:

- Master and Dog [Formerly John, Shelly, and the Creatures]; 11 November 2010; The Empire Music Hall
- LaFaro; 14 November 2010; Auntie Annie’s Porterhouse
- Dirty Roots; 16 November 2010; Auntie Annie’s Porterhouse
- The Flora, The Fauna; 16 November 2010; Auntie Annie’s Porterhouse
- Katie Richardson and Conn Smyth of Katie and the Carnival performing jazz numbers; 20 November 2010; The Black Box
- Katie Richardson and Conn Smyth of Katie and the Carnival performing on air the radio show Tuesday Take Down on Féile FM 103.2; 2 November 2010.
- Cara Cowan premiering freshly recorded tracks off her upcoming album to her housemate, Katie Richardson; 1 November 2010
- Filming of a publicity song and music video for the Oh Yeah Music Centre, contenders for Northern Ireland’s People’s Million Award; Various Belfast musicians; 21 November 2010; The Oh Yeah Music Centre

Interviewees

Basis for Selection? Demographics? Method of Recording and Transcribing.

The following list is of individuals whom I had the opportunity to meet with and discuss their relationship with contemporary music in Belfast. They are listed in the order in which I semi-formally interviewed them. Their responses to my questions provided extensive insight into contemporary music in Belfast and ultimately served to shape this presentation of my findings. The fully transcribed interviews can be viewed in the Appendix section of this report.

1. Ben Craig: Belfast-based singer, songwriter, and guitarist. Member of the band Dirty Roots.
2. *Kris Telford*: Belfast born and bred singer and songwriter. As a web designer by trade, Kris supports the scene by making websites and album covers for local bands.

3. *Charlotte Dryden*: The development office of Belfast’s Oh Yeah Music Centre.

4. *Jonny Black*: Front man, vocals, and guitar for LaFaro, a Belfast rock band, now on tour throughout Europe.

5. *Katie Richardson*: Well-known and immensely connected Belfast born and bred musician. Front woman for Katie and the Carnival as well as a contributing musician to a variety of other local acts.


Through my advisor Elizabeth Welty, on my first night up North from Dublin, I was able to meet one of her best friends, Katie Richardson, a friendly and well-connected Belfast musician who seemed to know just about everyone in Belfast’s contemporary music industry. I met Katie prior to that first evening several weeks back at a local event where Katie performed with her band Katie and The Carnival. I instantaneously fell in love with her music, so much so that I told her this, grabbed her card, and the next morning looked for her on iTunes. Then when this first November night rolled around, when my mind was like wet sand in that it was at its most impressionable state, I was lucky enough to spend a couple of hours at Katie’s apartment discussing music. It was Katie who introduced me to the world of the Belfast musician and having her on my side made further connections with other sources conceivable and feasible. A major finding in my studies was how connected people were and how important contacts are when trying to make it in the contemporary music industry of Belfast. This also holds true throughout my research period. Having a single person with friends and contacts in the music industry proved crucial because then through those original contacts, I was introduced to
others. By the end of my three-week research period, I found myself in a web of direct sources and engulfed with more than enough information to move forward with.

I interviewed six musicians as well as a music organization executive. My interviewees ended up ranging in age from twenty-five to forty, both males and females, from different music genres, all born and bred in Northern Ireland, either individual singer-songwriters or musicians in bands, and either signed to a record deal or independent. Most of the interviews took place in comfortable and casual locations including cafés, houses, and offices. I used a recording device for all of the interviews regardless of location and I refrained from taking notes because I felt that the interviews, though formal in set up, were generally casual conversations and note-taking would prevent interpersonal connection with my interviewees. The recordings proved vital when completing transcriptions and reflections on the interviews. Though seemingly tedious and exhausting to do, the completed transcriptions were helpful in the gathering of information and the writing of this paper. I took time to carefully annotate the transcriptions, highlighting themes and relevant quotations that eventually became the parts and sections of this paper. Part one focuses on the past, parts two and three focus on the present, and part three focuses on the future:

- Part 1, Section 1: Historical Context. Where has contemporary music in Belfast come from?
- Part 1, Section 2: How did current musicians become involved in the contemporary music industry?
- Part 2, Section 1: Discussion of the renaissance or growth in contemporary music.
- Part 2, Section 2: The current contemporary music scene and the impact of various venues and organizations on it.
- Part 2, Section 3: Politics in contemporary music. Should musicians be more political?
- Part 3, Section 1: The community of musicians that makes Belfast unique in comparison to other musical cities.
• Part 4, Section 1: How to be successful in Belfast music.
• Part 4, Section 2: The future for Belfast’s contemporary music industry.

Obstacles and Final Notes

The biggest obstacle I faced throughout this study was time. While I had enough time to complete interviews and to go to different shows and events, I felt as though I really only skimmed the surface of contemporary music in Belfast. That is why I think it was so important to focus solely on the perspective of the musician. If I were to discuss different perspectives in addition to that of the musician, I don’t think a three week research period would give justice to all of those directions. Even just within my focus, as well as with the countless number of Belfast contemporary musicians that exist, I would never have had enough time to meet and interview with all of them. By the time I received someone’s contact information or schedule, it would have been difficult to find a time that works for the musician, because they would either be on tour, going on tour, performing, or working in some way and by the time they would be free, I would be long gone from Belfast.

Had I had more time, I would have opened up my study to include sources like the BBC, Féile Radio Station, Queen’s Radio Station, The Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Small Town America Records, and the management of various venues. The truth of the matter is that I did e-mail several of these sources and to my dismay they never responded so I relied on the guaranteed contacts I had made through original contacts.

It is important to highlight the fact that none of the sources that contributed to this study sugarcoated the music industry of Belfast. Anytime you are talking to a person it is generally the case that you must take possible bias into consideration. Despite some
inevitable bias regarding contemporary music in Belfast, it was surprising how honest and reasonably fair-headed each subject was. This provided a well-rounded glimpse into the world and mind of the contemporary musician.

Further Reflections

My final morning in Belfast was the perfect ending to my time in Northern Ireland and the start to my project write-up. Katie Richardson organized fourteen of Belfast musicians to write and perform a publicity song for the Oh Yeah Music Centre, a finalist for the People’s Millions award. The People’s Millions is a grants program run by the Big Lottery Fund, in partnership with ITV. The Oh Yeah Music Centre reached the finals of the People’s Millions event and if the Centre won the grant, it would be able to build two learning suites to train people in music industry skills. On 24 November 2010, voting phone numbers were released for each finalist in the competition for the public to call in to vote for what organization they think should receive the grant. This particular song and accompanying YouTube® music video were created to publicize the Oh Yeah Centre for this award. Though they won runner-up to the grand prize, the musicians involved in this song and video successfully brought great attention to the Centre.

On the morning of Sunday, the 21st of November, I found myself on the third floor of the Oh Yeah Music Centre sitting in a large circle with these fourteen Belfast musicians practicing the song that six of them had written just days before. It was amazing to see first-hand the structuring and restructuring of the song as they would figure out who was singing which part, who was harmonizing, how loud the drums would be, how the video would be shot, and so forth. I could just see the creative juices flowing, so to speak, and I was impressed with the input that each and every person contributed.
What struck me most about this morning and what also left the biggest impact on me was how much the lyrics of the song applied to the music industry of Belfast as a whole and furthermore, how they applied to my time researching in Belfast. While the lyrics and list of artists involved in the song can be viewed in the Appendix section of this report, I would like to point out a particular verse that most symbolizes this:

“Never had a chance till you came my way, Oh Yeah
All my conversations just went one way, Oh Yeah
Just a simple mind with a simple goal, watch it unfold
Step forward to a place where I’m okay.”

The Oh Yeah Music Centre has become a fundamental force in the music scene and the musicians that it supports and represents identified that point in this song. These lyrics relate to the growing music scene because before places like the Centre, musicians had a much harder time breaking into music in Belfast. Now that there are places like this and support like this, it allows for the music scene to grow and flourish. The lyrics relate to my time in Belfast because I arrived there with little direction and many questions. Once I made contacts, met with people, and started to understand the life of a Belfast musician, I felt comfortable and ready to represent them and present my findings in this report.
Part 1, Section 1:
Where has contemporary music in Belfast come from?

“There are a lot of good bands in this country and they are getting out and getting heard but they still celebrate where they are from, which is nice, and I don’t think that part is ever going to change.”³

“No bands would come to Northern Ireland, even now bands are shitty about coming to Northern Ireland. Yeah, I would say there are still people out there whose managers would come in and say, “Well going to Dublin, then go to Glasgow, and just skip Belfast,” because A. we don’t have a population that is large enough, and B. because we are not so well off that the ticket sales wouldn’t make them as much money. We have always been this sort of “middle-band-climate.” We had people like U2 come through, but that was more of a political statement than anything else. When they came and did Belfast, that was the largest gathering of people in peacetime that we had had since before the fucking thing started. They didn’t like the idea of having huge gatherings. Actually Bono, gosh he is a bit of an asshole, but he got up and made a massive statement about how it was amazing to have all of these people together in peace in Northern Ireland, made a massive speech in the middle of the concert. It was to prove the point that we were all very hopeful that those bigger bands would start coming to Belfast, and they have. We now have all the biggest stars in the world, you know [Bob] Dylan has been here, everyone has been here. Dylan actually played 1998, Zeppelin played in Ulster Hall in the seventies actually. The first time “Stairway to Heaven” was played was [knocks on the table to symbolize ‘here’] in Belfast, Northern Ireland. You can look that up. My uncle Bob was there, he had to keep his mouth shut though because he had an English accent and people back then meant you were a squatty, a soldier, or a cop or something.”⁴

To really understand a person or a place, it is necessary to understand where they come from and what their past is. This especially holds true when trying to understand the cultural growth going on in Belfast through the medium of contemporary music. The past has defined this city and her people for decades. Key words like ‘the troubles,’ conflict, sectarian division, paramilitary groups, peace walls, political murals, and war are inextricably linked to Belfast and used to describe this Northern Ireland city in the international mind frame. So too have they impacted its contemporary music industry.

These words and the images and headlines they are associated with cloud the

³ Jonny Black, Personal Interview, 11 November 2010
⁴ Kris Telford, Personal Interview, 2 November 2010
international sight of what is really going on culturally in Belfast underneath the sheath of political and social turmoil that has veiled this city for over forty years. The truth of the matter is that contemporary music has been a constant thread throughout those years of turmoil and only until recently have people really started to see the embroidery of musicians that make up the current contemporary music scene. Belfast’s Oh Yeah Music Centre houses an exhibition open to the public “which documents the impact that music from Northern Ireland has had on the world, or globally, and the successes that have come from this part of the world. That itself inspires confidence that something great has come out of this part of the world.”5 Who and what have helped shape Belfast’s current contemporary music scene? While it would take weeks of research and writing to discuss all of the big players that have been involved in Belfast’s music, through my research and from current musicians I have spoken to, I hope to emphasize a select few.

There is no denying the impact of Irish musicians on the global contemporary level. Names like U2, Van Morrison, and Snow Patrol are musicians who are famously and frequently connected with Ireland and Northern Ireland. There are a number of other well-known bands that have hailed from Northern Ireland and have provided a solid foundation for current acts to add to including The Undertones, Stiff Little Fingers, Ash, and Therapy?. There are also countless contemporary songs and albums about ‘the troubles’ and about Belfast. In a 2009 booklet entitled Popular Music and the Conflict in Northern Ireland; A Troubles Archive Essay, written for the Ulster Museum by the co-founder and Chief Executive of Belfast’s Oh Yeah Music Centre, Stuart Bailie highlights several of these albums and songs. This list includes but is by no means limited to Morrison’s 1968 Astral Weeks album, Morrison’s 1972 album St. Dominick’s Preview,

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5 Charlotte Dryden, Personal Interview, 10 November 2010

Rarely did Belfast see big international bands come through town. As Belfast-based singer and songwriter, Kris Telford, points out “one of the maddest things about Belfast, because it was viewed in such a bad light by the rest of the world, was that no big bands came to Northern Ireland.” This consequently resulted in an “upsurge of domestic music making, with local bands filling the vacuum left by the more established international acts.” This surge of a ‘do-it-yourself’ attitude was ultimately the emergence of the punk scene in Belfast.

Playing punk music back then would have been a predominantly West Belfast, Catholic thing to do. Punk music was all in that area, which is still seen as kind of the Irish quarter of town, you know Punk music was all political lyrics and all the bands that had made Punk music famous in Northern Ireland were songs about suspect devices, things like that.

Young musicians in and around Northern Ireland would write songs that addressed their everyday lives as teens living in Northern Ireland. They would express their anger and

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6 Clayton-Lea and Taylor 1992, 55-56
8 Kris Telford, Personal Interview, 2 November 2010
dissatisfaction as “they were talking about ‘the troubles’ and that is what people used as an excuse to get up and scream abuse about what was going on [in Belfast].”

By the mid nineties, the contemporary music scene in Belfast was in despair. There was a lull in new and original music and the bands that were around, segregated themselves from other bands and the scene was isolated and cold:

Thirteen years ago, all the bands in Belfast hated each other. The scene was really desperate and no one was involved in each other. There were local music gigs about three or four nights a week but they were all very separate from one another. There was no sense of community at all and no solidarity between any of the musicians. That very slowly changed. Since then, thirteen years ago, there became fewer and fewer bands and musicians until about maybe seven years ago.

By 1998, much of this had changed. On a global political scale, Northern Ireland was in the height of the peace process as the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement gave way to more international music acts now including Belfast on their tour schedules. The famous image of U2 front man, Bono, raising joined hands with John Hume, the leader of the Nationalist SDLP, and David Trimble, leader of the Unionist UUP, at Belfast’s Waterfront Hall ‘Vote Yes to the Good Friday Agreement’ campaign concert, became one of the most significant indicators that among other things, music in Belfast would never be the same again. In an ‘out with the old, in with the new’ attitude, the contemporary music scene flourished with young talent as the “dinosaurs” phased out to make room for the young musicians. To many, including Jonny Black, front man for the

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9 Kris Telford, Personal Interview, 2 November 2010
10 Jonny Black, Personal Interview, 11 November 2010
11 Jonny Black, Personal Interview, 11 November 2010
Belfast-based international rock band, LaFaro, “from that point on musicians were young and the music they were making was very current and exciting no matter what kind of genre they came from.”
Part 1, Section 2:
How did current musicians become involved in the contemporary music industry?

“I became involved in music here in the same way that I think everybody gets involved in music here. You think it’s going to be the answer to all your dreams [laughs] and you think you are going to become rich and famous. . . . We are kind of catching up culturally to the idea that you can be an artist as a job. You don’t have to be a mechanic, or a doctor, or a lawyer and work in an office. You can be a musician, a painter, an artist and that is okay. You aren’t a lazy fucker for doing so.”

“The most important thing for me being in The Delawares [a once influential Belfast band], though I was just really a backing singer, but the most important thing in that band, and this is one of the key things for being involved in any of the arts in Northern Ireland, but it was the amount of people I met. I literally met hundreds of other musicians, promoters, and people who respected the band.”

Musicians in Belfast’s contemporary music industry followed their passions and dreams of making music, which landed them where they stand today. Considering much of the current scene is made up of young talent, this means that many of these musicians grew up well after the height of the troubles and were relatively young throughout the peace process. For those musicians who can remember the state of Belfast before the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement, they can recall a much different music scene than that of today. When these musicians were first starting out, the prospects of sending out your EP\(^{14}\) to various record companies or being discovered by Mr. Big\(^{15}\) were all too common dreams. They quickly learned that the reality of making it in any music industry, especially that of Belfast, for reasons to be discussed later in this report, would take a lot more effort, time, and self-sacrifice than what they had initially imagined.

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\(^{12}\) Jonny Black, Personal Interview, 11 November 2010

\(^{13}\) Katie Richardson, Personal Interview, 15 November 2010

\(^{14}\) EP: Extended Play-a recording that contains more music than a single but not enough to qualify as a full album

\(^{15}\) Jonny Black, Personal Interview, 11 November 2010
Personal background played a major role in getting involved in music because for some, music became an escape from what was going on around them and a hobby born out of a lack of other activities. Jonny Black emphasizes how growing up in a rural coastal Northern Irish town meant there was not much else to do other than “skateboarding and drinking” so playing music became the magnet that brought together “like minded people . . . who were interested in music and bands [and wanted to] emulate [their] heroes.”

Ben Craig, a Belfast-based singer and songwriter, faced a similar situation growing up on the rural North Antrim coast and having limited access to music other than that which would play on the radio: “I was just listening to the radio and the radio just plays pop music all the time and it was never anything I wanted to listen to really.” He also pointed out the impact that international music as well as the development of the Internet had on his musical interests. While he would only hear certain bands and genres where he lived, he was able to hear American music through mixed tapes sent to him, which introduced him to a whole new world of music. The arrival of the Internet became a revolutionizing aspect for music because it too created new ways to access music as it could be downloaded and listened to for free. For others, music was inherited and influenced by family members. Northern Ireland continues to have a strong history of traditional Irish music. Students in school were given relatively good opportunities to explore music and thus ignited musical interest at a young age. Craig recalls learning his first tune on his father’s acoustic guitar:

I grew up around Corrymeela [Reconciliation Centre] on the coast and there were always people coming through who played instruments and

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16 Jonny Black, Personal Interview, 11 November 2010
17 Ben Craig, Personal Interview, 2 November 2010
stuff. So probably when I was about 13-14, I decided I wanted to learn how to play the guitar. My dad could play a little bit and he had an acoustic guitar so he, like, tuned it to an open tuning for me and showed me how to just make a bar and he taught me “Smoke on the Water” by Deep Purple.\textsuperscript{18}

Those interviewed stressed the importance that friends and connections had on breaking into the contemporary music scene. Katie Richardson, a Belfast born and bred musician and front woman for the band, \textit{Katie & The Carnival}, reflects on the impact that making these connections had on her career:

Through a friend [of] a friend, a situation that I think happens a lot here because it is such a small place, but the friend of a friend is Ben Craig [Belfast musician] I kind of started singing with him and I was pretty nervous about it. I didn’t really know that there was a music scene here, even though I grew up here. I didn’t know it really existed or that there was anything that I would even find interesting in Belfast. . . . I found the contemporary music scene to be a little world that I felt completely comfortable in.\textsuperscript{19}

Young kids would organize bands with friends and attend different gigs together forming a web of musical friends: “We had quite a good big following for such a wee band because it was all of your school friends and everything else that would all skip out and get together and go to the gigs—half of them would get kicked out for being underage.”\textsuperscript{20}

In comparison to other cities, Belfast is considerably small, a characteristic that greatly

\textsuperscript{18} Ben Craig, Personal Interview, 2 November 2010
\textsuperscript{19} Katie Richardson, Personal Interview, 15 November 2010
\textsuperscript{20} Kris Telford, Personal Interview, 2 November 2010
affects the tight-knit community of musicians that make up the current scene. Because of this, making connections with other people in the music industry happened simply by going to local gigs and planning ahead to make sure if someone important was scheduled to be there, you made sure you were there to introduce yourself to that person.
Part 2, Section 1:
Call it a *renaissance* or call it a *growth*, whatever it is, *something* special is going on.

“The music scene, I think, is changing the city. I think it is changing it from a place that people saw to be a very narrow-minded, closed, and troubled place into somewhere that is now full of exciting and young musical artists who are doing their own thing and challenging people’s views. . . . The city has just changed so much. I hated this place as a teenager. I loathed Belfast. All I wanted to do was leave Belfast. . . . Belfast has proven me wrong. I feel very lucky. I left school six years ago and all of the things I have done in that time, whether it has been in theater or in music, it has all been fun and exciting and really hard too, but Belfast allows me to do all of that. I get quite excited when I think about the things that could happen here. It is a good place to be at the minute because if you are here, you are part of the creation of the city and of the art scene. People have new ideas all the time that are not done here, maybe in bigger cities they are done, but here you are usually the first person to do something and that makes it so exciting!”\(^{21}\)

With the changing political times came the changing and the tuning of the city’s soundtrack. From the perspective of the musician, contemporary music is currently experiencing an exciting movement with more and more bands coming onto the scene and experimenting with different sounds, different genres, and a newfound confidence to leave Belfast and perform their music to international audiences: “There is a thriving music scene in Belfast. I think Belfast has a wealth of musical talent that goes across so many genres. There are people who are being a lot more experimental now. There are world-class musicians here.”\(^{22}\) Musicians agree that there is a new spirit and confidence in the industry today and many owe this to bands that are now presenting Belfast to international audiences. While Ash, Van Morrison, and more recently, Snow Patrol, are most notably responsible for doing this, the current successes of bands like And So I Watch You From Afar, Two Door Cinema Club, Divine Comedy, LaFaro, Duke Special,

\(^{21}\) Katie Richardson, Personal Interview, 15 November 2010
\(^{22}\) Katie Richardson, Personal Interview, 15 November 2010
and General Fiasco “have given all of these new bands a better platform to launch themselves from.”

While the presence of contemporary music is clearly no new concept to Belfast culture, the concept of having infrastructures in place to turn a group of friends playing music in a bedroom into a touring rock band playing music in venues was seemingly revolutionary and non-existent. That was, until now. In the last several years, numerous venues and organizations have popped up to supply advice, practice and recording spaces, and more performance spaces for up and coming musical acts. This leads many to believe that Belfast is indeed going through a musical metamorphosis as it is growing in size, growing on the national radar, growing across genres, and growing in confidence as musicians are growing more and more savvy by marketing their product in ways that had never been used before. Perhaps this musical explosion owes itself to the ability of musicians these days to self-promote their music through the Internet. The Internet has opened up countless doors of opportunities for musicians to spread their talent to a wider audience through public networking sites and video sites:

There is a really strong folk scene in this country and there is a really strong country music scene and a very strong traditional Irish scene and a blues scene. . . . Artists like Katie [Richardson] are really smart about it and they are making interesting music but are packaging it in such a way that the press is still interested even though it is not trendy music. It is so

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23 Charlotte Dryden, Personal Interview, 10 November 2010
24 Charlotte Dryden, Personal Interview, 10 November 2010
much more interesting than that and smarter than that but she is smart enough to realize that you need the press still.25

Furthermore, gone are the days where the airwaves would swarm with songs about anger, frustration, and backlash built up as a result of social and political corruption. Instead, current contemporary musicians choose not to write songs about the troubles because for starters, most were too young to have anything to say about it now, but also because those type of songs are expected26 from an area rich with Punk history:

Music now is not about an escape from that it is about everything else. It is a really interesting development because so many people think that Belfast is all about that still and it is really not. It is so far from that. It is about the future. It feels like quite a romantic time here.27

This is a new era made up of young musicians that have risen above Belfast’s reputation as a war-torn, gloomy, and barren land starving for culture. In many ways, this is a completely new stage in Belfast contemporary music because of all the successes of musicians today, because of a renewed confidence, because of an influx of venues, organizations, and festivals, and most of all, because of the relative peaceful times in Belfast at the minute.

So if this is all new to Belfast, how can it be considered a renaissance or a rebirth of contemporary music? It depends on whom you ask. Some would disagree and say that this is not a rebirth because it is a completely new age for the contemporary music industry, in that the business side of music has never before seen this level of recognition. Most, however, would agree that this is a revival of the contemporary musician. There is

25 Jonny Black, Personal Interview, 11 November 2010
26 Peter Wilson, Personal Interview, 15 November 2010
27 Katie Richardson, Personal Interview, 15 November 2010
a difference between the two. Musicians have always been present in Belfast and their sentiments to make music and do what they love have always remained the same. For a long time though, as a result of what was going on around them politically and socially, musicians in Belfast were sidetracked. Today is seeing a renaissance of the musicians’ creativity. It has always been there but for quite some time, it was overshadowed by Belfast’s reputation and it did not receive the recognition it deserved. Now, this creativity that has always been there is reemerging during a time that is more suitable for it to be noticed. Finally, the Belfast musician has the stage, and more people are starting to listen.
Part 2, Section 2:
Scores of Sounds in Today’s Scene

“Much of today is happening because politicians looked at Dublin and said, ‘We need that!’ So they decided to put money into building an area of Belfast that has culture. So now we have coffee shops, bars, music venues, and art galleries and there are obviously people to fill them.”

“I think that what has changed probably, was that suddenly there was openness and a freedom, particularly where business can grow. People have always been creative but I think now there is that opportunity for the industry side of things to flourish a bit. There has never really been an infrastructure for developing new talent so I think there is a chance now and this time is representative of that I suppose. Again in an informal way, nobody has this master plan, but it is just making space available for others to come in. I think that is the exciting thing.”

While cities like Seattle, Manchester, Atlanta, London, and New York have well established and identifiable music scenes, the music scene in Belfast is not as defined. Because Belfast had a historical reputation, the city was not recognized as having a strong culture. For this, Belfast was rarely acknowledged for its music scene. In recent years, Belfast has seen an influx of venues, organizations, and festivals devoted to making a name for Belfast’s contemporary music. Kris Telford took note of what has been happening culturally in the last five years as “Belfast has changed massively and for the better. [Belfast has changed] culturally, and visually, by way of restaurants, gigs, art exhibits, carnivals, and festivals.”

With this influx of stages to play on and support to rely on, Belfast now has a stronger music scene than ever as more bands are emerging and experimenting with a wider variety of genres. Charlotte Dryden is the development officer for the Oh Yeah Music Centre and she thinks that because Belfast does not have one set and defined sound, it allows for different genres to emerge and consequently for more bands to

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28 Jonny Black, Personal Interview, 11 November 2010
29 Peter Wilson, Personal Interview, 15 November 2010
emerge. For example, Dryden notes that the successes of recent bands, specifically noting the post-punk, instrumental band, And So I Watch You From Afar, directly influences and encourages similar bands to realize there is a place for them in the music industry:

So there have been a couple of stronger things that have developed from certain bands that have done quite well. You’ve got folk sounds, And So I Watch You From Afar [Belfast band] have inspired bands to work in post-industrial sort of instrumental type sounds, and then the Indie sort of sound has always been quite strong anyway, but I don’t think Belfast has one particular sound to be honest.30

Jonny Black pointed out that specific genres are doing well at the moment including rock, electronic, instrumental, pop, folk, country, and blues but other styles of music are gaining steam as well. He points out that bands like Katie & The Carnival, who do not fit into specific music genres, also do well because they are making unique music but they are presenting it in such a way that the press is still interested and therefore, they get air time. The Belfast music scene is a melting pot of different styles influenced by music from around the world, most specifically the United States and England. Peter Wilson, better known by his stage name, Duke Special, notes that though people could not say “Oh that is a real Northern Ireland sound” in the way that there is an Americana sound or an English sound, Belfast’s music scene stands strong atop a culture where “music is woven into the fabric of who [they] are.”

Though many famous names derive from Belfast, it was not until Snow Patrol hit the international charts in 2006 that people really started to look to Belfast. Now entities like Small Town America Records and the Oh Yeah Music Centre are providing the

30 Charlotte Dryden, Personal Interview, 10 November 2010
infrastructure and support for local musicians and bands to rely on. The Oh Yeah Music Centre has been an invaluable addition to the music scene. Opened since 2008, it has become a “hub of activity for the local music scene” and a place “where people can [go], network, meet, and work in the industry as well as be inspired to write music, practice, and perform.” As a social and charitable enterprise, the concept for a dedicated music center in Belfast came about when Snow Patrol had become a popular European act and the local music scene had started to flourish. Dryden discusses the Centre’s roots:

There was a renewed confidence in the bands coming out of the North and funny enough, Gary Lightbody [front man for alternative rock band, Snow Patrol] and the Chief Executive of the Centre, Stuart Bailie, he is a former NME [New Musical Express] journalist, all got together over a pint of Guinness and said ‘you know we need somewhere like the Nerve Centre in Derry.’

Located in the Cathedral Quarter of downtown Belfast, Oh Yeah houses an exhibition on the history of music in Northern Ireland, a performance space for bands to play, rehearsal rooms, songwriting rooms, the offices for Small Town America Records, an artist development consultant, a recording studio, a festival development office, a program called Volume Control for teenagers to organize local gigs, and offices for Duke Special as well as the manager of Belfast band, General Fiasco. Musicians including Katie Richardson, Jonny Black, and Duke Special agree that Oh Yeah is a key place in Belfast contemporary music:

31 Charlotte Dryden, Personal Interview, 10 November 2010
32 Charlotte Dryden, Personal Interview, 10 November 2010
One of the most important things that it does is give young people, very young, like teenagers, an opportunity. It tells them that rock music is okay. If the Oh Yeah Centre continues to grow as it has already started to, I think that it could revolutionize music here. I really think it has the power to really break a lot of concepts about music here.\footnote{Katie Richardson, Personal Interview, 15 November 2010}

After decades of violence and money being poured into the peace process, the city is refocusing their funding to emphasize the cultural aspects of Belfast. The success of places like Oh Yeah prove that Belfast is breaking free from the chains of its past and excelling as a city of culture.

Venues and festivals have also contributed immensely to this new era in contemporary music. When older and established venues close over the years, new ones are quick to fill their spaces. Places like Auntie Annie’s Porterhouse, Lavery’s, The Black Box, The Limelight, and The Empire Music Hall are known for their regular gigs and for promoting up and coming acts. These venues help to encourage young bands because they give them the space and time to perform for audiences and when new bands are just starting out, any audience is considered a good audience. Festivals like the Belfast Nashville Songwriters festival, the Cathedral Quarters Art festival, and Glasgowbury have helped to expand these audiences because they allow more space for audiences to fill:

These festivals put local acts on another level. There are always going to be people who come to gigs, but it will always be the same people coming to gig after gig. What the festival does is give local acts an opportunity to play to a bigger audience and more open to the general public and it will
attract thousands of people who would never have heard your music otherwise.\textsuperscript{34}

Venues and festivals only add to the growing music industry and as each year sees more venues and festivals coming onto the scene, it further supports the argument that the music industry in Belfast is on the rise.

\textsuperscript{34} Katie Richardson, Personal Interview, 15 November 2010
Part 2, Section 3: 
Pausing the Political Playlist: Are Musicians Political Enough?

“Without trying to sound too cheesy and too ‘peace and reconciliation’ it is true how music can just bring people together. I don’t know the religion of any of the people I hang out with. I don’t know the religions of anyone in my band and I don’t care. Neither does anyone else care, really. We don’t think about stuff like that. We think about who is a nice person and who is a good musician and who is interesting.”35

Although Belfast music has a history characterized by Punk music, a style that expressed anger and frustration over political and social issues, musicians today choose to talk more about the politics of love than they do about the anger and frustration over the economic crisis. Should musicians today take a page from the Punk book and start talking about the real issues facing today’s society? Charlotte Dryden, of the Oh Yeah Music Centre, thinks that is exactly what they should do: “Today that is my biggest gripe about the current scene. I don’t think people are political enough. I don’t mean in a Northern Ireland politics way.”36

The current generation of musicians shy away from singing about ‘the troubles’ because they were generally too young to experience the height of the troubles and therefore, they have nothing to say about the issues. If musicians were to sing about the politics of ‘the troubles’ or the peace process, they run the risk of being checked off as “[yet] another Northern Irish band just singing about ‘the troubles.”37 Bands want to be taken seriously as a music act and not defined by where they come from. Most of the musicians interviewed think this is a new time for musicians in Belfast as they are no longer inspired by politicians but more so by other bands they hear and want to sound like. Jonny Black, Katie Richardson, Kris Telford, and Ben Craig are all in agreement

35 Katie Richardson, Personal Interview, 15 November 2010
36 Charlotte Dryden, Personal Interview, 10 November 2010
37 Charlotte Dryden, Personal Interview, 10 November 2010
that music has always been above the Northern Irish conflict and if a band were to go out onstage with a political song about ‘the troubles’ they would immediately be booed off.

We have moved past it. This is seen in a lot of people’s music as well.

Punk music for instance is still angry, obviously, but more than that it’s more kind of jubilant and triumphant. They aren’t singing songs about the conflict now.  

The question of whether bands should be more political or not is less a question of whether or not they should harp on ‘the troubles’ but more so should bands say more about their generation and the problems that their generation faces?

Katie Richardson concluded that though it is important to talk about current political and societal matters, it depends on a band’s style of music: “I can’t imagine how it would fit into my style and Katie & The Carnival. . . . I can imagine it fitting into LaFaro’s style and that is great because you need to have music about all different kinds of thing.” So despite Belfast’s political history and the Belfast musician’s political history, today’s musicians are breaking away from the past and setting their own paths, which only further supports the argument that Belfast musicians are in a new age.

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38 Jonny Black, Personal Interview, 11 November 2010
39 Katie Richardson, Personal Interview, 15 November 2010
Part 3, Section 1:
Solidarity Sets Belfast Apart

“I think the reason people think the Northern Irish music scene is strong at the minute is not so much the sound but the community spirit among the bands.”

A reoccurring theme throughout the contemporary music scene is this idea that the scene fosters a community of musicians. In the last five years, a number of people in the music industry have all become close friends and they perform together. This community aspect is unique to the Belfast music scene because the city is small enough that it can maintain a tight-knit group as musicians’ “paths cross more than would be the case in other cities.” Musicians are constantly supporting fellow musicians and if ever a band is in need of a backup singer, a guitar amp, an audience member, or an ear to listen to fresh cuts on their EP’s, they know they can call up a fellow Belfast musician and help will be on the way. Ben Craig highlights that the shared commonality between members of the music community is the love of music: “There are loads of people like us, where music is our passion, our hobby, our love and so on that basis people help each other out and do stuff for each other and play together.”

When discussing this theme with various people in the music industry, their examples of solidarity amongst Belfast musicians spoke such volumes that paraphrasing would ruin the sincerity and significance of each example.

Kris Telford: “I have an amazing point to make about this community of musicians that Belfast has. Jonny Black from LaFaro and his band went to play a gig in Derry and they drove there in their van and brought all of their equipment and they got off stage, stuck all their gear in the car, locked it up, and went back in to have their free drinks. They came back out again and their car was gone. Some idiots stole their car, drove it around Derry for a while, and then burnt it out with all the gear inside of it including thousands of pounds worth of equipment. They got on the Internet and basically said ‘Holy shit these guys just burnt out all of our stuff,’ so they organized a gig and called it ‘Raise Against the Joy Riders.’ They earned enough money to buy back the car, and buy back all of the equipment, which they did, fair enough not the

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Charlotte Dryden, Personal Interview, 10 November 2010
Peter Wilson, Personal Interview, 15 November 2010
Ben Craig, Personal Interview, 2 November 2010
car. There was a massive rally and musical support. Every band in the world felt like turned up for that gig and Jonny and his band got all the equipment back and now tour Europe. If it was ten years ago, that rally and gig would not have happened and people would have told them ‘tough luck, you shouldn’t have parked your car in Derry!’

Ben Craig: “[Katie Richardson] doesn’t just work in [the music scene] but she also socializes in it. She goes and sees other people play, and she’ll advertise gigs, and support her friends till the end. I don’t think you have as much a sense of community in bigger cities, because it is so much more dispersed. There are only a number of venues to play at and soon enough you run into people you recognize from different gigs you have both been to. It is all a big, unofficial collective. People also just come together for different things. Like the huge disaster in Haiti, we all came together. So many bands from all over Northern Ireland came out for that and played at that to support Haiti and it was packed! The thing that is pretty unique to Belfast is that all the bands pretty much know each other and this collective is only growing bigger! People are hungry for the diversity of it and they are hungry for new stuff.”

Charlotte Dryden: “There are a lot of collaborations. There are a lot of bands working together that will tour with each other. [For instance] And So I Watch You From Afar organized a festival about two years ago now called Solidarity, which is a great name and it basically meant all the local bands coming together and being showcased in all different venues around the city.”

Katie Richardson: “There is a really exciting scene in the way that, you know, you can get a phone call from any other band and they will say ‘We are doing a gig here would you come and do this, or that.’”
Part 4, Section 1:
In order to make it in Belfast, you must leave Belfast.

“Because there is such a small scene here, bands here are able to get people to come to their gigs and so they are doing well but when you go out of Belfast, it is a hard slap of reality when they realize that no one else knows who they are. Outside of Belfast you realize you are nothing. As much as I think of Belfast as a very nurturing place, it is very important at this stage to leave as well.”

From the perspective of a developing music industry, the last thing local musicians should do is leave the city of Belfast and move to other cities’ scenes. From the perspective of the musician, however, that is exactly what needs to be done. Ultimately, music is a career and no matter how much Belfast musicians want the local contemporary scene to do well and to continue to prosper, at some point they need to focus on themselves in the context of the bigger picture. Why do people need to leave Belfast to make it as a musician if they have the opportunity to play to an audience in Belfast? It comes down to size of the city and the limit of people “who have any influence in the grand scheme of things.” If they want a record deal and a music career, they feel as though they must move to the cities with the record deals and with the managers since Belfast is not quite at that point yet. Local musicians can only reach a certain stage here until the scene continues to flourish and grow and have its own record labels and managers. Katie Richardson is one such musician contemplating making a move for her career despite the growing scene in Belfast:

I think the Belfast music scene is growing quite slowly. I think that Belfast is an ever-growing city to be honest. I think that it will happen here but I think that it will be quite a long time in the making. I think that that is why

43 Katie Richardson, Personal Interview, 15 November 2010
44 Katie Richardson, Personal Interview, 15 November 2010
the people working here now need to be tempted to stay. If everyone keeps going away from here, nothing is going to develop in the arts but at the same time, people have to go away. It is kind of a catch-22.

Peter Wilson expressed similar sentiments and finds that if you want to expand your music to more ears, once you play the biggest gig in Belfast multiple times and once you are a permanent fix on the radio, you must move on to another city, start from square one again, and play local gigs and radio stations there. Can a musician stay based in Belfast and still be able to expand internationally? The truth of the matter is it can be done, but it is incredibly expensive to travel overseas and since Ireland is an island, there is always water to cross: “Getting out of this country to perform is a hurdle, a hurdle that is a body of water and a fortune to cross. You are at the mercy of ferry companies.”

Charlotte Dryden conversely thinks that as natural as it is to want to move on and to want to sign a record deal, musicians should be patient with Belfast because the chances of making it in a larger city are slim. She continues that in a city like London “you may do much worse because you just get swallowed up” and when managers from London travel to Belfast, “the one thing they always say is that [Belfast] reminds them of the industry before it became so cutthroat. . . . Belfast still has the community spirit” that will not be found anywhere else.

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45 Jonny Black, Personal Interview, 11 November 2010
Part 4, Section 2: Foresight

“We’ll be a City of Culture in the next ten years, I’ll tell you that much.”

There are high hopes for the future of the contemporary music scene of Belfast with many musicians concluding that if the music scene has grown this much in the last five years, they can only imagine how much it will continue to progress in the next five years. As Jonny Black explains, with this confidence comes caution in the possibility that international record labels will come in and take over:

I really want this country to be better. I don’t want it to fool itself that it is great all of a sudden, when it is not. . . . Like any music or city that has been ravished by labels, the downside is that there is a bottomless vacuum on the other side of that and it creates bitterness and hatred between bands. It has happened in Seattle, it has happened in Manchester, it has happened in any major city in the western world where music has been great.

Musicians like Black are wary of this newfound success for the music industry and worry that international record labels will see Belfast bands making money, come into the scene, and mess up what is working. In other words, musicians agree that while the record labels’ attention would be welcomed and appreciated, they are fearful that it could also lead to the exploitation of the local scene and the downfall of the community aspect of musicians that is so unique to the Belfast scene. Black further supports this prediction by telling the story of his best friend from Derry who signed a major record deal with Atlantic Records. The record label strangles his friend musically as the company

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46 Kris Telford, Personal Interview, 2 November 2010
47 Jonny Black, Personal Interview, 11 November 2010
executives declined ninety-six songs he wrote for his second album. Because he signed a deal, he was forced to write with professional songwriters. While his friend is set financially for the next three to four years, the downside is that automatically the first half-million Euros worth of sales goes to the record company and if the album fails to sell, it will take a long time before his friend sees any profit off of songs that were not even his own.

Katie Richardson is certain that the scene can only move forward but to a certain extent. She concludes “if [the scene] keeps growing the way it is growing now where you have [all] of these young people . . . then that heads towards a bright future for Belfast . . . [with] a lot more musicians.” 48 Furthermore, she thinks that even with a growing number of musicians and attention on the music scene at the moment, there is still only so much the scene can grow and she owes this to the small size of Belfast. At present, Belfast can only sustain a smaller scene in comparison to larger cities because it does not have enough organizations, like the Oh Yeah Music Centre, or enough local record labels, like Small Town America Records, to maintain anything much larger. Richardson stresses the necessity to educate the youth in various music trades, like producing, promoting, and managing so that there will be more of these locally trained professionals in the future. Once this happens, there is nowhere to go but up.

48 Katie Richardson, Personal Interview, 15 November 2010
Drawing Conclusions

“All I had was hope and misguided dreams
A pocket of emotions and a step between
With a hungry heart that will lead the way
Got a felling that I’ll find the way”

The past month has been a whirlwind of new faces and new sounds in a new city mixed with excitement, exhaustion, and a deadline. When I came to Belfast on the first day of November, I was unsure of who I would meet, what I would find, and where exactly my vision was directed. When I left Belfast on 21 November, all of those uncertainties were long gone. Though I would have wished to have more time to complete a project of this stature, I feel that I got to know the Belfast music scene through the perspective of the musician to the best of my ability in the time that I was allotted.

Through various interviews and performances, I left with a good insight into the past, the present, and the future of Belfast’s contemporary music scene. I successfully looked at the history, how today’s musicians became involved, the growth of the industry, characterization of the current scene, the impact of organizations, venues, and festivals, the role of politics, the community of musicians, the career restrictions, and future goals. After examining all of these factors, it can be concluded that this is a new era for the current contemporary music scene. Despite Belfast’s reputation as a chaotic and dangerous city after decades worth of political and social unrest, the musicians have broken free from the chains of their past, take pride in the progress of the present scene, and look forward to a creative and promising future.

49 Oh Yeah Publicity Song
The realities of being a musician in Belfast is not all fun and games. Between a restrictive city size and the limitations that come with living on an island, Belfast is taking its sweet time evolving culturally. It is understandable that from a career point of view, successful Belfast musicians are looking to explore the music scenes of other cities. They recognize, however, that it is equally necessary to maintain ties and a fan base in the place they call home. Just as the music scene has gone through an evolution over the last five to ten years, so have the musicians themselves. Both entities are moving forward but are careful to bring a piece of their past with them while they do so.
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Appendix

Part 1: Transcriptions of Interviews

The tale of two men who grew up as boys in Northern Ireland into the Belfast singer/songwriters that they are today

- Tuesday, 2 of November 2010 at 9 pm
- Interview with musicians, Ben Craig and Kris Telford, at the Belfast home of Kris and his wife.
- Scenario: Sitting around a dinner table, eating pasta with their friends and spouses present.

Kris: So what I was saying was that Jarrow’s [a local venue in the nineties] gave us the chance to not only play live, but to record songs, ‘cause you needed to have songs recorded to get a gig anywhere else—

Ben: What year was this?

Kris: ’96—7 when I started recording stuff there anyway, I don’t know. I mean I was young before we started playing. Geisha [his band as a teenager] started to play gigs and then I had another wee band as well and it was because of Jarrow’s that allowed us to do recordings, fare eno—enough, they weren’t great, but they were good for the equipment that they had. So if we recorded something there it means we could go on somewhere else and play a gig at someplace like Quidi Vidi or Auntie Annie’s or Lavery’s—and God Help us. At the time Lavery’s hadn’t been expanded and wasn’t the grandeur place that it was today. It was actually quite a, I wouldn’t call it dangerous, but definitely dingy place back then, I mean they had these big doors that were solid—remember those big doors in Lavery’s? They were like this thick solid steel and a wee window that was bulletproof, you know what I mean, and it was kind of scary. We would go into this building to try to organize a meeting with these guys and see if we can get a gig by them listening to your CD and the terrifying part was having to sit with them and then listen to the CD and they go [long sigh to show what the managers at Lavery’s would do], Everyone Laughs

Kris: “Maybe we can get a gig with you this time next year”—type thing. No, no, they wouldn’t be that bad but eventually, you know, because we were so young [14 years old] we got practice playing in gigs and we practiced all the time in Jarrow’s playing crap—gigs to kids on Saturday afternoons and things like that. Then eventually we got better at the live thing and because they allowed us to record we could go on and play a gig [somewhere else]. And then we had quite a good big following for such a wee band because it was all of your school friends and everything else that would all skip out and get together and go to the gigs—half of them would get kicked out for being underage. But yeah, that’s where music basically started for me and then I went into singer/songwriter stuff after that.

Martha: How did you start Ben?

Ben: Laughs. [I completely started different]. Eh, I started, well I suppose, like, I was always sort of into music and stuff from when I was really young but I was more into the outdoors and that sort of stuff but I grew up around Corrymeela on the coast and there were always people coming through who played instruments and stuff. So probably when I was about 13-14, I decided I wanted to learn how to play the guitar. My dad could play a little bit and he had an acoustic guitar so he, like, tuned it to an open tuning for me and showed me how to just make a bar and he taught me “Smoke on the Water” by Deep Purple. Laughs. Which is a really easy first tune to learn. Right around that time I was just starting to be able to earn enough money to buy you know CD’s, or do stuff like that from part-time jobs or whatever. So that totally broadened my musical horizons ‘cause other than that I was just listening to the radio and the radio just plays pop music all the time and it was never anything I wanted to listen to really. So I think my first CD that I ever bought was Nirvana’s “Nimrod,” no not Nirvana, Green Day’s Nimrod. I said Nirvana because I had a Nirvana tape that somebody left in our house and I was like “this is amazing! What is this?” And then I got into Green Day, and then I got into Radiohead, and then I got into a whole bunch of different stuff. And then probably when I was still trying to learn how to play the guitar and stuff like that, sort of played around with a few friends, we started to try to put together a little band and it was totally rubbish. Right when I was about 16-17, I started playing more music and there was a guy that came through Corrymeela that wrote his own songs and stuff and this wasn’t something I had ever tried to do before, until that point it had always been to try to learn somebody else’s song and try to be better at that. So he started to encourage me to do that and started coming up with songs. Actually one of the big turning points for
guitar playing for me was when Elizabeth [his now wife] gave me a tape, like a mixed tape back in the day of mixed tapes.

**Martha:** Yeah, [Elizabeth] told me you guys would swap tapes.

**Ben:** Yeah, switch around our mixed tapes. So, you never did a mixed tape, Kris?

**Kris:** Nope.

**Ben:** Really? Never, ever?

**Kris:** Not for a girl anyway, nope. I had other ways of [flirting with girls].

_Everyone laughs._

**Ben:** Anyway, you missed out on them by not doing mixed tapes. So [the tapes] had stuff like Ben Harper and Dave Matthew’s Band, and Rusted Root, and the Beastie Boys, and just a ton of really cool stuff that I hadn’t listened to before. So I started trying to play some of the songs that were on this tape and Dave Matthew’s and Ben Harper really grabbed me quite a lot once I started listening to more of their stuff and I really started to learn how to play that. Then the internet was just getting going as well so, you could look and watch them online or you could download stuff and that just completely revolutionized the music I could get my hands on.

**Martha:** Did you not listen to them because they weren’t here?

**Ben:** Yeah, I didn’t know about them at all. I didn’t know they existed for starters because, Dave Matthew’s for example is relatively unknown over here.

**Martha:** Really? He is huge at home!

**Ben and Kris:** We know. _Laugh._

**Ben:** Yeah he would have sort of a bit of a cult following here but he is never on the radio or anything like that, he played his first gig in Belfast ever a couple of years ago, at David Tin near the Waterfront.

**Kris:** I have a sister that is two years older than me and had an obsessive fan, a bloke called Jimmy. Jody Neely, we called him. And he was a couple of years older again and had the best musical taste in the world and would make her mixed tapes...

**Ben:** See mixed tapes were ingenious.

**Kris:** Wait, wait, I wasn’t involved myself in mixed tapes. So what 1991, I was an absolute child, that was the year that so many brilliant albums came out like Nirvana, Bleach, the Pixies, everything all those things came through the guy Jimmy to my sister and she would listen to them once and then I stole the CD after that. I steal an offer lot from my sister, apart from like [Bob Dylan’s CD]. _Lights a cigarette._

**Ben:** I didn’t get into Dylan until much later. My dad was really into—another big musical thing for me was Bruce Springsteen and Jackson Brown, and stuff like that.

**Martha:** Yeah, sounds like my dad.

**Ben:** It was the first gig I ever went to see, was Bruce Springsteen, solo acoustic in Belfast on the Tom Joad tour. That blew me away, like, he tapped out “Born in the USA” on the big twelve-string acoustic guitar by himself on the stage. It was so completely different that what you would be used to. So from then on really, I was like “right, acoustic guitar. I love it. It is totally class and I want to be good at playing the acoustic guitar.” So pretty much then, after I left school, I worked as an outdoor instructor on the West coast of Ireland and bought my first guitar of my own down there. So I just used to play that loads and used to annoy everybody learning to play and learning to try to sing and all that stuff. Then I went traveling and annoyed more people. I went traveling for a year and nine months of that year I was in New Zealand so I bought a guitar in New Zealand and played it and then I started trying to record things more as well. I had like a mini-disc player and recorder and I worked out that if you plugged headphones into the microphone jack you could record through your headphones ‘cause it just reverses the polarity and it works. I couldn’t afford a microphone or nothing else so this was how I would record. So I would record myself playing something and I would listen back to it and be like, “right, well that’s shit” and then I would try to do it again or that kind of thing. That used to drive my best friend, Keira, insane.

**Kris:** One of the maddest things about Belfast, because it was viewed in such a bad light by the rest of the world, was that no big bands came to Northern Ireland, and if they did they came to the really big venues and you wouldn’t have got there if you were [our age].

**Ben:** Plus, I grew up in Ballycastle, so it is rural and [no bands] come through. So there was traditional Irish music in the bar and that kind of a thing but I didn’t get to really start going to see gigs until I left home.

**Kris:** For me, the bands that we got to hear live all the time, were the bands that were from Northern Ireland, like the ones, like Ash and Therapy.

**Ben:** I only heard those bands on a CD when I was in school.
Kris: Yeah, I went to something like eight or nine Therapy gigs, I’ve seen Green Day in the Ulster Hall, and I’ve seen bands like that when they started coming through. But Therapy, they were like the biggest bands in Northern Irish history, for rock music anyway for a very long time. It got to a point where you were meant to be a certain age before you got into these concerts but you found ways, we didn’t have any money of course, but everyone would wait at the front door [of the venues], there would be hundreds of people waiting at the front doors and if you were quick and if you were sharp enough you could duck down in between the people and push through and the guys that were looking for the tickets wouldn’t catch you and you would just walk straight into the concert, light a cig, and you would be in this rock concert, it was amazing. Have you ever been in the Ulster Hall?

Martha: No, I haven’t.

Kris: Well, it is a big old Victorian building that has now been renovated, but back then it was decrepit, you know what I mean, walls with water coming down them. It was our biggest venue at the time, apart from the King’s Hall, which is basically a glorified livestock ship, physically. We used to go to these concerts on occasion and they would blow us away. We got to see Therapy and Ash—these are Northern Ireland bands. Then eventually over the years, when it came to like 1997-1998, we started getting bands like Green Day and [thinking for a moment], Placebo, and these are all brilliant concerts, but this was the first time that big bands, that we had ever seen big bands here.

Martha: Do you think this was a direct result of everything that happened in 1998, in terms of the Peace Process and the Good Friday Agreement?

Kris: Yes, it was a total direct result, yeah. These bands, just no bands would come to Northern Ireland, even now bands are shitty about coming to Northern Ireland. Yeah, I would say there are still people out there whose managers would come in and say, “Well going to Dublin, then go to Glasgow, and just skip Belfast,” because A. we don’t have a population that is large enough, and B. because we are not so well off that the ticket sales wouldn’t make them as much money. We have always been this sort of “middle-band-climate.” We had people like U2 come through, but that was more of a political statement than anything else. When they came and did Belfast, that was the largest gathering of people in peacetime that we had had since before the fucking thing started. They didn’t like the idea of having huge gatherings. Actually Bono, gosh he is a bit of an asshole, but he got up and made a massive statement about how it was amazing to have all of these people together in peace in Northern Ireland, made a massive speech in the middle of the concert. It was to prove the point that we were all very hopeful that those bigger bands would start coming to Belfast, and they have. We now have all the biggest stars in the world, you know [Bob] Dylan has been here, everyone has been here. Dylan actually played 1998, Zeppelin played in Ulster Hall in the seventies actually. The first time “Stairway to Heaven” was played was [knocks on the table to symbolize ‘here’] in Belfast, Northern Ireland. You can look that up. My uncle Bob was there, he had to keep his mouth shut though because he had an English accent and people back then meant you were a squatty, a soldier, or a cop or something.

Ben: Therefore, a target.

Kris: Well, yeah, but that is a bygone era now. That is the good thing about now. Now when you are playing a certain type of music you are not automatically assumed to be this that or the other. Playing punk music back then would have been a predominantly West Belfast, Catholic thing to do. Punk music was all in that area, which is still seen as kind of the Irish quarter of town, you know Punk music was all political lyrics and all the bands that had made Punk music famous in Northern Ireland were songs about suspect devices, things like that. They were all talking about ‘the troubles’ basically and that is what people used as an excuse to get up and scream abuse about what was going on. Generally people were against the war, I mean no one was going “yeah go on!” they were going like, “this is ridiculous!” Musicians are generally quite pacifistic. You get very few of them that are going, “Yeah, kill everybody!” After all of this rock band stuff, I ended up disliking working with groups of people. At that age I was a little bastard and I wanted to just play guitar and not have any problems. It wasn’t until the last four years that I started playing with bands again. I played singer/songwriter nights for a long time because I was so sick of the whole having to car around three other guys or four other guys and the equipment to play a gig, when I could just literally get up on stage with a guitar, plug in, and sing.

Ben: My first gig in Belfast was at the Menagerie.

Kris: With us? [his old band]

Ben: Yeah, with his old band Crave Release. It was great because I had just come back from traveling and I was just trying to find my way in Belfast, you know never lived in Belfast before, had always been from the Coast and that sort of thing. I loved music and I was starting to go to see more music and wanting to
play more music and stuff. I eventually came across Kris through a mutual friend who I was working with at the time called, Amy, and so she figured out “okay you love music, you play music, you need to come meet my friend Kris and come and hang out.” So I did and I remember my first time meeting Kris and the guys was in this house on Florida Street and I remember walking in and it just seemed like this was a bunch of guys that just lived like they were rock stars [everyone laughs], but they’re not! There was just a wall of Jack Daniels bottles and loads of guitars and ridiculously long hair and it was really Bohemian and cool. I was like “I didn’t realize this sort of stuff happened in Belfast, this is really cool! Before too long, somebody put a guitar in my hand and told me to play something and I did and then, the next thing there was talk of a gig and stuff and we played some gigs at the Menagerie. I was really nervous about playing, I would get sort of a leg shake, whilst I was trying to play. There were a few nights set up for singer/songwriters to get in on the whole music thing. I played at a night called ‘Gifted’ at the Empire Music Club. It was the coolest venue to play at. That was my ambition, to get to play at the Empire. That was what I wanted to get to do and I got to play it last year for the first time for our EP launch. It was just so cool. It had taken like five years for me to play there, I was pumped.

**Kris:** It made me want to have a band again, it was one man on a guitar on this huge stage with one microphone. The last time I had been on a stage that large was with a full band and with that big backup the nerves just disappear. I learned quickly that you could use the stuff you have been writing and make it more appealing to the masses by sticking a band behind the words. I ended up playing country rock, which you wouldn’t be able to do if it wasn’t for this ‘change’ that has happened in music in Northern Ireland. You were either a rocker or you were into line dancing. It was literally traditional music and rock/punk music, there was no in between. But when everything changed people just started doing whatever the hell they wanted. We decided to start a band that was a country rock band. We called ourselves ‘Ten Gallon Hat and the Big Salute.’ The band that sort of paved the way was ‘The Delawares.’ They were really popular. I remember one of the last gigs they played was a Christmas concert and it was upstairs in the Empire [Music Hall in Belfast] and you couldn’t get in the door and people were just going crazy. It was one of those moments where I couldn’t be more proud of Northern Irish music because everybody was just going crazy for it.

**Ben:** Really crazy for it! At that point that was one of the first bands that I saw in Belfast that were not doing straight ahead rock or covers or punk to try to fit into the scene they were doing their own versions of these things. They did throwbacks to stuff that I loved but there were quirky twists on things as well. There was an essence of The Band in there, some Bob Dylan, and definitely some Neil Young. They were a real band and they were doing their own thing, so that was really cool. After going to see them, I was like ‘Ah okay! That is the standard right there. That is where the bar has been raised!’

**Kris:** The infighting in that band ended it all and the lead guitarist ended up moving on, to my band Ten Gallon Hat. We didn’t get the same [support] that The Delawares had but we did have a good following, played some nice gigs, and toured. At the end of the day, the things that destroyed The Delawares in the first place kind of dissolved Ten Gallon Hat as well. When you have a band that is an amalgamation of different styles and there is more than one songwriter, if one wants to pull in one direction and the other one wants to pull in another direction, it is a natural progression for that band to end. No hard feelings at all though. It has only been a month and a half since Ten Gallon Hat has folded and I already have a new recording project and band waiting for when the recording is finished.

**Martha:** So then do you feel then that you have to have a certain genre you should be categorized in?

**Kris:** No that is the opposite of what we are trying to say. If you stand apart from the general masses of Indie rock and do something different, and if you are good [laughs], it makes for something interesting. Every city in the world has already had all these different scenes but we are only now establishing scenes, we now have a country rock scene!

**Ben:** There this whole collection of musical people who all have become good friends over the last five or six years and we all organize gigs together.

**Kris:** This is an example of the massive musical explosion here in Northern Ireland. There are so many bands and so many venues that just weren’t there when we were younger. Let me put it this way. I am a web designer and I make good money by making web sites, album covers, and stuff like that just for local bands. I am actually making a living by supporting local artists and doing it for reduced prices. If you were to go off to a record company, it would be expensive! That’s another thing. We have independent record companies in Northern Ireland, like Small Town America Records.
Ben: Interestingly enough, they are the ones behind the band LaFaro and the lead singer, Jonny Black, actually Kris and I met through Jonny’s girlfriend, but he is a full on blue-grass fanatic even though LaFaro is like punk-metal.

Kris: It’s weird, country music is an amalgamation of [Ireland’s] folk music and blues and a few other things that have made country music what it is in America. To get back to the point though, there is a huge musical explosion going on at the moment and we have recording studios all over the place. Not just that, but now people can even just record in their houses! Now we have a whole new generation of people who started in the Oh Yea Centre and we have other musical centers that are opening up. It’s brilliant! Before there weren’t places like this, there wasn’t funding, there wouldn’t be an emphasis on music at all. It was more about rebuilding after decades of, you know, war.

Ben: People didn’t have the confidence. It wasn’t so safe to be around and outside so arts and music and culture, and that freedom of expression, has really blossomed.

Kris: We’ll be the City of Culture in the next ten years, I’ll tell you that.

Ben: Particularly in the last five years, Belfast has changed massively and for the better. [Belfast has changed] culturally, and visually, by way of restaurants, gigs, art exhibits, carnivals, and festivals.

Martha: Do you think you have to be in Belfast to see this change or do you think it has been seen outside of Belfast?

Kris: Unfortunately, Belfast doesn’t always have the best reputation.

Ben: People didn’t have the confidence. It wasn’t so safe to be around and outside so arts and music and culture, and that freedom of expression, has really blossomed.

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[15-minute conversation about politics and paramilitary groups and dissident activity and recent events]

Martha: Can you guys talk about this idea of a community of musicians that is unique to Belfast?

Kris: It is not that hard to find musicians in Belfast and music is such a tradition that it is taken relatively seriously in education as well. At my school, which was a pretty good one I suppose, if you were good at music you were supported and pushed to do it. If you really wanted to play and instrument and couldn’t afford to do so, they would have gotten one for you to play. Now it is even more the case!

Ben: There are loads of people like us, where music is our passion, our hobby, our love and so on that basis people help each other out and do stuff for each other and play together. That is another thing. There are a lot of people who play for a number of bands.

Kris: For instance, Katie [Richardson] involves herself in everything that has to do with the arts and she just knows everybody that works for music. She is like the hub because she works her ass off 24/7, 365 days a year and sometimes a little too much.

Ben: She doesn’t just work in [the music scene] but she also socializes in it. She goes and sees other people play, and she’ll advertise gigs, and support her friends till the end. I don’t think you have as much a sense of community in bigger cities, because it is so much more dispersed. There are only a number of venues to play at and soon enough you run into people you recognize from different gigs you have both been to. It is all a big, unofficial collective. People also just come together for different things. Like the huge disaster in Haiti, we all came together. So many bands from all over Northern Ireland came out for that and played at that to support Haiti and it was packed! The thing that is pretty unique to Belfast is that all the bands pretty much know each other and this collective is only growing bigger! People are hungry for the diversity of it and they are hungry for new stuff.

Martha: As musicians what would you have to say about Belfast being in the midst of a renaissance?

Kris: I couldn’t agree more but it’s not just in music, it is in all the arts. They have just taken off.

Ben: I do have to say I have a bit of a problem with the word renaissance. I would say that because when has Northern Ireland ever been like this before, when has it ever had such a vibrant arts and music culture, when has it ever been peaceful like this in history?

Kris: There has always been arts and music like this but never on this scale.

Ben: What is this throwback or this rebirth? You know what I am saying? This is a new era. I think ‘renaissance’ has a slightly different social definition.

Kris: There is something going on though and the real indication of this is to look at the bands that left Northern Ireland and made it big. For instance, Snow Patrol and Van Morrison eventually come back.

Ben: Rebirth as well, I have a problem with that word. This isn’t a rebirth either. This change that is going on is a period of growth. Yes, it is a new era but it is not forgetting where Belfast has been. It is growing and progressing to a whole new level where it has never been before.

Kris: I would say it would now be frowned upon to write a song about anything political in Northern Ireland where as before the punk scene would have been all over writing stuff like that.
Ben: If you start writing about the troubles in Belfast and play it in Belfast…

Kris: They would boo you off the stage. It is just not something people want to hear anymore. It is past tense. People feel safer to express themselves. I have an amazing point to make about this community of musicians that Belfast has. Jonny Black from LaFaro and his band went to play a gig in Derry and they drove there in their van and brought all of their equipment and they got off stage, stuck all their gear in the car, locked it up, and went back in to have their free drinks. They came back out again and their car was gone. Some idiots stole their car, drove it around Derry for a while, and then burnt it out with all the gear inside of it including thousands of pounds worth of equipment. They got on the Internet and basically said “Holy shit these guys just burnt out all of our stuff,” so they organized a gig and called it ‘Raise Against the Joy Riders.’ They earned enough money to buy back the car, and buy back all of the equipment, which they did, fair enough not the car. There was a massive rally and musical support. Every band in the world if felt like turned up for that gig and Jonny and his band got all the equipment back and now tour Europe. If it was ten years ago, that [rally and gig] would not have happened and people would have told them ‘tough luck, you shouldn’t have parked your car in Derry!’

End. Duration: 1:10:00
**The Oh Yeah Music Centre**—“The aim is to encourage musicians and people who are keen to explore the industry. It is also a welcoming place for the music fan, who wants to explore the story of music from this prolific part of the world.”

- Wednesday, 10 November 2010 at 5 pm
- Interview with Charlotte Dryden, the development officer of Belfast’s Oh Yeah Music Centre.
- Location and Scenario: In the Cathedral quarter of Belfast on Gordon Street in Charlotte’s office.

**Martha:** In your own words, can you briefly explain the relations between you or the Centre with Belfast’s music industry?

**Charlotte:** Okay, well the Oh Yeah Music Centre is a social enterprise and a charity that sort of came from an idea that Belfast needed a dedicated music center. The local scene had started to flourish, you know Snow Patrol had become the biggest act in Europe, there was a renewed confidence in the bands coming out of the North and funny enough, Gary Lightbody [front man for alternative rock band, Snow Patrol] and the Chief Executive of the Centre, Stuart Bailie, he is a former NME [New Musical Express] journalist, all got together over a pint of Guinness and said “you know we need somewhere like the Nerve Centre in Derry.” Have you heard of the Nerve Centre?

**Martha:** Yes, I have and I stopped in when I was visiting Derry a couple weeks back.

**Charlotte:** So, yeah they said “somewhere where people can come, network, meet, and work in the industry as well as be inspired to write music or practice or perform.” So it is kind of a bit of everything and we have been open since 2007, staffed since 2008, so basically since 2008 it has become a real hub of activity for the local music scene. We have an exhibition, which documents the impact that music from Northern Ireland has had on the world, or globally, and the successes that have come from this part of the world. That itself inspires confidence that something great has come out of this part of the world. We have a performance space where a lot of bands play, there are rehearsal rooms, there are businesses operating from within the building so a lot of the young entrepreneurial music business types rent offices within the building. There is a record label that operates within here, there is a festival organized, a recording studio, and there is a guy who manages General Fiasco who operates from here, and Duke Special [a local but well-known musician] uses the building as a songwriting room. So you have all of that going on in the building. And then you have Mark Gordon as well, who has Score Drawn Music, which is synchronization as well as composition and one or two other things. So if you hear local music on TV or on a TV show, the chances are that Mark has managed to get that piece of music on the show. So it’s a lot of things at the Oh Yeah Centre, but the main thing is you come down and you make your own opportunities and we provide the physical space for you to come down and try to do something creative.

**Martha:** I wrote this in that e-mail to you, but everyone I have talked to tell me “you have to get to the Oh Yeah Music Centre because that is like the hub of music in Belfast.”

**Charlotte:** It’s great that is has become recognized as that and that is exactly, you know, that was our vision and we are sort of realizing now that that is sort of coming true, which is great. That is fantastic. That is great to hear.

**Martha:** How would you then describe the current music scene in Belfast? Along the same lines, what type of music, if any is emerging from Belfast?

**Charlotte:** Lots of different cities have been known for their scene, you know like, Detroit, Seattle, have got you know their certain sound.

**Martha:** I wrote this in that e-mail to you, but everyone I have talked to tell me “you have to get to the Oh Yeah Music Centre because that is like the hub of music in Belfast.”

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**Charlotte:** Lots of different cities have been known for their scene, you know like, Detroit, Seattle, have got you know their certain sound.

**Martha:** Grunge.

**Charlotte:** Exactly. Manchester has Oasis [the band] and that sort of thing. Belfast technically doesn’t have a sound I don’t think but it is very good [because] lots of different genres are emerging. There is the folk scene now, stronger than it has ever been I think, in the vein of Mumford and Sons [band] type thing. There is a really influential band at the minute called And So I Watch You From Afar, who are kind of like post-punk industrial kind of sound and it’s instrumental, doesn’t have lyrics, and I have seen at least half a dozen bands directly influenced by them because they have done so well locally and they have been nominated for awards and they are doing tours around the world. They did seventy festivals this summer. So they are kind of the band that people are looking up to, but they are much younger. So there have been a couple of stronger things that have developed from certain bands that have done quite well. You’ve got folk sounds, And So I Watch You From Afar [Belfast band] have inspired bands to work in post-industrial sort of instrumental type sounds, and then the Indie sort of sound has always been quite strong anyway, but I don’t think Belfast has one particular sound to be honest.
Martha: Where would you say these sounds have come from in the last ten years or so and where do you think Belfast’s music industry is heading?

Charlotte: I think the reason people think the Northern Irish music scene is strong at the minute is not so much the sound but the community spirit among the bands. There are a lot of collaborations. There are a lot of bands working together that will tour with each other. [For instance] And So I Watch You From Afar organized a festival about two years ago now called Solidarity, which is a great name and it basically meant all the local bands coming together and being showcased in all different venues around the city. I think there has been a renaissance or resurgence of local bands feeling confident about making music. I think the Internet has opened up a world of possibilities. Bands are much more Internet savvy, media savvy, and PR savvy, which means they are promoting themselves better, which makes the scene look stronger. There is a renewed confidence because of the successes of bands like Snow Patrol, And So I Watch You From Afar, Two Door Cinema Club, and General Fiasco, there are all of these bands that are quite confident and doing quite well and doing the festival circuit. This has given all of these new bands a better platform to launch themselves from. Ten years ago there wasn’t a strong scene. There were still a lot of bands around but there was, I suppose, a kind of low because Therapy [Belfast band] and Ash [Belfast band] would have been the last bands that had done quite well. Then there was a bit of a break I suppose and now it has become quite strong again.

Martha: Have you seen any direct political influence or impact on the contemporary music scene here in Belfast?

Charlotte: I think the opposite has happened. I think most bands are trying to move away from singing about the troubles. Stiff Little Fingers sang about the troubles but they did it in kind of a left wing socialist way so it was like “rise up against the bullshit, rise up against the system, and rise up against sectarianism, we want an alternative Ulster” type thing. On the flip side of that you had the undertones who didn’t write about the troubles but more so about other things to escape the troubles. So they wrote about, for instance, their favorite cousin, they wrote about Mars Bars®, the teenage kicks, and so on. They wrote about things that made them happier and made kids happier where as Stiff Little Fingers wrote about things they saw around them that were pissing them off and they thought “let’s rise up.” Today that is my biggest gripe about the current scene. I don’t think people are political enough. I don’t mean in a Northern Ireland politics way, I don’t think we need to be harping on the troubles this, the troubles that but there are other issues: the recession, the war in Iraq. Bands are afraid to say stuff and I think there are only two or three bands that I can think of that have something to say and Axis Of and Tin Pot Operation were another band that were never afraid to say anything. I think bands could be saying a lot more about their generation, a lot more about the fact that there are fewer jobs now or that we are in a recession, and because of the troubles, bands don’t want to be seen as bands that sing about the troubles, they want to be taken seriously outside of Northern Ireland so they don’t sing about the troubles. If you sing about the troubles, people outside of Northern Ireland go “oh it’s a Northern Irish band just singing about the troubles” where as Two Door Cinema Club have done very well not singing about the troubles and they are now selling out in New York and playing worldwide festivals. We are in a new generation of bands now that didn’t experience the troubles as they were so it is not really an issue for them anyway.

Martha: I guess off of that, someone I met with last week said to me “If you want to make it as a musician in Belfast, you should leave Belfast.” What would you say about that?

Charlotte: That has always been the argument for here. I know the argument is also that hard work gets you the things you need and want in life but I think that things are much stronger here now and I think there are people here now that young bands and the industry take seriously. Like Small Town America Records are taken seriously. They have had several of their tracks played on BBC Radio 1. Whether you like Zane Lowe [radio show host] or not, or what he plays, he has a lot of influence on the Alternative scene and Small Town America Records is on his radar and the bands on that label are played by Zane Lowe, which is incredible! We just put together a compilation CD and we sent it out to every radio station in the country and it has been played on BBC 6 music. We have had industry experts take us more seriously in that we were able to get people to come over to talk to us. In terms of leaving to make a success of you, well a lot of bands that are now successful started here and developed here and have their first couple of successes here. Yes, they have moved on but of course you move on. It really depends on what level of success you want to achieve but I think Northern Ireland is as good a launch pad as anywhere at the minute because there are people taking music and the industry of music seriously. Where as bands used to go to London to be managed by a London manager or mentored by a London manager or developed by a London manager, we now have an artist development person in the building who has contacts with London! So you don’t
have to go to London because we have the contact here and likewise if a label like Small Town America hears a band then they will work with them to develop them as well. It is a hard one to answer to be completely honest because yes, of course you are going to do much better if you move to London but the chances are you may do much worse because you just get swallowed up. That goes back to the more community feel of Belfast. We have had London people come here and the one thing they always say is that [Belfast] reminds them of the industry before it became so cutthroat. Everyone here works together, they work harder, and they don’t like what London or Dublin has become but Belfast still has that community spirit. I hope we don’t become cynical if we become very successful with an industry. Just because we don’t have a major label in the North doesn’t mean we don’t have bands worth listening to.

**Martha:** Would you say then that that is what makes Belfast unique in comparison to places like Dublin, London, and Manchester?

**Charlotte:** If you are talking about the UK, then it currently does make Belfast unique, I suppose. Belfast, I don’t want to say it, but it could possibly be the new Manchester, the new Glasgow, in that there is a spirit there, there is a scene that has developed, gigs are always fairly busy, there are dozens and dozens of promoters working very hard at the grassroots level to provide music that they love to people that also love it and bringing the more obscure stuff over, helping local bands tour, and then the Oh Yeah Centre like I said puts together a CD of up and coming bands. I think we nailed it. We identified at least six bands on the CD that went on to better things such as General Fiasco, And So I Watch You From Afar, and LaFaro. So yeah maybe that is our unique selling point, that there is community spirit here [in Belfast] in the minute.

**Martha:** Great, well thank you so much for everything. That was incredibly helpful!

*Stuart Bailie [CEO and founder] walks into Charlotte’s office.*

**Charlotte:** Martha, this is Stuart, he is the chief executive.

**Stuart:** Hello, how are you?

**Martha:** I have heard so much about you, from reading about you and what not.

**Charlotte:** Martha is doing a study on Northern Irish music scene, she is from New York and she has done a wee bit of work with Katie Richardson so Katie told her to come talk to us.

**Martha:** A lot of people told me to come here, so that is how I found myself here.

**Stuart:** Fantastic.

*End. Duration: 00:16:53*
**Jonny Black—vocals and guitar for LaFaro, a Belfast rock band**
- Thursday, 11 November 2010 at 8 pm
- Location and scenario: sipping on coffee and tea at Clements Café, 139 Stranmillis Road, Belfast

**Martha:** Can you tell me a little about how you became involved in music in Belfast?

**Jonny:** I became involved in music here in the same way that I think everybody gets involved in music here. You think it's going to be the answer to all your dreams [laughs] and you think you are going to become rich and famous. You have a pretty self-inflicting opinion of yourself. My friends and me just started playing together and apart from that there was really nothing much else to do. I grew up in a very tiny town, very north coast and I practiced skateboarding and drinking but there was really very little to do and I guess it was like-minded people coming together who were interested in music and bands. At the same time we were trying to emulate our heroes so we just picked up guitars and drums and tried to do it on our own. It was good fun but it was just teeny-stuff. We were all very young and we were just having a good time. Nobody took it that seriously, not until now that is! I'm joking. [Laughs] That's how everybody got into it, you know? There were a couple of people whose whole families had been linked to traditional music so they were kind of destined to be good at music from the outside but for most teenagers like me, it was all about Nirvana and that's about it.

**Martha:** I talked last week with Katie Richardson and then again with Charlotte Dryden and they both touched upon the idea that musicians here in Belfast have created this community that is unique to Belfast in that it is small enough where if you needed a guitar or amp you can call up one of your friends and they'll help you out. What do you have to say about this?

**Jonny:** It hasn't always been that way. I moved up thirteen years ago to Belfast to go to college, painting school to be exact. It's one of the most ridiculous degrees ever and just useless.

**Martha:** Well maybe you can do your album artwork now.

**Jonny:** Yeah that's about all I can do, except I couldn't sell any. Thirteen years ago, all the bands in Belfast hated each other. The scene was really desperate and no one was involved in each other. There were local music gigs about three or four nights a week but they were all very separate from one another. There was no sense of community at all and no solidarity between any of the musicians. That very slowly changed. Since then, thirteen years ago, there became fewer and fewer bands and musicians until about maybe seven years ago.

**Martha:** Why do you think that was?

**Jonny:** I think it had to happen. I think everyone that was playing at that time [thirteen years ago] were the dinosaurs in the sense that they had to be phased out in order to give room for new youth to come through. That maybe sounds really wanky. From that point on musicians were young and the music they were making was very current and exciting no matter what kind of genre they came from. That has continued to this day. There are hundreds of bands now in this country. An hour and a half takes you from one side of the country to the other but there are hundreds of bands in that span, which is amazing.

**Martha:** So because of that would you say there isn’t one set scene in Belfast?

**Jonny:** There are those who see it as though there is a Northern Ireland musician and then there are those that see it as though there is a Belfast musician and they think that Belfast is the center of the world. I kind of see it as Northern Ireland’s music instead of just Belfast music because it is a small enough country where that can be the case. Some of my best friends are musicians in Derry and they treat the country as their hub rather than just Derry or Belfast. It becomes a far closer tight-knit community because of that. About three of four years ago, just by pure accident, about four or five bands came together and started making their own gigs by not using promotions and it was purely just to make more money instead of being paid a measly £100, you can actually make some decent money. There were about four or five bands in this group and they started getting some serious following and this inspired a lot of other bands to do something similar so the audiences that the first four or five bands collected, would go and support the other bands that were inspired. It kind of grew a network that way and it is still happening today. A lot of bands started in that scene, like Duke Special and Snow Patrol. Snow Patrol is a very huge export. They are probably well known in America too, I would think. I went to college with Nathan, the guitar player.

**Martha:** So then do you know Kris Telford because he was telling me he went to college with him too?
**Jonny:** Yeah, we all went to college together, and with Danny from Cashier No. 9 [another Belfast band]. I see Nathan all the time. When [LaFaro] goes to London to play, he puts us up in his mansion [laughs]. Now with the help of these record companies, all of these bands are touring together. Am I talking a lot?

**Martha:** Not at all, would you say ‘the troubles’ has had any impact on the contemporary music scene in Belfast now?

**Jonny:** Yeah. Did Charlotte call it ‘the troubles’?

**Martha:** No, I mean I’m not too sure what to call it at this point. Maybe I should say the ‘issues’ instead?

**Jonny:** The war. [Laughs]. See in America you called it the Civil War. For some reason we call it ‘the troubles.’ It’s not really that bad. I mean of course it was. It was really divisive. I didn’t play in certain parts of Derry till very recently. I’ve never played in Donegal. I didn’t cross the border into the south of Ireland until I was twenty-two years old. Being from the community I am from, it just wasn’t done. That wasn’t allowed. So it was really divisive. But nobody gives a shit anymore. Young kids these days don’t give a fuck and it is great, it is really great. You can now use what used to be derogatory terms about people, like Fenian, as jokes because these people are my friends. I think it is more important now that although the conflict isn’t really resolves, there is no real resolution to it but we have moved past it. This is seen in a lot of people’s music as well. Punk music for instance is still angry, obviously, but more than that it’s more kind of jubilant and triumphant. They aren’t singing songs about the conflict now.

**Martha:** Charlotte was telling me about how she doesn’t think musicians are political enough. What do you think about that?

**Jonny:** Certainly not with the young people because they don’t care. They hear bands that they want to sound like, and these bands aren’t from here. They are from England, Japan, or America and they emulate that and try to equate that sound and talk about the things that those bands talk about. Those bands have obviously struck a cord with them. The politicians don’t inspire them. They have nothing to say. You wouldn’t be playing music if you were broke so generally the people who play music, can afford that lifestyle. Music itself doesn’t really pay you much money so obviously the money must be coming from somewhere else. I find kids these days, when I say kids, I mean I know loads of good bands [whose musicians are] now eighteen or nineteenth years old and they don’t a lot to say about politics and the conflict. There are a lot of singers that are still involved in the political aspect of this country but not really in Belfast but certainly more so outside of Belfast, like in Derry, and especially a lot on the north Coast where there is still a heavy Irish tradition.

**Martha:** How would you assess this statement: The culture in Belfast is experiencing a renaissance through a medium of contemporary music. Would you agree, disagree, or change the statement to better reflect what you think?

**Jonny:** I strongly agree. The whole of Belfast is and it is because it has a massive cash investment. Couple that with a sense that it is time to move on and that applies not just to the aspects of the war but we are kind of catching up culturally to the idea that you can be an artist as a job. You don’t have to be a mechanic, or a doctor, or a lawyer and work in an office. You can be a musician, a painter, an artist and that is okay. You aren’t a lazy fucker for doing so. People don’t see the rehearsal and the managerial side of what you do and that is very time consuming and extremely boring but it’s necessary.

**Martha:** You guys are about to go on tour tomorrow [12 November 2010], right?

**Jonny:** We start a series of gigs tomorrow, around Europe, and get back the eighteenth of December.

**Martha:** How do you like that? Do you like getting out of Belfast for a bit?

**Jonny:** I hate coming back to Belfast, to be honest. It’s kind of a love/hate relationship. I love it when I am here but it’s just really small and although really good things are happening here now, because of the work of a few people making it good rather than a general majority who are still really cynical and bitter. Much of today is happening because politicians looked at Dublin and said, “We need that!” So they decided to put money into building an area of Belfast that has culture. So now we have coffee shops, bars, music venues, and art galleries and there are obviously people to fill them. Belfast is great though. I do like getting back here after a while but I also get quite depressed when I get back because it’s tiny!

**Martha:** I have heard that if you want to make it in Belfast’s music scene, you need to get out of Belfast.

**Jonny:** Yeah you have to get out of Ireland. I think it depends on the type of music you make as well. The fact that [LaFaro] gets an audience in Northern Ireland, just shocks me! I mean our music isn’t currently hip. It’s just not. It’s pretty angry punk rock and I didn’t think people wanted to listen to that but it turns out that, there are!

**Martha:** Have you guys been to the States?
Jonny: Yeah we were there a couple of years ago in Austin, Texas at the South By Southwest festival. It was really good fun. Then we did a road trip across the southern states and up to New York where we did a series of gigs. Everywhere treated us well.

Martha: So you were kind of talking about this before, but how have the venues influenced the contemporary music scene of Belfast?

Jonny: For years and years in Belfast, venues would try to rip artists off and still try to do that here. Musicians here are paid nothing in comparison to what the venues make in return, but that is simple business and it is going to happen anywhere. I think musicians now are smarter for this and fight their corner and have a lot more on their side to be able to bargain with. Unfortunately the young kids still don’t know how to but there are a lot more people who are savvy and know how to control the business people. All the established places in Belfast have started to close, the best venue in town I think, is the Empire [Music Hall] and they don’t really do original music anymore, maybe just two nights a month.

Martha: I am going there tonight actually.

Jonny: Tonight is a Gifted night [special event]. I might see you there. That means there is original music tonight. For the most part, there are cover bands, which is really sad because it is just a waste of a great space. It is a proper old-style theater. For whatever reason, the way it is run, the management thinks it is more worth their wild to do cover bands. In the places where old venues have left, new venues pop up all the time. It is brilliant that they have. The Oh Yeah Centre is a great space because all the gigs in there are free.

Martha: What do you see for the future of contemporary music in Belfast?

Jonny: There are a lot of young acts that are really organized and really talented and I think more is going to come and while good things are happening at the minute, I think great things are to come. The difference in the acts and the artists now, from when I moved up here, because I am a dinosaur, is that the young bands these days aren’t afraid to go on tour and get out of here, where as we were terrified to do that. We had to find out for ourselves how to go about doing that where as now there are more infrastructures. You can now go down to the Oh Yeah Centre and talk to Charlotte [Dryden] or Stuart [Bailie] and get advice from them and you can contact Small Town America [record company] for advice about how to get out of Belfast and what you need to do to make it here. That wasn’t the case in our day. I have certainly noticed young acts that are able to go on tour three or four months out of the year and get themselves heard by a wider audience, which is amazing. It was what my friends and I wanted to do, to show people that it is possible to make it as musicians. I really want this country to be better. I don’t want it to fool itself that it is great all of a sudden, when it is not. There are still loads of things to be done here. We need everybody to do great things, if we want it to be truly great. The larger record industry, and I would see that as major record labels based in London, does know this country exists. A lot of people think they don’t see us, but they are very aware of what is happening with music in this country. For years I thought they just overlooked us, but that is not the case. Major labels are just too scared to put money anywhere. They only take calculated risks.

Martha: Do you think these record companies are intimidated because it is Belfast?

Jonny: They just don’t invest money in anywhere. If you take any band and they become a major band in the last twenty years, they have done it themselves for a large part of the way and then they get funding from a small record label and a particular record has really sold, then a major label comes in and make it available to masses and sell shipments. When the record companies see Northern Ireland music making shitloads of money, they will come knocking.

Martha: Do you think that will happen?

Jonny: I don’t think that matters whether it happens or not. If it doesn’t happen, Northern Ireland will be bigger, better, and healthier and we will have more culture for it. If it does happen, like any music or city that has been ravished by labels, the downside is that there is a bottomless vacuum on the other side of that and it creates bitterness and hatred between bands. It has happened in Seattle, it has happened in Manchester, it has happened in any major city in the western world where music has been great. I sound really pessimistic, but it is absolutely the truth. I used to dream about Mr. Big coming along to see us and signing us a deal and the reality is that that just doesn’t happen.

Martha: Do you think that will happen?

Jonny: No. I think the reality has changed and that is only through experience that that happens. My career is far better off for it, not like I have done anything major, but I certainly, I don’t know…

Martha: You guys are well known.
Jonny: The band is getting well known and for the right reasons I think as well but we have done it all ourselves, which is amazing, and it kind of had to happen because it wasn’t going to happen any other way. If bands here got major interest and money started to come into the industry from the outside, I think that would majorly upset it so we would have to be very careful to find our way through that. My best friend, from Derry, has a major record deal right now with Atlantic Records, and he has been strangled. He wrote ninety-six songs for the second album and none of which were good enough according to the label. He was forced to write with songwriters and all of this costs an absurd amount of money but he signed the deal. Yes, that deal affords him three years to not worry about anything else in life, he doesn’t have to worry about paying the rent, he doesn’t have to worry about musical equipment, he doesn’t have to worry about flights. He is free for three to four years to just be a musician. The downside is that all of this money is recoupable so if this album doesn’t sell, the first half-million dollars is the record companies before he sees a penny of it. That is the reality of having a major record deal. It strangles you musically. Wow, I sound really pessimistic. Well, there is a really strong folk scene in this country and there is a really strong country music scene and a very strong traditional Irish scene and a blues scene, believe it or not. That music doesn’t really get a mention but young and hip music mostly comes out of Belfast. It is such a small selection of what is available. Artists like Katie [Richardson] are really smart about it and they are making interesting music but are packaging it in such a way that the press is still interested even though it is not trendy music. It is so much more interesting than that and smarter than that but she is smart enough to realize that you need the press still. That kind of gets back to the wee start of it. Musicians are savvier now than they ever have been and they still can see the big picture. Getting out of this country to perform is a hurdle, a hurdle that is a body of water and a fortune to cross. You are at the mercy of ferry companies. I’ll give you an example, I went to Belgium last year to do a gig and the entire trip, including diesel, the Channel Tunnel, food, accommodations, and supplies, and booze was cheaper than the ferry from Belfast to Liverpool. That is the hurdle that bands face. What kind of stuff are you into?

Martha: Everything, absolutely everything.

Jonny: That’s a good answer.

[Brief aside to talk about American country music]

Jonny: In music terms, the divide between the North of Ireland and the South is bigger than anything the war could have done. Dublin treats Northern Ireland music very much as a separate thing. Unless you are Duke Special because Duke Special suits the singer/song-writer theme that Dublin loves down there. It is so hard to get a gig in Dublin, same with Galway and Cork. There is a music festival here called Glasgowbury, held every July, and the festival has been run for ten years now. Last year was the first time that RTE came up for to do any pieces. The BBC has been involved for about three or four years but it took them a while as well. I mean Paddy, the guy who runs it, he is a staunch Irishman, and he wanted all of Ireland to know what was going on up here because it is all local acts. When I say local, I mean artists from Northern Ireland and they just weren’t interested and didn’t believe it was actually happening because there is nothing like that down south. A part from massive, government funded festivals like Oxygen and Electric Picnic, they don’t have the local acts, where as Glasgowbury is for us and it is for people who are interested. It celebrates Northern Irish music and culture and it has been doing very well. RTE didn’t want to know and they still don’t really. We continue to tour the South because it is important for us to still do but they are by far the worst attended gigs that we do, the venues aren’t set up for a rock band because the stages aren’t big enough for all of us and for our equipment. Ah I am sorry I sound so pessimistic about everything! I am really not a pessimistic person. I just really want people to be a lot more realistic about what is really going on. There are a lot of good bands in this country and they are getting out and getting heard but they still celebrate where they are from, which is nice, and I don’t think that part is ever going to change.

End. Duration: 00:54:00
Katie Richardson—well known and immensely connected Belfast born and bred musician; front woman for Katie and the Carnival as well as a contributing musician to a variety of other local bands.

- Monday, 15 November 2010 at 11 am
- Location and scenario: sipping on coffee and tea at Clements Café, 68 Botanic Ave, Belfast

Martha: How did you get involved in the contemporary music industry here in Belfast?
Katie: Basically I worked as an actor in theater and I had always loved music, I did it in school, worked in choirs and stuff but I wasn’t very confident when it came to a band situation. I just kind of, through a friend through a friend, a situation that I think happens a lot here because it is such a small place, but the friend of a friend is Ben Craig [Belfast musician] I kind of started singing with him and I was pretty nervous about it. I didn’t really know that there was a music scene here, even though I grew up here. I didn’t know it really existed or that there was anything that I would even find interesting in Belfast. When I was in this band with Ben and started to grow my confidence in being onstage, I heard about this very established local band [The Delawares] that was looking for a female singer but I didn’t go for an audition because I was just too nervous and didn’t think I would get it. Eventually one thing or another happened and I got an audition with them. I think they were really desperate for a singer and I didn’t even know them but again, a friend of a friend introduced me, I auditioned, and I got it. I felt like I got a number one hit, I was so excited to be in this band! My first gig with them was at the Empire [Music Hall] and I cried after that because it was just amazing! Then I just started to fall in love with the music scene. I started to meet all of these people who I would have never had the confidence to talk to. I just loved it. I found the contemporary music scene to be a little world that I felt completely comfortable in. So when that band split up a couple of years ago, that was when I started to write my own music and even though I was devastated when that band broke up, now I am really glad that I had the opportunity to start my own project. So that is a long drawn out story of how I got involved but yeah, there you go.

Martha: That band was The Delawares, right?
Katie: Yeah, that was The Delawares. It was a brilliant band to be in. We were very lucky. We got to support well known acts and they played on big outdoor stages and it was a really good experience because through it I made so many friends. The most important thing for me being in The Delawares, though I was just really a backing singer, but the most important thing in that band, and this is one of the key things for being involved in any of the arts in Northern Ireland, but it was the amount of people I met. I literally met hundreds of other musicians, promoters, and people who respected the band. At the same time, that also caused problems because there were a lot of promoters and musicians that didn’t like the band so then I had to try to prove that what I was doing was something different. In Belfast it can be very hard because once you have established an image, or once someone has an idea of you, it is very hard to battle against that because it is such a small place and people really do make their minds up about things like that. If I ramble just tell me to stop.

Martha: You aren’t, don’t worry. I have never heard that before though, the whole musician image thing.
Katie: Yeah, The Delawares were like a country/rock band and I don’t want to do anything that sounds too country now or soon after we broke up because I wanted to make a complete departure from The Delawares and I really thought I had to prove myself in order to do that. I needed to prove myself as Katie Richardson, not as the backing singer for The Delawares.

Martha: How would you describe the current music scene, if you think there is one, in Belfast?
Katie: There definitely is one. There is a thriving music scene in Belfast, in a way. The music scene in here is quite basic. I don’t mean that as a reflection on the music that is created or on the talent of the musicians here. I think completely the opposite. I think Belfast has a wealth of musical talent that goes across so many genres. There are people who are being a lot more experimental now. There are world-class musicians here. What I mean by basic is that on a basic level it works so well, as in there is a community of musicians here and everyone works together. There is a really exciting scene in the way that, you know, you can get a phone call from any other band and they will say ‘We are doing a gig here would you come and do this, or that.’ It is like we are one big giant group and there are always people that will splinter off or have big heads or whatever, but as a whole in Belfast, it is a really, really lovely place to be an Artist. Well a
musician actually, not an artist, because that is too big a statement. In saying that at the same time, however, it is very difficult. Once you reach a certain stage here, there is nowhere else to go. The music industry itself has changed a lot anyway in that you don’t really get discovered by a record label, they don’t release your record, it is all about the internet and it is all about self-promotion now. In Belfast there aren’t really any managers. There are starting to be publishing companies who are putting music out to different places but because it is such a small place, there is a limit of press here. There is a limit of people who have any influence in the grand scheme of things. This is going to sound like I am slagging off the media in Belfast, and I am not but everyone here, I think, puts a lot of self-importance on the media. At the end of the day, even if they are working for BBC, they are just local journalists. They don’t have influence over the world, or the UK scene as a whole. If someone doesn’t like you, it is very easy to go “Alright, well I should stop then,” but know that you just have to go other places and keep trying. The more I do this and the more I learn about it, the less I feel like there is any point to stay here and do gigs here because I could do four or five gigs a month here, or three gigs a week here if I wanted, but who is going to come and see it.

Martha: Would you say that is what sets Belfast apart from other places? When I was talking to Charlotte [Dryden], she was saying that Belfast is different from places like Manchester, London, or Dublin in that there aren’t major labels or producers here in Belfast.

Katie: I don’t have very much experience in other places. I think that is why I am talking about the limits. I think that Belfast tricks you a wee bit. I think that a lot of people think that when you become successful here, that translates to other places. You are learning all the time in this industry. If I knew everything, I would have loads of album sales, or be writing the best songs, but I don’t know everything of course. If you are on the mainland it is easier to be connected to the mainland. You know? We are across the water and it just seems a little more difficult for some reason, and I really don’t know why. It is harder to do a tour, it is more expensive to go around the UK, and there is something that just separates us from these other places. I think with Dublin as well. The relationship between Dublin and Belfast’s contemporary music scene is unnaturally bad. It is really strangely bad. There is no support and there is no interest. Like if a Dublin band were to come up here, we would have never heard of them. If we were to down there, they would have never heard of us. It is just stupid. We are so close. Just a couple of hours away! The Dublin scene is very closed. I don’t think the Belfast one is so much. I think that we react to the fact that the Dublin scene doesn’t really welcome us because I think it is older than the Belfast music scene. I think the Belfast music scene is growing quite slowly. I think that Belfast is an ever-growing city to be honest. I think that it will happen here but I think that it will be quite a long time in the making. I think that that is why the people working here now need to be tempted to stay. If everyone keeps going away from here, nothing is going to develop in the arts but at the same time, people have to go away. It is kind of a catch-22. I don’t know how you resolve that.

Martha: Can you talk about the influence that places like Oh Yeah and other venues have had on the contemporary music scene here, through your perspective as a musician?

Katie: I think that the Oh Yeah Centre is one of the key places here actually. When I was growing up here, I was very heavily involved in music here. I was in six choirs, and I was in orchestras. The choirs I was in would go to Westminster Abbey every summer to sing. We sang in the Royal Albert Hall. We won all of these competitions and we traveled around. I went all over Europe. But my voice never really suited classical music but I basically wasn’t given any other options. It was classical music or musical theater and I didn’t know that it was acceptable to do anything else. I knew that pop music existed but I didn’t think that it was an acceptable form of music or that it was something that you could be creative with or something. So the Oh Yeah Centre, as an organization, is essential. One of the most important things that it does is give young people, very young, like teenagers, an opportunity. It tells them that rock music is okay. They have rehearsal rooms for young bands to come and practice. One of my favorite things is volume control, which is this group of teenagers who organize gigs and it is amazing. If the Oh Yeah Centre continues to grow as it has already started to, I think that it could revolutionize music here. I really think it has the power to really break a lot of concepts about music here. There is a place that is here called the Institute of Contemporary Music. Again it is like a rock school and there are these rock schools that are popping up all over Northern Ireland now. I love classical music and it of course is not wrong, but kids will relate more to rock and contemporary music. So the Oh Yeah Centre, I find, is great. I think that they have always been very encouraging to me and to other people. I think there are lots more that they can do or things that they aren’t doing that they should do. I think that that is because of funding really though, so I tell them, but they know these things. [Friend comes running over and they catch up briefly]
Charlotte [Dryden] is a close friend of mine, she is incredibly intelligent and really understands music and the scene and it things like workshops and outreach and free services that we all need. It would be so brilliant if the Oh Yeah Centre had a place where kids could come in and practice recording, but that costs unimaginable to fund plus you would have to have someone there to supervise it I guess. This award that the Oh Yeah Centre is going for at the minute [the People’s Millions Award] would win them a learning suite. That is what we are all doing that song for, to generate publicity for them so that on the day of the award, people will phone in and vote for the Centre [Katie organized a day for musicians from all around Belfast to write and record a song for the Oh Yeah Centre to help them win this award and prize]. It would win them all these things that they want to do but can’t because of funding. So the Oh Yeah Centre is just great. Venues here and promoters are key really in the whole contemporary music scene here. They are the ones that give you the gigs. I think the festivals are very important here as well. There is a festival called the Belfast Nashville Songwriters festival or there is a festival called the Cathedral Quarters Art festival. These festivals put local acts on another level. There are always going to be people who come to gigs, but it will always be the same people coming to gig after gig. What the festival does is give local acts an opportunity to play to a bigger audience and more open to the general public and it will attract thousands of people who would never have heard your music otherwise.

Martha: What about places like the Black Box?
Katie: Well, first I’ll explain to you how it works. So if a promoter puts a gig on, they will pay for the venue and then they would pay you to do the gig, so if you are organizing your own gig, because I would do that quite a lot, but I would tend to use smaller places. It is difficult though because if you are established, it is not hard to get to play gigs here in Belfast. When I say established I mean for instance that Katie and the Carnival would now be established as a local band in that people have heard of us. It is not hard for that to happen, it is a small place. If you are a young band starting out, it is really hard to get gigs, but once you break in, you are fine. When a young band is starting out, they want encouragement and they want people to hear them. The main thing for them to know is that you have to make connections and friends with other musicians and other people. It is not hard to do that though! Go hang out at other gigs, watch other bands perform, talk to other bands, get to know them. People here are more impressed when you are a nice guy. It is more about “oh he is a nice guy, let’s get him on stage” here in Belfast and less about “this is the best band I have ever heard, let’s put them on stage.” It is more about a friendship vibe. If ever someone is trying to get into the scene, I always say just to go chat with people. I make sure I am at specific things if there is certain people there whom I want to talk to. Anyway, back to the Black Box though. I literally have all the time in the world for the Black Box. I know I work there, but I perform there before I work there. I think that they are one of the most important venues in Belfast because they have always been generous to give out their space for free or for discounts. They are always trying to promote new acts and they have great spaces. When Katie and the Carnival started, when we had our first gig, I can’t even describe the level of nerves I had. I cried for two weeks before we performed. I kept saying to myself “This is too much. I can’t do this! I don’t want to!” So I said to the Black Box, “look I am going to be sick if I go on stage for the first time with the band on Friday. Can I do a practice gig with the band in the café on Thursday?” They were like “yes of course!” So they opened the place for me for free, and this was before I worked there, and told me to do the gig. I didn’t invite anyone down and there were about only five people watching us, so we did our set like three times and became really confident for our show the next day, which was brilliant! We wouldn’t have been able to do that if it was somewhere else to be honest.

Martha: Why do you think they were so encouraging and accommodating?
Katie: Well they did know me as someone who was involved with the arts and they knew that I had put events on there and I had paid for the venue in the past so I suppose they wanted to support that. They are great and really nice people. I only really work there now because I really love it. I have worked in restaurants and coffee shops since I was sixteen and I hate it now but I love the Black Box!

Martha: How has the musical culture in Belfast changed in the last ten years or so? Specifically since the ‘end of the troubles.’
Katie: I don’t know all that much about it because apart from anything I wasn’t directly involved or affected. Of course I was aware of the troubles but I grew up in a very mixed area. From what I know of it though, well, music here during the troubles centered on the punk scene. Belfast is kind of famous for its punks. When that scene was going on the music was all about the troubles and getting away and it served as an outlet for anger and frustration for the young people here. Basically I don’t think it is about that anymore. I mean I know it’s not. I don’t think I have heard a young band talking about that. Music now is not about an escape from that it is about everything else. It is a really interesting development because so
many people think that Belfast is all about that still and it is really not. It is so far from that. It is about the future. It feels like quite a romantic time here. I don’t know, ah I don’t know! It’s just that, well, a lot of the theater here is still about the troubles. It’s actually really tiring because most new plays that come out in Belfast are about this and that and the troubles and the whole Northern Irish thing and I am so sick of it! I think that young people, no, I think that most people, doesn’t matter the age, are bored of it! Music has taken the other way. No one really deals with it anymore, which I think is a good and healthy thing. I don’t think it is technically because people don’t want to deal with it, I think it is because they just aren’t interested in it anymore and all of us, well most of us here at least, have moved on. If that makes any sense at all, I don’t know enough about it I guess.

**Martha:** I was talking to Charlotte [Dryden] about this and she said she didn’t think that musicians these days are political enough. Not necessarily what is going on in Belfast or in Northern Ireland, but more so what is going on in and throughout the world. She doesn’t think musicians are saying enough about that. What do you have to say about that?

**Katie:** I think that opinion probably depends on your musical background and the music you listen to. So Bob Dylan obviously talked about politics in that way. I think that that is totally a matter of opinion. I think that it is healthy for people to talk about political things, but I think that some music suits the politics thing better than other music. I think that that at the end of the day, it comes down to the personal opinions of the songwriters. I talk about the politics of relationships and I don’t mean it to be like that. You know, to sit down and think to write a song about a specific thing, well sometimes I do I guess if it is for a play. For instance, I just wrote a song for a play about the fear of getting older because it was for a group that was over sixty years old. I was a wee bit nervous when I turned twenty-five this past summer. I was quite worried about feeling older and getting older. So this specific song that I did came from a very honest place and I think it is the most honest song I have ever written. All the other songs in the play were quite silly but that song I was so proud of and it was serious and made people cry because it was so honest. All I am saying is that you can write about political issues if you want to or not but I can’t imagine how it would fit into my style and Katie and the Carnival. Maybe it will one day, probably not though. I can imagine it fitting into LaFaro’s style and that is great because you need to have music about all different kinds of things. That is why there are so many different types of music.

**Martha:** Where do you see Belfast’s contemporary music scene heading in the future?

**Katie:** It is definitely forever growing. I find that to be quite a difficult question. If it keeps growing the way it is growing now where you have got all of these young people, especially because of the Oh Yeah Centre, and because now more than ever the bands are incredibly young, well then that heads towards a bright future for Belfast because there will be a lot more talented musicians around and just a lot more musicians in general. There will be more bands doing different things and people will be learning from an earlier age. At the same time, as I said earlier, one problem I see about here is that since everyone has to go away there is only so much that the scene can grow here.

**Martha:** They come back though, right?

**Katie:** That’s the thing. People move away a lot. Yes, you can go away on tour and come back, and yeah that is great but it’s hard to come back. Like I’m thinking about moving to London with Cara [Cowan-Katie’s roommate and a fellow Belfast musician]. I just think there are so many more opportunities outside of Belfast. I really think it might have to be done. I kind of feel like, and this is not meant to sound big-headed at all, but I feel like I know everyone that I need to know here and people still are latching on, which is great, but I keep being played on BBC1 here, I keep playing in the Empire, so it is like ‘what do I do now?’ I guess organize my own tours, which I can do, but I am not nearly an expert! I don’t have the contacts! That is the problem I am facing now. I am stuck, on my own really, without a manager, without a full time band. It really is just me. It is scary and you wake up in the middle of the night with a cold sweat. To go back to the question though, I hope that more people will come and recognize what Belfast has to offer. I hope that more managers come to. If there are a lot of young musicians coming out of Belfast, maybe that means there will be young promoters and people who want to be managers coming out of Belfast in the future. I want people to come and take, well what [outside managers] think of as risks. The internet does make things a lot easier now but at the same time there are just hundreds upon thousands upon millions of musicians and bands out there so how do you go that extra step and make yourself be known. Because there is such a small scene here, bands here are able to get people do their gigs and so they are doing well but when you go out of Belfast, it is a hard slap of reality when they realize that no one else knows who they are. Outside of Belfast you realize you are nothing. As much as I think of Belfast as a very nurturing place, it is very important at this stage to leave as well. Even if it is just for a tour, you can come
back and that is fine. I want Belfast to achieve as a musical city but at the minute it is something that I myself need to think seriously about.

**Martha:** As an ending point then, how would you assess the statement that Belfast is experiencing a cultural renaissance through the medium of contemporary music.

**Katie:** I definitely think that that is true. The music that I know and love is the folk-rock-poppy kind of scene here that young people are doing here but there are a lot of great producers and DJs around, people that are creating more electronic music here. Whatever art it may be, it is an outlet. Art in general is an amazing outlet. The music scene, I think, is changing the city. I think it is changing it from a place that people saw to be a very narrow-minded, closed, and troubled place into somewhere that is now full of exciting and young musical artists who are doing their own thing and challenging people’s views. I have always believed that art is a very cathartic thing. Whether it is music, visual arts, theater, drama, poetry, whatever it may be, it brings people together. Without trying to sound too cheesy and too “peace and reconciliation” it is true how music can just bring people together. I don’t know the religion of any of the people I hang out with. I don’t know the religions of anyone in my band and I don’t care. Neither does anyone else care, really. We don’t think about stuff like that. We think about who is a nice person and who is a good musician and who is interesting. It has never been like that for me, I know more so for others, but not for me and not for my friends. The city has just changed so much. I hated this place as a teenager. I loathed Belfast. All I wanted to do was leave Belfast. That is why I went away to New York and to Africa and I traveled the world. I never in a million years thought I would spend more than a couple of months here as an adult. My parents are shocked I am still here. Belfast has proven me wrong. I feel very lucky. I left school six years ago and all of the things I have done in that time, whether it has been in theater or in music, it has all been fun and exciting and really hard too, but Belfast allows me to do all of that. I get quite excited when I think about the things that could happen here. It is a good place to be at the minute because if you are here, you are part of the creation of the city and of the art scene. People have new ideas all the time that are not done here, maybe in bigger cities they are done, but here you are usually the first person to do something and that makes it so exciting! I hope that all makes sense!

*End. Duration: 00:36:19*
Peter Wilson - Belfast based songwriter and performer whose alter ego, Duke Special, has made him into an international and well-known act with six albums.

- Monday, 15 November 2010 at 3 pm
- Location and scenario: his office in the Oh Yeah Music Centre, Gordon Street, Belfast

Peter: I was doing with a PR company in London but they are doing some PR for Northern Ireland and specifically for Belfast’s music scene and one of the questions they asked was why do I think there is a growth in contemporary music at the minute, so I think that is a good place to start.

Martha: That is one of my questions so you can start it off.

Peter: Okay, well I think it is a mixture of things. One is the fact that there have been some successes from here. Historically you have big giants like Van Morrison, Stiff Little Fingers, The Undertones, and people like that way back to Ruby Murray.

[Katie Richardson knocks on the door and comes in to bring us coffee and hot chocolate and to say hello to Peter]

I think recently with successes like Snow Patrol, Ash, Divine Comedy, and so on I think there is an expectation of "we can do this!" I think that matched with the fact that it is now cheaper to travel to the UK where as before it was really prohibitive to get to London because it would cost you an absolute fortune. The cost is still really prohibitive for a lot of bands to go over by ferry to do a gig for a little bit of money and being out 500 quid, out of your pocket, by the time you travel there. London still is, to an extent, the center of the music industry so it is still a little prohibitive coming from Northern Ireland but compared to what it used to be like, it is better. Here its used to be a backwater and not many people would have come across to check out a band from Belfast because if you wanted to make it, you moved to London and that was the end of it. There was an exodus of people going to London to try and make. I think now with cheap air flights, also I think the industry is in such meltdown, well I think part of it is in a meltdown and part of it is that a label is no longer a necessity to build up a fan base or to bring out a record. There are so many bands now that are going out and doing it whether or not you have a record label behind you. Certainly how I started out. I toured relentlessly for six years without any label involvement. I just sold stuff at gigs and built up a fan base. Lots of people are doing that. I think also now there is a bit more work being done by existing labels to go out and scout over here. Because I think there is so much going on here now, people are coming over here and looking for the next big thing. When you have the successful act, for example again like Snow Patrol, it suddenly raises the profile of the region. With all that, there is also that thing about the lack of violence now. That has meant there has been a flourishing of business and investment now, which has provided a good soil for growth.

Martha: How did you become involved in music and in the contemporary music scene of Belfast?

Peter: Long journey for me. Always wanted to play music, from when I was little. There were not many role models who were doing the kind of music I wanted to do. My career advice from school was to become a teacher or else you become a classical pianist. I wasn’t good enough to be a classical pianist, I hated the ten scales, and I would have made a shit teacher because I have too many bad habits. I joined a band when I was eighteen and moved to England. It was the nearest thing I could do to actually be living the dream. Then my Northern Ireland upbringing kicked in. I felt guilty about doing music and thought I should get a proper job you know I obviously hate being self-indulgent doing this stuff. So I came back, went to college, and in all I did about five or six years of community work. About a month into the degree, I realized I wanted to do music! I went through everything to try to figure out how I could combine community work and music. I realized they were both huge vocations and they demanded everything from me. I always knew there was something I hadn’t gotten to or realized within the music direction so the day I left college I became a self-employed musician who did a little bit of community work in the side, granted that diminished and I just started to do music full time. I did a couple of bands that weren’t going anywhere in Belfast, then I went out on my own and created this alter ego, Duke Special, in 2002 and then just began to tour and make and sell EP’s [Extended Play-a recording that contains more music than a single but not enough to qualify as a full album] and I progressed from there.

Martha: How would describe, if you think there is one, the contemporary music scene of Belfast?

Peter: Diverse. There is no one particular sound, not in the way that there would have been one in Manchester in the early nineties. That is one of the exciting things about here. I think that another reason
for there being a wealth of music from here is one, coming from Ireland, I think music is woven into the fabric of who we are and there is a storytelling inherence in what we do but also I think that music just forms a huge part of our culture. I think we have to try a bit harder than if we lived in London. There are different hurdles [for wherever you live]. If you live in London, it is saturated and your competition is huge. The same goes for Dublin. I remember years ago in the eighties, there was an explosion of bands and competition. Here in Belfast, the serious music people compared to those just having a go, not that there is anything wrong with those having a go, but you have to really want to do it to get anywhere from Belfast. I think there are such a diverse number of styles. To English speaking people, one comment would be “Oh you sing with your accent,” and that is maybe a little bit unusual for musicians from [Belfast]. I don’t think that people could say, “oh that is a real Northern Ireland sound” in the way that there is an Americana sound. Even if there’s not, since there is a huge diversity of sounds in America, but we draw on a lot of American music, a lot of English music, and all kinds of music. There is electronic music, rock music, instrumental rock music, indie, pop, folk, it is a real melting pot here of musical styles and I don’t think there is any one particular scene but there is certainly lots of crossovers between band personnel and support for each other. Also, Snow Patrol as being the big name to come out here in recent times on a global scale, they have been really supportive of inviting Northern Irish bands to guest with them. I have certainly played with them a few times and they have been involved with this whole place and encouraging of that growth so fair play to them.

**Martha:** Along the same lines then with that, I have heard a reoccurring theme of a community of musicians in Belfast. Would you say that is what makes Belfast unique in comparison to bigger places like London or Manchester?

**Peter:** I think one of the cool things about Belfast in lots of ways, is that in terms of size, it is not overwhelming. In a lot of cities you sometimes find pockets of communities building up. Belfast just isn’t big enough for that to be the case. Obviously bands know each other better than other bands and are drawn to styles and they share resources, but I think that Belfast is more like a big town so it is much more possible to get your head around it and I think that all of our paths cross more than would be the case in other cities.

**Martha:** Do you think that is something that is permanent or something that is up to change in the next few years?

**Peter:** As the industry is growing, you see a lot more bands exiting from Belfast, not in a negative way like it may seem to be, but actually they are going on tours internationally. At the minute, you have Two Door Cinema Club [Belfast band], And So I Watch You From Afar [Belfast band], and General Fiasco [Belfast band] all out internationally playing. At the same time, you have a lot more people based in Belfast than you ever would have. I think in the past, as I said, people would have moved to London to try to make it, where as now people often have representation in England, or someone who is going to-and-fro on their behalf, but I think that a lot more bands are based in and around Belfast.

**Martha:** I was talking to a few people last week and they reiterated to me that if you want to make it in Belfast, you have to get out of Belfast. What are your thoughts?

**Peter:** I think that that is the same for any act. It is a really good thing because you can easily become a really big fish in a little pond if you stick around too long with your local following but any band has to replicate that in ten other cities before they begin to really catch. Even within Ireland, there are people who are massive in Ireland but they struggle to get a gig across the water.

**Martha:** Why do you think that is?

**Peter:** I think that is because the bands just haven’t made that step. Whenever you got to new territory, particularly if you don’t have radio play, if you don’t have a hit on the radio in England, you are back to square one. I think in Ireland, we are lucky because there is always an export community [of Irish heritage] in most countries. So like in America, I played the Craic Festival last year in March. A lot of the people coming to that are Irish, second generation. There is more than that but certainly a good starting point to build up an audience. In that respect we are luckier than say if you come from Luxemburg or whatever. I think for an artist who has done really well in Ireland, the temptation is to sometimes stay and enjoy that as oppose to going back to square one and crossing the water.

**Martha:** Did you ever feel that you got to a certain level of success here and you couldn’t really go anywhere else? Like you played the big venues and you’ve had sold out shows, now what?

**Peter:** I had always toured the UK equally as I had toured Ireland. At the beginning to not many people at all but once I built [a following] up, I signed to a label in London who had distribution over here. So I was lucky I had London on my side. I was doing over a hundred shows a year and just playing all the time.
trying to get it out there. To make it big in Europe now probably, I would have to do the same and I don’t really want to do that anymore because it is just really, really, really grueling and I have a family and I have done the whole thing of sleeping in cars and sleeping on people’s floors. While I am not above that, I feel for me now in this stage of my life I can do it a little differently. At the same time, if I had to do it again and start over again, I wouldn’t hesitate to do that process again. Going to America for example, I have done a few showcases in L.A. and New York before, but this time I am doing a mixture of house gigs and club gigs for two weeks.

**Martha:** How do you think the troubles have impacted the contemporary music industry here?

**Peter:** In some ways, music has always been above that. It was a leveler. It was a common language that was shared by everyone. Sure you had your Republican traditional music, which would have been political and you have your Orange Order parade march, which is its own particular thing, but I think, you know Stuart [Bailie] would tell you for example, Punk was the great meeting point during the height of the troubles where they didn’t care where you were from or what your background was. I have toured all over Ireland many times and where I come from has never been a problem because music is more than that. I have never really written about any of it, well except one song I wrote about the conflict here. You tend to find that a lot of people from here don’t really write songs about it. In some ways it just seems a little cheap or a bit obvious to write songs about the troubles. I think that what has changed probably, was that suddenly there was openness and a freedom, particularly where business can grow. People have always been creative but I think now there is that opportunity for the industry side of things to flourish a bit. There has never really been an infrastructure for developing new talent so I think there is a chance now and this time is representative of that I suppose. Again in an informal way, nobody has this master plan, but it is just making space available for others to come in. I think that is the exciting thing.

**Martha:** What do you think about politics in music? Should musicians be saying more or does it depend on your genre?

**Peter:** It does but I mean Woody Guthrie was one of the biggest political songwriters ever so, in that tradition, so it doesn’t have to be swaggy, angry sounding music. It can be a ballad. I think on one hand, that end of the music industry, the high-budgeted pop end, I just feel so indifferent to. I feel like on all the X-Factor and Pop-Idol things, you are never going to see substance in terms of songs that actually mean things. I mean they do cover songs that mean things, but they are sugared and palatable. I think this time being a real time of change in the industry where nothing is going to be the same in that primary league [the stage he calls high-budgeted pop], you know there aren’t the same record deals being handed out or the same amount of money blown in making a video. That primary league is becoming more and more irrelevant as a music lover. It is far more interesting what is happening at a grassroots level. For example, I have a friend who was at the Imogen Heap concert last week in Royal Albert Hall. It was sold out and my friend said it was the most incredible gig. [Imogen Heap] written an orchestral piece in the beginning, which lasted and hour. It started with microphones all around the room sampling conversations in the audience and she wove that into the introduction of her performance and the orchestra crept in and it ended with the sound of the audience. There was a full band section and then a choir came on. Then you hear my friend berating the radio saying “why are people being pushed all this shit on the radio and being told this is where it’s at” when in fact there is amazing music out there waiting to be discovered. I’m not sure if that will ever change because people are busy and many people out there only have time to listen to what is recommended and the voices that are shouting the loudest are often the big labels who are advertising something or pushing the most recent thing. As is X-Factor doing on T.V. Different stuff is out there if people look for it. To answer your question, yes I think as the models, or what people perceive you can do in music, as they grow and as the music industry combusting and, even though that sugary-sweet, bland thing will always still go on, as people do it more as D-I-Y [Do it Yourself], there are more possibilities to start talking about the real stuff.

**Martha:** What do you see for the future of Belfast’s contemporary music scene?

**Peter:** It’s hard to know because when you are planning your own thing sometimes you are just aware of that, but I would expect certainly to see a lot more bands going on and touring at a national level for sure. I think it has only started, what is happening. On a personal level, I am really interested in collaborating with other art forms, that is kind of what I am doing over the next while. My next writing project is collaboration with the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York in March. Are you going to be there?

**Martha:** Yeah, I heard about that. I would love to see that.

**Peter:** Yeah, they approached me with the idea of writing songs based on a photo exhibition going on there from the early 1900’s. It is three giants of photography and early development of techniques, so I am going
to be writing songs and performing it in the theater with a string quartet and visuals and stuff. I am really inspired and intrigued by the idea that the history that I have had in touring and, for lack of a better phrase, pop music, and colliding that with other art forms like photography or visual art. I am writing music for a play, I did a play last year too, but that type of thing is really exciting to me. I love the idea of performing that for Belfast audiences so that it completely blows out of the water what is possible [for music]. For me that is what I hope for in the next few years.

**Martha:** How do you think different music organizations, venues, and festivals have impacted the contemporary music industry?

**Peter:** I think festivals have been great. There are so many festivals in Belfast now, it’s great, it’s like festival city. I actually tried to run my own last year. I don’t play Belfast very often because I live here and people will get sick of you. Initially when you are starting out you try to play all the time, anywhere you can for nothing. After a while it is better not to play so much so you can do something big or really interesting. So my last show, previous to the one last year was two Christmas’ ago in St. George’s Market. There were about 1,500 people at it and it was brilliant. We ended up doing it all day long and then in conjunction with another festival, which I helped to curate. Hats off to organizers of festivals. It’s hard work. The key is to start really small and let it grow. I think festivals have been really, really great for music in Belfast. I think some venues are brilliant but I think there is some temptation for other venues to put on tribute bands all the time. It is the easy options for venues because it gets people in drinking at the bar but it kind of kills original music. I think there is a long way to go for live venues, but I understand why that is the case for people. It takes a lot to get people in to see original music sometimes partly because of the whole [whispers] X-Factor thing, but I won’t go into that. Partly also because people are reluctant to go in and hear something new sometimes and I think that is an education thing. We have to encourage people that this is really important to come see new music. Someone said once “I would rather go and see a concert than have to suffer a band’s new material.” In other words, people will go and see an Oasis tribute band because they love all the songs that they know as opposed to the new stuff from different bands. I think in live venues there is work to be done. I just applied for funding from the Arts Council Northern Ireland. The Met is giving me some money for my thing in March, so the accommodations and travel. I think initially they were just like “Oh can you write some songs?” and my head just started ticking and coming up with all of these ideas, so it is going to cost a lot of money, like twenty-seven grand. I have applied for fifteen of that twenty-seven from the arts council. That decision is made today but if I don’t get it, I will do my performance with a piano and slide projector. Whatever I do, it’s going to work out. The Arts Council is always criticized for funding more high-end arts, so they would be putting a lot of money into the Ulster Orchestra for example, or in opera. Some would argue that they only serve to certain parts of the community, traditionally it hasn’t been so good at funding bands because some people would say, the Arts council wouldn’t see bands as a worthy, artistic endeavor, or that they are generating money so they don’t need Arts Council funding. I think there is definitely an argument for the Arts Council to be more progressive and forward thinking in investing in other kinds of music.

**End. Duration: 00:39:41**
Part 2: Publicity Song Lyrics

Publicity song for Oh Yeah Music Centre in the People’s Millions Awards

Never had a chance till you came my way, Oh Yeah
All my conversations just went one way, Oh Yeah
Just a simple mind with a simple goal, watch it unfold
Step forward to a place where I’m okay

Oh Yeah, now I’m really glad that I found you
Oh Yeah, Now I’m really glad that you’re here
Oh Yeah, now that I know there’s a place I can go
Oh Yeah, Oh Yeah

All I had was hope and misguided dreams
A pocket of emotions and a step between
With a hungry heart that will lead the way
Got a feeling that I’ll find the way

Oh Yeah, now I’m really glad that I found you
Oh Yeah, Now I’m really glad that you’re here
Oh Yeah, now that I know there’s a place I can go
Oh Yeah, Oh Yeah

We know we got it this time
We know we got it right… etc.

Musicians involved in the performance:
*→Involved in writing the song in addition to performing.

Cara Cowan*
Steven Toner (Queer Giraffes)*
David Bell (Kami Kids)*
Matthew Maxwell (Kami Kids)
Paul Irwin (Ed Zealous)
John Conway (Katie and the Carnival)
Conn Smyth (Katie and the Carnival)
Ryan McCormick (Kaspar Rosa)*
Ben Craig (The Dirty Roots)
Matt McGinn*
Elizabeth McGeown (Uber Glitterati)
Rachel Austin
Andrew Train
Katie Richardson (Katie and the Carnival)*
Part 3: Pictures

Katie Richardson performing onstage at the Black Box in Belfast on 20 November 2010.

Peter Wilson’s alter ego, Duke Special, performing onstage in Belfast.

Jonny Black, front man of rock band LaFaro.
1. Katie Richardson and Conn Smyth performing the Tuesday Takedown, a radio show on Féile 103.2.
2. Auntie Annie’s flyer highlighting some upcoming shows.
3. Album cover for Master and Dog, previously known as John, Shelly, and the Creatures
4. Ben Craig and Pete Murray performing at the Black Box on 16 November 2010.
The red gates of Belfast’s Oh Yeah Music Centre

Publicity for the Oh Yeah Music Centre’s chance to win the People’s Millions Award.

Portion of the history of Belfast’s contemporary music exhibit in the Oh Yeah Music Centre: “We have a history of heavy industry and heavy politics so it’s no surprise that many of the musicians from this part of Ireland like their music on the weighty side also.”
The Black Box, a café and venue in the Cathedral District of Belfast.

Snow Patrol performing in 2008 at the Empire Music Hall, a famed venue on Botanic Avenue in Belfast.

Auntie Annie’s, another famed venue in Belfast and the location for most of the gigs I attended throughout my research period.