

Stuart Bailie: The story of music and conflict in Northern Ireland

Tuesday 10 April 2018

What makes a song or a musician the voice of a movement?

My book *Trouble Songs* tells the story of music and conflict in Northern Ireland. It begins with 'We Shall Overcome', an anthem that has inspired American people for a century (...) and which became a universal anthem. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights movement sang it as they marched for changes, including universal voting rights and the fair allocation of social housing.

In 1968, this was a non-violent movement, but it led to clashes. Unionists wanted to retain the links between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. Nationalists wanted to unite the Republic of Ireland. This is a very complex story and much of the history is contested. My book avoids getting bogged down in these arguments. Rather, I look at how musicians and their audiences expressed their feelings in song. Over 3,700 people have died in conflict-related events since 1968. Paramilitaries armies and State security forces have been involved. There was a political agreement in 1998 and life in Northern Ireland is considerably less violent, but we are not entirely at peace yet.

A song can also have immediate impact. In 1998, just as the peace process seemed to be making progress, there was a bomb in the market town of Omagh that killed 29. The local artist Juliet Turner sang the song 'Broken Things' at a memorial service in the town a week later. She channelled the sense of heartbreak and frustration into a short song. She articulated what thousands of people were feeling. They wanted a cessation of violence. It was such a powerful moment.

What makes music such a powerful medium for expressing a place in history?

Compared to other expressions such as film and theatre, music is fast, cheap and accessible. During the conflict in Northern Ireland in the 70s, 80s and 90s, local punk musicians could record music cheaply. You can hear the thrill and the sense of empowerment in those recordings.

People can make a statement with a couple of chords or basic software. The song 'The Men Behind The Wire' by the Belfast folk group Barleycorn topped the Irish charts a few months after the introduction of internment in 1971, when hundreds of suspected terrorists were imprisoned without trial. The song articulated a raw feeling for the affected families from the Nationalist/Republican community. A more famous song like 'One' by U2 has been used to soundtrack many causes and events over the years but in May 1998, it was about the peace process in Northern Ireland and support for the Good Friday Agreement. Bono performed it at the Waterfront Hall, and during the gig he encouraged the two main political leaders, John Hume and David Trimble, to shake hands on stage. It was an iconic moment. Music helped to swing the referendum and the future of Northern Ireland. (...)