


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bad Infrastructure, Good *Craic*: Affective Transformation at Irish Traditional Music Festivals in the Catskills

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Abstract

Each year, twice a year, musicians flock to the Catskill Mountain hamlet of East Durham, New York, transforming this otherwise sleepy town into a bustling site of music, dancing, and parties. East Durham is home to multiple Irish cultural festivals a year, but two stand out for their focus on Irish traditional music: the Catskills Irish Arts Week and the Northeast Tionól. These festivals, affectionately referred to collectively as “the Catskills,” are curious in their allure. Sprawled across a three-mile stretch of rural highway, most festival facilities are rundown and date to the heyday of the region in the first half of the twentieth century, when East Durham was an enclave of Irish American resort vacationers. Dotted the side of the road are more vacant and dilapidated buildings than there are in use. Yet, musicians attend each year with fervor, citing both the difficulties of the location and its pleasurable potentials as core to the “Catskills” experience. Drawing upon ethnographic observations and interviews, I examine this affective ambivalence and how it is structured by sensory qualities unique to the physical geography and infrastructure of the Catskill Mountains. Though these sensory experiences are characterized with a negative valence, they generate positive musical experiences, creative production, and deep sociality. I argue that this affective transformation occurs because the sensational features of the Catskills provoke reflexive encounters among musicians that resonate with and amplify values central to Irish traditional music making.

Introduction

Upon entering the hamlet of East Durham, New York, drivers coming down Route 145 are welcomed with a green and gold sign emblazoned with the slogan “The Emerald Isle of the Catskills.” Nestled in the Northeast region of the Catskill Mountains and home to less than 500 residents, the town wears its history as being a once popular vacation destination.¹ Dozens of resorts dot the side of the road, remnant destinations for throngs of Irish American summer vacationers from the 1930s to the 1970s. Only a handful are still in operation today. The remainder sit vacant and decaying or have been demolished by time and nature. Washed out signs with faded green shamrocks memorialize the decades when Irish Americans fled the urban jungle of New York City for the rural open air of upstate.

Since the mid-1990s, however, East Durham has taken on a new role in sustaining Irish culture in the United States as a site for multiple annual Irish cultural festivals. Two of these festivals, the Catskills Irish Arts Week and the Northeast Tionól,² stand out as being “for musicians.”³ That is, compared to big budget Irish American cultural festivals, the programming is focused solely on Irish traditional music.⁴ Held

¹According to the 2020 US Census, East Durham had a population of 466 across 214 households.

²*Tionól*, pronounced chin-OHL, is Irish for “gathering” or “assembly.” In the United States various regional *uilleann* (elbow) piping organizations arrange their own *tionól* weekends throughout the year. The Northeast Tionól was called the East Coast Tionól until 2006.

³Interview, “OA”, December 11, 2018.

⁴Mick Moloney divides the types of festivals that feature Irish traditional music into two categories: (1) multicultural folk festivals where Irish traditional music may be featured; and (2) festivals centered on Irish cultural activities and organized by Irish American organizations. The latter category can be further divided into festivals that focus entirely on Irish traditional music and

in July and October, respectively, these festivals transform the town into a bustling site of music, dancing, and sociality. Established in 1995 and hosted by the Michael J. Quill Irish Cultural & Sports Center, The Catskills Irish Arts Week is an annual week-long festival whose primary focus is instruction in Irish traditional music and dance, but which also features workshops in song, language, writing, and painting. Begun in 1986 and held in East Durham since 2005, the Northeast Tionól is a weekend-long festival centered on instruction and performance of the uilleann pipes, flute, and fiddle. Both festivals attract attendees from nearby hubs of Irish music and dance such as New York City and Boston, from across the United States, and from Canada, Ireland, and the UK. The town's business owners and residents come together to support festival operations, with activities hosted in resorts, restaurants and bars, and some private homes of generous residents.⁵ In addition to instructional workshops, both festivals feature evening activities such as concerts and pre-organized sessions; the Irish Arts Week additionally hosts social dances (*céilís*). All day and all night there are also impromptu music sessions ranging from intimate duets tucked away in hidden corners to large ensembles that fill pubs and overflow onto porches. The festivals in East Durham are prized by musicians and dancers for having great music and great *craic* (Irish for “fun”).

When I first began attending festivals in the Catskills in 2013, I was warned by musicians and dancers about the shoddy accommodations, scarce food options, and limited cellular phone service. At the time, there was one establishment with a somewhat reliable wireless internet connection. My friends regaled me with stories about stray critters wandering through lodgings, musty and dusty indoor air, and surfaces that felt tacky and sticky. In July the heat and humidity were barely managed by outdated air conditioners. In October the absence of insulation forced attendees to double up on layers and use space heaters to shield against the cold evening mountain air. These hardships, however, did not seem to dampen excitement for these events. As I quickly learned, withstanding the discomforts of festival infrastructure yielded rewards for those desiring a plethora of good tunes and a critical mass of good musicians with whom to play.

In this article, I am concerned with how the physical infrastructure and landscape of the Catskills structures meaning making among festival goers. Sprawling and physically difficult to navigate, run-down and outdated, simultaneously hot and clammy, dusty, sulfuric, moldy, and dark—these are just a sample of some of the negatively valenced sensory qualities that characterize the Catskills and provoke feelings of discomfort for festival attendees. Rather than inhibiting the pleasurable experiences of music making and sociality, however, these qualities are also cited by musicians and dancers as core attributes of the Catskills. This tension between negative and positive affective responses to the Catskills provokes several questions: How do the conditions and qualities of festival infrastructure produce feelings of comfort and discomfort? And in the event of the latter, how does discomfort get affectively recoded into positive sociomusical experience? That is, how do affective responses to bad infrastructure become coded as good? Drawing on ethnographic observations and interview testimony from festival attendees I argue that sensory qualities particular to this locale provoke reflexive encounters among festival attendees with place, history, aesthetic values, and past music-making experiences. Thus, these seemingly negative affective and physical experiences generate positive musical experiences of deep sociality and creative production. It is these distinctive sensory characteristics of the Catskills that give the place its extraordinary quality.⁶

those intended for a more general audience and feature a variety of musical genres as well as cultural activities and goods vendors. Moloney notes that there is a further subcategory of those festivals that focus exclusively on Irish traditional music that consists of teaching weeks and summer camps. It is in this last category of Moloney's scheme that the Catskills Irish Arts Week and the Northeast Tionól. See Mick Moloney, “Irish-American Festivals,” in *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States*, ed. J.J. Lee and Marion R. Casey (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 426–42.

⁵The scattered nature of festival activities across a three-mile stretch is an example of Jonathan Wynn's “confetti pattern” festival framework, where festival events occur over a wide area and control over access to these events is minimal. Jonathan R. Wynn, *Music/City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁶I conducted ethnography at these festivals in the form of participant observation over the last decade, attending either or both the Catskills Irish Arts Week and the Northeast Tionól each year. My observations are supported by formal and informal interview testimonies from festival participants, including instructors, organizers, students, and fringe attendees. Though the overarching sentiment of festival goers is that East Durham is a generative and positive force for the Irish traditional music and dance scene, testimony about the discomforts experienced in this location could cause harm to local business owners or reflect

Despite causing physical discomfort and hardship for its visitors, the Catskills operates as an important US cultural site in the translocal Irish traditional music scene. Its festivals draw together musicians and dancers from disparate parts of the United States and Canada, from Ireland, the UK, and further afield. These events attract top musicians as teachers and performers, which in turn stimulates student enrollment, concert attendance, and a hefty fringe festival attendance. Like similar festivals in Ireland, its teaching focus fosters the translocal reproduction of values for the Irish traditional music scene. Leonieke Bolderman, in a study of the Willie Clancy Summer School held annually in County Clare, Ireland, argues that because these teaching festivals cater specifically to a learner population and occur outside of everyday social and geographic life for its attendees, they operate on the periphery of the music scene.⁷ However, this interpretation fails to take into account the key role that such teaching festivals play in creating connections between new and established members. Furthermore, the festivals themselves provide essential economic and social support for the musicians and dancers who make up the faculty at the festival. Perhaps most importantly, the tradition of fringe attendance at the Catskill festivals ensures that these events unite a broad swath of translocal participants who do not fall into the learner category. For many, these festivals are some of the only opportunities to reunite with certain musician friends, affirming social and musical bonds that would otherwise be impeded by geographic distance.

By closely analyzing the specific qualities of the Catskills, I introduce these festivals as crucial to the translocal Irish traditional music scene, contributing to a growing literature on the musical influence of the US via trans-Atlantic flows of musical figures and media.⁸ Refocusing on networks and flows of musical activity is one way that ethnomusicologist Tes Slominski argues for mitigating the ethnic nationalist subtext of discourse that centers Ireland as homeland and Irish heritage as a marker of authenticity.⁹ In a similar critique, musicologists Paul Wells and Sally Sommers Smith describe Irish music in American contexts as a “far richer and more complex weave of cross-Atlantic connections and influences” than suggested by unilinear narratives.¹⁰ When considering these flows of individuals and musical encounters, however, it also behooves us as scholars to consider how nodes in the network are formed and sustained. I center the Catskills in this growing discourse, demonstrating how its features uniquely position it within a translocal musical scene.

To fully appreciate why the Catskills and its festivals are so meaningful for Irish traditional musicians and dancers—and to reconcile the affective tensions experienced therein—I explore the intersection of sensation, musical aesthetics, and infrastructure. Situated at this nexus is the body. Gesturing toward the multisensory experience of place, some music festivals scholarship brings attention to embodied experience of festival geographies, assessing how physical orientation and navigation of festival spaces (or lack thereof) impacts the “atmosphere” or “aura” of music festivals.¹¹ A sense of place,

poorly on festival goers. It is with sensitivity to these concerns that I have anonymized my interlocutors with pseudonym initials and have eliminated named references to specific facilities when discussing anything but historical context.

⁷Leonieke Bolderman, “Participatory Belonging: How Tourist Music Workshops Establish Trans-Local Music Scenes,” in *Popular Music Scenes: Regional and Rural Perspectives*, ed. Andy Bennett, David Cashman, Ben Green, and Natalie Lewandowski (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 181–93.

⁸Scott Spencer, “Transatlantic Migrations of Irish Music in the Early Recording Age,” in *The Irish in the Atlantic World*, ed. David T. Gleeson (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 53–75; Steve Coleman, “‘Nonsynchronism,’ Traditional Music, and Memory in Ireland,” in *Memory Ireland: Volume 2: Diaspora and Memory Practices*, ed. Oona Frawley (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 161–70.

⁹Tes Slominski, *Trad Nation: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Irish Traditional Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2020).

¹⁰Paul F. Wells and Sally K. Sommers Smith, “Irish Music and Musicians in the United States: An Introduction,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 4, no. 4 (November 2010): 395.

¹¹Britt Swartjes and Femke Vandenberg, “Festival Atmospheres,” in *Remaking Culture and Music Spaces*, ed. Ian Woodward, Jo Haynes, Pauwke Berkers, Aileen Dillane, and Karolina Golemo, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2022), 21–33; Isabelle Szmigin, Andrew Bengry-Howell, Yvette Morey, Christine Griffin, and Sarah Riley, “Socio-Spatial Authenticity at Co-Created Music Festivals,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 63 (March 1, 2017): 1–11; David Cashman, “‘The Most Atypical Experience of My Life’: The Experience of Popular Music Festivals on Cruise Ships,” *Tourist Studies* 17, no. 3 (September 1, 2017): 245–62; Wynn, *Music/City*; Michelle Duffy, “Lines of Drift: Festival Participation and Performing a Sense of Place,” *Popular Music* 19, no. 1 (January 2000): 51–64.

and more broadly a sense of belonging, within music festivals can be explained by the capacity of the “sensuous body” to respond to musical rhythm through movement.¹² In focusing on particular sensory and affective experiences of place, my study extends these discussions of atmosphere and belonging to include the impact of physical infrastructures. Moreover, I draw together literature from sensory memory studies and the anthropology of infrastructure to clarify how music making, sociality, history, and place intersect. Anthropologist Lisa Parks frames such a “phenomenology of infrastructure” as “excavating the various dispositions, feelings, moods, or sensations people experience during encounters with infrastructure sites, facilities, or processes.”¹³ Responding to this provocation, I consider how the affective particularities of the Catskills as festival site and historically rich locale give the place its attractive properties—that is, how it manages to draw members of a vast musical scene to it in meaningful encounter. The aging infrastructure in the Catskills supports the convergence of artists, giving this location qualities reminiscent of what geographer Doreen Massey calls a “meeting place” or “a particular constellation of social relations.”¹⁴ Further, in focusing on this particular place, I excavate a history of urban immigrant communities in rural locales and show the ongoing influence of this history on contemporary productions of American sensibilities around Irish traditional music.

A place for music amid infrastructural remnants

The fragments of a neon sign hang from rafters: The letters D-A-N are all that remains to mark the Emerald Isle Dance Hall (Figure 1). In his 2016 documentary on the history of music and dancing in the Irish Catskills, filmmaker Kevin Ferguson ventures into this now abandoned building to reminisce about times when it was a main destination for music and dancing: “The most important thing would be the dancing.”¹⁵ Ferguson explains, “One of the birthplaces of the Irish Catskills was here... a lot went on here.”¹⁶ Like the Emerald Isle Dance Hall, most of the resorts that once housed Irish American vacationers in the early and mid-twentieth century are now abandoned or demolished. Yet enough facilities remain to support the infrastructural needs of the Irish Arts Week and the Tionól: housing for instructors, staff and attendees; venues for concerts and dances; rooms for group lessons; and bars and restaurants for eating and socializing. An organizer for the Irish Arts Week recalled seeing the potential for creating a meaningful festival experience in the Catskills in the early 1990s:

We were delighted to come up here because of all these roadhouses. I mean, the history of the Catskills had people come up here for Irish music and dance, so they had to have good wood floors. [...] It was like, you know, nirvana really to see so many good places. We didn’t care about how bad the rooms were.¹⁷

For this organizer, the low quality of lodging and other facilities paled in comparison to the opportunity presented by underutilized spaces with a rich Irish American history. This tension between “good places” and “bad rooms” is an ambivalence rooted in the sensory-laden chronotopic character of the Catskills.

For many of today’s festival goers, and as Ferguson’s scene illustrates, the crumbling facilities are reminders that music and dancing in the Catskills are part of a longer lineage of socialization in the area. “There’s a lot of people at Irish Arts Week who are part of that old Catskills history, that real history,” recalled one festival goer, referring to those musicians whose families have visited the Catskills for generations.¹⁸ Just as the desire to be near supposed cultural origin sites compels many

¹²Michelle Duffy, Gordon Waitt, Andrew Gorman-Murray, and Chris Gibson, “Bodily Rhythms: Corporeal Capacities to Engage with Festival Spaces,” *Emotion, Space and Society* 4, no. 1 (February 1, 2011): 17–24.

¹³Lisa Parks, “Infrastructure and Affect,” *Technosphere Magazine*, 2016.

¹⁴Doreen Massey, “A Global Sense of Place,” *Marxism Today*, June 1991, 28.

¹⁵*The Irish Catskills: Dancing at the Crossroads*, directed by Kevin Ferguson (Narrowback Films, 2016).

¹⁶*The Irish Catskills: Dancing at the Crossroads*.

¹⁷Interview, “KA,” July 16, 2019.

¹⁸Interview, “JL,” December 13, 2018. For specific examples of musical and familial lineages, see Brendan Dolan, “Music in the Mountains: The Irish Catskills and Traditional Music,” in *The Irish-American Experience in New Jersey and Metropolitan*



Figure 1. Still from Kevin Ferguson's documentary *The Irish Catskills: Dancing at the Crossroads*, 00:05:33.

musicians and enthusiasts to pilgrimage to Ireland to find “the music” and be near “the people,” visitors to the Catskills festivals go in part because of its long history of Irish American musical and social community.¹⁹ Though most recognized in popular culture for its strong Jewish American presence (the “Borscht Belt”), the Catskills Mountains have been a vacation retreat for several ethnic minorities since the 1890s including Irish Americans (“the Irish Alps”), Italian Americans (the “Bocce Belt”), and African American communities, among others.²⁰ During the economic peak of the Catskills from the 1950s to 1970s, music and dancing were ever-present features of summer life for Irish American vacationers in the towns of East Durham, Leeds, and Cairo.²¹ Establishments such as Erin’s Melody, The Sligo Hotel, the O’Neill House, McKenna’s, and a dozen more, boasted live music and dancing every night of the week.²² For European immigrant groups, music, dancing, food and games helped them affirm an “Old World” identity, while also, as historian Laura Miller notes, articulating a common white ethnic identity.²³ Miller’s analysis of the draw of the area for Italian Americans applies equally well to Irish American communities: “Throughout the twentieth century, the resorts appealed to vacationers seeking an insulated recreational environment in which group identity and transatlantic ties—both real and imagined—could be fostered and sustained.”²⁴

New York: Cultural Identity, Hybridity, and Commemoration, ed. Marta Mestrovic Deyrup and Maura Grace Harrington (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 151–71.

¹⁹Though festivals like the Catskills Irish Arts Week and the Northeast Tionól do provide an alternative for those unable to travel to Ireland, they are not mere surrogates for an “Irish” experience. Rather, these festivals stand in their own right as having significant value to the sustenance of Irish traditional music communities in the United States.

²⁰Janis Benincasa, “Ethnic Resorts of the Catskills: A Project, a Process, a Product,” *New York Folklore Newsletter* 15, no. 1 (1994): 6–7.

²¹There is evidence of an Irish musical influence in the Catskills apart from vacation culture. In the 1940s and 1950s, songs and instrumental tunes and their “Old World” connections were documented by Herbert Haufrecht and Norman Cazden and published in an edited anthology in the 1980s. See Herbert Haufrecht and Norman Cazden, “Music of the Catskills,” *New York Folklore Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1948): 32–46; Norman Cazden, Herbert Haufrecht, and Norman Studer, ed., *Folk Songs of the Catskills* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982).

²²Dolan, “Music in the Mountains.”

²³Laura A. Miller, “Italian Americans in the ‘Bocce Belt’: ‘Old World’ Memories and ‘New World’ Identities,” *National Identities* 15, no. 1 (2013): 33–49.

²⁴Miller, “Italian Americans in the ‘Bocce Belt,’” 33.

Transformations and developments in Catskills infrastructure were critical to its rise and fall as a favored resort destination. Catskills resorts underwent “continuous adaptation” to meet the demands of their visitors, repurposing casino rooms of the 1920s and 1930s into multi-purpose entertainment spaces, or by building dance halls.²⁵ Many resorts added pools and dining halls in the 1950s and 1960s to keep up with demands of their patrons.²⁶ In the 1970s, however, vacationers to the Catskills steadily decreased due to a mix of factors. White ethnic groups had assimilated into broader American society, creating less of a desire to affirm “Old World” heritage. These same groups were experiencing upward economic mobility and moved from urban to suburban living. Such shifts in leisure behaviors away from resort vacations were influenced by transformations in global and local travel infrastructure: Vacation options were expanded by the increasingly affordable air travel, and the construction of Route 23 meant tourists bypassed the towns of Leeds and South Cairo.²⁷ Despite the overall decline in mass summer vacationing in the area, Irish traditional music retained a foothold in the area in part because existing pubs and club venues were engaged by local business owners for small concerts or special event weekends throughout the 1970s and 1980s.²⁸

The physical infrastructure of the “Irish Alps” renders such musical and social histories visually and viscerally present for its visitors. One instructor reflected that

With the Catskills there’s a living history that’s there all year. Even if it’s at its biggest during Irish Arts Week, it’s part of the place itself. So it feels really authentic in that way. It’s not like a thing that we all just move in and do that week. It’s like we are the visitors to the place and the place is holding that music whether we’re there or not. The place is holding that tradition and that music whether we’re there or not.²⁹

On one level, my interlocutor is expressing a sentiment held by many that the Catskills is a time capsule, holding and accruing history with each subsequent visitation. Also at play is the sense that because the infrastructure of the Catskills has such historical significance, it is an appropriate space in which Irish traditional music might live and thrive. The idea that “the music” might find a place to hold it is not limited to physical structures.³⁰ That is, other tendencies within the rhetoric around Irish traditional music reflect this same emphasis on material modes of transference. “There’s a lot of music in this box,” a well-known button accordionist once remarked about a cheap rental Horner I showed him during a lesson in the Catskills; it was just up to me to coax it out.³¹ Music is also located through the naming of lineages and references to specific players who “have” or “give” a tune to listeners or fellow musicians—the player in this case being the one who holds the music. From whom a tune or step was learned, on what album the tune appears, where a version may have originated, alternate tune or step names—lineage and identification information are given when teaching a lesson, performing a concert, or in response to an inquiring session player, “where did you get that tune?”

²⁵Elizabeth Cromley, “A Room with a View,” in *Resorts of the Catskills*, ed. John Margolies, Alf Evers, Architectural League of New York, and Gallery Association of New York State (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 12.

²⁶Dolan, “Music in the Mountains.”

²⁷Dolan, “Music in the Mountains”; Miller, “Italian Americans in the ‘Bocce Belt’”; Marisa Scheinfeld, Jenna Weissman Joselit, and Stefan Kanfer, *The Borscht Belt: Revisiting the Remains of America’s Jewish Vacationland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016); Dan Barry, “UPSTATE: Yesterday’s Retreats; Where Summer Just Isn’t What It Used to Be,” *The New York Times*, July 31, 2002. Dolan additionally suggests that Catskills tourism was negatively affected by the reduced number of Irish immigrants entering the United States following the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. It is difficult to assess, however, if immigrants would have continued to vacation in the Catskills given developments in American leisure tastes.

²⁸Dolan, “Music in the Mountains.”

²⁹Interview, “JI,” December 13, 2018.

³⁰Tes Slominski warns of the dangers inherent in focusing on “the music itself,” which often masks an ethnic nationalist tendency to assign greater authenticity to musicians who can pass as having Irish heritage because they are White. See Slominski, *Trad Nation*, 18, 106, 139.

³¹Personal communication, June 6, 2021. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the Catskills Irish Arts Week went virtual in 2020 and 2021. A cohort of stalwart festival attendees gathered in June 2021 for a “fake Catskills.” A similar event occurred later that year when the Tionól was cancelled for the second year and musicians persisted in visiting the Catskills for a “fake Tionól.”

Hailing musical heritage through material specificity—be it place, medium, or person—constructs a particular kind of nostalgic sensibility that is more complex than mere longing for a real or imagined past.³² Anchoring music in some physical form allows it to exist through time and not just in time, a process that resonates with the “dual character” of musical listening in Irish traditional music: “the enjoyment of sound in the here and now, as something *always new*, versus the perception of sound as an embodiment of time and memory.”³³ The Catskills, too embodies this double character of being both of a previous time while serving as a setting for new musical experiences. For both Irish traditional music and the Catskills, such capacity for generating reflexive encounter is rooted in their sensory richness.

Gritty and dusty: sensory-aesthetic alignments

The Catskills has a special propensity for producing the right conditions for transformative musical experience. Though musical encounters are the target for festival goers, it is the summative features of the Catskills that make it a magnet for music making. As one interlocutor astutely put it, “you could take everything about the Catskills and move it to a clean, nice location, and then it would no longer be the Catskills.”³⁴ In juxtaposing “everything” with “a clean, nice location,” this festival attendee suggests that the place—its history and its contemporary festival events—are made meaningful in part by the physicality of the location itself. That is, because the Catskills is not “clean” and “nice,” its multiple histories are given material form through dirt, dust, and discomfort (Figure 2).

What my interlocutor’s statement points to is that infrastructural decay—not merely infrastructure itself—produces meaning for musicians and dancers in the Catskills. It may seem that the decline of facilities in the Catskills and its subsequent importance for the experience of festival attendees is another example of the ways in which “invisible” infrastructures “become visible on breakdown.”³⁵ However, as anthropologist Brian Larkin points out, this view fails to acknowledge the varying levels at which infrastructures operate in society.³⁶ As argued further by Kavita Ramakrishnan, Kathleen O’Reilly, and Jessica Budds, decay is a particular state of infrastructure that reflects a temporal context.³⁷ Brokenness is part of an infrastructure’s lifecycle. Thus, decay both produces meaning and creates a particular type of utility that might otherwise be overlooked if “breakdown” were the only mode of conceptualizing visible infrastructure. For Irish traditional musicians, for example, a well-kept and brightly lit hotel lobby with towering ceilings (and the resulting poor acoustic profile) is completely unsuitable to the intimate music making desired for music sessions.

According to one interlocutor, “Irish music to me, it can be gritty. It can feel really dusty sometimes. For me, I need to be in a dimly lit setting, or just under a beautiful bright blue sky and in a grassy field at a Catskills resort in order to feel good playing Irish music.”³⁸ Aesthetically, Irish traditional music embodies “grit” in the musical textures created from fiddles, flutes, uilleann pipes, accordions, and bouzoukis. Though all the musicians in a session play the same tune at the same time, they may play with slightly different ornamentations or pitch shaping. The sound takes on a visceral shape, outlined by the grooves and arcs of session interplay. Irish music is “dusty” because it is so deeply linked to a sense of pastness and lineage through the marker “traditional” and in the performance

³²For discussions of how Irish traditional music can be a conduit for different forms of nostalgia see Felix Morgenstern, “Sideways Nostalgia, Adopted Republicanism and the Performance of Irish Rebel Songs in the GDR,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 30, no. 3 (December 2021): 340–57; and Sean Williams, “Irish Music and the Experience of Nostalgia in Japan,” *Asian Music* 37, no. 1 (2006): 101–19.

³³Steve Coleman, “Nonsynchronism,” *Traditional Music, and Memory in Ireland*, 162. Emphasis in original.

³⁴Interview, “OA,” December 11, 2018.

³⁵Susan Leigh Star, “The Ethnography of Infrastructure,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 43, no. 3 (1999): 380.

³⁶Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (October 21, 2013): 327–43.

³⁷For an analysis of decay as one of the temporal qualities of infrastructure, see Kavita Ramakrishnan, Kathleen O’Reilly, and Jessica Budds, “The Temporal Fragility of Infrastructure: Theorizing Decay, Maintenance, and Repair,” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 4, no. 3 (September 1, 2021): 674–95.

³⁸Interview, “AR,” December 12, 2018.



Figure 2. A resort pool abandoned to nature. October 2019. Photo by author.

of oral history through naming tunes, teachers, and source recordings. And by describing a condition of low lighting, my interlocutor signals a sense of secrecy. That is, an unknowing listener cannot fully appreciate the subtleties and nuances that make Irish traditional music so pleasurable for its players. Nor will an outsider fully grasp that, as another musician described, “We’ve all agreed upon the real stuff of Irish music, the nitty gritty: the going back as far as you can go and really getting into the heart of the thing, whether it’s Sligo fiddling from the twenties or Chicago piping from the 1890s or Sliabh Luachra music”.³⁹

The decaying infrastructure of the Catskills provides such a setting for this “gritty, dusty” and secretive music; the sensory experiences of the place are markers of its suitability for this genre and provoke reflection and attachment. Larkin calls this sensory organization of the physical world through technologies and facilities an “ambient infrastructure”: “Softness, hardness, the noise of a city, its brightness, these are sensorial experiences regulated by infrastructures.”⁴⁰ For Irish traditional musicians and dancers, the infrastructural decline of the Catskills suits the aesthetic and function of their chosen genre, even amid discomfort or risks to health and safety (Figure 3).

The sensory provocations of infrastructure in the Catskills also prompt musicians and dancers to reflect on and engage with multiple pasts. Dust is a particularly rich object for understanding this type of relationship. As literal material fragments of past physical encounters, dust is demonstrative of passing time and indicative of neglect (or at the very least irregular care and maintenance). It can be seen, felt, and smelled; it is likely to create feelings of uncleanliness and cause allergic responses such as sneezing or wheezing. It is an uncomfortably visceral token of time.

One year the Irish step dancing class at Irish Arts Week was held in the bar room of a resort. The space, though having a wooden floor, was otherwise a difficult place to hold a dancing class because of its low ceilings and lack of airflow. A single decades-old air conditioner rattled out only mild

³⁹Interview, “WI,” December 12, 2018. Sliabh Luachra is a region in Ireland that straddles the counties of Cork and Kerry, and its associated music is known for its predominance of polkas and slides among other distinctive musical characteristics. For a discussion of the region’s musical style and some of its most well-known musicians, see Matt Cranitch, “Paddy Cronin: Musical Influences on a Sliabh Luachra Fiddle Player in the United States,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 4, no. 4 (November 2010): 475–89.

⁴⁰Brian Larkin, “Ambient Infrastructures,” *Technosphere Magazine*, November 15, 2016, <https://www.anthropocene-curriculum.org/contribution/ambient-infrastructures-generator-life-in-nigeria>.



Figure 3. Musicians play in the dark in July 2019. Photo by author.

temperature control, in large part because of a significant layer of dust that had accumulated on its filter and vents. Its use created a clammy and mildewed air that filled our nostrils and coated our tongues. Another student in the dance class attempted to clean it out, to provide some relief, but the significant buildup of dust had done what seemed to be irreparable damage.

The air conditioner itself was not a sign of decay or neglect—in fact, its presence could (in other circumstances) suggest a level of care, attention, and adoption of modern amenities. However, its condition told another story—one in which the lack of maintenance catapulted the air conditioner, and us, from the present to the past. Our sensory experience of it, through smell, taste, sound, and sight, called forth history. Simultaneously, we visit an imagined past where the last time the air conditioner was serviced was during installation decades prior, and we revisit our own past festival experiences of hearing concerts, dancing in sessions, and enjoying a pint in this room. Because the scent of mildewed clammy air is common in other festival spaces, the sense experience recalls more general memories of music making in the Catskills. The sensory milieu of the air conditioner and our close proximity to its dust also created a new memory that will be interpolated through future encounters in the bar room. Nadia Seremetakis calls this “sense memory,” whereby sensory-laden objects and places “provoke and ignite gestures, discourses and acts—acts which open up these objects’ stratigraphy. . . . In this moment the actor is also audience of his/her involuntary implication in a sensory horizon. This can be a moment of sensory self-reflexivity.”⁴¹ The air conditioner’s sensory qualities generate reflexive engagement with a social, historical, and cultural past.

In the Catskills, the objects of infrastructure—the old air conditioner, the musty motel rooms, the abandoned pools—accrue their meaning because they create a larger landscape of infrastructural

⁴¹C. Nadia Seremetakis, *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 7.

decline with which festival goers are continually forced to reckon (Figure 4). The buildings, their walls, carpets, and furniture, are all soaked in a history that manifests through the senses: a thick cloak of dust, a bizarre perfume of mildew and stale beer, dark corners, and the sounds of Irish music floating through the midnight air.

Musical and infrastructural otherworlds

They put me up in a room. If I had had a car, I would've been gone. There was dust that thick on the carpet. [...] there was a wash basin covered in rust. And the electric fluorescent light was hanging. It was totally dangerous. It was awful. But I keep coming back. By the Tuesday of that week, I was convinced that I'd stay, like. Because the *craic* was good, and it was lovely.⁴²

You don't go there for accommodation. You don't go there for the food. But I go there for the *craic*.⁴³

The promise of *craic* seemingly overshadows the discomfort and even danger of the Catskills. Though often glossed as “fun,” *craic* is an affect that embodies intensely positive social and emotional feeling.⁴⁴ Writing on social life in a small Irish village, Adrian Pearce describes *craic* as “those public occasions on which an intensity of shared emotion and well-being is generated in specific places already endowed with a strong sense of belonging.”⁴⁵ Music making is one way in which “intensity of shared emotion” is fostered; and for Irish traditional musicians, such intensity is generated by the convergence of players who share sensibilities toward repertoire, ornamentation, phrasing, and texture.⁴⁶ Ethnomusicologist Adam Kaul adds that because *craic* is “elusive, momentary” and “emerges from the risk of spontaneity and indeterminacy,” festival settings are uniquely structured to afford a greater potential for experiencing good *craic*.⁴⁷ In the context of festivals, *craic* could be described as the transcendent feeling that results from a rooting of aesthetic values into sensory experience.⁴⁸ There is a risk, however, in valorizing Irish music sessions and similar encounters as being entirely positive; idealizing the music session paints such musical encounters as not only harmonious, but homogenous, underplaying the importance of difference.⁴⁹

The presence of musicians and dancers who are there just for the fun combined with the relaxed sensibility of festival activities affords an environment where spontaneous music and dance encounters can thrive, such as a last-minute set organized for one of the evening stage concerts; a hurriedly thrown together step-about during a break at an evening *céilí*; or inspired playing during a late night music

⁴²Interview, “MA,” July 19, 2019.

⁴³Interview, “MN,” July 19, 2019.

⁴⁴*Craic* is a Gaelicized version of “crack,” a term used by the English and Scottish to refer to entertaining conversation. Diarmaid Ó Muirthe, *Words We Use* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2006). Henry Glassie places “crack” in a continuum of verbal art: “Cracking” is a way of moving and turning witty conversation: “silence, chat, crack, story, poetry, song, music: with each step, entertainment increases, sound becomes more beautiful, and the intention of the creator of sound becomes more clearly to please the listener.” *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 37.

⁴⁵Adrian J. Pearce, *A World of Fine Difference: The Social Architecture of a Modern Irish Village* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2001), 98.

⁴⁶The feeling of *craic* is often tied up with the aesthetic-affective quality of “lift,” described by musicologist Micheál Ó Súilleabháin as “rhythmic vitality” or “an invitation to dance.” See Micheál Ó Súilleabháin, “The Creative Process in Irish Traditional Dance Music,” in *Musicology in Ireland*, ed. Gerard Gillen and Harry White (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1990), 123.

⁴⁷Adam Kaul, *Turning the Tune: Traditional Music, Tourism, and Social Change in an Irish Village* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 149. Though *craic* is positively connoted, adjectives such as “good” are frequently added to emphasize or reinforce the value placed on such affective experiences.

⁴⁸In elaborating on the transcendent potential at music festivals, Andrew Mall discusses the relationship between musical aesthetics and festival experience in terms of Brigit Meyer’s media and religion concept of “sensational forms.” See Andrew Mall, “Introduction: Festivals and Musical Life,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 14, no. 1 (February 2020): 2–9.

⁴⁹Slominski, *Trad Nation*; Helen O’Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008).



Figure 4. The crumbling ceiling of a resort in 2019. Photo by author.

session.⁵⁰ At one music session in the Catskills in the summer of 2021, a dancer recalled that “there was this energy of waiting for a good tune [for dancing].”⁵¹ The ambient infrastructure of the Catskills creates an environment where musicians and dancers are more likely to experience great *craic* than in everyday musical encounters.

Like the sensory provocations of infrastructure, the broader aesthetic and affective experiences of the Catskills mirror a quality of Irish traditional music that straddles the boundary of the everyday and the extraordinary. If, as Slominski describes, “trad inhabits a discursive space that is both homely and otherworldly” then the Catskills too lives in this in-between.⁵² The Catskills festivals are set apart from the everyday both by their fact of being festivals, but also because of the specificities of the place itself. Described as both “so close” and “so far away,” its rural geography provides a welcome balm to urban living, continuing a legacy of nature seeking that was true for some of the first vacationers to the Catskills in the 1820s.⁵³ By the end of the nineteenth century the mountains, creeks, scenic views, and “mountain-distilled pure air” attracted swaths of visitors seeking the healthful and restorative benefits of nature.⁵⁴ For festival goers today, the Catskills promises fewer physical health benefits, yet it retains a quality of away-ness that offers a different kind of restoration.

The away-ness or alternate space of the Catskills is further reinforced by its architectural “hodgepodge.”⁵⁵ Writing on the architectural features of resorts in the Catskills, architectural historian Elizabeth Cromley describes the variety of building types ranging from motels and bungalows to high-rise hotel blocks.

⁵⁰In a step-about, dancers line up and perform solo steps in turn, usually ending together on a previously agreed upon choreography. Most step-about are not pre-planned, but in the Catskills these occasions feel even more spontaneous and thrown together.

⁵¹Personal communication, “ME,” January 27, 2021.

⁵²Slominski, *Trad Nation*, 138.

⁵³Alf Evers, *The Catskills: From Wilderness to Woodstock* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972); Betsy Blackmar, “Going to the Mountains: A Social History,” in *Resorts of the Catskills*, ed. John Margolies, Alf Evers, Architectural League of New York, and Gallery Association of New York State (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 71–100; Miller, “Italian Americans in the ‘Bocce Belt.’”

⁵⁴Blackmar, “Going to the Mountains: A Social History,” 75.

⁵⁵John Margolies, “Introduction,” in *Resorts of the Catskills*, ed. John Margolies, Alf Evers, Architectural League of New York, and Gallery Association of New York State (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), ix.

Most resorts began small and added facilities when the need arose. Hotel owners are also the original recyclers, adapting existing buildings to new uses. And so the typical Catskills resort is a set of parts done in different styles and materials for different purposes, with no inherent unity of design, and often no unity imposed after the fact either.⁵⁶

Led by tourism and utility, the infrastructural development of the Catskills in the early to mid-twentieth century gives the place a character of being cobbled together, such that the buildings themselves force their presence into the everyday encounters of its visitors. Obvious visual confusion coupled with the multitude of other visceral reminders of its history orient visitors to the Catskills as a particular place, while disorienting them in time.

In the Catskills, according to one dancer, “people are thrown back in time to this place that’s very relaxed, very full of good humor, and very connected to the mountains, the creeks, [and] the dingy old venues that hold a lot of memories inside their walls.”⁵⁷ As in the tale of Rip Van Winkle, a venture to the Catskills yields the promise of losing track of time. Such disorientation is reinforced by the resistance of this rural area to modern wayfinding. Though cellular service and wireless internet access has dramatically improved over the last ten years, navigation and communication are still made difficult by dead zones and generally unwalkable distances between festival venues.

The juxtaposition of infrastructural decay and rural geography lends itself to a kind of abandon. Musicians can gather in large swarms, the bar will keep pouring drinks long after “closing,” no one will mind a late-night music session that plays continuously through to the early hours of the morning. “There’s no end to the day or night sometimes,” one attendee declared, “people don’t come here to sleep.”⁵⁸ In some respects, the open-ness of the Catskills is literal: Doors are often left unlocked, leaving spaces available for roving musicians and wandering critters alike. As one organizer put it, “how many other situations can you come in and take over a town? And have so many varied things?”⁵⁹ Such open-ness is attractive to musicians and dancers seeking the thrill of great tunes.

A regular attendee of both festivals elaborated on this notion of the unique flexibility of East Durham and its link to infrastructural decline:

[East Durham] is a crumbling resort town, so it feels like there’s much more space in the place for people to kind of shape it for a week or for a few days after their own model. Whether it’s the owner of one place being completely contented to let people who aren’t staying at the joint at all play the main building until eight in the morning. Or whether it’s just the level of neglect at another place that just means that anyone can cruise up and play in those common rooms. There are these places where people who are wanting to be slightly apart from the central events can break off and make their own little sessions and play there for a while, and then kind of rejoin the mainstream of things for a while.⁶⁰

Opportunities to play music all night abound across East Durham and range from the bar and event spaces of resorts, to outdoor patios, to the individual rooms and bungalows of festival goers. The popular places for gathering often differ from the spots with the greatest likelihood of having “good *craic*.” Those most valued spaces are usually the ones that are hidden away and small, affording room for only a small number of people compared to the mega-sessions that erupt in bar rooms. Musicians prowl among the rows of motel rooms searching for a session that’s not already too large. They listen at doors and peak through windows, assessing the players and the repertoire. Is there already a guitar player? How many fiddles? Is that a free chair stuffed in the back or just a pile of instrument cases? Opening the door, the tunes burst forth amid a thick fog of hot air that cuts through the crisp night.

⁵⁶Cromley, “A Room with a View,” 12.

⁵⁷Interview, “JI,” December 13, 2018.

⁵⁸Interview, “AO,” July 16, 2019.

⁵⁹Interview, “KA,” July 16, 2019.

⁶⁰Interview, “WI,” December 12, 2018.

The “shag cube” is a particularly cherished tune hideaway specifically because of its weirdness. So named because its 1970s red-orange shag carpeting and wood-paneled walls create a feeling of monochromatic immersion, the shag cube is a medium-sized room in a free-standing building belonging to a bungalow-style resort. Lamplit and perfumed with the scent of stale and matted carpet, the room invites the intense intimacy of Catskills music sessions (Figure 5). Mattresses are pushed to the sides of the room or rested on end to make room for as many musicians who can fit inside. When seats are filled, players perch on side tables and tuck into corners. Often a wood board gets laid down in the center for dancers. The shag cube is almost exclusively a night destination for tunes, with musicians disbanding and creeping back to their beds at the crack of dawn.⁶¹ The shag cube attracts a certain demographic of Catskill goers who have self-described as seeking a “counterspace” for playing certain regional styles and tune types, away from the more raucous and performative sessions that tend to dominate at resort bars: “We wanted to carve out a spot where we could just be our weird selves and play our weird music and not be judged.”⁶²

Such intimate tuneful encounters create experiences that musicians and dancers describe as “magical” or like “Alice in Wonderland tumbled down the rabbit hole.”⁶³ Time diffuses amid the delirium of all-night tune playing, drinking, fatigue, and dehydration. In the resulting “surreal bubble,” weird conversations and intense musical communion affirm and renew social bonds. One musician described,

I remember an amazing feeling of just being in *that moment*, musically and socially. Everybody’s doing the same thing and they’re all just into it. And despite the fact that you’re cold, and it smells like mold, and you’ve been eating crappy food, and you feel kind of gross. It’s not a place that I would ever hang out otherwise. But it has some really visceral memories for me.⁶⁴

Being in “that moment” is, for this player, not merely musical or social, but is also fully embodied. Her “visceral memories” of the Catskills are a marriage of discomfort and pleasure.

Secrecy, musical intimacy, and belonging

The Catskills, with its many hideaways, is uniquely suited to support the social and musical intimacy of Irish music sessions; intimacy is core to whether participants feel a sense of belonging and inclusion in these musical gatherings. Many of my interlocutors expressed a preference for the Tionól over the Irish Arts Week because its smaller scale begets greater intimacy. Though intimate encounters can be found at the larger Irish Arts Week, they are more easily attained at the Tionól where the population of attendees is much lower and official programming is centralized in a single facility. For musicians, intimacy means an opportunity to have a musical dialogue, as one interlocutor put it,

It’s an opportunity to actually interact with the finer points of the way people are playing tunes. Sometimes you might be sitting there with whoever you’re playing with and someone does a phrase that’s a little bit different that stands out to you and you go, “oh, that’s kind of cool. I’m gonna try that out,” and you do it. And then, you know, sometimes if that person is paying attention and they hear that you copied them from the last time, then it might turn into this fun

⁶¹The shag cube, like other hideaway destinations for musicians, magnifies some of the expectations around session etiquette and belonging. To borrow Erving Goffman’s terminology, such “focused interactions” affirms social ties while delineating boundaries between “ratified” and “unratified” participants. That is, those people who play in the shag cube are ratified so because of their skill as musicians and their longstanding social ties to one another. See Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (New York: Free Press, 1966).

⁶²Personal communication, “BR,” July 22, 2024.

⁶³Interview, “OA,” December 11, 2018; Interview, “JI,” December 13, 2018.

⁶⁴Interview, “NA,” December 10, 2018.



Figure 5. Trading steps and tunes in the delirium of the Shag Cube. October 2014. Reproduced with permission.

game where they'll try something stupid or crazy or just different. And then, you know, it just kind of continues on from there.⁶⁵

In contrast, this same musician noted that moments of musical dialogue are more difficult to find at the Irish Arts Week because its sizeable population means musicians are more likely to encounter exclusivity or competitiveness. Rather than being focused on musical communion, musicians might instead be more focused on showing off their vast repertoires and their playing abilities. Irish Arts Week can “feel too cliquy and political” compared to other folk music festivals. Musical experiences can become shrouded by negativity and competitiveness: “Who knows the most tunes, who knows the

⁶⁵Interview, “WI,” December 12, 2018.

most obscure tunes, who can play the fastest. Sometimes the exclusivity of that doesn't make me feel that great," reflects one musician.⁶⁶ The Irish Arts Week is more likely to host "mega" sessions of thirty or more players, which dulls the opportunity for musical engagement. A musician might be playing along but not playing with.

As noted earlier, one of the aesthetic priorities of Irish traditional music is subtlety and understatement, which I elaborated as a kind of secrecy and intimacy well suited to the dimly lit and relatively abandoned hideaways found in the Catskills. Such aesthetic frames, however, can often have the more negative effect of silencing. As Slominski elaborates

When musical aesthetics merge with social practices, understatement comes dangerously close to 'decorum' (invariably understood as white and upwardly mobile) and 'blending in' (impossible for people of color in such a white scene, and usually complicated for white women and queer musicians).⁶⁷

Slominski's investigation of the experiences of queer, non-white, trans and women musicians in Irish traditional music reveals how the social rules that dictate behavior in music sessions and the emphasis on "the music itself" often masks exclusion rooted in ethnic nationalism.

Though many of my interlocutors claim no Irish heritage, nor emphasize "Irish"-ness as a reason for playing Irish traditional music, there is nevertheless an importance placed on musical heritage that is inherently linked to the Irish nationalist project. The Catskills brings much of this into relief because East Durham's history as a retreat for Irish Americans makes the place attractive to festival goers today, not least of all because its history provided the conditions in which East Durham and surrounding towns could be an incubator for Irish traditional music in upstate New York. Indeed, the fact that ethnic New Yorkers could go to the Catskills and vacation according to ethnic boundaries was one of its attractions in the early to mid-twentieth century.⁶⁸

Contemporarily, comparing the Irish Arts Week and the Tionól offers an interesting opportunity to consider how the more intimate nature of the Tionól affords opportunities for music making where the participants are more likely to be known entities. That is, the risk of experiencing exclusionary behaviors—be it rooted in musicianship, or the social biases of sexism or racism—may be lower, and thus these more intimate spaces would be safer. The extension of this is that in feeling a sense of belonging, the experience of *craic* is more likely than in situations where exclusionary social interactions exhaust nonconforming participants.

There is a tension, here, however, in the value placed on intimate encounters and the need to find secret places to have such encounters as the secrecy begets some level of exclusivity. That is, the whole point of secreting away to the shag cube or to some other random motel room for tunes is to escape the possibility of a mega session with too many people, or to avoid the cooption of a session by unknown entities.⁶⁹ Repeatedly, my interlocutors, even those who were concerned with feelings of exclusion, emphasized how playing music with their friends, whose musicianship they trusted and cherished, was a primary motivator for attending either or both festivals in the Catskills.

Conclusion: keeping the tradition alive?

I find myself asking, why do we come here again? Why are we doing this to ourselves? At the Tionól you're freezing. Some weekends it's been so cold and you're sleeping in uninsulated rooms and it's just freezing. And the water smells like sulfur. And you're tired all the time because even if you try to

⁶⁶Interview, "AR," December 12, 2018.

⁶⁷Slominski, *Trad Nation*, 156.

⁶⁸Miller, "Italian Americans in the 'Bocce Belt.'"

⁶⁹One way that musicians carve out space in areas of the Catskills that might otherwise seem "open" (such as pub porches) is by playing in alternative keys, such as having a music session entirely in the key of E-flat. A musician requires an instrument in that key, or to retune in the case of fiddle, to participate.

go to bed somewhat early, you're probably not sleeping well. You're eating crappy food. It's just, kind of miserable sometimes. But the misery sort of, I think, brings people together.⁷⁰

In the Catskills, musicians and dancers develop a sense of solidarity through shared strife. When discussing the experience of being in the Catskills, festival goers seem to at times relish recounting its discomfort and decay. Some describe the act of complaining and trading horror stories as ways of building camaraderie. One dancer described the “frustrations” of the Catskills as fostering a “can-do sense of fun and team spirit.”⁷¹ Just as the physical infrastructure and sprawl of the festivals provide the perfect conditions for spontaneous musical encounter, it also presents uncertainty. Some festival goers describe the fear of missing out on a great set of tunes because they chose to go to one locale, when really the great tunes are happening across town. Such anxieties also extend beyond the momentary to concern about the longevity of resorts, and thus the festivals.

As the sensorial experience of the Catskills reflects the aesthetic priorities of Irish traditional music, so does its precarity resonate with a trope of survival among musical styles labeled “folk” or “traditional.” Irish traditional music, as discussed earlier, orients around a nostalgic narrative perhaps best encapsulated by East Durham’s Irish cultural center slogan, “Keeping the Tradition Alive.” Music festivals with an emphasis on teaching, like the Irish Arts Week and the Tionól, participate in a particular kind of heritage preservation that maintains focus on the practice as an active, and presumably not declining, aspect of social life.⁷² These festivals also manufacture reflexive encounters through commemorative events, such as the screening of Ferguson’s documentary in 2016, which featured interviews with Irish Arts Week faculty and organizers, and a 2019 special presentation on the history of Irish music in Leeds. Celebrating its thirtieth year in 2024, the Irish Arts Week announced its Saturday finale concert as a memorial to several recently deceased major figures.⁷³ The place of the Catskills provides a container for such preservation acts. And yet, though it shares the attribute of museums or historical re-enactment villages of transporting its visitors to the past, the Catskills is not being maintained as such a destination. Its resorts are not advertising that visitors can be launched back to the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s. It is rather a relic of past time, one that is primarily being destroyed by human neglect and the incursion of nature, and sometimes by fire. Deteriorating facilities embody a contemporary failure to uphold a glorified past, while at the same time hosting nostalgic activities that mythologize and attempt to reclaim this past.⁷⁴

The Catskills and its resorts have this character of pastness in large part because resort owners struggle to stay in business and the cost of maintenance and reinvestment in their properties exceeds their capabilities. In recent years, the Catskills region has become a destination for luxury vacation rentals, often backed by major developers. As reported in a recent local news outlet, one East Durham resort in operation since the 1920s and owned by the same family since the 1960s, has posted their business for sale amid these pressures.⁷⁵ The risk of facility closure is ever present for its musically oriented visitors:

You know as I was driving up this time, you know, and especially coming up [Route]145 you start doing this math in your head: How many places have closed? There were certain properties you said if this closed, I don’t know how we could do the week. And somehow you always do. The

⁷⁰Interview, “NA,” December 10, 2018.

⁷¹Interview, “JI,” December 13, 2018.

⁷²Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s critique of folklore as a discipline provides an interesting parallel. She writes, “...folklore is by definition a vanishing subject. The time of our operation is the eleventh hour. Before the eleventh hour there is life, after the eleventh hour death. But in that threshold moment between the two is the disjuncture from which our disciplinary subject has historically emerged. It is for this reason that the eleventh hour is always with us, shifting its location with the imminence of the next disappearance.” “Folklore’s Crisis,” *Journal of American Folklore* 111, no. 441 (Summer 1998): 281–327.

⁷³For about a decade starting in 2007, the Saturday Finale Festival was named in tribute to the New York fiddler Andy McGann.

⁷⁴Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

⁷⁵Martha Brennan, “Family Forced to Sell Beloved Irish Inn after 62 Years,” *New York News, Irish Star*, January 29, 2024, <https://www.irishstar.com/news/new-york-news/family-forced-sell-beloved-irish-31998079>; Dolan, “Music in the Mountains: The Irish Catskills and Traditional Music.”

Catskills is one of these resilient places where somehow something comes together, you know? In a way that can be helpful. I mean you can't dwell in the past. You can't go backwards. You gotta keep playing the hand you're dealt coming here.⁷⁶

Probably what keeps me coming back is, in some ways it, it feels like this is an experience that I myself will not be able to do forever. Or that isn't going to last. It feels like the place is falling down and every time I've gone—I've only been going for, you know, seven years or something—And noticeably a lot of things are becoming more dilapidated. So it feels kind of like a thing that should be experienced while it lasts. Because I don't know if it'll last forever.⁷⁷

At the same time, the character of the Catskills is put at risk by the desire for more comfortable lodging by festival goers themselves. Though the rundown nature of resorts provides hideaways for tunes, it also dissuades visitors who perceive the costs of staying in such facilities to be higher than the value evinced by their quality. For some musicians and dancers, poor quality lodging poses significant threats to their respiratory health and prohibits their continued attendance at the festivals. In recent years more and more festival goers are seeking accommodation outside of the main resort areas, particularly as Airbnb rentals have multiplied. Though providing greater comfort and safety, these residences tend to scatter musical encounters, decentralizing them from the festival infrastructure rooted in the old resorts.

"Nicer" accommodation does not merely threaten the social gravitation of the Catskills, it transforms its character. Resort owners are embarking on occasional renovation. Post-pandemic, the dusty old bar room air conditioner was supplanted with mini-splits. Prior to the 2024 Irish Arts Week, the red-orange shag carpeting of the shag cube had been torn out and replaced by hardwood—a renovation that presents a potentially existential threat to the character and identity of the hideaway. The new flooring transformed both the acoustic and olfactory qualities of the room: "nicer and cleaner," the room also feels "less personal and homey."⁷⁸ One festival goer in the summer of 2023 was shocked to enter a motel room in a resort she had frequented in previous years to find a renovated room complete with "Live Laugh Love" signs and other contemporary kitsch. Describing this room as "fancy," my interlocutor questioned its authenticity, "It doesn't feel like the Catskills anymore."⁷⁹

Such tensions between the risks of neglect and the risks of development reflect an affective ambivalence produced by sensations that both aggrieve and please. The Catskills and its Irish music festivals can be sites of a uniquely intense and joyful musical community only because of the risks posed by its infrastructural decline. Sensory provocation makes these risks obvious to festival goers while also giving the place a chronotopic character. The Catskills not only brings together contemporaneous subjects into social and musical encounter, it beckons visitors backward in time. Infrastructure in the Catskills links the present with several pasts: a mid-century Irish American resort past; a mid-1990s Irish music boom past; and twenty-first century past iterations of the festivals. In these sensory-rich reflexive encounters, musicians and dancers find the best tunes.

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⁷⁶Interview, "KA," July 16, 2019.

⁷⁷Interview, "NA," December 10, 2019.

⁷⁸Personal communication, "RU," July 22, 2024.

⁷⁹Personal communication, "HO," October 13, 2023; There is a sense that the Catskills is defined by a particular kind of mid-century or 1970s kitsch (e.g., shag carpeting) or Irish American kitsch (e.g., shamrock adornments). That twenty-first century kitsch decor feels unlike the Catskills suggests it is not merely kitsch that gives the Catskills its aesthetic character, but the way that kitsch functions as a marker of time and heritage.

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