



Drone On!: The High History of Celtic Music

By Winnie Czulinski

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A lively history from 1000 B.C. to Broadway.

Drone On! is a humorous spin on the history, mystery, magic, mythology, musicians, musical instruments and multiculturalism of Celtic music.

The book covers the influence of the Celts on classical composers, country crooners, film soundtracks, today's explosive *shamrock 'n' roll* as well as the phenomenon of the global touring shows *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance*.

Undoubtedly Irish/Scottish cultures have shaped the music of North America, from Newfoundland to Nashville, and continue to inspire musicians everywhere, with rhythm and repertoire. From the Celts' first piping-and-plundering over 3,000 years ago, to some twenty-first century triumphs, this music still delights.

Like poet Arthur O'Shaughnessy (1844-1881), the author sees the Celts as music-makers, dreamers of dreams and "the movers and shakers, of the world forever, it seems." Never before has Celtic music and all its complexity been treated with such loving irreverence. **Drone On!** is bouncy enough to be read in one go -- while each chapter can be savored for its light-hearted lore.

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Editorial Review

Review

Charming... fascinating and funny. (Jann Howell *Music Educators Journal*)

Runs the gamut from the origins of the Celtic peoples... to such present-day incarnations as the step-dancing of... Michael Flatley. (Desmond Maley *Canadian Book Review Annual*)

I would urge anyone with a modicum of interest in Celts music or history to buy, read and enjoy this book... full of wondrous facts. (Nicky Rossiter *Rambles: A Cultural Arts Magazine* 2005-10-22)

A humorous spin on the history, mystery, magic, mythology, musicians, musical instruments, and multiculturalism of Celtic music. (*International Musician*)

A well researched and irreverent history of Celtic music... I highly recommend this book for its sense of humor, fast pace, in-depth research and passion. It will delight all who read it. (J. Lynn Fraser *Surface and Symbol*)

About the Author

Winnie Czulinski is a writer and musician who performs as *Winnie, Lady of the Dulcimer*.

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Horning and Hollering into Hystery

Some time before 1000 BCE, the Celts rose up out of the headwaters of the Eastern European *Danuvius* or Danube River, named after the mother-goddess Danu. They shook themselves off before the sun, invented some weapons, tried out their voices, stamped their feet, drank a toast for posterity and were off.

This motley collection of Indo-European tribes with horned helmets and horrendous warhorns began to thunder and reel over most of the known world, stopping off for a role in Biblical times. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, Celts who had settled in Gaul, he urged them to "avoid idolatry, sorcery, hatred and murder." In other words, all the stuff that made for really good songs. Fortunately, the Celts seem to have ignored Paul's pleas, and musicians and music-lovers, parading pipe bands and dancers everywhere are reaping the benefits of that rebellion.

The ancient Celts were whooping it up in places like France, Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia, Greece, possibly Africa and even China, but they left the longest-running musical evidence in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, The Isle of Man, Brittany and Celtic Spain, as well as ultimately in North America, from Newfoundland to Nashville.

Still, it's obvious the Celts were "doing it" with whomever they came across in their multicultural hystery tour. How else to explain the similarity of the mystical terms *siddhartha* (Hindu/Buddhist) and *siddhe* (hinterland-Irish)? Or the fact that the bad guy in *Lord of the Dance* is called Don Dorcha (dark lord), same way Brando was bowed to as Don Corleone in *The Godfather*?

First-century BCE scholar Diodorus thought the Celts were great dramatists if noisy and other people think they're just noisy, but they've given us a legacy of music that's universal, timeless, endlessly re-invented -- and does have some Ps and Qs. In Celtic linguistics, P stands for the Celtic "Brythonic" languages of Welsh, Cornish and Breton, and Q for Celtic "Goidelic" of Scottish, Irish and Manx, while Celtic-Spanish stands alone. There's a lot to be said about any of these lands, but a potty history follows, starting with:

IRELAND

Also known as Eire, Eireann, Em and Aisling, it first was settled by Celts called Milesians from Spain and Egypt and is famous for stepdancing, fairies called sidhe (shee), harps on beer bottles and warrior heroes known for their great lays, or ballads.

Music was a relative thing, with families like the O'Dalys, who were higher than anyone else in the 12th century, because they went back to Conn of the Hundred Battles in the second century. The O'Dalys were the type to split someone's head with an axe, then immediately sing a poem about it, and nothing could better illustrate the Celts' dual war-and-literature leanings.

This also was due to the parti-influences of Vikings and French knights who came muscling in to create some Pan-Celtic. By the 14th century or so, this musical melting pot began to suffer, when the Crown started passing statutes to clamp down on any music remotely Celtic, a recurring theme throughout this history.

It didn't quite work, and by the 18th century Irish music was a knotty tapestry of fiddling, piping and planxties, a kind of song blind harper Turlough O'Carolan wrote for his patrons. Many a modern Celt musician can thank Big Tur for his efforts, which were rescued by the great 19th-century song-collection agencies.

You'll hear stuff like this in the *seisiun* or "session," where musicians get together, often in a pub, and play their hearts out with whatever they can lay their hands on. This kind of thing, and get-togethers called *ceilis* (kay-lees), make for especially good *craic*.

SCOTLAND

It's the land of the Scotch measure, strathspey and Highland bagpipes. The first is a kind of rhythm (as well as a drink and a dirty look), the second both a tune and dance, and the third an instrument intended to make up for the country's ongoing lack of battle strategy.

The Scots came from Irish rovers known as *Scotti* who needed more space, so sailed east to end up in a place named Dalriada, after an early Irish king. Alternative history says Milesius of the Milesians wed an Egyptian princess named Scota, who had a child called Goidel, thus Scotland and Goidelism. Others pushed north from what's now England. However it came to be, they pounded down an identity in a welter of horns, harps and hysterics.

Occasionally warring with indigenous tribe the Picts, they became so musical that one 12th-century Norman news correspondent, Geraldus Cambrensis, thought the Scots actually excelled over Ireland in music. This was in spite of the fact they got hold of the bagpipes. These figure prominently in the history of the Scottish Stuart kings, and people like 18th-century Robert Burns, a poet who periodically remained sober enough to piece together songs for us to enjoy today.

Today there are plenty of Highland pipes, small-pipes, border pipes and reel pipes, and they've all found their way into the country's rock 'n' reel musical movement. If you'd prefer, you can go for the old parlor songs like *Donald, Where's Yer Troosers?* The Scots always did like an irrational anthem.

WALES

They may have wailed as they were pushed west over 1,000 years ago by successive waves of German-Saxons and French-Normans, but the Welsh -- *Weahlas* for "foreigners," as the Saxons called them -- got over it and just went on making music.

Inevitably, they came under the eye and ear of that itinerant archivist, Giraldus Cambrensis, who actually had some Welsh blood. Though he criticized his half-kin's houses, hair and the way they brushed their teeth, he had to admit they had the song-and-prophecy thing wrapped up.

One of Wales' biggest contributions to musical history is the grand *Eisteddfod* festival, where almost everything is unpronounceable. It almost died for all time when King Henry VIII pulled out his 1536 Act of Union to kill Welsh culture and language. The later Puritan-cum-Nonconformist religion movement also tried to shut everyone up.

In the 18th century, there was a revival in London, of all places. The *Eisteddfod* came back home, a national society was allowed to form around it, and the rest is history. Backing it was the long-running Welsh peculiarity of a harpers' genealogy, which has nothing to do with blood, but is more a continuity with the magical style of the old harpers. It's a certain something called tinc, you either have it or you don't, and it's the kind of movement that can't be obliterated.

Wales was given equality with England by the Welsh Language Act of 1973, but even before that they were learning some music from books (unlike their Irish and Scottish kith), so it's no wonder their wails are so well preserved.

CORNWALL; ENGLAND

The Cornish are another group pushed as far west as they could go, right to the southwest cutoff point of Land's End. Their mythology is full of islands that sank eons ago, and from which, if you're lucky, you can hear watery strains of music issuing forth.

On land, Cornwall has a few good works like its *Bewnans Meriasek* (Life of St. Meriasek). It's full of musical references like "Pipers, blow quickly. We will, every son of a breast, go to dance." Thought to be the oldest surviving life of a Celtic saint in any Celtic language, it's a bright spot in a Cornish existence of getting called names, murdered, and driven to the sea. By the 1540s, these people also were told they had to speak, write and sing only in English, and then the Methodists got going on their holy cleaning sprees.

There were the inevitable stubborn holdouts, and that handy thing called "folk memory," so we do have some authentic Cornish music-and-miracle stuff left today. The Cornish <

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Malcolm Lee:

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