

The Return of the Dublin Jazz Scene

The drummer sets the pace in an Aztec-patterned shirt, body dancing with every strike of his snare drum. Beside him, the alto saxophonist closes her eyes in concentration as she belts out measure after measure of an improvisational solo. When her moment ends, the crowd whoops and claps their hands excitedly, making music of their own. The bass player's fingers fly from fret to fret, and next to him sits the final member of the group: the keyboardist. With a neatly trimmed beard and curly brown hair, he seems to be the youngest player in the group, but certainly no less experienced. The keyboardist flips switch after switch before running his fingers up and down the keys in spectacular runs and harmonies.

It's a Sunday night at The Workman's Club in Dublin, Ireland, and the O'Halloran Trio featuring Luke Howard is rocking the stage with a blend of contemporary jazz and improvisation. When the intermission arrives, I learn from the band's drummer, Hugh Denman, that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this gig is the first live performance of jazz in Dublin in over a year. Hugh goes on to tell me that "it is heartwarming to be in such a pleasant space with good sound, and [to be] performing for such an appreciative audience." He trails off, taking in the scene around him. I follow Hugh's gaze and look around myself.

The performance room at Workman's can best be described as straight out of the 1970s. Yellow wallpaper encompasses the room, and mismatched furniture covers every nook and cranny. A selection of brightly colored vases line wooden shelves, and a beer bottle asserts its dominance on almost every table. The room feels casual yet distinctive, kind of like Hugh's outfit. He wears khaki pants and sneakers in addition to his brightly patterned shirt.

If you leave the performance room at Workman's you'll run into another snug room with worn couches and slightly stained coffee tables. And then, if you take a right, you'll pass by the

bar and seating area, which has a style that can best be described as gothic-chic. Dark purple covers the walls, and the whiteness of the checkered floor contrasts with the darkness of the black leather booths. Red candles give off a low light, and grand columns line the doorway. And, of course, you can't forget the wooden barrels which are painted the same shade of purple as the walls. The barrels don glass tops and act as tables. Despite the room's dark decor, I wouldn't call the atmosphere ominous, but rather, enticing.

Lost in thought, Hugh's voice pulls me back to the present, and he asks if I play music myself. I relate to Hugh that I played the alto saxophone from the ages of twelve to eighteen at my school in America. When I got to college, however, I left my music days behind me and instead shifted my focus to creative writing. Hugh tells me that I'm lucky to have grown up in the American school system where the arts are more encouraged. He goes on to say that since "the Dublin school system focuses heavily on academics, not so much creative endeavors," he didn't get into the drumming scene until the age of twenty-three. Instead, Hugh chose to pursue a more 'practical' career in computer science.

Curious as to how Hugh ventured into the music scene, I ask him directly. He says that he found his way into the music scene by chance while pursuing his postgraduate studies in electronic engineering at Trinity College. One night at a party, Hugh was tapping on a table with pencils, drumming along to the background music. Some friends noticed Hugh's musicality and asked him to join their band. "That [night] led me to discover the Jazz Society rooms at Trinity, where there was a kit that I could practice on," Hugh says. Once Hugh joined the band, he started to meet other musicians, and he realized that there were several musical opportunities for him in Dublin. Hugh's passion for jazz music even led him to pursue a second undergraduate degree in jazz performance (with a drumming emphasis of course). After spending a few years working as

a software engineer in the U.S., Hugh returned to Dublin and felt that he'd "lost touch with the music scene entirely." Luckily for Hugh, he found a new home in one of the ensemble classes at the Newpark Academy of Music. It is in one of these classes that Hugh met Eoin, the O'Halloran Trio's bass player. The two connected and did some gigs together over the years before forming the O'Halloran trio with the saxophonist Yuzuha, who is actually Eoin's wife.

While my conversation with Hugh has been mostly positive thus far, I feel I need to ask him about the impact of COVID on the Dublin jazz scene, as the pandemic created an eighteen-month period in which musicians could not play live music at venues. Hugh's mood understandably turns a bit somber, and for the first time, the forty-three-year-old's gray hair seems to age him. "COVID was pretty ruinous for the jazz scene," he states. "There were no live performances, and apart from the financial impact, I think that [COVID] sapped the energy for a lot of people." Hugh carries on, telling me that some musicians even considered quitting music due to the lack of performance opportunities. I nod solemnly and ask Hugh if jazz musicians have been given any government aid since the pandemic started. He says that the government has been poor with their support, "with seemingly very little priority given to the consideration of how the live music scene could be revived." Hugh tells me that a lot of musicians, in addition to himself, have second jobs to make ends meet.

Despite Hugh's disappointment at how little the government has aided musicians during the pandemic, things *are* looking up for artists in Dublin and Ireland as a whole. An initiative is set to roll out in March of 2022 to give approximately 2000 artists in Ireland €325 a week, which totals €16,900 a year (Falvey, 2021). While it may seem like a small measure for the government to only be aiding 2000 individuals, the initiative is a step in the right direction for those pursuing

creative passions in Ireland. And hopefully, as time progresses, more artists will receive aid so that they can pursue their artistic interests full time.

While at Workman's, I also have the opportunity of conversing with Daniel Rorke, who is a jazz musician and professor of music performance at Dublin City University. Daniel, who dons a shirt that matches the walls and turtle-pattern glasses, tells me that the jazz scene in Dublin is rather tight-knit, which is exemplified by the fact that Daniel not only knows each member of the O'Halloran Trio personally, but he also put together the jazz event at Workman's. Daniel goes on to tell me that "the Dublin jazz scene is rather underground, so the pandemic did much harm to an already niche area of interest." Daniel doesn't elaborate as to why the jazz scene in Dublin is so small, but I can make my own inferences. Speaking from personal experience, jazz music wasn't something I grew up listening to. I heard rock and pop and occasionally rap on the radio and from my parents, but my first introduction to jazz came in middle school when I took a band class in school and pursued the saxophone. Aside from hearing and playing jazz music at school, I never heard it elsewhere. I believe that jazz music is there if you look for it, but it's harder to find if you don't have a direct connection with it. As Hugh expressed to me earlier, music and the arts were not encouraged when he was growing up in Ireland, which is likely a contributor to why jazz music is more marginalized than other genres.

Despite the setbacks caused by the pandemic, Hugh tells me that "It's been a testament to the commitment of the musicians to see how enthusiastically people have thrown themselves back into performance." As we converse, Hugh begins to prepare for the next set. He sits behind his drums and sorts through his utensils, plucking out which ones he will use for the first song after the intermission. Sensing that I'm about to overstay my welcome, I ask Hugh one final question about where I can check out more of the Dublin jazz scene. He mentions venues such as

Billy Byrnes and Arthur's Blues & Jazz Club, the latter of which is currently closed to the public due to renovations. And of course, the jazz scene at Workman's isn't a place to miss. I thank Hugh for his time and return to my spot in the back corner, ready to continue the performance.

As I sit back on a shared couch, I notice that Hugh settles for a standard pair of wooden drumsticks. He pushes his assortment of drum brushes and mallets aside, which I'm sure he'll use later on in the set. The rest of the musicians once again take the stage, and they fill the room with melody after melody. There's no talking in the room, but the instruments seem to be in conversation with one another as notes rise and fall, connect or clash. All around me, attendees bob their heads and tap their toes in enjoyment—a community coming back to life.

References:

Falvey, D. (2021, October 13). *'It's a game-changer for us': Artists welcome guaranteed basic income plan*. The Irish Times.

<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/it-s-a-game-changer-for-us-artists-welcome-guaranteed-basic-income-plan-1.4699820>.

The Color Orange...

—*After Ross Gay*

...has been and will forever be a personal delight. Neon, tangerine, of the copper variety. I'm favorable to every shade of orange except coral—it's a bit too pink for my liking.

There's not really a simple explanation for how or why I've come to love the color orange; it has simply always been there. Orange was the color I plucked from my childhood ball pit and posed with in pictures. Orange was my crayon of choice on preschool assignments, all of which were pencil optional. Orange is the color of my bedroom walls and my ukulele, my lamp, Keurig, and a good portion of my clothes. (If you, reader, need an orange shirt to wear on a festive fall day, I have several you can borrow. Long sleeve? Short?)

On days when I don my orange converse and eyeliner—a very fitting shade called acid trip—I feel like a light in a world of subdued coats and black boots. And on days like today when I lost my orange post-it notes in my sheets and comforter of the same pumpkin hue, I felt delighted when I had to shake the blankets out and hunt for the missing stack. (Update: I did find the post-it notes, and many of them now color Ross Gay's *Book of Delights*—which in itself is a delight, a delightful book of delights.)

Someday when I've graduated from college and can afford a small house of my own, I want to turn the house into a monochromatic tribute to myself. And by that, I mean, I want the house to be orange inside and out because I can, because there aren't enough orange houses where I live, because there exists in orange a constant reminder that there is beauty and wonder and joy in this world.