

Influence of the Song and Dance Music of Ireland on the Folk Music of North America (2015 Q5 B (i))

In the years shortly after the Great Famine, hundreds of thousands of Irish people immigrated to America. This had a great impact on the Folk music in the Appalachian mountain regions, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Cape Breton. Many people in Newfoundland still have Waterford surnames and speak with Waterford accents.

Many traditional songs, such as “Rose Connolly”, which was noted down in 1811 by Edward Bunting from a singer in Northern Ireland, travelled to America with the immigrants. A new repertoire developed from these immigrant experiences; railroad songs, lumber jack songs, work songs, songs of love, comic songs and songs of home. Many variations of these songs entered the mainstream of American folk song. An Irish song called “Siuil A Rúin”, which dates from the seventeenth century was collected in the lumber camp region of Wisconsin with the title “I’ll Sell my Rod, I’ll Sell my Reel.” “St. Anne’s Reel” is a French-Canadian piece and “Fred Finn’s Polka” is American yet both resemble Irish tunes in structure and style.

“Drops of Brandy”, which was an Irish slip jig now exists with different time signatures in the Métis fiddling tradition in Canada. There are also similarities to be found between Athabaskan dance music and Irish Music. Set dancing is popular in both traditions and the Athabaskan fiddler Bill Stevens ornaments his dance music with double-stops and slides.

In 1920 the gramophone was developed in America, which had a huge impact on Irish traditional music in both Ireland and America. It meant that when tunes were released in Ireland they could make their way across the Atlantic to America. Michael Coleman, who came from Killavil, Co. Sligo, had a huge impact in America and Ireland with his music. His regional style has influenced generations of fiddle players.

Irish music has changed greatly in America, and fused with many other musics such as English and Scottish. Irish traditional music has had such an influence that many cultural groups believe Irish music to be “theirs”.