

Towards the creation of a shared space in a divided Northern Ireland:

The role of humour in the songs of Tommy and Colum Sands

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This paper aims to explore the intangible yet powerful role of humour in song, when used as a tool for questioning received perceptions and breaking down barriers, and also for providing comfort and relief in the divided society of Northern Ireland during “The Troubles.”¹ The study is based on the principle outlined by the founder of the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research, Daisaku Ikeda², when he identifies mistrust and the prejudice and preconceptions that arise from it as being the main obstacle in building a culture of peace.³ He believes that exchanges in art and culture can enable people to overcome mistrust and prejudice and build a culture of peace.

Although this paper highlights the role of music as a unifying force, Olivier Urbain⁴ reminds us that “music has tremendous power to move people in any direction, towards peaceful and noble goals, or violent and destructive ones.”⁵ Throughout history, music has at times been appropriated by movements and ideologies to promote hatred and division. This can be seen in the case of Northern Ireland where the process of reconciliation was rendered difficult by the appropriation of music by both sides of the community. Suspicion and sectarianism were kept alive through the singing of party songs and the playing of certain melodies to conflate tribal identities. Johan Galtung, one of the founders of Peace Studies, refers to practices such as this as “cultural

violence” as opposed to the concept of “cultural peace” or a “culture of peace”⁶.

Galtung states that “peaceful education, including socialization would probably imply exposure to multiple cultures and then a dialogue...”⁷. This paper argues that the combination of music with humour in the songs of Tommy and Colum Sands has enhanced the potential to reduce this mistrust, and therefore has further contributed to building a culture of peace, by attempting to overcome bigotry and by promoting an understanding of otherness. Both singer-songwriters have used humour in their music as a medium to reach out to people and to create an open space to explore the commonality inherent in humanity.

Apart from their solo careers as singer-songwriters and radio broadcasters, and their work in educational programmes promoting peace at home and abroad, both Tommy and Colum Sands are members of the internationally renowned Irish Folk and Traditional Music group, *The Sands Family*, from Co.Down, N.Ireland. They come from a rural Catholic background, both born in the mid-late 1940s into a mixed neighbourhood of Protestants and Catholics, who, in spite of their religious and cultural differences, joined together to work the land and to play music. Although peace activist Tommy Sands is probably better known internationally for his serious songs on the Troubles, such as *There were Roses*⁸, and his brother Colum for songs such as *Last House in the Street*,⁹ and for their songs celebrating the commonality and inclusivity of humankind, this paper will limit its scope to examining the use of humour in their work and will illustrate with four of their songs related to the Troubles. It will attempt to evaluate the use of humour in their work, where their songs of reason and imagination played and continue to play over what John Hume¹⁰ referred to as “the sound of division and prejudice.”¹¹

The analysis of the humorous effect in their work will be supported by concepts from the theoretical framework of Humour Studies, Peace and Reconciliation Studies, and Word and Music Studies. The songs chosen to illustrate this paper are *Whatever you say, say Nothing* and *If it wasn't for the Border* written by Colum Sands and *Humpty Dumpty was Pushed* and *The Mixed Marriage* by Tommy Sands. Before analysing the themes and lyrics of the above-mentioned songs, the study will explore the functions of art, song and humour for the betterment of society and examine how they apply to the work of these song-writers. Referring to the role of art, Nobel Peace Prize winner John Hume agrees with the moral imperative in the poet Seamus Heaney's claim that "the object of art is peace" when he states "It is a question above all of demonstrating the possibilities of alternative, and thus peaceful, modes of existence."¹²

Edward Said also emphasises the importance for intellectuals, artists, and free citizens to make room and create a space "for dissent, for alternative ways and possibilities to challenge the tyranny of the majority, and, at the same time and most importantly, to advance human enlightenment and liberty."¹³ For Daniel Barenboim, it is important that the musician asks him/herself, "Does music have a purpose, a social purpose, and what is it? Is it to provide comfort and entertainment, or is it to ask disturbing questions of the performer and the listener?"¹⁴ This paper offers the view that the music of these Northern Irish singer-songwriters embraces both of these purposes, by providing comfort and entertainment, while at the same time forcing both performer and listener to question received opinions. It also argues that the songs presented here illustrate Said's view that the purpose of education is to learn how to think critically "*for oneself*", rather than accumulating facts or memorizing the 'correct' answer.

Like Hume, Said and Barenboim, cultural historian Professor Kevin Whelan¹⁵ also emphasises the need more than ever for our artists to imagine an alternative future and claims that the great artist is always about a generation ahead of us, imagining new perspectives and possibilities.¹⁶ This paper supports Whelan's claim when he situates Tommy and Colum Sands among the artists who belong to "the in-between space", and claims that this is the most ethical yet difficult space to occupy, as it is not a fixed one and needs to be constantly negotiated.¹⁷ He also makes the point that this position in itself is a political statement in that it advocates the creation of a shared space and an invitation to self-criticism in order to understand the other's situation. Colum Sands recognises this and clarifies the reason for self-editing what they wrote during the Troubles. When referring to the joint show *Humpty Dumpty was Pushed*, which they first performed at Queen's Festival in Belfast in 1980, he outlines the reason for this awareness as "not as being over-careful about what you wrote but as being sensitive to keeping the lines of communication open throughout the show, for potentially anyone from any background."¹⁸ He believes that one of the purposes of art is to make people feel at home, and to provide a comfortable space to the audience for them to witness themselves, even if means hearing uncomfortable things at times.

I will now present some of the principal functions and benefits of humour and trace how they have been used in the songs of Tommy and Colum Sands in order to create a shared space of inclusivity in a polarised society. When setting up that space where their audience can feel at ease, they recognise the significance of the ten functions of humour outlined by Spanish educationalists Alfonso Francia and Jesús D. Fernández.

1. Physiological function, where physical and psychological tensions are released, thus strengthening energy levels.

2. The function of lucidity invites us to criticise reality, which means that a person with a sense of humour knows how to observe reality from different angles and is open, agile and aware.

3. The function of pleasure

Humour provokes and strengthens the sensation of pleasure, joy and well-being.

4. The function of affection

An atmosphere of trust and comradeship is created, favouring a positive relationship among the members of a group.

5. The function of aggression

Humour which does not construct, destroys.

6. The social function

Humour acts against rigidity and lack of flexibility.

7. The defence function

Humour can serve not only to attack but also to defend oneself.

8. Intellectual function

Humour can help us to forsake distorted thoughts and irrational beliefs, forcing us to be imaginative and creative, to question our perception of reality and to process new information.

9. Transforming function

Sometimes humour can soften rigid positions, create new opinions and heal open wounds.

10. Pedagogical function

Humour generates a positive attitude among the members of a group. It improves general attention, sharpens the senses and increases motivation.

When defining the purpose and role of humour, W. E. Jung reflects on its origins humour, and suggests that the principal evolutionary purpose of humour and laughter was to facilitate co-operation between people. He claims that ultimately a response of laughter indicates that “one is both ready and able to cooperate.”¹⁹ In keeping with the notion of empathy and willingness to cooperate which humour can generate, I’d like to quote a seminal figure from the discipline of Peace and Reconciliation Studies, Professor John Lederach.²⁰ In his speech in Belfast City Hall in June 2006, he identified one of the five misconceptions regarding the process of reconciliation as being based on the notion that seriousness and intensity is more effective than humour and playfulness in the reconciliation process.

This paper supports both Jung’s and Lederach’s theories and the functions of humour outlined by Fernández and Francia above, which argue that the sense of empathy and co-operation can be heightened through the presence of the play-spirit or humour. This concept of the importance of increasing the state of empathy is also expressed by Felicity Laurence²¹, when she proposes a link between the fields of empathy and of music, suggesting the *potential* capacity of strengthening empathic response which lies at the core of music’s function within peacebuilding.²²

Referring to the importance of empathy, Colum Sands emphasises the importance of creating this type of rapport with the audience, and claims that everyone in N.Ireland is programmed and that, “If you criticise people they get defensive, they close up, whereas the artist wants to keep those lines of communication open”²³. He believes that “rather

than pointing out the tragedy, which everyone knows, point out the ridicule, which will give people the courage to laugh at themselves and be critical of their viewpoint.”²⁴

In keeping with musician Fintan Vallely’s claim that, “All ballads and folksongs are the original works of anthropology, sociology and politics in the lives of country people and the migrant poor of the towns”,²⁵ the songs I have chosen to examine in this article reflect the socio-political atmosphere of the divided society of Northern Ireland during the Troubles, where everything was polarised and politicised.

Humpty Dumpty was Pushed, which was later to become the title song for the show with the same name mentioned previously, was written by Tommy Sands in the mid-seventies and was inspired by a line of graffiti he read in the toilets of a pub in Belfast. Colum Sands describes it as a song that was challenging a fixed truth, by asking “Suppose we’ve been looking at this from the wrong angle all these years, supposing that all the truths we’ve been given are not as true as they appear to be?”²⁶ By melodically framing the song in this familiar nursery rhyme form, using the comfortable figure of Humpty Dumpty, the songwriter is able to present an uncomfortable message in an apparently innocent way. By singing it in a childish voice, an apparent aura of innocence is transmitted. However, the message has threatening undertones, and as the storyline unfolds we find out that punishment and incarceration await those who dare to defy and question the “truth” that Humpty Dumpty had fallen off the wall. The singer wrote this song in the Northern Ireland context, in a criticism of the press and their hidden agendas when portraying their version of “truth”, and also of the issue of unfair imprisonment at that time. Sands concludes:

If all the truths that I was inoculated with since, through education, press and media are anything to go by, then Mr. Dumpty was probably pushed off the wall.²⁷

This reflection is in keeping with Johan Galtung's claim that violence in a society can be reduced by making the culture less exclusive and its structure more horizontal from an early age on.²⁸

Tommy Sands points out that humour can also provide the opportunity to address taboo subjects and views the next song *Whatever you say, say Nothing*, by Colum Sands as epitomising this. He refers to this song, among others, as "perhaps serving to create that space where we could all enter"²⁹ and suggests that perhaps if we could laugh at the fact that we cannot talk about the fear of suspicion and the fear of talking, then perhaps a pathway can be opened to address that silence and allow us to discuss it. To put this song into context, I would like to refer to the trait of reticence and cautious speech of the Ulster Irish character as portrayed in the local folk maxim "Whatever you say, say nothing". Colum Sands's song with the same title as Heaney's poem, *Whatever you say, say Nothing*, is based on this local, rather neurotic turn of phrase we Northerners have grown up with and humorously describes this sense of being afraid to say the wrong thing in the wrong place at the wrong time. Tommy Sands suggests that Colum's song takes this concept of fear of speech further than Heaney's poem, in that "...in the sense that if you keep saying nothing you'll never get anywhere, and by going out of your way to say nothing, you're actually doing the opposite." Referring to the last verse of the song, Colum Sands admits that it is a nudge to be active rather than passive.

The Mixed Marriage, recorded by Tommy Sands in 1975 uses incongruity to create humorous effect to depict a not so humorous situation which many couples from Northern Ireland faced during the Troubles, and which still exists. The song depicts the criticism and rejection these couples had to face from their own and the opposing communities and families. In the song, the language of courting and romance is juxtaposed with the language of bigotry and prejudice, where the menacing voice of the tribal mindsets conditions that of the lovers. In an apparently innocent and subtle way, he presents the dialogue of the lovers in the early stage of their relationship. Using the local turn of phrase, Sands' audience from Northern Ireland will immediately be able to read between the lines and understand the sectarianism present in the questions, where one's address and place of worship on Sunday are tell-tale signs of which tribe one belongs to.

The following verses imagine highly improbable changes "both sides" and the politicians would need to carry out in order to create the perfect conditions for this couple to marry. The lines alternate in dialogue form, and the inherited prejudices are presented, in turn, in each of the lover's conditions. References they make to the Catholic Church of Rome and to the Protestant King William, objects of hostility and antagonism to each of the communities, are parodied in order to reflect the bigotry of each side.

On a more sombre note, Sands reflects on the political stalemate pre - 1998, in pre-"Good Friday Agreement" days. The principal causes at stake in the Troubles were the constitutional status of Northern Ireland and the relationship between the mainly-Protestant unionist and mainly-Catholic nationalist communities in N. Ireland. Articles

two and three of the Constitution of Ireland made the claim then that the whole island formed one “national territory”, a claim unacceptable to the Unionist population. This condition is then counter-acted in the song by the Catholic grievance over the Government of Ireland Act of 1920, which partitioned Ireland into two autonomous regions, Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland, unacceptable to the Catholic, nationalist population.

In the end, Sands has the lovers see the absurdity of the situation and in spite of all the obstacles and prejudices facing and surrounding them, they decide to get married and give love a chance in the face of bigotry and sectarianism. The song is dedicated to all mixed marriages and the last verse offers hope and courage to defy the pressures imposed on them by their communities.

The last song *If it wasn't for the Border*, by Colum Sands, deals with the constitutional status of N. Ireland, and presents the issue of partition manifested through the physical border separating the twenty-six counties of the Republic of Ireland from the six counties of Northern Ireland, which was the result of the Government of Ireland Act mentioned above. Although the song deals with the physical geographical border, Colum Sands' view is that borders are also “a state of mind”³⁰. The song reflects the fact that the border, and borders in general, support a whole way of life, from customs to security to smuggling and drawing unemployment benefits on either side of the border. Referring to the nearby border³¹, Tommy Sands comments that whereas “the Orange man would say, ‘we need the border’, so too do the people in Catholic, Republican South Armagh need it to survive.” Colum Sands comments that his song on the border “was just about making the most of a bad job and also pointing out that some people, much as they ranted against the border, found ways of making money out of

it...³² The serious issues of road blocks, partition and unemployment which accompanied life at the border are fused with the picaresque elements of smuggling, and drawing the dole twice. The storyline of the song is narrated by a simple farmer whose way of life changed dramatically when the “little dot that’s called the border” split his land in two. Sands parodies the border situation, the double vision which entailed having two parliaments, two currencies. Here, he is using the technique of self-humour to invite the community of his origins to have another look at the border and what it really meant in their lives.

Although the songs I have chosen to illustrate were written in the Northern Irish context in what has been called “one of the world’s most divisive regions,”³³ and in the midst of the worst period of the Troubles,³⁴ they are still pertinent today. In spite of the fact that physical borders are shifting, the borders of the mindset of prejudice, fear and hostility towards the “other” still exist. Tommy Sands comments on the universal appeal of the themes and songs and explains that although they use the home-ground as a microcosm, this expands out to the universal in an attempt to understand conflict and problems and issues abroad. Both he and Colum Sands have sung them in other areas of international conflict, for audiences here in Germany, in both the GDR and West Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and in Bosnia, Israel, Palestine, Afghanistan and other areas of conflict. Their songs are still working to shift perceptions and through the humour present in them and the skilled and sensitive performativity of the singer-songwriters, they continue to nudge and tease audiences into considering the narrative of the other, and have been translated into different languages and sung by several international singers.³⁵

I would like to close this study with two quotations³⁶, from Confucius and Plato, regarding the value of music and humour. Confucius wrote:

The superior man tries to cultivate music as a means towards the perfection of human culture. When this music reigns, and the minds of the people are directed towards correct ideals and aspirations, we can see the birth of a great nation.³⁷

Aristotle on humour:

Humour is the only test of gravity, and gravity of humour;
for a subject which will not bear raillery is suspicious, and a jest which will not hear serious examination is false wit.

This paper believes that the artistic creation and songs of Tommy and Colum Sands fulfil the ideals set out above. It hopes to have demonstrated that their songs have created a foundation of mutual understanding and respect between divided communities and also to have reflected their understanding of the role of art, song and humour as vehicles for peace.

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- ¹ A term used to describe the thirty years of political violence in Northern Ireland. The duration of the Troubles is conventionally dated from the late 1960s and considered, by many, to have ended with the Belfast “Good Friday Agreement” of 1998. Violence nonetheless continues on a sporadic basis and the Peace Process, although functioning, is fragile.
- ² The Toda Institute was established in 1996 by renowned Japanese peace philosopher and activist Daisaku Ikeda in honour of his mentor Josei Toda.
- ³ Daisaku Ikeda, “Thoughts on Peace” at www.daisakuiked.org Date of Access: 12 October 2009.
- ⁴ Olivier Urbain, Ph.D. is a Research Fellow at the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research, Tokyo, Japan. He is the founder and co-convenor of the Commission on Art and Peace of the International Peace Research Association.
- ⁵ Olivier Urbain, “The Roles of Music”, in Olivier Urbain (ed.), *Music and Conflict Transformation: Harmonies and Dissonances in Geopolitics*, (London – New York: I.B. Tauris in association with the Toda Institute Book Series on Global Peace and Policy, 2008), p. 2-3.
- ⁶ Johan Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means – Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*, (Oslo: PRIO International Peace Research Institute, 1996), p.196.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Tommy Sands wrote this song, *There were Roses*, after the tit for tat killings carried out by the opposing paramilitary groups in 1974, of two neighbours and mutual friends from Ryan, his homeplace, the Protestant Isaac Scott and the Catholic Seán McDonald.
This song has been translated into various languages and sung by Irish and international artists. The version by Irish singer Cara Dillon is very well-known.
- ⁹ This song depicts the suffering of children in the midst of conflict and violence, where dividing walls still stand in Belfast and other places of conflict.
- ¹⁰ John Hume is a former Irish politician from Derry, Northern Ireland. He was a founding member of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, and was co-recipient of the 1998 Nobel Peace Prize with David Trimble.
- ¹¹ John Hume “Everything is Political in a Divided Society” in *Arguing at the Crossroads: Essays on a Changing Ireland*, (Dublin: New Island Books.1997, originally published as *Désirs D’Irlande, Actes Sud*, Paris: AFAA, 1996), p.99.
- ¹² John Hume, “Everything is Political in a Divided Society” in *Arguing at the Crossroads: Essays on a Changing Ireland*, (Dublin: New Island Books.1997, originally published as *Désirs D’Irlande, Actes Sud*, Paris: AFAA, 1996), p.101.
- ¹³ Daniel Barenboim and Edward W. Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), p. 181
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 44.
- ¹⁵ Professor Kevin Whelan is Director of the Keough-Naughton Notre Dame Centre, Dublin, Ireland.
- ¹⁶ Professor Kevin Whelan. “Keynote lecture at II John McGahern Summer School, Carrick-on-Shannon, Ireland, 23 July 2009.
- ¹⁷ Interview with Professor Kevin Whelan, Head of the Keough- Naughton Notre Dame Centre (Dublin, 24 November 2009).
- ¹⁸ Interview with Colum Sands, singer-songwriter (Rostrevor, N.Ireland, 15 January 2011).
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Professor of International Peace Building at University Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana.
- ²¹ Felicity Laurence is Lecturer in the Music Department at Newcastle University, UK.
- ²² Felicity Laurence, “Music and Empathy”, in Olivier Urbain (ed.), *Music and Conflict Transformation: Harmonies and Dissonances in Geopolitics*, (London – New York: 2008 - I.B. Tauris in association with the Toda Institute Book Series on Global Peace and Policy), p. 14.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Interview with Colum Sands, singer-songwriter (Rostrevor, N. Ireland, 22 July 2009).
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- ²⁷ Interview with Tommy Sands, singer-songwriter (Rostrevor, N. Ireland, 13 January 2011).
- ²⁸ Johan Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means – Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*, (Oslo: PRIO International Peace Research Institute, 1996), p.46.
- ²⁹ Interview with Tommy Sands, singer-songwriter (Rostrevor, N. Ireland, 28 November 2009).
- ³⁰ Interview with Colum Sands, singer-songwriter (Rostrevor N. Ireland, 15 January 2011).

³¹ This border is situated about 15 miles from where Tommy and Colum Sands live in Rostrevor, Co. Down, N.Ireland.

³² Interview with Colum Sands, singer-songwriter (Rostrevor N.Ireland, 15 January 2011).

³³ <http://www.tommysands.com/programs.html> Date of Access: 24 July 2009.

³⁴ The four songs I have commented on were written in the late 1970s, early 1980s, at the height of “the Troubles” in Northern Ireland.

³⁵ John Baez, Dolores Keane, Cara Dillon, Billy Connolly, Kathy Matthea, Sean Keane, Franck Paterson, Dick Gaughan, and The Dubliners are some of the artists who sing their songs.

³⁶ These quotations have been translated from Spanish by the author of this text.

³⁷ Helen L. Bonny and Louis M. Savary, *La música y su mente* (Madrid: Edaf, 1993), p. 27. The original title in English is *Music and your Mind*.