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Title	Sir Henrys @UCCLibrary: Telling the history of a live music venue through a librarian-led research exhibition
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Publication date	2019-10-01
Original Citation	O'Connor, M. and Hogan, E. (2019) 'Sir Henrys @UCCLibrary: Telling the history of a live music venue through a librarian-led research exhibition', An Leabharlann: The Irish Library, 28(2), pp. 11-17.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://www.libraryassociation.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/An_Leabharlann_28-2_Full.pdf
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Download date	2026-11-08 04:37:53
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/8982



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

AL
An Leabharlann
28–2
October 2019





Sir Henrys @UCCLibrary: Telling the history of a live music venue through a librarian-led research exhibition

Martin O'Connor and Eileen Hogan

Abstract

In 2014, University College Cork presented the *Sir Henrys@UCC Library* research exhibition, which documented the history and socio-cultural significance of a famous Cork live music venue called Sir Henrys. This article explains how the story of Sir Henrys was researched, shaped and told, how it was presented to as wide an audience as possible, and how that audience responded. It also looks at the impact and legacy of the exhibition.

Keywords: *Popular Music, Exhibition; Popular Music, Ireland*

Introduction

In 2014, University College Cork presented the *Sir Henrys@UCC Library* research exhibition, which documented the history and socio-cultural significance of a famous Cork live music venue called Sir Henrys.[1] The exhibition presented the story of the venue through the people who worked there, the bands and the DJs who played there, and the people who attended performances and club nights over its twenty six year existence.



Sir Henrys opened as a piano bar on October 4, 1977 and developed over the years to become an important live music venue for generations of rock bands and their fans. Initially it hosted local bands and Irish bands, but by the late 1980s, it was hosting some of the biggest international bands on the Indie Rock scene. Also, towards the end of the eighties it began to host dance (rave) nights and soon became known as a destination dance club for Irish clubbers. The best known night was a club called *Sweat*, which was voted the best dance club in Europe by *MTV* at one stage – something which Henry's dance clubbers never ever forgot. Sir Henrys finally closed its doors in 2003.

SirHenrys@UCC Exhibition (July-September 2014)

The idea for the exhibition germinated in a social media conversation between Martin O'Connor, a librarian at UCC Library, and Stevie G (Grainger) a local DJ. Martin was frustrated by the fragmented history of the venue and the privileging of certain musical genres (particularly dance) over others in people's memories. With the aim of rebalancing this skewed history to better include its significance as a site of rock, Martin initially sought the support of Stevie G, and later, Eileen Hogan, a popular music academic based in UCC. This new team then set about the task of enlisting the help of the general public to curate an exhibition about the iconic venue.



The curators started planning the exhibition in January 2014. At this stage all we had was a core idea, that is, to hold an exhibition about Sir Henrys in UCC Library. But the only one of us who had any material from the club was Stevie G. This is when we decided we needed to put a call out to see what material we could borrow from former Sir Henrys' attendees. To do this we needed to have a strong social media presence so before we went live to the public we set up our Twitter account, Facebook account and our Wordpress blog. We then went live on social media in January 2014. From then on we used our social media presence to spread the word about the exhibition, to contact people to gather the actual material, and to engage with the Sir Henrys' community. Once the social media accounts gained attention, we used these to share the stories, the memories, and the photos and images that people were sharing across Twitter and Facebook.

Sir Henrys@UCC Library was both a physical and a virtual exhibition. The physical exhibition was hosted in the small foyer, the permanent exhibition space, of UCC Library. Items that were used in the exhibition were whittled

1 Those attentive to grammatical concerns may note differing perspectives on whether an apostrophe should appear in the name "Sir Henry's"/"Sir Henry's". Based on our access to various images of the signage over the years, we noted that the more common practice was to exclude the apostrophe, and we respected this practice in our research and related documentation. However, many posters, flyers, and articles about the venue use the apostrophe. It is not within our remit to make a definitive decision on whether it should be included. Let the debate continue.



Stevie G

I entered UCC in the autumn of 1992, and by the time I left three years later I was a DJ while waiting to enter the real world. The real world never came, and I remain DJing and writing about hip-hop and music in general, which I did passionately for the *UCC Gazette* in those student years.

With hip-hop you were always on the defensive back then, and it has come a long way in the last 25 years or so. Now Kendrick Lamar can win a Pulitzer prize while UCC can secure a 2 million euro global hip-hop study grant through my pal Griff Rollefson, who lectures in popular music studies there. Legitimising our culture has always been a challenge, but hip-hop and dance music are here to stay, and we can see or hear it every time we turn on the radio, check a festival line-up or even read a business article.

It was word of mouth back then. We promoted the music through mix-tapes and flyers, and when Martin and Eileen approached me in late 2013 about the prospect of showcasing some of the material we were gathering online regarding the legendary Sir Henrys nightclub, I was delighted to help. I was a DJ there, but I always collected not only records and tapes and CD's but flyers and posters and other memorabilia too.

Having UCC Library so enthusiastically back it helped legitimise all the time wasting I had been doing before during and after college, and the superb exhibition in the summer 2014 was a wonderful hat tip to all of us wasters who became immersed in this youth culture along the way!

down from over a thousand individual items that we received from the generous Sir Henrys' community. The final physical exhibition space comprised twelve storyboards, a detailed timeline of the club's existence, cabinets packed tight with eclectic material artefacts – a guitar, clothing, photographs, setlists, cassettes, vinyl records, flyers, zines, tickets, underwear, letters, legal documents and licences pertaining to the setting up of the club. This physical space of the UCC Library foyer was complemented by virtual spaces, including a Twitter account, a Facebook page and a WordPress blog. Here, alongside members of the community we gathered together photos, stories, and memories of Sir Henrys.

Motivations

So, why was the exhibition held? There are several reasons which are pertinent: the specific people involved as curators and supporters; the social, cultural, and academic role of the library; community engagement; cultural heritage and storytelling; academic interests; and, finally, but importantly, having fun.

For the curators, it was an opportunity to engage with something that had meant so much to us and to so many other people. We had each been Henry's "heads" – the self-designation of those who regularly attended Sir Henrys – in our younger years. Given that we had strong affective connections to the space, the opportunity to curate an exhibition on the club was interesting from a personal, biographical perspective.

From the perspective of UCC Library it was an



opportunity to try something which you would not necessarily expect of a library. In line with the library's and the broader university's strategy and policy, it was an opportunity to engage with the wider community. Furthermore, it was an opportunity to collaborate with people in Schools and Departments outside the library, allowing strong relationships to be built with our academic colleagues across UCC campus.

It also allowed us to forge connections between the university and the public as a community engagement initiative. Indeed this was a particular strength and legacy of the project, which we discuss in greater detail below.

From a cultural heritage perspective it presented the opportunity to tell a more multidimensional story of the venue than already existed in most people's minds. Although the club was home to many diverse kinds of music over the years, people often held a very narrow vision of the club that was limited by their own particular memories and experiences. The exhibition presented an opportunity to pull together various musical strands and histories into one place and to present a more comprehensive representation of the venue's musical, cultural and social significance.

It was also an opportunity to bring something that is often perceived as a "non-academic" interest into an academic setting. From a popular music studies perspective, academics located in this field of study meet with varying degrees of appreciation and snobbery about its status by comparison with more established arts and humanities subjects and disciplines (such as musicology, for example). The academic dimension to the project allowed us to confront, and even challenge, this negative bias towards the value of popular music studies and its perceived 'proper' place within academia.

Finally, and this cannot be underestimated, we thought it would be a fun project to work on. We felt it would be 'cool' (if you can forgive the colloquialism!) to bring something into a library, particularly an academic library, which one would not expect to see there.

Crowdsourcing

The items featured in the exhibition were located through "crowdsourcing", which is a participatory research method that at the time was a little utilised approach but has since gained in popularity. The process of crowdsourcing invited members of the venue's former audiences to loan physical artefacts to the library for the duration of the exhibition. Furthermore, their stories about these artefacts and memories relating to the venue were collected through various social media channels.

As Bennett and Rogers (2016) observe, "the live music venue serves as an important barometer for individuals in respect of their involvement in the production and articulation of a specific, collectively shared emotional geography". Sir Henrys, as a venue, is a microcosm of a broader emotional geography, since Cork city itself evinces strong feelings in its inhabitants, who often articulate a close attachment to their city. In contributors' stories, Sir Henrys is remembered as an inclusive space, as 'home'. People felt and experienced Sir Henrys as a warm and embracing place and this 'tribal' feeling was essential to the subjective experience of the venue. The strength and

depth of this community feeling is the reason why crowdsourcing worked so well for us as a research method. Crowdsourcing enabled the community itself to create, share, and collaborate in the production of Sir Henrys' history, exemplifying a more democratic approach to cultural heritage-making. We knew that the material artefacts – the ephemera – that we ultimately showcased to the community were valuable and meaningful and worthy of exhibiting because they were located *through* the community. So, in getting to know the community, we got to know what was important to the community. The process of curating material objects of local popular music heritage allowed us to shed light on how significant these artefacts are as symbolic markers of shared values, collective identity, locality and belonging, as communicated by Sir Henrys' employees, attendees, and performers.

Lessons

We were very enthusiastic but relatively inexperienced curators and we learned many lessons in the process of creating this exhibition. Some positive outcomes were serendipitous. And, in retrospect, we would have done some things differently.

One of the first things we would have done differently was our use of Facebook. Originally, we set up a Facebook personal account for the exhibition to facilitate interactions with other users; we saw it as a way to increase engagement and we felt it would personalise our use of Facebook. However, we now realise that it would have been valuable to instead create a Facebook page, which could operate as a digital showcase for the project. By the time we had recognised the value of the page, the personal account had garnered so much momentum – almost reaching the limit of 5,000 friends – that we felt it best to continue in that vein rather than risk losing our online audience. One result of this decision was that we lost out on the opportunity to avail of the data analytics that Facebook provides for business pages.

Although the Facebook, WordPress and Twitter sites are valuable records of the exhibition and of the venue's history, we really should have set up a website to post the digitised material as a permanent record of the exhibition using a suitable web-publishing platform such as Omeka to host all the material. This would have demanded digital skills that were beyond our capabilities and unfortunately, financial constraints limited our capacity to pay someone to undertake this work. We also initially hoped to begin the process of building a more permanent special collection – an Irish popular music archive – in the library, but found that this too would require a long-term commitment from a working group and considerable financial investment that was beyond our remit.

We learned through this process that happy accidents occur, and that when they do, it is wise to follow their lead. For example, the initial idea with the blog was for the curators to populate it with content, but for one reason or another (lack of time, mainly) this did not happen and the blog lay idle for a number of months. However, in May we received an email from a "Henrys head", in which she outlined her excitement about the upcoming exhibition. She told us how she met her husband at the club and how important the club was to them, and that they were looking forward to bringing their teenage children to the exhibition to show that 'we were cool back in the day'. We thought this was a lovely memory and the tone of the email was so infectiously warm that we asked if we could post it on our blog. The writer was delighted and the blog was enthusiastically received by readers internationally. Thereafter we began to use the blog to document personal narratives about the venue that people submitted organically in response to hearing about the exhibition. We also began to invite specific people to contribute and to record their memories and the blog really took off. Over the course of the exhibition, it gained over 150,000 views.

We learned too that public engagement in the research and curation process is a hugely rewarding and worthwhile endeavour that contributes positively to the democratisation of heritage and memory. However, public engagement must be managed ethically and sensitively in order to demonstrate respect for popular music audiences' collective memories and identities and for their emotional attachment to buildings, material objects, and to other members of the (imagined) community of former audiences. The

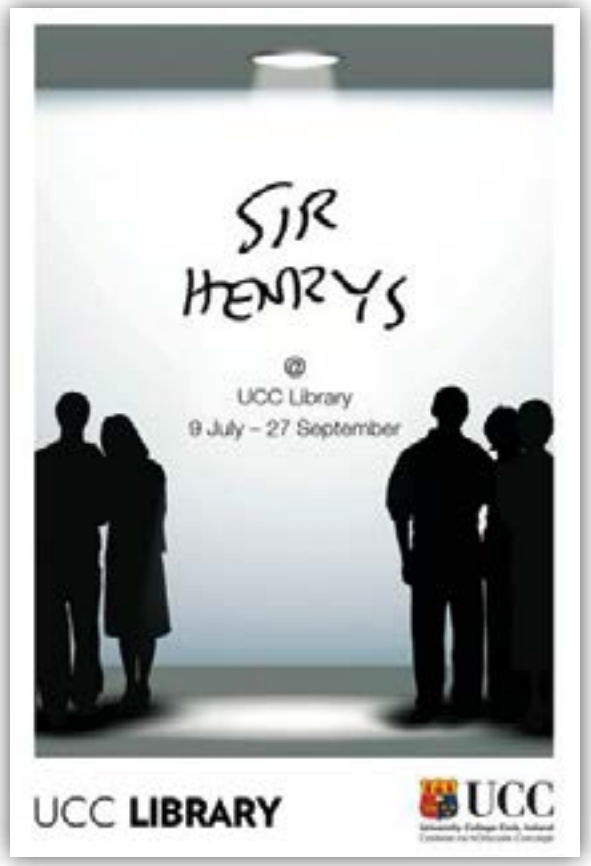
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library, then, is an important point of entry for popular cultural heritage-makers, but the success of initiatives that aim to attract and engage new audiences is heavily reliant on the professional, interpersonal and communication skills of the librarians and their collaborators.

Impact

The exhibition was a huge success, as measured by the thousands of visitors to the library, their reactions to the exhibition documented in the visitor book, and the significant local and national media attention it generated.

People who had never been inside UCC grounds itself came to visit the exhibition – we know this from comment in the visitors' book and from conversations with the UCC Security Staff, who were regularly approached by people looking for the exhibition space. People told us that they organised their summer holiday around a trip home to Cork to visit the exhibition. People who had never been inside a university library visited the exhibition and for the duration of the exhibition UCC Library was a go-to destination. How often can we say that about a library?



UCC Library also featured heavily in the local and national media. The exhibition was featured on the RTE Six One evening news. It also featured in a documentary on TG4. It featured on all the local radio stations, and Eileen was interviewed by Dave Fanning for his radio show on RTE Radio One. Local and national papers all ran features on the exhibition.

An important impact, for the curators, was that the exhibition did manage to provide a more comprehensive story of the club than was out there prior to the exhibition. And this story is now there for people to read via the social media accounts, particularly through the blog.

For many, it changed the perception of what UCC Library did and gave the staff confidence to try new things. Subsequently, Martin established a weekly radio show with his library colleague, Ronan Madden, called Shush! (http://shush.ucc.ie/). A post published by the Irish music blog, *The Fanning Sessions,* observed that: 'We first became aware of strange things happening at UCC Library in January 2014 when they curated an exhibition dedicated to the memory of the famed Cork rock venue and club Sir Henrys… Then in May 2016 came the Shush radio show hosted by two librarians playing music you wouldn't necessarily expect to hear in a library'.

A second popular music and popular culture-oriented exhibition, *Publish and Be Damned,* took place from July to September 2019 celebrating fanzines (see Ó Caollaí, 2019). This was curated by Siobhán Bardsley and Fiona O'Mahony, sisters who had been Sir Henrys' fans and who had contributed significantly to the *Sir Henrys@UCC Library* exhibition by loaning photographs of significant local and international acts that had performed there in the venue's rock heyday.

Another significant cultural outshoot of the Sir Henrys' exhibition blog is a music blog, *The Blackpool Sentinel*, by the Irish music blogger, Colm O'Callaghan. Colm wrote three posts for the exhibition blog which led Martin to suggest to Colm he should start his own blog. He did. And four years on, the blog is achieving over 100,000 views a year and is one of the go-to spaces for those with an interest in Irish rock music of the 1980s and 1990s.

In terms of its social significance, the exhibition revitalised a community of people, many of whom had lost touch with each other over the years. One of the most gratifying outcomes was the renewed connections that were

observable through social media, both between people living in the same city who had lost touch over the years and between people who were now dispersed across the globe.

And finally, academically, the exhibition was the subject of a number of conference presentations over the next few years – five in total – concerned with subjects as diverse as library and internet library issues, anthropology, and material culture. It even got a mention in one speaker's paper at the law librarians' BIALL conference in 2015.

Conclusion

In the above we have shown how and why UCC Library undertook a librarian led research exhibition – one that engaged thousands of Henrys' heads and garnered widespread coverage and exposure for UCC Library.

And in the spirit of the exhibition we would like to finish with two quotes from one of the contributors to the exhibition blog, a quote that sums up the affective appeal of both the exhibition itself and Sir Henrys, and why both were so successful and why both are still recalled fondly at this time, years on. "It was a dump all right, but it was our dump…" and "History will always judge, for better or for worse and Sir Henry's is now (with this exhibition) getting its rightful recognition. I think that is fantastic".

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