

Going for a song

The Irish capital is making trad music “cool again” – and there’s never been a better time to go on a gig crawl of the city, discovers *Ailbhe MacMahon*.

A red alert weather warning has flashed across Ireland. It’s a freak storm, one of the worst to hit the country in decades, but it hasn’t stopped the crowds gathering at Dublin’s annual TradFest music festival.

“Thank you for braving the storm,” announces 18-year-old Irish folk singer Muireann Bradley, before launching into a velvety ‘murder ballad’ that dates back to the 1920s. She’s performing in Saint Patrick’s Cathedral, a soaring medieval church in Dublin’s Liberties district. The musky perfume of incense is in the air, and all wooden pews are filled. Bradley’s sunny vocals and finger-picking guitar playing are an antidote to the harsh weather outside.

I’m a Dubliner born and bred, but TradFest shows me the city in a new light.

Now in its 20th year, the festival sees folk and trad acts perform across the city over five days. The line-up challenges the misconception that trad music is all about “old men with beers and woolly jumpers”, TradFest’s chief operating officer, Claudine Murray, tells me. “Trad is becoming cool again,” she says.

Recent years have seen a surge in contemporary Irish acts making it big on the international stage, such as Fontaines D.C., Lankum and The Mary Wallopers. “They’re coming from a traditional

TOP, FROM LEFT: © Alexander Ruiz/Unsplash; the soul of music; getting into the spirit © Angelo Martucci/Pexels; MIDDLE, FROM LEFT: a toastie of the highest order © Loose Canon; fun in a storm © Alan-TheScratch; a fine drop © Steve Wrzeszczynski/Unsplash
BOTTOM, FROM LEFT: Happy punters © Alan Harrison; finding respite at Grogan’s pub © Tourism Ireland; local talent



IRELAND

CENTRE: Ardgillan Castle holds 300 years of history
RIGHT, FROM TOP: Bliird performs live © Alan Harrison; Sunday roast at Fade Street Social is a must; a new generation of musicians © Killian Broderick

background or they’ve been influenced by traditional music,” Murray says. “There’s a huge wealth of creativity at the moment and trad and folk music is very much part of that.”

One of the festival’s standout gigs is that of The Scratch, a young Irish band blending trad with heavy metal. They draw in a crowd of 1,600 on a cold, windy night.

Other acts are more traditional. I watch fiddle player Bernadette Nic Gabhann perform in the chandelier-topped drawing room of Ardgillan Castle, an 18th-century pile along the Irish Sea coast. “The amount of tradition that our Irish music has, it goes back thousands of years,” she says. Halfway through Gabhann’s set, her bushy-browed father, Antóin, joins her onstage with his fiddle, the pair harmonising on a few reels.

A ghost haunts the castle’s grounds, I later learn while on a walkabout tour through the building’s grand rooms with guide Len Montgomery. She appears wearing a white dress on “dark, cold, foggy” nights. “It’s a bit of folklore,” he says.

Back in the city centre, I catch another gig in the Pepper Canister, a Georgian church named for its peculiar shape. Accordionist Josephine Marsh takes to the altar, looked over by a mural of angels with golden wings. Alternating from heart-soaring to sorrowful, her music is enriched by the church’s acoustics.

A taxi ride takes me to the National Stadium, the home of Irish boxing tournaments. “Are you seeing a match?” the driver asks. But I’m actually here to see the folk group Kíla perform. They have eight official band members but are joined by another nine musicians onstage, creating a kind of genius folk orchestra.



where €4 cheese toasties slathered with mustard are the staple, and the Guinness tap works overtime.

If you’re after a more elevated cheese toastie, thick with slabs of Irish cheddar, you’ll find it around the corner in Loose Canon on Drury Street, a sleek natural wine bar. In the summer this intersection of streets fills with alfresco drinkers and people watchers. The area’s bar basements also become the territory of live DJ sets late into the night.

While TradFest runs for just five days, Dublin is a year-round destination for music. Gig venues like the Button Factory and Whelan’s are local go-tos. Snug pubs such as The Cobblestone and O’Donoghue’s host nightly trad sessions. Then there’s The Big Romance, an ‘audiophile pub’ inspired by Japanese listening bars with a custom sound system for vinyl. The Hugh Lane Gallery hosts weekly free concerts in its

grand sculpture gallery, while in the summer, post-punk and folk come together in the grounds of the Irish Museum of Modern Art for In The Meadows festival.

As TradFest winds down, I dig under the skin of Dublin’s music history on a tour of Windmill Lane Recording Studios, the Art Deco-style powerhouse behind big hitters such as U2 and The Cranberries. AC/DC, David Bowie and Lady Gaga have also graced these studios, I’m told as we move through hallways lined with platinum discs. At one point, the place was owned by Van Morrison, and the Rolling Stones rented the building out for six months to record their 1994 hit album *Voodoo Lounge*.

I can’t help but think of the music that’s going to be created there in years to come. Dublin’s music scene is at an exciting juncture – come for a week to hear it for yourself. 📍

📍
TRAVEL
FACTS

FURTHER INFORMATION
ireland.com
tradfest.com
ardgillancastle.ie
stpatickscathedral.ie
fadestreetsocial.com
robertas.ie
loosecanon.ie
groganspub.ie
windmillanerecording.com