# On the Terrace: Ritual Performance of Identity and Conflict by the Shamrock Rovers Football Club Ultras in Dublin

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**Abstract:** Aiming to explore the relationship between spectator performance and sport, this presentation will focus on a Dublin-based group of Shamrock Rovers Football Club supporters called Ultras. Ultras create an aural and visual spectacle by inciting mass crowd participation in the hope that such modes of expression will have an advantageous effect on the outcome of the game. The SRFC Ultras' idealized matchday aesthetic revolves around the creation of an expressive and evocative atmosphere through constant singing, chanting, clapping, body movement, handmade signs, and use of marine flares and smoke bombs. Such performative activity in the stadium space plays an integral role in the actualization of the Shamrock Rovers community, recreating evocative moments in Shamrock Rovers' history in a manner that attracts and transforms newcomers into supporters, and supporters into Ultras. Crowd atmosphere and chants are a proactive and reactive mode of collective communication with opposition supporters, meant to incite conflict and enact symbolic violence. Such heated interactions reach their height when Rovers play their greatest rivals, Bohemians FC. Chants reconstruct opponents as two-dimensional Others, and further reinforce the Shamrock Rovers identity in the face of adversity, emphasizing courage, bravery, and undying loyalty—difficult commodities to acquire in daily life. However, conflict extends past any singular rivalry. Chants in the sporting context are a music of resistance and empowerment for the Ultras, who embrace the hatred of their opponents and the mistrust of the Irish public, singing proudly, "No One Likes Us, We Don't Care."

On my last night in Dublin, I met with a few of the Shamrock Rovers Ultras for my "going away" session at the pub that Fiachra worked at near St. Stephen's Green. The Ultras are a supporters group associated with Shamrock Rovers Football Club, the most successful and also the most hated soccer team in the League of Ireland. The Ultras see it as their job to create the best atmosphere possible through continuous singing, chanting, clapping, dancing, and lighting of flares. Several pints in and reflecting on my assimilation into the group, the guys asked, "You do hate Bohs right?" Bohemians FC are Shamrock Rovers' most hated rivals. Everyone waited for my response and I knew there was only one correct answer. "Of course!" I shouted to unanimous looks of approval and affirmation.




*Figure 1. Shamrock Rovers Ultras. Photo by Max Jack.*

Within the sporting narrative that Shamrock Rovers (SRFC) supporters have made for themselves, Bohemians FC, their cross-city rivals, are considered to be Enemy Number One. Through continuous verbal (and occasionally physical) abuse, the Bohs community is intrinsically connected to the Ultras' experience. Being an Ultra means loving Rovers, but it also means hating the opposition—especially Bohs. As such, conflict is an integral component of the sporting narrative that is created around singular games, into seasons, and then years of competition between Shamrock Rovers and their opposition. This paper suggests that group camaraderie not only emerges from the actualization of one's shared identity, but is further enhanced by the Ultras' shared enemies, who rouse powerful forces of anger and aggression as part of the spectator experience. I argue that songs not only reflect these animosities, but also serve as an allowable mode of symbolic conflict and violence within the stadium space. Much like the Ultras' ritual internalization of a Shamrock Rovers collective identity, hatred is bred in a similar fashion, through constant exposure to conflict in the sporting narrative and the reinforcement of aggressive attitudes and behavior through performance of songs and the presentation of "displays." Such aggressive and emotional terrace activities have (perhaps unsurprisingly) contributed to the Ultras' perception that "no one likes us."

Though many of Shamrock Rovers' lesser opponents are not always taken seriously by the Ultras, Bohemians are an entirely different matter. Davy reflected this sentiment during our interview.

> It's programmed into you if you're a Rovers fan of recent times that Bohemian FC are the number one enemy. It's like the Israelis and the Palestinians in a way. You know if you're an Israeli that the Palestinians are going to fucking hate you, excuse my language, they're going to hate your guts. You might not have done anything to them and any Bohs fan, nobody's done anything on me, but I still don't like them as a club. The way they go on, the way they act, their colors, everything like that is just, it's mad how much I hate them. I can't wear anything red and black because it just reminds me of them and it's disgusting. (Davy Doyle, personal interview, 7/13/12)

“Programmed” to hate Bohs, Davy recognizes the fact that he has never been personally targeted by Bohemians supporters. Nevertheless, he is quite straightforward about his disdain towards them as a group, a commonality amongst the Ultras and the greater Rovers community. His own disgust at Bohemians’ colors indicates that his feelings are permanent ones, extending past the stadium space and into the outside world. Furthermore, it is indicative of Brandon Randolph-Seng’s observation that “outgroup symbols” can “activate relevant identities” without direct confrontation after a certain amount of continued activation (2010:338).

These emotional activations can develop within the stadium through ritualized communication of collective chants or through aggressive acts in the surrounding neighborhoods that the Ultras perceive as “enemy territory.” “Walking Down Phibsborough” addresses the heated relationship between Rovers and Bohemians.

> I was walking down Phibsborough one fine day
> When a Bohs cunt got in my way
> Kicked him in the bullocks but he got away
> We are the SR - FC

“Walking Down Phibsborough,” like many songs within the repertoire, portrays a particular relationship between Rovers and Bohemians, constructing Bohs as cowards in comparison to a brave and aggressive Rovers contingent, who, in this song, are deep into Bohemians’ “territory” on Phibsborough Road, close to Bohs’ stadium. Davy similarly describes his experience of walking down Phibsborough Road on game day, acknowledging the reality that emotions can boil over, resulting in physical clashes.

> If you don’t look for something you won’t get it. If you go looking around for a fight after a Bohs game you’re guaranteed at least one if you’re not caught by more of them. It’s something that, yeah, I do thrive on it, but I don’t agree with it. It adds to the matchday experience of Rovers and Bohs and it's something that as much as I don’t like it, I would not change it for the world because it’s one of those feelings that it’s part of being a fan of a club, hating someone to the point where you don’t see them as humans. (Davy Doyle, personal interview, 7/13/12)

As “Walking Down Phibsborough” and Davy’s anecdote indicate, songs and physical violence both play a role in fostering animosity between the two communities.

While violence can erupt outside the stadium, songs and chants persist within it. Lyrics recount moments of victory—sometimes on the field—but more often off the field in brawls between rival “hooligan” groups called *casuals*. Fiachra offers his opinion about the content of the ultras’ songs about Bohemians and their historical significance.

> M: So you feel like the rivalry is connected by the violence between the opposition support?
>
> F: Yeah, definitely. Even though most people wouldn’t take any part of it, we all still sing about it. All those songs about Bohs, nearly every single one of them is about fighting, and there are real old songs that we don’t sing anymore that were about fighting Bohs as well. (Fiachra O Brolachain, personal interview, 7/5/12)

Though fighting was seemingly more rampant in previous decades, emotional tension is still effectively stoked through symbolic violence in the form of songs with provoking lyrics that fuel the fire between opposing supporters who are “nearly in spitting distance” of each other at Bohemians’ home ground, Dalymount Park (Colm Byrne, personal interview, 6/17/12). Throughout Europe, home and away supporters do not stand in the same sections of the stadium, but rather are physically segregated, presumably to avoid physical conflict. Yet at Dalymount, this

separation is paper thin, enhancing the atmosphere and the level of animosity in the stadium space.

Lyrics tend to emphasize the courage of Rovers' supporters in the face of violence, validating and defining the collective as they sing together. Thus, Shamrock Rovers' history of hooliganism is symbolically reenacted in the present to actualize characteristics of strength and bravery. Songs effectively recreate and caricaturize Bohemians as a two-dimensional Other, but are also meant to stoke antagonism between the two groups of supporters.

The song "We are Rovers" demonstrates the Ultras' creation of their own version of Bohemians' collective identity, while also reflecting on their own perception of their negative standing within the Irish community.

> We are Rovers, super Rovers
> No one likes us, we don't care.
> We hate Bohs, orange bastards
> And we'll fight them anywhere.

In this instance, "We are Rovers" references Bohemians' Protestant founders with the symbolic color orange. However, this stereotype is based on only a small grain of truth and does not accurately depict the Bohemians fan base in the present day. Regardless, "We are Rovers" relegates the Bohs to "orange bastards." The Ultras' reconstructed version of Bohemians identity is more fiction than reality, but "truth" is not necessarily the point.

Though songs and chants construct an image of the Bohemians' identity for the Ultras, they are also important as modes of collective communication—and instigation. For the SRFC Ultras, songs are not only meant to be heard by the Rovers community, but are also intended to be heard by the opposition. Thus, chants are an interactive medium that stokes conflict between the two groups, often in unique ways.

> *Fiachra, Karl, and I took a taxi to Tolka Park from Dublin city center for Rovers' away game against Shelbourne. Shelbourne and Shamrock Rovers stadiums reside in different Dublin neighborhoods. For a Dublin derby game, there were fewer Shelbourne supporters than everyone expected. The Rovers contingent, located near the midfield line, was facing away from the game and instead were looking towards the Shelbourne Ultras, singing "Where the fuck is your support—where the fuck is, where the fuck is, where the fuck is your support?!" But several minutes later, Shels scored, sparking wild celebration from the opposition support in the terrace behind the goal. After a few initial moments of silence and disappointment in the Riverside Stand, the Rovers support started chanting a rhythmic call-and-response with each other, "Come on Rovers—Come on Rovers—Come on Rovers!" as the team scooped the ball out of their own net and resumed play. Several minutes later, Rovers equalized with a goal from Scottish forward, Gary Twigg. Colie and a bunch of others rushed down the terraces, leaning over the railing, as close as they could get to the Shels supporters, and gave them the finger, laughing as they sang, "You're not singing anymore!"*

This particular example serves to show the collective back and forth that can occur between opposition communities. Songs and insults can be based on the unfolding events on the field, providing unique responses in ways that aim to outdo their opponents, not just on the field, but in the terraces as well. The ability of the Rovers supporters to collectively provide a clever response to the opposition supporters allows the SRFC Ultras to establish their symbolic dominance not just on the field, but also in the stands. Only minutes later, Rovers supporters returned to songs about Bohemians. "The amount of times we're on the TV winning a game and everyone's singing 'Are you watching Bohs scum?' It's kind of a way of letting smaller teams like Sligo [or Shels in this case] know that they really don't matter at all" (Fiachra O Brolachain, personal interview, 7/5/12).

However—though they'd hate to admit it—the Rovers community needs the Bohs community in order to create the desired matchday experience that balances on the cusp between physical and symbolic violence. Physical violence is a reality, but it is also a rarity. Yet, its presence is a necessary component in recreating an exhilarating matchday. Many supporters, especially the Ultras, relish the symbolic violence and conflict that takes place between opposition supporters in the stands and through the events on the field. As Gary Robson elucidates, "Such songs are not for arguing with because ritual thus enacted is neither explanatory nor discursive. Its core purpose and power lie in its capacity to activate an experiential sphere located, as Bourdieu has it, on the other side of discourse" (Robson 2000:170). Songs in this scenario do not necessarily reflect societal circumstances, but rather

construct and enact conflict in the present based on past events, reinforcing and continually stoking emotions between the two communities. They are used with the purpose of creating a tension-filled experience that actualizes violence in a non-violent way. Much likes Geertz' depiction of the Balinese cockfight, "The slaughter in the cock ring is not a depiction of how things literally are among men, but, what is almost worse, of how, from a particular angle, they imaginatively are" (1972:25).

## "No One Likes Us"

As individuals integrate themselves into the Shamrock Rovers community, their outlooks often change as to how the rest of the world perceives them. Songs reinforce and actualize the pervasive notion of "us versus them" as well as an "us against the world" mentality. As a general rule, Rovers fans feel that all other League of Ireland supporters look upon them with especially reserved disdain. Numerous songs fittingly describe the duality of Shamrock Rovers' existence, and their fans recognize themselves as both the best club in Ireland and the most widely hated. The strong reactions amongst opposition supporters towards Rovers have essentially made them, as described by Carlton Brick, "everybody's 'local rivals'" (2001:15).

Additionally, the Ultras' emerging perceptions of and identification with the collective Shamrock Rovers identity is seemingly at odds with their place in the broader shadow of Irish and even English culture. Because the *Ultra* style of support is not embedded in English football culture, instead originating in Italy, most people outside of the League of Ireland have a hard time understanding what being an Ultra actually entails. Through the adoption of a foreign style of support, the Ultras often find their own way of life at odds with the understanding of the greater Irish society, which is influenced by a perceived heavy presence of British culture—especially in the media and sports. In this light, many members of the Ultras recognize their actions as a symbolic mode of resistance.

The choice to adopt a style of singing and support from different areas of the world makes a statement about the Ultras' rejection of certain aspects of modern Irish society. Timothy Rice notes that, "Music can be understood . . . as a regime of self-creation (subjectification) and as a tool of resistance to those regimes" (2007:28). Furthermore, Rice asserts that "the ideology of creativity often associated with music gives the sense that composers and performers of music have the power, the agency if you will, to model new and alternative forms of behavior not given by the 'rationalized schemes' of everyday familial and government discourse and discipline" (ibid). The Ultras' style of performative behavior is such an activity that has understood implications as a rejection of the present cultural circumstances that pervade Ireland. This is understood within the group, but not necessarily by the society that they aim to distinguish themselves from.

The use of expressive body language and chants are thus empowering on multiple levels, containing layers of meaning and purpose. Participating in chants and the creation of atmosphere changes individuals' perspectives regarding their relationships with outgroups such as Bohemians, the League of Ireland community, and the greater Irish community: "Most people in this country only care about English football," said Newbie during our interview. "We take a bit of pride about the fact that many Irish fans go over to [Manchester] United and sit in a stadium full of 78,000 in silence—but at home games we get four or five thousand and at away games it could be only a thousand people and it's still much, much louder than those English stadiums." Perceived outgroups are essential to the Ultras' existence because they help to further define the Ultras and Rovers community by situating them within a broader context.

The Ultras' relationship with Bohemians is recreated by selected moments of violence between the two groups, effectively fueling present day animosities. Songs in this context serve to actualize the enemy and instigate emotional tension between the communities. Bohemians are constructed in chants as "scum" or "orange bastards." They also reflect the Rovers community's attributes in the face of adversity—such as bravery and strength. Though these vocal acts are largely symbolic for the Ultras, much exhilaration comes from the participants' knowledge that physical violence is a real possibility.

Being a part of the Rovers community also expresses a multi-dimensional sense that "no one likes us, we don't care," be it on a footballing level or a societal level that rejects the perceived cultural mainstream in Ireland. This SRFC Ultra experience alters its members' perceptions of the outside world—that people outside the collective can't (or won't) understand them: "Young men like to feel like they belong to a cause even though its only football," said Karl to me (Karl Seale, personal interview, 7/1/12). "They like to have the idea that we're hated by everyone, and it's me and these guys who are going to stick together and represent and we don't care." Karl laughed. "So *no one likes us and we don't care*. I love the whole idea" (ibid).

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