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In an exclusive interview, Christy Moore talks revealingly to Leagues O'Toole about music, community and life amidst restrictions



# Christy Moore: 'I need to distract myself from the loss of a way of life'

As a new compilation charts an essential and fascinating first decade for the singer, he reflects on the past, ponders life under Covid-19, and looks to the future in the only way he knows how: through the lens of song



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Christy Moore: 'Some songs I sing reflect where I've wanted to stand at different times in my life.' Camera Press/Pebbles Clinton

There are decades of great Irish music lost in the mire of history. Record labels that were once thriving cultural hubs are now dormant, and much of their music languishes as untapped folders abandoned deep in the system of an industry that constantly devours itself.

The 1970s and 1980s produced many great Irish folk and traditional records that have slipped through the cracks, not to mention the fingers of the very musicians who made them. Christy Moore's early albums represent key milestones in the journey he has undertaken as a recording artist. They contain songs that have endured and been revisited in some of his most recent live concerts. The albums themselves, however, haven't been readily accessible to fans for some time.

Thankfully, the recent acquisition of Tara Music's catalogue from that period by Universal Music Group has facilitated the release of Christy Moore - The Early Years 1969-1981. It's a vinyl, DVD and CD package, compiling recordings from Moore's first six albums, various lost EP tracks and rarely seen television performances from the RTÉ and BBC archives.

The Early Years project captures Moore's nascent navigation of the British 1960s folk club circuit, the process of collecting songs, the studio experience and the political movements that informed his music.

Three of those albums were part of Tara Music, set up in the 1970s by John Cook and Jack Fitzgerald. Cook owned a record store in the Dublin suburb of Rathfarnham, which he subsequently sold to Fitzgerald, who had his own shop specialising in American imports on Tara Street.



The Early Years captures Moore's navigation of the British 1960s folk club circuit

One record in particular had high demand was *Prosperous* (named after the town in Co Kildare), the second album from Christy Moore. He was then a young songwriter with a burgeoning cult following.

The album had been recorded by Bill Leader, a key figure from the British folk revival, in the basement of a house called Downings in Prosperous. An ensemble of carefully chosen musicians included the late, great Irish uilleann piper Liam O'Flynn, Andy Irvine of Sweeney's Men and Moore's old school friend Dónal Lunny.

*Prosperous* was released on the producer's own Leader label in Britain. Demand was so high back in Ireland for this beautiful new progressive melting pot of traditional Irish and folk styles, however, that Fitzgerald bought the rights and so Tara Records was born.

"Back in the 1960s, it was very, very difficult to gain access to the recording process," Moore explains to the *Business Post* from his home in Dublin. "Recording studios were big, expensive buildings controlled by the music business.

"Making an album back then was a much bigger deal than it is today. Literally anyone can record an album these days."

Moore's debut album *Paddy on the Road* was something of a false start, recorded with Dominic Behan in Chelsea's Sound Technique Studios and a band of hired jazz musicians. This was the wrong environment for a naïve young Irish folk singer, but it did teach him one key lesson.

To make the sort of records he wanted, he needed to think carefully about the musicians, the location and the technicians he worked with.

"Dominic Behan made my first album happen. There I learned how not to make an album," Moore admits.



Andy Irvine, Liam O'Flynn, Donal Lunny and Christy Moore of Planxty pictured in London in 1973

"Two years later, I got a second chance with Bill Leader. Bill understood what I wanted to do, and he helped me to achieve it. He came to Co Kildare with his two-track Revox tape recorder and two stereo microphones and he recorded that album which still resounds 50 years on.

"It was a special time. My sister Anne was married to Davoc Rynne and they were living in the Rynne family home in Prosperous. Liam, Dónal and myself grew up nearby and we felt very much at home in that basement, which had been the scene of many legendary music sessions.

"I still recall the excitement we felt as the music began to emerge, that early sound of Liam's playing being underpinned by Dónal and Andy's interplay with my rhythm underneath. It was a blissful experience which bore no comparison to my confusing experience in London two years previously."

## Musical credentials

The Tara Records label became a home to some of the most important and exciting new Irish music of its time. This included Stockton's Wing, who married their All-Ireland champion musicians' credentials with a grá for cosmic American folk-rock and country.

Tara also gave us Clannad, the otherworldly family band from Gweedore in Co Donegal, and the studio budgets which would ultimately take their phantasmic vision to a global audience. The label even fended off major international competition when Planxty got back together in 1979 for their brilliant *After the Break* album, releasing the record on its label.

Tara simultaneously paid tribute to "the pure drop" while finding a new eclectic way forward for traditional music. With the label gradually becoming less active and no distribution point for its back catalogue, however, much of this music has retreated into the shadows of history.

"Having delved into the Tara catalogue when licensing tracks for our Planxty release *Beyond the Jigs and the Reels: A Retrospective*," explains Universal Ireland director Mark Crossingham, "we realised how much music there was on Tara that deserved to be heard more widely."

"I had no idea this release was coming down the line," says Moore of The Early Years. "Universal acquired the Tara label and came up with this concept. I welcomed the idea and agreed to co-operate with them where possible.

"[The] truth was, they could have proceeded without consulting me. I have little or no rights over any of my early recorded work.

"They dug deep into the archives and uncovered long-since forgotten tracks. They agreed to drop certain tracks at my request; they also ran everything past me for approval.

"I've had some bad experiences with certain labels over the years, [but] there was another factor which was [that] Universal did a tasty job on the Planxty retro two years back. All four of us Planxtys were happy with that."

Planxty, of course, was the groundbreaking group that emerged from the Prosperous sessions and took Moore on an incredible journey for several years before he returned to his solo career. But it wasn't easy trying to re-establish himself as a performer under his own name.

Once again, destiny would lead Moore to a new circle of musicians who gave him the confidence to go back into the studio. Whatever *Tickles Your Fancy*, released in 1975, saw him form a new band around Donal Lunny, the brilliant London-Irish fiddler Kevin Burke (later of The Bothy Band), and two now sadly deceased legends of that era, guitarist Jimmy Faulkner and bassist Declan McNelis.

"Upon leaving Planxty, I was very much at sea. I found it very difficult to get work," Moore recalls. "Nicky Ryan, who had been Planxty's sound engineer, suggested that I meet up with Jimmy Faulkner. We began to play together in the Meeting Place in Dorset Street, Dublin, back in 1973.

"Then Jimmy introduced Declan McNelis, who joined us. I met Kevin Burke in London way back. I invited him to come to Dublin and we began to play as a four-piece. It was a difficult time, as gigs were scarce and travelling was hard. George McManus from Polydor London suggested to Polydor Dublin that they might record us. That was a strange experience.

"The head man in Dublin was a [music hall entertainer] Peggy Dell man. As we struggled to gain studio time and make ends meet, his mantra to me was: 'I recorded two albums with Peggy Dell in one morning.' But we got it done, and here it is coming around again.

"What was I trying to achieve? All I can say is, whatever tickled our fancy! We enjoyed playing together, we had a good innings musically, with absolutely no financial success or stability. But we soldiered on."

### Unmistakable voice



Christy Moore in 1981

The Early Years is a fascinating portrait of Moore's artistic development. His voice is unmistakable on those early recordings, but at the same time it is a raspier version of the tender and controlled performances we later became accustomed to.

"Like all my other bits and pieces, my voice has changed a lot since 1968," he says. "The range is narrower, my bass end is closer to the ground. These days, I sometimes risk falsetto - [it] doesn't always work! But some of the changes are very positive. Across the 1990s, I began to treat my voice with more respect, to recognise it was an instrument that needed care and attention.

"In the 1960s and 1970s, I never gave the instrument itself very much thought. I certainly did not look after it. Also, along the way I found my own singing style. For years, I copied every singer I admired, but gradually my own voice emerged."

This period of Moore's musical life also coincides with the anti-nuclear movement, a cause heavily adopted by the leftist folk community. In Ireland, fear was mounting that Taoiseach Jack Lynch would endorse an ESB bid to mount a power plant at Carnsore Point in Co Wexford.

The reaction from Ireland's arts community, aligned with a plethora of international activist organisations, was inspiring. More importantly, it was successful. The powers that be backed down in the face of large festival gatherings such as the Anti-Nuclear Power Show.

This period also produced songs including House Down in Carne (The Ballad of Nuke Power), written by Jim 'Doc' Whelan and given to Moore. It's one of literally dozens of what we commonly refer to as "protest songs" littered across The Early Years. That, however, is a term Moore does not personally connect with.

"I was at the first meeting when the Irish Anti-Nuclear Movement was formed," he recalls. "There was one other musician there, the late Tommy Peoples. All the others came later and together we built a powerful movement.

"But Carnsore was only part of an ongoing experience. I remember internment, Bloody Sunday, the blanket protest, the hunger strikes, a hundred picket lines, the never-ending list of good causes worthy of support.

"Meeting surviving brigadistas [from the Spanish Civil War], powerfully brave anti-fascists, the Nicky Kelly campaign, the miners' strike, hands off the GLC, equal rights, the Eighth [amendment] - it goes on and on. There are always new campaigns as the world evolves.

"I find phrases like 'protest singer', 'protest songs', too convenient, lazy terms used generally to trivialise the subject matter of songs that deal with issues of war, murder, rape, oppression, racism, exploitation, gender, clerical abuse . . . the list could go on.

"Some songs I sing reflect where I've wanted to stand at different times in my life. Dick Gaughan writes about it in A Different Kind of Love Song. I consider Magdalene Laundry, On the Blanket, Strange Ways, Veronica, Tyrone Boys, Ann Lovett, Ordinary Man to be love songs . . . different kinds of love songs. These songs are very important to me. Certain other songs oil the wheels that drive the wagons."

Whether the songs were written by Moore himself or learned from someone he met on the road, each one represents a moment. The Early Years is a roll-call of obscure and famous names who gave Moore the material that filled his repertoire. It includes the socialist folk power couple Peggy Seeger and Ewan MacColl, Elizabeth Cronin, Mike Harding, Barney Rushe, Andy Rynne, Colm Ó Lochlainn's Irish Street Ballads, John Reilly, 'Galway Joe' Dolan, and Muriel Graves. All these people enriched Moore's songbook but there is one influence who he cites above everyone else, one which takes him right back to the source: Nancy Power.

"Everything comes from our mothers," Moore says. "They give us life, carry us, create our blood and mould our bone. My mother was Nancy Power from the Yellow Furze in Co Meath. Nancy sang every day. We all grew up hearing her sing. She remains my earliest and my greatest influence.

"She left us almost 30 years ago, but still gives me a dig-out. There were many who helped and influenced my music but none so much as Neans de Paor."

#### Altered lives



Moore on stage at the Feis Festival in Finsbury Park in London in 2011



With this new retrospective release, Moore may take some time to reflect on the past, as no doubt we all are doing in Covid-19 times. We each have our own experience, and have had our lives altered dramatically.

We've had vital activities taken away from us and restrictions placed on the very things which we attribute to keeping us mindful and healthy, and which can combat the anxieties we experience in times of crisis. It feels like a cruel irony for many of us.

At 75 years of age, Moore is still in one of the most active gigging periods of his life. But, as is the case with all artists in Ireland, that has suddenly been taken away from him. How does someone like him fill that sudden void in his life? How does he cope with Covid-19?

"Deep down, I don't know what the fuck is going on," Moore says. "It is hard to know who or what to believe. It is hard to know when nobody knows. We are living in lockdown and trying to do the best we can. More than anything, my wife Valerie and I miss the weekly visits of our grandchildren. What keeps me going more than anything else is sharing this life with my partner of almost 50 years. That, and the love of our 'chadults' who have grown up to become our friends, plus our extended families.

"Most times, I feel I can get on with it; sometimes feelings of fear and hopelessness emerge, but I don't go under. My wife and I and our family have so far remained healthy. I feel very privileged to have family, to have a home and work to sustain me. It's a hard time, but not as hard as World War II which our parents endured, or World War I which our grandparents endured, or the Famine which our great-grandparents endured.

"Then again, the world itself has never been like this before, teetering on the brink. I have strong feelings about where we are at as a species on this planet, but I haven't got my thesis fully sussed yet.

"We try to keep busy here. I need to distract myself from the loss of a way of life. I've been gigging constantly since 1966. I miss my fellow musicians, my workmates, my listeners. The whole live music industry has shut down, and so many people are left at the bottom of the pile.

"Every gig we do would involve between 60 and 70 people when everyone concerned is listed. It might be advertised as 'my gig' but there are numerous others involved. Band, crew, management, agents, promoters, publicity, sound, lighting, transport, accommodation, food, security, venue staff, and all the back-up. I miss all the interactions that take place around our workplace, the friendship, the crack, the banter."

In saying that, Moore is quick to point out his good fortune, in having come to a place in life where he has financial ease.

"We are privileged," he says. "We have a mortgage-free home. We are a tight-knit family. I'm way past retirement age, I'm 75 but I have songs to work on each day, I constantly revisit my working repertoire. I exercise daily and keep up routines that help to keep depression at bay.

"In all my working life I've never had so much time to prepare an album. I've always been a gatherer of songs. I've been offered a number of very good songs which are ready to record.

"Also, I have written one or two songs that may make it onto the next collection. I'm also considering a number of songs that I recorded 30, 40, 50 years ago that I consider may be worth revisiting. All in all, I've got a lot of work here to keep me well occupied in this Covid, gig-less time."

The future of the concert industry is uncertain. As has been repeatedly pointed out, it was one of the first industries to shut and will be one of the last to re-open. Right now, Moore can only dream of those nights in Vicar Street in Dublin or the Barrowlands in Glasgow or the Marquee in Cork or some tiny backroom in the middle of nowhere.

He has a beautifully complicit understanding with his audience these days, and they sign up for an experience that can encompass pain, humour, love, and divilment all over the course of two hours. To help alleviate that sense of absence Moore recently played online for his fans, transmitting the songs from an empty National Concert Hall in Dublin to a global audience.

"It was quite an experience. I've never had such worldwide feedback to a performance before. I spent weeks before preparing mentally for the 'empty' room. I ignored the emptiness and sought to project the songs out to thousands of living rooms around the world. Those far-flung listeners were my audience on the night and I sang to each and every one of them."

"I'd love to do it again but not half as much as I'd love to head out the road to some gig. I keep imagining that beloved side-of-stage experience, the final moments as the lights go down, that waft of perfume and aftershave from a roomful of enthusiastic listeners.

"There's a bit of my head-space still lingering around those old folk clubs: I must have played a thousand of them. Played to four listeners in Aberdeen in 1967, to 50,000 in Glastonbury decades later, last week to 50 in Lisdoonvarna, last Saturday to an empty National Concert Hall. The world changes, everything changes all the time. I'll just keep singing as long as I've got a voice and the strength to carry it."

Moore smiles as he thinks of the circular nature of things. "Here I am back again where I was in 1966, trying to figure out how to get a gig!"

*The Early Years 1969-1981 is released on Universal Music on November 13*