

Christy Moore, Botanic Gardens, Belfast

June 5, 2024



Behold, the great presence of Christy Moore in Botanic Gardens, Belfast. The stage is draped in black and he's up there with his guitar for the best part of two hours. You know most of the songs as this 79-year-old tilts from rage and sorrow to sweetness and levity. He sings of a nation's difficult progress. He notes the villains and the victims. He'll make you cry and there are moments in the crowd when friends embrace each other and the hurt passes through them.



Christy Moore in Belfast, 2024. By Stuart Bailie

He sings 'They Never Came Home', remembering the 48 young people who died in the Stardust nightclub fire in 1981. The lyrics provoked a legal action and the song's removal from his *Ordinary Man* album. But Christy and the families were vindicated this year when Dublin's Coroner's Court declared that it was "unlawful killing". So, the song is revived and he sings about the fire and the chained-up escape exits, with no hesitation or apology. One of the dead was Jim Millar from Twinbrook and the singer makes the local connection and praises Jim's relatives for their justice mission.

He touches you when he sings of the exiles in Chicago, dreaming of the hills of Donegal. He locates the tender heart of the Richard Thompson story in 'Beeswing'. It's a delight to recall the inspiring role of Jack Charlton and the Euro '88 adventures – a time when Ireland was kicking off the remnants of a cultural cringe and Joxer had the best holiday of his life. Likewise, 'Lisdoonvarna' causes major joy, a memory of the formative festival in Clare and the blossoming of the island's music capacity.



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But Christy is not merely a nostalgia act. He sings 'Palestine' by Jim Page. The words are unequivocal: "*What can you do, when they demolish your home?*" he asks, "*and your olive trees, all buried and gone?*" A flag is raised out of the audience and the keffiyehs are unwrapped in solidarity. He continues: "*They talk about peace, like it's a moral obligation, but you'll never have peace under occupation.*"

He played Belfast 50 years ago with Planxty, when he sang the Mickey MacConnell song, 'Only Our Rivers'. It was the start of a relationship with struggle in the north, with Bloody Sunday, internment and the hunger strikes. Tonight, that finds expression in 'No Time for Love', 'Back Home in Derry', 'The Time Has Come' and 'The Boy from Tamlaghduff'.



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These are still raw memories and mostly the music is received quietly and sadly. But a feverish young man at the front show keeps shouting “Up the ‘RA” between songs, and Christy isn’t keen. He jokes and deflects and asks the boy’s companions to box his ears. The message is received, quiet follows and the singer resumes his authority. “Never mind blowing kisses at me,” he tells him. “I know you’re a bollix.”

There is another viewpoint in the song ‘Lyra McKee’ by James Cramer, which questions the work of dissident republicans. This leads into the ceasefire confession, ‘North and South of the River’. Rather than fury and fixed points, there is nuance along the borderline:

*“Can we stop playing these old tattoos,
Darling I don’t have the answer.
I want to meet you where you are,
I don’t need you to surrender.
There is no feeling so alone
As when the one you’re hurting is your own.”*



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Other songs in his set are more intensely received but this is one of the most important. Christy walks us through awful commemorations and wrongs that need fixing. He provides conscience and empathy. As with the American songwriter Woody Guthrie, he has made injustice a matter of record. Surely Christy feels the massive love when he leaves Belfast with 'Sonny'. Such an artist. Will his likes be seen again? Unlikely.

Stuart Bailie

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