

“...Life Ain’t No Good No How, Without A Song.’

by Terry Ryan

A song. Just a short poem set to a pattern of musical notes. A pattern which each generation arranges to suit its own rhythms. But no matter how banal, how trite, songs become time-capsules, fossilized in emotion. Preserved in the strata of memory that makes a life..

As Noel Coward said, “Extraordinary how potent cheap music is”.

A moment happened on the Classic Movie Channel the other day. The film was “It Happened One Night”. Oscar-winner in 1934. The scene, the interior of a Greyhound Bus. The Passengers, desperate itinerants looking for jobs in the Great Depression. One of them, shabby, weathered-hated, starts to sing.

“Once I was happy, now I’m forlorn.

Like an old coat that is tattered and torn...”

I didn't know it. It sounded appropriately sad. But when he got to the chorus the whole bus joined in, their spirits lifting.

“He flies through the air with the greatest of ease

The daring young man on the flying trapeze

His movements are graceful, the girls he doth please

And my love he have stolen away.”

And I was beamed back. My Mum singing that chorus, the only part she knew. As a highlight in a life, not very significant. But it is the first memory that I can now put a year to. The film was generally released in 1935. Clark Gable took off his shirt and he wasn't wearing a vest.

And my Mum loved it.

Throughout my childhood, my Mum sang. She sang because she had plenty of reasons not to. And as she sang,. you could hear her cheering up. She sang at the sink. Sang cooking.. Even sang when red-leading the front step.

She had a powerful, key-perfect, untrained voice. And she sang seamlessly, a mixture of, Irish songs, both sad and comic. Music-hall songs, songs from musicals and light operetta Plus the odd Hymn when she needed the money and had nothing left to pawn. To these she would add mangled versions of the current songs which she routinely Spoonered and Malapropped.

Mum was born in 1901 in Clonmel, Tipperary. A town where to be illegitimate was akin to being a murderess. And Mum was illegitimate. A secret she kept pretty ineptly. But I believed her story of a Father who died in a fire, "rescuing horses". The fact that Mum's maiden name was Disney, the same as her Mother's, was to me not the least suspicious. And throughout her life, I let her keep her secret, Her Mother was sent away to be a 'House-keeper" to a man named Green. A morganatic marriage. they call it.

Loving Grand-parents brought her up .But they couldn't prevent the cruelties. The Priest, banning her from Benediction. Friendships abruptly terminated..

Songs learned from her Grandmother, Mum belted out, lyric perfect. The Croppy Boy was one. A ballad in which Albion was particularly perfidious, A Croppy Boy - an orphan - confesses his childish sins to a Priest, who is a disguised English Army Captain in *"fiery glare "*.

*"In fiery glare and in fury worse,
Instead of a blessing, he breathed a curse."*

Instead of a blessing, a curse. You couldn't get more perfidious than that, could you? Oh yes you could. That Yeoman Captain went on to hang the poor lad in Geneva Barracks, Waterford..

Another was *"The Blind Man he did see"*. A sorry tale about a woman who *"... loved her Husband very much but another man twice as well "*. and how the Husband frustrated her attempt to murder him.

Pretty maudlin material.

But they were joyous compared to *"Terence 's Goodbye to his Mary."* Terence, his Wife Mary having died in childbirth, was off to New York. So, being Irish, he had to sing about it,

"I'm sitting on the style Mary where we sat side by side..."

The song dirged on while they buried Mary with *"your Baby at your breast."* And then Mum would sing the first verse again. This time cheekily adding a lavatorial 'h' to the verbs in that opening line.

Exquisitely naughty to this small Boy.

When Mum's last Grandparent died, her Uncle Simon and Auntie Dotty moved into the family home and threw her out, selling her off to be a scullery maid in England. She was just fourteen.

Mum spent the next seventy two years in London, never lost her brogue.

Mum's missing father: I have been told he was English, a soldier, that he was the scion of a local rich family. But I believe none of these..

The secret's more guilty than that.

I think he was Jewish, which in those days in Ireland, was worse then being a Bastard.

To be a Jewish Bastard was double-dammed.

You just had to look at my Mum's nose, apart from memories, her only legacy to me. It's a nose like no other in the Disney family. Made Streisand's look positively gentile.. It could have been used as the template for the one Ron Moody stuck on his face for the part of Fagin..

And her first employers? You guessed it, they were Jewish.

And while she cleaned their scullery, Mum sang "My Little Grey Home in the West" and "The Moon shines bright on Charlie Chaplin".

She met her first husband, in nineteen-nineteen. At a demonstration outside Wormwood Scrubs Prison, where Terence Mac Sweeney, the Mayor of Cork, was

starving himself to death. Chris Reardon was an, ex-Machine-Gunner in the Royal Munster's. He killed so many Germans, he threw away his medals and never talked about it.

In their short courtship. they went to see Josie Collins in *The Bohemian Girl*.

And Mum never forgot the magic of that night. Or the main song "I dreamt I dwelt in Marble Halls."

They were married in the same year. By now Mum had added "*Sweet Mystery of Life*" and "*Come, come I want you only*" to her repertoire.

These were her happy years.

In 1929, Mum was a widow. With two boys under six, no pension, no job and no skill apart from house-cleaning,

And my brothers were listening to Mum sing "*My desert is waiting...*" and "*When I'm calling you-o-o-o-o-o-o.*"

She met Dad in 1932. Martin had spent the War in the Medical Corps.. Seeing so much horror, he threw away his medals and never talked about it.

He needed a home. She needed a Husband, They married in the same year.

There was another pressing reason.

Me.

Mum always insisted that I was three months premature, though I weighed in at seven-and-a-half-pounds. How big would I have been if I had gone full term?

And then I heard her singing *"The Daring young Man on the Flying Trapeze."* My sister was born, and though Mum was singing *"Sally"*, they called her Shirley. And though Shirley nearly died from Scarlet Fever, Mum kept singing.

On September the First, 1939, they took her Babies away And Mum sang *"Some day my Prince will come..."*

As the bombs fell, Mum was hanging out the washing on the Seigfried Line. Nursing my young Brother, she sang *"Old Mother Riley went milking a cow..."*. The woman yanked the wrong part of the cow's anatomy with odious results. When Buzz-Bombs and V2's rained down, she sang *"They'll always be an England..."* My Baby Sister was rocked to sleep to *"Ashby de la Zouch Castle Abbey"*, except Mum sited the Abbey in Cashel.

And though they cut out her kidney, she sang *"Deep in the heart of Texas"*.

With Victory, she sang *"Lets not be beastly to the Germans..."* "but she didn't mean it. Around 1950, Mum created her Master-work. She entwined an unlikely miscegenation,. fusing the U.S. Army marching song "Sound-Off" with the folk-song "The Higher up the Cherry Tree" The songs featured in two different films in a Double-Feature Mum had been to. The resulting farrago was:

"E goes the cherry-tree, 'e goes the Cherries.

E goes the cherry-tree, 'e goes the Cherries.

E goes the Cherry tree, take me back to Gay Parree..."

Mum belted it out with the confidence of Gracie Fields. And the neighbours never

complained.

On my wedding morning she took my hand because “I was a stranger in paradise.”

Perhaps she took a pause for breath when Dad died.

Then her first born.

But she was singing again in the Seventies. “I dreamt I dwelt in Marble Halls”,
perhaps dreaming of that happy time..

And then my sister, the youngest in the family committed suicide...

She never sang again..

Did she have a favourite song?

Oh yes! And she could never finish it without tears.

“If ever I’m left in this world all alone

I’ll wait for my call patiently.

And if heaven be kind I’ll awake there to find

Those two eyes of blue, come smiling through at me.”

As Noel Coward said. “Extraordinary how potent cheap music is.”