

**'Is this the Real Life? Is This Just Fantasy?'**  
**How Tribute Bands have taken Centre Stage over the**  
**past two Decades**

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## Introduction

*'What do you mean?*

*You're living out someone else's dream*

*What does that mean?'* – Philip Paris Lynott

This series of five feature articles is focusing on the Tribute Band phenomena in Irish Popular Music Culture.

Even though there is a great diversity of tribute entertainment offered, the topic doesn't get much attention in the media. This is despite the big market there is for tribute bands in Ireland nowadays. It's a fascinating phenomenon, which also very often is overlooked on the music scene, even though the tribute band scene is ever increasing.

In this series the scene is examined through interviews with musicians, promoters, journalists and family members of passed musical legends. It is also looked at through the fans eyes and studied through live observations.

The articles will highlight how this new sub-culture appeared over the past two decades, how it has changed and what effects the recession has had on the scene - if it's still possible to make a living in this increasingly competitive industry.

The series will also look at how it is to be a member of a tribute band and to keep your heroes' spirits alive, by bringing their music back to the live scene. And on how to do this with a ready-made critical fan-base, who is not scared to tell you if they don't think it adds up.

The tribute bands have to identify themselves with their characters and many have to step fully into their shoes by using costumes, make up, stage effects and other supplements.

They work hard to sculpt their shows into perfection and they take their craft very seriously. After all they are the ones keeping the legacies of the legends alive.

*By Linn Therese Heldal*

As far as tribute bands are concerned, and keeping the spirit of the Thin Lizzy rockers alive, 'Thin Az Lizzy' are right up there with the most well-respected. The band, with frontman John 'Johnny Fox' Conlan, were known to be more than a mere tribute band. In their time, they captured Thin Lizzy's unique thrill of rhythm and rock, in venues all over Europe and Ireland, showing that the world is 'Still (very much) in Love' with Phil Lynott.

The times we find ourselves in, and with concert tickets costing an arm and a leg, tribute entertainment has become a significant and valuable part of the Irish music scene. The tribute bands' recreations of the legends of the past are presented to new generations of fans and followers.

So, what really is the deal about tribute bands - the fairly new phenomena in live music, which has taken centre stage in the last couple of decades? And which prominence only seems to grow?

Just a glance at the Irish Ticketmaster site shows a great variety of tribute acts, playing all around the country, in venues ranging from local pubs to regional theatres and full-sized stadiums. Ticketmaster.ie even have a separate category for tribute bands, right under the rock/pop category. This is not the case on other European Ticketmaster sites, such as in Scandinavia, Germany, Holland and France.

Ireland certainly has one of the largest tribute scenes on the continent, and Irish tribute bands achieve success all around Europe, some even across the pond.

Johnny Fox, from Thin Az Lizzy, is central name on the Irish scene. Back in 1995, he and some of his musician mates decided to put on a tribute gig, for their ultimate rock heroes, Thin Lizzy, in their hometown Dundalk.

John invited Philomena Lynott (mother of Phil Lynott of Thin Lizzy) and Smiley Bolger (promoter of the Thin Lizzy tribute festival 'Vibe for Philo'), to come to the concert. They both came, and "it was great craic," he said as he smiled.

Little did he know that the gig would be the start of a long career as frontman in Thin Az Lizzy. John and the boys quickly established themselves as the number one Thin Lizzy tribute in Europe and Ireland. By 1997, the band had 150 gigs in their diaries, in prestigious venues all over the continent, and of course, back home in the old country. The band's European tour, 'Excess all Areas Tour' was the most widespread list of dates ever done by an Irish tribute act. John ended up rocking out Thin Lizzy classics full time for eight years.

"By 1999 we were very popular, it was a good band - it was tight. We were gigging three or four times a week and built up followers. We were getting great gigs with large crowds and we made a good living out of it. The scene has definitely grown, there weren't so many tribute bands floating around back then," he recalled.

John can be called a veteran amongst tributes and he knows all there is to know about how to make a living in the tribute game. He thinks the scene mainly works because people know what they are getting and thankfully there is still a great demand for live music. "Tribute bands and live music in general, and pubs and venues putting on more live gigs, will help towards making the music scene in Ireland healthier," said John.

Thin Az Lizzy used to play every year at the Dublin tribute festival Vibe for Philo, which is an anniversary in honour of the life and craft of the passed-away, legendary rock star Phil Lynott. Punters from all over the world flock to Dublin every January for the festival, which takes place in one of the big venues in town.

The creative director of the festival is Smiley Bolger, music journalist, Thin Lizzy icon and close friend to Phil Lynott. Having a long history on the Dublin rock scene and

the tribute scene in particular, he thinks that all musicians are tributes in one way or another: "It can be either their influences, tonal expressions, attitude or dress code."

Smiley also means that there are very few original artists in the world, as everyone grows up listening to various musical styles, it will all influence them in one way or another: "It's the fusion of these styles that becomes the art form that they may later be acclaimed for," he said.

In relation to the festival he promotes, he thinks that it's very important to have bands that are well rehearsed and used to play in front of a large live audience. "We need someone who knows their chops, are tried and tested and who can deliver with a sense of grace."

That doesn't mean that the festival have no time for up-and-coming new acts, in fact it has it's own day to showcase young aspiring talent - the 'Young Rockers Matinee.' The show lets the youngsters play together with the main bands in front of a big, grown up audience.

Every year the Vibe for Philo also invite special artists to recreate Thin Lizzy's music in a new style, it be by rap, dance, trad or jazz. "In general we like to push musical boundaries at the Vibe, by inviting these artists to work their magic on new arrangements of Phillip's music," said Smiley.

Dublin soul/indie rock band Sal Vitro and classical guitarist Pat Coldrick, are good examples from this year's event.

Being in a tribute band can be an extraordinary experience and lead to other things, such as playing with ex-members of the original band and people who has been involved with the original music.

It was at the Vibe for Philo Johnny Fox first met saxophone player John 'Irish' Earle. John Earle, who passed away in 2008, was widely known for his contribution on Thin

Lizzy's album *Live and Dangerous* and especially for his solo on the fabled tune *Dancing in the Moonlight*.

"The band were like 'there is John Earle, go talk to him!'" So John went over, they got talking and he asked him if he wanted to do some gigs with Thin Az Lizzy. The band had just been offered a gig at the Olympia Theatre, so they felt they had a great platform to ask him on.

John Earle said yes to John and the boys, and came on-board for more gigs after the Olympia. John had a great time on the road with John Earle and he especially recalled an episode from a show they did in Sligo. After the show they all went back to where they were staying for a few drinks. One of the roadies fell asleep and started snoring like crazy. John and the boys were very privileged to play with John Earle, and wanted him to feel comfortable, so John asked him if he was going to be able to sleep. 'Snoring doesn't bother me at all!' John Earle said.

"When I woke up the next morning John Earle was gone and I found him asleep in the kitchen. He said, 'I couldn't stand that snoring!' I thought it didn't bother you', I said. Then he laughed: 'Well how wrong can a human being possibly be!'" John laughed.

Other veterans on the scene are the Queen tribute, Belfast band, 'Flash Harry'. Drummer, Stevie Shanks, also believes that his career with Flash Harry has taken him to places he wouldn't have been otherwise: "There have been some pretty special gigs and some pretty special moments, which I don't think I would have achieved outside of Flash Harry. Well, I'll never know though!" he laughed.

The band played their first gig in 1992, at the Ulster Hall, on the first anniversary of Freddie Mercury's death. Later on, their recreation of Queen's music has taken them as far as playing at the Royal Albert Hall and at a sold out Odyssey Arena, where they had a 50 piece choir and the Ulster Orchestra on stage with them.

“The scene has changed quite a bit and has definitely grown. In 1992 there were only a handful of bands doing a ‘tribute’ show. There is a whole genre of music now, which can be defined as the tribute scene,” said Stevie.

He recalls that back when they started out, a tribute artist was a new thing and it was always done as a big event - therefore the bands and the shows had to be big productions. Nowadays, folks can get tribute entertainment any day of the week and in any local pub, mostly by solo performers doing walk-ons. “For me, it has taken the magic out of the tribute scene, but for others it has made it much more accessible, which is a good thing.”

The music scene in general has evolved and in this digital age, the regular form of an original band - the making of an album and the tour cycle, is not as popular as it used to be. “New artists are more structured in terms of sound, image and promotion, but there is still a huge market for what went on before, basically because it was so good!” said Stevie.

For the fans, tributes can be a goldmine. Not only do they get to hear all the hits in one night, it will also usually be for a tenth of the price as the original band. For many, tribute bands certainly become the next best thing as entertainment. Also, obviously, if the band is not around anymore, the demand is bound to escalate. “There will of course be die-hard fans, who will want the new stuff and will snub tributes, but that’s ok and is to be respected.”

Speaking as a drummer in a Queen tribute band for over 20 years, Stevie says it has been the best experience of his life. “I never tire of playing the music and the shows never get old! We can also change things around for the fans, as Queen had so much to draw on both in terms of music and stage theatrics,” he said-

Despite the great diversity of tribute entertainment, and the fact that people pay their hard earned money to see them perform, the phenomena doesn’t seem to get much attention in the media and it is often overlooked on the music scene.

This is what university lecturer and author, Georgina Gregory, wanted to highlight by

writing the book *Send in the Clones, a Cultural Study of the Tribute Band* (2012)

“Nobody else have appeared to take this important phenomenon seriously, despite the growing popularity of tributes and the ever increasing number of venues offering tribute entertainment.” said Georgina.

“With media-coverage and those all-important record sales figures being the main yardsticks, tribute acts often fail to fit within the benchmarking system - they are effectively invisible,” she added.

After researching the topic though, she predicts a bright future for the tribute scene, with increasing status and fame: “I think they will only become more and more common and in the future, people will probably train up a corp of tribute artists to play their repertoire live,” she finished.

Stevie Shanks also thinks that the scene in general will continue to grow. He believes that with any style of performance, there are going to be good ones, and some really bad ones. But he must admit that he have seen some pretty amazing tributes over the years, and not just in relation to Queen. “Some of the solo performers are astonishing. You can walk into a local pub and sometimes see an attribute playing and sounding better than the original! The sky is the limit and so is your imagination. If you can imagine it and believe in your act, then you can do it!”

Johnny Fox believes that the trick of the trade in the tribute game is to be in love with the music you’re playing. “I have always been a huge, massive fan of Thin Lizzy, so for me to be able to play their music in big venues was kind of a little dream come true,” he said.

In the hallway of his big and modern house just outside Dundalk town, which he bought when Thin Az Lizzy were at their peak, hangs a framed newspaper article on the wall. The article is published in the Evening Herald on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 1993 and is written by Eamon Carr, drummer in the legendary Celtic rock band, Horslips.

Philomena Lynott, the mother of John's biggest idol, whom he calls "The Ultimate Rocker", Phil Lynott, is quoted: 'A young man from Dundalk called John Conlan sent me a song called *Crazy Dream*, which he wrote for Philip, and the interesting thing is that he sings just like Philip'.

*By Linn Therese Heldal*

'Agnetha' is standing in the spotlight. She is wearing a silver lamé cape, a glittering white mini dress and white platform boots, which are clearly not for beginners. With her Swedish accent she calls out to the audience: 'This is for all you Dancing Queens!' She bounces her 70's style, super shiny, blonde locks and throws herself into the song.

But wait a minute, ABBA disbanded in 1982, and even if they were to do a concert in 2014, they would have been way more likely to do it in the Odyssey Arena, than in the Empire Music Hall.

The 'Agnetha' performing is actually Karen Rush, singer and actress from Belfast. Her brainchild 'Björn Identity' is a tribute band for the Swedish ultimate pop group and disco-darlings.

To get something straight, there are two different types of tribute bands, the ones who do dress up, and the ones who don't. For the ones who do, the music and look goes hand in hand, and their success hinge on how thoroughly they can give the fans a sensation of actually experiencing the original. The resemblance can often be astonishing, as the aim is exact imitation of the voice, sound, look and behaviour.

"You need to study their musicianship, get the instrumentation correct and study their vocals and intricate harmonies. This is in a way the key, but what is almost just as important on the impersonations side, is getting the look right," said Karen.

Earlier this year, the original ABBA revealed that their unforgettable stage outfits, was worn due to tax reasons. According to Swedish law, if the outfits are too outrageous for daily wear, it allowed for tax deduction.

This doesn't mean that the copycats in any way are letting go of the glitter, lamé and lycra. The group have spent thousands of pounds on replica costumes, instruments and set pieces. They also have gigantic ABBA gold letters and Benny's iconic, white

Yamaha piano on stage with them. The girls change their costumes five times during a show, in-between belting out ABBA's greatest hits.

Just like the original group, they are keeping it in the family. Karen is married in real life to Richard Doubleday, which is the group's Björn Ulvaeus, just as Agnetha Faltskog was. She thinks this is something that adds to the band's authenticity as a tribute.

The couple's tribute careers' started out in London, where they toured with many top ABBA tributes, such as ABBA Mania, Thank you for the Music, and Bootleg ABBA.

After touring stadiums and venues all over the world, Karen and Richard decided to put their passion for ABBA in their suitcases, and move home to Belfast, to create their own ABBA show for the Irish market.

They quickly established themselves as a tribute band - clearly there was a great demand. The Empire Music Hall decided to 'Take a Chance' on Björn Identity, and the response was great. The venue itself stated: 'We haven't had an ABBA tribute perform on the Empire stage for years, because UNTIL NOW, we couldn't find one good enough.'

The band gets a lot of feedback from people who say they booked them because of their look and their image perfection. Karen thinks that this is because they blow promoters' expectations of tacky ABBA bands out of the water a bit. "It's because of our quite authentic show both in likeness and sound. It really helps to give the band a cool and clever name too!"

Even though appearance and image is very important factors for an ABBA tribute band, 'The Name of the Game' is certainly not just to put on a disco dress costume and wing it.

Björn Identity is trying to pay tribute to some of the most loved singers in the world and the expectations are high. Not a day goes by when the band don't listen to the original ABBA songs, to make sure they don't fall into any of their own bad habits on

their interpretations of ABBA's vocals.

"We do vocal exercises while we put on our makeup. Just before we enter the stage we like to do a four part harmony version of *Staying Alive*, by Bee Gees, to get us in the right mood!" said Karen.

It's not just the voices that need a warm up pre-gig; the girls also do a physical warm up, so they won't injure themselves. "Certainly not easy to dance in knee high platforms for two hours!" said Karen. The boys have an easier job, 'Benny' warms up his fingers for playing piano and 'Björn' tunes in his guitar.

Three of the band members are professionally trained actors and musicians from theatre, TV and musical theatre backgrounds. They try their utmost to portray the ABBA idiosyncratic on stage and each member steps fully into their character's shoes.

Agnetha was known for turning her back to the crowd and wiggling her bottom (hence voted rear of the year). Frida was an energetic, fierily performer and danced a lot more than Agnetha. Björn tended to play guitar with one leg turned in and did a funny bounce. Benny was all about the acrobatics of playing amazing piano and shaking his long hair about. "We try to keep them all in character, as they were four individuals who all brought their own special elements to the magic that was ABBA."

The tributes ability to step into the part they're playing, was what became a dilemma for author Georgina Gregory, when she was doing the research for her book *Send in the Clones, a Cultural Study of the Tribute Band* (2012). She did most of her research by observations and interviews, before and after the gigs, when the tributes were in their roles. "It was sometimes very confusing to establish the extent to which you are interviewing the person as representing the artist they pay tribute to, or if it is the real person you are talking to."

At the same time, she also found them very fascinating and she thinks sometimes the similarity was extraordinary: "It is amazing that the fans express all this love for artists who have long passed away and that the feelings remain so constant. I also

found it astonishing that the tributes actually become the artist they were paying tribute to,” said Georgina.

Even though the overall aim is to ‘become’ your character, Karen thinks that the acting should end when the wig is off and the show is over. “We really love our job, but it is still a job. We don’t walk around thinking we actually are ABBA,” she said.

‘Bono’ in Ireland’s ultimate U2 tribute ‘Zooropa’, Mark Breen, agrees with Karen. As much as he thinks it’s great to play the music that he loves and to share it with three other talented guys, he doesn’t think it should affect his life in other ways.

He thinks the impersonation should definitely end by the stage door, although that may not always be the case. “Friends and family actually now refer to me as Bono. So do the other members of the band after the shows, although it’s usually ‘Hey Bono get those glasses off and put those speakers in the van!’” Mark laughed.

And it seems as if the two Bonos’ may share the same extravagant lifestyle: “If our gig is 10pm, I try to sleep until 6pm, then the wife will pour me a glass of red wine and leave it out for me with an unlit cigar. I gave up smoking years ago, but I still like to flirt with them.

I wish that was true!” he laughed.

According to Mark, that couldn’t actually be further away from reality. He’s usually working on a gig day, so he is always under a bit of time pressure. Therefore the preparation has to be done in the days leading up to the show. The band has a rehearsal prior to the gig and they have to constantly communicate with each other over phone and emails.

They try to make their shows as authentic as possible, and there is a lot of prep to be done before they can interpret U2’s fine, electrifying art. They have to do research on what is needed to reproduce U2’s sounds and visuals and the most important thing for them is to do the homework. They spend hours studying their character’s musical style, by watching footage and rehearsing. “It is very important that all

members of the group subscribe to this process, or the progress will be very slow, if not impossible,” said Mark.

One thing the band always does, before and after each show, is to get into a big group hug. “Some people call that bonding, but it’s more of a brotherly spiritually kind of thing for us, which must sound weird! But we have done it since our first gig. It’s like we have started this journey together and we will finish it together. Something like that is very rare in bands,” Mark said.

Brotherly spiritual thing or not brotherly spiritual thing, it would actually be weird if Zooropa wasn’t a bit weird, after all their tribute band name is U2’s weirdest effort of an album.

Bono is one of the most controversial rock stars in the world. He is loved and hated, iconized and loathed. He is mostly scorned for avoiding his massive tax liabilities to his bankrupt homeland, while representing himself as the new Messiah.

Mark has got to take the rough with the smooth. The impersonation is what’s most important for a tribute band and since his position involves trying to imitate one of the most loved rock stars in the world, but also one of the most despised, each gig can be very different and it’s a very fine line.

“I’ve lost the count on how many times I’ve been told to F\*#k off and pay my taxes, amongst other things. But it most certainly isn’t all bad, I’ve also been asked for tons of autographs and photos post-gigs, sang into fans phones and signed boobs and bras!” Mark laughed.

*By Linn Therese Heldal*

Rory Gallagher was the very first global rock star coming out of the Republic, and it's safe to say that he blazed the way for other Irish rockers, such as U2 and Thin Lizzy. He was so non-rock star, he managed to keep the showbiz to a minimum. All he wanted to do was to play guitar, and Boy, did he play. He was known to make people feel 'A Million Miles Away' with his hypnotic intensely guitar playing. Combined with his love for blues, folk and rock, it eventually made him celebrated as one of the world's greatest guitar players. Unfortunately, it also contributed to his premature death at the age of 47.

"When a talented artist such as Rory, with a devoted 'cult' of followers, has sadly passed on, in a sense the tribute festivals are similar to a family in post-bereavement, who feel the need to gather together to share their feelings of loss, but in a celebratory way," said Dónal Gallagher, Rory's brother and manager.

The summer is on our steps and the 'music season' is in full bloom. The sun is out and punters flock to festivals to have their favorite bands put a musical spell on them. For Rory's fans though, their beloved musical hero is not around anymore, so instead they have to rely on tribute acts to work his magic on the live scene.

"For fans and followers, their experience of Rory's music, in particular if they have seen him perform, have been a huge high. This is what they wish to emulate again and they want to introduce these emotions to newer generations," said Dónal Gallagher.

The tribute festivals are great inspirational factors, which has a healthy competitive nature, but also allows for a trading of musical technique. The events allow a stage for young and older musicians alike, to be assessed by the fans for their abilities: "In a way, they are measured by the 'Rory' standard'," Dónal added.

In Ireland, two of the biggest annual, international, tribute events are the 'Rory

Gallagher International Tribute Festival’ and the Thin Lizzy tribute festival ‘Vibe for Philo’. The followers of these festivals even have their own terminology: on festivals and gatherings they are ‘Roryfriends’ and ‘Vibers.’

The followers devote much of their time and money on their interest, spending hours on chat forums online and travelling to festivals. Many take it very seriously, as this comment from a fan, on the Rory Gallagher festival’s Facebook page, inclines: ‘The festival is going down hill, it has lost it’s Rory tribute tag, it’s just another festival now. If I hadn’t already booked my hotel I wouldn’t be going. It’s disgraceful, the big top has taken the eyes off the ball, it’s about Rory, not about filling a tent!’

As the fan expressed, the tribute scene is very important for the followers. For many it becomes more than just a hobby; it can even generate a lifestyle.

The gatherings in themselves can often create a great feeling of family bonds and a strong sense of belonging. At the festivals the fans meet like-minded people, who share their love and interest for the particular musician or band.

“First of all the great friendships and the feeling of unity it creates. At the festivals there is a possibility to meet new friends that share some of the feelings about the Man,” said Roryfriend, Per Bjørge Hansen, who travels from Norway to Ballyshannon every year, for the Rory Gallagher festival.

One of the highlights for Per Bjørge is to have met Ted McKenna, who was the drummer in Rory Gallagher’s band for a long time. Per Bjørge was on his way to the hotel in Ballyshannon, when he saw Ted crossing the street in front of him. “I asked politely if he was Ted, of course I knew, I’ve seen him play the night before. He seemed interested in why I was there, which I actually felt quite flattering.”

Ted said yes to join Per Bjørge at the hotel for a chat and Per Bjørge got to talk to him about things that have been pickling his head for years and the impact his music had on him. Ted especially lit up, when Per Bjørge mentioned the festival ‘Ragnarock’ in Oslo, Norway, in the mid-seventies, where Ted was playing with the

Seasonal Alex Harvey Band. “The concert started out with Alex coming nude out of the lake beside the stage and entered it doing a reverse strip tease (he was dressing). It made Ted remember some other wild Alex stories!” said Per Bjørge.

He also got to talk to Ted about his time with Per Bjørge’s ultimate guitar hero, Rory Gallagher. He tried to get the topic over to a concert Ted did with Rory in Norway in 1978. He wasn’t sure about that one, but when Per Bjørge told him it was the act before Bob Marley and the Wailers, Ted remembered it with a huge laugh. “He could not elaborate, but I guess it was quite a time backstage! After the chat *he* actually thanked *me* for my time, and said we had to do it again,” Per Bjørge smiled.

To Per Bjørge, tribute bands are no substitute for the ‘real deals’; it’s more so the social aspect that attracts him to the gatherings. Having said that, he still thinks there is a great collection of brilliant bands in Ballyshannon. “It seems to also be a possibility for young aspiring bands to get some stage-time during the festival, which I think should be kept up and encouraged in more ways,” he said.

‘The new deals’ - the tribute acts, are accessible to the fans in a way the original never was. In this game they have a saying on the matter: “One of the ‘major’ Thin Lizzy tribute bands is not universally liked, as some people have the opinion that they are little more than a money-making exercise, long past their sell-by date as a genuine tribute and fans of the band,” said Phil Osborne, Thin Lizzy enthusiast and ‘Viber.’

He thinks that many get into it as Thin Lizzy is a popular vehicle as a tribute act, but with many tributes there is a lack of genuine feeling for the band and the music, which gets all too apparent. “Personally I don't like to see Thin Lizzy tribute bands wearing wigs and quoting Philip between the songs either,” he said.

Phil has dedicated much of his life to Thin Lizzy and the tribute scene. In the late 80’s/early 90’s he was a contributor to the *Black Rose – Thin Lizzy Magazine*. He is also member of every Thin Lizzy fan club in the book and a promoter of the Thin

Lizzy tribute concert in his hometown Dumfries, 'Dedication in Dumfries'. "Through all these activities I graciously was given credits on one of Thin Lizzy's ex-members, Brian Robertson's, albums."

He first became a fan of Thin Lizzy in 1976, after he saw them on 'Top of the Pops' and was completely hooked. He got to meet his hero Phil Lynott, after a gig in Manchester, "I asked him some really naff questions!" he laughed.

Phil and his wife even got a card from Phil Lynott when they got married: "It was such a surprise, the fan club was brilliant to organize it."

Phil was absolutely devastated when Philip Lynott died in 1986, and he dropped out of the Thin Lizzy world for a while: "I didn't lose interest, but we had children and I just didn't have as much time."

He re-established a couple of Thin Lizzy contacts in 1998, and that's when he got in to the tribute scene for real, and attended his first Vibe for Philo. "I was so ashamed it was the first time I'd been there! But having been there and meeting so many wonderful people, I have been enthused ever since," he said.

For Phil the most important thing about the scene is the atmosphere, the 'craic' and the celebration of Phil Lynott. The quality of the acts can be variable he thinks, but the cohesion is always there. "Musically, some Vibes are stronger than others, but as the (International) Vibe 'community' has developed over the years, that has become less of a problem, as there is always like-minded friends, new and old, to meet and catch up with."

The town's shoe salesman at daytime, and an electric 'Bono' at nightfall, Mark Breen is the frontman in the U2 tribute band 'Zooropa'. He thinks that to succeed in the tribute game and take things to a higher level, the band need reactions during the show, and after, from the audience. "Positive feedback breathes confidence and makes you believe in yourself, but you also have to be able to listen and take criticism from the fans, when things aren't going according to the plan."

He believe that connecting with the audience and make them feel part of the act is the key to the much needed, continued support. "It's a weird one, as some audiences just want to be part of the songs and others want to feel the showmanship, so sometimes you have to find that fine line between both."

Mark has certainly felt the controversy around his character, the so-called 'Bono-hate' in Paddy pastime. "I have had audience members say 'F\*#k off Bono and pay your taxes,' among other, worse!, things. While this could discourage me, I tend to take the positive from it, if they are relating to me as that character, then we as a band are connecting with them as that character," he said.

Tribute bands are very much dependent on the fans to survive, and they must constantly thrive to keep their fans happy as Larry. "If you are good, punters will tell five people, if you are bad, they will tell everyone," Mark finishes.

*By Linn Therese Heldal*

Unless you've been hiding under a rock, or in your mansion, the past decade, you are probably highly aware of the on-going recession the Green Island finds itself in.

It has hit hard on (almost!) every aspect and people in the society, and one should think, especially on freelance artists and musicians - people without a steady and set salary, and who are depending on entertainment for their income.

Therefore it may come as a surprise that the scene has actually, in many way grown, as recessions tend to produce musicians and bands. This goes for the tribute scene in particular - the phenomenon has exploded over the past decade, into an increasingly competitive industry.

"There are a lot more bands now, and less money around, but you just have to take what's going. We're still getting the gigs we used to have, but that is probably due to our history on the scene," said John 'Johnny Fox' Conlan, frontman in the highly acclaimed tribute band 'Thin Az Lizzy'.

The band had their peak in the late 90's and early 2000's, when they toured big venues, all over Europe and Ireland, belting out Thin Lizzy classics to hordes of followers and fans. They are known to be very authentic, and capture the rock thrill-power and Celtic Twilight of Ireland's greatest rock and roll band.

Nowadays they're are not rocking out Thin Lizzy tunes full-time anymore; their general income is made in other bands. With Thin Az Lizzy they are only doing functions and festivals.

"There are tributes everywhere now, back then they weren't so widespread. Unfortunately nowadays many venues just want one or two pieces. 15 years ago, they were more inclined to book a band and take a chance. Hopefully it will turn back to that again!" said John.

Members of a tribute, or cover, band usually gets paid €100 up to €300, for a gig. They are typically a three or four piece, which means the pubs have to pay three times as much for a band than for a troubadour or a DJ.

That is why many bars have started to rely more on DJ's and technology for the entertainment, than on live bands. Many musicians also get rid of the whole band and use a Mac for backing tracks. "There are a lot of washing machines going around and chancers with computers. That's why I like the gigs that we are still doing, we're keeping it real. We're trying to keep it the same and push out those guys with their machines," John said.

Stevie Shanks has been the drummer in the Belfast Queen tribute band 'Flash Harry' since 1992. As a veteran on the scene, he also sees a clear change over the past years. "I do know a few solo tribute artists who can still make a living from their shows, but they can access smaller venues and there are so many more places and situations they can work in than for us," he said.

The band used to tour all over Ireland and Europe with their action-packed Queen show. They have been known to give other Queen tributes a run for their money with their Queen energy and stagecraft, and their 'Freddie's' charisma and powerful voice.

Flash Harry have made several TV performances, played in the Royal Albert Hall and the Odyssey Arena, but nowadays it seems like business is slower: "The recession killed our work in the south of Ireland, which used to be our biggest market. However, Northern Ireland has remained strong for us - on our tour in January, February and March this year, all except two shows sold out," said Stevie.

Marty 'McStarchild' McStravick agrees with Stevie about the changes on the scene. He is the lead singer and guitar player in 'Hotter than Hell', a mind-blowing KISS tribute band, known for taking their shows to the limit, with roof-lifting

pyrotechnics, fire breathing, smoking guitars and the mandatory 7- inch platform boots. No wonder Hotter than Hell are voted Europe's hottest KISS tribute. In their time they played gigs in massive European stadiums in front of over 10.000 people. They are still touring all over Europe with their wicked, blood spitting show, but they have certainly felt the negative effects of the recession.

“We don't make our living out of Hotter than Hell, we've always done it because we love playing the KISS show and that's what comes first now as well.” said Marty.

The cost for their shows is at the very least £500, as they have all the features of the real band, such as the expensive pyrotechnics and other stage effects. Makeup, platforms, leather and lycra doesn't come cheap either. On top of that they have the travel costs and they also have to fly in one of their guitarists from Italy for every show. “When we're on tour the costs are usually more than our fees. The recession has hit the music scene in general. It's very unfortunate in this climate and we are thankful for the gigs we still get.

“When that is said, we still actually do play for packed out houses most of the time, it's basically the fees that have gone down,” Marty finished.

Like Marty said, many venues doesn't completely suffer from the recession blues, they can still sell out the shows they put on.

The recession can provide a need for joy, value and culture for people. The art of the tribute band may not be as mind-blowing as the original, but they can be more than good enough for a recession- friendly date night or banter.

The market for bands may have decreased, but if there is no cover charge, the pubs only bring in money through bar sales. Therefore the better the sales are during a band, the more inclined the pub is to bring the band back. This is pushing forward a healthy development, as venues have to be willing to pay more for good bands. The bands will then realize that there is a completion out there, which gives them an opportunity to push the prices up again. “In a perverse way, the recession may be

good for bands, because the pubs need to have quality live music to get people in,” said Johnny Fox.

A tribute artist who hasn't really noticed the recession much, is the Rory Gallagher tribute veteran Barry Barnes. He has been Rocking for Rory for over 20 years and he was one of the first tributes on the Rory Gallagher scene.

“As Ronald Reagan once said: ‘Recession is when your neighbour loses his job. Depression is when you lose yours.’ As far as I am concerned the scene hasn't changed much since I started. For me it's just the same, but I do of course know that the money on the tribute scene has gone down a lot in general,” said Barry.

The Rory scene is still going strong because it's a relatively small scene, consisting of mostly the same fans and followers, and, no pyrotechnics in sight, just a man with his guitar. Rory wasn't in the media, he stayed away from the spotlight and he wasn't looking for fame with what he was doing. “I think it would be very different to be in a Rolling Stones or Queen tribute band, they can feel the recession in a whole different way.”

For Barry, the scene, the gigs and the travelling are a lifestyle. That's why he can devote himself so completely to what he's doing, after being in love with Rory Gallagher's music for over four decades. “The Rory tribute bands are just in love with the music and playing the music is all we're doing. We can't even say that we play it like Rory did, because none of us are in any way good enough!” Barry laughed.

Like many tributes, he has released several albums to his hero, which he sells online. In order to get the performing rights he needs to release the albums, he always asks Rory's brother Dónal Gallagher. “If I ever do anything I always ask Dónal and there has never been a problem. He always says ‘of course you can Barry’ and gives me the signed documents I need to record Rory's music in a professional studio.”

Barry certainly isn't getting rich of what he is doing, but with supplements from the government and tax credit on his house, he can make a living and gig full-time. "I make a living, but the reasons for why I can make a living, is that I don't really need anything. I'm not married and the Rory Gallagher scene is my whole life. It's my income, but also my social life.

"I certainly have a bohemian lifestyle, but I wouldn't have it any other way. I'm skint, but I'm very happy," he said before he entered the stage to entertain Dublin's Rory fans.

*By Linn Therese Heldal*

The tribute scene has exploded into its own modern music culture of musicians and bands. Through likeness and belting out their heroes back catalogue, the tribute bands recreate their icons work, by bringing it back to the live scene.

As well as entertaining Irish pub-goers, the tribute festivals also draw thousands and thousands of fans every year. One of the biggest festivals in Ireland is the annual 'Rory Gallagher International Tribute Festival', which takes place in Ballyshannon.

"As my brother was very much a live, spontaneous performer and writer, having other musicians emulate, pay tribute and be inspired by his music, is very satisfying for me. It is an achievement he would be very proud of himself," said Dónal Gallagher, brother of the passed away Irish guitar legend.

Dónal was also Rory's manager - a manager who always had his best interest at heart and a friend he could trust fully. Knowing this, Rory could completely concentrate on his Fender Stratocaster and on writing thrilling rock and blues, which would eventually make him world celebrated as one of the greatest, and an almost mystical, guitar player in history.

No wonder musicians want to pay tribute to Rory Gallagher.

Barry Barnes has his 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a professional Rory Gallagher tribute act this year. He was one of the first artists to pay tribute to Rory and he travels all over Europe to entertain the dedicated Rory fans, both with his band 'Sinnerboy' and as an acoustic solo act. Tonight he is going to entertain his Dublin fans, in the Rathmines pub 'Slattery's',

Barry has long history and a very close relationship with Rory's music. The devotion first came about in 1969, when he went to the local record store on the search for Led Zeppelin II. The shop was sold out. "I still had 15 shilling burning a hole in my young pocket, so I bought 'On the Boards', by Rory Gallagher's band, Taste," he recalls.

That was it: Barry was sold. What he didn't know, was that it would grow in to a full-time profession and take him as far as touring in America and follow in his hero's footsteps, by playing in the Ulster Hall in Belfast.

Rory Gallagher was one of very few artists who would include Belfast in his tours during The Troubles in Northern Ireland. "The people of Belfast has a long love affair with Rory," said Barry.

After a Sinnerboy show in the Empire Music Hall, a promoter approached Barry and the boys and asked if they would like to play at the Ulster Hall. "'Feck off' I said, I couldn't believe it!" he said as he laughed and took a sip of his Guinness.

The promoter explained that they were going to get help from the local council to put a Rory Gallagher concert on in the Ulster Hall, where Rory used to play during the conflict.

Barry was very nervous before the concert: "It is one thing to fill the Empire Music Hall, something completely different to fill the Ulster Hall!"

In the afternoon it was just a sound check, but when he came out on stage at night-time he was in front of 1400 Rory Gallagher fans. "I stood there, where Rory used to stand to do his stuff, and I completely lost the plots! It took me ages to get myself together!" he laughed.

Other highlights for Barry are the things he gets to do on a regular basis and the places Rory Gallagher's music has taken him. Gigs on top of mountains in Spain, drinking coffee with his friends in Athens, skiing with his Norwegian friends in snowy Norway, gigging all over Holland and Germany. "You just can't beat it," Barry said as he smiled.

Tribute musicians are very much journeymen. Just like original bands they have a rather unorthodox lifestyle, spending most of their time on the road. The rest of the time is spent doing their utmost to get their acts down to perfection, every riff and every tone must be as near as possible to being as good as the originals.

A question one may ask is it this a youthful dream come true for musicians, or can gaining fame, and occasionally even fortune, of playing other peoples music sometimes feel like a strange kind of accomplishment?

Not too long ago, in 2012, guitar player Phil Edgar found himself stranded in a broken down van an hour outside of Killarney. His band, Sweet Savage, was on their way to do a support gig for the current line-up of Thin Lizzy, Phil's ultimate heroes and a band he's been paying tribute to ever since he picked up the guitar.

He had been buzzing; the tour had been going really well. Sweet Savage had also been booked as the warm-up act for Thin Lizzy's shows on two large festivals in Northern Ireland after the Irish tour.

As fast as lightening they got taxis to the venue, but missed their slot by ten minutes. "I was freaking out, I thought we were about to get kicked of the tour by my favourite band of all time!"

Thankfully that didn't happen. After the concert the boys bumped in to Scott Gorham, the Thin Lizzy guitar player. Phil was stressed, but Scott Gorham burst into laughter about the situation: "He said 'If I had a dollar for every time I've broken down, I'd be a rich man!'" Phil smiled.

Thin Lizzy ended up taking Phil and the band to the next gig on their tour bus with their road crew. "How could such a disaster of a situation turn into such a great night, especially for a guitar player in two Thin Lizzy tribute bands, right?" he laughed.

Phil is only in his early-twenties, but has already made an impact on the Irish music scene. He is the guitar player in the two praised Thin Lizzy tribute bands 'Thin Az Lizzy' and 'The Low Riders', alongside with the original 80's metal merchants Sweet Savage, who was widely renowned by their peers and even had Metallica cover one of their songs, *Killing Time*.

One thing that is as sure as fate, is that not all tribute musicians get to support the band they pay tribute to, but for Phil his job with Sweet Savage led to fulfilment of this long-time dream. "I was loving life, getting to watch Scott Gorham, Darren Wharton and Brian Downey sound-checking before we did and bumping in to them backstage."

The support tour was not the first time Phil got close to one of his Lizzy heroes. When he was 14, his dad took him to the unveiling of the statue of Phil Lynott in Grafton Street and he ran into Brian Robertson at a nearby hotel. Phil and his dad went over to sit and chat with him and his manager for a couple of hours. Before he knew it, Brian Robertson had given him his room number and told him to come by the next day for a jam. "My dad being older and wiser than me assumed that the invite was just the alcohol talking and it that it wouldn't be cool to turn up with guitar in hand and Brian to have no recollection of the night before, so we never went!

"I was 14 and absolutely gutted, but in hindsight I'd say my Da made the right call. I eventually got to hang out with Brian Robertson again not too long ago, but as of yet, still no jamming!" he laughed.

Phil thinks that when it comes to fulfilment as an artist, tribute bands can be just as good as original bands. "It's amazing when you get that feeling that you're nailing the songs -it can actually be better than an original band. It's also great to feel the crowd's expectations and to see their reactions when you play their favourite tune", he said.

At the young age of 15 he was touring all over Ireland and the UK, playing Thin Lizzy classics. The tribute scene was his main gig for over two years, but with his two current Thin Lizzy tribute bands, he only does big events and functions. His every day income is made in other bands.

Phil said the problem was that it eventually became a job, so he decided to jump off the tribute bandwagon. "You'll be playing for people who don't necessarily want to hear all Thin Lizzy and they'll be coming up saying, 'do you do any ACDC? or whatever. That's when we stopped doing it full-time," he said.

He was also 15 when he played at his first 'Vibe for Philo', which is a large-scale Dublin-based Thin Lizzy tribute festival. It takes place every January in one of the large venues in the 'Old Town,' and is a part celebration, and part wake, over the life and workmanship of legend Phil Lynott, frontman in Thin Lizzy. After starting out in the backroom of a pub 28 years ago, it has developed into an international event.

Smiley Bolger is the originator and the promoter of the festival. He can be called a pioneer on the tribute scene- only Las Vegas Elvis conventions has longer track records than the Vibe for Philo. Smiley has seen and heard heaps of tribute bands over the years, and he thinks that if the band is done well it's a joy to behold, and well worth €10 admission fee any night of the week. "If they're good it's great, if they're bad it's a disgrace and disrespect to the original artist who recorded the material with love and passion in the first place," he said.

The relatively new, sub-culture consists of musicians who make their fan base and their claim to fame, by performing their icons' music. Are they simply stand-ins for the real thing, or is it more to it than that?

Smiley emphasized how important it is that tribute musicians, no matter how well rehearsed, need to make it their own act:" If they don't put their own stamp on the music, it doesn't connect with the people."

“Also, the absolute biggest piss off with tribute artists is, especially if they happen to be in any way successful, that they come to believe that they are ‘the real deal’,” he said.

About one of Phil’s bands, the Low Riders, he said that he doesn’t think they are a tribute act per se: “The Low Riders are more creative interpretive artists who always seem to find a new angle and bring something new to the table with passion and power, much like the Vibe itself really,” said Smiley.

It becomes quite apparent that the bands and the music they are paying tribute to means the world to many tribute musicians. They are taking their craft very seriously and are highly aware of the responsibility they have to carry on and keep their icons’ heritage alive.

‘Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Dónal Gallagher sees little or no difference between a ‘top’ orchestra, at the most prestigious venue, performing a piece by Beethoven, and a band playing Rory’s music in a local pub. In his eyes they’re both paying tribute. “In some part, Rory was emulating his blues and rock heroes’ music as well. Passing on the torch as it were.”

*Ends.*

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