

# Power without glory

The legacy of Irish punk band,  
The Radiators From Space

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PUNK ROCK'S CURRENT MAINSTREAM cultural acceptance is far from the dreams or desires of most early punks. The snotty music genre took a surprising route from the margins to the established. The journey left many casualties: often the most innovative and imaginative. The Radiators From Space were Ireland's first band wholeheartedly to embrace the attitudinal adjustment required by the new musical movement. They were cruelly chewed up and spat out by an industry that demanded conformity, capital and consumer-friendly product and denigrated sincerity, skill and substance.

Yet if the Radiators From Space were victims, finally defeated by a succession of caprices and foes, they leave an under-appreciated yet influential legacy. The Radiators hold the distinctive accolade worldwide of being the first 'punk' group to land a song, 'Television Screen', in national Pop Charts. And managed that feat in a country where punk received a particularly savage reception.

Terence Brown described the choice facing artists following Irish independence: "nourish the dominant essentialist ideology of the state" or "define artistic identity in terms of opposition and dissent". By the 1970s he argued that the former involved "evasion and sentimentality". The Radiators From Space' début single confronted the "man in the shiny suit saying: get them off the streets and into the schools". In doing so they challenged the Irish authorities. And condemnation of them was often savage.

Publicity is the steroid of the music industry. It gives the habitual user almost superhuman strength. Even one dose can grant an advantage over rivals. And in 1976 the Radiators From Space went in search of that compulsive fix. To get the attention they desired and, as far as I'm concerned, deserved, the band submitted a letter from a 'concerned mother' to the Sunday World. It expressed shocked at what her daughter witnessed at a Radiators' gig. Needless to say, the letter was printed and a newshound was dispatched in search of the truth. He reported back on the band in an article that seemed to magnify every Irish mother's nightmare.

The paper described the band yelling outlandish statements: "Christian Brothers, Christian muggers"; they had shouted at their punk audience.

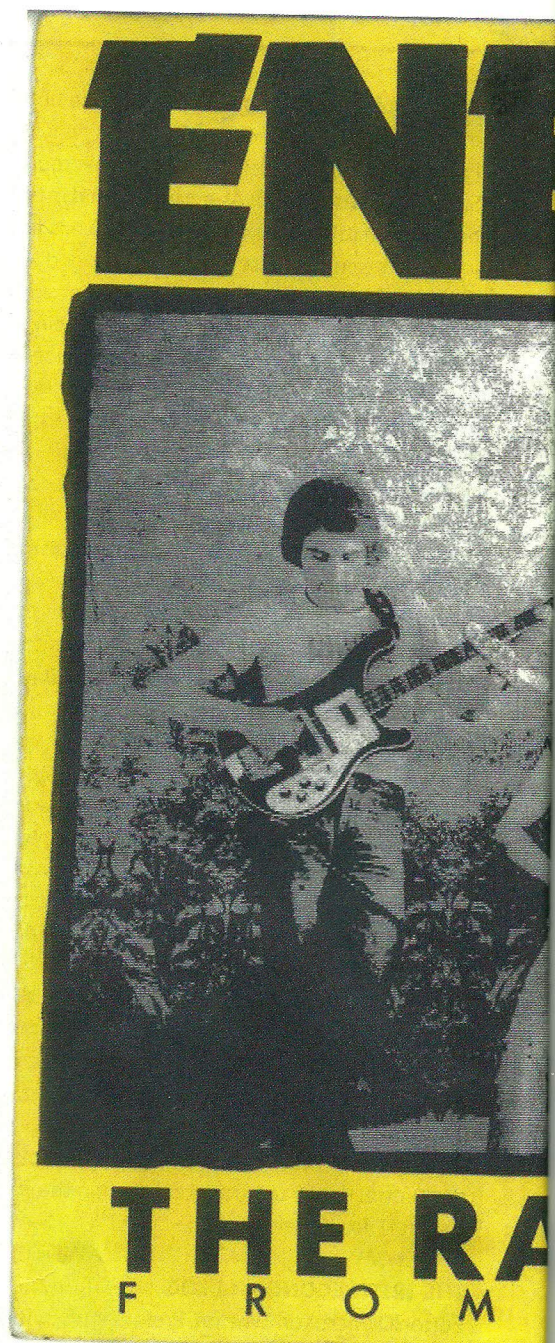
Outrageous! In Ireland who would dare publicly question the religious order that maintained a stranglehold on Irish education? When the band told the reporter that they didn't take drugs, he ended the article with the rejoinder: "who needs drugs when your brains are already scrambled". The music magazine Spotlight declared they wouldn't pay any attention to the band. The double ironies were that Spotlight had valiantly served the gimmick-crazy world of showbands and that the journalist was in a band called The Establishment.

By the end of 1977 then Minister for Justice Patrick Cooney, in staking his claim (unsuccessfully) to one of the first elected seats in the European Parliament, touted the benefits of the European project. It would protect, he said in the Seanad, Western Civilisation from the scourge of decadence. He cited types of decadence threatening Christian values: violence on television; violence in literature; pornography. But the first form of decadence he listed was punk rock.

But even when commentators weren't castigating the punks they were contributing to a confused representation of the youth movement.

The Sunday World, when it emerged in the mid-1970s, actually represented itself as a voice for modern Ireland. It was brash, brazen, colourful and crude and had a trendy priest as a columnist. The cleric in question, Father Brian D'Arcy also wrote the music reviews for religious magazines and, in his writings, unlikely lads such as The Sex Pistols, Black Sabbath and The Rolling Stones received the diocesan seal of approval. Such respectability may have set their causes back by decades. When Father D'Arcy applied his typewriter to punk it spelt out sympathy. They had something to say, according to him, even if they were misguided. He listed their hates: love, hippies, authority and dogs! Having spent the best part of thirty-five years searching for any evidence that punks hated dogs I'm ready to abandon the search.

The very idea of a Catholic priest assessing the musical youth of the time is another reminder of the power of the Church. In late 1976, as reports about the punk movement spread, the Sunday World published remarks from a cleric in Wales. His words were fire and brimstone: God will forgive murders but he won't forgive punks. The rhetoric appears



ridiculous now. Yet at the time statements like this informed the public perception of punk.

If the Radiators were going to escape the stifling atmosphere of late 1970s Ireland they'd need the assistance of the English media. Sounds magazine made their debut 'Single of the Week' yet signalled how the Irish were still seen as a joke: "Irish punks? Will it start 'One, tree, faw, two'". The NME's Tony Parsons (who later became a successful author in the 'chick lit by-and-for men' genre) greeted the band poised with poisoned pen. His put-down was a classic misinterpretation of Irish reality. To him the Radiators: "will never make political statements but will always get kids dancing". He completely missed the point of the band's début single 'Television Screen'. It was a landmark in Irish culture: a vitriolic musical statement of defiance from a country where silence and shame reigned. Anyone familiar



**"The Radiators hold the distinctive accolade of being the first 'punk' group to land a song in the national pop charts"**

romantics with abandon and purpose. They proclaimed their honest vulnerability at a time when macho postures or sullen self-indulgences were more in vogue. Most used punk as a communion or catharsis, The Radiators used it as a confession. The two albums they made are a rare pair in the annals of Irish music. 'TV Tubeheart' is a raw and primal statement of intent. Musically it merged the vital electric legacy of Iggy Pop, T. Rex and the New York Dolls. Lyrically it was a flying tackle on the pillars of Irish social convention. A daring escape from the shadows that loomed large and impenetrable over every adolescent on the island. To the young punks of Ireland 'Television Screen' was Ireland's 'Anarchy in the UK', and 'Enemies' was simultaneously its 'Stairway to Heaven' and its 'Highway to Hell', a song you could express blind faith in, as well as scream shamelessly with anger to. There was a palpable sense of tragic bitterness and isolation in its narrative - sadder for being true - of betrayal at the hands of the media.

Its successor 'Ghostown' was a huge leap forward in every single respect. It was a dark and deft celebration of a city. None of their punk or new-wave contemporaries had painted the specifics of their hometown with such poetic insight. Much of it stands comparison with the best punk songwriting: the works of Joe Strummer and Mick Jones of The Clash and The Jam's Paul Weller. If it is Ireland's 'Nebraska', then it is also its 'Straight Outta Compton'. 'Ghostown' was a piece of work that was so far ahead of its time that it soared over the heads of the knuckle-dragging doppelgangers that constituted the unimaginative mass of the second wave of punk rockers. It is still a marvel to behold all those years later.

The Radiators reported from the dark corners of Ireland. They also shed light on what was happening in even darker corners of that society. In doing so they gave hope to the rest of us who lived there. And even though they were damned to hell for being who they were, history proves they were on the side of the angels. They were Ireland's most important band. ■

with the dreadful, unspeakable and unconscionable child-abuse perpetrated by pillars of the Irish State or the homogeneity and ubiquitousness of the cultural policies of the Fianna Fáil government knows that Ireland was a land of bowed heads.

The time will come when people will wonder why popular music was mute during the dark times. Popular music is often presumed to be progressive, an outlet for youthful shaping against authority. The dominance of the showband acts with their adoption of American country and western hokum overwhelmed the prospects for original artists in Ireland. Its conservative legacy still lives. When Tourism Ireland airlifted Crystal Swing to the United States last year, their executive described it as "a great opportunity to spread the good news about the island of Ireland to a huge audience". The young singer, in white suit naturally, described his

favourite music: "...showband music which is very popular in Ireland... all the singers based their music on American singers you know....my favourite song The Hucklebuck... was made famous by a man called Brendan Bowyer in our country, it was Elvis Presley who he got all his moves...from".

The Radiators were the musical equivalent of a swift kick-in-the-balls to the men behind the showbands. The Radiators' outlook on introspection was beautifully captured by the cover image of the debut LP, 'TV. Tubeheart'. Basking in the surreal translucent denim glare of the cathode tube, the band stare out. What would they have made of a future that suckled Crystal Swing?

The Radiators were Manic Street Preachers a (terrible) generation too early. Desolation angels and handsome devils. Dapper, energised, passionate and intense, they played the songs of desperate