

In this searingly honest interview, The Pogues guitarist



Heyday: Philip with Shane McGowan on the cover of The Pogues album *If I Should Fall From Grace With God*

PHILIP CHEVRON, lead guitarist of The Pogues, breathed a sigh of relief when, in April 2012, doctors finally give him the all-clear after five agonising years of battling head and neck cancer.

But four months later tragedy struck when — as Philip revealed in a statement last week — doctors delivered the news that the tumour had returned and this time is inoperable. Devastatingly, he was told that it 'will prove fatal in time'.

Just over a year later, the cancer has now accelerated to such an extent that the 55-year-old Dubliner is unable to talk. However,

THE JASON O'TOOLE INTERVIEW



the musician — a founding member of the legendary punk band The Radiators From Space as well as a key member of The Pogues, having written one of their biggest hit singles *Thousands Are Sailing* — agreed to conduct this exclusive interview through a series of emails exchanged over several days.

'I think we have to do this by email as my capacity to communicate verbally is diminished considerably,' he wrote during our first exchange.

'But don't worry about it, I'm quite used to email interviews and reasonably literate. I won't let you down if you keep faith with me, too.'

He was more than true to his word. What follows is a heart-rending but life-affirming account from a man who refuses to be self-pitying in the face of death.

I start our correspondence by explaining that I can't even begin to imagine how frustrating and painful it must feel for a musician to be no longer able to use his voice, particularly as Philip is lead singer of The Radiators, who only recorded their latest album last year and are still performing live.

'There are no words [to describe it],' he responds simply.

Despite it being 'impossible to measure life expectancy' as he lives out his final months, Philip is determined to enjoy each day to the full and will continue playing concerts and recording music.

'I've just decided to continue living,' he says. 'I can no longer sing or even speak, which is a massive bummer, but I can still play and I can still write.'

'As nobody is in a position to give me a cut-off point, I just carry on as normally as my daily health allows.'

'There are up and down days, so it's hard to commit to something where my reliability is a factor, but I get around most things.'

Philip — whose real surname is Ryan and who grew up in Santry, Dublin, as the eldest of two children — first discovered the news that he had cancer in 2007, when the hospital rang him while he was at a Tube station in London.

He had suspected something was terribly wrong for several months prior to being diagnosed, as he was in tremendous pain while recording an album with The Radiators in 2006.

'Both times it was a very particular pain in my vocal area, which required

live into my 80s and now everything felt compressed.

'But then, after a couple of days, I just got on with it. I lead an interesting life, chasing the best theatre and opera around the world.'

'I'm mostly in Dublin but I still love to travel to "my cities" and do so at every opportunity.'

'I have favourite cities I like to spend time in — London, Dublin, New York, Berlin, Paris, Galway, San Francisco. I do my very best to get around still, medical procedures and doctor's orders permitting.'

Philip, whose father was a renowned theatre critic, insists that he is in no

I'm not sure, given the choice, I'd ever have married

pain at the moment. 'I'm fortunate. The palliative care I get is exceptional. The pain and discomfort management I get is world class.'

Philip explains that he is 'not interested' in euthanasia but adds, 'not at this point at any rate'.

Like many cancer patients, Philip dislikes using the phrase 'battling cancer'.

He explains: 'You don't, in my opinion, battle cancer. It's bigger than that and if it's going to get you, it's going to get you.'

'The battle becomes a familiar one of how you're going to manage it, cope with it, on a daily basis, deal with the chemotherapy [and] get your head around the scorching radiotherapy.'

'You hope that if you give it your best shot it might go into abeyance.'

'After five years, I was indeed declared cancer-free. However, I then pulled the almost-never-happens card, which is when you learn only four months later that it's back — and worse. This time it's inoperable because it's so close to the brain stem.'

'So I was in no position to say I had battled cancer. It was just waiting for me.'

Philip has managed to retain a sense of humour throughout his ordeal. When I ask if he has any regrets in life, he jokingly replies: 'Yes. I think I'd have enjoyed being good looking and hunky!'

Many people turn to God when faced with serious illness, so is he religious?

'Absolutely not, though I defend to the death anyone else's right to be. There will be no deathbed conversion, no calling for the priest, no last-minute acts of contrition.'

'Just, I hope, a real gratitude that I made it here at all, against the odds probably, and enjoyed the awesome world we have created for ourselves out of sheer initiative and curiosity.'

'But I do also subscribe to Hamlet's caution to Horatio that there may be more than is "dreamt of in your philosophy". I hope there is, that would be even greater fun.'

'But I'm satisfied. I met people, I heard music, I saw movies, I experienced theatre.'

'Why would you need an organising deity with all that going on?'

Philip seems possessed of a determination to remain upbeat and positive. How he is able to keep such a positive energy going?

'I suppose that's just the kind of person I am. There are down days too, of course.' How does he deal with these?

I had, stupidly, persuaded myself I was going to live into my 80s

self-medication. The first time I self-medicated myself through the making of an entire Radiators album, *Trouble Pilgrim*, before finally biting the bullet and having a biopsy.

'I got the results of the biopsy as I was waiting outside a suburban London Tube station to meet with the guy from Warner Brothers who was taking me to The Pogues' tape storage facility to begin the rummage for The Pogues' five-CD box set. Erik James was his name. Poor man.'

Despite the devastating blow, Philip continued to personally oversee the re-mastering and packaging of the box set.

'At first, I won't lie to you, I was just very, very sad.'

'At some point I had, stupidly, persuaded myself that I was going to

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