

Pop



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An Evergreen Career, Charting Irish History

As Christy Moore turns 80, he continues to connect with generations of fans.

By BOB MEHR

A sudden buzz crackled through the 2011 Oxegen Music Festival as one of pop’s starriest power couples — Beyoncé, who was performing on the final night, and Jay-Z — made their way backstage at the summer fete in the rolling countryside of County Kildare, Ireland. An older gentleman (bald, barrel-chested, in a black T-shirt) held open a door to the V.I.P. entrance for them. Sweeping past, Jay-Z pressed a \$50 bill into the man’s hands, assuming he was a staff member or security — unaware he had just tipped Ireland’s most beloved living musician, Christy Moore.

Moore closed the festival that night, as the surprise guest of the headliners, Coldplay. Performing his soaring 1984 anthem “Ride On,” he heard 60,000 fans roar at his introduction (“One of our heroes since we were kids,” Chris Martin announced), sing along at full volume and chant his name.

Born in nearby Newbridge, Moore had returned home after a long, celebrated career as a singer, songwriter, solo artist and leader of the groundbreaking folk band Planxty and the Celtic rock collective Moving Hearts. He had become an icon, a national treasure — but a man still easily mistaken for the help.

“Once, at Carnegie Hall,” Moore recalled gleefully during a recent interview, “a critic wrote, ‘When Moore came out, I presumed he was a stagehand coming to move the piano.’ I think that review was OK.”

Moore, who turned 80 this month, finds himself at a surprising professional peak. Last year, his 25th studio LP, “A Terrible Beauty,” debuted at No. 1 in Ireland, besting Sabrina Carpenter and Tyler, the Creator. Once a globe-trotting touring artist, these days Moore plays only his native island, performing solo — accompanying himself on guitar or bodhran drum, or sometimes singing a cappella — while exploring a repertoire of songs that cut across 600 years of history.

Whether singing about the Blanket Protests (“90 Miles From Dublin”), detailing the Stardust nightclub tragedy (“They Never Came Home”) or pondering post-Troubles reconciliation (“North and South of the River,” his collaboration with U2), Moore has made a career charting his nation’s tragedies, triumphs and often difficult progress.

“Christy occupies a very rarefied part of Irish culture preserved for those who are trusted to speak of, from and for the Irish people,” said the Edge of U2. “It’s an almost priestly role, but one he handles without ever becoming pompous or taking himself too seriously.”

In a music business perennially in thrall to the latest tech and trends, Moore is a rarity. “I’ve not been on a plane for 25 years, not been on a ferry for five,” he said. “I don’t engage closely with social media. I use an old Nokia. I’ve been on the road since 1966, and yet my audience seems to get younger as I grow older.”

As Moore’s fan base has evolved, its affection for his music has grown more intense. “It’s something else to hear Christy achieve a connection to an arena or festival-sized crowd,” said Elvis Costello, a friend. “There

were times when I saw him when the audience’s participation was almost overwhelming — but he was always in charge.”

That depth of feeling for Moore is down to the fact that “Irish people see themselves in Christy,” said Patrick Kielty, host of the country’s long-running television institution, “The Late Late Show.”

“Part of it is because he does look like he could be the doorman at the venue,” Kielty added. “If you saw Christy behind a wheelbarrow, you’d think that looks right. But when you see him with a guitar, you go, no, that looks better. And when you hear him sing, you know that’s what he was meant to do.”

IT WAS EASTER SUNDAY in Mountmellick — a small town in the Midlands of Ireland — as Moore sat for what turned out to be his first ever video interview. Wearing a knit hat and rimless glasses, his blue eyes widened with wonder as he peered into a laptop and came face-to-face with an interlocutor some 5,000 miles away. “*Jaysus*,” marveled Moore in his gentle burr. “This is amazing.”

Backstage at the Mountmellick Community Arts Center, Moore was preparing to play a concert for 450 fans, his most intimate show of the year. Though he once gigged 67 consecutive nights at the start of his career in the ‘60s, Moore now performs once or twice a week, for audiences typically ranging from 1,000 to 5,000, before returning home each night to the Dublin suburb of Dun Laoghaire and his wife of 52 years, Valerie Isaacson.

Going to a Christy Moore concert has long been a popular ritual in Ireland. In 1994, he played 12 shows for 50,000 fans in Dublin, resulting in his classic “Live at the Point” album — which stayed on the Irish charts for 11 years straight. Moore traced his current renaissance to the pandemic in 2020, when he filmed a series of online “Lockdown Sessions” performances, ushering in a new wave of fans.

“A lot of people will be coming to see me for the first time tonight,” Moore said, “many of them in their 20s, and that brings its own energy. I also have occasions where grandparents, parents, kids and great-grandkids — four generations — pop up together, too.”

Over the course of his career, Moore has been variously an ardent champion of folk music as Pete Seeger was, and also a disrupter of its tradition in the manner of Bob Dylan. Like Kris Kristofferson and Jackson Browne, he’s penned exquisite love songs but brought equal passion to tales of political outrage and social injustice. Yet somehow his appeal hasn’t been limited by his unwavering moral compass and outspokenness. A Moore concert offers the same inclusive, ecstatic communal spirit one might find at a Bruce Springsteen show.

The president of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, said in an email that Moore was “a rare talent, but more than that, a deeply humane spirit. Christy’s work reminds us that the arts, and music in particular, are not simply forms of frivolous entertainment, but play an important role as vital expressions of our shared humanity, of our griefs and joys.”

Moore sees what he does in more modest terms. “I’m a rambling Irishman who sings for his supper,” he said. “I like the concept of the old traveler singers who went from town to town singing on the streets and selling their penny broadsheets, carrying the news.”

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“A Terrible Beauty” — set to be rereleased in an expanded edition this summer — certainly plays like a timely report, with stark narratives about domestic violence and homelessness, the killing of the journalist Lyra McKee, and the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza.

“Christy’s gift is that he’s always able to sing the right song about the right thing at the right time,” said Kielty, who conducted a powerful, emotional interview with Moore about the album last fall on “The Late Late Show,” a program on which the musician has been a fixture since 1972.

Moore closed that appearance with a performance of “Viva La Quinta Brigada,” his song about how some Irish volunteered to fight against fascism in the Spanish Civil War, while others were seduced by it. It was a meaningful choice, given that the country has seen its share of far-right invective and violence in recent years.

“One of the reasons why people are tuning in to Christy in droves currently is that Ireland has changed,” Kielty said. “As we change, we look to certain artists to try to work it out for us, like: ‘*Who the hell are we now? What does it all mean? I know, we’ll go and see Christy Moore.*’ It’s almost like we’re going to have an audience with the sage to get his take on things.”

FROM THE TIME HE began exploring the ancient folk collections in his local library as a teen, the main thrust of Moore’s life has been songs: rediscovering old tunes, writing new ones and making the work of others feel like his own.

Moore has been the pre-eminent interpreter for several generations of great Irish songwriters — Jimmy MacCarthy of Southpaw, Shane MacGowan of the Pogues, Brian Brannigan of A Lazarus Soul. He’s given voice to the words of the I.R.A. hunger striker Bobby Sands, the Native American rights campaigner Floyd Red Crow Westerman and the Seattle political activist Jim Page, and reimagined the works of Woody Guthrie, Dylan and Costello.

“It is something else again to have Christy sing one of your songs,” Costello said. He

noted that Moore’s rendition of “The Deportees Club” — “at first manhandled and later simplified, so its story was clear,” as he explained — “was an inspiration to me.”

Over the years, Moore has played those songs on picket lines and in prisons, and recorded tracks critical of the Catholic Church, corrupt politicians and merchants of corporate greed — efforts that have made him a target for harassment by the government, the courts and the press. But Moore has never shied from challenging anyone, including his own audience at times.

“There’s little sense in singing a song of conscience to an audience that’s uniformly in agreement,” Costello said, “and Christy’s been willing to make the case in his song interpretations. As much as they come from within the song, they also come from within the man.”

Even as music is increasingly treated as a background utility, Moore retains his faith in its power. “Songs have changed my thinking,” he said. “I’ve been educated by songs, soothed, angered, encouraged, driven, calmed in the dark of night. I’ve had songs banned, slated, loved, lauded. Songs can change me, change you; there is power in that, a power that can change the world.”

Last month, the Irish Traditional Music Archive — which acquired Moore’s manuscripts and recordings — announced plans for a major exhibition on his career to open in January. “The real news, the real versions of what happened historically has always been in the old songs,” Moore observed. “Hopefully that’s encouraging to young songwriters to show that they can be telling the truth of what’s happening today.”

As he prepared to mark his 80th, Moore was pressed as to whether he had any creative or career goals left. He pondered the question for a long moment before his manager came to remind him that the audience in Mountmellick — 20-somethings and multiple generations of families alike — would soon be filing in to see him play.

“I’ve been very privileged in my life and my music. I’ve no regrets, no great ambitions to fulfill,” he said, smiling, “apart from making it home safe tonight.”

Top and below, Christy Moore at the National Concert Hall in Dublin before a concert there. He turned 80 this month, and last year his 25th studio LP, “A Terrible Beauty,” debuted at No. 1 in Ireland.

