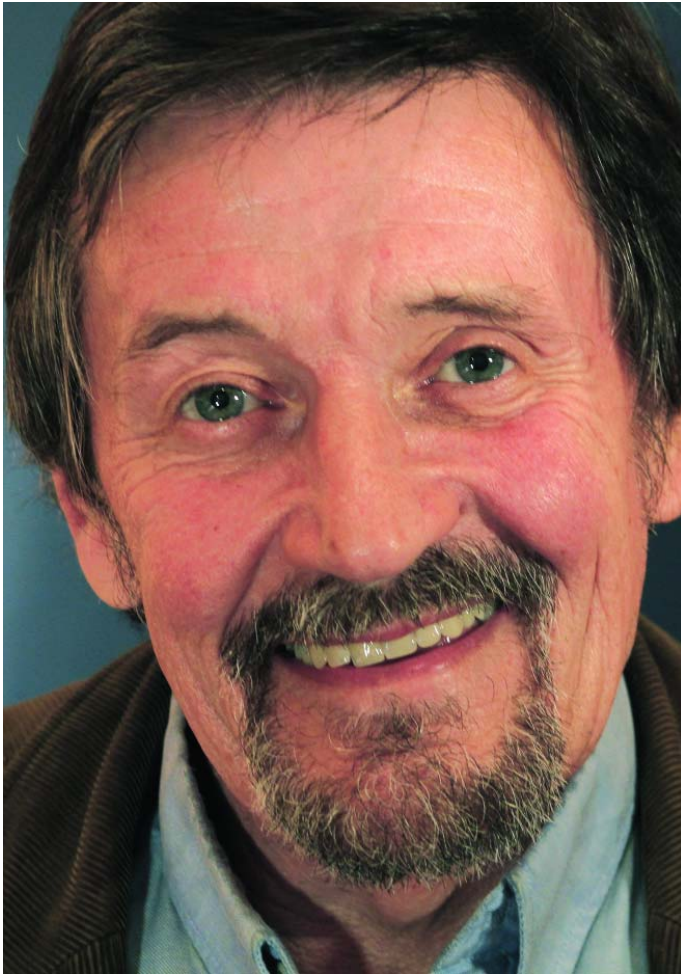


TRACING TRACKS TO CABRA

John Brophy meets Mick Fitzgerald who has released a new album.



“You know, Mick, we go back way beyond the *Stature of Limitations*,” said I to Mick Fitzgerald. “Would you stop, boy,” he replied, “We go back even before the Brehon Laws!”

It wasn't an exaggeration. When we met he brought the picture I had taken of him all of 40 years ago, plus the engraver's block of a picture the had been published in the *Evening Press*. And it's nigh on 20 years since that last graced the streets.

We were meeting to talk about his latest album, which he has called *Cabra Tracks*. Cabra is the suburb in north Dublin which has a famed railway junction and it's where the tracks to the

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south go in a curve and then into a tunnel under the Phoenix Park. Mick grew up there, and his present house is in the back garden of where he grew up.

As long as I have known him he played guitar, not just three-chord tricks, and to this day there is in my attic a reel-to-reel tape of his early songs. Good stuff too, and at least one of those songs is on the current collection. *City Almost Gone* is a wistful elegy of the boats on the Royal Canal – the last trader was Leach of Killucan who used to bring boatloads of bog ore to the gasworks.

Time for a digression: do you remember when Mick was a novice and he got a call to do a story about the famed broadcasting mast in the Dublin Mountains and the intrepid engineers who braved

snow and isolation to ensure the country was not deprived of the *Late Late Show*. And I said I'd help but on the way down the steep and narrow mountain road the back wheel fell off the car, a Singer Gazelle as I recall, and Mick was so freaked he could write of nothing else,.

Not to worry, we didn't crash, and though the car is long gone, we're still here. And Mick is still gigging and writing and has also developed his interest in acting, both stage and film, He recently had a small part in *The Tudors*, as a jailer.

It's nothing like a humdrum nine-to-five lifestyle. Musically. It can be a mix of Trad, Folk and Rockabilly. But technically, it's up to the minute: Mick has his own website and a Facebook page also. And he hasn't lost any of the fine-tuned sardonic wit that is his heritage.

So if you want the gem-like words of *The Last of the Iron-Arsed Pub Balladeers* it's on the web. So are several other good songs, including ones from the current collection.

Mick's family were all railway people, and he grew up with the clatter of trains. So there is a song *Trains at Night* to evoke those boyhood sounds drilled deep in the memory.

Then there's the song *Thruppence In The Morning*. On market mornings, the cattle used to be walked into the market all the way from Dunshaughlin down the Navan Road, and the drovers would pay young boys three pennies – the price of a bar of chocolate – to keep cattle off the footpaths and stop them fouling pedestrian ways, for which drovers could be fined. It was a lucrative way to miss a morning at school, though punishment inevitably followed.

Another song *It isn't over till it's over* is about the custom of bringing home a few drinks after pubs have shut as a way of prolonging the golden hour. And there's the darker side in *Justice Was Good* about a local character best described as one of life's unfortunates. We've all known such.

And nobody can escape emigration. He has two songs: *Penguin Island* is about the Irish workers queuing to get hired, all wearing dark suits and white shirts. They lived in the Arlington House Hostel in North London. There's a monument to them in Finchley Cemetery. Chris Smash of the group Madness, aka Cathal Smith told Mick of his knowledge of their plight. And Mick also wrote *Have You Seen The Roses?* about the queue for the telephone at the street corner kiosk when none of the houses had their own when he was young.

There is also the song *Johnny's Farm*. Most of North Dublin was developed by the Catholic Church with many institutions. Near where Mick lived was the Dominican convent with a farm attached. And every week there was a trip down to Mountjoy Jail to collect slops for the pigs. You'd want to be very short of adventure to sign up for that trip.

As we spoke the album was just waiting for two small pieces to be added. Mick was waiting to hear if he'd be needed for a theatre gig in London. (Pause to sing the *Belle of Bethnal Green*). We part, promising not to leave it 20 years till the next meeting. There's far too many memories and good times to celebrate, too many tracks back to Cabra.