



Saw Doctors “Live In Galway” C0 & DVD Rykodisc Records

If you were to search for “saw doctor” in the dictionary, it will more than likely inform you that it was a term applied to an itinerant craftsman who, in centuries past, travelled the countryside sharpening and resetting saws. Initially a band that contained *only* Irish born members, The Saw Doctors were formed in 1986 in the Galway town of Tuam, and to this day it remains their base. To date the band has released half a dozen studio albums that feature original material. “**Live In Galway**,” a sixteen-song CD, was recorded in late July 2003 at the Black Box Theatre in Galway City, and it has been simultaneously released with a DVD of the same name. I’ll be reviewing both formats here, and the DVD features eighteen tunes from the Galway concert, as well as the fifty-minute long Stephen Lock directed documentary “**A Different Kind Of World**.”

As is the want of record labels, there’s a marginal difference in the musical content on each format. While only the CD features the love song “Share The Darkness,” the DVD includes “Tommy K,” “Galway And Mayo” and “Maroon And White.” By way of eliminating any *genre* misconceptions at this early juncture, the bottom line is that The Saw Doctors are, essentially, an electric pop band, while Derek Murray’s accordion adds a hint of Celtic jigs and reels. One thing is certain, I can’t imagine anyone who, within earshot of The Saw Doctors in full musical flow, wouldn’t be captivated by their infectious toe tappin’ brand of rock’ n’ reel. In fact in terms of Irish music U2 may be *the* rock band, while lyrically The Saw Doctors are custodians of the nation’s cultural history. Be it mundane or monumental.

The two main songwriters, and founding members of the band are Dave Carton and Leo Moran, and early in documentary the latter mentions, with some pride, that they are a “*community based band*” and pegs their music stylistically as “*thrash-ditional*.” In fact Moran’s opening comment forms an essential part of the secret of their success, since their lyrics reflect daily life in the west of Ireland, in their native Galway and neighbouring Mayo in particular, while also offering exposure to local Tuam personalities such as “Tommy K” [the late Tommy Kavanaugh was a local rebel and Tuam’s first d.j. who during the 1960’s dared to hold a disco in Tuam’s Phoenix Ballroom during Lent] or “Michael D. Rocking In The Dial” [an author and poet, Michael D. Higgins is the local sitting member in Ireland’s Parliament, the Dail Eireann, and currently the Labour Party spokesman on Foreign Affairs], or the contradiction of late 20th century social and sexual mores and the rigid pursuit of the Catholic faith as portrayed in “Bless Me Father,” while “Clare Island” [home and resting place of the notorious 16th century female Irish pirate, Grainne O’Malley aka Granuile] and “Green And Red Of Mayo” succeed in capturing the history and beauty of the landscape in which The Saw Doctors music has been distilled.

Their *down to earth* [and *earthy*] lyrical approach is perfectly encapsulated in the lines “*You know, you’d often wonder as the years go past, Why have you ever bothered going to mass, Was it the fear a God or to find a wife, Or just buying shares in the after life*” from their celebration of life in Tuam, “Same Oul’ Town.” As for sport, “To Win Just Once” could be applicable to many such activities whether individual or team, while “Maroon And White” is a tribute to Galway’s Gaelic football team. As for the aforementioned Celtic reels, both formats feature a roistering rendition of “Joyce Country Ceili Band.” During their performance of the latter song, The Saw Doctors are joined onstage by Lunasa’s Sean Smyth [fiddle] and the traditional acoustic quintet Ri-Ra. The solo guitar break partway through “That’s What She Said Last Night” includes a melodic cross-reference to Springsteen’s “Born To Run,” and if *even more* love songs are your particular *glass of Guinness*, then “Why Do I Always Want You,” “Red Cortina” and “I Usedta Lover,” the band’s # 1 single and, probably, the first lyric to rhyme the Catholic “*mass*” with “*ass*,” as in the body part that’s behind us all, should see your drinking pot overflow. The CD and DVD close

with an encore rendition of their boisterous hoedown, "Hay Wrap." In the process of portraying [Irish] life, The Saw Doctors lyrics are chock full of sly humour and irony, and are subjectively inclusive – nothing is too sacred to mention - rather than being exclusive. While, to date, I have emphasised the band's inherent Irishness, it's a testament to the *universal* quality of The Saw Doctors songs that they have successfully been exported to Europe, Australia and America.

The documentary title "**A Different Kind Of World**" comes from a line in "Galway And Mayo," a *rite of passage* lyric that opens with the past reflection "*Hardly anyone had a tele*," [+] continues "*Heaven was a game of football, Before I ever kissed the girls*," following which the narrator goes on to recall how, as a youngster, his family would go on a car trip every Sunday afternoon. In the process, he learned the history of the locality from his parents. Segue forward a few decades and the narrator finds himself repeating the process with "*my own boy now*." As for the beautiful simplicity of what the words of, mainly, Messrs. Carton and Moran achieve, the following gems appear in "Galway And Mayo," – proving that children the world are over are the same, during the aforementioned Sunday car trip "*We'd be asking 'Are we nearly there?'*," while "*There's a stillness in the summer air, sheepdog lying in the sun*" and "*Three young girls with butterfly nets, Break into a run*" portray scenes witnessed from the back seat of that *oul' Ford* car. As for the relentless passage of that man made invention, time, "*I show him where we cut the turf*" is a reference to the Irish bog-land activity of digging peat [aka *turf*] for fuel.

In the opening sequence of Steven Lock's film, an old wine red Ford Cortina, with members of the band aboard, is seen driving down the road. The film includes sequences from the band's "*rain drenched*" appearance at Prospect Park in the summer of 2003 during the Celebrate Brooklyn! Performing Arts Festival, acoustic performances of band songs at The Rustic Vaults Bar in Tuam [their local pub] and on the beach at Clare Island, as well as snippets from the Black Box concert. Leo is seen on a solo fishing trip on Lough Corrib during which he offers the insight that he'd rather "*have another hit record, than catch a fish*" while, later, Carton philosophically offers "*In a 100 years time if somebody was singing one of your songs in a pub, that would be success for us. I think that at this stage, surely, there is at least one that will carry on. And it will, hopefully, paint a picture of history as well.*" As the documentary unfolds, there are numerous street scenes from Tuam, a band rehearsal, a ferry trip to Clare Island, the band and some youngsters playing football on the beach at Clare Island, Carton's three sons rehearsing their heavy metal rock band GURT and much more.

Among the many contributors to documentary are Michael D. Higgins who in a wonderful brogue initially intones in relation to their music, "*The band is slightly pagan, I suppose*," but with a devilish Irish twinkle in his eyes, this 62-year old comes across as a stalwart supporter of the band. In relation to some of the band's *racier* song lyrics the Galway based broadcaster Sean Ban Breathnach comments "*I don't think The Saw Doctors were anyway at all disrespectful of the church. Indeed they might have kind of narked them a little bit with the lyrics to a few of their songs.*" Writer and Irish Times columnist, John Waters, expresses, at one juncture, surprise that other Irish bred bands have not followed in the wake of The Saw Doctors, adopting their lyrical approach, but taking it to new artistic heights. Maybe nobody has because no one could do it better, is the unspoken answer.

In 1985 freelance producer and actor, Paraic Breathnach, founded the Galway based performing company Macnas. The word means "*joyful abandonment*." By way of proving the diversity of Moran and Carton's sources of inspiration, his organisation turns up in the title and lyric of the song "Macnas Parade." Moran and former band drummer John Donnelly [1989/2000] are, respectively, past/present members of the company. Also included on the DVD is a 200 shot *inclusive* photo album by Leo Moran. My favourite still is of a local establishment that bears the name "Tuam Raiders" complete with *copycat lettering* fronted by the figure of Angelina/Lara resplendent in her kit.

Personally speaking, I'm a faded old, died in the wool sixties contemporary folkie, and while the once *de rigueur* rock band approach of "unplugging" is now looked upon as old hat, that is one performance area that The Saw Doctors have yet to explore on record. The aforementioned segments filmed at Tuam's Rustic Vaults and on the beach at Clare Island provide ample proof that *their poems* possess great potency when performed acoustically. In an electric band setting, they form part of the total sound, and are sometimes buried in *the electrically driven sound* that the musicians generate.

In conclusion, I've got to say that there's far more to The Saw Doctors than just some *oul' "thrash-ditionial."* band from Tuam, and both versions of "**Live In Galway**" furnish evidence of that fact. I'll leave

the final words to Irish actor/comedian, Tommy Tiernan, *“The spirit that created the first songs is still the spirit that’s creating the new songs. The Saw Doctors deserve to be listened to with an open heart.”* Amen, to that.....

Note.

[+] – For “*tele*” read television.

Folkwax Rating 8 out of 10

Arthur Wood

Kerrville Kronikles 03/04

Photo Credit

Saw Doctors 5_I to r Jim Higgins Jr, Derek Murray, Padraig Stevens, Anthony Thistlethwaite, Leo Moran & Davy Carton_Credit Paul MacCarthy.jpg