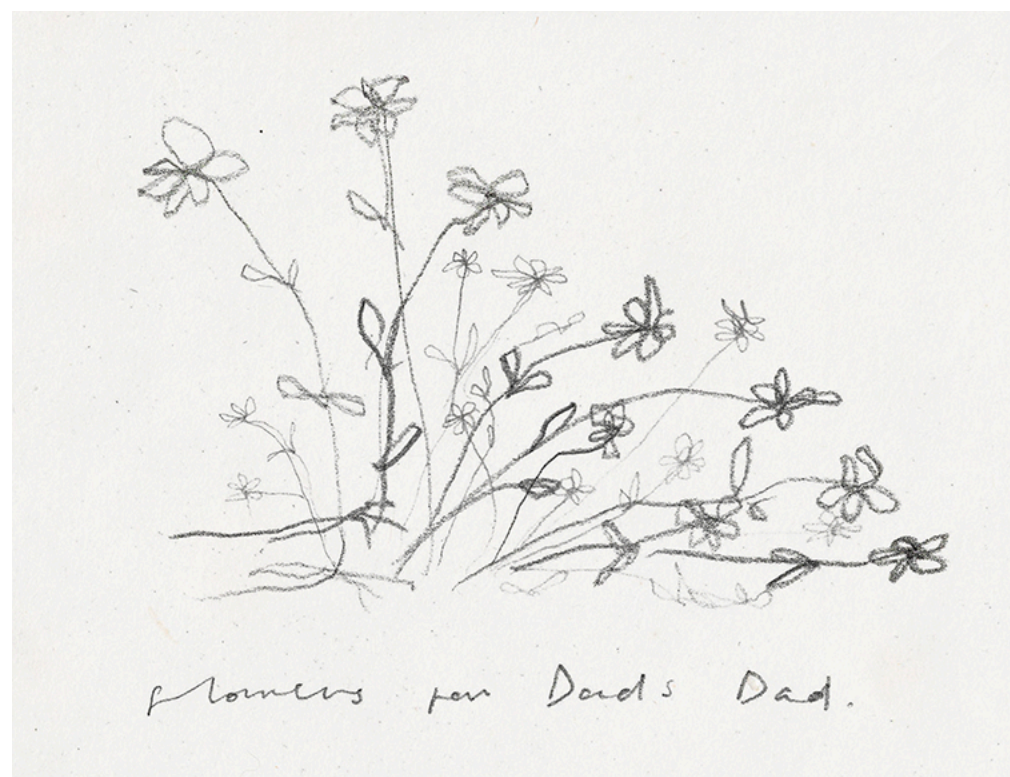


KILKELLY: THE PRICK & THE PETAL

Facing Ireland's scars through art, storytelling and dark folk music.

The Liverpool Irish Festival always likes to challenge our artists (and audiences) to try new things, describe their work publicly and provide additional opportunities in which people can shine. Since starting their email chain, the Festival and KilKelly have been discussing storytelling and how different forms provide mechanisms for expression and inspiration for other mediums. Using music as a vehicle and visual art, critical dialogue and mass culture as stimuli, KilKelly are offering a new presentation of their music. Here, they tell us more about the shape and style of their new album and how the visual art affects the audio art.

KilKelly's debut album *The Prick and the Petal* is an artistic investigation, through song and 'conceptional' art, into the psyche of the superstitious, the oppressed and the destitute of old Ireland. It demonstrates how grievances of the past resurface to this day through depression, alcoholism and drug abuse in modern Ireland. The work is a collaboration between songwriter, Conor KilKelly, (Drogheda, Ireland) and visual artist and band-member Stephanie Hannon (Coventry, England; ancestry, Limerick, Ireland) resulting in fully formed art piece and concept album.



Joined together, as two ex-pat artists living in Berlin, they try to celebrate -and brutally assess- how Ireland's traumas and eccentricities are held in the minds of those who've journeyed away. In KilKelly's case, this occurred as a young adult, and in Hannon's, it is considered through her grandfather's emigration to England.

The narrative is a simple, and familiar story: two star crossed lovers, ripped apart by the lures of depravity heralded by the desperation of the times. With their relationship in tatters, the lovers separate, and we follow each of them as they journey aimlessly through the recesses of society and the darkest corners of the Celtic mind. Joe and Mary are plagued by guilt, driven mad, to murder, drink, drugs and prostitution, and we, the perceiver, look on through the descriptions of their victims and through their own internal monologues.

Lamenting lyrics and spoken word guide us through the eleven songs, depicting the scenes of each act with explicit, visceral realism. Accompanied by dark-folk style acoustic guitar, double bass, accordion, cello and percussion; all available in the times of old Ireland.

The artworks, although directly inspired by KilKelly's music, are more ambiguous. Heavy in emotion, they paint a story of Ireland that throughout history has only been whispered. The public airing of grievances, both internal and external are depicted by Hannon representing the plight the characters and her grandfather's journey from Limerick to Coventry in the 1950's. Her work encompasses the religious dogma of the time, the treatment of Irish immigrants in England, as well as the mythological superstitious tropes so rampant in the lives of the Irish.

The era in which *KilKelly's* narrative takes place, is unknown, which perhaps suggests that the very same preoccupations of the mind that hold our protagonists hostage, still hold true today. It is only in airing these topics that we urge a dialogue on the hardest topics in Ireland's past in an effort to defuse the impact they have over the nation today.

Conor KilKelly says: 'Anyone who's lived in Ireland has an uncomfortable relationship with loss. The devastation of the famine, where impoverished people were only allowed sustain their lives with one measly crop (and were left to die or emigrate when it inevitably failed) knows that fleeing is in the country's DNA.

'Every recession sees this unconscious fear breach the surface of society, and our young go far afield, as if intuited; a biological survival tool passed down by those lucky enough to have survived before. I left in the last big bust. I went to Berlin. I never confronted why. Said 'I went on a whim and stayed', never addressing what the makings of a whim amount to when you boil it down far enough. It was only during the making of this album that I realized the extent of my repression of it all: of leaving, of Ireland's past, of our theocratic rule for so many years, and how that's left the psyche of the State reeling and emotionally scarred.

'I write in the same 'whim' like way, in so far as I try to think as little as possible about what I'm saying or doing until I'm faced with the ugly truth of it - the end result. Only then do I decide whether or not I can bear to show it. Thankfully characters emerged that cloak the content's personal nature, to a degree, and give a narrative I can feel at least superficially [remain] apart from and so deliver the grit and grief of Ireland's past with respect and with its people as the focus, not me.

'Only when I found I had eleven songs, all relating to those characters we've stumbled upon lying in the gutter, or drinking themselves to death, or simply not being able to cope with the times and fleeing as 'Anywhere but here will do' (as one song laments), only then did I realise I had written an album of connected, interrelated songs, dealing with loss -Ireland's loss- and, as such, mine.

'Working with Stephanie Hannon allowed these characters to take form, as she instinctively curated and amassed materials that somehow seemed to belong to those I sang for and about.



'During the creation of the album Stephanie became an Irish citizen, having retraced her grandfather's steps, who migrated to her birthplace of Coventry. She travelled to his home of Limerick city touring as part of *KilKelly*, and we spent time there; contemplated moving there, too. 'Why not just get a live-aboard boat and forget about everything else?'. As whims go, I think it's not bad one'.

Stephanie Hannon: 'I visited Ireland for the first time in 2017, working initially as a photographer for *KilKelly* on the first Irish tour. Ireland struck me as a magical place, where the people aren't afraid to show compassion; aren't afraid to let their guard down and show emotion. The Irish sing songs for each other. Felix, *KilKelly's* German bassist cried when he saw this and it was then I realised what an impact these traditional singers truly had, and have. I felt at home and comforted by the fact that my ancestry is there and decided to apply for citizenship. This led to me delving deeper in to my family history. I thought a lot about the way my Grandad was treated as an Irishman living in England and the effect it had on his family and consequently, my family; my dad in particular.

'My dad's last encounter with his dad was an all-out brawl. He never forgave himself for that. The role that guilt played in my dad's up-bringing -and how this is passed on- is striking. To illustrate it, I made a drawing called *For Dad's Dad* - part of a series called *Flowers For*. The *Flowers For* series is about the symbolism of flowers; we lay flowers when we lay someone to rest. The drawn flowers act as a gesture of understanding someone's pain and hardship. Simple in appearance, these drawings are meaningful emblems. Their aim is to privately speak to that person -dead or alive- and offer empathy, uncompromised understanding, and -when applicable- redemption.

'Conversations with my dad revealed his Catholic up- bringing - which was more prevalent than I had realised. He showed me his "Jesus Box", with religious paraphernalia, and then while gathering my Nan's possessions, I unearthed her stone with the words "My Dear Lord" painted on it, among all of the religious trinkets I found in her jewellery box; cherished, but hidden. I suspect, in a way, this collaboration with *KilKelly* is an examination of our collective boxes, passed down, for better or worse, from those who came and went before, hidden no more'.

KILKELLY

will show work and play their music, supported by singer-songwriter **Sue Rynhart** (and guitarist Rob Luft) at *Leaf on Bold Street*, Sun 20 Oct 2019, £12 adv/£14 on the door. liverpoolirishfestival.com/events