

Sunday Life

IN ANOTHER LIFE

I forged ahead, but missed home every step of the way

In 1959 Dickie Rock threw aside his welding torch and left the steel yard to front a showband and pack out ballrooms around Ireland. But while the singer was fired up for a flash of stardom, strong family bonds meant he would always stick with Dublin

I never set out to be a professional entertainer. When I was about 16 or 17, I went to England to get work. I had an uncle in Manchester and got a job as an apprentice welder. I worked in a place where they made metal tanks and that sort of thing.

In Manchester, I got very homesick. I used to ask for overtime just so that I could fill in another day. I find that living in a small country like Ireland, you're inclined to miss it more when you're away – well, I did anyway. And that stayed with me all through my career. I just like to be at home.

I only stayed in Manchester for about 10 months, and homesickness was the main reason. I had a good job over there and good money, but I just wanted to be back in Dublin. I came from a good home with a loving mother and father and I had two sisters and two brothers whom I missed terribly.

So I came home and I got a job at Unidare, a steel fabrication company in Finglas. I wanted a trade and picked welding because my father and all my uncles were in that industry: they were sheet metal workers and shipwrights and metalsmiths in the shipyard on the city's East Wall Road. It wasn't hard work and I loved it actually – I was even good at it. There was good money in it too, but singing was calling me.

Being a young man at the time, I would not have been aware how difficult it was for my mother and father to make ends meet. My father was a blacksmith, so it would have been hard for them raising a family and five children with just the one wage coming in. I was delighted when I started making a few bob and could come home to my mother and give her my wage packet, which is what we used to do at the time. I was the eldest and the first one of the kids to make some money. At that time, even a pound or two made a huge difference to my parents.

I was still living at home up to the time I got married when I was 26.

I had sung as an amateur when I was younger. I was in a choir which went around hospitals singing – I was billed as "Richie Rock, Boy Soprano". Then when I was about 14 or 15, I was in an amateur variety group called the Casino Players, which also used to go around the hospitals and entertain the patients.

“I was delighted when I started making a few bob and could give my mother my wage packet



BRYAN MEADE



Rock found work in Manchester for 10 months in the 1950s but got homesick

I got into singing professionally when I was on the job at Unidare one day teaching somebody else how to weld. I was behind a big screen in the workshop, because as a welder you would get a flash in your eye otherwise and it was very dangerous. I was singing away behind the screen, as a lot of people did, when this fella came up to me. He had heard me singing and he said he had a band and that the singer was leaving. He asked if I would be interested in coming down to do an audition. So I did.

I went down to Parnell Square and sang some songs, and they gave me the job. That was a band called the Melochords.

The Melochords worked all over Dublin and sometimes down the country. We were basically a rock 'n' roll band – the music was at its height at that time. I started singing with them in 1959, so that makes it nearly 60 years I have worked as a professional singer now.

I didn't set out to be a solo singer: someone came up to our house in Cabra West one day and asked me to come down to the Scout Hall in Donnybrook to do a gig and they gave me 10 shillings. That was the beginning of it and it snowballed after. [After going on to front the Miami Showband, Rock sang solo for Ireland in the 1966 Eurovision Song Contest and went on to become one of Ireland's most successful recording artists, with a run of 25 hit singles between 1963 and 1983.]

I didn't decide, "I'm going to be Dickie Rock, the singer", it just sort of came to me, which I was delighted with. I didn't know if it was going to be a career move, but the rest, as they say, is history.

Interview by Yvonne Gordon

Dickie Rock plays the Gleneagle Ballroom, Killarney, Co Kerry, on June 13, July 14, July 28, August 11 and August 25. gleneaglehotel.com

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THIS WEEK WHY NOT



RE-JOYCE AT A BLOOMING GREAT PARTY IN DUBLIN

Board a vintage double-decker for a Joycean sightseeing tour of "dear dirty Dublin" at the Bloomsday Festival. Starting in the capital next Sunday, the six-day event celebrates all things James Joyce in the run-up to Bloomsday on June 16, the day on which the events of Ulysses took place. Authors Dermot

Bolger and Geoff Dyer will give historical talks and readings, and you can mingle with body painters at a "poetry brothel" nightclub featuring theatre, magic and burlesque performances, visit a Martello tower, and drop into the iconic Sweny's Pharmacy for lemon soap. bloomsdayfestival.ie



FLY THE FLAG FOR CORK AT A MARITIME HERITAGE FEST

Try stand-up paddle boarding in the city, or live out your seafaring dreams at the Cork Harbour Festival. This nine-day celebration of Cork's maritime culture, which started yesterday, takes place in Cork city and surrounding harbour towns and villages. Visitors can try foraging for seaweed, learn

how to kayak, and browse a seafood market. Today's competitive action is the Coastal Rowing Championship Regatta, while next Saturday it's the Ocean to City race where 600 people will battle it out in currachs, longboats and dragon boats. corkharbourfestival.com



LACE UP YOUR BOOTS FOR A RAMBLE IN KILLARNEY

Take in some of Ireland's most breathtaking scenery at the Killarney Walking Festival. Organisers of the three-day event, starting on Friday, have lined up hikes to suit walkers of all ages and abilities. You can tackle the MacGuillycuddy's Reeks – Ireland's highest mountain

range – or make an ascent of Cruach Mhór to see the remnants of an old airforce plane. For a less demanding outing, check out Ross Castle, or take a family stroll to Muckross House. All walks are guided, but appropriate clothing and footwear is essential. killarneywalkingfestival.ie



DRUM UP SOME CULTURAL JOY IN ARTISTIC CARLOW

From Wednesday, you can get your culture fix at the Carlow Arts Festival. Now in its 38th year, the event includes music, award-winning shows, immersive visual art and family fun – and most of it is free. Music will be provided by the Strypes and Carlow native Sarah O Gorman, who will

perform alongside blues-funk outfit Stomptown Brass, pictured. The tales of Lewis Carroll, Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm will get a spectacularly dark makeover by festival debutants Ondadurto Teatro. The festival runs until June 13. carlowartsfestival.com