

THINK LOCALLY  
SING GLOBALLY

COSMOPOLITAN  
CORKMAN  
JIMMY  
CROWLEY

by Steve  
Winick

Terry Evans

On the cover of his latest CD, Jimmy Crowley, the mustachioed balladeer from Cork City, blasts his way out of a bottle of Murphy's Stout, arms akimbo, propelled by foam. It's a fitting image in several ways. First of all, Crowley is to his friends Christy Moore, Andy Irvine and Ronnie Drew exactly what Murphy's is to Guinness: not quite as famous, but equally tasty. Like Murphy's, Crowley is indelibly associated with his home turf of Cork city and its environs. And like the folks who generally hang out inside bottles, Crowley can usually grant your wish — if it's a song you're after, that is.

Crowley's been granting the wishes of fans for years. He's sung on every stage that Irish music has to offer, and played with some of the greatest musicians in the tradition: Jerry O'Sullivan, Joe Burke, Jackie Daly and Micheal O'Dhomhnaill, to name only a few. Talk about Crowley to a scholar of Irish music, and you

get an immediate, positive response; Mick Moloney likens him to Zosimus, the legendary gleeman of 18th Century Dublin, while Micheal O'Suilleabhain calls him a "musical icon." The most telling piece of evidence, however, comes from Crowley's biggest fans: other folksingers. Liam Clancy keeps a tape of Crowley's singing in his car at all times, while former Dubliner Drew calls him "a great singer." Mary Black relishes her memories of Crowley's performances in the late 1970s, and English singer Martin Carthy is even more effusive, saying that Crowley "embodies all that is good and true" about folk music.

Crowley is known for his taut, almost strident singing voice, which in Moloney's words "can only be described as lonesome." It's an urban voice, an Irish voice, a voice with echoes of children's street games and hawkers' cries ringing in cobblestoned alleys. Crowley uses it to sing a wide range of songs, but he's best

known for his thorough knowledge of Cork's rich folklore. Pieces like "Salonika," which he learned from a former bandmate's granny, and "The Boys of Fairhill," which he collected from the author's brother, wouldn't be known at all without him; likewise, "Johnny Jump Up," which Christy Moore and many another balladeer have picked up from Crowley, and "The Coal Quay Market," which Cherish The Ladies recorded a few years back, are part of the Irish folk scene because Crowley's passionate delivery made them compelling to his colleagues.

Songs have been Crowley's passion since his teen years. He served his time as a cabinet-maker, but in his heart his apprenticeship was in singing. Part of the reason for Crowley's eclectic repertoire today is the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Cork. "Cork was a port city, and we had the whole heart of Ireland sail out of Cobh to go to the New World, and that affected the place," he explained in a March, 1999 interview. "We had a lot of the merchant princes in Cork and they did business with people on the continent. So the music was touched by all that, yet there was an indigenous kind of a ballad culture." The result was a richly varied repertoire that he picked up at a young age: "a lot of urban ballads, songs about the First World War, or the war of independence. A lot of comic songs, a lot of music-hall songs."

Although he was enjoying his musical life in the city, Crowley also became fascinated by country life in the Irish-speaking areas of Ireland. "Going up to Miltown Malbay in the late 60s," he told me, "was like going to a different world. It was like going to Morocco. I was brought up in the city, you know, but I always just loved country people." Besides Miltown, favorite haunts included Dún Chaoin in Co. Kerry and Cúil Aodha in Co. Cork, both of which were bastions of the Munster dialect of Irish. In these and other rural townlands, Crowley spent his time listening to sean nós singing, fiddling, and piping by local musicians like Níochlás Toibín, Denis Murphy, and Willie Clancy. "For a young fella, about 16," he said, "it was great to see all the different colors of Ireland. I spent a very memorable time going around, picking up bits of *bealoideas*, folklore, and collecting songs."

Crowley began performing in a band with his friends in the late 1960s, and was well known enough by the mid-1970s that Mulligan records, the premiere label of the Irish revival, asked him to record an album. That 1977 disc, *The Boys of Fairhill*, spurred him on. His band became a tighter, more formal ensemble. "It was a three piece band, the first band," Crowley remembered. "It had a cousin of mine, called Smiley Daly, who sang an awful lot of English folksongs, and sang them very well. And we had a fellow called Mick O'Brien on strings. We used to play in west Cork and we had a very quaint repertoire, you know, like we

had some very authentic kind of American music, some English folk ballads, like murder ballads and sea songs, and I sang the Irish repertoire, a lot of the Cork songs. It was a very amazing band, really, for three lads, we were just having fun, we didn't have a kind of agenda, but we knew we had something going for us, and we weren't going to sing just any kind of songs."

Over the years, Crowley's band grew. It was christened Stokers Lodge after a hunting lodge in Co. Cork connected with the family of *Dracula*'s author, Bram Stoker. In 1979 the group recorded the classic album *Camp House Ballads*. By then it had grown into a five-piece consisting of Crowley (vocal, mandolin, bouzouki, harmonica, melodeon), Johnny Murphy (guitar, harmonium), Mick Murphy (vocal, mandolin, guitar, harmonium), Christy Twomey (concertina, autoharp) and Eoin O Riabhaigh (uilleann pipes, whistle). Their lively interpretations of classic songs like "The Coal Quay Market" and "I Know My Love" make *Camp House Ballads* a sweet and memorable album.

Despite their artistic success, however, Stokers Lodge were not destined to last. "We never officially broke up," Crowley explained. "It just seemed to be harder to get people together, to get people to tour. Mulligan got a really nice tour together for us, and one by one, guys were bucking and kind of pulled out."

One reason for the demise of Stokers Lodge was that only Crowley was committed to a full-time musical career. As he put it, "these lads were great, and it was a very authentic sound and everything, but they weren't able to give it the full whack." Today, the other members of Stokers Lodge are mostly in business; Mick Murphy, for example, is a butcher with his own little shop, while Johnny Murphy is an artisan in brass. Crowley would love to organize a reunion tour someday, but the logistics are hard to work out. "They can do some summer gigs and some things," Crowley explained. "But I do it to earn my livelihood, so I'm just on the road all the time."

Crowley has gotten to know the road very well in 21 years as a professional touring musician. "I was just kind of drawn into it by the hand of fate. It's lonesome and hard, but it colors everything you do in your life. I went back to college three years ago to do a degree in Folklore, and I just learned that you can't serve two masters, you know." As soon as classes were out he went back to the road.

The road is where Crowley finds so many unusual songs to arrange and sing. Traveling around Ireland in the 60s, he collected songs wherever he went. Traveling around the world, he's still doing it today. "Every night in the folk clubs in Scotland and England," he explained, "there will be five or six floor singers. I've often heard mighty songs there, from local people. They might sing a song about the mines, or something about the fishing industry.

Or about emigration. And, okay, they might be English songs. But I've gone to those people and said, 'I'd love to sing that song in my own way, would you give it to me?' And they did, you know?" When the floor spots aren't enough, Crowley simply follows his nose. "I can get the smell of a song, I smell an odor." And once on the scent, it's hard to put him off. "I just make it my business, like a little fisherman, after a nice pike," he grinned.

Alongside his role as an interpreter of the tradition, Crowley is also a songwriter, who tries to express his feelings about Ireland in his songs. Some of his albums, like 1997's *My Love is a Tall Ship*, are made up almost entirely of Crowley's originals. On these works, his political convictions come to the fore, and he's revealed as an important voice in Ireland's national conversation on Irishness. "*My Love is a Tall Ship*," said Crowley, "was sort of about the theme of postmodern Ireland, change, and the loss of our identity. It was a big thing with me. You know, we came to a stage where we at long last became solvent financially, and we became a so-called "Free State," a "Republic." And that was the time that we did more harm to ourselves than in all the years before, because we just incorporated anything from outside. Television, videos, everything from outside." The result of this encroachment, Crowley believes, was a vicious circle: decreased interest in Irish culture both springing from and contributing to a sense of inferiority. "There was this thing about seeing something good [from outside] and not seeing anything good in yourself. It was almost a shame thing. People didn't have confidence enough in Irish culture."

The most immediate fear Crowley expresses for Ireland in the coming years is the

disappearance of the Irish language. In "Roisin's Song" he writes of the diminishing size and importance of the Gaelthacht as a "conquest": English is battling Irish, and Irish is losing. Either Irish could be lost forever, Crowley speculates, or it might snap back with a vengeance: "You know you had the cultural revolution in China?" he asked. "I think Ireland could have something like that. Because there are so many people who just want to live in an Irish reality, and they're being killed. I mean, the whole concept of their reality is being tainted by these kind of "Dublin 4" accents. They don't know if they're English or Irish! And this is the kind of culture and music that we have coming at you."

Crowley conceded that, since he wrote the song, there have been improvements: a full-time Irish language television and radio station, for example. But he still fears the Irish government isn't doing enough. "They could bring [Irish] back overnight," he said. "The Jews brought back the Hebrew language, look at it now! Even as we speak there are people speaking Gaelic all over Ireland and Scotland, too. They could bring it back. The attitude is just not right. They pay lip service to it, and they speak it every time there's an election. But they've incorporated all the ways of the English way of life, and an Anglo-Saxon culture and philosophy. The kind of Protestant ethic of individualism, which is grand and so on, but it's not the same as Celtic culture."

"You know," he continued, "there's a saying in Irish, 'Together We Live.' Years ago it was a tradition of visiting people in their houses, playing the fiddle, dancing and sharing problems as well as wealth. That's why so many songs that I write are about that, because



Jimmy Crowley playing with Mick Moloney

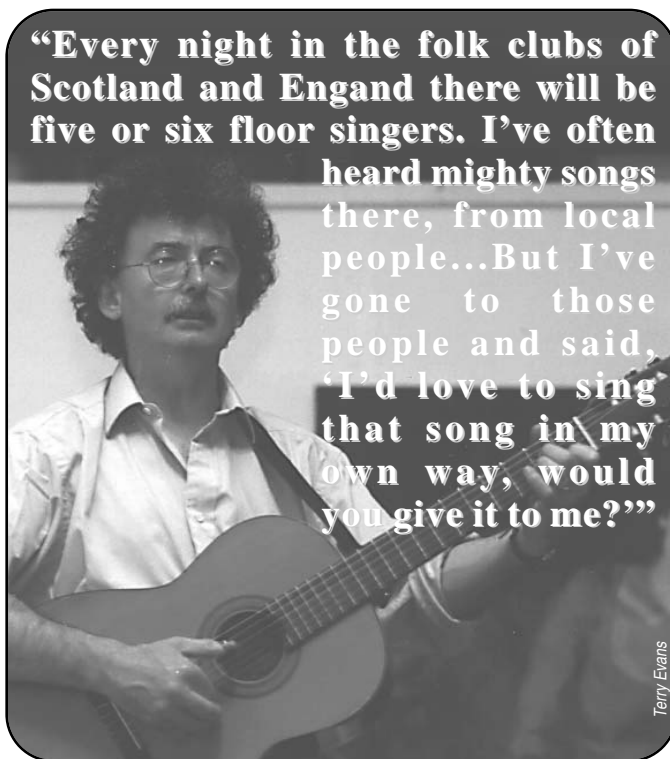
it's something that I want to get people to wake up about, you know?"

Crowley sees traditional songs as a corrective to the deterioration of Irish culture that he decries in his own songs. That's why *Uncorked* is a return to a mostly traditional format. As for the concept of the album, Crowley is quick to give away credit for that. "Mick Moloney was the man who...fair play to him! He said, 'Crowley, you've never been captured as you really should be. Your introductions to the songs are important, too. Don't sell yourself short. Do a live album of songs that are not available on your other CDs.' So I recorded it in Cork with a nice audience, got the crowd to sing along, introduced the songs, did everything just live." For Crowley, that means alone, with just a guitar, a bouzouki, a harmonica, and his lonesome voice.

This sparseness is a departure from *My Love is a Tall Ship*, which featured strings, grand piano, fretless bass, brass, and synthesizers. Some of Crowley's friends and fans, as well as some critics, felt that *My Love* was overproduced; those people have nothing to fear from *Uncorked*, which is barely "produced" at all. In fact, the lack of big production was part of the inspiration for the album's name; the idea of a stripped-down live production reminded Crowley's friend Johnny Miller of other similar projects. "He said to me, 'You know, there's *Unplugged*, and then Led Zeppelin had a thing called *Unleaded*, you should have *Uncorked*,'" Crowley explained. " 'Johnny,' I said, 'you're a genius! Jesus, that's great!'"

In many ways, *Uncorked* is an ideal Jimmy Crowley album. With 10 of his best known songs and a few newer pieces, it's like a greatest hits album with bonus tracks. Some of the songs on *Uncorked* forever associated with Crowley, Cork, or both, include "Salonika," "Would You Like Your Old Lobby Washed Down, Con Shine?" "I Know My Love," "The Holy Ground" and "The Boys of Kilmichael." Fans of Crowley's traditional songs should be prepared, however: In some cases the versions here are quite different from the ones he has recorded before, and may take getting used to. Crowley explained, "The original version of 'Johnny Jump Up' was incomplete. I subsequently met Tadhg Jordan, the author, who completed the picture for me, so when the live album came up, I used the full text. This applied to 'The Boys of Fairhill' and 'The Armoured Car' also: More text was unearthed with research."

Crowley's next album will keep to the general format of mainly traditional songs and spare acoustic arrangements that have marked his best work in the past. It's a classic idea for



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a folk album, one that's been done by many singers in the past, but that's still ripe for Crowley's exploration. "It's romantic songs of the sea from Ireland, Scotland, England, and America," he explained. An avid sailor himself, Crowley has recently been enjoying the growing popularity of sea music in Europe. "You've got sea festivals, maritime festivals, old time fishing smacks and old time yawls and schooners and that," he enthused. "I sail myself, I have a boat and I'm a very keen sailor. Just for the last few years I've gone crazy about that. It's changed my whole life."

Based on this love of the sea, he had already begun to seek out sea songs when we spoke, and was very excited about what he'd turned up. "Not sea shanties," he carefully explained, "but songs about the sea and how the sea affects people who voyage, and who get left at home. There's some very funny songs, some tragic songs, some songs about ships. Some of them, the titles are

the names of ships, like "The Lady Leroy"; Phil Callery from Dublin gave me that song. There's an old Victorian song I learned from my ma, called "The Coast of Malabar;" there's a Gordon Bok song, "The Hills of Isle Au Haut;" a couple of songs from Co. Cork that are totally unknown; and a song I wrote myself about my own little ship. There are songs written by mates of mine who are seamen, and Len Graham gave me a couple of songs from Ulster."

As for the album's sound, he was equally enthusiastic about that. "It's exclusively played on mandolin family instruments," he said, "bouzoukis, mandobass, mandocello, mandolas, and a couple of old vintage mandolins." In addition, Triona Ni Dhomhnaill, of Bothy Band and Nightnoise fame, sings on the album, and that Mick Murphy, Crowley's old colleague from Stokers Lodge, plays some lovely mandolin on it.

Like his previous two discs, this one will be released initially by Crowley's own label, Free State Records. Having his own label is part of his fiercely independent attitude, an almost foolhardy integrity that other artists can only admire. "Having your own little label means that you can really put your money where your mouth is," he said. "An artist should know what he or she should do, and if they don't sell one CD, it should be enough. If your soul and your heart is in something, all trends don't mean a thing. I could see if I was going to survive [without my own label] I'd have to do a lot of compromising, following trends and PR. I don't want to do that. I know what I want to do, and this label allows me to do it."



## JIMMY CROWLEY DISCOGRAPHY

### *UnCorked*

Greentrax (CD1998; licensed from Free State)

### *UnCorked*

Free State Records (1998; CD)

### *My Love is a Tall Ship*

Free State Records (1997; CD)

### *Jimmy Crowley*

Free State Records (1991; soon to be reissued on CD)

### *Jimi Mo Mhile Stor (Gaelic)*

Gael-Linn (1981; LP/cassette)

### *Some Things Never Change*

Mulligan (1980; LP/cassette)

### *Camp House Ballads*

Mulligan (1979; cassette)

### *The Boys of Fairhill*

Mulligan (1977; unavailable)

**Free State Records** PO Box 145/ Cork,  
Ireland

Jimmy Crowley will be touring the U.S. this fall.  
Watch the *Dirty Linen* gig guide or email  
lrmason@hotmail.com for info.

<http://www.IRISHTRAD.COM/crowley/>