

# Arts & Ideas

Editor: Liam Stebbing

## Patrick Freyne



# The Bannon barometer of our national derangement



As most good Catholics know, the liturgical calendar goes: Advent, Christmas, Room to Improve, Lent, Easter, Ordinary Time, Hammer Time.

We are currently at the fourth Sunday of Room to Improve (RTÉ One), which means we've had four weeks of observing the Passion of the Bannon. His is the most familiar face in Ireland now Ryan Tubridy has been removed from all photographs, like a Bolshevik in the 1930s.

Dermot Bannon is deeply concerned about the houses of Ireland and the people who live in them. He's almost a figure of folklore these days, appearing to us all as a ghostly apparition moaning and bleeding from the eyes as we commit atrocities against light or space. ("But that's the window in which I always pile my clothes, Dermot Bannon!") "But where else would we heap our old DVD boxes but in this narrow corridor leading to the kitchen, Dermot Bannon?" "I like having a very dark dining room, Dermot Bannon."

Yes, I'm basically saying Dermot Bannon is a Christ figure. He's at his wit's end with us, but he *cares*. In other countries they think property is a pragmatic consideration, "shelter" being just one item in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. We just have one Maslow's Need: an extension. We operate differently. Freud famously said that the Irish were impervious to psychoanalysis\*. Dermot Bannon demonstrated without a shadow of a doubt that the Irish are *not* impervious to architecture. Indeed, Irish brains don't even show up in an MRI machine unless they're planning an extension.

(\*Colleagues keep telling me that this story is apocryphal, but I think that just makes it more true, so I'm sticking with it.)

Need to have a serious conversation with your spouse? Build an extension instead. Having an existential crisis brought on by retirement? Build an extension. Never really reckoned with the reality of those delightful children you thought you wanted? Build an extension. (That should hold them.) Basically, the joy of Room to Improve is sitting down each week, cracking your knuckles and saying, "Right, what's wrong with *these* people?" (before looking ruefully at your own disappointing family and thinking, I should build an extension.)

In the midst of a housing crisis, Room to Improve also feels like a good barometer

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**Where are we so far? Well, I've likened Dermot Bannon to Christ, Freud, the Monolith in 2001: A Space Odyssey and Oppenheimer. And not one of you thinks I've gone too far, so I think it's going very well**

of our national derangement. There's something both decadent and revealing about the fact that people can think about poured-concrete floors and granite-topped kitchen islands at a time like this. Thus far in this year's programmes we have had several people spending insane amounts of money that make no sense outside a dysfunctional housing market. Sometimes I feel they should replace the voiceover with some audio from Morgan Kelly circa 2008.

Of course, history is a circle. The people on Room to Improve have been radicalised by years of watching Room to Improve. Bannon is the Monolith to their bone-smashing apes. As people recount their plans to Bannon these days, they often seem to want an extension that he designed on another episode years ago. In those moments a haunted expression crosses Bannon's face and he looks like Oppenheimer reckoning with the atomic bomb. "Now I am become death, destroyer of below-code 1970s extensions," he thinks, and then shows them some tiles.

(Where are we so far? Well, I've likened Dermot Bannon to Christ, Freud, the Monolith in 2001: A Space Odyssey and Oppenheimer. And not one of you thinks I've gone too far, so I think it's going very well.)

Much of each episode involves Bannon trying to talk a couple out of something they want because they've seen it elsewhere (in a local coffee shop, their sibling's house, something designed by that chancer Dermot Bannon). We lack self-knowledge, and part of what Bannon brings to town is a reckoning with the self.



■ Dermot Bannon: deeply concerned about the houses of Ireland and the people who live in them. Left: Bannon on a project... 'Now I am become death, destroyer of below-code 1970s extensions.' PHOTOGRAPHS: ANDRES POVEDA/RTÉ

Why do we want extensions? He is not just in the business of improving rooms but in the business of improving mankind, for the full Bannionisation of Ireland will only be possible come the fully actualised New Bannion Man. That's just basic Marxism. He needs each of us to contemplate the extension within.

Bannon is also fighting a rearguard action against Ireland's chintzy, shadowy past. Frequently he encourages us to turn our back on the old ways. For example, in the second episode of the series he opens up a freezing bungalow so it has views of the Rock of Cashel, which, it turns out, was right next door. Our ancestors generally felt that we'd get sick of looking at nice views ("it's just a rock") and that our attentions were better focused inward, on our sins. If they could have got away with it

they'd have had no windows at all.

There is a warmth to Room to Improve that evades many other property shows. In some ways you can watch each episode as a portrait of a couple lovingly etched into an open-plan kitchen. Different relationship dynamics are on display: a dyad of strong personalities; a talkative woman and a man who silently smiles; a talkative man and a woman who sighs. They're all nice people.

In every couple there is one person who will become unreasonably fixated on a countertop or a poured-concrete floor or the colour of the tiles. This is probably the point at which Freud gave up on us. There are also those who cling to cash so hard that it turns into metamorphic rock, and those whose money bursts into flames as soon as Bannon crosses the county

border. I mean, one family this season spent more than €600,000 renovating a three-bedroom house in Santry. I call this art installation The National Children's Hospital.

Children also appear on Room to Improve, but they tend to lurk in the background, sullenly preparing narratives for their therapists as their elders squander their inheritance for a decorative pergola. The producers sometimes interview the kids, but they all just say the same thing: "When I turn 18, if humanity still exists, I'm putting my parents into a nursing home. Then I will spend what time I have left watching climate-change storms through the massive f\*\*king windows I have instead of money for food."

There are three people in every marriage on Room to Improve if you include Bannon, and four if you include people at home for whom building extensions is a kink (all of us). The most erotic bits of Room to Improve are the sums and the bit where they assess if everyone involved came in on budget. We usually have, in fairness, though not always financially speaking. Then the extended family, Dermot Bannon, QS Claire and all the various craftspeople gather in the now perfected home and talk about how well everything worked. What else can they say? "I panicked about my mortality, and now I have a kitchen you could park a bus in?" It doesn't matter. All of us at home just fold our arms in unison and respond as per the liturgy: "Isn't it fine for some?" And then Room to Improve is over for another liturgical year.

## New Releases Music



**THE DEVIL'S SPINE BAND**  
Arrows of the Golden Moon ★★  
Self-Released

If you were to try to categorise the debut album by this motley crew of Irish musicians and artists, you would find yourself as confused as its tracklisting. Is it a spaghetti western? An offbeat sci-fi movie? A 19th-century period drama?

The Devil's Spine Band, a collective led by the keyboardist Trevor Knight, first came together in 2011. This album, apparently inspired by Oscar Wilde's trip to Colorado in 1882, features luminaries of the Irish independent scene such as the jazz singer Honor Heffernan and

the blues guitarist Ed Deane, who cowrote many of these songs (some of which are Wilde's poems set to music).

Knight's background in theatre directing and sound design makes more sense in the context of the instrumental numbers, particularly the ominous, intricate Down Below the Snakeline and the experimental, ambient electronica-tinged Captain Moonlight and the Silver-Tongued Mountain.

Elsewhere, there is a proliferation of bluesy, twangy rock'n'roll that sounds like a poor homage to Joe Meek or The Shadows (The Devil's Rodeo), while the mournful cabaret of Desert Poppy comes across as Twin Peaks meets Edward Scissorhands.

Other tracks are overlong; no one needs 10 minutes of the primal yowling that is Chief Bridgeman Summons the Wild Electrical, or the grating rasp of Everything Is Blue.

LAUREN MURPHY



**VIJAY IYER**  
Compassion ★★★  
ECM

Vijay Iyer is one of the most lauded musicians in modern jazz. Over the past 30 years the prolific American pianist and composer has released a series of quietly commanding and highly acclaimed albums that embraces chamber, contemporary classical, hip hop, Asian and film music – and that reimagines jazz as something he prefers to call "creative music" or, better still, by no name at all. Iyer has won major awards and fellowships, including the MacArthur "genius grant", and been a tenured professor at Harvard since 2014. He has serious artistic and intellectual heft.

Iyer has led piano trios, too, most recently with two consummate improvising musicians who are also composers both in and out of the moment: the double bassist Linda May Han Oh and the drummer Tyshawn Sorey. Although Compassion is only their second album together, the three musicians have connections that stretch back many years, in Iyer and Sorey's case for two decades or more. You can hear the group cohesion, energy and understanding.

Over a dozen diverse tracks, nine written by Iyer – there is also a spirited interpretation of the Stevie Wonder earworm Overjoyed – the music ranges across a complex Venn diagram of blues, classical, soul, funk and free improv, with a deep knowledge and respect for jazz (there, I said it) at its intersecting centre. It is heady and visceral stuff, a state-of-the-art trio working at the very highest level.

PHILIP WATSON

## Shtick, yes, but still a killer debut



**LAST DINNER PARTY**  
Prelude to Ecstasy ★★★  
Island

It could have been a very different outcome. When you have a debut single that bulldozes through the music scene in the way that Nothing Matters did last year, it's usually only downhill from there. Indeed, the enormous early success of The Last Dinner Party soon led to accusations of the London band being either nepo babies who were fast-tracked to

the top or manufactured industry plants – charges not subdued by their top placing on the BBC's Sound of 2024 poll and a Brit Award as rising stars. Really, there is only one way to quieten the naysayers: make a killer debut album.

Prelude to Ecstasy is just that: a pop album that swerves and swoops into unexpected places but with plenty of hidden depths to discover with every listen. The band, led by Abigail Morris, take a forward-thinking approach to songwriting yet are similarly unafraid to dip into nostalgia for a brief wallow.

Opening the record with a classical overture, borrowing from 1980s acts such as Kate Bush and Siouxsie and the Banshees, and plundering a hearty baroque influence throughout, this is a

delightfully offbeat and incredibly accomplished collection, steered by the steady hand of James Ford, its producer.

More to the point, these are simply great songs. Morris, her versatile voice laden with both charisma and firepower, sells her lyric sheet with a convincing side of melodrama, as heard on Burn Alive ("I break off my rib to make another you") and Portrait ("I'd die for you, no questions asked/If anyone could kill me, it probably would be you"), songs that sound as if they were plucked from the soundtrack of the 1980s cult horror film The Lost Boys.

If Florence Welch is too screechy for your taste, the slightly more understated Feminine Urge ticks a similar box without the vocal histrionics. Sinner and Caesar on a TV

Screen do a line in barbed, tongue-in-cheek indiepop; My Lady of Mercy deftly switches between a Sparks-like surreal pop verse and a beefy stadium-rock chorus; and the sultry Portrait shows that the band are not afraid to pull out the big guns when required, building to a powerful, string-drenched climax.

Is there an element of shtick to it all? Undoubtedly: this is a band that thrives on image, as their stylised music videos and extravagant stagewear have shown. Yet beneath the facade is also thoughtful, well-crafted songwriting that instils a confidence that we'll be hearing more of The Last Dinner Party in years to come. And if not? Well, they've made that killer debut album, regardless.

LAUREN MURPHY



**VARIOUS ARTISTS**  
Patterns on the Window –  
The British Progressive Pop  
Sounds of 1974 ★★★  
Cherry Red/Grapevine

Any teenager alive in 1974 with an ear for pop-music oddballs would have cringed with despair at the musical vacuity of that year's singles charts.

The likes of Seasons in the Sun (Terry Jacks), Y Viva España (Sylvia), Love Me for a Reason (The Osmonds) and Billy, Don't Be a Hero (Paper Lace) might now be classified as easy-listening guilty pleasures, but to Lord and Lady Misfit they were as limp as overcooked noodles.

Across 66 songs (on three

CDs), Patterns on the Window goes all out to explain that for every simpering pop song your parents liked, an art-pop song was waiting in a nearby laneway, ready to mug them.

The writing had been on the wall from 1972, when David Bowie and Roxy Music arrived in their retro-futuristic spaceships. Add the glam-pop of Cockney Rebel (Judy Teen), Be-Bop Deluxe (Jet Silver and the Dolls of Venus), Sparks (Hasta Manana Monsieur), the rough but persuasive folksiness of early Rod Stewart (Farewell) and the here-comes-punk strut of Kilburn & the High Roads (Rough Kids) and Dr Feelgood (Roxette) and you have a healthy enough antidote to the habitually anodyne nature of what featured on Top of the Pops.

As usual with Cherry Red/Grapefruit compilations, a well-researched, well-written booklet contains enlightening details about each track.

TONY CLAYTON-LEA