

van morrison

Who am I to speak of Van Morrison?

I suppose that the assumption is that since we're all from the same small island, we all must know each other. The truth of the matter is that I really haven't had the good fortune to experience firsthand the famously cranky Van the Man personally. Back in my early days when I was a concert promoter for about five minutes, I did book a band called the Others, who were always to be billed as "The Others (drummer ex-Them)," but that was about as close as I got. Still, it's oddly comforting to know that Van Morrison would probably find a reason to object to whoever was asked to write something about him.

When I first came to Ireland at age 10, his band, Them, was already happening. Them was formed in 1963 and included members of his earlier band, the Monarchs, and some school friends. There's a photograph of him with the Monarchs that I can still remember. They're total Mods, with the same white jeans and the same moody poses and expressions as all the other Mod bands of the time.

Even from that one picture, you can just tell that Van Morrison was extremely uncomfortable and out of his element in that format. He looked so much happier later when he went off on his own and got to California. Like U2, I suppose, Van Morrison seems to have been truly liberated by his contact with America. To me, that remains a big connection between Van and Bono, two men who actually know each other.

As I recall, I was quite stunned when I realized that the man making that incredible music on *Astral Weeks* was Irish. He always had that very odd hybrid of an accent that's hard to read. But some of the streets he sang about on the record were in West London, so I knew something was up. The same thing was true a few years back on the *Avalon Sunset* album when he did that sort of spoken song about "Coney Island" and you gradually realized the Coney Island he's talking about is in Northern Ireland, not New York. His Americanisms seem in some utterly unexplainable way connected to all the Gaelic and Celtic that's in him. He's quite a mess in that respect, I suppose, but he's also a genuine original, a ground breaker, a

great man, and one of the most talented artists in rock & roll.

It was the best kind of shock for the lot of us when we first heard him. Here was a white, Irish guy who had all of this tremendous soul pouring out of him. And he helped a lot of people — U2 included — overcome what is a huge paranoia in our part of the world. As the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band once put the eternal question, "Can Blue Men Sing the Whites?" More than anyone else, Van Morrison managed to establish in everyone's consciousness that you didn't have to be black to be soulful.

Van always seems to be utterly devoid of ambition in any traditional sense. Musically, it is clear that he does exactly what he wants to do, exactly when he wants to do it. Apparently his only ambition is to make those amazing records, and that he manages to do quite frequently. He's been prolific to a frightening degree. He appears to put out albums constantly, probably more frequently than his record company would prefer. But when you succeed as often as he does, I suppose you earn the right to indulge yourself, if you choose.

He is clearly not someone who makes music for other people. He definitely seems to do what pleases himself. At the same time, I am utterly impressed by the fact that he's been able to maintain himself in the business on his own terms all these years. Van is not just a survivor; he's a major success story. He may have been, as the stories go, suspicious and contrary in many business dealings, but he's certainly nobody's fool. I believe he owns all his copyrights and masters.

I think the real point here is that Van Morrison is a fantastic enigma. There is so much about him that is remarkable. That incredible big, brown voice sounds like a saxophone — which is, after all, his original instrument. As a writer, he was one of the first lyricists in rock & roll who was not afraid to open up and expose his spiritual side.

In the end, the similarities between Van and U2 are considerable. We were all foot-soldiers in the ballrooms of rural Ireland one day. We're all rather practical in our own way, and we're all very much in love with America.

To be fair, Van did get there first. — PAUL MCGUINNESS

