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# People & Culture

## 'I didn't have an ounce of fear'

*Artist Guggi on his brush with death, being visited by Bono while in prison and his new show*



**Life:** Writer Kevin Power on how everything changed when he became a dad. Brendan O'Connor inflicts a new guru on his loved ones. **Interview:** Actor Derbhle Crotty talks theatre, grief and joy. **Movies:** The return of the musical.

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# Escape artist

A hand reaches out from the right side of the frame, palm up, against a cloudy sky. Below the hand, a coastal landscape unfolds, featuring a bay, a beach, and distant hills under a grey, overcast sky. The foreground is dominated by green grass and large grey rocks.

The acclaimed artist Guggi talks to **Barry Egan** about how his faith in God helped him survive an operation for an aneurysm, squaring up to a heroin addict in Mountjoy Prison, being visited in jail by his mate Bono, and the inspiration for his latest exhibition

Guggi's unwavering  
faith helped him  
through his surgery.  
*Picture by Mark Condren*



**L**ate one Saturday night, two months ago, Guggi was at home in Killiney, Co Dublin. He was listening to music on the sofa when pain began to shoot through his body. It started at the top of his head and then quickly spread down his neck and all the way to the backs of his legs.

"The pain was horrendous," he says. The artist was curled up in a ball on the floor in agony.

"There's something wrong," he told his girlfriend Gabriella Janni.

However, he wouldn't let her call an ambulance. The last thing he wanted when he was in so much pain was to be poked, prodded and asked questions.

By Sunday, he was no better.

"I was in rag order. I kept throwing up with the pain."

He finally allowed Gabriella to call an ambulance, which took him to St Vincent's hospital.

"I was completely hysterical when he left," says Gabriella, who couldn't go with him because of Covid restrictions.

In St Vincent's he had a CT scan, then was put in a wheelchair and given a bed.

"I thought, 'if the CT scan was clear, they wouldn't be treating me like this'. So, I kind of knew."

Then a doctor told him: "There's blood all over your brain." He had an aneurysm that had bled into his brain. Guggi asked what his chances were of survival.

"Not great," came the reply.

Another ambulance took him to Beaumont Hospital the next morning.

"I was talking to a few of my mates on the way," he says, meaning his childhood pals, Bono and Gavin Friday.

In Beaumont, Guggi was asked his name, date of birth and the month. Then he was asked it again and again.

"The same questions, over and over, it never stopped."

At 1pm, he was brought to the theatre, where four surgeons were waiting to operate on him.

One asked him again: "Guggi, just give me the date and the month please."

"It's January 1996," he answered.

The operating theatre fell silent.

"Then I said: 'Only messing!' The four of them cracked up laughing."

The surgeons told him: "We are going to go in through your groin, up through your heart to your brain. We are going to send a camera up there and have a look to see if you are suitable to have the procedure done this way."

They drew him a diagram and explained that he had a subarachnoid haemorrhage, the aneurysm had ruptured, and bled into his brain. They were going to block up the hole with titanium pins. "We could have to go in through your skull."

Luckily, Guggi was one of the 85pc who could be operated on via his vascular system, rather than cutting through his scalp.

"Then I breathed in the purest, cleanest air that I had ever inhaled. I woke up as I was being wheeled back to the ward," he says.

"The operation took four-and-a-half hours. It was a bleed on my brain, but it then bled a bit more while they were operating."

What kept Guggi calm throughout the operation wasn't the morphine. It was his faith in God.

"There was a far greater force at work. There was no doubt about that. That took over the situation. I wasn't frightened. It was my Creator. There is absolutely no doubt about it. I mean, why wasn't I afraid? I didn't have an ounce of fear, genuinely."

He spent two weeks in recovery in St Vincent's. On May 3, Gabriella and his eldest son Moses brought him home.

**Guggi was born Derek Rowen in the Rotunda Hospital on May 13, 1959. He can remember drawing a pirate ship with a rolled-up rope when he was four.**

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That was the age at which he met his neighbour at 10 Cedarwood Road in Ballymun, Paul Hewson. Another friend, Fionan Hanvey, lived at No 140, at the end of the road.

At 13, he renamed Paul "Bono Vox" and Fionan "Gavin Friday", while Paul christened him "Guggi".

When he was 17, he moved out with his younger brother Trevor – by then renamed Strongman – to a squat on New Cabra Road. As they left the house, their father told them how tough it was going to be out in the big bad world.

"I'm still waiting for it to get tough," Guggi says. "It's not that it can't be tough, but it's not nearly as tough as he made it for us. He's a difficult person. He was a lot tougher than he needed to be. He was unreasonable. He had a bad temper."

His father's mood wasn't improved when, in 1977, Guggi, Strongman and Gavin formed The Virgin Prunes (with The Edge's brother, Dik) and started to wear skirts and high heels.

"He did not like that. He kind of blamed Gavin. He blamed me as well for being so stupid, being led astray. Gav would call for me wearing a pair of culottes. Gav loved rubbing it in. My dad didn't get that at all."

Robert Rowen was a strict fundamentalist Christian who sent Guggi and his siblings to Christian Brethren meetings in Merrion Hall from an early age.

"It was the gospels and teachings of Christ without all the frills and altars and the costumes and the candles," he explains. "They just wanted the message, uninterrupted."

Did his father prefer him to be with Bono because his father was Church of Ireland, rather than Gavin, whose father was Catholic?

"There was certainly a touch of that with my dad, which I had no understanding of at all. I was always, 'you take people as you find them'. Actually, Bono's dad was a Catholic and his mum was Church of Ireland. He was brought up Church of Ireland. So, I don't know. My dad had all sorts of fixed ideas, I guess."

In any event, Guggi was fired from the Virgin Prunes by Gavin in 1984.

He opened a signwriting shop that also sold fruit and vegetables because he wanted to make some money.

He also had other ambitions.

"I wanted to paint full-time," he says.

**The following year, in 1985, he was**

arrested by the police in Finglas. He had been driving at 120mph with no tax or insurance.

When he appeared in court, he told the judge he realised the severity of the offence and had immediately gone out and had the motorbike taxed and insured.

The judge seemed pleased and as if he was about to let him go, when he was informed that the young man in front of him had 14 such previous offences.

Guggi was sentenced to six months; he appealed and received a shorter sentence.

The week before he went to court, however, Guggi was at a bus stop and said hello to one of the local heroin addicts who used to buy lemons (to help break down the heroin) from him. Guggi kept saying hello, until he noticed that the guy had his hand in the bag of an old lady.

The woman realised she was being robbed and the police were called.

"You're f\*\*king dead, pal," the addict said, thinking Guggi was somehow responsible for his arrest.

Fearing for his life, Guggi took an iron bar into his shop the next day. The man never showed up.

On his first day in Mountjoy Prison, after being strip-searched, it was suggested by a warden that he get his hair cut. He refused, saying: "This is who I am."

Another time Guggi was in the yard when he recognised the lemon guy walk-

**Different strokes – Guggi in his studio and, right, one of his latest works, 'Turquoise' (2020, mixed media) from his Time show.**

Picture by Mark Condren



ing towards him with two men. The first one looked "absolutely mad". The second one had a scar all the way across his face.

"The animal came out in me," remembers Guggi. He walked up to the aggrieved prisoner, put his own forehead against his and said: 'If you come near me, I will f\*\*king kill you.'

Neither the addict nor his two friends came near the young artist again.

Two weeks later Guggi was transferred to Loughan House Prison in Co Cavan.

He recalls: "The next day, in the yard, everyone stood to the side for this prisoner who had chopped a young fella's head off with the side of a shovel because he caught him robbing one of his horses."

The man beckoned Guggi over and asked him to smell his aftershave. Then he asked him if he wanted to buy some. When he replied that he wasn't in the market for fragrance, the man pulled Guggi by his hair, kissed him and said: "If I ever see you in the showers, you're f\*\*ked."

He didn't know whether it was a threat or a joke. But Guggi was glad the following week when one of his friends paid a visit.

"People were coming up and saying: 'He is a f\*\*king ringer for Bono!' I said: 'There's a reason why he looks so much like Bono. It is Bono.'

"They simply did not believe that such a person could be in such a place for any reason. 'I'll tell you one thing, he could do well now as a lookalike. He could be signing books. He could make a living out of that.'

"I eventually gave up and said, 'He is very like him, isn't he?'"

The U2 singer was fresh from playing to a TV audience of one billion at Live Aid and had come to see him with Gavin Friday.

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People were saying: 'He is a f\*\*king ringer for Bono!' I said: 'There's a reason why he looks so much like Bono. It is Bono'

"No one searched the B man. Then they slipped me the half bottle of whiskey.

"I was really risking a lot by walking back to the cell with that whiskey under my jacket. I remember going past the second in command, the assistant governor, nodding to him and then to my room and stashing the bottle behind the sink.

"That night I cracked it open with my cellmate from Scotland."

In the prison, Guggi came into his own artistically. He showed the art teacher how to sign write and made and sold jewellery boxes.

"I had everyone wanting me to make these boxes for them. It gave me real power. I was getting double portions from the lads in the kitchen and cigarettes. I wouldn't say I was running the place but there was no one who was running it more than me."

When he got out of prison he continued to paint. His first exhibition was in Dublin's Hendriks Gallery in 1988. It was a group show with the whiskey smugglers themselves: Bono showed photographs he had taken in Ethiopia and Gavin showed some of his oils on canvas.

Guggi's work featured landscapes and skyscapes. He says now: "I knew it wasn't what I was about."

In 1989 the Kerlin Gallery gave him an opportunity to show one of his paintings in a group show. "They said drop over two and we'll pick one. I dropped over four and hoped they would pick two."

When he drove up in his van, there was no one at the gallery. He propped the paintings against the wall, and pulled off.

He had just pulled off in the van when the actor Richard Harris and director Jim Sheridan arrived. The pair were working



Guggi with Gavin Friday in *The Virgin Prunes* in 1979 and (below) with Friday in front of a photo of Guggi with U2. Picture by Arthur Carron/Collins



together on the movie *The Field*. Harris wanted to buy Sheridan a painting. The director chose one of Guggi's. "So, he walked into the Kerlin and bought one for Jim and the other three for himself. That was the biggest pay day I had ever had in my life up to then. I think they were a grand each."

Guggi rented a studio space in Dublin's city centre. It was here that he met German artist Sibylle Ungers, who had a studio in the same space. They had a joint exhibition in the Kerlin in 1990 and in Ghent in Belgium the year after.

The following year, the couple got married. In 2003, Sibylle told me: "I sometimes think I met a boy and I now have a man. Guggi will often say I'm the sanest person he's ever met."

"Because Guggi and I became a unit, he was able to maybe leave his father - as much as he loves him - behind him a little bit. Not to forget, but to look beyond his father, to put that time behind him, and heal himself to an extent, because he did, in my opinion, have a hard childhood."

**Their marriage ended in 2017.** "I moved out that year," Guggi says. The break-up came after nearly 30 years and four children together. He is father to Moses (33) by a previous relationship, and has four sons, Eliah, Caleb, Noah and Gideon, ranging in age from 28 to 19, with Sibylle.

His exhibition in 2019 was titled, *Broken*.

Does he feel the stress of the break-up played any part in his aneurysm?

"I had a few pretty hard years. Not hard in the way that some people have hard years. I have always been a family man, in

**Family ties - Guggi with sons Noah, Moses, Eliah, Caleb, Gideon and ex wife Sibylle, above, in 2009, and above right, a recent picture taken by photographer girlfriend Gabriella Janni**



Old pals - Bono and Guggi in 2013

the sense that I am the second eldest of 10 children.

"When I was a small child myself, I was helping to feed the baby and taking the baby for long walks in the pram. I was surrounded by children. Then I got a few years off and I started having my own.

"I suppose going from being a member of a big family to having my own big family to just living in a little apartment by myself and not seeing my four youngest children, which I didn't. I was under all sorts of pressure in those ways. And I suppose I felt it. And then building up to this," he says, meaning the aneurysm.

"But you know during that time [the end of the marriage], I had wonderful times too. It wasn't all pressure and concern and depression or anything like that.

"In many ways, my friends are also my family. I have very close friends who stood by my side all the way through it, and I have so much to be thankful for. Look, the old cliché, 'if it doesn't kill you, it will make you stronger' holds. I think I am a different person to the person that I was five years ago."

Why did he and Sibylle split up?

"I would say we grew apart, to put it mildly. I think I am a different person. I think I'm wiser [now] in some ways because I have experienced stuff that a lot of people experience - health issues, break-ups. But I suppose one led into the other; and just as I was feeling that 'now I am back on my feet', it happened," he says, referring to the brain aneurysm.

"So, the timing was interesting. I am so aware of the fact that people go through much harder things. People lose

children. So, I would never dare complain about anything. I have so much to be grateful for. When I think of my dream as a child in primary school to become an artist..."

Internationally acclaimed, the fella from Ballymun has exhibited from Los Angeles to Tokyo to London, Berlin, Reykjavik and the South of France. His latest exhibition, *Time*, opened two days ago at the Galerie 75Faubourg in Paris and runs until July 30.

The show was inspired by his obsession with ordinary objects - vessels of one kind or another, often discarded or unwanted - an obsession that began as a child in his granny's house in Fairview.

"I just remember really hating a milk jug made of tin she had on her windowsill. It was no more complicated than that.

"It struck me as like someone with an enormous nose that appears to start at the base of their forehead, and I could really see an awkward-looking person in this jug. And over many years, I came to love that shape.

"Then I started collecting these jugs," he says. "And then anything of awkward or simple or cylindrical shape I loved and I collected. Some because they struck me as a beautiful shape; others because they struck me as ugly, but for that reason, they then struck me as being beautiful.

"I collected them with an idea to photograph them. Then I had an idea of setting up a very simple shelf system and putting some of these objects on it. Then when we got this house [in Killiney], which was built in the 1860s, I started looking at the surfaces. There were four or five layers of paint or wallpaper, and you pull it and see all the different layers, colours, surfaces, fragments..."

There is time in the walls?

"Absolutely. It is what time does to things... There is a real beauty that can be missed."

**He and Gabriella chat to me as they eat their lunch at a paint-splattered wooden table at their house.** Guggi finishes his ham sandwich and starts on some Tayto crisps.

"He eats like a 17-year-old," Gabriella, an Italian photographer, says. "I compare him to a 17-year-old too with his energy, humour and absolute love of life. He is more flexible than me."

For his part, he says of Gabriella: "She has been by my side and making everything work for some of the most difficult years of my life."

The recent brush with mortality doesn't seem to have slowed the 62-year-old down. I mention the motorbike parked outside in the yard.

"I tried to bump start it the other day," he says. "But it was out of petrol." No doubt he was hoping to take it out for a spin around the narrow hairpin bends of Killiney.

How does he feel now?

"I feel great. The blood lying on your brain can cause all types of different problems. I am not out of the woods because the blood is sitting there and it has nowhere to go.

"But my chances of it happening again statistically are the same as yours and Gabriella's."

Did the experience strengthen his belief in God?

"I don't think it reinforced my faith, but I think it brought it home that I could have been taken. I want to up the ante a little bit regarding my life and my work. I'll see to what extent it changes me," he says.

"I do have a very practical faith. He is always with me in that sense. I do have a strong Christian faith - strong in the sense that I don't tend to get rocked, but not 'good' in the sense that I'm a good Christian, because I am not a good Christian. I am a really bad one and I know so many great ones and I am not one of them. But you are either in or you're out."

*'Time' by Guggi runs at Galerie 75Faubourg (in participation with the Galerie Enrico Navarra) in Paris until July 30*



Celia Holman Lee, aged 18, in the engine of the first jumbo ever to land at Shannon airport. Picture by Dermot Hurley

Celia Holman Lee didn't have it easy growing up – she came from an unfashionable part of Limerick city and didn't meet her father until she was 10. As the former model turns 70, she tells **Barry Egan** the story of her life

# The girl from the wrong side of the tracks

**C**elia Holman Lee sits in the conservatory of her grand five-bedroom home in Ballysheedy, Co Limerick, looking out on an acre of manicured gardens. It's a peaceful spot, one of the more visible rewards of a life of hard work. These days, the former model is often to be found on RTÉ's *Today Show* talking about style with Maura and Daithí. But it is here in rural Limerick on the eve of her 70th birthday that she reminisces on her life, recalling the sometimes painful memories of her childhood.

She grew up in a council house on Carey's Road in Limerick city with her mother, Kathleen Meehan. Her parents' marriage broke up just after she was born in the old Bedford Row maternity hospital on December 2, 1950.

Her father, Jackie Holman, left to live with his two sisters in Geraldine Villas on Mulgrave Street. And he took with him Celia's two older brothers, Donald and Leonard, born 1946 and 1948 respectively.

Jackie worked at the railway station five minutes' walk from where Celia lived. Yet for the first 10 years of her life, she never set eyes on him. Nor did she see her brothers until she was eight. Her mother never mentioned the subject of her father and Celia never brought it up. She says now that she didn't miss her dad because he had been absent from her life since birth, while her uncles on her mother's side were a constant presence. "I was surrounded by my mother's brothers — there was seven of them. They were all so good to me."

Her Aunt Theresa, who lived across the city in Thomondgate, helped out and became like a 'second mother'. Celia's grandmother, Elizabeth, kept an eye on them, too. All Kathleen's five sisters looked out for their sibling and her daughter. "They was always watching my mother."

Why?  
"My mother wasn't well," she explains. "She had terrible anxiety and depression. Auntie Theresa used to say to me, 'She

wasn't well after you'. Now we call it manic depression, after babies," she says, meaning postnatal depression. "I am so sorry now I never asked, but I never wanted to know."

Celia wanted to keep her life focused, because "if I didn't go back, everything was OK. So, I kept going".

She believes the root of her mother's depression was losing her sons and "being left alone with a baby. I used to 'lose' her. That's the word that would describe it. I was always trying to find her."

Trying to make ends meet wasn't easy for lone parents in the Limerick of the 1950s. "It was very tough, I would think. But what you have to understand is when you are living that life, you know nothing more or nothing better. I was loved."

"I did Irish dancing. My mother wouldn't have the money for the dancing and my uncles would chip in. Or when I went to the Dalton's School of Dance, if I didn't have the money to pay, they wouldn't ask for it."

Even then, she was able to "lock myself down and move on very well. It is a good trait and a bad trait."

Attending Presentation School on Sexton Street in the city centre, she remembers being happy. "I used to run up and down William Street and Bedford Row in the city, up O'Connell Street, up by the People's Park, up by St Joseph's Street where Ger Lee [her future husband] used to live. That was my home territory."

When Celia was in fifth class, she and her mother moved to a corporation flat in Ballynanty Beg, a working-class housing estate on the northside of Limerick.

Her mother's depression worsened "from the minute we moved there" and Celia found herself taking on the role of mother. "I minded her. I had to. I never let go of her. I couldn't leave go of her. Not even to this day," she says, tearful now. "I idolised her, even though she was off there [she gestures into space]. It was difficult for me to relate as a young girl but then when I think of it — her two baby boys going living with their father, and me living with her back at home — how the f\*\*k did she survive at all?"

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*Modelling was elitist. I did feel at times I wasn't accepted... I was frightened to tell them where I was from*



Celia Holman Lee admits she is nervous about turning 70, despite not feeling her age.

Picture by Frank McGrath

A few years after the move to Ballynanty, she met her father for the first time and began to get to know him. "My relationship with him was good. He was a very quiet man, very kind."

She never asked him about the marriage, or her mother. "He never said anything about her, other than: 'Is your mother alright?' He would never say 'Kathleen'.

"He was good to me. He got me whatever I wanted every Christmas."

Was what she wanted most to have her father back in her life more?

"I didn't need my father back. He was always there if I needed him. I had the best childhood ever with mother and her family. It was difficult but it was happy."

She went on to develop a good relationship with her brothers. Sadly, her eldest brother Donald, a retired Garda, died of cancer aged 59 at Waterford Regional Hospital in 2006.

**In 1964, a chance sighting sparked her modelling career.** A scout called Ann Moloney spotted the 14-year-old Celia walking up Limerick's Patrick Street on a message for her mother. Celia went on to become one of the most successful models in the country. Did she face obstacles because of where she came from?

"Modelling was elitist then," she says. "I did feel at times that I wasn't accepted. I didn't feel that comfortable in the industry. I wouldn't be telling them where I was from because I was frightened to tell them where I was from." She was frightened, also, that the prejudice would stop her from getting somewhere in life.

"You have, in Dublin, Foxrock and Ballymun. Carey's Road was the wrong side of the tracks for the snobs and Ballynanty was the same. There was a class distinction there. Because of my background, and the way I grew up, I lacked confidence until later in life. You wouldn't think that, but I pretended I was confident."

Even when she was well established,

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she found prejudice. She recalls a woman from "the horse set" in Limerick who heard that her modelling agency was putting on a show at the National Ploughing Championships in the early 1980s. The woman was interested in working with her, but not before subjecting her to an interview to judge her suitability.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"It always followed me around that I was from the council side of the city. We got the job anyway. And then I told her to go f\*\*k herself!"

She fought back against this prejudice "by being bloody good. I made sure I was the best f\*\*king model on the ramp".

It was around the age of 14, too, that she came across Ger Lee, the man who was to become her husband. She first met the 16-year-old local lad on the beach in Kilkee, Co Clare, long beloved of Limerick people. A year later, they met again in the Cavalier Club, a disco in the city, and he asked her out. They got engaged in 1969 and married at Bunratty Castle in 1972. "[My father] paid for my wedding," she says. "He didn't go. I didn't invite him. My brother Donald was there. My other brother Leonard didn't go then because my father wasn't invited."

Why didn't she invite her father?

"There was no issue with my father not being at my wedding. He was happy that I was happy with Ger." She leaves it at that.

By 1974, Celia had set up her own modelling company, and a fashion boutique, Celia Lee's, followed three years later. The couple bought a big plot of land in Ballysheedy, a few miles outside the city, and built the house they still live in today.

Business may have been thriving but there were dark moments in her personal life. Her father developed Alzheimer's. She can recall pushing baby Ivan in his pram one day in the city. He passed her. "I said: 'Dad?'" He didn't know who she was.

"No one knew what Alzheimer's was back then."

In 1976, when her father was in his mid-70s, he fell into the river Shannon near the city centre. "His body was never found. My two brothers both searched up and down the river. There was no funeral."

Growing up without a father didn't affect her, she says, until she had her own children. When Ivan and Cecile arrived in 1975 and 1978, she suddenly thought, "How could I be separated from Ivan and Cecile, even if I had a third child? How could I?"

She believes she "inherited" her mother's survival instincts. She called on those qualities when her boutique had to close after almost 20 years of business in the late 1980s.

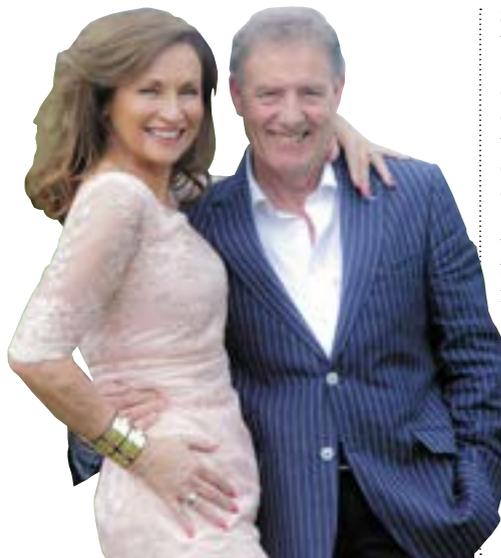
"We lost everything, nearly. The minute the boutique went bust, I dug into the agency. It took us about three years to recover. It was very difficult," she says, adding that having two young kids at the time added to their worries. "Then I thought



Celia as a young model (left and above): a chance sighting as a 14-year-old sparked her career during the 1960s. Below, with her beloved mother Kathleen Meehan, who died in 2004



“  
My looks got me noticed but my work ethic made my livelihood. When I look at myself in pictures as a model, I think, 'I wasn't half bad'”



about where I came from and said: 'Christ, we're not dead. We'll get out of this'."

Ger Lee also had to close his clothing manufacturing plant at the old Tait factory on Lord Edward Street when he lost a crucial contract for Husky coats with Dunnes Stores, among other companies.

"Ger took that worse than me. He really worked on it and it was flying. It was just the way it was. It wasn't Dunnes Stores' fault. It was the country's fault. It was the recession's fault. Everybody falls on their arses and picks themselves up again. That's what we did. Ger had to shut the factory and lay off everybody. He had about 60 staff. It was a very hard time for us.

"An understanding came in as I got older of what my mother went through. I thought: 'Christ, how did my mother survive?'"



Did she ever ask her mother about it? "I couldn't."

As the years went by, her confidence grew, particularly when she started "mixing outside of Limerick and getting recognition in Dublin". She was a judge on the Late Late Show Fashion Awards in the early 1980s and went on to become a fixture on afternoon shows on RTÉ and Virgin Media TV, talking about fashion and modelling the clothes herself or having one of her models do it. In 2002, the girl from the wrong side of the tracks won a VIP Magazine Most Stylish Woman Award.

She also still runs, with her daughter Cecile, one of Ireland's longest-established modelling agencies, and is an unofficial ambassador for the city of Limerick. Not bad for a girl who left school early and had to work for everything she got in life.

"My looks got me noticed as a model but, when we set up the model agency,

for many years it was my work ethic that made my livelihood. When I look at myself in pictures as a young model, I just think, 'I wasn't half bad.' I appreciate that I still look well."

Her beloved mother lived to the age of 82, dying on March 17, 2004, at the Roseville Nursing Home in Limerick. She lived with Celia and Ger in Ballysheedy for two years. "Then we bought her a house in Glasgow Park near us."

**On the day her mother died, Celia, who** was grand marshal at the St Patrick's Day parade in Limerick, attended a mass at the chapel in Sarsfield Barracks before ringing the nursing home to check on her. She was told her mother wasn't great.

"It isn't easy to watch someone you love die. She held my hand, looked up at me, two tears came down her eyes, and then she closed her eyes and died."

**Celia Holman Lee pictured in her home near Ballysheedy, Co Limerick, that she built with husband Ger Lee, inset, and where she raised her two children Ivan and Cecile.**  
Picture by Frank McGrath

Celia was "very bad" when she died. "And I'm still not right. I truly and honestly believe when I die that she is the only one I want to meet. We were always together, going around town, with the hat on her."

As for turning the big Seven O next week, she is unequivocal: "I don't want to go anywhere. I don't want to think I have only 10 years left and be dead at 80. I am nervous at getting older. I don't want to be told I'm a great age. I don't want to leave this place. I don't feel 70, as God is my judge."

What lessons has she learned from life? "That you hold on. You give life a chance. You don't run out the door at the first chance because it doesn't work out. You have two children and you want to make sure that they are OK because their father is very important to them. Ger was always brilliant as a father. I needed that in my life. I needed a family."

**‘Everyone saw  
me as a party  
girl, full of life  
but inside I  
wasn’t happy’**

Moya Brennan has  
found peace and  
happiness  
Picture by Steve Humphreys





Clannad superstar Moya Brennan has lived a life less ordinary. She tells **Barry Egan** about her abortion at 19, her miscarriage at 32 – and how she eventually named the two babies she lost as part of her healing – plus the break-up of her first marriage, dating Adam Clayton and how meeting an English photographer saved her

**T**he idea of headmaster's daughter Marie Duggan from Gweedore in Co Donegal shacking up with a singer in a showband would not have been smiled upon in 1950s Ireland. Even less so had it been discovered that 21-year-old Marie was unmarried and three months pregnant. That baby would grow up to be one of Ireland's best-known singers, Moya Brennan, the eldest of the couple's nine children.

But on the morning of February 19, 1952, Marie and Leo Brennan, the singer in The Slieve Foy showband, eloped to Carlingford in Co Louth where they asked a local priest to marry them. The priest rang their parish priest back in Gweedore who, in turn, rang Marie's father Hugh. It was the first he had heard of the pregnancy or the marriage.

"The reason they went to Carlingford was the Brennan clan had lived there for years when my father was young and he still had a sister there," Moya says. "So they went to her and she would have known the priest."

Marie's father drove 210 kilometres on bad roads from Gweedore to Carlingford and arrived at 3pm. After a long discussion with the priest, the young couple were married that afternoon. That was how things worked in the Ireland of that time.

Moya believes now that her parents eloped because they were "scared of the situation" they found themselves in and they "wanted to be together".

"I am in admiration of my grandparents for allowing [my parents] to get married without the concern of what gossip or what people would think [in those times]," she says. "He could have refused the marriage and sent my mother to one of those awful convent, Magdalene places. Thank God, he didn't."

She'd heard the stories of the poor mothers and babies who were sent away to those places. Moya was born on August 4, 1952.

Twenty years later, in 1972, she was also aware of the stories about the young Irish women who had to take the boat to England "with their shame".

Now it was her turn...

**By this stage, Moya was singing with the Brennan clan's folk band, Clannad, and had travelled to a music festival in south Britain. It was here that, as she remembers it, the "desperately naïve" girl from the west Donegal Gaeltacht fell for Pierre, a handsome young man with dark curly hair who played guitar in a French band.**

Six weeks later, feeling nauseous, she realised she was pregnant. In June of that year she made a call from a phonebox in Gweedore to a clinic in Leamington Spa, England, for an appointment.

"I was scared and nervous. I didn't know what I was doing. I thought it was a way out."

She told the woman at the other end



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of the phone that her name was Martina Walsh and she worked in a bank.

Then she told her parents that she was going to London to visit her cousins. She almost broke down in tears when her father and Gran gave her a £10 note and told her to have a lovely time in London.

She did cry on the ferry from Dublin to Liverpool. "The whole journey was a bit of a haze."

She and a friend who travelled with her booked into a B&B. The next morning, she went on her own to the clinic. She remembers handing over the £100 fee in a forbidding house, where women sat waiting "on red plastic chairs", before she was shown into a room with "pale pink walls and a worn carpet".

She says she felt "terribly lonely in this foreign country". The sun poured in the window that day, and Moya wondered would the sun be shining back home in Donegal too.

The doctor told her that Martina Walsh was a nice name, before saying that they could start the procedure once she hadn't eaten anything. Moya's face went as white as the egg she had had for breakfast that morning.

"The lovely lady at the B&B had made me a big breakfast. Totally in my innocence, I ate it all, not aware I was going to have an operation and should have been fasting. I had never been in hospital before for anything. So when they ask me if I had fasted and I told them I had a full breakfast they laughed. They had to reschedule my op to the last person that day."

Afterwards, that night in the B&B, she cried herself to sleep.

When she returned to Gweedore, she went to confession but the priest refused to give her absolution "because I told him what I had just done", she says. "And I never went to confession again after that day."

**Slowly she started down a path of excess and self-destruction. She was drinking, smoking cannabis and, in time, taking cocaine. She was also on her way to becoming an international star with Clannad, which between their early 1980s heyday and 1997 sold 40 million albums.**

Yet, inside, Moya was miserable to the core.

In 1985 she married musician Pat Farrell in Howth. The marriage lasted less than 18 months. "I don't want to say much about it out of respect to Pat except I was as much to blame for the breakdown," she says now.

In the aftermath of the split, Moya lived in a flat in the city centre, watching TV and smoking dope by day. At night, she became – by her own admission – a party girl, a regular in clubs like The Pink Elephant.

Then, coming up to Christmas 1986, she found out she was pregnant again. She spent Christmas trying to keep her family at a distance so they wouldn't find out her secret. It was like 1972 all over again.

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She spent New Year's Eve alone in Woodtown Manor, a Georgian mansion on 120 acres in Rathfarnham, Co Dublin, which she and Clannad were renting from Guinness heir Garech Browne.

By the next morning, the first day of 1987, she made a decision – she was going to keep the baby. She travelled to Donegal and told her parents she was pregnant. If it makes you happy, I'll be happy for you, her father told her.

Sadly, in early February, a painfully thin Moya lost the baby. She cried down the phone to her mother in Gweedore. She locked the door of her bedroom in Woodtown Manor, closed the curtains and stayed in the dark on her own for three days.

In her head, which was as dark a place as the blacked-out room, she thought of her life as "a sham", marked by the breakdown of her marriage, a miscarriage "with an illegitimate child" (as she described in her book *The Side of the Rainbow*) on top of all the drinking, the drugs and the partying.

**Then one day, something happened that changed everything for her.** She found a book called *Prayers for Forgiveness* in a drawer in her bedroom. She opened it and started reading the prayers.

Would she be alive now if she hadn't come across that book by chance? Did she believe that God was reaching out to her? "I believe my prayers were answered when I came across that prayer book, as I know my parents and grandparents had been concerned for me," she says. "God only knows where and how it would have ended if I hadn't started living a more responsible life, and God is very much part of that now."

As time went by, she came to terms with the loss of her two babies. Eventually she gave them names. Was that part of the healing process?

"It was a friend who shared with me about naming the babies I lost and, for me, it did give me a sense of peace."

In 1987 she was in a relationship with Adam Clayton, the bass player with U2. "I cared a lot for him, and we enjoyed being in each other's company."

She stayed with him at his parents' house in Malahide, Co Dublin, the night before U2 flew off to America on the Joshua Tree tour in April. "I went to the airport to wave them off. We decided to call it a day shortly after that."

Later that year, she met British photographer Tim Jarvis in Donegal. He was on an assignment to shoot Clannad for *New Musical Express*. He was a Protestant with a strong faith while she was a Catholic who was on a vague promise to go back to her faith. Three weeks later he sent her a letter, telling her that she was "the grandest woman in Ireland". ("I would say now that she is the grandest woman in the world," Tim tells me.)

With Moya in Donegal or on tour around the world with Clannad and Tim in London, the relationship developed slowly. They agreed not to sleep with each other until Moya's marriage to Pat had been annulled.

Although she had begun to pray and had met Tim, a committed Christian, she hadn't quite left her old lifestyle behind. She still took cocaine occasionally.

"Only when I was out in nightclubs," she says. "I had rarely bought any. Always given to me. I had definitely been taking less and less."

That said, a week before their wedding in Cambridge in late 1990, Tim walked in on Moya snorting cocaine in the toilet at a party. "I could count on one hand the amount of times I had cocaine – from the time I started to pray to the last time at a party in a restaurant in December before I got married when Tim found me."

Did Tim have second thoughts then? "He believed me when I told him I would never do it again and that he was the most im-



Moya with her mother Baba at home in 1953



An 11-year-old Moya with her father Leo's band in Glasgow (Leo is directly behind her)



On tour in Germany in 1978

Clannad's Noel Duggan, and Ciarán Brennan, Moya Brennan, Pádraig Duggan and Pól Brennan in 1982

Picture by H. McCarthy



portant person in my life," says Moya. "And, thank God, he felt the same way. The wedding was never in doubt."

**For the first two years of their marriage,** they lived in a small council flat in Brixton "where," she jokes, "even the dogs walked around in pairs. It was one of the happiest times of my life".

She was 39 years of age when their first child Aisling was born in January of 1992; their son Paul arrived in October of the next year.

How did it feel to be a mother after all she had been through?

"Becoming a mother for the first time is something special. Aisling was born in London as we were living in Brixton at the time. I didn't care where I was as I was on cloud nine, holding my little girl with lots of hair. As all mothers do, I thought she was the most beautiful girl in the world. She ended up on the cover of my first album."

Aisling is now 29, and Paul, 28, and both are accomplished singers and musicians.

Last year the family sold their grand Dún Laoghaire home of 25 years which overlooks the sea, and rented a house in Castleknock on Dublin's northside. They are, she says, looking for something smaller to buy in Dublin and plan to spend most of their time in Gweedore.

"My kids are the best," says Moya. "I love working with them and at the moment they're collaborating with me on my next album. I can't say enough about how talented they are, both in song writing,



*It is hard to believe such things happened in this country and it's taken far too long to get justice and give peace to all*

performing, and engineering, producing. I suppose they grew up with music all around them, I don't know if that was a good thing, but they say they wouldn't want to be doing anything else.

"It's great to see them developing their own music as solo artists or together as Banyah [the band the siblings set up in 2019] and, at the same time, not being embarrassed on stage with their mother."

Their mother is, of course, one of the greatest singers ever to come out of Ireland – The First Lady of Celtic Music even. She has been nominated for two Grammys and has won an Emmy Award.

**Clannad started out in the late 1960s** playing at Leo's Tavern, her father's pub, in Crolly in the Donegal Gaeltacht. Moya sang and played the harp, while her two brothers Ciarán and Pól, and their identical twin uncles, Pádraig and Noel Duggan played double bass, tin whistle, flute, guitar and mandolin.

Moya says she will always remember winning the Letterkenny Folk Festival in 1970. "We were so in awe of some of the other groups in against us and everything was so new to us. It was when we decided to call ourselves Clannad and we never in our wildest dreams thought we had a chance."

Their fusion of trad and more unorthodox modern sounds – coupled with Moya's haunting ethereal voice – ensured that Clannad was unique.

In 1980 Moya's younger sister Enya Patricia Brennan joined the clan. On their 1981



album *Fuaim*, she sang lead vocals on 'An tÚll' and 'Buairéadh an Phósta'. She left in 1982 to become a superstar (with albums like 1988's *Watermark* and *Shepherd Moons* in 1991).

The band became a huge success on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1992 'Harry's Game' was part of the film score for *The Patriot Games*; a year later, 'I Will Find You' was used in *The Last of the Mohicans*. In 1997, *Landmarks*, their 15th album, sold more than 10 million copies and won them a Grammy Award for best New Age recording.

The band then took a long break, reforming in 2012 to tour and promote what was their last studio album, 2013's *Nádúr*. Sadly, in 2016, Moya's uncle and founding band member Pádraig died, aged 67. Last year, an anthology package *In a Lifetime*, with two new tracks the band recorded with Trevor Horn, was released.

What are the highlights of her long career in music? Moya singles out 'In A Lifetime', the 1985 duet she did with Bono – who along with his wife Ali Hewson provided emotional support after her marriage breakdown.

She has also sung with Robert Plant, Paul Brady, Glen Hansard, Paul Young and Shane MacGowan. In 2005, she sang in Cologne for Pope Benedict XVI in front of an audience of a million people.

And she has just released a new single, 'Rivers', a full-on spacey electro dance track with Trance Wax, aka Belfast's Garry McCartney. "It was inspired by nature

and Donegal," she says. "I was in lockdown there when I wrote it. I am always interested in trying new things."

She gives her husband the credit for her solo career. "Tim has been my rock," she says, "It was his idea to record my first solo album," she says referring to *Maire*, in 1992. "And here I am now doing my 10th album."

"Tim is my best friend and he manages me as a solo artist. So, we spend a lot of time together. We just celebrated our 30th wedding anniversary last January and we feel closer than ever. I think because of our faith we trust each other," she says, "especially in my line of work as, at the beginning of our marriage, I was on tour with Clannad a lot and he was at home with the kids. Not an easy thing for him to do especially when it wasn't the in-thing to do back in those days. Now when I am on tour he's with me and the kids are in the band. I feel very blessed and happy."

**She turns 69 in August. "It's just a number. I've done so much in my life and I feel I still have a lot to do. When we're allowed to tour again, I will do a farewell world tour with Clannad. I am doing some song-writing with a few people and my new album will be released sometime this year."**

Moya was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis in 2016. "Being a Christian also helps me cope with it."

"I am not afraid if people see me as a Holy Mary," she says. Her faith has guided her "into the kind of person I want to be.

**Divine intervention... finding that prayer book changed Moya's life as did meeting husband Tim**

*Picture by Steve Humphreys*

**Below: Moya with husband Tim Jarvis**



I still have a lot to learn to be that person." Her favourite saying is by St Francis: "Go out and preach the Gospel and use words when necessary."

"So it's really about what kind person you want to be," she says.

"I feel there has been so many bad examples in the Christian faith," she says, "with sexual assault and the mother and baby stories. It makes me very, very sad to see that they represent the same God that I believe in. I can totally understand people's reaction and maybe feeling God rejecting them.

It's hard to believe such things happened in this country and it's taken far too long getting justice and giving peace to all concerned."

How does she feel now when she thinks of that 32-year-old who believed her life was a sham?

"I really wanted to change," she says. "I guess everyone saw me as a party girl full of life, great fun to be with, but inside I wasn't happy. I had achieved success with Clannad but there was something missing. I knew I needed to change and finding that prayer book helped me and guided me to realise that I didn't need to be alone."

*'River' by Moya Brennan and Trance Wax is out now. Moya is an ambassador for [cancercarewest.ie](http://cancercarewest.ie)*

*If you have been affected by any of the issues raised here, contact the Samaritans on [freephone 116 123, samaritans.org](http://freephone116123.samaritans.org)*