



The Joe Jackson interview: The Frames



THAT's a great line," says Glen Hansard, smiling then shaking his head, as though instinctively hooking into every nuance of truth in Kierkegaard's warning: "Beware a falling statue doesn't strike you dead". But then, Glen has every reason to smile and identify with the line, having twice had the opportunity to stand in the vicinity of his idols while the pedestals on which they'd been placed seemed determined to shift and turn his dreams into debris. One idol was Bob Dylan, the other Van Morrison. Yet before he relates the tale, shouldn't Glen explain exactly why both had such a profound influence on his life and song-writing?

"Sure," he agrees, zapping back to memories of his own childhood in Ballymun, and speaking, no doubt, just as gleefully as the boy of 13 or so who first became a fan of Dylan, Morrison and their style of songpoetry. "My mother was listening to things like Dylan's *Greatest Hits* while she was doing the Hoovering," Glen continues.

"And a song like *My Back Pages* hit me like nothing around at the time — which was all the New Romantics like Duran Duran. And looking back on it now, I realise that the difference is that there are some songwriters who paint the whole canvas, and others who just do a sketch. What always blew me away about Dylan is that I had all these strange lines like, 'I was so much older than/ I'm younger than that now' coming at me, firing my own fertile imagination and because I didn't fully understand I probably took to writing songs myself, as a response. Yet I still don't want to be told what a song is about and hate being asked that question about my own work."

Glen "totally agrees" with those who claim that creativity is a circular process in which a work of art — a song, for example — is "co-created by its audience", a "process of empowerment he had never encountered before hearing Dylan and which still dictates his attitude to live performances. But to get back to the process of potential disempowerment, on a more personal level, à la Kierkegaard, how was Glen "disillusioned" when he finally met Dylan?

"Well, meeting him was the moment the hero-worship stopped," he replies. "What happened was that we were recording in the Factory about two years ago and someone said he was in the next studio and that no one was to go near the man. But at the end of the evening we were sitting round doing *Before You Go* and, in the middle of the song, our other vocalist, Noreen, just looked at me as though someone had died!

"Then Colm Mac Con Iomaire stopped playing and I turned around and there was Dylan. And I just said 'how's it goin'?' Then he said, 'sounds good' and I said

'thanks', thinking the floor was going to swallow me up. But then I went over, and said, straight out, 'listen, meeting you is what it must have been like when you met Woody' and he launched into a big thing about how much of an inspiration Woody Guthrie had been and he was squeezing my hand as he was telling me all this! And, I swear, he had this aura of about 50 feet around him. Then, to top it all, just one day later, his manager called and asked would we like to support Dylan at a gig in London, that night."

Glen Hansard is on a roll and clearly not about to be derailed by any interruption. As he speaks he somehow assumes the shape of every rock fan who ever dreamed of meeting his, or her hero. This is rock'n'roll, in its essence.

"What more could you ask for? Your hero sees you and offers you a gig," he continues, gushingly, in a far more detailed and circuitous manner than I can replicate here. "And outside the theatre it said: 'Tonight, Bob Dylan and the Frames'. But though the gig went

great, after it I sat on the flyover near the Apollo Theatre with me girlfriend Siobhán, and I felt completely gutted. Because it was over. I'd met me hero, but there was no big revelation, I didn't get to hang out with him, or play with him, which is what I'd always dreamed of.

"Yet then his car pulled out and as he passed I ran out on to the middle of the road and said 'yeah' (thumbs up) and he waved and I suddenly felt brilliant, like I'd been liberated from the whole hero thing by finding out he was just a regular guy, a human being. So I thought to myself, okay, move on, grow up, leave that part of it all behind."

Around the same time Glen had a similar experience with Van the Man, after being invited to the singer's 50th birthday party. Morrison was singing to the small group gathered in "Marina Guinness's home, outside Maynooth" and, emboldened by wine, Glen asked him to play *Hungry For Your Love*. But before we get to Van's response to this request,

FACT FILE

Cultural origins: Glen Hansard was born in Ballymun, Dublin, in 1970, got a guitar in his early teens and first busked "just off Grafton Street" in 1986, where he "made the best 20p I ever earned in my life and ran home delighted". Two years later he borrowed "a few grand", financed his own demo, was offered a deal by Island Records and formed the Frames, who later released the album *Another Love Song*. Hansard also played a lead role in the movie *The Commitments*.

Latest projects: New album, *Fitzcarraldo*, which includes the top 10 hit, *Revelate*, and will make 1996 "the year of the Frames" according to Dennis Woods, managing director of Warner Brothers, Ireland. Playing at Dublin's Mean Fiddler on December 31st.

let's sketch in the background to the story.

"Well, the fella who introduced me to Van's music was a hippie guy called Jimmy Judge, when I was about 13," Glen explains. "He's still a very important person in my life, because he also got me buskin' to begin with and was the first person to make me believe I'd go places as a musician myself. He was like 15 years older, a real 'head'. So he played me *Astral Weeks*, which I really tuned into because of that 'I am nothing but a stranger in this world' idea, which is what I felt like, as a hippie in Ballymun, at the time. Then Jimmy introduced me to albums such as *Wavelength*, with tracks like *Hungry For Love*, which is why I asked Van to play that, that night. Yet when I did, he leaned across and said, 'you don't know me' and I nearly died. I went out of the room and said to Siobhán, 'the bastard, I've bought all his records, loved him since I was a kid, why did he do that?' But then Marina asked me to sing, I took the guitar from Morrison, said

'this is one of my own songs' and he left the room.

"Then he came back in, sat down, said 'what song did you want me to play?' and when I told him he said, 'I'll play it, you sing it' which started a fabulous session of us doing songs of his like *Madame George* and *Sweet Thing*. Around 5 a.m. it ended and he just said, 'nice songs, nice voice' and patted me on the back. And I got on me bike and sailed home to Dublin."

This particular motorbike was paid for "by the money I made from *The Commitments*", an experience Glen Hansard regards as "totally positive", apart from the fact that the whirlwind of publicity tours for the movie led to an "emotional collapse". This sudden downturn in his career was compounded roughly two years ago when Island Records dropped the Frames, their bass player left, the rest of the band went back on the dole and Glen himself had to contemplate leaving the music business. This set of events led di-

Glen Hansard:
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rectly to their new album, *Fitzcarraldo*.

"We all really felt depressed," he says. "But I was particularly vulnerable after all the work publicising *The Commitments* — and when Island said they didn't want our next album, it was like the kick in my ribs that broke me. And since I was young I always thought, 'either I'll make it as a musician or I'll kill myself'. But instead, I went to New York on me own, stayed in this flop house for two weeks, writing constantly, asking for a sign. I went there to make up my mind about the future and was completely self-centred there, in the best sense. Then came the song *Fitzcarraldo* which, to me, was the sign I needed. It was a song that just rolled out of me, all about redemption."

THE latter was, in part, inspired by the movie of the same name which Glen claims "had a profound effect on me because it was about a man with a vision" which he "could easily relate to". Following this song came other album tracks such as *Revelate* and *Red Chord*. Glen returned to Ireland, and the band, "totally rejuvenated".

"And this is where the story really gets exciting — because at that point I felt I became a member of the band, not just its songwriter and singer, which eased a lot of the pressure on me. That's why, now, I say none of the songs on the album is *mine*, I see myself more as a scrap metal collector who brings a bit of metal into the recording studio, to the band, who have all their tools and we then build our little constructions together. And because I don't feel so personal about it all I'm not devastated if people reject the songs," he says.

"So all this happened after I came back from New York, sat everyone down and said, 'okay, let's go for it, let's give it our best shot and if we fail, to hell with it' and suddenly the band bonded like never before. And from that point on, everything started going our way. Whelan's Bar in Dublin put up the money for this album; then Warners got behind us; and now it really does look like things are going to take off for us next year."

All of the members of the Frames apparently feel much the same, with new member, bass player Graham Downey "adding new blood to the music" claims Glen. As with John Lennon who, in the song *God*, claimed he no longer believed in heroes such as Dylan, Elvis or the Beatles, "just me, Yoko and me", Glen Hansard also unselfconsciously rates the Frames as one of his favourite bands right now, and *Fitzcarraldo* as one of his "favourite three albums". The other two are (*What's The Story*) *Morning Glory*, by Oasis, and Foo Fighters. And as for his old idol, Dylan, would Glen give him a gig supporting the Frames?