

# MUSIC INTERVIEW

CONVERSATION, STORIES AND TALES WITH RANDOLF AND THE CROKERS



*"Sometimes you just need four chords and the truth." - Randolph and the Crokers' motto according to lead female vocalist, Clare O'Brien.*

Single-Screw. Those were the two words first uttered on our taped interview by Keith Kelly following an amusing dispute between who had the most offensive initials; KK (Keith Kelly) or SS (Shane Storan).

The argument comes to an abrupt halt as Clare O'Brien (Lead Female Vocalist) places a bird-shaped milk jug atop of a novelty Ché Guevara placemat, followed by a pot of fresh-boiled tea.

In the corner of the room, their orange tabby, Scout lay curled up on the sofa, paying little heed of the crowd and the chatter.

This month TLM sat down in conversation with Limerick folk-band, Randolph and the Crokers; a band born and bred in the heart of Limerick. The influence of the city lies in every aspect of their music, right down to their name. "Shane lives out in Murroe," Keith begins when asked about the band-name's origin, "All the pre-band meetings were held in a pub near Shane's house called Crokers. As time went on we began to research and find out stuff about the name of the pub. He [Croker] was a member of an old Limerick family who came here and built a lot of the buildings around Barrington's hospital." Shane continues the history lesson, "They were aristocrats in the area and Croker Barrington was the heir. He was the rogue of the family and a rogue to his duties and spent a lot of time drinking down in the pub with the lads." Clare labels him as "a bit of a rock 'n' roll, man of the people".

During the production process of Randolph and the Crokers' first EP, the band took a field trip to the Croker estate.

They reminisce about climbing fences to get inside, along with the characters they met on the way. The cover of the band's first EP, *Conversation Amongst the Ruins*, is in fact a picture taken from that day of the Croker house. As for Randolph, Keith adds, "Randolf comes from Shane's nickname, mistakenly, when I was supposed to call him Gandalf but called him Randolph instead. There may have been alcohol involved." Their second and newest EP, entitled *Tales of Little Lanes*, takes its name from one of Limerick City's most famous features. "I always like to tie the name into Limerick somehow, Limerick is known for its lanes," Keith explains, "We're all very proud of being from here and it goes back to Angela's Ashes with the lanes.

Everyone we know came from lanes, we were brought up in lanes and our families came from lanes." Clare adds a quick note on the alliteration of the EP title and its importance. When she's not in the recording studio, Clare O'Brien is teaching English in St. Anne's secondary school. She also mentions that the first EP shares its title with a work from her favourite poet, Sylvia Plath.

In June 2017, Randolph and the Crokers' strong Limerick ties aided them in securing a performance at Michael D. Higgins' garden party in *Áras an Uachtaráin*. Like many, my first question was how? The other members of the band direct me to Keith for the answer:

"When we were sending out the last EP to press and radio stations, I was signing all the envelopes up and sending them off and I decided, I'm gonna send one to the President for the craic.

So, I wrote up a handwritten letter basically saying, he's from around Limerick and we're from Limerick and would he like to listen to our stuff." They all praise Higgins' passion for culture and support of the arts, labelling him as a 'culturehead'. A few months ago, Keith received a call from the *Áras* saying they had listened to the EP and would like to invite the band to play at their garden party.

As part of their visit to the *Áras*, Randolph and the Crokers were given the opportunity to meet with the man himself before their performance. "I usually get kind of nervy around important or famous people," Clare says, "but it was the complete opposite with him [Michael D. Higgins]. He made you feel at ease and very warm. It was like meeting your aunt or uncle from up the country that you hadn't seen in a while."

Randolf and the Crokers, along with The Strypes, Beoga and Duke Special were the main music acts for the afternoon. While the other acts played in the marquee later, Randolph and the Crokers had the privilege of entertaining the guests during the day, playing on the main lawn. "There was a really lovely moment when the president actually walked out of the *Áras* and walked down along the garden and didn't really have to do anything, but he stopped right beside us," Clare recalls, "His dog parked himself beside Keith and gazed lovingly up at Keith while he played harmonica. In doing so, just for a moment, he [Michael D. Higgins] was giving us our little moment. Not that it's about that, but I thought it was just a really generous thing to do. He really listened and enjoyed the music."

This isn't the first time Randolph and the Crokers have brushed shoulders with the famous. Their very first gig was an opening slot for none other than Dublin folk artist Mark Geary. Geary is renowned for his time spent playing alongside Jeff Buckley in the *Sin É* Irish café in New York. "When you look back now, it's really insane that we opened for Mark Geary, who we all respected and loved. Personally, I'm obsessed with Jeff Buckley and this whole connection with him and that whole era in New York. Mark was just so nice and was like, yeah, you can play." Clare later notes that had she the time on her hands, she would happily listen to Buckley's album *Grace* every day until she died.

Throughout the interview, the band had nothing but high praise for Geary's character and the help he gave them starting out: "He couldn't have made it any easier for us being that green and on our first night. To this day we haven't met anyone as nice as he was on that night." Shane adds. "He'd a pot of tea with him and he was in a very natural and non-patronising way giving us wisdom. Just keep writing, really enjoy it and don't get too jaded by the whole business side of it." Clare concludes.

Not only did Geary offer them a support slot, but before they took to the stage, he even put forward the idea of an on-stage collaboration with Keith: "He asked me what I do in the band and I said I play harmonica. That's great, [Geary replied] I've a harmonica song. I'll set a place for you and you can play on that." Having only been playing the instrument a week, Keith protested. Despite this, Geary dragged him out on stage anyway during the set. "To this day, it's been one of my favourite gigs, to be honest." Keith adds.

While on the topic of the early days, we ask the band did they notice much difference in their music now, versus their debut EP three years ago. Clare replies: "In the first record we were kind of feeling our way, we were green and trying to figure out the songs and what we wanted. We really weren't that sure on what the sound would be at the end. This time, I think, influences are far clearer to hear. They're, hopefully, not clashing, they blend together. You can hear a lot more of the blues and old school, rhythmic stuff." Clare goes on to note that the familiarity of the situation certainly helped:

"The first time around I was so petrified by the whole process. I was nervous about recording, singing and by how it would be received. That probably took away and retracted some of the joy of it for me."

For Shane, it was the familiar faces in the process, most notably, Mike O'Dowd: "Working with Mike O'Dowd in Lakeland Studios - which is miles from any lake - really helped us along the way. He's the fifth Beatle or seventh Croker, as regards to bringing us together. He really gets things going.

We bring it [Music] to him and he always gives a decent input and opinion."

"We're not only more comfortable doing it, but more comfortable taking risks too," Clare states. "Our sound hasn't changed as such, but we're evolving and trying different things. We're comfortable feeding on influences and showing off, or working around our vocals and working on our harmonies.

"The blend of influences is certainly visible in the second EP, with tracks like 'Home' featuring a lot of blues influences from Shane's collection, while the vocal arrangements are reminiscent of Clare's adoration for Stevie Nicks and Fleetwood Mac. The band's growing confidence and constant development becomes a running theme of the conversation

As for lyrical influences, the list goes on: "We come from a base of storytellers like Neil Young. I grew up listening to my Mother's favourites like Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell and those kind of people, while Shane has a real appreciation for John Lennon and that kind of thing. Those are the roots of the tree before we all branch off into our own things."

Along with the highlights of their musical career, we also delved into the struggles of any musician or band starting out: "When you're just playing original music it's hard to get people to take a chance on you. When it's a Friday night they just want a cover band and that's understandable.

It's always fun to dance around and listen to songs you know, I totally get it." Clare continues, "Every band you'll ever talk to will probably tell you about that gig where they're competing with the soccer match at the back of the pub, or people aren't buying it, aren't interested or when it is just not happening. You'll always have those nights and they're hard, but as my Mother would say, they're character building. You have to go through them and bulk up."

Finding an audience and a stage is one thing, but the real struggle for every aspiring musician is the financial struggle. "The financial challenge is very, very real," Shane states, "That's why bands like us, regardless of if they're good, bad or indifferent, don't get the chance because they just don't have the funds. That's not just a challenge to our band, but it's to every band who are trying to write and record original music. We feel their pain and they'll feel ours." At this moment, Keith throws in a joking request for free money to any reader who's feeling generous.

To close, we asked Randolph and the Crokers one final question; why EPs and not albums? While time and funding were the main reasons, the band also had a few creative reasons for their decision to postpone the album for another while: "Music is going that way at the moment.

Everything is digested much more quickly, you're onto the next thing all the time. I still love an album and I see huge value in making albums, but it just wasn't the right fit for us right now," Clare elaborates.

"The first EP and second EP feel a part of the same album. Maybe further down the line we'll do a third and a fourth EP as part of the batch, but it's just the way we put it out. This is just chapter two of the same book." With that worthy finishing line from Keith, the interview concludes.

Tales of Little Lanes will be launched in Dolan's Warehouse on November 3rd. Limerick punk-rock act Anna's Anchor will support Randolph and the Crokers on the night and a video for the EP's lead single 'Home' will be released on YouTube before the tour kicks off.

If you could have written any song in the world, what song would it be?

CLARE: Landslide - Stevie Nicks

KEITH: This house is not for sale - Ryan Adams

SHANE: God - John Lennon/Chelsea Hotel - Leonard Cohen

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