

## 2 L2 COVER STORY

# Pop goes U2 at '78 Stella gig

It is 40 years since 'the exact moment' The Hype became U2 at a Limerick contest. DJ Micky Mac was MC. The rest is history

**T**HIS Sunday marks the 40th anniversary of the moment Adam Clayton has described as "the exact moment of becoming U2" at an event in Limerick's Stella Ballroom.

Pop 78 was a competition run as part of Limerick Civic Week to find the most promising Irish rock band. It took place on March 18, 1978 at the Stella Ballroom and was sponsored by CBS, Harp Lager, and the Evening Press. I was invited by co-ordinator PJ Power to MC the gig.

37 bands entered from all over the country. After heats it was whittled down to seven bands for the final. I was quite excited to be asked to MC because one of the judges was the legendary radio producer, Billy Wall, who at the time produced the Gay Byrne Hour on radio, and went on to be my first boss at 2FM. Other judges were Jackie Hayden of CBS Records, Paul O'Brien, President of Limerick Junior Chamber who organised the event, and Colm Clarke of Guinness.

My job was to introduce each band, the adjudicators and keep the competition flowing. It was a bitterly cold, dark and rainy Saturday night in March as I arrived at the Stella Ballroom on Shannon Street. I went along early so that I could meet the bands and get some research done before the show commenced. I was expecting a good crowd, even queues, as Limerick had a lively music scene. It was very quiet with an hour to go and I wondered to myself "does anyone know that this is going on?"

All the bands had arrived and were hanging around the dressing rooms. I heard a mix of accents and spoke to each band's leader for research. Village from Limerick, whom I knew were one of the favourites, the only all-girl group in the competition, Harmony from Tallaght, and the East Coast Angels caught my attention with other bands from all over.

As I went from group to group I came upon The Hype. They were 16 year old Larry Mullen from Artane, Dave Evans, 16, from Malahide, Adam Clayton, 18, a Leaving Cert student and their 17-year-old guru,

Paul Hewson from Ballymun, who was also doing the Leaving.

"Hey man, we entered as The Hype but now we are calling ourselves U2," said a very, very confident Bono. I put a face on me and said: "U2 is not a great name, if you don't mind me saying".

Looking back, I was quite on a roll myself because that morning I was told I had got a presenter gig on RTE Radio. The four guys had travelled down by train and Larry Mullen tells in the authorised biography of the band, U2 by U2, that he and his dad almost missed it. They were joined on the trip by a group of supportive friends. Bono said: "It was very exciting to be on a train with your mates going somewhere to play in front of the music business. It was rock and roll."

The competition was due to start at 8pm - and there were not 40 in the hall. I remember that the local media were not impressed when the event was sponsored and promoted by the Evening Press, and I did not blame the Limerick papers for not supporting and publicising it. I remember saying to PJ Power: "Will we wait for more to come?"

With about 60 in the audience plus the judges, the show started. The Edge admitted later that U2 were expecting it to be "a dreadful amateur free-for-all". He went on: "Once it started it was obvious the calibre of talent was of much higher quality than any of us expected."

When The Hype/U2 were introduced they got a huge reception from their many friends who travelled down from Dublin. I also remember being told Adam Clayton's dad, who was an Aer Lingus pilot, was in the small crowd.

I am often asked how did they sound that night 40 years ago. To put that time in context Rivers of Babylon by Boney M was top of the charts and young Ireland was already tired of cheesy disco. The Boomtown Rats were in the charts with Lookin after Number One so a post-disco revolution was unfolding in pop. U2 on that faithful night sounded connected straight away, particularly with the confidence of Bono and the way he introduced their songs. He looked and moved



At the unveiling of plaque at the Stella Ballroom to mark U2's piece of history in 2011 were Bono's brother, Norman Hewson, then Mayor Maria Byrne, Brendan Ryan, Ken O'Callaghan and PJ Power PICTURE: ADRIAN BUTLER

**I often wondered would it have happened so quickly for them if they did not win in Limerick**

like Rod Stewart wearing a neat grey polo neck as the other guys played in a workmanlike fashion. I also remember the amazing bass sound that Adam got on the night, despite the sound in the big hall being so hollow - you can imagine the echo in a venue that usually attracted 800 dancers. There seems to be some uncertainty as to what they played in the competition. As far as I can gather, all the songs were original numbers - and the consensus is that they played Street Missions, The TV Song and Life on a Distant Planet.

After all the bands had played, the judges went into conclave, and the future U2 joined the 18 or so fans that had travelled from Dublin. I can remember that Don O'Connor of Reform was in the audience, as well as local DJ Nicky Woulfe. The rest of the audience were fans of the other bands. I do remember a local

wedding band musician coming up to me and saying he had accompanied Bono singing at a wedding he was playing at in the Limerick Inn the week before the competition, where he sang some rock and roll numbers. This was correct as Bono's brother, Norman Hewson, had married a lady from Castleconnell in Monaleen Church a week earlier.

I had the privilege of asking Jackie Hayden from CBS to announce that U2 had won and their fans just exploded. Jackie made reference to the obvious lack of rehearsal and congratulated the winners, saying that he hoped that someday they would achieve the same success as Reform.

Adam Clayton said that it was like winning the lottery - £500 as a prize (1978 remember) and a recording test with CBS - he remembers grabbing the chair in front of him and with all the excitement slamming it down on his dad's foot. Edge jumped in the air - he was sitting with a friend as he was convinced that they had not won.

I introduced Mayor Frank Prendergast who presented the trophy. In second place was a Dublin

band Rockster, while the excellent Village from Limerick came third. None of us knew how important and historic that moment was. U2 won that competition at a time when they recognised how important it was to have belief in their project.

After the concert the celebrations were somewhat subdued as the boys were under-age and were not allowed attend the Festival Club in the Royal George Hotel where I was DJing at Fernando's Night Club. They stayed in the Royal George, went to the Wimpy Bar, and then back to their rooms where they stayed up all night. Waiting for the train the following morning they went to Funderland at Arthur's Quay as guests of the Bird family, and Adam picked up the winning cheque with his dad for safe keeping.

Looking back it amazes me how the event, which U2 recognise as being so significant, went largely unreported. At that time pop and rock music was not played on Irish radio and ignored by TV. As far as I know the concert was not recorded or filmed so there is no record of the event. Winning Pop 78 was instrumental in launching the career of the world's biggest rock band. A few weeks later, U2 booked into Keystone Studios in Dublin for their audition to fulfil their agreement with CBS. From what I hear the session was challenging for them - they were very nervous and wanted only to record two or three tracks. CBS wanted them to do seven or eight. The rest is history.

I often think that if Mayor Prendergast and PJ Power did not have the foresight to add Pop 78 to the festival week in Limerick, which usually had classical voice and trad competitions, U2 may never have got their initial break. I was knocked out when I heard the early demos of Boy Girl, Stories For Boys and Out of Control and wondered would it have happened so quickly for them if they did not win in Limerick.

Michael McNamara or 'Micky Mac' is a former 2FM DJ



The biggest band in the world got a big break after winning the Limerick event