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Long and Windings road

The Choice Music Prize nominees are ready to take their place in the spotlight

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The legally Winding Choice

After many years of underwhelming album sales and playing to audiences as small as two people, Windings frontman Steve Ryan tells **John Meagher** of his hopes that their Choice Music Prize nomination will open doors for this under-rated band



The announcement, Steve Ryan says, came out of the blue. The Windings frontman hadn't imagined his band would be among the nominees for the Choice Music Prize, so when he was told they had been selected alongside former winners Julie Feeney and Adrian Crowley, he had to do a double-take.

He should not have been surprised. Windings' third album, *I Am Not the Crow*, was one of last year's stand-out Irish releases and its omission would have reflected very badly on a judging panel who, somehow, neglected to include a back-to-her-best Sinead O'Connor. "We are thrilled," the 33-year-old Limerick man says. "It's great to be recognised for an album that's a bit more leftfield than most."

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"It kind of validates what we've been doing over the years, and it's an acknowledgement for those whose financial support made this album happen."

I Am Not the Crow would not have been made were it not for the crowd-funding initiative that Windings — newly swelled to a five-piece — had undertaken.

The band raised enough cash from supporters to afford studio time with a pair of acclaimed producers — Godspeed You! Black Emperor main man Efrim Menuck and Villagers' guitarist Tommy McLaughlin.

The resulting, mainly instrumental, album is intelligent, daring, frequently beautiful — and quite unlike any other Irish album released last year.

"We had honed the songs before we went to record them, because we knew we wouldn't have the luxury of teasing them out in the studio," he says. "We raised enough to afford two days' each with Efrim (in Montreal's celebrated Hotel2Tango studio, where Arcade Fire recorded *Funeral*) and Tommy (in his Donegal studio).

Cork band Fred had recorded in Hotel2Tango and had inspired Ryan to work there too. And he had collaborated with McLaughlin on the previous two Windings albums.

The first half of the eight-track album is culled from the Montreal sessions; the second half from those done in Donegal.

"Both are hands-off producers," he says. "But they're not afraid to let you know very quickly if what you're playing isn't up to scratch."

Ryan is something of a veteran of the Irish music scene. He's been in bands for 15 years.

His first outfit, Tooth, failed to make an impression outside Limerick, but he had far greater success with Giveamanakick. A duo featuring Ryan on guitar and Keith Lawlor on drums, their pulsating, thrilling minimalist punk rock — which really came into its own in concert — was critically acclaimed.

This is the sixth album he's been involved in — there have been three with his former band Giveamanakick and two others with Windings — and all are available on the Limerick independent label, Out On A Limb.

But there have been times when he's wondered if his music was making any impression outside Ireland's small indie circuit. He talks of an ill-fated tour of Britain when, more than once, he found himself playing in front of a handful of unenthused punters.

"There were times where we'd come out on stage and there would be literally two people who were more interested in playing pool at the back. It would make us question why we were putting ourselves through this."

"It's easy to forget that there are thousands of bands trying to get noticed in the UK. If there isn't a buzz around you to begin with, you can't blame people for not taking a chance."

Ryan is at pains to point out that he isn't looking for sympathy and can't quite believe his good fortune that he is able to "get by" and make music virtually full-time. "People from all walks of life are going through a hard time to make ends meet — not just musicians."



"Support from family and friends is important though and I get that from my wife and the guys from Out On A Limb. Without it, I'm not sure if this album would have happened."

He was much taken with the news that even a band as globally successful as Grizzly Bear can struggle to make ends meet.

"Yeah, I read that interview too," he says of the *New York* magazine cover story from October.

"It was brave of them to say it as it is, and it shows that even bands like that are not immune to the fall-off in sales."

Ryan has learned from bitter experience that costs have to be kept down. It's one of the reasons why *I Am Not the Crow* has not been issued on CD. Instead, it is available as either a download or on vinyl.

"It's the first time I've gone down that road," Ryan says.

"Obviously, downloading is the route that many people are taking, but what's been really interesting — and heartening to see — is the re-emergence of vinyl, especially among a younger generation."

"People just don't feel the same loyalty to CDs

— which were never aesthetically pleasing, just horrible jewel case things that would break on any given opportunity."

"So rather than spending all this money pressing thousands of CDs, we thought we'd do a limited run of picture disc vinyl and make it collectable."

Before our meeting, Ryan had perused the shelves at one of Dublin's newer record shops, Elastic Witch (which is located in the same building as The Twisted Pepper venue) and bought a handful of vinyl records including an album from Portland punk rockers, *White Fang*.

The purchases sit proudly in front of him in a brown paper bag.

"There's even something about a vinyl shaped bag that gets people talking. They want to know what you've bought."

The changing music retail scene has been felt most strongly outside Dublin, which remains reasonably buoyant. "There's only one record shop left in Limerick now," he says, a note of resignation in his voice. "It's Wingnut Records that stocks a lot of Irish stuff. There used to be lots of small shops and

two large HMV stores but they're all gone now."

Ryan feels the loss of Limerick's HMV stores more than most. As an ex-employee, he strongly sympathised with the sit-in that was staged by workers when the store shut in January. But he feels such closures have a detrimental effect on the cultural landscape too.

"Of course there are benefits to buying music online, but it's sad to think of a new generation who will not have the sort of record shop experience many of us have had."

"Meeting like-minded music fans, just happening upon an album you'd never heard of but would turn out to be great... all that's been lost."

For now, boosted by the Choice nomination, Ryan will motor on. And do so in Limerick. He has never been tempted to base himself in Dublin.

"We're not really part of a scene and don't particularly want to be," he says. "And Limerick isn't sufficiently far away for me to feel that I'm missing out."

I Am Not the Crow is out now. Windings play the Choice Music Prize live event at Vicar Street, Dublin, on Thursday, March 7

THE CHOICE MUSIC PRIZE 2013 NOMINATIONS

We take a look at the competition Windings are facing for this year's Choice Music Prize.

WALLIS BIRD

WALLIS BIRD
A quirky, but uneven third album from the Wexford songwriter and guitarist, it's easily the weakest album nominated.



CAST OF CHEERS

FAMILY
Their second nomination and a marked

improvement on their over-praised debut. Their genre-hopping brand of indie is a dark horse. Well worth a flutter.

ADRIAN CROWLEY

I SEE THREE BIRDS FLYING
Another fine album from the Galway troubadour, but these keenly observed songs aren't as compelling as those found on his best album, 2005's *Long Distance Swimmer*.

DELORENTOS

LITTLE SPARKS
The best album on the list from a band that has worked hard to become one of the country's top draws. But will their chart-friendly rock prove too safe for the judges?

DAMIEN DEMPSEY

ALMIGHTY LOVE
The social conscious songwriter is not at his best on this sixth album, although there are songs in which his talents shine brightly, such as the beguiling *Canadian Geese*.

JULIE FEENEY

CLOCKS
The Galwegian pipped BellXI to win the inaugural prize, but she won't land the gong for this patchy effort that contains as many half-baked songs as good ones.



DAMIEN DEMPSEY



DELORENTOS



MUMBLIN' DEAF RO



TWO DOOR CINEMA CLUB

HEATHERS

KINGDOM
Ireland's answer to Tegan and Sara, the Dublin twins' folk-pop is loaded with charm, but they have some way to go before they record a truly essential album.



HEATHERS

MUMBLIN' DEAF RO

DICTIONARY CRIMES
Ronan Hession is an understated songwriter whose quotidian preoccupations mark him out from the pack. A solid album — with some fine songs — but not strong enough to win.

TWO DOOR CINEMA CLUB

BEACON
The Northern Irish trio just about beat Villagers to win the award two years ago for their exhilarating debut. This follow-up is even more commercial, but it's not nearly as special.

WINDINGS

I AM NOT THE CROW
A career-best album from Steve Ryan, it stands a very good chance of winning — especially if DeLorentos split the votes.