

RORY GALLAGHER

OFFICIAL BIOGRAPHY

If ever there was a “musician’s musician” then that accolade surely belongs to Rory Gallagher. Renowned for his blistering live performances and highly respected for his dedication to his craft, he died in 1995, aged just 47, yet his reputation has continued to flourish in the years since. Indeed, some of rock’s most seminal figures, from Jimi Hendrix to Eric Clapton, Queen’s Brian May to The Smiths’ Johnny Marr, have cited him as an influence. Clapton credited Rory with “getting me back into the blues”, while May has unequivocally stated: “I owe Rory Gallagher my sound.”

Rory remains a touchstone for all would-be guitar heroes in the 21st Century, yet the rural Ireland he grew up in even barely acknowledged the arrival of rock’n’roll. When he was born William Rory Gallagher, in Ballyshannon, County Donegal, in 1948, his father was working for the Irish Electricity Supply Board, constructing a hydroelectric power plant on the River Erne above the town.

Later, Rory, with his younger brother Dónal, moved to Cork with their mother, Monica, the boys attended the city’s North Monastery School. Monica Gallagher sang and had acted with Ballyshannon’s Abbey Players, so the Gallagher boys’ early musical inclinations were indulged by their parents. Rory, especially, showed precocious talent, first mastering ukulele and then graduating to acoustic and, finally, electric guitar.

Unable to find – or even afford – records, the young Rory stayed up late and listened attentively to Radio Luxembourg and the American Forces Network, where he first heard rock’n’roll legends Buddy Holly, Eddie Cochran and Lonnie Donegan, before later discovering two of his biggest influences, Muddy Waters and Lead Belly. Of the former, Rory later enthused: “The more I heard, the more I got addicted.” Fired up by his informal musical education, Rory taught himself to play slide guitar and also worked out the rudiments required to master a variety of instruments, including bass, mandolin, harmonica and saxophone.

In the pre-Beatles early 60s, the country’s music scene was dominated by showbands. A peculiarly Irish phenomenon, the showbands were, in effect, the highly efficient covers acts of their day, and their biggest stars, such as Joe Dolan and Brendan Bowyer (the latter sometimes referred to as “the Irish Elvis”), generated a hysteria akin to Beatlemania on the Irish club and ballroom circuit. Having acquired his totemic sunburst Fender Stratocaster from Crowley’s Music Store in Cork during 1963, Rory duly joined the Fontana showband: a sextet playing the popular hits of the day.

Though struggling with the restrictions of being a sideman, Gallagher nonetheless succeeded in injecting some much-needed fire into Fontana, and his blues-y style bled into the band’s repertoire as they began performing several Chuck Berry numbers. Fontana kept busy on the UK and Ireland club circuit – not to mention playing the same Hamburg clubs as The Beatles – with Gallagher later moulding them into an R&B outfit renamed The Impact before they split in 1966.

Having paid his dues, Rory moved center-stage, forming Taste – an on-trend blues-rock power trio. He was initially accompanied by two Cork-based musicians, Norman Damery and Eric Kitteringham, when Taste began in 1966, but by ’68 the band’s classic line-up had fallen into place, with guitarist/vocalist Gallagher joined by Belfast-born rhythm section, drummer John Wilson and bassist Richard McCracken.

A residency at London's Marquee Club helped the talented young outfit amass a burgeoning fanbase (their number including a smitten John Lennon) which led to Polydor signing the band in the thick of the late 60s British blues boom. Taste recorded two excellent studio albums, *Taste* and *January 1970's On The Boards*. Climbing to No.18 on the UK album chart, the latter introduced Gallagher and co to a much wider public, with legendary Rolling Stone critic Lester Bangs bowled over by the quality of Rory's jazz-inflected guitar playing and praising Taste's sound for its "impressive... progressive blues".

Taste burned brightly during their brief, mercurial tenure. Aside from their Marquee residence, the band supported Cream at their Royal Albert Hall farewell concert and toured North America with Eric Clapton and Ginger Baker's short-lived post-Cream supergroup Blind Faith. Their prowess as a stellar live act can still be rediscovered on two dynamic live albums, *Live Taste* and *Live At the Isle Of Wight*: both released shortly after the band split in 1970.

Taste's electric performances of 'Sinner Boy' and 'Gamblin' Blues' also remain among the highlights of their performance at the 1970 Isle Of Wight festival, captured for posterity by director Murray Lerner and released, in 2015, as the Eagle Rock DVD *What's Going On: Taste Live At The Isle Of Wight*, the same year that Polydor's 4CD Taste box set, *I'll Remember*, attracted unanimous critical praise. Record Collector's review sagely pegged the blues-rock trailblazers as "surely the most impassioned and rapturous unit to have blasted into the public ear during the fat years of blues-rock dominion".

With the world seemingly theirs for the taking, Taste were torn apart by management disputes and they split after an emotional farewell show in Belfast on New Year's Eve, 1970. Though the loss was shattering, Rory forged ahead, choosing to go solo and seeking a suitable new rhythm section. He initially rehearsed with former Jimi Hendrix Experience rhythm section Noel Redding and Mitch Mitchell, but eventually recruited two more Belfast natives, bassist Gerry McAvooy and drummer Wilgar Campbell, to complete his durable, new-look power trio.

Prolific from the off, the newly-established unit were in the studio recording Gallagher's first studio album within weeks of their initial rehearsals. Released in May 1971, the ensuing Rory Gallagher featured an eclectic mix of songs, ranging from hard-driving live favourites ('Laundromat Blues', 'Sinner Boy') to delicate, Bert Jansch-esque acoustic folk ('Just The Smile') and the jazzy 'Can't Believe It's True', but it was hungrily embraced by Gallagher's expanding fanbase and yielded the first of seven consecutive gold discs.

The early 70s proved notable for Rory, with UK rock publication *Melody Maker* voting him their International Top Guitarist Of The Year ahead of Eric Clapton, in 1972. His new outfit's second album, *Deuce*, also appeared in November '71. Earthy and raw compared to the relatively polished Rory Gallagher, *Deuce* included the fiery, Celtic-tinged 'I'm Not Awake Yet', the slide guitar-imbued 'Whole Lot Of People' and the emotional, Irish Troubles-related 'In Your Town', which frequently closed Gallagher's live set. Attracting widespread praise, *Deuce* inspired future guitar legend Johnny Marr, who later informed *Guitar* magazine that the album served as "a complete turning point for me as a guitar player".

By this stage in his career, Rory's reputation as one of the blues-rock scene's master craftsmen had attracted the attention of some legendary figures. During the early-to-mid-70s he also had the opportunity to guest with many of his own key influences, putting his signature stamp on milestone titles such as Jerry Lee Lewis' *The Session* and Albert King's *Live*. Perhaps most of all, however, he relished the opportunity to appear with his old hero Muddy Waters on the latter's much-acclaimed *The London Sessions* album, released in 1972.

Keeping Rory's own career on an upward trajectory, 1972's *Live In Europe* was unusual for a live document inasmuch as the record included mostly new Gallagher-penned songs such as 'Going To My Hometown', alongside fierce reinterpretations of blues numbers such as Junior Wells' 'Messin' With The Kid' and Blind Boy Fuller's 'Pistol Slapper Blues'.

Gallagher and McAvoy recorded 1973's *Blueprint* with a reconfigured line-up, having recruited keyboardist Lou Martin and replaced Wilgar Campbell with Rod de'Ath. Another UK Top 20 success, this inspired and consistent set included several evergreen live favourites ('Walk On Hot Coals', 'Hands Off') and a spirited reworking of Big Bill Broonzy's 'Banker's Blues'.

This extended line-up enjoyed further artistic triumphs with November 1973's *Tattoo*, '75's *Chrysalis* debut, *Against The Grain*, and '76's *Calling Card* – the latter title co-produced by Deep Purple's Roger Glover. Arguably the band's most significant mid-70s release, however, was *Irish Tour '74*: an impassioned and much-celebrated live double-album recorded during homecoming shows at Belfast's Ulster Hall, Dublin's Carlton Cinema and Cork's City Hall.

Undoubtedly one of rock's truly great live recordings, *Irish Tour '74* eventually notched up worldwide sales of around two million copies and spawned director Tony Palmer's acclaimed spin-off documentary of the same name. Throughout the dark era of The Troubles, Rory insisted his domestic tours always featured gigs in Belfast, where his vibrant, life-affirming music spread some much-needed hope and optimism throughout a city whose people were so frequently torn apart by tension, fears and divisions – both religious and political. Belfast continued to loom large throughout Gallagher's later career and he went on to appear on records by bands he directly inspired, including Stiff Little Fingers and Energy Orchard.

Across the border, Rory's influence should never be underestimated either. He funded Ireland's premier rock publication *Hot Press* and headlined Ireland's very first open-air rock festival. Organised by Rory and his brother/manager Donal, this event, billed as *Macroom Mountain Dew*, took place on 26 June 1977 in Macroom, County Cork, and attracted over 20,000 loyal fans, paving the way for large Irish outdoor gatherings ranging from Thin Lizzy and U2 at Slane Castle to the present-day *Electric Picnic*.

During the build-up to the event, Rory had expressed reservations as to whether he could achieve the high quality sound his fans expected of him, but after the services of the band's regular stage team (who included future U2 sound engineer Joe O'Herlihy) were secured, things went off without a hitch. Remarkably, despite the fact that the festival was the first of its kind in Ireland, it wasn't covered by the country's national TV broadcaster, RTE. Yet *Macroom* remains a landmark event in Irish rock'n'roll history (and was the first large-scale concert that The Edge attended); as Gerry McAvoy recently told *The Irish Examiner*, "The time around the *Macroom Festival* was the high point of Rory's career."

Featuring a new line-up, including former Sensational Alex Harvey Band drummer Ted McKenna, Gallagher's next studio album, 1978's *Photo-Finish*, again included a clutch of long-term live favourites such as 'Shadow Play' and 'Last Of The Independents'. The record's raw, stripped-back sound more than held its own in the post-punk landscape and it was followed swiftly by another high-octane blue-rock studio set, 1979's *Top Priority*.

Ted McKenna stayed on for the *Top Priority* tour, from which selected highlights were chosen for Rory's third live album, the hard-edged *Stage Struck*. He was replaced by Brendan O'Neill for 1982's *Jinx*: an oft-overlooked jewel in Gallagher's crown which included tenacious rockers ('Big Guns', 'Bourbon'), elegant, semi-acoustic ballads ('Easy Come, Easy Go') and a tough, Delta-fried version of Louisiana Red's 'Ride On Red, Ride On'.

Jinx proved to be Gallagher's swansong release with *Chrysalis*. Though he remained steadfastly loyal to hard rock and the blues, his impassioned guitar-driven oeuvre suddenly seemed anachronistic during the early-to-mid-80s, when synthesizers and glossy production values seemingly ruled the roost.

To his credit, Rory remained dedicated to maintaining what he referred to as "a good vintage, ethnic sound", steadfastly favouring analogue over modern recording equipment. Indeed, 1987's *Defender*

(recorded for stalwart indie imprint Demon) saw him back in harness with McAvoy and O'Neill, blasting through some of his most memorable tunes, such as the Sun Studios-style rockabilly of 'Loanshark Blues' and the imperious, slow-burning blues of 'I Ain't No Saint'.

Gallagher's loyal fanbase devoured Defender. However, while his health had begun to decline in the late 80s, partly due to medication prescribed to counter his phobia of flying, Rory's final studio album, 1990's Fresh Evidence, showed that, creatively at least, he remained in the rudest of health.

Recorded with an extended line-up including returning keyboardist Lou Martin and a horn section including ex-Thin Lizzy/Graham Parker alumnus John "Irish" Earle, Fresh Evidence took an atypical six months to piece together, but included some of Gallagher's finest songs, not least the defiant 'Walking Wounded' and the haunted 'Heaven's Gate', inspired by Robert Johnson's eerie blues 'Hellhound On My Trail'.

As a live performer, Rory's reputation was second to none, and he toured heavily to the very end, regularly notching up 300 gigs annually and never giving less than 110 per cent onstage. By the turn of the 90s, he had played 25 US tours and appeared at both the Reading Festival and Switzerland's Montreux Jazz Festival more times than any other act. Sadly, however, his health began to fail and, as drink and various prescription medicines took their toll, Rory literally played on until he dropped, collapsing onstage in Rotterdam, in January 1995.

Within months, Rory had undergone a successful liver transplant, but sadly passed away from complications while convalescing, aged just 47. He was buried in St Oliver's Cemetery in Ballincollig, just outside his adopted hometown of Cork, where his headstone is a replica of the award he received for winning Melody Maker's International Guitarist Of The Year award for 1972.

The music world was united in grief at Rory's passing and 15,000 people lined the streets of Cork as he was laid to rest. Yet Rory Gallagher's music has continued to defy the ravages of time. Posthumous releases such as 2003's acoustic collaborations collection, Wheels Within Wheels (including contributions from the high-profile likes of Bert Jansch, Lonnie Donegan and The Dubliners), and 2011's Notes From San Francisco – a welcome issue of unreleased songs from Eliot Mazer-helmed studio sessions from 1977 – have attracted a new generation of fans, not to mention reams of critical praise.

Rory is commemorated throughout Ireland and the wider world. A bronze statue stands in Ballyshannon, while there's a sculpture in Cork where a theatre and a city square – Rory Gallagher Place – are named in his honour. There's a mounted guitar in Dublin and a blue plaque adorning Belfast's Ulster Hall, while, further afield, there's a Rue Rory Gallagher in Paris.

Elsewhere, Fender have globally marketed a tribute model of Rory's ubiquitous paint-stripped sunburst Stratocaster. A diverse younger breed of guitar heroes, ranging from Guns N' Roses' Slash to Joe Bonamassa and Manic Street Preachers' James Dean Bradfield continue to sing his praises, reflecting his across-the-board appeal and ensuring Rory Gallagher will cast a long shadow across the global stage for many years yet to come.

Tim Peacock 2017

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