

U2 and a host of top stars are lining out on the Late Late tonight to pay tribute to Ronnie Drew, but does their number do him justice?



TRIBUTE: Ronnie Drew as we all like to remember him. RIGHT: Ronnie as he fights cancer

SONG NOT IN TUNE WITH THE LEGEND OF RONNIE

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WE ALL love Ronnie Drew! Right. We wish him well in his battle with illness. And believe the idea of honouring the man and his achievements is a good one.

As Bono says: "When you're fighting cancer, your mood is critical. We want Ronnie to know how much he is respected and loved."

So Bono, The Edge and a bunch of friends collaborated on a song for Ronnie. So far, so good. Surely this would be a thumping, rip-roaring celebration of a man who seemed to personify our glorious ballad tradition. Surely it would be both swaggering and tender, a glorious toast to the voice and the character that, as much as the writings of James Joyce, captured the essence of what it meant to be from Dublin.

But showbusiness is a fickle and mercurial calling. It can be as cruel and brutal a career as professional boxing. Except that in boxing you've only your immediate opponent to worry about. Release a new recording and the whole world becomes involved.

It's a bit like the Circus Maximus in Roman times. No matter how worthy the athlete, the court of public opinion is where judgement is passed.

Since The Ballad Of Ronnie Drew began getting airplay earlier in the week, the response has been mixed. I heard a guy on radio say something about how he expected he'd enjoy hearing it again so that he could have fun picking out the various guest artists that include Christy Moore, Moya Brennan and Shane MacGowan.

HOSTILITY

In Dublin over the last few days, a taxi driver, a man in a pub and an office worker have engaged me in a one-way conversation about the song. "Gank!", "wojus!" and "bleedin' brutal", were the critiques they fired at me.

When faced with such hostility, there's seems little point in saying, "Ah, it's not that bad."

The reality is that Ronnie Drew is such an icon that everyone wants the very best for him. Everyone believes they're part of the great Ronnie family. Passions run high. And so there's always going to be controversy. There's always going to be those who feel that best should be better and that better should be sensational.

But it got me thinking what their problem with this ballad might be. And, while the idea is excellent and should be applauded, a bit of investigation reveals what seems to be a design flaw at the heart of the project.

Bono and The Edge are among the finest songwriters on the planet but, for this, it seems they were persuaded

by some bright spark to call in Robert Hunter, the lyricist for psychedelic rockers The Grateful Dead. Like, HELLO? It's reported that the plot was hatched over a bottle of wine. That figures.

Hunter, from California, was among the first to sign up as an official tester of psychedelic chemicals in the early 1960s. While Ronnie Drew and the lads were banging out The Rocky Road To Dublin in O'Donoghues pub, Hunter was being paid to report on his reaction to LSD, mescaline and psilocybin. A long way from the point of plain.

He has written some fine singalongs, Casey Jones among them. "Drivin' that train, high on cocaine, Casey Jones you better watch your speed." But I don't think any of Robert's songs have ever been recorded by Ronnie Drew, The Dubliners or Paddy Reilly.

ANTHEMS

Now your man in the pub or your punter on Moore Street might reckon that if you're serious about honouring Ronnie Drew with a ballad, then you should call in the man who's written the most memorable Irish ballads of the modern era, many of which have been sung by Ronnie and the Dubliners.

If you want Ronnie's praise to be sung at public gatherings and sporting events, then you've got to involve Dublin's Pete St John, the Bard of Ireland, whose The Fields Of Athenry and The Rare Auld Times are our unofficial national anthems.

No doubt, what with their new 3D movie and an album to prepare, it was probably easy for U2 to take their eye off the ball. And sure, what harm! The Ballad of Ronnie Drew does what it says on the label.

It's heart-warming to hear the greats of Irish music pay tribute to a character who deserves our respect and best wishes. And it's reassuring to know that the proceeds, no matter how small, will go to a cancer charity. I'll be paying for my download. And I'll be happy to sing, "Ronnie Drew, we love you."

Sure it has to be said!

LATE LATE LINE-UP

ALONGSIDE U2, an A-list selection of guests will be on hand to perform their special tribute to the Dubliners frontman, Ronnie Drew - which features Bono, Shane MacGowan, Christy Moore and Damien Dempsey on each verse, while Andrea Corr and Sinead O'Connor lend their vocal talent to the chorus along with Moya Brennan.

The song was recorded in Windmill Lane last month and produced by Jake Reynolds.

