

# Thom Moore's Irish Ballads From Russian Heart

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Moore performing in Dublin on Monday night. He remains undaunted by the lack of interest in his 'translations' of Vysotsky's music and words. **Peadar Gill**

DUBLIN — Thom Moore is another proof point that you can leave Russia, but it never quite leaves you.

At the debut concert for his new album this week in Dublin, about 150 aging fans of music from times passed packed Whelans and warmly greeted the folk singer, linguist, English teacher and former inspector for the U.S-U.S.S.R Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

Moore's sharp, yet poetic, intellect and personal charm haven't helped give him broader popularity, but he is at peace with this.

"My music makes no sense whatsoever to Americans or any of their imitators in Europe, being a strange amalgam of Irish, folk and poetic concerns," he said in an interview before

the concert.

Moore, who will turn 70 this year, was accompanied by a band of all-stars from the Irish music scene, including guitarist and producer Gavin Ralston, his brother Aongus on bass, Robbie Harris on percussion, Brian Connor on the key board and Seamie O'Dowd on fiddle.

The generation gap became even more glaring when Moore admitted that at least three of the band members had been introduced to his music by their parents, who collected his singles in the 1970s.

The new album, *Seven Things Aloom*, whose title betrays Moore's interest in astrology, has several songs written during the early 1990s when he taught English at the university in Izhevsk, hometown of the Kalashnikov rifle. He settled there after falling in love with and marrying Lyubov Zamyatina, one of the women he worked with in the late 1980s during the missile inspection job he held at the rocket factory in Votkinsk, the birthplace of Tchaikovsky.

The only track on the new album that refers to Russia is called "Kosmos Cafe." It's a poetic reminiscence of the lonely life of missile inspectors and the local restaurant and bar where they dined, danced and occasionally got to know their Russian hosts better than the treaty foresaw.

Moore's discography also functions like the orbital cycle of certain planets, with this new release coming 18 years after his last one, and previous albums coming in three to 12 year intervals prior to that. But they always contained some Russian themes and words, weaved in to Irish and other melodies.

But his Russian fans haven't forgotten him. They provided 15 percent of the money he received via crowd-funder fundit.ie to produce the new album.

Many of his songs have been covered by famous artists, including America's Pat Boone and Ireland's Maura O'Connell and Mary Black, who pushed *Prayer for Love* (Моление о любви) — a thinly disguised ode from Moore to his future wife — onto the Irish charts in 1991.

He wrote his first song while completing a Slavonic languages degree at UCLA in 1969. After a stint in the Navy in Vietnam, a disillusioned Moore resettled in Ireland in 1971 to pursue his musical interests. In 1975 he produced *Pumpkinhead*, an album of traditional Irish dance tunes and three original songs. The album *Midnight Well* followed in 1978 along with an eponymous group he formed.

Sent back to the U.S. by his then-manager Paul McGuinness, Moore wound up teaching English in California to make ends meet, until the end of the Cold War created a surge in demand for Russian speakers. He joined the INF Treaty and moved to Votkinsk in 1989.

There, he served as an interpreter for three years, before ending his service and setting up in Izhevsk in 1993. He lived in Udmurtia for two more years and produced the albums "Dreamer in Russia" and "Gorgeous and Bright."

He returned to Ireland with Lyubov in the mid 1990s. She is involved in running

an assimilation center for immigrants, while he supports his music habit by working as a freelance interpreter.

Moore sat down with The Moscow Times prior to the concert to give his view of linguistic nuances, cross cultural quirks and his own obscurity. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**Q: Ho did you get interested in Russia?**

A: I was exposed to Russians for the first time in my life in Ethiopia, where I lived from 1950 to 1953. They were first-wave immigrants — old, sad, and mysterious. I found myself at university in 1965 after service in the Navy, and the only class that was even vaguely interesting was Russian. I switched majors, largely because Cyrillic held few problems for me.

**Q: What is your link to Ireland?**

I was raised a Catholic because my mother was a romantic and, captivated by Latin and incense, converted from her Protestant background. Family rumor was that we were Irish, so I naturally assumed I was from that tribe. I was mistaken, of course: My Irish antecedents were, to the best of my knowledge, West of Ireland Prods. In the meantime, the whole of Irish-American 'culture' was composed of the grossest cliches and infantilism, then as now.

But the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem had brought their rather wonderful store of music and folklore to the U.S., and just before I joined the Navy in 1961, I caught a promotional short of theirs on television: I was hooked, because this was real. When Nixon cut the funding for all Eastern European centered studies, I found myself — in the face of the horrible Vietnam War and evidence that the peace movement was actually prolonging it by polarizing the country — looking for some kind of exit from the madness: I found it by packing up all my belongings and becoming a 'cultural refugee' in Ireland.

Once there, I discovered that a great many of my tastes and preferences were par for the course in Ireland and decided to stay. This was made possible by success in the musical field. But success bred its own pitfalls, and by 1979 I found myself back in California, music career completely derailed.

**Q: Why did it take so long for you to come out with a new album?**

A: In 1979, my career had been taken under the management of Paul McGuinness, supposedly a business genius, who promptly broke up Midnight Well, getting rid of the two Irish musicians and sending me and the vocalist Janie Cribbs back to America to 'open doors' for him, us and his new boy-band, U2. My music makes no sense whatsoever to Americans or any of their imitators in Europe, being a strange amalgam of Irish, folk and poetic concerns. American television and its values had completely swamped Ireland and Europe by the time I returned from Russia in 1995, and there was no market whatsoever for my product.

**Q: What does your average fan look like, and does he understand you?**

A: My average fan looks a bit like me, I guess: white-haired, ex-hippy, in other words, not

people who have nostalgia or money invested in the pop-music machine, but old folkies, people who like a moral sense of some kind in their music. The Russian nuances in my music tend to be not terribly obvious: the odd minor key, always inappropriate in Western pop music; every now and then an allusion to something local in Russia, like the Kosmos Cafe, a venue famous only in the minds of Votkintsy and Americans stationed there in the '90s. I don't make the 'nuances' difficult to comprehend. They just turn out that way.

Americans in particular don't want to be made to think about something and consequently are endlessly devoted to the style of songs rather than their substance, which means that the average consumer of pop music has no desire to listen to more than a couple of seconds of any song of mine.

**Q: Do you think you accomplished your goal of translating Vysotsky for non-Russian speakers?**

A: In our times, doing something in the face of incomprehension or scorn is labeled as foolish and a waste of time, unless you are sure of your quest, and of its value: The rest of the world is wrong, and you alone are right. This is guaranteed to put you under suspicion, if not actually resulting in your being sent to the madhouse. The genius of Vysotsky is so clear to most Russian-speakers that the idea of elucidating it to others is a non-starter.

I even shocked myself with the virtue of translating both the lyrics and the music of five of his songs in quest of my thesis. The tale would have had a perfect ending if my translations had been received in any quarter with interest or belief.

This is not the case, unfortunately: The kindest anyone has been to me on hearing my 'translations' is to tell me that they like my songs better. On hearing the originals, most non-Russian-speakers of my acquaintance have pronounced the great man sad and querulous.

**Q: What are your fondest memories of living in a provincial city like Izhevsk?**

A: Being appreciated as something exotic. Izhevsk, being a closed city, its experience of foreigners was minimal. As a Russian-speaker, I was doubly exotic and people tended to be fascinated for as long as it took them to get used to the idea.

The more entrepreneurial of them tried to figure out how to make a profit from my acquaintance; the more idealistic tried to convince me of the virtue of the simple Russian provincial life, which I deeply appreciate, being 'from the cradle' averse to big cities; and the more cynical of them realized I was a non-commodity, worthless to them or anyone.

**Q: What do Russians and Irish have in common?**

A: There are commonalities among some cultures that share a background of general suppression, either due to economic, racial or cultural factors. Theorists are of the opinion that Russians and Irish share a certain reverence for their peasant cultures and its gems: traditional music, folklore and, latterly, booze and its cultural ubiquity and prevalence. But if popular folk singer Nadezhda Kadysheva is the sum total of this expression in modern Russia, and U2 in Ireland, then god help us all: The Irish and the Russians both seem to be keen to abandon virtually all of their peasant virtues and become upwardly-mobile Americans.

**Q: Do you see any formula for Russia and the West to work together better?**

A: I was as hopeful as anybody back in the halcyon days of the downfall of Soviet orthodoxy. Now, it doesn't seem in the slightest bit possible. I watch RT all the time, constantly appalled by the willingness of the Russian state to use propaganda as a legitimate tool in international relations. They have learned that you don't even have to lie: You simply leave out the bits that might "confuse" people. By the same token, I get Fox news, but I never once could stand to watch it.

**Q: Who inspires you?**

A: I have been delighted all my life to encounter the writings of original thinkers like Robert Graves, more than anyone else; Bruce Chatwin, Richard Feynman and, of course, Bob Dylan. Oh, and Carl Jung and Vladimir Nabokov.

**Q: When are you coming on tour in Russia?**

A: I don't think there will ever be sufficient demand or clamor from anywhere in Russia for me to make another appearance there. Also, the world is overdue for some kind of apocalypse, anyway, obviating any need for such a fairy-tale ending.

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