

# Tales of The Great Unwashed

WITH THE GREAT UNWASHED being a free house, and one of the few remaining, we've been feeling the pinch this last wee while.

Over a century we've been here, and a good few bob has passed over the counter down the years, enough at any rate to raise several families and see them alright. So when things get pushed as they are now, it's all hands on deck and never say die and all that.

Just around the corner there's yet another new 'Irish' pub opened, with 'genuine' old posters and chests of drawers standing in the middle of the floor and old hats and shoes and bootlaces and you-name-it hanging here and there. Packed it is already too, and that's it open only a month.

So—bold strategies are called for. I've pledged to peg the price of a pot of stew for the next year at least, and I've extended the lunchtime menu from Pie & Beans, Sausage Roll & Beans, or Bridie & Beans, to include the same things, but with a twist - now my customers can have any of the aforementioned pastry products solo i.e. without the beans, for ten pence cheaper, and mighty popular it is proving. But that surely is the essence of change—assessing the customer's needs and adapting to them.

And the Karaoke is another invention which may yet help us see off the interlopers. On Thursdays we get Bobby Elbow's *All-Star-Roadshow* in, and a fine range of tunes he has on his big discs. Most of the regulars enjoy stretching their cables once they've had a couple, and none more so than Joe 'Doghead' Ryan, who has won the first prize (a token for a half-bottle of his choice) for the past three weeks.

Because Joe has few of his own teeth left, it is difficult for him to sing without releasing unpleasant rasping splatteroid noises whenever he reaches for notes of higher type, or attempts lyrics containing many Esses, but he was advised recently by Bobby Elbow that by cutting a small banana-shape from a normal beer-mat and winding it between his remaining choppers, the dentally-challenged delivery can be much improved.

And so Joe has done this, with great success. Now he can launch himself into heartfelt renditions of his favoured Roy Orbison classics with confidence, as I expect he will tonight.

There being a sensation of change in the air what with elections and all that, I expected that some scintilla of optimism might be detected in the songs chosen by my loyal and trusty regulars, but it seems that they don't care too much for it all—whether it is change they fear, or perhaps just that they don't give a tom-tit either way, I cannot truly say, but I had hoped there might be more of a buzz about it all.

Bobby Elbow kicks the night off, as ever, with a hearty version of *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* which is his signature tune and sets a suitably claustrophobic tone, it being hot and sticky and not a little malodorous what with all the crusty old souls packed in.

Next up is Sippy Pat from the Wynd, who never takes her Afghan off and treats us to Bohemian Rhapsody: 'Nobody loves me!' she caterwauls, and the entire company screams in reply, 'She's just a poor girl from a poor family!' and she starts crying 'Let me go!' and we all scream 'No!' and eventually she tears her Afghan open and axe-grinds her way towards the crescendo with much yipping and ya-hooing from all present. Joe is already on his feet by the puggy, banging his approval of Sippy's efforts on the heads and shoulders of those seated before him, and his enthusiasm duly sparks a small disturbance which I'm forced to quell with a few short blasts of the fire extinguisher.

But Joe is man enough to replace those drinks ruined by the dusty spray, and soon we all settle down to enjoy 'Jarler' Callaghan's outrageous treatment of the obscure Primo Detroit Ensemble's 1964 top-ten heartbreaker I'm About To Burst, which just gets better every time.

By half-eleven we're pretty much as full as we can be, the bar jammed with aspiring chanters demanding request slips despite cautions that they've little chance of performing tonight.

Bobby Elbow is due his well-earned mid-session break after belting out *Down Down Deeper and Down*, but Quo's most stirring of anthems sets Joe off again, and this time I have to allow the brawl to take its natural course as I'm too busy with the paying customers.

But then it all goes wrong. A trio of well-oiled, well dressed punters enter, and with them comes a scent of trouble. Two men and a woman who look familiar, and have an air of authority which my regulars sense and recoil from.

The strangers buy White-wine-&-peach schnapps 'Blinders' (the house speciality), demand a receipt, and have barely touched the drinks when the smallest of them catches my eye.

'Are you the proprietor sir?' asks this little fellow, and a sinister type he is too with his baldy red head and great tufts of white hair sprouting from his ears. I nod, whereupon he produces a large plastic identity card and holds it up to my face.

'Sergeant O'Lally,' he says then, 'Operation Grumblebust. We have reason to believe that you have been allowing these premises to be used for the gratuitous encouragement of behaviour liable to cause gloom and general downheartedness.'

'Well you've had a bum steer,' says I, and the other chap pipes up then—he's another shifty one, with a straggly grey beard grown to partially conceal the awful debauchery writ large on his pasty features.

'Make it easy on yourself,' he says low and mean, a dangerous smile playing about his thin cruel lips: 'We know all about it. Patsy Cline stuff, early Willie Nelson and Johnny Cash.' He pauses, and I see the disgust flick across his face as he whispers, 'Two Little Boys? Do you take us for fools?'

'Who sent you?' I ask, and the woman shuffles nearer the bar, staring at me through her milk-bottle

gazers. 'That's immaterial,' she says, her neck wobbling like a gigantic parson's nose as she chastises me: 'Everyone knows Elbow's been at it for years. Cohen, Jim Reeves, the works. You expect us to believe you don't know the type of filth he peddles, the misery he's caused?'

'Look about you,' says I, and they all do. I follow their gaze to find that Joe has mounted the stage and is making final adjustments to the dampened strip of beer-mat which will act as a temporary upper-set.

Bobby Elbow is preparing to launch part-two, and its a cert it'll be a Big O weepie. I have a mental picture of myself, suited and shaved, in the dock, being charged with Assisting in the Supply of Woebegoneness by Means of Musical Media, and have resigned myself to early-closing when Elbow's tones rise high and loud through The Great Unwashed. 'Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you, thrice champion, the one, the only, Jeooooooooo Ryan!'

The small baldy fellow pulls a tape-recorder from his pocket and presses it on, smiling at his cronies. Joe unbuttons his donkey jacket and spreads his legs, mike cupped in his hands, a washboard frown developing, his eyebrows twisting into inverted commas of sadness. And then he erupts into 'I was walking, down the High Street, when I...'

My mind races. It's not Orbison. It's *The Laughing Gnome*. God bless you Doghead! The Sergeant flicks off his recorder and the woman huffily slugs what's left of her Blinder. The bearded one fires me a look of stinging contempt as he leans across and snarls: 'Don't think for a minute that this aberrant piece of Bowie whimsy can get you off the hook.'

But there's method in Joe's madness. He stays on-stage, defying all others to remove him, and launches into *Kisses for Me* as Elbow exhorts the massed regulars to sing along. By the time Joe gets to the end of Dolce's timeless *Shaddapayaface* the trio has clearly had enough.

'Now, have you tried around the corner?' I ask, and they stare blankly. 'There's those new places. Genuine Irish pubs they are,' I say, 'and no end of wanton miserableness in there what with ballads about sailing away to Amerikay and never coming back, and awful dirges about tatty-howking and banshees chasing folk around. God bless us and save us and soap us and shave us, it's enough to make a grown man weep so it is.'

They frown and glance at one another, then move silently towards the door as the first chords of *Agadoo-do-do* bring all to their feet.

Joe has earned his half-bottle tonight and no mistake. I pour myself a pint and raise a hand in reply to Bobby Elbow's wink, then join the rest of The Great Unwashed, pushing the pineapple, shaking the tree.

Ian Brotherhood