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**Article:**

O'Hagan, L. (2019) *The Irish Rover: Phil Lynott and the Search for Identity*. *Popular Music and Society*. pp. 1-23. ISSN 0300-7766

<https://doi.org/10.1080/20567790.2019.1653623>

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Popular Music and Society* on 28th August 2019, available online:  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/20567790.2019.1653623>.

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*“What’s it like to be black and Irish?”*  
*“Like a pint of Guinness.”*

The above quote is taken from an interview with Phil Lynott, the charismatic lead singer of the Celtic rock band Thin Lizzy, on Gay Byrne’s ‘The Late Late Show’. Lynott’s often playful and bold responses to such questions about his identity served to mask his overwhelming feelings of insecurity and ambivalent sense of belonging. As an illegitimate black child brought up in the 1950s in a strict Catholic family in Crumlin, a working-class district of Dublin, Lynott was seen to have a “paradoxical personality” (Bridgeman, qtd. in Thomson 4): his upbringing imbued him “with an acute sense of national and gender identity” (Smyth 39), yet his skin color and illegitimacy made him the target of racial and social abuse in a predominantly white and conservative Ireland. For Lynott, becoming a rockstar offered an opportunity to reinvent himself and be whoever he wanted to be. While he played up to the rock and roll lifestyle in which he was embedded, Lynott is often considered to have been a man trapped inside a caricature (Thomson 301). Geldof (qtd. in Putterford 182) believes that this rocker persona was Lynott’s ultimate downfall and led to his untimely death at just 36 years of age in 1986. For all his swagger and bravado, behind the mask, Lynott was a troubled, young man searching for a place to belong.

While many books have been written about the life of Phil Lynott (e.g. Putterford; Lynott; Thomson), few have drawn attention to the notion of identity and the way in which music provided Lynott with an outlet to explore his self. The exception to the rule is Brannigan, who investigated minstrelsy, racism, and black cultural production in 1970s Ireland using Lynott as an example. However, Brannigan’s chief focus was on race rather than other aspects of identity, such as nationality, religion, or gender. While some work has been carried out on ethnic and cultural identity in song lyrics (e.g. Kennedy and Gadpaille), most studies tend to focus on well-known American storytellers, such as Bob Dylan (e.g. Dettmar), Johnny Cash (e.g. Edwards), and Bruce Springsteen (e.g. Neiberg and Citino). Even within the context of Ireland, most studies neglect the work of Thin Lizzy (e.g. Fitzgerald and O’Flynn) and no scholar has yet turned their attention to Phil Lynott and the interconnections between his personal identity and his musical narratives.

Thus, this article seeks to explore Phil Lynott’s complex quest for identity, for what is believed to be the first time, through his music and song lyrics, supported by archival interviews and documents. In particular, it aims to demonstrate how many of their recurring themes or archetypes were, in fact, multifaceted self-portraits that gave Lynott the creative freedom to negotiate his own identity. However, these identities were conflicting and often comprised a struggle between two extremes: the Celtic warrior and the black orphan, the streetwise hustler and the romantic poet, the aggressive rocker and the doting father, not to mention the cowboy, the gypsy, the vagabond, and the Lothario.

### **“My *Róisín Dubh* Is My One and Only True Love”**

Philip Parris Lynott was born at Hallam Hospital in West Bromwich, England on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1949. His mother, Philomena, was a Dubliner, who had moved to England a few years earlier to seek employment, while his father, Cecil Parris, was an Afro-Guyanese stowaway. Struggling to juggle being a single mother and working full-time, Philomena sent Lynott to live with his

grandparents, Frank and Sarah, in Crumlin, Dublin when he was eight years old. Despite the fact that 1950s Ireland was “almost universally white” (Brannigan 239), with just four indigenous black children in Dublin (Thomson 21), Lynott was generally accepted within the local community. However, Lynott’s uncle, Timothy, notes that Dublin’s conservative Catholic climate meant that his arrival came “without an accompanying explanation” (qtd. in Thomson 19). Most neighbors assumed that Lynott had been adopted and nobody made an effort to correct them. One of Lynott’s closest friends, Jim Fitzpatrick, claims that life began in Lynott’s head when he was eight (qtd. in Thomson, 14). He argues that this seemed to be a way for him to adjust psychologically and forget about his early years in England.

Lynott attended Scoil Colm Christian Brothers’ School on Armagh Road, Crumlin. The education provided at this school was heavily grounded in religious doctrine and support for Irish nationalism. Thomson (26) reports that the emphasis was on a “one-sided appraisal of the country’s history, language, and geography,” while a former pupil, Martin Duffy (qtd. in Thomson 27), describes the school as indoctrinating children with the belief that the English were evil and that the Irish were rebellious heroes. Moody (71) and Magee (1) note that this largely divisive and sectarian mythology was commonly transmitted by Irish institutions throughout the twentieth century. Moody (86), in particular, warns that this transmission was “ruinous” to Ireland, as it fostered an “obsession” with the Irish as an oppressed nation that had to rise up and resist English colonialism. According to schoolfriend and Thin Lizzy drummer, Brian Downey, Irish history and mythology had a big impact on Lynott. Downey claims that Lynott “became steeped in the tradition” (qtd. in Thomson 29), avidly reading the *Ulster Cycle* (a series of medieval sagas and legends about Ireland) and *Our Boys* (a comic strip of the great figures of Celtic nationhood) in order to emphasize that he fitted into Irish society.

Interestingly, Lynott’s school reports, now held in the Irish Rock ‘n’ Roll Museum in Dublin, show that Irish and History were his weakest subjects: he obtained an average of 42% and 57%, respectively, compared to 100% and 88% obtained in Algebra and Arithmetic. Despite these low grades, it is clear that, in the Irish struggle for freedom, Lynott recognized his own personal struggle as one of the few black children growing up in Dublin at this time. Many classmates recall that Lynott quickly developed a strong Dublin accent and seemed to become “*more Irish, more Dublin, more Southside* than those who had been born and raised there” (Thomson 22). At school, Lynott’s race was viewed more with “benign incomprehension” (Thomson 21) rather than hostility by his classmates. Pupils touched Lynott’s hair bemusedly or assumed he came from Africa, but according to Liam O’Conner, a former classmate, “there wasn’t any racism. We weren’t sophisticated enough to be threatened” (qtd. in Thomson 21). In a 1976 interview with Chris Salewicz for *New Musical Express*, Lynott would argue that his color was simply there like having “big ears.” Nonetheless, it remains apparent that for Lynott, immersing himself in Irish folklore offered him a means through which to lose his status as the ‘outsider’ and gain acceptance amongst his peers. According to Booth, Irishness became something that Lynott could hook on to, which “allowed him to have much deeper Irish roots than people might initially perceive from just looking at him” (qtd. in Thomson 137). This sense of Irishness also afforded Lynott with a certain symbolic power that protected him from any potential questions from others about his parentage.

This ‘Irishness’ became a key aspect of Thin Lizzy’s music, the band that he would go on to form in 1969 with Brian Downey and Eric Bell. Booth (qtd. in Thomson 138) claims that Lynott used Ireland to brand Thin Lizzy very cleverly before any other Irish musicians were really aware of the concept of branding. Although it is not the focus of this study, the artwork of Thin Lizzy’s album covers served as a major part of the band’s branding. Most of Thin Lizzy’s albums were designed by Jim Fitzpatrick, an Irish artist who is most famous for his two-tone portrait of Che Guevara. Fitzpatrick’s album covers were strongly influenced by the Irish Celtic tradition and feature ornamental spirals, triskelion patterns, and knotwork. On *The Vagabonds of the Western World* album, whose title is a clear reference to J.M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*, the three members of the band are even positioned as the three leaves of a shamrock, thus further augmenting Thin Lizzy’s connection to narratives of national culture.

Interestingly, throughout Thin Lizzy’s discography, Ireland recurs time and time again not as the traditional female who could be ‘courted’ or ‘wooed’ by the English, but instead as a masculine warrior who was born to fight and stand up for justice. O’Brien (84) has examined this tendency of linking Ireland with feminine imagery in fifteenth and seventeenth century poetry, as well as the politically-oriented writings of Patrick Pearse. He notes that most Elizabethan representations of Ireland portrayed the country as female because it emphasized its inherent weakness, thereby legitimizing the colonial relationship. While MacLaughlin (247) has argued that reconstructing or challenging traditional stereotypes of Ireland and its people was heavily tied up with nationalist views and state-centered ideologies, this was not Lynott’s intention. Instead, Lynott’s creation of a new type of Ireland enabled him to construct a personal (and indeed, corporate) identity that was masculine and powerful (Cullen 250). Like with other Irish musicians of the time, such as Horslips and Van Morrison, this identity enabled him to maintain a strong sense of his roots, while at the same time opening up his music to the broader international rock spectrum (McLaughlin and McLoone 184).

‘Eire’, which appeared on Thin Lizzy’s eponymous first album in 1971, is the earliest example of Lynott’s romanticization of Ireland. It tells the story of the high King Brian Boru who vanquished Viking invaders at Clontarf in 1014. It also makes reference to the heroism of Red O’Donnell and Hugh O’Neill, two Irish lords who fought against the English in the Nine Years War at the end of the 1500s. As Thomson (29) notes, both events were taught at the Christian Brothers’ School as heroic examples of the Irish struggle against foreign domination. In this song, Lynott portrays the Irish as united and differentiated from foreign invaders on the basis of linguistic identity. This was further emphasized in the original version of the song, whose final line, “The land is Eireann| The land is free,” was sung in Irish. However, it was changed into English by the record label, Decca, as they believed it would marginalize the market outside of Ireland. Prendergast notes that singing in Irish was risky in the 1970s because it was associated with nationalistic tendencies (89). He claims that the one exception was Clannad whose unique sound enabled them “to transcend these limitations.” According to Kiberd (124), the presence of an external ‘other’ was vital to the development of a unified form of Irish national identity. Although in ‘Eire’, the external ‘other’ is England, it could equally be argued that, as a black man, Lynott also risked being an ‘outlander’. Therefore, while for other Irish musicians, singing about Irish national heroes often had a political goal (e.g.

Horslips' *Táin* album), for Lynott, this goal was purely personal: it enabled him to embed himself in this rich past and make it his own history.

The theme of Irish heroism is taken up again in the song 'Emerald' from the 1976 *Jailbreak* album. The lyrics recite the story of Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army and the English conquest of Ireland, particularly the Sack of Wexford and the Siege of Drogheda in 1649. Throughout the song, Ireland is depicted as an emerald, which the English came to take "and without it they could not leave." The symbol of the emerald was first used by the poet William Drennan in his 1795 poem *When Erin First Rose*: "The Emerald of Europe | it sparkled and shone | in the ring of this world, the most precious stone." Much as Lynott's song does, Drennan's poem laments the violence wrought by forces loyal to the British crown and Ireland's struggle for freedom and independence. Thomson (30) claims that 'Emerald' is defined by a combination of the romantic and the dramatic. Through its blend of yearning, machismo, and bravado, it bears similarities to oral histories that were designed to be embellished every time that they were told. This amalgamation of traditional storytelling methods and bold attempts to rewrite Irish identity can be best heard in the infamous live version of 'Emerald' on the 1978 album *Live and Dangerous*. Lynott opens the song with the line, "Is there anybody here with any Irish in them? Is there any of the girls who'd like a bit more Irish in them?" In combining a historic tale of bravery with strong masculinity and the Irish 'gift of the gab', Lynott was able to embed himself in Celtic stereotypes, while simultaneously packaging his Irishness in his own unique way. This "hybridity" has been noted by McLaughlin and McLoone in their study of Van Morrison. They claimed that the geography of Morrison's mental landscape was so complex that, despite drawing upon Irish myths, he was able to avoid any questions about his political tendencies (186). Similarly, Lynott was able to build a cultural identity that did not raise any issues about its synonymy with Irish nationalism because he cleverly embedded these myths into his own rock and roll persona.

Perhaps the most conspicuous romanticization of Ireland is in Thin Lizzy's 1979 *Róisín Dubh (Black Rose): A Rock Legend*. The name of the song comes from the poetic symbol of the black rose, the 'dark Rosaleen', who was a female figure who personified Ireland in its time of need against its oppressors. The original *Dark Rosaleen*, written in 1846 by James Clarence Mangan, was one of Ireland's most political songs, albeit disguised as a love song, as nationalistic expression was outlawed in Ireland at this time: "Tis you shall have the golden throne | Tis you shall reign, and reign alone | My Dark Rosaleen!" In Thin Lizzy's 'Róisín Dubh', the ancient kings and queens of Ireland are mentioned, as well as Cúchulainn, an Irish mythological hero who was a warrior in the service of Conchobhar, king of Ulster. In addition to Irish historical figures, the song's guitar solo blends elements of traditional folk songs, such as 'Shenandoah', 'Wild Mountain Thyme', 'Danny Boy', and 'The Mason's Apron', while in the song's fade-out, Lynott references other classic Irish symbols (i.e., the Mountains of Mourne, Tipperary) and uses puns to allude to famous Irish people ("the Joy of Joyce | William Butler Yeats | Oscar, he's going Wilde | Brendan, where have you Behan? | George, he knows Best | Van is the Man").

Despite the fact that this song was released at the height of IRA trouble in Britain (this was the year of the Warrenpoint Ambush and Lord Mountbatten's assassination), the song cannot be read as nationalistic in nature. Indeed, it is possible that its assertion to "tell me the legends of long ago" was an attempt by Lynott to disassociate himself from the increasingly

negative perception of Ireland and return to a bygone and nostalgic age. Alternatively, it can be said that its overt Irish references, in fact, betray Lynott's concerns at not being considered truly Irish due to the color of his skin. This is particularly apparent in the penultimate line of the song when Lynott sings, "As Shaw Sean I was born and reared there." Equating himself with such famous Irishmen – George Bernard Shaw and Sean O'Faolain – makes it far less likely for anybody to dispute Lynott's claim that he is, indeed, truly Irish. Perhaps even more significantly, however, is the dual meaning of the 'black rose' as a national symbol of Ireland, but also as a metaphorical reference to Lynott himself. Indeed, Lynott's grave in St Fintan's Cemetery is marked "Go dtuga Dia suaimhneas da anam, an Róisín Dubh" (Go to God with peace in your soul, the Black Rose).

Nonetheless, although Lynott was often keen to demonstrate that he was Irish, he also cleverly played the color of his skin to his advantage as and when it suited him, particularly when it came to questions by interviewers on the Troubles. In a famous interview with Gay Byrne, Lynott is asked his thoughts on the situation in Northern Ireland to which he answers, "It was tough growing up a kid in the Catholic working-class Dublin of the '50s, but it was tougher still being the only black kid." When Byrne probes him by inquiring whether he would welcome a 32-county republic, he deflects the question by claiming generally, "We all seem to be Irish when we're away from Ireland" before emphasizing his own personal situation: "'When I'm in Ireland, I say I'm from Dublin. When I'm in Dublin, I say I'm from Crumlin. When I'm in Crumlin, I say I'm from Leighlin Road and when I'm in Leighlin Road, I say I'm a Lynott. So, it's that type of attitude..." In one final attempt, Byrne requests Lynott's thoughts on Gerry Adams (a prominent Irish republican who went on to become leader of Sinn Féin). Lynott simply replies, "I haven't heard too much of him." Fitzpatrick notes that Lynott "avoided modern Ireland like the plague" (qtd. in Thomson 137), which enabled him to identify only with an idealized image of the country that suited his needs. According to Brannigan (240), Lynott was able to do this successfully because his upbringing and appearance enabled him to be both "comfortably Irish and apparently free from the constraints of Irish society."

Although Lynott clearly tried to avoid any questions regarding the Troubles, Thin Lizzy were one of the few bands, along with Rory Gallagher's band, Taste, to continue playing in Northern Ireland throughout the 1970s. Despite the fact that many of their songs could be interpreted nationalistically, both bands never experienced any problems in unionist communities. It is possible that the presence of both Catholic and Protestant members, as well as multiracial and international members (in the case of Thin Lizzy), helped to abate any potential disturbances. Cullen (243) notes that Rory Gallagher was accepted by Protestants and Catholics because he maintained a distance from any provocative proclamations. Equally, Lynott did not overtly touch the issue of the Troubles in his songs – a purposeful strategy that allowed him to appeal to a wide and diverse rock audience in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Rolston (65) claims that few Irish rock groups referred directly to the Troubles and when they did, it was in the context of the pointlessness of conflict and war rather than political messages. This is apparent in two of Lynott's collaborations with Gary Moore that took place in 1985 – 'Military Man' and 'Out in the Fields'. In both songs, the Troubles are only touched upon superficially through such lyrics as "I don't know what I'm fighting for" and "Death is

just a heartbeat away.” The fact that Moore hailed from Belfast may account for Lynott’s engagement with the topic after years of deliberately shying away from it.<sup>1</sup>

When he was not singing about Irish heroism, Lynott often reflected on Ireland’s troubled history of exile and immigration. Again, this national history was strongly bound up with Lynott’s own personal history as a young boy who was sent alone to a foreign country. ‘Wild One’, an album track on Thin Lizzy’s 1975 album *Fighting*, tells the story of the Flight of the Wild Geese – the departure of 30,000 Irish soldiers who were forced to move to France following the treaty of Limerick in 1691, which brought an end to the Williamite War. The overarching themes of the song are loneliness and exile and at times, it is hard to distinguish between the voices of the soldiers and the voice of Lynott: “So you go your way wild one | I’ll try and follow | And if you change your mind | I will be waiting here for you tomorrow.” The ‘wild one’ can be interpreted as his mother, Philomena, who had Lynott out of wedlock with a black man and remained in England while he grew up in Ireland. According to Feighery (qtd. in Thomson 49), Lynott felt hard done by and had ambivalent feelings towards his mother. Lynott’s mother herself claims that their relationship was far more like brother and sister than mother and son due to their separation and that she found the answers to a lot of questions about their relationship when she listened to his music after his death (Putterford 20).

Another classic Thin Lizzy song about exile was ‘Fools Gold’, taken from the 1976 *Johnny the Fox* album. The song opens with Lynott telling the story of the Great Famine of the mid-1800s and the desperate stream of migration to America that ensued. The lyrics bear similarities to the famous poem *The Great Hunger* by Patrick Kavanagh, which maps the long-term emotional and psychological consequences of the Great Famine. What makes the opening of the song even more striking is the fact that it is spoken in an Irish accent. The use of the accent internalizes the experience for Lynott and makes the events of the nineteenth century remain relevant and important today. Rolston (54) claims that the popularity of many Irish artists is partly due to their ability to slot into a widespread definition of Irishness, whether that be mystical, spiritual, or historical. He cites U2, The Pogues, Enya, and Sinéad O’Connor as clear examples of this. By using his strong Irish accent to introduce an Irish tale of exile, Lynott arguably also fits this criteria. In a 1976 interview, Lynott stated that his choice to speak the lyrics was based on the fact that he wanted to set people straight who looked at him and wondered why a black man was singing about this situation (qtd. in Cullen 256). Therefore, for Lynott, this song has dual importance: it has international appeal due to its universal theme of exile that describes Ireland nostalgically, while simultaneously proving to critics that, despite his skin color, he was legitimately Irish.

The importance of accent as a sign of Irish identity was a core aspect of Lynott’s early music before Thin Lizzy were well-established. On 1971’s *New Day* EP, Lynott sings a song entitled ‘Dublin’, which makes reference to well-known local landmarks of the city (Grafton

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<sup>1</sup> The only exception is the 1977 Thin Lizzy song ‘Soldier of Fortune’, in which the lyric “as we march along singing just another soldier’s song” invokes the Irish Republic’s national anthem ‘Amhrán na bhFiann’, which translates into English as ‘the soldier’s song’. This song was typically dropped from their set in Northern Ireland. As a solo artist, Gary Moore did reference the Troubles in many of his songs including ‘After the War’ and ‘Wild Frontier’.

Street, Derby Square), as well as the lack of opportunities and money that lead him to leave eventually and move to London. This song is significant because Lynott makes use of a strong Dublin vernacular, thus associating himself not only with Ireland as a whole (like in 'Fools Gold'), but even more deeply with the city of Dublin. Lynott's childhood friend, Paul Scully, recalls that apart from songs like 'Molly Malone' and 'The Auld Triangle', nobody talked about Dublin, so to hear the city not only sung about, but sung in a strong Dublin accent, was an "amazing moment" for him (qtd. in Thomson 130). Writing about Van Morrison, Mulhern (187) argues that he showed that Protestants knew more than one way of singing about Belfast. Equally, Lynott demonstrated that Catholics knew more than one way of singing about Dublin. Throughout his life, Lynott would often speak affectionately about Dublin, claiming in a 1981 interview with Gay Byrne that he was a "real Dubliner" and got "terribly homesick" when he was away. This concept of homesickness is ubiquitously bound up with Ireland as a nation of emigrants, thus serving once again to emphasize Lynott's identity as a true Irishman.

No appraisal of Phil Lynott and Irishness would be complete without a brief look at one of Thin Lizzy's biggest hits 'Whiskey in the Jar'. 'Whiskey in the Jar' is a traditional Irish folk song that tells of a marauding highwayman who roamed the mountains of Southern Ireland and got arrested for robbing Captain Farrell. Thin Lizzy initially recorded the song as a joke in a rehearsal session, but the record company were so impressed that they released it as a single and it reached number six in the charts. Years later, Lynott claimed in an interview with *Titbits* that "the song has lived to haunt me," as it represented a type of Celtic folklore that he was keen to rewrite. While much of Lynott's work was rooted in Irish mythology, it constituted a form of hybridization in its contemporary rewritings of traditional Irish genres and themes. 'Whiskey in the Jar', on the other hand, conformed fully to stereotypes of Ireland as a country of folk music and showbands. Ultimately, Lynott wanted Thin Lizzy to recast Irish music so that in years to come when people asked 'what was Irish music in the 1970s and 1980s?', the answer was "Well, there was this geezer Phil Lynott" (qtd. in Thomson 30).

Lynott's experimentation with genres and themes is perhaps best recognized in 'Sitamoia', an unreleased track from the 1974 Peel sessions that was only unearthed in 2001 for the *Vagabonds, Kings, Warriors, Angels* boxset. While the legend goes that Lynott made up a Gaelic word so that they could say shit on television, his bandmates claim that the word derives from the Irish 'Si Do Mhaimeo' meaning 'wealthy widow'. Like 'Whiskey in the Jar', 'Si Do Mhaimeo' is another traditional folk song, this time about a rich old lady; however, this is where the similarities end. Lynott introduces new lyrics to 'Sitamoia' about children starving in Africa, while the line "hey mister, can I shine your shoes?" alludes to the stereotypical job that black people once had as boot polishers. A series of West African vocal chants are also introduced midway through the song, which are juxtaposed with traditional Celtic guitar playing. Although this song was not released at the time (perhaps due to its bold experimentation), it clearly portrays Lynott's conflict between his Irish and black identity and the way in which music was a device through which he attempted to synthesize them.

### **"Oh Lord, Come Save My Soul"**

For most children growing up in Ireland in the 1950s, Catholicism had a strong presence in their lives. The Roman Catholic Church was a dominant social agent and was central in the organisation and management of schools in the Irish Republic. The schools, run by the



Christian Brothers, were notorious for their use of corporal punishment with blackthorn sticks and leather straps. Biographers of Phil Lynott and Rory Gallagher (Thomson, Coghe) have reported both men being beaten by priests at school for playing what was considered to be the “devil’s music.” Despite the negative legacy of the Christian Brothers and Lynott’s rock and roll lifestyle, religion, nonetheless, played an important role in his life. Lynott attended mass every Sunday when he was back in Dublin and in a 1983 interview with Tony Clayton-Lea in *Hot Press*, he stated:

As I get older, I get more religious... I’d say it’s almost like being Irish and Catholic. Once you’re Irish and Catholic, you’re always Irish and Catholic. I think it’s in you. You can never disassociate yourself from it. You can acquire another accent, but it’ll always be there in your head. The rules that were beaten into me at school are ingrained. I still know when I commit a mortal or a venial sin, you know?

In his dissertation on the development of Irish rock music, Cullen looked extensively at the imagery and language of religion in Lynott’s songs. He notes that one of the most commonly reoccurring images is that of the Virgin Mary. On the 1974 album *Nightlife*, the song ‘She Knows’ draws strongly on the image of Mary as an archetypal mother figure and protector of the Catholic faith. Lyrics such as “Who’s going to help you when you feel you’ve had enough? | Mother Mary, this time it’s rough” portray Mary as a loving woman who can be called upon in times of desperation and helplessness. Tait (183) notes that the centrality of Mary as the celestial mother is a key aspect of certain modes of Irish artistic expression. However, her representation has changed over time. Tait claims that, while in the Middle Ages, Mary was the focus of distant veneration, by the nineteenth and twentieth century, Mary was seen as a patron of domestic life “whose strength lay in the ways she managed to incorporate the concerns and interests of the various sections of the Catholic community” (183). When viewed within this context, ‘She Knows’ acquires an additional meaning: rather than simply reflecting Lynott’s adoration of Mary, it also represents his relationship with his own mother, Philomena, and his need to ask her whether she will be there for him when he needs her. Even in adulthood, Lynott’s insecurity about his upbringing was at the forefront of his mind.

‘Spirit Slips Away’ from the 1975 *Fighting* album is another song in which Lynott deals with religious themes. The lyrics tell the story of a man on his deathbed who is experiencing the ebbing of life and sees an angelic presence guiding him to heaven. Cullen (260) asserts that this song recalls the language of Irish blessings in terms of its meter and structure, as well as the notion of celestial assistance in times of need. As a regular churchgoer, Lynott would have been familiar with this tradition. In this song, Lynott appears to allude to a deep essence of Irishness that is ideologically conservative, while marking difference through what McLaughlin and McLoone (182) call the “strategic mobilization” of aspects of this Irishness in order to create a unique identity within the global landscape of the rock world. Just like the attempt with ‘Sitamoia’ to harmonize his black and Irish roots, this hybridization of Catholicism and rock served to synthesize one another in a bid to, as Lynott’s wife Caroline Crowther later stated, “maintain his own moral compass that perhaps didn’t quite conform to the tenets of the religion” (qtd. in Thomson 346).

This blending of Catholic liturgy and rock music occurs again on the 1977 album *Bad Reputation*. In ‘Downtown Sundown’, religious imagery is heavily used to explore Lynott’s relationship with God: “If you climb the mountain, you will see | there is no great distance between the Lord and me,” while ‘Dear Lord’ acts as a confessional, which Cullen (261) claims is essentially “a prayer set to music.” Unlike the previous songs, ‘Dear Lord’ is written in the first person and suggests that Lynott is the person asking God to save his soul, give him dignity and restore his sanity. This was a time in which Lynott had started to become a heavy user of drugs and arguably, ‘Dear Lord’ served as a quiet cry for help that could be hidden behind a musical veneer. Similar ‘cries for help’ have been noted in the songs of other troubled singers, such as Amy Winehouse (‘Rehab’) and Freddie Mercury (‘The Show Must Go On’). Mulrooney claims that the confessional style is a key literary device in Irish writing, particularly in the work of James Joyce and Brendan Behan – both famous Dubliners. Cullen (263) states that it is bittersweet that the fate of Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist* resonates with Lynott’s own experience as recounted in ‘Dear Lord’: both face “a rather sad Icarian end” (Mulrooney 166).

### **“I’m a Little Black Boy, I Just Play My Bass”**

When asked who his greatest inspiration was, Lynott always cited Jimi Hendrix. In a 1981 interview with Gay Byrne, Lynott claimed that Hendrix “showed to me that a black fella could be the front of a band and be completely respected for what he did.” A previously unreleased Thin Lizzy song entitled ‘Song for Jimi’ was issued on the 2001 *Vagabonds, Kings, Warriors, Angels* boxset and outlines the influence that Hendrix had on Lynott. He talks about the two of them being “brothers” who are “stone free” – a reference to both the title of a Hendrix song and the fact that they are free from the shackles of slavery that many of their forebearers would have suffered.

Despite the seeming incompatibility between being black and Irish, Onkey (162) claims that black people and Irish people share an alliance through the fact that both groups have an authentic identity distinct from a dominant culture. She goes on to argue that many Irish people use blackness to legitimize a link with African Americans in terms of suffering. Indeed, one of the most famous quotes on the matter comes from Alan Parker’s film *The Commitments*: “Don’t you know the Irish are the blacks of Europe?” alluding to the fact that they have often been the subject of widespread discrimination. In the case of Phil Lynott, however, being black and Irish meant that this discrimination was doubly real. For this reason, he generally preferred to play down his black identity in his songs with Thin Lizzy. After Lynott’s death, however, his newly acquired status as a national treasure meant that being black and Irish came to be seen by others as congruous. This was consolidated by Gary Moore’s tribute song to Lynott, ‘Blood of Emeralds’, which refers to him as “the darkest son of Ireland,” thus showing how both aspects of his identity were compatible.

In the scant cases when Lynott did explore his black identity, these explorations tended to draw upon Hollywood portrayals and gang culture, such as ‘Johnny the Fox Meets Jimmy the Weed’, which talks about shady deals taking place in ghettos where “only black men go.” Growing up in Dublin in the 1950s, Lynott had very little exposure to any form of black culture, which meant that most of his depictions tend to involve such Hollywood stereotypes. This is perhaps most apparent in ‘Black Boys on the Corner’, the unusual choice for a B-side to

‘Whiskey in the Jar’. The song opens with the spoken line “Whatcha doin’, maaan?” in an overexaggerated black patois. Like the use of an Irish accent in ‘Fools Gold’ and ‘Dublin’, this accent serves to set the scene for the song and orient the listener; however, as Lynott had no personal experience with black culture, the song can be viewed as a failed attempt to connect with something of which he was never really part. This is further exemplified by the portrayal of black men doing nothing but shooting pool and rolling dice – something that would certainly not have been witnessed first-hand by Lynott in 1950s Dublin. Although Thomson (142) believes that Lynott wrote the song as an “expedient land grab for the fashionable Blaxploitation market,” it is clear that some of the lyrics were undoubtedly personal: “I’m a little black boy and I don’t know my place.” This switch to the first person when singing this line outlines Lynott’s experience of arriving in Ireland and feeling like an outsider. Much of the song’s reported speech also seems to reflect Lynott’s ‘hard man’ attitude when asked about his race: “I need none of your pity”; “people been putting me down | I’m so tired I’m yawning.” Ultimately, as Brannigan (242) claims, the song seems to be more about expressing a connection rather than a belonging. With limited personal knowledge of black culture, Lynott saw himself obliged to adopt an image of black people that was specifically cross-cultural and transnational.

‘Fight or Fall’, an album track from 1976’s *Jailbreak* is another song that Lynott uses to express solidarity with his ‘black brothers’, but like ‘Black Boys on the Corner’, it is apparent that he is not sure where to align himself with his black heritage. Fellow band member Scott Gorham (qtd. in Thomson 205) believes that Lynott was neither proud nor not proud of being black; it was just part of him. Similarly, in interviews, Lynott himself often referred to “his brothers”, but in a manner of a man outside the circle of conversation trying to find a suitable entry point. In a 1976 interview with Chris Salewicz, he claimed that his cause was “more the half-caste cause.” He even went so far as to record a song around the same time entitled ‘Half-Caste’ as a B-side to ‘Rosalie’. ‘Half-Caste’ outlines the tale of a boy who cannot get along with his black girlfriend because he is not considered black enough, yet he does not satisfy the middle-class white girl because her father thinks “the brown boy is born to serve.” Although fictional, this song demonstrates some of the obstacles that Lynott faced when trying to align himself wholly to any one community or being accepted in return. This may be why he always felt most comfortable defining himself as “an Irishman first, black second” (Clayton-Lea).

Later in his career, Lynott began to explore his black identity further through different styles of music. This is most apparent on his two solo albums (1980’s *Solo in Soho* and 1982’s *The Philip Lynott Album*), which favored typically black genres of music, such as blues and soul. Brian Downey and Midge Ure (qtd. in Thomson 280) claim that Lynott also started to socialize more frequently with black people at this time, his first solo tour consisting of an all-black band. ‘Ode to a Black Man’, for example, released in 1980, positions Lynott as a “bad black boy” and references many other famous black people, such as Stevie Wonder, Martin Luther King, Muhammad Ali, Bob Marley, Jimi Hendrix, Malcolm X, Robert Mugabe, and Haile Selassie. The song also emphasizes the fact that “there are people in the town that could never understand a black man,” perhaps alluding to some of the discrimination that Lynott faced when he was growing up. Thomson (23) reports that as a young man in Dublin, often, taxi drivers tried to overcharge him, children pointed at him, and some clubs banned him from entering. On the whole, however, Lynott dealt with his black identity with humor, which

Vaillant believes is a coping mechanism used by many in the face of insecurity. Lynott joked that he “had a beauty spot all over” (Thomson 23) and when told once that he was not very black, he wittily replied, “Well, I can’t be grooving around South Africa, can I?” (Thomson 280). He also often humorously referred to himself as “the darkie in the middle” who had “rhydym” (Salewicz).

### **“He Was a Playboy of the Western World”**

As if growing up in 1950s Dublin as a black boy was not hard enough, Lynott had to face the fact that he was illegitimate too. Lynott’s mother did not provide him with any concrete details about his paternity; he was only drip-fed information over time. As a child, Lynott did not even know his father’s name and simply referred to him as “a big black bastard” (Thomson 52) when asked. Typical of Lynott’s sense of irony, this reference is also somewhat tongue in cheek and had Irish connotations in slang: ‘black and tan’ referring to both an alcohol drink made of Guinness and pale ale, and the British paramilitary force formed to suppress the Irish independence movement in the 1920s.

Throughout Lynott’s early career, the figure of the orphan, which he saw himself as, appears time and time again. It is no coincidence that his first band was called *The Orphanage* and one of Thin Lizzy’s earliest songs was entitled ‘Shades of a Blue Orphanage’. Thin Lizzy’s third album, *Vagabonds of the Western World*, features a poignant message on its back cover that encapsulates Lynott’s personal feelings toward his illegitimate status: “it is written from that day to this, all male descendants of the fatherless child are blessed in the art of love, to win the heart of any, but cursed never to be in love, or they will grow old and wither.” Even at the pinnacle of his fame, Lynott never stopped thinking of himself as a solitary ‘bastard child’ who wandered the world alone.

Lacking any hardened facts about his father, Lynott gradually started to form his own romanticized portrait of him as a Brazilian or Caribbean tap dancer who had an easy way with women or a mysterious gypsy from afar. This portrayal is apparent on the title track from *Vagabonds of the Western World*, which offers a fictionalized autobiography of Lynott’s father. The narrative talks about a roving traveler who romances many women: “He gave a girl a baby boy | He said “this child is my pride and joy” | “I’m busy running wild and free” | “Make sure he grows up like me” | And I’m a vagabond.” In providing a back story for his father, Lynott is looking to understand his own heritage, while simultaneously justifying his own reputation as a Lothario simply because he is his ‘father’s son’. By the close of the song, Lynott’s own story mixes with that of his father’s, as he refers to the protagonist as “the son of a gypsy” who “wore an earring in his left ear” (Lynott always wore a gypsy earring in his left ear). The gypsy reference may also be inspired by Lynott’s love of Jimi Hendrix. Nomadism was a key theme of Hendrix’s music (e.g. *Band of Gypsies*), which Gilroy (94) claims offered him an escape from the difficulties of negotiating his black identity and helped him to rationalize his ambivalence towards being black and American. Prior to the release of *Vagabonds of the Western World*, there were rumors in the press that Lynott had fathered a child. This may have also been at the forefront of his mind when writing about the vagabond protagonist of the song who takes no parental responsibilities for his actions. Parenthood is, in fact, a key theme of the

entire album, with songs like ‘Little Girl in Bloom’ talking about a ‘secret’ that “a girl carries in her womb.”<sup>2</sup>

The year after the album’s release in 1974, Lynott made a life-changing discovery: his father was Cecil Parris, a Guyanese man who now runs a hat stall in Shepherd’s Bush Market, London. They agreed to meet at the BBC Studios in Maida Vale where Thin Lizzy were recording a radio session for John Peel. Lynott’s bandmate, Scott Gorham, recalls that Lynott was not happy about meeting him. “He said to me, ‘Whatever you do, don’t leave me alone with this guy’” (qtd. in Thomson 219). When Parris arrived, Lynott spent just ten minutes with him. Fitzpatrick notes that Lynott seemed “totally nonplussed” (qtd. in Thomson 220) about the meeting and was not forthcoming in revealing any details about it. “He never said anything more about his father. Never spoke about it,” says producer Chris Tsangarides, reflecting on the meeting (qtd. in Thomson 221).

Despite his silence, it is clear that Lynott’s meeting with his father had an impact on him, as there is a noticeable shift in his song-writing at this time, with an increasing focus on the American Old West. The Irish fascination with the Wild West has been well-documented by numerous researchers (Gibbons, McBride and Flynn). In fact, it is claimed that the cowboys and Indians dichotomy reaffirmed many mythological systems that Irish children would have encountered at school: the Catholic/Protestant narratives, violent heroism, defiant individualism, and the hegemony of nationalist blood sacrifice (Cullen 319). The cowboy was often viewed in a similar vein as St Patrick or Jesus, or indeed the Irish nationalists, martyring himself for the wellbeing of others. Seen in this light, Lynott’s interest in the Wild West can be better understood. More significantly, however, for Lynott, the Wild West was a place of individualism where everyone was a lonesome outlaw that did not have to depend on anyone else for survival. Cullen (316) claims that in the Wild West, Lynott recognized the Gaelic concept of ‘Tír na nÓg’ (Land of Youth) – a mysterious realm that was free from trouble and where there was only happiness and beauty. Furthermore, Lynott saw himself in the image of the cowboy. By recasting himself as a controversial outsider who is disconnected from society, Lynott could protect himself from his inner identity as the orphan child. Kaulingfreks *et al.* claim that the cowboy’s lifestyle meant that he was able to avoid the Hobbesian fate – something that Lynott saw as appealing. This transition was visually represented in the album cover art for Thin Lizzy’s next album *Nightlife*, which shows Lynott as a lone black panther on a rock poised above a city landscape.

Shortly after his meeting with Cecil Parris, Thin Lizzy recorded a number of Wild West songs that reflect Lynott’s move away from any association with his father: ‘The Cowboy Song’ (“set me free | the cowboy’s life is the life for me”), ‘Southbound’ (“Tumbling with the tumbleweed | Down the open road | Taking only what I need | Before my head explodes”) and ‘Here I Go Again’ (“we were like the lonesome outlaws | We would go which way the wind did blow”). The promotional adverts for ‘Showdown’ even show Lynott in cowboy apparel walking through a town with a pistol in his hand. Lynott also turned more towards the Wild West instead of Ireland when exploring historical events. ‘Massacre’, for example, tells the

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<sup>2</sup> In 2010, it was revealed that Lynott, indeed, did have a son in 1968 who was immediately given up for adoption. Thus, ironically, Macdaragh Lambe, as his son is known today, suffered many of the same anxieties and resentment that Lynott himself had faced towards his own father.

story of the fights between cowboys and Indians that took place on the American plains in the nineteenth century, while ‘Genocide’ refers to the destruction of the buffalo in America. When asked in 1980 by DJ Dave Fanning about this change of theme, Lynott simply claimed that he was “getting off that kick” of Ireland now and wanted to explore new subject matter, but deep down, it was also an attempt to carve yet another new identity for himself, one that depended less on other people and more on himself.

The last reference that Lynott made to his father was in his 1979 duet with Gary Moore, ‘Parisienne Walkways’. The opening line “I remember Paris back in ‘49” alludes to the year in which Lynott was born. According to Buskin, the line as it appeared on the original sheet music was “I remember Paris in the fall tonight,” but Lynott changed it to lament for the father who was not there for him when he was a child. Near the end of his life, Lynott wrote a follow-up song entitled ‘Blue Parris’, which was more explicitly about his father, but Byrne (278) states that its bleak nature rendered it to the cutting room floor. For all his front as a hard man, Lynott never got over his relationship, or lack thereof, with his father. Although different in nature, the characters of the orphan and the cowboy were both sources of protectionism that Lynott could hide behind and mask his true fragility. This fragility can partly explain why he embraced the rockstar lifestyle so wholeheartedly. As he once explained in a 1983 interview with Tim Clayton-Lea, “I’m black, I’m Irish, and I’m a bastard. If I don’t make it as a singer, I’m never gonna make it.”

### **“I Am Your Main Man If You’re Looking for Trouble”**

To many people, Phil Lynott was the ultimate rocker, with his leather trousers, studded wristbands, and Valentino moustache. However, for those who knew the real Lynott, this was a persona that served to mask his true insecurity. Thin Lizzy’s manager, Ted Carroll, notes that, in the early days, Lynott was “a shoe-gazer,” too nervous to make any eye contact or connection with the audience (qtd. in Thomson 128), while producer, John Alcock, describes Lynott as “quiet, reserved, and very polite” (qtd. in Thomson 202) off stage. As he became more successful, Lynott began to play up to the image that was expected of him. Soon, the rock and roll was accompanied by sex and drugs, starting with the odd spliff but ending with devastating heroin and cocaine addiction. Lynott once admitted that rock was “just a game” (qtd. in Thomson 244) to him; however, he increasingly could no longer seem to separate the ‘Philip Lynott’ that everyone knew to the ‘Phil Lynott’, who was a womanizing drug abuser.

This image is most apparent in ‘The Rocker’, a successful hit from 1973’s *Vagabonds of the Western World*, which represents the new direction in which Thin Lizzy were heading. The song’s iconography is sex, violence, and motorbikes and Lynott talks about himself in the first person as the “main man if you're looking for trouble.” Carr notes that ‘The Rocker’ “presented a vision of the quintessential rock star, which Lynott would find himself increasingly striving to live up to” (qtd. in Thomson 162). Even his stage presence changed at this time: he began to stand in a crouching position with his legs wide apart and installed a shiny chrome scratchplate on his bass to shine into the eyes of attractive women that he saw in the audience (Putterford 71).

Thin Lizzy’s biggest hit ‘The Boys are Back in Town’, released in 1976, is perhaps the clearest example of Lynott’s new persona. The man who once sung about having “a happy home, a hand to hold, a land to roam” (‘Honesty is No Excuse’) was now talking about

brawling, getting drunk, and fooling around. Thomson (198) claims that it captured the gung-ho spirit that enabled the band to celebrate the macho code of ethics. Through lines like “remember that time down at Johnny’s place,” Lynott was able to form a connection with the audience, making the experience a communal one, which Thomson (198) believes heightened and exploited Thin Lizzy’s realm of folklore. Thus, although the Celtic influence may be much less obvious than with earlier songs, an element of it remains in the elaborate retelling of a story.

There are a number of other songs from the period that also recount Lynott’s new bad boy lifestyle, such as ‘Jailbreak’, ‘Bad Reputation’, ‘Johnny’, ‘Ballad of a Hard Man’, and ‘Fighting’, which all focus heavily on stereotypical manly domains (i.e., prison, ghettos, fast cars) and pursuits (i.e., theft, fights, guns). Later songs like ‘Killer on the Loose’ and ‘Thunder and Lightning’ also focus on this ‘dark’ side of crime and illicit activities. With the exception of drug abuse, Lynott had not been involved in any altercations with the police. Therefore, the majority of these experiences were drawn from films or newspaper reports, even if he played up the fact that all of these events were indeed autobiographical. The autobiographical character of ‘Johnny’ in particular was a recurring one, appearing in songs throughout Lynott’s career. Lynott himself called his rock persona ‘Johnny Cool’ in reference to his seeming self-assurance and confidence, as well as the eponymous mafioso in the 1963 neo noir crime film.<sup>3</sup>

As Lynott’s drug abuse moved from recreational use to heavy addiction, his songs also began to become increasingly oriented towards this theme. ‘Warriors’ from the 1976 *Jailbreak* album was written in the third person, yet can be viewed in hindsight as largely autobiographical. Although Lynott told Salewicz that he wrote the song about heavy drug takers (“people like Hendrix and Duane Allman” who lived fast and died young), he failed to recognize, or perhaps knowingly ignored, the fact that he would also become one of them. ‘Opium Trail’ on the follow-up album *Bad Reputation* is another song full of open drug references. It talks about the effects of addiction and what it does to a person (“it clears your pain | but it’s got you claimed”). In a 1977 interview with Pete Makowski, Lynott claimed that ‘Opium Trail’ was actually an anti-drugs song that he wrote to make people aware that “you can flirt around with these sorts of things but eventually they’ll trap you.” Lynott’s manager, Ted Carroll, however, believes that Lynott was trying to tell him something and that he was perhaps experiencing some kind of internal conflict (cited in Thomson 236).

The most explicit song on drug abuse came when Lynott’s habit was at its worse. ‘Got to Give It Up’, which appeared on the 1978 *Black Rose* album, is the first song to talk in the first person about drug and alcohol addiction and heavily blurred the lines between fact and fiction. The song seems to be an overt cry for help, as Lynott warns that he has “been messing with the heavy stuff,” is “sinking slow” and has “lost control.” Sound engineer, Kit Woolven, notes that when Lynott sang ‘Got to Give It Up’, he did so with a joint in one hand and a brandy in the other, snorting cocaine between takes (qtd. in Thomson 272). When asked about the song by journalist Harry Doherty, Lynott claimed that “I don’t condone drugs, but I know why artists take drugs. To go to the edge. And if you go to the edge, you must be prepared to fall off.” This was the closest he had ever come to admitting that he had a problem. The two follow-up songs ‘Chinatown’ and ‘Sugar Blues’ also toyed with this drug theme. Fitzpatrick claims that

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<sup>3</sup> Gary Moore’s 1989 song ‘Johnny Boy’ was, in fact, written about the life of Phil Lynott.

Lynott's lyrics "deteriorated horrendously" (qtd. in Thomson 290) at this time, as drugs were affecting the connections that his mind made. They had also begun to change his character and make him more inconsiderate and bad-mannered.

In addition to the fabricated crime and the very real drug abuse, Lynott introduced the third element of the rock and roll equation into his songs: women. In songs like 'Don't Believe a Word' and 'Romeo and the Lonely Girl', Lynott openly wore his heart on his sleeve and declared himself as a ladies' man who was not to be trusted. Nicknamed "Philip Line-'em up" by the road crew due to his habit of womanizing, Lynott boasted to Makowski in a 1976 interview, "Sometimes I'm real brutal with chicks, just go after them, get what I want, and see you later. Everything I do and say is to get what I want." This attitude is summed up in the immortal line in 'Jailbreak': "hey you, good looking female | come here." "Phil was a guy of multiple personalities," Scott Gorham claims. "On the one hand, he was that hard guy from the songs, but on the other, he was a real gentle guy too (qtd. in Thomson 190). The problem was that, as Lynott became more famous, he found it increasingly difficult to distinguish between his on and offstage persona.

Other lyrics seem to reflect Lynott's fashion consciousness and sharp dressing: "A new suit, pretty boots to boot | Gonna go to town, look around and pull a chick." Fitzpatrick notes that Lynott "would promenade up and down Grafton Street in kaftans, white mackintoshes, suits, full-length leather coats, patterned woolen jumpers, sunglasses, and even ladies' boots with high heels. He loved the attention" (qtd. in Thomson 64). While it was clear that women adored Lynott (Frank Murray brazenly claims that "if shagging was a sport then he would have been Ronaldo"), Gary Moore believes that all this womanizing simply served to hide Lynott's insecurity (qtd. in Thomson 76): he used women to replace the void in his life left by his father and feared getting too close to any of them in case they hurt him. However, this all changed (or at least on the surface) when he met Caroline Crowther in 1977.

### **"When You Came in My Life, You Changed My World"**

Meeting Caroline Crowther, the daughter of British comedian Leslie Crowther, seemed to remind Lynott temporarily of his softer side, the way he once was before fame and glamor had come into his life. In 1978, they had a child together – Sarah – followed by Cathleen two years later. The couple would also marry at St Elizabeth of Portugal Catholic Church in Richmond that same year. While Lynott claimed in a 1981 interview with Gay Byrne that marriage had made him faithful to one woman, Thin Lizzy's co-manager Chris Morrison claims that Lynott moved his wife and children to Ireland so that "he could get laid by every woman he met in London" (Ling).

Whatever the truth about his infidelity, it was apparent that Lynott was devoted to his two daughters. The hit song 'Sarah' was written especially upon the birth of his daughter in 1978, while the lesser known 'Cathleen' was recorded for his second solo album in 1982. He also recorded the solo song 'A Child's Lullaby' around the same time. These three songs show a different side to Lynott, as he sings such lyrics as "you are all I need to live | My love to you I'll give," "she is a beautiful Irish girl" and "Please don't be sad my baby girl | Your daddy is here with you," which could not be more in contrast with the rockstar image that he represented. Having children had made Lynott more protective and intolerant of injustice: "it is making me



twice as quick to go off the mark with the temper, as well as making me very soppy,” he claimed in a 1980 interview with Paul Du Noyer.

However, the reality was that sopiness and sentimentality was nothing new for Lynott. Many of Thin Lizzy’s early songs did carry this edge to them, but it had become lost along the way amongst the rockstar persona. For example, before the version of ‘Sarah’ written for his daughter, Lynott recorded a tender piano ballad in 1972 for his grandmother entitled ‘Sarah’. The song included a pun on the family name: “Never told no lies | he loved Sarah.” Similarly, in 1974, Lynott released the song ‘Philomena’ for his mother, which takes an epistolary format as he writes home to tell her that he is keeping fine and that he loves her. Early songs also reference his then-girlfriend Gale Claydon who hailed from Northern Ireland in both apparent (“somewhere from the North, this gale I knew just blew in” – ‘Look What the Wind Blew in’) and subtle ways (“you are my life, my everything, you're all I have” – ‘A Song for While I’m Away’).

Considering these early song lyrics, it is no hyperbole to describe Lynott, or at least one of his personas, as a poet. As Thomson (180) reflects:

There was an innate refinement to Lynott’s thought process, to his imagination and expressive instincts, which was evident not just in the way he shaped words and phrases, but in his intelligence, his organizational skills, his wit and leadership qualities. These were natural gifts which he exploited, but his songs also drew from an intellectual curiosity not always evident in the non-negotiable trappings of being a rock star.

In his lifetime, Lynott published two poetry books (*Songs for While I’m Away* and *Philip*) and worked on ideas for thirteen short stories throughout the 1970s. When asked by Chris Salewicz in a 1976 interview what he was most proud of, he gave the publication of his poetry as the answer. Underneath his rockstar image, the Celtic poet was still embedded (most notable in later years in his turn to folk music with the band Clann Éadair); the problem was that it was now becoming increasingly harder to unearth it. In a lost solo recording from 1981, ‘Somebody Else’s Dream’, Lynott sings “Who do you think you are? | Are you a poet, a lover, a father, a rock and roll star? | As silly as it seems, I’m so tired of living out somebody else’s dream.” Sadly, in the end, the rockstar won out.

By the time of his death on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1986, Thin Lizzy had broken up, Lynott had become estranged from his wife and children, and he was a heavy drug user living alone in Kew, London. Thomson (336) argues that Lynott’s transformation can be best viewed when comparing the lyrics of his first (‘The Friendly Ranger at Clontarf Castle’) and last (‘Nineteen’) songs. ‘The Friendly Ranger’ is essentially a poem about Ireland set to music, full of meter, rhyme, and word sounds, while ‘Nineteen’ is a repetitive machoistic chant about being “mean,” “bad,” and “tough”. Like the protagonist in the eponymous track on the 1981 *Renegade* album, Lynott was “a boy who had lost his way,” “a man who did not fit,” but he was “a king when he was on his own.”

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Phil Lynott started life as an illegitimate black boy growing up in a working-class, Catholic district of Dublin; he ended it as an international rockstar who was revered the world over for

his talent, good looks, and charm. Despite all of his success, for his entire life, Lynott remained that insecure child searching for a place to belong. It was this search that led him to rock and roll in the first place as, in his words, it allowed “anybody to be anybody” (qtd. in Thomson 44). Through rock music, Lynott could be a hard man, a confident Lothario, and a rebellious lone wolf, while at the same time emphasizing his Irishness and, more specifically, his ‘Dublinness’. While some listeners or record buyers may not have been aware that Lynott was black (or Irish, for that matter), they equally empathized with his music, as it epitomized freedom through its eclectic imagery of cowboys, comic-book heroes, gigolos, rakes, romantics, hard men, and old softies (Kelly, 48). This almost postmodernist assortment of characters and themes gave Lynott a poetic license to live many different lives filled with adventures and perils, tensions and contradictions, rises and falls. He once told Harry Doherty that, “When we die a death, I’m only the bass player.” This could not be further from the truth. In death, just as in life, Phil Lynott was anything he wanted to be.

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