

Roesy starts to show his true colours



Roesy – Alan Roe from Birr – has dragged himself out of a musical rut. He wanted to make a bit of noise, he tells Tony Clayton-Lea

One must never, it now seems clear, write an artist off. Just because they have made one or two pieces of work – or even a series – that one considers not up to scratch, there is always a chance, slim though it might be, that they will eventually come up with the goods. Offaly singer-songwriter Roesy (real name Alan Roe) is a case in point.

For more than five years, Roesy has been trying to make a name for himself in the over-subscribed world of Irish singer-songwriters. Albums such as *Sketch the Day*, *Paint the Night* (2001), *Live at the Spirit Store* (2003), and *Only Love is Real* (2004) found a small audience, but never threatened to cross over from their introverted status to something that could be embraced by the likes of me, you and the postman. With these records (self-financed on his own Blue Cloak Records label) you felt Roesy was never going to amount to anything more than a footnote; you knew there was never going to be a Damien Rice “thing” about to take place – the songs were competent, workmanlike, decent, nothing to get too excited about.

Interestingly, Roesy felt the same way. “I had started to notice that

small shows – the one man and his guitar thing – weren’t working for me any more. I’d get restless at gigs, and in my own music I felt I was getting tired. I didn’t do a lot of gigs around that time, because I stopped when I noticed my own lack of interest. I can’t pinpoint the actual gig, but it was after one in particular when myself and the piano player were in the car, driving back, and we just looked at each other and kinda shrugged.

“We’d been belting at it for a couple of years by this stage – it was brilliant, don’t get me wrong, and it was where I was at – but after that gig I knew I wanted to get going at something bigger, I really wanted to start making a bit of noise. I was ready for it, simple as that.”

The result of such self-examination is Roesy’s new album, *Colour Me Colourful*, which is so good it had this writer checking to see if, by mistake, someone else’s record had been slipped into the CD player.

It helps that it isn’t self-produced, and it helps that the songs are a decided step up in quality from what he has written before. It also helps that Autamata’s Ken McHugh produces, and that added textures and sonic sprinkles come from

an array of musicians and singers (including Autamata’s Carol Keogh, and Maria Doyle Kennedy).

What helps most of all is that Roesy has shoehorned his way out of a corner from which there seemed to be no escape. It’s been a long time coming for the 30-year-old Birr native. He left Ireland in his teens with a few dreams and a guitar he couldn’t play. He recalls sitting on a bus to Denmark, with a how-to-learn-guitar book sitting on his lap, trying to get to grips with a Paul Simon song. “At the start,” he says, “guitar playing

Roesy future. Photograph by David Sleanor



was a means to an end – to carry my voice and lyrics.”

The interim period is a bit of a blur – hard work, practising his guitar technique, trying to make it as a singer-songwriter. Not a lot of thanks for a considerable amount of effort. There was a point when he considered quitting music for his second passion – visual art (his paintings sell from between €400 to €3,000; his debut exhibition in 2003, at Dublin’s Cross Gallery, sold out in jig time).

And then there came a point when he thought he’d be better off not doing anything artistic at all. But art, he claims, is a vocation; you can no sooner desert it than stop breathing. “I tried to walk away from it all on three occasions,” he admits. “The funniest stand-down was in Holland – I was in an internet cafe, about to come home, and I was on the web looking up courses in floral arranging. I was thinking that florists must have a great time! Ultimately, I suppose I knew that I had to move on, or the career had to. It’s been a good few years now that I’ve been drilling away; it’s all

been self-financed, with the usual headaches and upsets. Even health wise there is only a certain amount of stuff you can do. If the album does good, then fine. If it doesn’t, well, I still think I have a great record.”

His life is, he says, something of a free one, but it’s all down to choice.

“I have done without on a lot of levels in the past couple of years. There have been some awful, awful times – bills coming in the door and you wondering how they’re going to be paid.”

So you start looking at what you do and you question the life you lead? He agrees. “I’ve had to go out and do various nixers for a month or more just to pay bills. The most bizarre nixer was laying down hemp insulation. And then I was French polishing furniture for a while – I had no more a clue about that than the man in the moon. But bills have to be paid, so you just get on with it. Giggling helps, of course – every week if I had to.

“And I’ve been blessed, really, that whenever some shit hits the fan a commission for a painting will come in. Something happens to make it better, and in that way I believe that what I do actually is a calling, that it’ll work itself out – especially if you work hard at it.”

◆ *Colour Me Colourful* is on N4 Records. Roesy plays *Whelan’s*, Dublin, Mar 23, 31 and Apr 7; *Half Moon*, Cork, Mar 25 and 26; *Róisín Dubh*, Galway, Mar 27 and 28, and *Dolan’s*, Limerick, Apr 1

◆ Aidan Dunne’s visual arts column returns next week

