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The greatest Irish music of 2014 (VIDEOS)

Mike Farragher | @brainonshamrox | December 29, 2014 | 01:08 AM

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Another great year for our culture, with the artists scoring high on the pop charts and in listeners' hearts.

Photo by: Irish Voice

This past year saw us saying hello to old friends we haven't seen in a while like Damien Rice, while waving goodbye at a rip-roaring Irish wake for the mighty Black 47.

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It was another great year for our culture, with the artists scoring high on the pop charts and in listeners' hearts.

Here is a list of the best things I heard all year.

This is a bittersweet list for me to create this year, as it represents the last one I will file as a weekly columnist for the Irish Voice and IrishCentral.com after 18 years.

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I want to thank you for reading this column, whether I inspired you to check out a new sound or if you considered my work irrefutable proof that I'm a right eejit.

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GAY VETS FOR BOSTON MARCH
 The organizing committee of the Boston St. Patrick's Day parade voted to allow a gay group of veterans to march under their own banner in next year's event. Mayor Marty Walsh applauded the move, but other gay groups remain skeptical. Page 4
 THE YEAR'S BEST AND WORST!
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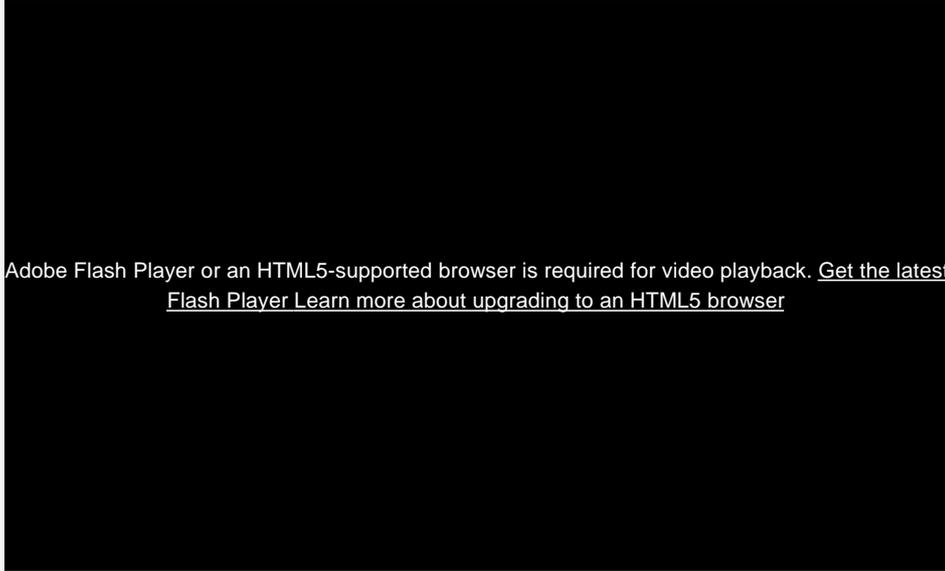
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It's been an honor to be part of this conversation on our culture and I'm looking forward to dropping by on these pages again when the spirit moves me. My best to all of you for the 2015. I hope some of these songs become the soundtrack to the New Year of your dreams!

Damien Rice: My Favourite Faded Fantasy

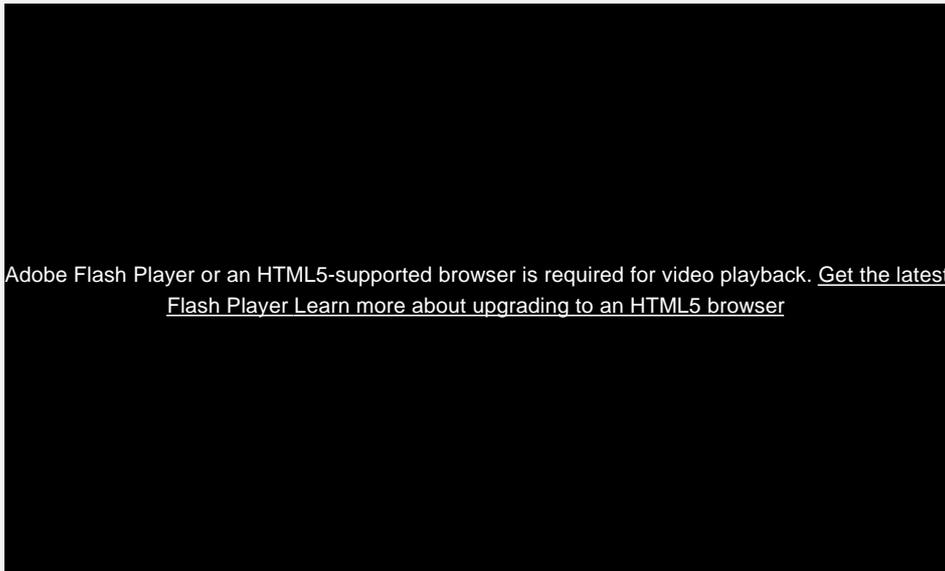


This is Rice's first collection of material in eight years and it was produced by Rick Rubin and Rice. Rubin is a fitting choice as he has resuscitated the careers of Johnny Cash and Tom Petty with milestone albums.

The album is as stunning as it is raw. The title track is a fractured lullaby-like arrangement that churns on a relentless guitar riff.

The quiet/loud juxtaposition of Rice's music also follows the cycle of low introspection and anger that comes with the territory of love lost. His pain is our gain. This is gorgeous, haunting music.

U2: Songs of Innocence



I never understood the fracas around the band's decision to dump an album of such high quality into my iTunes account at no charge. What am I missing here?

The first thing one notices on "Songs of Innocence" is how the music looks backward in both sound and musical content. According to interviews and press releases, the boys in the band went back to the bands and the Dublin streets that inspired them.

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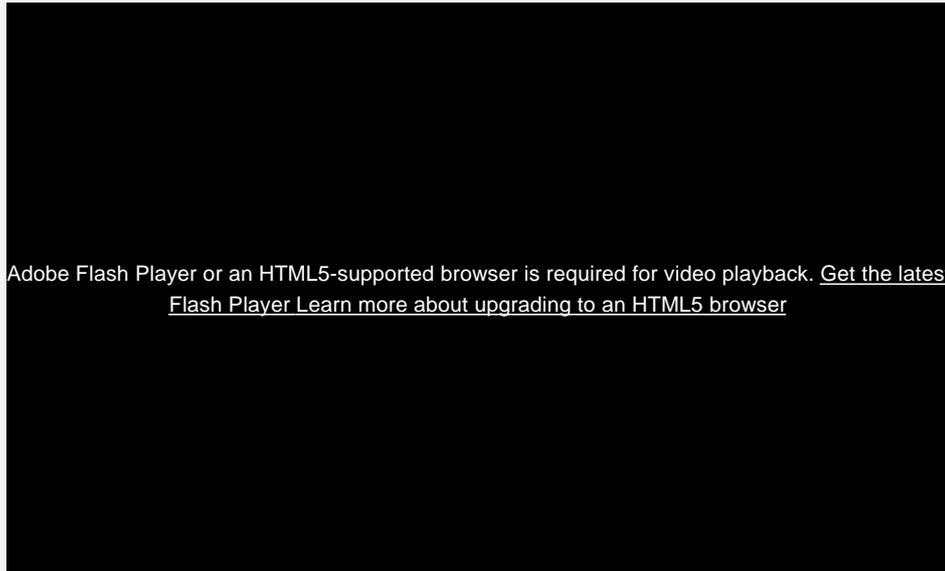
"This Is Where You Can Reach Me" has spooky 1980s synths and a bass line that's a Far East cousin to David Bowie's "China Girl." "Volcano" could be an outtake from The Clash's "London Calling."

No band has been this relevant for this long. I can't wait to hear these songs on tour!

The Script: No Sound Without Silence

This is one of those albums you'll put on when the world has kicked you a few times too many. This band has been there as well, and these uplifting songs are proof that anything is possible.

The lyrics encourage the listener to pursue your dreams and stay true to your heart. That advice comes from the experience of persisting through decades of highs and lows in the music business.



"The Energy Never Dies" is a U2-like ditty that warns against putting off living life in favor of living for the moment. "Superheroes" was the lead-off single from the disc, and it is a catchy tribute to those of us who were told we would never amount to anything, only to prove the world wrong.

The band sold out Croke Park for a show in their hometown of Dublin next year, proving that nice guys finish first – eventually.

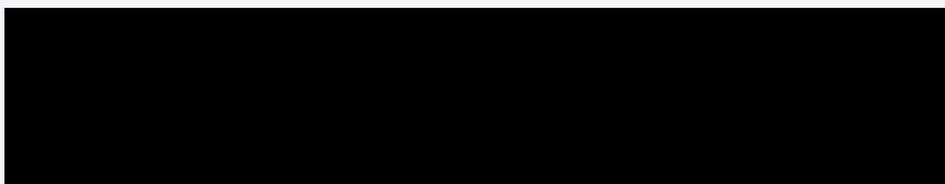
Thomas Johnston: Table for One

The songs on this disc vacillate between affairs of the heart and affairs of the history book without missing a beat. It opens with "This Close to Heaven," which chronicles the building of the Empire State Building by Irish laborers "so high they could touch the hand of God."

Johnston's conversational singing style, combined with news correspondent's eye for detail and a fantastic poetic flow calls to mind "Lisdoonvarna" or any number of slice-of-life songs by Christy Moore. Make a reservation at "Table for One" by visiting www.thomas-johnston-music.com.

Celtic Cross: Saoirse's Heart

A strong collection of new songs that tell the story of the Irish American experience by using textures of folk, country, Cajun, rap, and a little jazz thrown in for good measure.



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What makes Celtic Cross so special is their ability to siphon the Irish American experience in their lyrics with a reporter's eye for detail in their songs. A highlight is "One Last Party," which paints the picture of the malarkey and melancholy that ensues when faced with flying home to Ireland to close up the family homestead after the passing of a loved one.

The structure is chock full of memories for singer Kathleen Fee, "the house that stood two stories but a thousand it could tell." Check them out on www.celticcross.com

Deirdre Forrest: Weathered Woes

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This CD runs the gamut of acoustic flourishes, from bluegrass to alternative folk to back porch acoustic blues. Forrest credits the swirl of sounds she heard on the family's record player as the chief influence of her sound.

She started out with Tom Johnston in the folk act group Beannacht but soon found inspiration in both the Asbury Park music scene and her boyfriend, Michal Brett. He contributes guitar, bass, mandolin and, according to the liner notes, "patience, love and inspiration."

He adds an understated yet vital harmony on tracks like "Patty Sue," amplifying the sweet melodic qualities of Forrest's voice.

"Weathered Woes" is the start of a new beginning for Forrest as a solo artist, and might mark an era of a new "boss" in stilettos ruling the Asbury Park music scene.

"Weathered Woes" is available on CD Baby and iTunes.

Ed Sheeran: X

Sheeran's "X" (pronounced multiply) has something for the whole family: sappy ballads for lovesick teen hearts, musings about the passage of time for adults, and a few dance jams to keep the car shimmying for the next family trip!

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"X" starts off with "One," an echoed introspective, acoustic guitar-driven ballad. Sheeran himself admitted during the recent MTV "9 Days and Nights" documentary that he writes these types of songs for "the single lonely women out eating pints of ice cream at home."

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The stunningly beautiful "Thinking Out Loud" sneaks up on you. A breathtaking piece of blue-eyed soul that's a musical cousin to James Blunt's "Beautiful" and U2's "Stuck in a Moment You Can't Get Out Of," the song finds the singer promising to love someone forever, even after his voice breaks and his fingers can no longer coax magic from the strings.

Black 47: Last Call

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This CD sees the band serving a 200 proof cocktail made with a shot of funk and two fingers of Irish malarkey thrown in for good measure.

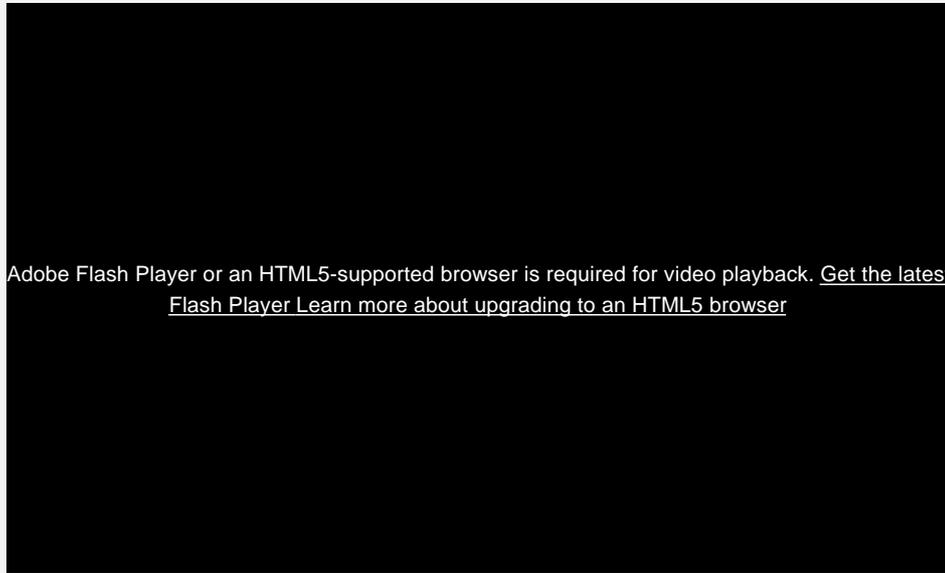
Sadly, the band called it quits this year but Larry Kirwan saves the best for last, using roots, rock, and reggae to bring the final curtain down on the most influential Irish American band in history. We will miss this brand of storytelling.

On "Johnny Comes A Courtin'," the band plays a lazy reggae tune while Kirwan eavesdrops on the letters written between a heartbroken father in Ireland and a daughter who has been taken to Jamaica to work as a slave on the sugar cane farms under the harsh eye of Oliver Cromwell. A romance is brewing with one of the natives and the lost daughter doesn't know what to do.

Check it out on www.black47.com

ARTIST OF THE YEAR

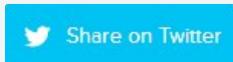
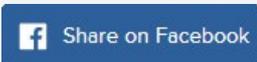
HOZIER



Andrew Hozier-Byrne grew up in Bray, Co. Wicklow, the son of a blues musician. While attending Trinity College Dublin he was a member of popular choral vocal group Anuna, and he appeared as a soloist on their 2012 release "Illumination." That's him singing "La Chanson de Mardi Gras."

His sound couldn't be more different from Anuna. On his recently released eponymous album, Hozier paints a dark and sensual world with guitar fuzz, gospel choruses, and shades of the blues. The bluesy howls for redemption are riveting. This is definitely music for the shadows. "Take Me to Church," not to be confused with the recently released Sinead O'Connor track of the same name, is a dark and twisted gospel melody. "I'll worship like the dog at the shrine of your light/I'll tell you my sins and you can sharpen your knife," he sings, pleading for salvation of his soul in the most soulful way imaginable! This intersection of blues, gospel, soul and swirled atmospherics that make up Hozier's sound has created Ireland's answer to Tom Waits.

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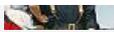
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