

Phil Lynott: Famous For Many Reasons

By John Horan



Bronze statue of Phil Lynott on Harry Street, Dublin
(by Paul Daly, cast by Leo Higgins, plinth hand-carved by Tom Glendon)

In view of the unique and colourful history of the ties between Ireland and Brazil that date back centuries, it is perhaps surprising that the most famous Irish-Brazilian was a mixed-race rock star from Dublin. Phil Lynott was one of Ireland's first world-famous rock stars, and definitely the most famous black Irishman in the island's history, long before the advent of a new era in the Republic that facilitated the immigration of people from various African nations from the 1990s. Lynott's band, Thin Lizzy, was the first internationally successful Irish rock band, and Lynott himself was considered the biggest black rock star since Jimmy Hendrix.

Phil Lynott: THE ROCKER, a 2002 biography by Mark Putterford, begins with the sentence, "Phil Lynott was one of the most colorful and charismatic characters in the history of rock 'n' roll." This sentence would be considered an understatement by those who knew him through all stages of his life. His family history was typical in some ways, but his mother's personal history was anything but typical for Ireland in 1949, the year he was born.

Philomena Lynott was born in Dublin in 1930 to Frank and Sarah Lynott. She was the fourth of nine children, all of whom grew up in the working-class Crumlin district on the south side of Dublin. Economic hardships in the Republic prompted her to choose to move across the Irish Sea to Manchester to find work, while many of her friends went to Liverpool. Shortly after her arrival in Manchester, she was courted by a black Brazilian immigrant whose surname was Parris. To this very day, Philomena Lynott has never spoken publicly about her son's father, so as to protect his privacy. She once said, "He was a fine, fine man, who did the decent thing and proposed marriage to me when I told him I was pregnant." Philomena and her former boyfriend stayed in contact for five years after their son was born. However,

when it became clear that marriage was no longer a possibility between the two, they drifted apart. It is said that Philip Lynott's father returned to live in Brazil and started another family, which has always been the reason given for Philomena's refusal to provide any information about the "tall, dark stranger" who was her son's father, as she never wanted to disrupt his life with his new family. Several sources cite that the Brazilian made some level of financial contribution towards supporting his Irish son in the early years.

On discovering she was pregnant, Philomena returned home to break the news to her family, who were not pleased. However, her parents and siblings rallied behind Philomena to support her. As Mark Putterford writes in his biography, "At first the shock was considerable, as it would have been for any God-fearing Catholic family faced with the shame of an 18 year-old unmarried mother." Philip Parris Lynott was born on 20 August 1949. His mother left him to be raised by her parents and sent home part of her wages from her work in Manchester, though she came home to visit her son regularly. Young Philip was raised alongside some aunts and uncles who were close to him in age. Throughout his childhood, many people in the area mistakenly thought that Phil had been adopted by the Lynott family from a foreign country. Even when Phil became famous with his band Thin Lizzy, nothing was known about his background other than that his father had been a black Brazilian.

While young Philip did endure some racist taunts at school, he was for the most part accepted by his peers. At a young age, he was fascinated by his uncle Timothy's record collection and accompanied him every Sunday when Timothy went to record stores in Dublin to buy new records. Phil especially liked The Mamas & The Papas, as well as most artists on the Motown label. Later on, he became entranced by more progressive rock bands from England, such as The Who and Cream.

As a teenager, Lynott concentrated on singing, and was especially partial to the voice and onstage antics of Rod Stewart, then the lead singer of The Jeff Beck Group, and later The Faces. It was not until attending the Christian Brothers School in Crumlin that Lynott formally joined a group upon cementing a friendship with fellow student Brian Downey. Both became part of a group called The Black Eagles. At the age of 18, Lynott joined Skid Row, the Dublin-based band that served to cultivate a following for Lynott throughout Ireland. Upon joining Skid Row, Lynott became serious about playing one instrument, the bass. He abandoned his infrequent guitar-playing because he thought that the bass would be more practical. Some years later, after Thin Lizzy had experienced international success, Lynott became part of the small category of singer-bass-players, which includes Paul McCartney, Brian Wilson, Sting, and Randy Meisner of The Eagles.

Brian Downey was ecstatic when his long-time friend Phil Lynott parted ways with Skid Row because he was also unemployed and looking to start up a new band. Downey had long hoped to form a band with Lynott and he was given his chance. In interviews, Downey recalled how taken he was with Lynott's determination, resolve and conviction that he would be immensely successful. In Putterford's 2002 biography of Lynott, Downey was quoted as having said: "The only other two people to come out of Ireland with that attitude were [Bob] Geldof and Bono. We used to laugh at Geldof when he said he was going to make it, and I used to have many chats with Bono about whether U2 were going to do anything. It was only after their [*sic*] second U2 album that we started to take U2 seriously. But with Philip you definitely had a gut feeling that he was destined for greatness. Philip believed it and we believed it."

Thin Lizzy was thus formed in 1969. Besides Lynott and Downey, it included guitarist Eric Bell. A few minor line-up changes would occur before their leap to stardom. Their first record was "The Farmer", on the Parlophone label. To recount the career of Thin Lizzy is beyond the remit of this article. The band released critically acclaimed albums, and had a hit in Ireland with "Whiskey in a Jar". Later, in 1976, the band scored an international hit with "The Boys Are Back in Town". The song was released in the United Kingdom in April 1976, reaching number 8 in the charts, and topped the charts in Ireland for several weeks. In the United States it reached only number 12 on the Billboard Hot 100 charts, but

became a highly-played song on FM stations at the time. Similarly, “Jailbreak” was a hit in the charts both in the United Kingdom and in Ireland, and received wide play on FM stations in the United States.

When Thin Lizzy was at the height of their popularity in Ireland and had become the first internationally successful Irish rock band, Jim Fitzpatrick, an artist who designed many of the band’s album covers, made an interesting observation of that era: “Of course, I’d seen Philip around Dublin before. I’d always noted his charisma, his presence, and I found him an exciting person to be with. I was always into Celtic mythology, and as one of the five races which make up the Celtic race is a Black North African race, the idea of this Black Irishman floating around intrigued me immensely.”

Thin Lizzy had countless notable hits in both Ireland and the United Kingdom. They toured all over the world. In the midst of his success, on 14 February 1980, Lynott married Caroline Crowther, the mother of his daughter Sarah, then fourteen years old. Two months after the wedding, he announced that he was buying an estate in the North Dublin fishing village of Howth, with the intention of fortifying his daughter’s Irish roots. The couple had one more daughter, Cathleen.

The band continued to tour and release records until their break-up in 1983. In addition, Lynott released two solo albums in the three years prior to the band’s demise. Thin Lizzy never reunited. There was brief speculation that there would be a reunion of the band for an appearance at the July 1985 Live Aid concert that never materialised.

In many respects, Philip Parris Lynott led the destructive lifestyle typical of some rock stars. He died on 4 January 1986 of heart failure and pneumonia as a result of years of various types of drug abuse, most notably heroin, which caused his body to be riddled with hepatitis and internal abscesses. Contrary to widespread speculation, the rock star did not suffer from AIDS.

Needless to say, Phil Lynott, as the lead singer of the first internationally successful Irish rock band, helped to pave the way for artists like Bob Geldof and U2. On 19 August 2005, a life-size bronze statue of Phil Lynott was unveiled on Harry Street in Dublin, just off Grafton Street in the centre of the city. Lynott’s mother, Philomena, was in attendance, as was the Lord Mayor of Dublin Catherine Byrne. More than 5,000 fans, from Ireland and around the world, also witnessed the event. News coverage of the unveiling made scant mention of the fact that Lynott’s father was from Brazil. To this day, the rock star’s Brazilian father remains an anonymous enigma.

Thin Lizzy’s music will continue to be a staple of “classic rock” on radio stations around the world, and it will always be noted as unusual that the first Irish rock star was black. However, in view of the multitudinous historical ties between Ireland and Brazil over the centuries, it is regrettable that the most famous Irish-Brazilian is not recognised in history for having that unique distinction.

John Horan

John Horan lives in the US and is a frequent contributor of articles about the Irish in the Americas.