

A photograph of a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark blue button-down shirt and jeans, sitting in a red armchair. He is gesturing with his right hand as if in conversation. The room has blue curtains, a floral lampshade, and patterned wallpaper. The title 'STAYING POWER' is overlaid in large white letters at the bottom.

STAYING POWER

*From city-centre busking to becoming a legendary live band, The Frames learnt to follow their hearts. Celebrating their 25th anniversary, they relive the highs and lows with **Tony Clayton-Lea**. Photographs by **Kathrin Baumbach**.*



One of my fondest periods of being in 'The Frames,' recalls Glen Hansard, his beard sporting various shades of grey, his thoughts focused, "was when we had just made *For the Birds* in 2001. We had recorded it in Kerry and in Chicago, and we had gone out and done a bunch of gigs, very much in the knowledge that we'd be playing the songs quietly. That album was, I felt, one where we finally had the confidence to make a calm record, and it was at that point where I felt most confident in the band. Anyway, during the album launch tour, after a gig in Waterford, one guy made his way back to our dressing room. He had the CD of *For the Birds* in his hands, and he smashed it onto the ground and expressed in no uncertain terms how much he disliked it. That was an intense moment for us, but we loved the passion that so obviously came from him. Better than indifference, that's for sure. He genuinely cared."

Glen's description of that event is, more or less, a suitably fitting encapsulation of

what 'The Frames' mean to people – there is no sitting on the fence when it comes to this band. Unlike so much of what passes for cookie-cutter rock music these days, 'The Frames' were founded and formed in a period (pre-Internet) when music really mattered to people. And if there was a standard bearer of a frontman and singer who put his heart on the line (regardless of commentary, positive and negative, that came his way), then Glen was that person.

Twenty-five years after the band formed, Glen, co-founder Colm Mac Conlomaire and Joe Doyle (not a founding member but a musical cohort and friend for the past 20 years, which makes him more than honorary) are mulling over the memories. We are seated in a Dublin music venue that, if the walls could talk, you'd never be able to shut them up. Whelan's may not be where it all began for 'The Frames' (that'd be Grafton Street – busker central in the early-mid 1990s – and the creative hub of the Ormond Multimedia Centre, now the Morrison Hotel, where Glen and friends relentlessly rehearsed their way to proficiency), but

it's definitely where they forged their reputation as a live band.

"You don't think in terms of longevity when you're young," reasons Colm. "It's more from one month to the next, isn't it? When you're in a band it's gig to gig and album to album, and then it's into touring cycles." He gives a wry smile. "It all catches up with you and suddenly 25 years have gone. It's very strange but not unpleasantly so. In some ways it feels like every second of that 25-year period and, in other ways, it has flown by. There are vague years and crystal clear years. Outstanding years, too."

The "crystal clear years", he says, arrived "after moving from certain record labels. Making records without industry interference is a huge relief, almost as if you've just been released from prison. Recording albums with certain producers has also been great, so there were periods across the years where we'd go from being apprentices to hitting our own groove, and then having faith in our own abilities."

"And being more proactive, and actually being behind the reins," adds Joe,



“rather than recording an album and expecting the record label to do everything for you.”

The vague years, explains Colm, were those when the band were finding their collective feet and innately trusting people. Glen reveals that *The Frames'* experiences with the established music industry in the 1990s (strings being pulled by record labels, promises and claims that weren't being followed through, meeting “interesting” people and realising they weren't up to much) prompted them to devise a DIY/cottage industry work ethic. Such a show of independence was years ahead of its time. Record contracts and management deals slowed everything down, claims Glen, and created a barrier between the two things that made total sense to the band – their music and their audience.

Outside U2's mid-1980s to mid-1990s heyday, has any Irish rock band enjoyed such an indelible and intricately linked relationship with their fan base? It's unlikely. “The audience was always the through line for *The Frames*,” Glen confirms. “Why is it the way it is? We work hard and when we play a gig we play a long one. Some would argue that we play too long

IT'S THE MUSIC THAT MAKES EVERYTHING WORTHWHILE. THAT HAS KEPT US TOGETHER OVER THE YEARS, ABOVE AND BEYOND OUR FRIENDSHIP

sometimes, but that's also part of the natural history of where things have gone for us.”

“We have a unique relationship with our audience,” agrees Colm, “in that we realise they're integral to the sort of performances we deliver. Everyone participates – and that goes back to us as buskers making music on the street. From moment to moment, street musicians have very strong antennae and Glen is brilliant at reading an audience; he has a sense of being able to keep everyone with you and to take off on tangents, or to stop and turn at any point.”

“Or as Colm has said very well,” interjects Glen, “sometimes I'll get the band through the battle and sometimes I'll get them all shot!” While gigs can turn this way or that on the flick of a coin, they are essentially about empathy. Glen is something of a master at this – he is sometimes messianic, sometimes messy, but he is always able to

Above, from left, Colm Mac Con Iomaire, Glen Hansard and Joe Doyle.

control a room. “It's looking into a room full of people and sensing that it needs something, some song – something to kick off the night. That definitely comes from busking and being able to read the mood. But it also comes from the family dynamic – like when you walk into the sitting room or the kitchen and you look at the faces and decide what to do. Do I stay or walk out?!”

Sometimes it goes pear-shaped, doesn't it? Cue three shy grins. “I have to put my hand up here about one gig,” Glen announces. “I'm still proud that I did it but it was embarrassing. We opened the headline slot at the Irish music festival, *Witness*, which was the forerunner to *Oxegen*. We were fairly high up on the bill – it was a time slot we had coveted for years – and we started the show with a super gloomy song called ‘A Caution for the Birds’, which would eventually find its way onto an album of ours, *Burn the Maps*.” ➔

➔ As The Frames performed the morose song they could see thousands of people drifting away for a more positive and festive experience. It was, claims Colm, “a rare misstep on a grand scale”. Glen continues: “That was us trying to use the head as opposed to the heart, but it didn’t work because whenever we use the heart pretty much everything goes great.”

Unusually for a band with such a lengthy history, there is a keen level of genuine friendship among the members. While you don’t need a map to know that Glen is the band’s benign dictator – and there’s a definite if diplomatic sense that his defection, of sorts, to projects outside The Frames, didn’t initially go down too well – there is nonetheless an unforced, obvious camaraderie.

“It’s a delicate thing,” admits Glen of the intra-band relationship



Four piece sweet? The Frames’ lineup has chopped and changed over the years.

(Colm and Joe nod in agreement), “because The Frames has always been all for one and one for all. It got a little murky around *Once*, to be honest; that movie was something I did with my

friend, John Carney, who was the first bass player with the band. In a weird way it was a Frames side project – and then some of the songs that appeared in the movie were on The Frames’ album, *The Cost*. Where those songs started and ended – songs that began in sound checks, whoever played a beat, and what that means in terms of who contributed what to which songs – is quite vague. I’m just delighted we’ve all managed to stay friends and to talk sense and that when something like marking the 25th anniversary of The Frames comes up that we’re all up for it.”

Being in a band, declares Glen, is like being a member of the

emergency services – you’re on call 24/7. Colm, meanwhile, likens it to an evangelical calling. “In essence,” he observes, “it’s the music that makes everything worthwhile. And it’s the music that has kept us together over the years, above and beyond our friendship.”

“Being away from it for ten years has been good for the band,” affirms Glen. “We’ve continued to play as a unit but without the pressure. A lot of my solo work came out of sound checks with the same band, so the creative centre of The Frames hasn’t stopped working; it has just been operating under a different title.”

And what of the journey, so to speak, if not the legacy, of The Frames? Glen looks at Colm, who looks at Joe, who in turn looks to Glen for a pithy, truthful summation.

“It’s all about,” Glen concludes, “following your heart.” 🍀

The Frames 25th anniversary concerts are on July 4-5 at the Iveagh Gardens, Dublin, and July 11, Live at the Marquee, Cork. The Frames “Best of” album, *Longitude*, is out now.

After The Frames - What Happened Next?

GLEN HANSARD His first studio album without The Frames was 2006’s *The Swell Season*, a collaboration with Czech singer/musician Markéta Irglová. Running parallel was Glen’s co-starring role, also with Markéta, in the low-budget movie *Once*. Another album by *The Swell Season* (*Strict Joy*, 2009) and a solo record (*Rhythm and Repose*, 2012) copper-fastened Glen’s increasing international success. All paled in comparison, however, with the huge commercial



achievements of *Once*, *The Musical*, which made its Broadway debut in 2012 and shows no signs of slowing down. Ditto Glen who, following Irish summer shows with The Frames, embarks on a European solo tour starting on September 29 at La Cigale, Paris.

COLM MAC CON IOMAIRE

Alongside Glen, Colm has been a mainstay of The Frames from the beginning and has also been a member of *The Swell Season* from its inception. Knowing how to play your part in a collaborative setting – and exactly where to stand on stage when you have someone

as forceful as Glen under the primary spotlights – is something that Colm is very much aware of, an intuitive stance borne out of his background in traditional Irish music. He has also released two fine solo albums – *The Hare’s Corner* (2008) and this year’s *Agus Anois An Aimsir* (And Now the Weather) – that have each highlighted his masterful and cinematic way with music that’s at once expressive and nuanced.

JOHN CARNEY The Frames’ bass player from 1991 to 1993 – has developed an enviable reputation as an auteur filmmaker of low-budget movies with big hearts.



Moderate successes – *November Afternoon* (1996), *On the Edge* (2001), and RTÉ TV series, *Bachelors Walk* – paved the way for *Once*, which was made for approximately €160,000 and went on to gross millions. While Carney’s *Zonad* (2009), divided critics, his movie *Begin Again* (2013), was a charmer. John’s next film is *Sing Street*, a Dublin-based, 1980s-set, loosely autobiographical tale of a teenager forming a rock band – with original soundtrack by U2’s Bono and The Edge.