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RAMBLIN' MAN

By
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'Once' creator Glen Hansard returns to his busking style on his second solo effort



It's a sunny summer day in County Kildare, just outside Dublin, and with a month to go before the release of *Didn't He Ramble* (Anti-) Glen Hansard is writing a new song. Back in January, when his car broke down in Jamaica, a woman passed by and asked, "Are you getting through?"

He's been thinking about those four words ever since.

"What a beautiful sentence," Hansard says. "Are you getting through? Are you getting through to someone? Are you getting through to yourself? So I've been sitting with that line for the past few days, and that's the song that's coming to me right now."

He picks up his Takamine and begins to sing:

*Are you getting through?
Are you breathing?
Is there someone looking out for you?
Do you need it?
Are you getting on?
Are you drinking?
Are you feeling strong?
Are you sinking?*

Less than an hour old, the song already has a melody, though the one Hansard sings is different from the one he tried a few minutes earlier, and it will keep changing as he keeps writing. It has a key, although that's shifted, too. At this point, the song is just a sketch, but it has a clear emotional center—what Hansard calls "a genuine empathy," where he's checking on a friend in need—and a set of lyrics that grows in intensity as he finds his way into the story.

"The thing is, you write these lines down, but they're just lines, they don't matter at all," Hansard says. "You throw them down, get them on paper, but what matters is the intention. And then what you do, what I did, is reverse them, make the song about yourself. And suddenly, the song is:

*I'm getting through
I'm breathing
Looking out for someone new
Still believing (or self-deceiving)
I've been staying home,
I've been drinking
Sleeping in too long
Over-thinking.*

"Two different ways, and whichever one resonates, whichever one feels the most uncomfortable to sing, is probably the right one," says Hansard. "So much of the time, we'd like to create an image of ourselves as strong. But a song is an opportunity to be vulnerable in a way that's different from regular conversation. It's putting yourself on the line."

Hansard has been putting himself on the line since he quit school at 13, determined to find his way as a busker on the streets of Dublin. At 19, he and some busking mates founded the Frames, a rock band that's been phenomenally successful in Ireland and is celebrating its 25th anniversary with a new compilation, *Longitude* (Anti-). At 20, he appeared as Outspan Foster in director Alan Parker's 1991 film about a struggling Irish band, *The Commitments*. At the time, wanted to be performing his own music, but now looks back at the project fondly.

At 26, he did a more personal film, *Once*, in which he played a version of himself as a Dublin busker. In that 2006 movie, he falls in love with a street vendor, played by Markéta Irglová, his real-life singing partner in the Swell Season. Filmed on a shoestring budget, and directed by former Frames bassist John Carney, *Once* went on to become a multimillion-dollar international hit, leading to an Academy Award (Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures, Original Song, for "Falling Slowly," recorded by both the Swell Season and the Frames). It spawned a chart-topping soundtrack, a Tony Award-winning Broadway musical, a Grammy Award-winning score, a tour with Bob Dylan, a second album by the Swell Season, and a third film for Hansard, the 2011 documentary *The Swell Season*. *Once* brought Hansard worldwide fame, launching his solo career with the stunning 2012 album *Rhythm and Repose* (Anti-).

After four attempts in late 2015, he released *Didn't He Ramble*, which is even better than the previous set. "It was a tough record to put down," says Hansard, who spent two years trying to find the right settings for the album's ten tracks. "Songs aren't difficult to start. If I was to play you that song I just sang, to play a full first verse, second verse, chorus, middle

GLEN HANSARD

eight, and an ending, then I'd be impressed, because I would have written a song in under an hour. But all I have now is a bit of a shape, a sketch, and that's frequently where the song is at its best, before all the changes and movements and rethinks and rewrites. Because it's at its most free in that moment; its most untethered, its most undefined."

Didn't He Ramble's first video, the Dylanesque "Winning Streak," started as "You Are My Friend," which became "May Your Losing Streak Find an End." After a few more iterations, Hansard transformed the piece into the more affirming "May Your Winning Streak Never End." The soulful "Her Mercy," which features the Commitments' horn section, was one of the easiest songs he's written, coming in a flash after reading a biography of Leonard Cohen, the song's unnamed subject. The folk-trad "McCormack's Wall" came on the morning after a night of carousing at the birthplace of tenor John McCormack and the grave of Irish Republican rebel Wolfe Tone.

The album's opening cut, "Grace Beneath the Pines," arrived while Hansard was waiting at a baggage claim in New Zealand. "This line was just going around my head: 'There'll be no more running around for me, no more backing down,'" he says. "And oftentimes, that's when music comes to you, when you're at your least conscious, when you're doing something really banal, like waiting for your bag to come out. In my head, I was enjoying the fact that it sounded like a prayer. It sounded like something old. It felt natural and easy. But when I took out my guitar, because my knowledge of the instrument is so limited, I applied these really bog standards, average chords for this ethereal melody, and I ended up going, 'God, this is a dreadful song.'"

Then Hansard decided it wasn't a dreadful song, just a dreadful guitar part. He was touring at the time, so he tried a punched-up version of the song with horns, which he sings into the telephone, punctuating the rhythm with shouts of, "Buh! Buh! Buh!" But to Hansard, it felt like a pose, and no matter how many different arrangements he tried, it sounded dishonest until he reached the final sessions, which has him singing over a droning C chord, the barest piano accompaniment, and a couple of muted horns at the end as he chants, "I'll get through this, I'll get through this, I'll get through this, I'll get through this." It's the kind of performance only Hansard can deliver, filled with hope and despair, strength and vulnerability, and after all this time and all those different attempts, he's happy with the final version.

For Hansard, happiness has come in a cluster. He's also happy to be celebrating 25 years with the Frames, whose new album includes a song that didn't seem right for *Didn't He Ramble*, though it's hard for him to describe the difference between Glen Hansard with the band and Glen Hansard without the band. He's at peace with his role in *The Commitments*, thrilled to have reunited with his mates for the film's 20th-anniversary celebrations, and pleased he's still touring with part of the horn section.

He misses "the Horse," the battered Takamine NP15 he'd played for years, and he's angry that when he plays it now, all he hears is the sound of glue and varnish stabilizing the body. He's replaced it with four newer NP15s, including one that's almost as battered as the Horse was in its prime, about five years ago. Hansard says he's not getting much better as a guitarist, but he doesn't seem to mind; as rough as it can be sometimes, he has all the technique he needs to deliver his songs in his best busking style.

"I never really wanted to be good at guitar playing," Hansard confesses. "I love being a guitarist, of course I do, but I often felt that if I ever got too caught up in what my fingers were doing, then something in my soul would be restricted. So I don't want to know how to do the fancy chords, because then I'm going to go onstage and concentrate on the fancy chords, and not on what is going on inside me."

"It would be great if I could do both, like Mark Knopfler, play amazingly and sing amazingly and mean it and own it. But, for me, the instrument has one job, and that job is to present the song. After that, if I happen to pull a fancy riff, or do something good on the guitar, then great. But the job of the guitar is to say the song and nothing else."

And what about the song he started this morning?

"Well, if I'm diligent and I stay with it, it'll become a song that I'll play at these upcoming gigs," Hansard says. "If I play it at these gigs, it'll become a song on my next record—well, maybe. There are songs you write when you're just about to release a record, that were too late to make the last record and too early to make the next one. They tend to go through the cracks, but I'd like to think this song has something. We'll see. It'll either start running around my head and haunting me or I'll just forget it. But if the song is good enough, it'll haunt you."

"At the end of the day, what should dictate whether a song is worth singing or not is whether you can mean it," he adds. "Can you own this? Can you sing this? Can you sing this with the right intention? If you can, then it's right!" **AG**



WHAT GLEN HANSARD PLAYS

GUITARS

"The Horse [Hansard's old Takamine NP15] is out to pasture. I haven't used it for a while. It stopped sounding good because I beat it too hard. Like any tool, like any person, it just got old. That's where the Horse is right now: It just sounds spent. And I feel really sad about it, but that's just the way it is. So I got another Takamine [NP15] that's beginning to look almost exactly the same as the Horse, and it sounds great. To me, Takamine is the best guitar, because when I hit it hard, it doesn't choke. I don't know quite what it does do, but it doesn't choke. It's a workhorse, a working guitar, and I've really gotten used to it."

STRINGS

"Lately, I've been using the Elixir Nanowebbs, which last about five times longer than the strings I used to use. The way my hands sweat, the old strings used to go completely dead after half a gig."

PICKS

Jim Dunlop orange tortex plectrums, .60mm

EFFECTS

1994 Sovtek "Green Russian" Big Muff, Line 6 DL4—Green (for looping only)

DI

Radial JDI-passive

CAPO

Shubb C1 original brass finish