

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

HONORARY CONFERRING

Friday, 9 September 2022

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR P.J. MATHEWS, Director, UCD Creative Futures Academy** on 9 September 2022, on the occasion of the presentation of the Ulysses Medal on **PAUL BRADY**.

A Uachtarán, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle (Acting-President, members of the University, and Distinguished guests),

In recognition of his outstanding achievements as one of Ireland's great songwriters, virtuoso instrumentalists; and leader in the field of the performing and recording arts, University College Dublin is proud today to honour the exceptional career of Paul Brady with the award of the Ulysses Medal—the highest honour that the university can bestow.

As a musician spanning genres from folk and traditional music to rock and pop, and a songwriter of national and international distinction, he has played an exceptional role as a performing and recording artist for over five decades. Paul's place as one of Ireland's most celebrated and beloved musicians is without question. His distinguished career has been characterised by an unrivalled ability to rediscover and reimagine great songs from the storehouse of tradition and to place them at the epicentre of Irish cultural life once more. Moreover, he has excelled in having many of his own original compositions earn their place within the 'Great Irish Songbook', and within the hearts of generations of fans in Ireland and across the world. Paul's work has been internationally recognised and acclaimed for many decades. He is highly regarded and emulated by international recording artists of the calibre of Bob Dylan, Tina Turner, Mark Knopfler, Carole King, and Bonnie Raitt, many of whom have covered his original songs.

Paul was brought up in the border town of Strabane, Co Tyrone, and attended a mixed sex, mixed-religion primary school in Northern Ireland. His experience of life on the border is, in many ways, a fitting metaphor for his own life as an artist ... always aware of creative possibilities and ambiguities that exist between and across cultures. He was nourished as much by the pop music of Radio Luxembourg as by the musical influences of Raidió Éireann. At boarding school in St Columb's College in Derry it was the music of Elvis, Buddy Holly, Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis that most enthused him. As a fresh-faced first year Arts student in UCD in 1965, Paul was captured on film outside the Adelphi Cinema in Dublin, waiting for the Rolling Stones to arrive for an evening gig. It was clear, even at that stage, what direction his future would take.

During his UCD years Paul began to find his way as a professional musician, soaking up the sounds, rhythms, and intensity of the Dublin beat group scene. Between 1964 and 1966 (with various bands) he took the stage to support iconic artists such as Roy Orbison, The Who and The Animals. He also rubbed shoulders with illustrious contemporaries such as Van Morrison and a budding young rock guitarist called Rory Gallagher. Phil Lynott, the great Thin Lizzy front man, bought one of his first guitars from Paul.

At the same time, he was also tuning into the early stirrings of the Folk Music revival—the innovations of Sean Ó Riada at home and the international success of artists like the Clancy Brothers abroad. The explosion of musical energy in the Dublin pub sessions of the time also proved inspiring. Halfway through his final year in UCD, Paul was invited to join The Johnstons, one of the most successful Irish bands of that era, with whom he recorded seven albums. Their distinctive blend of folk pop caught the zeitgeist and earned them a number of Top 10 hits in Ireland.

After the Johnstons, Paul joined Planxty—and fitted right into the most influential trad-folk ensemble of the period. Often regarded as ‘Beatlesque’ in their combination of popular and avant-garde styles, Planxty utterly transformed the sound of Irish music. A collaboration with his bandmate, Andy Irvine, led to the recording of an iconic album in 1976, with the title ‘Andy Irvine / Paul Brady’, which quickly became known as ‘The Purple Album’. This record is, without doubt, a high-water mark of

experimentalism during the folk music revival. It broke through older conventional approaches and refashioned a musical soundscape capable of great innovation while drawing inspiration from tradition. The standout track is Paul's version of 'Arthur McBride', which was later covered by Bob Dylan. This song combines his ornate vocals with a virtuoso open-tuning guitar style that has become a distinctive hallmark of his music. Paul showed great virtuosity in his ability to create new soundscapes and horizons of possibility for Irish folk song and melody, expanding the range and ambition of the form, and re-imagining old songs in new and exciting ways. There is no better example of this than his *Welcome Here Kind Stranger* album which memorably featured one of his best-loved recordings, 'The Lakes of Pontchartrain'.

Paul's gift as a maker of melodies is matched by his flair as a lyricist. His well-crafted words have engaged, consoled, excited, and inspired us for decades. If anything characterises his music, it is a relentless drive to follow his own creative instincts and break through the often-rigid demarcations and expectations of the Irish musical landscape, which at times can be heavily policed. A lyric from his song, 'Crazy Dreams', sums him up perfectly:

'And lately you've been getting doubts
A voice inside keeps calling out
That someone else's dreams don't get you nowhere'

How true that is: Paul has always followed his own path; inspired by folk and traditional music but never a slavish devotee of it. He is at once securely Irish in his musical accent and yet wonderfully promiscuous in his borrowing from other genres and musical cultures.

His songs tell of personal journeys, the trials and tribulations of life as an artist, relationships and fulfilment, and attachment to place. The mysterious and unresolvable nature of life is a common theme, as whimsically captured in his hit song 'Nobody Knows'.

Nobody knows why Elvis threw it all away
Nobody knows what Ruby had to hide

Songs of social concern have always featured in his work. Although written for other times many still resonate powerfully with us today, which is always the measure of a classic song. The passion of ‘Nothing but the Same Old Story’ captures the fear and stress of the Irish emigrant experience in the 1980s and resonates with the Irish immigrant experience today.

Came down to their city
Where I worked for many’s the year
Built a hundred houses
Must’ve pulled half a million pints of beer
Living under suspicion
Putting up with the hatred and fear in their eyes
You can see that you’re nothing but a murderer
In their eyes, we’re nothing but a bunch of murderers.

Throughout his career, Paul has sung about the futility of violence from a number of viewpoints. In ‘Arthur McBride’ the coercive tactics of the army recruiting officer are brilliantly exposed. The anti-war perspective of ‘The Island’ reflected on dark events at home and abroad at a time when ‘The Troubles’ on this Island were at their worst. This song has an all too poignant relevance once again as we watch the daily horror of the invasion of Ukraine. Earlier this year he tackled that topic directly in his new song ‘Let’s Be Grown Ups Now’.

Most of all, Paul’s music offers a joyous embrace of life’s possibilities, and this is never more obvious than at his live concerts. He has toured the globe many times and performed on some of the world’s most prestigious stages. Recently I saw him play at the Seamus Ennis Centre, in Naul, Co. Dublin. Paul was very much at home in this hallowed venue of traditional music dedicated to one of the great pioneers of the Irish folk revival—but he rocked the place! As the concert ended, the exuberant crowd steamed out onto the street singing with gusto the chorus of one of his great anthems-- ‘The World is What you Make it’. One thing is sure: whenever Irish people gather to sing there is a very good chance that a Paul Brady song will feature before the end of the night!

Paul was taken away from his UCD studies by the opportunities that his immense talent opened up for him as a performing and recording artist during the halcyon days of the folk and pop music revolution of the 1960s. He may not have completed his undergraduate studies at UCD but he can take some consolation from the fact that he is now part of the curriculum, his work now enthusiastically studied by new generations of UCD students. Indeed, Paul is a regular visitor to the UCD campus, as a distinguished UCD Creative Fellow he gives generously of his time to contribute to Creative Futures Academy programmes in the creative and performing arts, and is immensely generous in sharing his experience and insights with our students in masterclasses and seminars.

It is entirely appropriate that we honour the achievements of Paul Brady this afternoon with the award of the Ulysses Medal. On this exuberant occasion let us commend his outstanding achievements as we celebrate, too, the accomplishments of this extraordinary group of UCD graduates today.

Praehonorabilis Praeses, totaque Universitas,

Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui recipiatur insigne ulixis; idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.