

TO HERE KNOWS WHEN - GREAT IRISH ALBUMS REVISITED

...If I Die, I Die by Virgin Prunes

The Virgin Prunes ploughed a very different furrow to their Lypton Village brethren, a fact summed up succinctly by Leo Finlay when he wrote in *Select* magazine that they: “were Dublin’s Stones to U2’s clean-cut Beatles image.” They were the guys, continued Finlay, “who’d hang about Grafton St in dresses in the daytime, and spend nights preparing for gigs and atrocity exhibitions.”

The band abandoned traditional rock ‘n’ roll tropes in favour of performance art, installations and the avant-garde. Early gigs were often staged in performance spaces and galleries rather than pubs and clubs. Their live shows were legendary confrontational events: audiences were often simultaneously shocked and bemused. Not for nothing did Mark Prendergast, in his book *Irish Rock* describe the Virgin Prunes as, “the most overtly subversive rock group ever to come out of the genre.”

For Gavin Friday, the Virgin Prunes’ agent provocateur, ambiguous gender identity was allied with self-preservation. “From a very early age, growing up in Dublin, I was always very expressive with clothes, especially from being bullied and being called a pansy or a queer, or whatever derogatory thing. Rather than keep getting the digs, I stood up for myself, and the way I stood up for myself was with my clothes.”

“In the late 70s, to even have earrings was a cause to get your head beaten up, but to wear dresses and clothes the way we did, it was pretty much a red flag to the bulls. It was so liberating and it became my shield.”

In mid-82 the band recorded their debut album with Wire’s Colin Newman producing. Rather

than adopting a conventional A/B format, the sides of the record were given brown and blue colours, signalling earth and fire respectively, or primitive and urban. The music on each side reflected these moods. The “green” side utilised bodhrán, tin whistle, mandolin, psychedelic guitar and vocals inspired by Sean-nós singing. It sounds completely timeless. The “blue” side has the mammoth post-punk tunes - ‘Walls of Jericho’, ‘Caucasian Walk’ and the ever startling ‘Baby Turns Blue’. It’s a remarkable album.

Listening to the album again Gavin is struck by how contemporary he finds the lyrics: “‘Baby Turns Blue’ is about young people self-harming, taking drugs and mental health issues. ‘Walls of Jericho’ is an anti-fundamentalist religion song. The transgenderism of how we dressed, there’s very little here that isn’t relevant to 2022, which makes me feel really good.” “I’m really happy that I’ve been able to go back into

the Virgin Prunes archive and get it out there. I’m very proud of the Virgin Prunes.”

Fans of The Murder Capital, Gilla Band and Fontaines DC would be well advised to listen to *...If I Die, I Die*, for here not only will they find the origin of the species but also one of the greatest Irish albums of all time.

...If I Die, I Die (40th Anniversary Edition) is out now on BMG Records.



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Gavin Friday revisits *...If I Die, I Die* on To Here Knows When - Great Irish Albums Revisited, available on all podcast platforms. Episode notes and further information: <https://www.paulmcdermott.ie/>

