



# 'A barechested feeling

Fionn Regan has left the filigree folk music behind and embraced a lo-fi, electrified sound. But he retains his singular style. The artist formerly known as Bilbo talks to Tony Clayton-Lea

**I**T COMES AS no surprise to discover that, 10 years ago, Fionn Regan released an EP (*Slow Wall*) under the moniker Bilbo. It might be fanciful to suggest that Regan wouldn't look out of place in *The Hobbit*, but there's a smidgen of truth in such a notion. The mischievous features, the slim stature, the elfin-like demeanor, the pixie-like good looks – Regan has them all.

Since jettisoning Bilbo and forging out on his own, however, Regan has transformed into quite a tidy creative proposition. A few more EPs filtered out in the early in the new century (including *Reservoir* and *Hotel Room* on the small Brighton-based indie label, Anvil), but Regan's first proper calling card was 2006's *The End of History*, which introduced him to a far wider audience.

From Meteor to Mercury via Choice, *The End of History* garnered the kind of praise, plaudits and award nominations that fresh-faced singer-songwriters would sell their acoustic guitars for. After the album's release, Regan embarked on a promotional tour that saw him relentlessly traverse Europe and the US.

The way he tells it, over a few cups of tea in a Dingle hotel, all the travelling took it out of him. About two years ago, a new album was recorded with respected Ryan Adams producer Ethan Johns. But something, says Regan, got lost or confused or frustrated in the mix, and the sessions were scrapped. With no small amount of time wasted, Regan had to rip things up and start again.

The results of the second phase of songwriting and recording can be heard on his new album, *The Shadow of an Empire*. Anyone expecting a rerun of *The End of History's* de-

finer, filigree folk tunes is in for a surprise – Regan bolsters his uncanny knack for a sweet tune with astutely executed bursts of electrified, Dylanesque rock. It's fair to say that his



performance, and his haircut, in Dingle (for the *Other Voices* series) divided opinion –

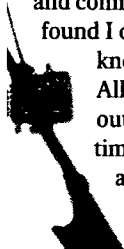
where were the pretty pastoral folk melodies? Is new song *Protection Racket* this year's answer to *Positively 4th Street*? Why is his hair reminiscent of one of Robin Hood's merry men? And how did the new album percolate over the past 18 months?

"It's a record that sort of came into place when I was travelling, touring around America," says Regan, who has occasionally phrases his words in circuitous analogy and metaphor. "I was writing a lot of it in my head, I suppose. It was seeing the 'shadow' in the title as both a positive and negative thing. For people with a fair complexion, a shadow is like a mother or a wing. Also, a shadow thrown by man-made things, like walls for example, can be a hindrance. So the record plays on both sides of that.

"It's also a protest against shadows cast by, for instance, someone's expressions. You can tell a lot from people's expression about what is happening. That's kind of how I operate – it's more about the result of looking at things.

"I wasn't running around a field with a net trying to catch the sound of the record. I'd done some sessions with Ethan Johns early on. It was a very uncompromising batch of songs, but . . . there was so much red tape around it that I ended up having to leave that batch of songs aside in the vaults and move on. Some of the songs crossed over on to the new album, but any of the ones I wanted to use I had to re-record."

Artistic temperaments and creative minds are rarely happy bedfellows with industry and commerce, it seems. "The way that I've found I operate best is trial and error. You know the way someone like Woody Allen says that he has to do things outside the committee process? Any time that has happened with me, the antlers lock to the point that there's no movement anymore. Things that are rigid, when the



## **“I find the best way for me to operate is in between the cracks of the normal way of doing things”**

wind blows hard enough, get pulled out of the ground, so I find the best way for me to operate is in between the cracks of the normal way of doing things.

“But things like this happen all the time in the music industry. You make records, sometimes they find their way out and sometimes they don’t. You learn something every time from each experience.”

For the second, somewhat more independent phase of the album’s creation, Regan set up shop in a small factory space close to his home in Co Wicklow. Reverting to as old school a recording methodology as it’s possible to get these days, he bought an old Trident desk tape machine and went to work.

“I wanted it to be like the acetate booths – you know, the old way of listening to albums back in the day? Before you bought them you’d listen to them in a private booth in a record shop. My idea was to record with those restrictions in mind, with that bare-chested feeling. That became the start of the idea of doing it – recording songs in just a couple of takes, and locking them down. It was completely against the grain, I think.”

The new album, he says, has its own swagger. Glitches and mistakes could have been swept up, but any faults and flaws were left in. “With the advancement of technology,

there is a tendency to overlook small nuances and creaks; things get smoothed a lot, and I didn’t want that. I wanted pulp to ooze out.”

Regan is clearly something of a Luddite, a smart guy happiest with books and a pencil. He wrote the lyrics of the new songs on an old typewriter, a percussive process he likened to being behind a drum kit. “You have to think about things before you commit to typing something; it’s a rough-and-ready technique. There’s a spirit and soul in the process, a feeling that something has actually happened. For the CD sleeve, I have all the lyrics – the typos, spelling mistakes and alignment errors are there, too.”

Is Fionn Regan misunderstood? By some, probably. One perception is that he’s a bit of an eccentric. Another is that he’s a fine songwriter with a marked tendency for ‘abstraction.

“I lean on the darkness,” he says when asked what his defining characteristics are as a songwriter. “Sometimes when you do that on a stormy night you can trip and fall into a hole, but songwriting is the journey back to the light source. That might sound abstract, but the evidence of that journey is the music. On a more personal level, within the walls of a song, a piece of writing, I feel I’m at my most potent. When I’m outside of that, a lot of stuff can be a mystery to me, and quite difficult.”

In what way? Quixotic analogy ahoy! “It can be like constantly stamping down tent pegs and hoping that the flysheet doesn’t blow off. I spend a lot of time in the dark stamping down pegs. It’s a bit like slapstick.”

**🎵 The Shadow of an Empire is released February 8th on Universal Records. The new run of Other Voices begins on RTÉ2, Wednesday, February 3rd at 11.25pm. Fionn Regan plays Cyprus Avenue, Cork (March 7th); Róisín Dubh, Galway (12th); and Vicar St, Dublin (13th)**



Photographs: Richard Gilligan