

PRAISE

TO THE

HIGHEST

## What attracts stars to a Kerry church? The best little festival in Europe and the Dingle dolphin, discovers Eithne Shortall

**D**ingle is the most westerly point in Ireland, as listeners to Philip King's RTE radio show will know. His grainy voice, dramatic weather updates, and soulful tunes give the location an artistic gravitas. For a couple of hours every Sunday night, Dingle seems to belong to another world, never mind country. This transformation of the Kerry coastal resort into a birthplace of folklore and a source of artistic inspiration has helped draw many unexpected visitors since 2002. Florence + the Machine, the XX and Ryan Adams are among those who have played Other Voices, an annual series of gigs King organises. Filmed in a small Dingle church in the depths of December, they are broadcast on RTE Television early

the following year.

Last month's line-up was typically impressive. The National, an American band, said they had long been aware of this small music festival, and were delighted their schedule finally allowed them to take part. The former Pulp front man Jarvis Cocker had agreed to play a "sold out" show at the 70-person capacity St James church, based purely on the recommendation of Richard Hawley, a friend and former band mate. Hawley played Other Voices in 2009, and was so enamoured that he asked to curate a stage for 2010. His selection comprised Cocker, the British folk darling Laura Marling, the Irish singer-songwriter Lisa Hannigan and Anna Calvi, a guitar player tipped for big things this year. Only Hanni-

gan had performed at the festival before. The rest were taking Hawley's word that the rugged scenery, laid-back atmosphere and musician-friendly locals would make the trip worthwhile.

"I wouldn't have asked Jarvis to do something I felt he wouldn't have enjoyed," says Hawley. "I was adamant that if I got him to Dingle he'd know what it was all about. He'd get out of it exactly what I do." The word around town the day after Cocker's performance was that he had been so taken with the event that he asked to curate a night at next December's show.

Other Voices is Ireland's answer to Later... with Jools Holland, and arguably the best arts programme on RTE. Only 40 or 50 tickets go on sale for each night's show, but



even if you don't get one, you can still make the pilgrimage to Dingle and watch the gigs streamed live into local pubs. The international impact of the programme is impressive, with cult followings in London, New York, Paris and Berlin. Some of those at last month's shows had travelled from England and Germany to be at the church for one night. Hannigan performed Teeth for a handful of people in 2006; it has since had over 190,000 hits on YouTube.

King says the show attracts a lot of acts by word of mouth – the National, Cocker and Hawley will tell other bands about their experience, and get a better response than if the approach was made by PR companies: "There's a sense within the musical community that Other Voices is a coming together of musicians in an atmosphere that's conducive to the making of music and some sort of musical exchange. The people who are aware of the west of Ireland know that it's a beautiful place and that something about it means music-making or creativity is cherished. Traditionally, that's been the way with this place. It has been a magnet for writers, poets, potters and artists. This is possibly because the music tradition is still here. Writers and creative people feel at home."

For nine years, musicians have been travelling by plane, train and automobile to take part in Other Voices, in exchange for nominal fees. With ice and snow covering Ireland last month, the line-up had to make an even bigger commitment than usual, and Marling added boat to the transport list. The singer got the ferry from Pembroke to Rosslare and then drove cross country. The National swapped flights home for Christmas for a trip to Kerry airport. After playing three dates at Dublin's Olympia, they travelled to Dingle with their families, making St James church the last stop on an eight-month tour.

The weather made getting to and from the Kerry peninsula difficult for spectators, too. Several got a lift to the train station with the English pop singer Ellie Goulding and her band. There was a collective sense that the festival was worth getting to. As well as performing nightly at the church, the bands took part in daytime sessions in pubs and homes. On Sunday afternoon, the National played Vanderlylle Cry Baby in a local taxi driver's sitting room. Aaron Dessner, the multi-instrumentalist who writes most of the band's music, intimates that Ireland is one of their strongest fan bases, beaten only

by Portugal and Croatia. He jokes that this might be because their music fans have less choice, as fewer acts play those countries.

Dessner and Matt Berninger, the National's lead singer, tried to rearrange their flights so they could stay a day longer. Berninger thought Fungi, the town's famed dolphin, was just what his two-year-old daughter would love. In the end, this wasn't possible but the band did taste Irish stew, Murphy's brown bread ice-cream and pints in Benners hotel.

Fungi was to the musicians what they were to the gig attendees. Goulding and her musicians took a boat out to see him, and Cocker in trademark dapper suit and square glasses spent 40 minutes watching Fungi frolic. Goulding and co were a little uncomfortable with the speed of the local driving and John Smith, a largely unknown singer-songwriter, not only had to follow the National on stage but also had to perform in Foxy John's pub/hardware shop where the locals demanded pints in exchange for simmering down. For the film crew, that was the price of the "authentic feel".

As much enjoyment as the add-on events and "celebrity in Dingle" sightings provided, the music won out. There were only a couple of setbacks, such as ill health keeping Marling in her Dingle hotel bed when she should have been on stage. Highlights of the first night included a Pulp reunion, Hawley and Hannigan delivering a heart-

wrenching duet of Hush-abye Mountain from Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, and an intimate performance from Calvi.

Hannigan also joined Hawley on the altar for Moon River, a song she'd always wanted to perform. As she walked out, Cocker rambled in, waving a tumbler of whiskey. He and Hawley did a rendition of the Pulp classic Something Changed, Cocker wooing the crowd with pelvic thrusts and comedic banter. For the first time he'd bought a plane seat for his guitar for the trip, and Mr Guitar Cocker even had his own board-ing pass. Hawley, Cocker

and Hannigan sent the congregation into the bitter cold night with a rendition of Silent Night warming their hearts.


Having a musician as a curator provided last month's show with a wider range of artists, with Hawley drawing on his friendships. King says this approach may be used again. "If Snow Patrol or the National or Jarvis Cocker appear here there's no way that the fee is commensurate with what they can ask for doing a gig. They give up themselves," he says. "The viral reputation definitely helps. Artists say 'You know that Other Voices thing? We've done that. Have you?' Richard Hawley wanted to curate and it's turned out really well."

The National, the most anticipated act of the week after the success of their album High Violet, opened the second night's show with high-energy performances of Afraid of Everyone and Fake Empire. Their hefty equipment meant they had to go first, a disadvantage for Smith, who had to follow the band with just a humble guitar. He was so nervous he had to be taken back across the road to Benners hotel for a quick whiskey. The Irish singer Cathy Davey was also suffering with her nerves on Sunday night and had to re-start several songs. It had been a while since she had played with her band and although she usually performs for larger crowds, the wider audience that the swivelling television cameras signified affected her concentration.

The last performance of the night was from Goulding, who silenced those who had dismissed her as a standard pop act. Her performance was mature and challenging, and her version of Elton John's Your Song rivalled the original. Other acts to travel to Dingle included the Cork/Waterford band O Emperor, the Welsh songstress Marina and the Diamonds, the Dublin singer-songwriter James Vincent McMorrow, the English folk duo Smoke Fairies and the American folk-rockers Lissie.

The reward for postponing Christmas holidays to travel along Kerry's back roads is not instantly obvious. But fans and musicians who attend the festival once need no convincing to make the trip again. The scenery is beautiful, the atmosphere relaxed, and the focus on great music is consistent. When you're sitting in the cold wooden pews of St James in Dingle, no band seems too big for this tiny church at the fringe of



Europe. The sensation is not so much of being on the edge as being on the cusp. 

*Other Voices will be broadcast on RTE 2 television in early February*



**Broad church:  
Goulding, main  
picture;  
Marina on  
stage, left;  
above right,  
Cocker and  
his pal Hawley  
chat to the  
BBC DJ  
Annie Mac**





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