

Liberate Ulysses Conversation

Question No. 1:

Steven Cole:

Before talking about your music and "Goddess," let's talk about you and 'Ulysses.' How/when did you first encounter the book? What about it struck you and eventually moved you in the direction of translating it into music?

Ken Cotter:

In June 2004 there was a lot of attention on Ulysses due to the impending centenary of "Bloomsday". I had read "A Portrait" many years earlier and had loved it, and "Ulysses" had been on the to-do list for some time. I was a little daunted by its fearful reputation, but on 16th June 2004, I began reading the lines "Stately plump Buck Mulligan" and many difficult months later I got to that famous "Yes".

I had struggled. I had navigated most of the novel, but Oxen of the Sun and Circe had thrown me completely. However, after reading an article by Declan Kiberd I realized how much of the subtlety and ingenuity of the novel I had missed. So I decided to read it again. Thus began my love affair with Ulysses. With each reading I began to appreciate more and more the unfathomable genius and beauty of James Joyce's masterpiece.

One of my first loves is history and I loved the way Joyce captured the sense of enormous change occurring in early 20th century Ireland. The impending upheaval of Irish revolution and war in Europe, the end of empire, the demise of Victorian class structures, the unrelenting march of modernity, the power play of the Catholic church to dominate the new political reality, while not quite approving of it either. I was taken by Joyce's sensitivity in portraying the struggle of ordinary people to survive, like his depiction of Patrick Dignam junior and the Dedalus sisters in the Wandering Rocks episode. Or Mrs. Breen with her threadbare blue serge dress in Lestrygonians. Being slightly parochial, I especially liked the Cork accents and place-names dotted throughout the book! Ulysses got under my skin and has stayed there ever since.

It was only a matter of time before the fingerprints of Ulysses appeared all over the songs I was writing. I resisted at first. I

suppose, if I'm honest, reverse snobbery was at play. I was fearful that people might think I was trying to be too clever- a mortal sin in Ireland! In the end I decided to be true to myself and follow where my songs were headed. The great Irish singer songwriter Paul Brady once said that the best thing you can do for your songs is to get out of their way. That's what I decided to do in the end. When I wrote the song 'Nighttown,' the die was cast. I decided that rather than avoid references to Ulysses, I should embrace them and make a feature of them in my songs. I then set myself the remit of writing accessible contemporary songs about ordinary everyday themes infused, to varying degrees, with references to Ulysses.