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THE RAGAMUFFINS IN IRELAND - A DIARY

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Though Stocki has already reviewed the Ragamuffins gig at Glenabbey he thought you might like to go behind the scenes and spend some time off stage and to be truthful on stage too with those Ragamuffins...

APRIL 22, 2000

Summer came to the north coast of Ireland. It was 11 o'clock in the morning of the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday and as I gazed out at Scotland just twenty miles across the Atlantic ocean the sea was the deepest of blues and the skies above me were what Rich would have been familiar with in New Mexico. As I walked towards the car I took off another layer of clothes, my third in 10 minutes and laughed as I remembered Aaron Smith being unable to get warm in the last 42 hours. We had just left the Ragamuffins to the aeroplane and as their flight took off so did our good weather. They are gone now some 10 hours and I sit typing after a barbeque, with my daughter already asleep after a whole day playing outside. Of course Aaron will treat this opening paragraph of their Irish tour diary as pure fiction. I promise you my dear friend it is sadly true.

We had been through cold and wet Irish weather for the entirety of the Ragamuffins far too brief skip in and out of Ireland. Indeed if weather was my wealth I would ask them to leave more often but there is more riches in the spending of time with brothers than in the sun on your back. As I walked in the heat of the day, the only heat of the year so far, I was so exhilarated about life that I almost cried with the over bearing joy and rush of what life can be. This short hejira with these guys was so inspirational that I feel my soul bursting with the very purpose of it's being – to be honest and vulnerable and relational and to live out the Jesus story in the circumstances of my day and to also entice the image of the Grand Designer out of the depths of my being much like an Indian charmer gives vitality to that snake within the basket. In seeking to do both these things I find myself closest to my source, created and redeemed by the Maker of the Universe. Can less than two days just hanging and listening with a bunch of Ragamuffins do this to your life. Yes!!!!!!

APRIL 20, 2000

To have A Ragamuffin Band in England where they are playing the Spring Harvest family weeks and not pay their flights to sing a few songs in Ireland would have been unforgivable so a few of us got together and set up two gigs for the band at Glenabbey Church near Belfast and in the Exodus a happening youth venue in the northern coastal resort of Portstewart. So we waited for their Heathrow to Belfast flight to arrive on Thursday afternoon. Soon we saw a few rough edged individuals who might just make up a band. I had met Rick before a few times but never for long and had worked with Jimmy on the Homeless Man video as well as being in email touch with him for some time. Mark and Aaron I had never met and so there was still some apprehension. Would I get on with these guys? Would they hate being here? Would they pay to empty venues? We did the Rubik's cube puzzle of bags into cars and sped off to Glenabbey where Gordon and Iris Ashbridge were hosts extraordinaire. A comfortable lounge, nibbles and food on the stove made for a gloriously relaxing pre gig time where the Muffin boys listened to tunes, emailed loved ones and oh aye eventually sound checked.

It was during the search for on line facilities that we discovered that Mark was still on honeymoon – the only problem being that his wife was back home. Mark and Janelle had been married less than three weeks and here he was on the other side of a big big ocean. There are many sacrifices involved when you commit yourself to giving your heart and self and ministry to the world.

Personally the rest of my afternoon was flumoxed and imprisoned when Jimmy showed me a copy of the delayed and about to be published Ragamuffin Prayers. I delved into the spiritual wisdom and photographic genius of Mr. Abegg himself.

This is a beautiful book and will have review elsewhere on this web page. What I will not include in that review will be my own humble contribution to that book. As I sat in the salubrious youth hovel in Glenabbey I was actually dumb founded to see my name against the others in the contents list. Jimmy had put his head on the block to convince a US publisher that this unknown Irishman should sit alongside Brennan Manning, Rich Mullins, Michael W Smith and Mike Yaconelli among others. It's another Mullins legacy that Jimmy should draw in the likes of me. I sat looking at the honour of my entire life. As I said the rest of this book will be reviewed elsewhere, it is a collection of different folk saying what they think a Ragamuffin prayer might look like and indeed looks like in their lives. Fascinating and insightful and the photographs by the compiler and guitarist of these Ragamuffin boys are truly spectacular.

Over the course of the few hours that we waited for sound checks and a beautiful meal made by Gordon Ashbridge's angelic wife Iris and her friend there was a coming and going of Ragamuffins. It was a chance for short conversations and during one with Mark I learned that we like pretty similar music in the form of alternative country acts like Uncle Tupelo. Mark was saying that he is doing a solo record in that vein. He also told me how he'd been producing some tracks for Mitch McVicker. Mark had been producing tracks with Rich for Mitch's first CD the night that of the tragic car wreck. He told me that it was difficult emotionally to finish that first album. We agreed that it was a reasonable first album but that it was a sign of what Mitch might later achieve. Mark says that the new Mitch album is a big big jump in songwriting and vocal performance. Even better he left me four tracks and boy is he right. As with much in this diary the review will follow at a later date. The final bit of CCM gossip and free CD that came my way was the new Chris Taylor album which Mark has produced with the help of Rick. More rocking and immediate than Taylor's previous release.

After tea I headed off for an hour and returned just before the gig. Belfast's finest Booley was tonight's support and they stripped it back to an acoustic feel. A sit down affair that removes the manic energy of their usual live setting and gives space to reveal the immense talent of not only the spikey haired Wilson but also his cohorts McCullough on tasteful touches of guitar and Ian McMillan's percussive shakes. Songs of love and

struggle of emotional and failure and new beginnings shows a man who is learning the artful craft of song smithery and bringing his deep spiritual convictions to a range of human experience. A more than fine starter.

The Ragamuffin's set is again reviewed elsewhere but suffice to say that they more than matched my introduction that suggested they brought a rare marriage to CCM with their spiritual insight and artistic integrity. Much more than a gig. A spiritual happening and none of the more than reasonable crowd left much more than impressed – they were touched!

So after endless hanging about and the very much missed opportunity to sell tons of CDs (Word Records slap your wrists), we headed into the night towards base camp Ballycastle. Rick and Mark had booked themselves into the Marine Hotel just a few hundred yards away (Jimmy would challenge the distance later on) and that made our wee summer cottage a little bit more roomy for Jimmy, Aaron and the sound techie genius Jordan. Arriving long after midnight we headed to The Marine's Bar (am I allowed to say that) for a little refreshing. Before we could order a double coke with ice, there were local weans (Teenagers) gathered around wondering who these rock star types were. Rick and Jimmy joined the Ballycastle community as best they could over the noise of very poor but very loud karaoke. There was a great moment when this bunch of fascinated youth discovered that Jimmy was not much younger than their fathers and a whole lot of fun. Quite the comedian and entertainer young Jim. I wondered if they went home with new expectations or hopes for their father's fun potential!!!! We eventually headed off to our wee home and told Rick and Mark that there would be little done before mid day.

APRIL 21, 2000

Today was the day that I found out how the Ragamuffins cope with touring. And how different they each are. It was a lazy morning and my thoughts were to show these guys the beauty of the northern Irish coast a spectacular little meeting of headland and sea that is only less than any other place on earth because of the chances that rain and cloud and mist will diminish it's finery. Still for some time I have believed Dunluce Castle to be an ideal video location and no one American wants to miss the Giants Causeway. Americans after all are why God put it there in the first place. More of that later.

The day's first problem was getting all the touring gang into the three cars and heading in any direction. There was a point where I thought the only thing that could cause more confusion and keep us back anymore would be to have had the man Mullins still with us. Jimmy assured me though that Rich could be a great stickler from punctuality and often slapped fines on late comers. My computer finds it hard to read that information but these guys are professionals too and it has to be said on the next morning they were ready to go on time, very early. However today they are in relaxation mode putting back sound check times at every time of asking when. The Causeway Hotel was a good place for a hearty lunch. Fin McCool Steaks for most of us.

Now Finn is the giant who built the Causeway. The story is that he was fighting a Giant from Scotland and when the Scottish adversary appeared Finn got a bit frightened and jumped into a pram and put a rock in his mouth as a dummy tit (Americans read soother). When the Scottish Giant saw the baby he thought that if this was the baby Finn McCool must be a really gigantic giant and took off as fast as his big kilt could take him. Finn chasing after him took a clod out of Irish soil and threw it at him. It landed in the Irish sea as the Isle Of Man and Lough Neagh was the gap in the Irish map that was left. Anyway it's this giant who built this Causeway of unique and marvellous looking five sided stones. A natural wonder of the world. Either that or geographers would tell us that lava from a local volcano met the cold Atlantic and turned solid columns of five sided stone. To be truthful both seems a bit far fetched for me. I call them a post creation doodle of the

Maker and this time he had American tourists in mind. They'll fly thousands of miles to see this, thought he.

God wasn't reckoning on Rick Elias. Here is Elias within a good brisk walk from said stones and as soon as steaks and Baillies and Chocolate Mousses are scoffed he is wanting back to his little apartment in Ballycastle. Jimmy told me that Rick was a city boy but thought we might con him with a possible video shoot. Anyway it would also explain why when Rick told me he had got up that morning at 6.30 he had not headed towards the gorgeous beach to gaze upon the Mull of Kintyre but gone up the town to look in closed shop windows!!!!

So Rick and Mark were dispatched to their settees and beds and whatever and I was to take the photographer Abegg to see this ruined Castle. Aaron and Jordan said they were keen too. Now Dunluce castle is quite a ruin. It sits perched on a north Antrim cliff top a few miles between the aforementioned Causeway and Portrush's great beaches. In the late 17th century it is said that the kitchen's fell into the sea and you can go to that very place and see the join or lack of it, if you understand. That the family was the McDonald family makes me wonder whether the kitchen swept up on an American shoreline some centuries later and that is the reason we are so cursed with those burger joints!!!! Anyway I think the ruins are immense visually. Out their broken down windows one can look east towards the causeway where indeed the stones for the walls may have come and west there is golden strands and blue blue sea.

Now if Rick is the starrer at walls and who cares what's outside them, Jimmy is the man for anything to take a photograph of. I reckon that the only time he doesn't have a camera round his neck is when it is replaced with a guitar and boy can this man take photos so I let him loose in Dunluce. He also gave me an addiction to click na few shots too. It can be contagious hanging around this man. I now have to wait a few days to get my three films developed before I realise that I should leave those quirky photos to an expert and suffer my wife's wrath of wasted films and her laughter at who was I trying to be. Jimmy Abegg, actually!

It then became obvious that our happy snappy guitar player, Aaron and Jordan were up for the Causeway after all. So off we went back to there. It was a bit of a hike down to the said stones and it took Jimmy twice as long as us as a result of his constant clicking of a camera and Aaron's nifty old speed on his feet. Never tell me that drummers are not fit.

From the Causeway, time was running out. We now needed to skate back to Ballycastle pick up the others and head straight back to Portstewart for the gig. However Jimmy had caught wind of a little ruined friary in Ballycastle and so, while Jordan got a few things, we headed round there for another million clicks. Where will all these photos turn up? Who knows. I look forward to discovering and told my daughter to smile all morning while she was his model – just in case! As this frantic pace was being set to get us to the gig on time Aaron was as peaceful as godliness. Either he immersed himself in Tom Clancey's Executive Orders - over 1000 pages is not my cup of tea must be said - or slept in his own Sea of Aaron calm. Indeed over the course of these hours I decided that maybe Aaron Smith was as close to godly as I had been in the presence of. I sensed his serenity. He does not get bothered. He is at peace with himself. He loves his God. He does not say a bad word about anyone, always sees the good and has great faith in God and people. It is a joy to be around him, and yet a joy tinged with the shame of not being like him.

Anyway we were late but we got there. Now the review of the Glenabbey gig is elsewhere on this web page and here begins the one at Exodus. This one was a bit of a battle and at the beginning I couldn't see how the Ragamuffins had any chance of winning. Indeed I had apologised to a few friends who had decided to come tonight instead of last night. They were going to miss the spiritual happening and blessing that

that had been. I told my wife as she left with my very very tired daughter, after three songs that I wasn't sure that I'd be long after her. These boys might just cut their losses.

To explain the battle I need to set the scene. The Exodus began some four years ago as an alternative to the club scene in the north coast resort towns. Indeed two murders in that area in the past few months that could be linked to that club scene has proved the need. Under the leadership of Jim Brown the Exodus has developed into a fine place of discipling young people and sending them overseas in droves all summer. It has in that respect been a success. When it comes to being a concert venue there has been more mixed results. It is a feeding ground for mid teens who are much more interested in chatting up members of the opposite sex than listening to good tunes. And it needs to be remembered that here in Ireland teens don't dig guitar bands as much as dance music these days. So I have watched Sarah Masen, Vigilantes Of Love and Phil Madeira struggle to gain attention. However this was a Friday night as opposed to their regular Saturday night concert night and there were a good smattering of older ragamuffin fans in tonight, so maybe.

Sadly not. During Faith Hope and Love I could hardly hear for the chatter going on around the soft drinks bar. Surely God Is With Us and You Did Not have a home had similar impact. Now you see what I always say in these situations is that you cannot hear the ones who are listening and I felt that tonight the majority were listening but still the hormonal bouncers were winning the day and I could see the Rags losing their rags and packing up. I was seeing my wife off when Jimmy started into a very gracious tirade against the chatters. They'd come a long way. They wanted to involve the crowd in remembering that this was Good Friday and he asked for some respect to a band that could hardly hear themselves. It was a turning point but far from convincing. I'd said to my wife as she left that there would be no Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow tonight.

Still though these boys battled and I have to say that I sensed a much better performance from them tonight than the night before. Jimmy in particular shone with some great guitar playing even giving Creed a U2 effect. Where the war turned was in involving the audience. Now of course this was very much a part of the plan but when it came near the conclusion and they got the audience up to become backing vocalists the majority who were listening suddenly got heard and they moved towards Sometimes By Step with a real sense of victory. Indeed as it finished and the audience sang Step by Step one more time Rick started up Praise God... and the band left before Jimmy appeared in front of a by now attentive crowd and we had a very well sung AMEN! Amen indeed. Total respect for these guys who did it against all the odds. If the Exodus has ever had a more spiritual night I am sorry I wasn't there. When I got home much later my wife raised her head off the pillow and asked. They won I said as loudly as possible without waking my daughter. They won. Boy did they win.

So more after gig chat and back to the wind down in the Marine Hotel before just a few hours sleep and off to the plane for a return to Spring Harvest. Off they went and on came the good weather. But whatever the weather this was a real blessing in my life. A little spiritual tonic in the midst of my Easter holiday. Thank you Jimmy, Rick, Aaron and Mark. Thank you Jordan. Thank you Stephen and Gordon who drove and organised and thank you to my wife and Gordon's who gave hospitality and a whole lot more. Come back soon guys. You know I get the feeling they will.

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