



Photo: Nik Pate

RÓISÍN MURPHY

Words:
Charles Shafaieh

Five questions for an art-pop icon.

For Róisín Murphy, unpredictability is a necessity. Amid the stultifying homogeneity of most contemporary pop and disco, the Irish-born artist's catalog is a rich amalgam of musical styles and cultures, inspired as much by Iggy Pop and Grace Jones as by Laurie Anderson and J.G. Ballard.¹ Her genre-melding predilections echo the diversity of revelers at Manchester and Sheffield clubs in the late 1980s and early '90s, where she immersed herself at just 15 years old by staying put in Manchester, alone, after her parents split up and relocated. Perpetually strong-willed and independent, she reached fame as half of the superstar duo Moloko and has continued delighting her dedicated fan base in her solo career since. Preceding the release of her sixth studio album, *Hit Parade*, she speaks about the necessity of dancing and bravery as well as the unlikely roots of her passion for clubbing.

CHARLES SHAFAlEH: *Hit Parade* opens with "What Not to Do," which challenges us to be brave and dream those dreams we might reject. Why is that call so necessary today?

RÓISÍN MURPHY: Always be brave. It's an essential part of being. That's something I've lived by since I was 15 and made the decision to go it alone. That decisive 15-year-old is still inside me. It takes bravery to be decisive.

There's an awful malaise in the modern world: Being able to communicate instantly through technology has made people less driven by their hearts, less committed. Just to get someone to meet you for coffee can be complicated! We didn't have a telephone in the house when I was a kid. People just walked in the door, sat down, and you had to make them a cup of tea. Everything was much more gut-driven. I still live by that.

Bravery has come up when people see my performances and artwork,

when they see me switch musically from one direction to another, when they see I play characters, and that I prioritize that over trying to predict what people might like or want. I don't see it as bravery though, because I don't have the bravery to be fake.

CS: Dancing is gut-driven, a form of letting go that rejects trying to control everything. You've called it a fundamental right. Why is it so important?

RM: I dance every day. I can't help but move to music. I don't play an instrument, and dancing is my gateway to understanding musical arrangement. It's drawing, in a certain sense; it's a 3D graph of the music you're absorbing. When it's predictable—when I can figure out the arrangement before it comes to me—I can't stand it! But if I don't know and have to adjust my dancing, that's when I'm really having fun.

CS: Was Manchester's club culture your first exposure to that kind of event?

RM: In a sense, no. I was brought up around live musicians and would have been at my uncle's jazz bands as a baby. They'd have these all-day events with eight-hour sets on Sundays. These amazing parties had the same essential feeling as the club—of getting together around music, getting drunk, dancing, living, aspiring to something more. Joy was what held it together. My aunts always said to me, "We knew you had the music in you when we saw you dancing to your Uncle Jim's band."

If we were in somebody's living room having a party, everybody would sing, one by one or all together. Everybody knew 100 songs. It was like living in an MGM musical. It was song as a storytelling form that was so essential to that culture in a really natural way—not in a way of wanting to be a superstar

but just as part of life, to communicate through previously existing songs. On this record, there's a strain of mortality underneath the joy, a black line underneath the color. I think it comes from seeing that culture go. It's unbelievable. And you don't just mourn the people who are gone but the whole time that has gone.

CS: Another world has died: Teenagers today couldn't live as you did in Manchester, receiving housing benefits to have your own apartment.

RM: It wasn't a perfect apartment—it had an outside toilet—but it was lovely. It was the best decision I ever made. In the UK now, you have to be over 18 to get housing benefits. I would have ended up in foster care or in a shared house with social workers coming and going. But I'm living proof that was the best thing that could ever have happened to me, and I gave back tons to society after that—plenty of tax! [Laughs]

It's confounding to me, when I look back, at how strong I was. But I didn't have anything else except strength. It was worth it, I think, so it's hard for me to get my head around the nanny state and bureaucracy. It's not more efficient.

CS: You never choose the "easy" path.

RM: Everything I do is sincere. I don't create things because I'm thinking about what people want. It's not that I don't want to be successful, and I have an ego, obviously. But I would be ashamed to make anything which I didn't put everything into that I possibly could. I'd be ashamed to make anything that was shit.

(1) J.G. Ballard's story "The Thousand Dreams of Stelavista," about mobile, mood-sensitive houses, inspired Murphy to think about AI and write a song for her latest album, *Hit Parade*.