

# Van Morrison

## The Drumshanbo connection

Vincent Mooney

HAS VAN MORRISON ever performed in Drumshanbo? That's the question which I have been puzzled by for 40 years.

An appearance by Van the Man on an RTE TV programme, "Talk about Pop" broadcast on November 9th 1973, prompted this question. It was his first time in Ireland in 6 years having emigrated to America in 1966. Van is reluctant to give interviews and the fact that he brought his acoustic guitar and performed 12 songs, some of which were unreleased at the time was a major coup for RTE. The show was presented by Tony Johnson and Van was accompanied by a lifelong friend of his, Donal Corvin, who probably encouraged Van to be so open and generous with his stories and songs. Corvin lived in Roscommon at one time and was editor of the *Roscommon Champion*. Van Morrison was a major International artist, having released highly acclaimed albums including "Astral Weeks" and "Moondance". He was on a 3 week holiday in Ireland following a highly acclaimed live tour in US and UK in 1973.

During the broadcast he played a new song which was unrecorded at that time called "Drumshanbo Hustle". Needless to say I was astonished to hear Van Morrison sing about my home town. My school friends were equally amazed and fortunately one of them, Pat Farrell, had the foresight to record the sound from the broadcast on his cassette recorder at the time, so that we had proof that we were not imagining things. To the best of my knowledge the original TV broadcast was not kept by RTE and is not in their archives.

I played the song for my father Joe, a man who would jump at any opportunity to put Drumshanbo on the map, hoping he would be impressed that an Irishman as famous as Van Morrison had written a song with Drumshanbo in the title. He was not as enthused about it as I was. I knew of course that he had a problem with the subject matter and some of the lyrics.

So what is the song about? Let's start

with how Van introduced it on the program. "This is a song that's gonna be on the album after the live album, a new album coming out after the live album - don't know when. The title of this song is "Drumshanbo Hustle", you know, got the title from a town we played when I was with a showband one time. Those guys were gettin' ripped off in those days, like they always get ripped off. I mean get ripped off no matter what you do if you're a musician. That's where the title comes from and the rest is about something else."

So what about those infamous lyrics. The chorus of the song goes:

*"I remember the day, the Drumshanbo hustle,  
We couldn't hear no birds,  
they were making not a sound,  
They were trying to muscle in,  
an easy way to bring the money in  
You were pukin' up your guts when you read  
the contract that you signed"*

So back in 1973 we waited for the new album, after the live album "It's Too Late to Stop Now". It turned out to be "Hard Nose the Highway" and was released in 1974 but no sign of "Drumshanbo Hustle". I waited for the next album, and the next, and it never appeared.

Fast forward to 1998 and the release of "The Philosopher's Stone", a compilation of studio out-takes, and previously unreleased songs. Lo and behold, the studio version with full band of "Drumshanbo Hustle" was finally available. The lyrics were slightly revised from the version he performed in 1973 with just acoustic guitar and I still prefer the version I heard first.

Van Morrison is still making records and still performing. At the end of 2012 he started performing "Drumshanbo Hustle" in concert. The song must still mean something to him after all these years.

So did Van Morrison play in Drumshanbo with a showband? I looked into this and cannot find any evidence that he did. The showbands he played with were "The Monarchs" formed in Belfast in 1960 which



■ Van Morrison 1970s PHOTO TONY FARRELL

featured a 15 year old Van Morrison (not to be confused with the showband from Limerick with the same name). They were on the Irish scene mainly playing in and around Belfast from 1960 to 1963 when they changed from a showband to more of an R&B group and toured in the UK and Germany. Van eventually left them and for a short time played with The Manhattan Showband, before he formed "Them" in 1964, the first band with which he had International commercial success.

Did The Monarchs or The Manhattan Showband ever play in Drumshanbo? It would have been in the Mayflower Ballroom, which opened in 1960 and hosted many of the best showbands of the day as well as some international acts. Checking through Leitrim Observers for 1963 gives a listing for The Manhattan Showband on October 13th 1963 in the Mayflower. It also lists "The Monarchs" for December 1st in the same venue. However there were two Manhattan Showbands on the scene at the time, one from Belfast and one from Dublin and there were also two Monarchs showbands. It is unlikely that it was the Belfast bands which featured Van Morrison that played the Mayflower, as it turns out that Van Morrison left The Monarchs in November 1963 to join The Manhattan showband.

So is that the end of the story concerning whether Van Morrison ever performed in Drumshanbo? Well not quite. I have it on good authority that Van Morrison visited Drumshanbo with a friend of his and spent a few hours in Stewart's pub on the High Street (now Monica's) in the early 1980's. Whether he sang or not is unclear. I would hope that if he did, it was a few bars of "Drumshanbo Hustle".