

Brendan Balfe, *St Mel's* and my Status

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It's 1967 and I'm into my second-year boarding in St Mel's College. I had attained, shall we say, a little status. Well, I was no longer a first year. That soon wore off as the first years gained confidence and I looked warily upwards at the 3rd, 4th and 5th years. They seemed miles ahead, their laughs were louder, they took over the wide window-ledges on the corridors to play push-penny and they had a swagger as they joined their classmates on the Walk, a circle of decaying tarmac which formed the boundary of a green used for playing soccer. 2nd year—no man's land!

There was football of course and I was the greatest footballer. Although injured, I could be brought on as a sub with my team 5 points down and only 2 minutes left on the clock. I would grab hold of the game and score 2 goals in the last minute. In my mind and in my dreams I scored lots of goals like that. Reality struck here in St Mel's. I wouldn't make the panel for the college junior team trained by Fr McKeown.

Ah well, there was always music. I mean listening to music on a

transistor radio. The problem here is they were in short supply, just like Kodak Instamatic cameras or the sight of a new suit on a fellow boarder. (Day boys were different — they had everything!). Declan McWeeney had a transistor, he was a year ahead of me, but I had an advantage in asking Declan because he was from my own town Carrick-on-Shannon.

My sudden urge to get access to a transistor was prompted by a new pop music programme on Radio Eireann called Pop Call. Brendan Balfe was the presenter and I had listened to him on school holidays. I liked his snappy upbeat style and Brendan always lets the music do the talking. I was delighted when Declan loaned me his radio without any fuss. Now to listen to Pop Call. I kept it safely in my desk during last study and headed for the dormitory after night prayers. I was in 'New Dor' this year and it took the same shape as last year's dormitory, named 'Spike', with 10 beds on either side of a double row of hand-basins and wooden lockers. Michael O'Rourke was in 5th year. He was appointed a Prefect and had to take up residence



St Mel's College

in our dormitory for his final year, his main duty was to keep the peace. But the Dean also kept an eye on proceedings. He could pay an unannounced courtesy visit to the dormitory and his interpretation of peace might differ significantly from that of the Prefect!

My anticipation of Pop Call superseded any anxiety about a spot check by the Dean and when Michael turned out the lights I turned on the transistor. There was a lot of good music in 1967: "Whiter shade of pale" by Procul Harum, Scott McKenzie's "San Francisco (flowers in your hair)" "Happy Together" by the Turtles and The Monkees with "I'm a believer". I believed in the Monkees alright 'then I saw

her face, now I'm a believer, not a trace of doubt in my mind'. Those lyrics were sending me off into my dreams when the dormitory door was flung open and the light from a torch zig-zagged in the darkness.

Then the lights were turned on and there stood Fr Murphy. He went straight over to Michael and my panic attack occurred when I heard his question, who was playing the music? I hid the transistor under the mattress and heard Michael saying he didn't know. He knew alright. Thanks for that Michael. Undeterred, Fr Murphy commenced a search of each bed, including under the mattresses. I thought about Declan McWeeney, how do I explain to him, I thought about my

mother and how she would deal with my expulsion.

I came back to reality and heard the whispered voice of Brendan Muldowney from the bed next to me "put it in your shoe". My face must have portrayed an awful sense of panic and guilt when it came to my turn in front of Fr Murphy, but nothing happened. He continued his search of the next five beds and left the dormitory, vowing to find out more. I lay back in bed with a sense of relief and an unwarranted anger against Brendan Balfe and Pop Call, who silently rested in my shoe.

My recently earned status sat uneasily with them. But, hold on, redemption was at hand. The next morning, just before the bell rang for classes, I was summoned to a group of 5th years who were holding court on back alleys. This could be a court martial situation. I sheepishly approached. Their spokesman was Paddy Lang. Paddy looked at me, paused to take a drag from his cigarette and then issued the most self esteem boosting and status enhancing words that I ever heard in my short time in St Mel's, "I heard you put one over on Murphy last night". Surely I must have walked away with a swagger. It's all about status!



Leitrim Does it Again!

Micheál McGoldrick, of Kilcoosey, Dromahair, Co Leitrim achieved no less than two All-Ireland Titles in the finals of the Agricultural Shows in 2018. He won the All-Ireland Potato Championship held at the Tullamore Show. He also took the All-Ireland Onion Championship held at the Moate Show. Micheál stated that, "It is an honour to represent Leitrim year on year at the agricultural shows held throughout the country. These shows are vital to rural Ireland to help keep the community spirit alive."

