



# Out of Africa

## David Burke hears how Tommy Fleming travelled some hard roads until his fortunes changed for the better

**T**ommy Fleming knows how to work a room, even when the room is as vast as Ireland's National Exhibition Centre, Killarney. He's an old-school performer who punctuates a set comprising the best in Irish balladry ('Raglan Road', 'Carrickfergus') and contemporary standards (by U2, Mary Chapin Carpenter and Jimmy McCarthy), with a comic's gift for anecdotal delivery. They love him and it's easy to see why.

Afterwards he glad-hands his constituency – which seems destined to grow larger still on the back of his impressive new live album, *A Journey Home* – in a 'meet and greet', fixing his smile like a consummate politician for every camera lens while posing with the good, the bad and the downright ugly. He's at it again the next morning, being agreeable as our conversation is gatecrashed by well-fed men and their slight women, who've spied another photo opportunity, and this despite his nursing a rattling hangover with a pint of Lucozade.

Nothing is too much for Fleming, a man appreciative of the stretch he occupies in the middle of the road after years of hard travelling. This native of County Sligo (a county in which William Butler Yeats is buried and half of Westlife were sired; talk about going from the sublime to the ridiculous) has some tales to tell – happy and hard-luck. And being Irish, the beauty is all in the telling.

There was the time he was spotted by Phil Coulter, writer of 'Congratulations', 'The

Town I Loved So Well' and 'Scorn Not His Simplicity', at a function and asked to join his orchestra as vocalist only to end up singing at Carnegie Hall in New York. Not to mention the time he broke his neck after crashing his car into a tree. Unaware of the extent of his injuries at the time, Fleming walked the two miles home before his family rushed him to hospital. Or the time he fled to Africa, ostensibly to work for a charitable organisation in Sudan, but essentially to get away from mounting debt. First thing's first: the big break with Coulter.

"Strangely enough, I didn't know who he was at the time. Everyone else knew. I always envisaged Phil Coulter as a younger man," Fleming recalls. "I cut my teeth with him very quickly. It didn't strike me afterwards how big a deal it was, playing Carnegie Hall at the age of twenty-two. He'd bring me on in the middle of the show and I'd do three songs. He kind of handed me his show. That was the first time I'd worked with an orchestra. Working with Phil really showed me how musicians work. That gave me the whole idea of putting a show together."

Fleming's show, incidentally, is well worth seeing. He gives it pelter in front of a nine-piece band, including a four-piece string section. To suggest it's polished would be to deny its emotional impact. After Coulter, De Danann – Irish trad royalty, came calling. He made his bow with the band at the Royal Concert Hall in Glasgow. He was always

leaving but ended up staying three years, traversing the wide world over. Then Fleming went for it himself.

"I made my first solo album [*Different Sides To Life*] in 1998. Ten years later I'm on eight albums and for six of those I never got paid a royalty. But then the people looking after me were about as useful as a chocolate teapot."

It was during a promotional tour for the album that Fleming had his accident – and something of an epiphany.

"I was a year and three months in recuperation after it. Luckily I haven't done permanent damage. It's one of those things I try to forget and yet I can't; I shouldn't. Sometimes I look back on it and I think it's the best thing that could have happened to me. It stopped me in my tracks very quickly. It made me realise a lot of things. It made me put things in perspective very quickly. I had a huge cage on my head, watching daytime television every day. It was awful. I thought, people do this every day of the week by choice!

"It made me realise what was in my life, what wasn't in my life, what should be in my life, what shouldn't be in my life. But when I went back on the road, the gigs were shit again. I was going back into the same thing. There was nothing positive; there was no encouragement, nothing to make me feel better about going back and doing it. It wasn't until 2003 that I really started to make money. I was up to my ears in debt. I'd worked for seven years and not got paid. My family kept

me going. There was negativity everywhere. You'd turn up to a gig; there were two or three musicians that the manager was reluctantly paying. They were constantly fighting. It was a horrible atmosphere."

A reception at Dublin Castle for the President of Uganda provided Fleming with an unorthodox solution. He met John O'Shea, the director of the charity GOAL, who invited him to do a concert for the charity.

"I told him there'd be no money in it. I told him to put me doing something useful. I said it as a joke. Two weeks later he rang me and asked me to go to Calcutta. I said, why not, kind of thinking it wouldn't happen. I ignored it for ages until he rang me and told me to get my vaccination shots. I talked myself into it. Off I went. Next thing, he rang me on the way and told me I was going to Sudan. I said, 'Where the f\*\*k is Sudan?'"

"Everyone asked me why I went. I'd love to say it was because I wanted to help people. But to be honest, it was the whole management thing. I ran away. I couldn't run any further than Africa. There were no telephones, nothing. Nobody could get me. It would very egotistical for me to stand up and say it was because I wanted to give something back. I didn't do it for anyone else but me. There were too many voices going on in my head and I couldn't deal with it – I had to get away."

Fleming flew into Sudan on 11 September 2001 and watched the unfolding horror of

the Twin Towers live on Sky Television. "I was glued to it. I never realised the intensity and the immensity of what had happened and where I was. I had no idea who bin Laden was or what al-Qaeda was."

The Sudanese camp was in the middle of a desert.

"My accommodation was a mud hut with one bed made out of goatskin. Nobody would have believed I would stay there. But I got stuck in and ended up staying for more than three months. I absolutely fell in love with the whole idea of where I was. I only had one pair of shorts and three T-shirts with me!"

"My first job in Africa was cooking for the camp. There were six of us. Then I started going out to the field administering medicine. Then it was mainly food provision. It was an amazing experience. Because it was so tense in there, you'd be sent to Nairobi for a break. When I was there I went working in a slum. That actually was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen, not in a good way. Every time I left it I was full up. The kids had absolutely nothing. Your first instinct is to give them everything, but you can't – that's the worst thing you could do."

Fleming returned home having learned the virtue of humility, having conceded he was "a bit arrogant" before the experience. Then he met Tina, who not only became his wife but his manager. Suddenly things began to happen for Fleming, peaking (thus far) when he signed a five-album deal with Universal.

"I've got three loves – Africa, music and Tina. I had a huge void in my life when I got back from Sudan. I just wanted to go back, but I knew I couldn't because I had a career to try to recover."

Mission accomplished. And it couldn't have happened to a nicer fella. □

