

Bushnell, Anne

by Terry Clavin

Bushnell, Anne (1939–2011), singer, was born on 28 March 1939 in the Rotunda hospital, Dublin, one of four children of John Kavanagh, a motor mechanic, of Arnott Street, Portobello, Dublin, and his wife Evelyn (née Ledwidge). She grew up in Milltown, Dublin, and danced as a child on the stage of the Theatre Royal, becoming a junior Irish champion dancer. While attending the St Louis convent school in Rathmines, she sang in the school choir and performed in musicals and plays, though the nuns discouraged her jazz-style crooning. She left school at age 16 as money was running short in her family and became a typist. In April 1961 she married Tony Bushnell, a salesman, from Clonskeagh, Dublin, who shared her interest in music. They settled in Templeogue, and had a son and a daughter.

She had continued performing in amateur musicals, and in the early 1960s sang Irish songs with a céilí band. Abetted by the fact that her husband came from a musical family, from 1967 she sang in Dublin jazz clubs and quickly emerged as a highly regarded jazz and blues vocalist and cabaret performer. In 1968 she competed in the national song contest and became a resident singer in the RTÉ Light Orchestra. By then she was one of the busiest singers in Ireland, much in demand for radio and TV commercial 'jingles' and as a backing vocalist for showbands making records. From 1970 she appeared regularly in RTÉ television variety shows, being one of the hosts of *Girls, girls, girls*.

During 1972–4 she was part of an ad hoc group called Family Pride, composed of session musicians who regularly recorded together. Singing close harmony, they competed in the 1973 national song contest, played in Dublin venues and on radio shows, and had two top ten Irish hits. Their rather uneven LP, *Family Pride*, which consisted mainly of easy listening covers and 'jazz-lite' arrangements of traditional tunes, failed to make the charts following its release in 1973. As a solo artist, Bushnell represented Ireland in various international contests and festivals, and released a handful of singles and an unsuccessful LP on CBS Records, *Are you ready* (1977), made up of pop and contemporary standards. She also sang backing vocals for Tina Reynolds on 'Cross your heart', Ireland's 1974 entry in the Eurovision song contest, and for Johnny Logan on 'What's another year', when he won the Eurovision for Ireland in 1980.

In the mid to late 1970s Bushnell appeared regularly in stage musicals, including well-received tribute shows to Jacques Brel (1974) and Bing Crosby (1978), and as such occasionally performed alongside her brother John Kavanagh, who subsequently became an internationally respected character actor on stage and screen. Working in pantomimes with Maureen Potter (qv) from the late 1970s improved Bushnell's capacity for mixing pathos with humour in her songs. In 1984

she starred in a musical that had been written specifically for her on the life of Édith Piaf entitled 'No regrets', and was widely acclaimed both for capturing and re-interpreting Piaf's stage presence and husky tones. The show, however, suffered when the closure of the Gaiety theatre forced it to open in the unsuitably large National Stadium. Bushnell subsequently devised a more successful one-woman version of the show, and also a one-woman tribute to Judy Garland.

A versatile entertainer, she could handle a broad range of material, and her cabaret act thrived into the late 1980s, typically featuring big band numbers and songs by Brel, Garland and especially Piaf. She was at her best growling blues and jazz material, and so impressed the mayor of New Orleans in this idiom that she was awarded the freedom of the city in 1986. Easily the most accomplished Irish jazz singer of her generation, and the next, she never made the commercial breakthrough her talents deserved and failed to preserve her best work on record.

Partly due to an underactive thyroid gland, which necessitated daily medication from the late 1970s, she struggled with depression, particularly after her father died and her husband lost his job in the late 1980s. Disillusioned with her lack of recognition in Ireland, she contemplated emigrating or reverting to being a typist, as she and her husband experienced a long period of sporadic employment and financial difficulty. Taking up painting in 1992 helped to ease her depression, and she continued to get regular singing work until her death, often for charity. In 1994 she received a Cheshire Foundation award for her charity work. She also appeared and sang in the film *Agnes Browne* (2000; dir. Anjelica Huston).

Bushnell died of cancer on 21 April 2011 in Tallaght hospital, Co. Dublin, leaving a will disposing of €219,068; her remains were taken to Mount Jerome crematorium, Dublin. Her son Paul appeared in and was music arranger for the hit Irish movie *The Commitments* (1991; dir. Alan Parker), and helped produce the related soundtrack album, before developing a career in Los Angeles as a session musician, producer and music director.

GRO (birth, marriage certs.); *Ir. Independent*, 25 Apr. 1970; 22 Apr. 2011; *Sunday Independent*, 17 Mar. 1974; 23 Jan. 1994; 26 Aug., 9 Oct. 2011; *Evening Herald*, 12, 26 Oct. 1974; 18 Jan. 1984; 19 May 1988; 25 Jan. 1990; *Ir. Times*, 10 Aug. 1978; 18, 22 January 1984; 20 July 2000; 7 May 2011; *Ir. Press*, 30 May 1991; 16 Oct. 1992; Deirdre Purcell (ed.), *Be delighted: a tribute to Maureen Potter* (2004); Brendan Balfe, *Radio man* (2007); Sonny Knowles, *Sonny: for the good times* (2009); 'Anne Bushnell' and 'Family Pride' on www.irishrock.org (accessed June 2017)

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