

Fuller, Bill (William)

by Terry Clavin

Fuller, Bill (William) (1917–2008), ballroom impresario and businessman, was born on 6 May 1917 in Glanoe, Kilfeighny, Co. Kerry, son of Stephen Fuller, a farmer of Glanoe, and his wife Mary (née Trant). He attended Tralee CBS and emigrated in the mid 1930s to London where he worked on building sites. Circa 1938 he began leasing St Patrick's dancehall, Bayswater, in partnership with Paddy Casey who, as one of five Kerry brothers renowned as oarsmen and wrestlers, helped attract custom and discourage fighting. (Casey bought Fuller out after five or six years.)

Soon after starting his first venue, Fuller secured permission to open another Irish dancehall, the Buffalo Club in Camden Town, which had been closed by the authorities owing to disturbances. Benefiting from his recreational bouts with Casey's wrestling associates, the short but burly Fuller manned the door and dealt efficiently with troublemakers. Working by day as a subcontractor, he assembled 600 Irish labourers and thrived during and immediately after the war from demolishing damaged buildings in Stepney and Islington, where it was said 'what Hitler didn't knock down Fuller did'.

He bought a bombed site directly abutting the Buffalo and used his workers to rebuild and expand the dilapidated venue, reopening it in 1950 with a capacity of 2,000. Located in one of London's main Irish areas, the Buffalo drew packed crowds and was renowned for its live music, mainly traditional Irish and the big bands. Up to six police vans, and on occasion a cattle truck, were parked outside to receive those evicted amid regular mass brawls. The Buffalo's wildness inspired the apocryphal tale, now enshrined in Camden Town folklore, of how the cancellation of a performance by Jim Reeves in 1963 provoked a riot that dispersed only when mounted police rode into the ballroom.

In 1948 Fuller opened the upscale Crystal Ballroom in South Anne Street, Dublin, before buying ballrooms in Parnell Square, Dublin, and Bray, Co. Wicklow, in the early 1950s, and in Tramore, Co. Waterford, in 1958. He also had ballrooms in Manchester and Birmingham. Undertaking extensive renovations before opening any of his ventures, which generally aimed for a mid-market clientele, he donned his workingman's overalls to supervise the developments and relied on a regular corps of craftsmen, many of whom were musicians. His notoriously overzealous bouncers barred 'teddy boys' and broke up jiving and jitterbugging on the dance floor.

During the 1940s and 1950s, he staged boxing events in Britain and Ireland, and became a music promoter, organising tours of his and other ballrooms for some of Ireland and Britain's most popular big band leaders, such as Joe Loss, Jack Parnell and Michael Delahanty (qv). He pitched in as a roadie on tours, carousing

indomitably with his clients while keeping their itineraries on schedule. When he staged two concerts by Stan Kenton's progressive jazz orchestra in the Royal Theatre, Dublin, in September 1953, Fuller arranged the rail and ferry transport for nearly 3,000 British fans, as Kenton had been barred from performing in Britain by the musicians' union.

Despite marrying and fathering three daughters with a Kerry woman he met in London, Fuller was an ardent womaniser, often declaring: 'I'm the fella with all the wives.' In April 1953 he secretly married one of his ballroom singers, Carmel Quinn, a Dublin woman with whom he had three sons and a daughter. He managed her career, and in spring 1954 they moved to America where he had a restaurant in Manhattan and promoted big bands, including those of Tommy Dorsey, Harry James and Woody Herman. Abetted by Quinn's breakthrough on American television, Fuller staged concerts in Carnegie Hall for jazz acts, including Billie Holiday, and handled country music clients such as Patsy Cline, Jerry Lee Lewis, Willie Nelson and Johnny Cash. He masterminded Cash's first Irish tour in 1963.

From 1956 he bought and renovated ballrooms to cater for newly arrived Irish immigrants in New York, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia and San Francisco; he also had venues in the Bahamas and Texas. His well-managed and conveniently located venues boasted impressive facilities, especially the air-conditioned, 3,500-capacity New York City Center ballroom in Manhattan. Always including a short traditional Irish set, he hosted a succession of bands and genres and imported Irish showbands from the early 1960s.

After arranging a US tour for Johnny Butler's orchestra in 1956 – the first for an Irish band since the early 1930s – he brought leading Irish acts on a circuit of his ballrooms in America throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, while also taking his American clients to Ireland and Britain. His musicians were paid and treated well, though he insisted in the mid 1960s that Irish showband performers trim their hair before an American tour. Controlling all visiting Irish bands, he sold them on to local promoters across North America, and in the late 1960s helped Ireland's most popular showband, the Royal, secure a much-coveted residency in Mafia-dominated Las Vegas. In 1971 he bankrolled the formation of the Big Eight (also known as the Irish Showband), which included the Royal Showband's former front man, Brendan Bowyer, and became a Las Vegas fixture under Fuller's auspices.

Nominally resident in Leonia, New Jersey, he travelled continuously, tending to his trans-Atlantic ballroom empire, and is believed to have accumulated extensive properties in various cities, owning a casino in Manchester and a pub in New York, and investing in shipping and several movies directed by John Ford (qv). Plainspoken and unassuming, Fuller preferred negotiating over a bottle of brandy and conducting business on a handshake, which allowed him to exploit his head for alcohol and avoid being sued if a relationship soured. Indulgent of musicians, he was otherwise crafty, implacable and quick-tempered, often leaving small creditors out of

pocket. He threatened an Irish rival seeking to move into Las Vegas, and levelled a shop operated by a Dublin sub-tenant who was slow to vacate the premises.

Changes to US laws in 1965 curtailed Irish immigration, which Fuller had anticipated by selling all his American ballrooms except the Carousel in San Francisco. He leased the Carousel in spring 1968 to a consortium of local rock bands, including the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane, but reconsidered once drug-taking and nude dancing attracted police attention and the rent fell in arrears. That June, he struck a five-year lease with San Francisco promoter Bill Graham, who rebranded the Carousel as the Fillmore West, turning it into the heart of the city's hippie rock scene. After slipping in a clause allowing the owner to serve nine-months notice for the purposes of demolishing the building, Fuller sold the venue to a hotel group in April 1969, though Graham remained *in situ*, as the planned hotel development never proceeded.

In the late 1960s Fuller focused on Ireland, where he befriended leading politicians with a view to building and operating a chain of hotels for tourists. His opening in 1968 of the Teach Furbo hotel near Spiddal, Co. Galway, aroused local opposition for depriving the surrounding bed-and-breakfasts of business and Bord Fáilte grants. In December 1969, a gelignite blast wrecked a portion of the Teach Furbo and Fuller sued Galway County Council, which sparked a protest rally outside the hotel for threatening a rise in the local rates.

Discouraged by planning delays and the fall in tourism precipitated by the troubles in Northern Ireland, he built only two more hotels – in Ballybunion, Co. Kerry, and Raheny, Dublin. His hotels' cavernous lounges provided an important outlet for rock and folk groups, and were among the first Irish venues that allowed customers to enjoy live music while being served alcohol. He continued to lead by example when it came to quelling scuffles, but also caused a few, and in 1972 settled out of court after a patron sued him for assault.

Loyal to his political roots, Fuller stood bail for Provisional IRA members brought before the Irish courts in the early to mid 1970s, and associated with Neil Blaney (qv) and other nationalist hardliners expelled from Fianna Fáil. As well as being his main residence during this period, his Old Shieling Hotel in Dublin was frequented by IRA leaders, prompting breathalyser-wielding gardaí to position checkpoints outside. The hotel used IRA men as bouncers, and hosted weekly performances by the Wolfe Tones, a band known for their lusty rebel songs.

In 1975 he left his second wife and moved to Las Vegas, converting his remaining ballrooms in Dublin, London and Manchester into rock clubs and delegating their management. McGonagle's in Dublin, the former Crystal Ballroom, hosted rock groups such as Thin Lizzy, the Boomtown Rats and U2 during the late 1970s. The Buffalo Club reopened in July 1978 as the Electric Ballroom and emerged as

London's premier mid-sized rock venue and a significant staging post for up-and-coming bands.

Fuller sold his properties from the mid 1970s, but for sentimental reasons kept the Electric Ballroom and enlisted much of Britain's rock aristocracy in successfully resisting efforts by the London Underground to demolish it from 2003. During his Las Vegas semi-retirement, he owned a small mining company and prospected for gold and silver in the nearby mountains, often venturing out alone with a shovel. He also married for the third (perhaps fourth) time to an Irish stripper working locally. She eventually returned to Ireland.

In 1999 he intervened in a high-profile Las Vegas case by posting \$300,000 bail for Sandra Murphy, a former topless dancer accused along with her secret lover of murdering her casino-owner boyfriend, Ted Binion. Previously unacquainted with Murphy, Fuller paid for her legal defence, apartment and shopping sprees, which led Binion's relatives to speculate that she was using money stolen from her deceased boyfriend. Everyone else assumed a sexual relationship, which Fuller denied while declaring his wish to marry her. After Murphy's controversial conviction in 2000, he funded her appeal and investigations into the prosecution's evidence. By the time Murphy was acquitted in a 2004 retrial – amid inquiries by the Nevada state authorities into witness-tampering by the defence – he had spent \$4.5 million mustering a galaxy of legal talent, including America's most famed defence attorney, Alan Dershowitz. Prior to both trials several defence lawyers were either dismissed or withdrew their services following arguments over fees and the activities of Fuller's private investigators.

Remaining vigorous into his final years, he died on 28 July 2008 in St. John's hospital in Santa Monica, California, from ailments triggered by a head injury sustained the previous March. His ashes were scattered in Kilfeighny cemetery.

GRO (birth cert.); *Ir. Independent*, 25 July 1946; 19 Sept. 1953; 13 Dec. 1969; 2 Mar. 1970; 9, 10 Feb. 1972; 14 May 1974; 12 July 1986; *Kerryman*, 7 Oct. 1950; 30 Jan. 1965; 10 Aug. 1968; 20 Aug. 2008; *Ir. Times*, 2 Dec. 1950; 13 Feb. 1954; 14 Jan. 1956; 23 Aug. 2008 (obit.); *Ballina Herald*, 17 Aug. 1957; *Munster Express*, 20 June 1958; *Sunday Press*, 2 June 1968; *Rolling Stone*, 8 Oct. 1968; *Life*, 14 May 1971; *Hibernia*, 14 May 1971; 2 Mar. 1978; *Western People*, 7 Aug. 1971; *Ir. Press*, 21 Aug. 1973; *Sunday Independent*, 28 Sept. 1975; 22 Aug. 2004; 10 June 2007; 3 Aug. 2008; 28 Aug. 2011; Frank McDonald, *The destruction of Dublin* (1985), 146; *Phoenix*, 13 Feb. 1987; Bill Graham and Robert Greenfield, *Bill Graham presents: my life inside rock and out* (1992); Eamon Dunphy, *Unforgettable fire: The story of U2* (1993); Tim Ryan, *Tell Roy Rogers I'm not in: the Paddy Cole story* (1995), 54, 66; Rebecca Miller, 'Irish traditional and popular music in New York city' in Ronald

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