

## Hennessy, Christie

by Linde Lunney

Hennessy, Christie (1945–2007), singer and songwriter, was born Edward Christopher Ross on 19 November 1945, in Tralee, Co. Kerry, the youngest of nine children (four boys and five girls) of James Ross, an electrician, and his wife Julia (née Griffin). They lived in a two-bedroom house in Brogue Lane; when the insanitary old houses there were demolished around 1948, they moved to more modern houses in Casement Avenue. The family was not well off, and circumstances deteriorated when James Ross, aged 48, died suddenly of a brain haemorrhage in November 1950 when Christie was just five years old. He did not start school (in Strand Road primary school) until he was almost seven. His failure to learn to read and write was not then recognised as severe dyslexia, and the youngster suffered physical and psychological punishments. Fear of school, and also the difficulties his mother was experiencing in keeping the family going, meant that he often played truant, and dropped out of school completely when he was aged 11, almost illiterate. He got a job as a messenger boy for a shop in the town, though he had to memorise the addresses on the parcels to be delivered, since he could not read them. At the age of 15, like his older siblings and many others from Ireland, Christie Ross had to leave home to find work on building sites in England, working generally as a painter.

The Ross family had been well known in Tralee for musical ability, and neighbours often visited them to join in impromptu sessions. Julia Ross was a storyteller and sang traditional songs, and Christie also heard the popular music of the day, especially from a neighbour called Henry Curtin, who had had a musical career in America, reputedly in Frank Sinatra's band, and who taught the boy how to play drums. After Ross moved to England, and was working on building sites by day, he still loved to play guitar and sing, and performed gigs in pubs and clubs catering to the Irish, as well as in folk clubs. Though concert tours round the country eventually increased his profile, for a long time he relied on casual labour to provide his main income, and reputedly turned down an invitation to become the drummer in a group that eventually became the well-known Fleetwood Mac. Adopting the stage name 'Christie Hennessy', he sang ballads and blues standards, but gradually built up a repertoire of songs that he wrote himself, painstakingly and laboriously. His illiteracy and lack of formal musical training were lifelong serious handicaps, but he constantly polished his music and words, and produced a large number of evocative lyrics set to beautifully crafted tunes. Many of these were picked up by other artists. 'Don't forget your shovel' was Christy Moore's first Irish no. 1 hit, in 1983; a reflection on the lives of so many of Hennessy's fellow Irishmen and women labouring unregarded in a foreign land, the song became widely known and was sung by other performers, sometimes adapted to new social and political circumstances, as when it was sung in support of a building workers' strike in Australia in 1991. Frances Black

had her first Irish no. 1 with Hennessy's 'All the lies that you told me' (1994), and Moya Brennan of Clannad had a hit with 'Oh jealous heart', a song about the exile's complex feelings for the native place.

'Oh jealous heart' was covered by Brennan in 1992, the year when Hennessy's music at last gained huge popularity. At a gig in Whelan's in Dublin, Dave Pennefather of the Mother's Son record company heard him and swiftly signed him up; the resulting album, *The rehearsal*, achieved triple-platinum sales and spent weeks in the Irish album charts, partly thanks to strong support from John Peel, the influential English disc jockey. Irish radio stations also promoted the album, and Hennessy finally experienced a breakthrough to fame and success. The Irish Recorded Music Association 'best newcomer' award in that year may have seemed to be a somewhat ironically belated encouragement. Exactly twenty years earlier, his first LP, *Christie Hennessy* (later known also as *The green album*) on Westwood Records, with no publicity or promotion, sold fewer than 500 copies (though those became prized possessions for some fans then, and for later collectors).

The early years of Hennessy's struggle to make it in the music business had been very stressful; when his first daughter was aged three, he had a nervous breakdown, as he faced the difficulties of providing for a family, and dealing with the psychological strains of being unable to read. He felt that some in the business had taken advantage of him; even in 1992, he was quickly disappointed in how he was treated by the Mother's Son label, and he signed instead with Warner the next year. Albums thereafter included *A year in the life* (1993), *Lord of your eyes* (1995), *The box* (1996) and *This is as far as I go* (1999), all making at least double-platinum levels of sales. He produced the last two albums himself, and also produced an album for the Welsh singer Aled Jones, in 2002. A number of singles charted in 1991 and 1993, and in 1997 Hennessy wrote incidental music and the theme tune for a BBC comedy series, *Get well soon*. He moved to the independent label MVine to produce the very successful *Stories for sale* album (2005) and a compilation, *The platinum collection* (2007).

Hennessy's sincerity, humorous self-awareness and gentle voice attracted thousands of fans who took his heartfelt songs into their own hearts. His life experiences and his sensitivity in responding to them and to other people made his performances in Ireland particularly meaningful, especially in Kerry; Tralee's pride in his success was a great pleasure for Hennessy, who often returned there. He was accorded a civic reception in March 1993. His enduring sympathy for those who, like himself, had failed to gain education found practical expression in support for literacy programmes in Ireland and the United Kingdom, and as patron of a Derry-based charity, Children in Crossfire; he helped raise awareness of its work when in 2006 he visited villages in Kenya, where poverty limited the options open to children, and recorded songs about them, 'A price for love' and 'When will we learn', to raise money for the charity's projects.

Hennessy never drank or smoked, but developed a rare form of lung cancer, diagnosed early in 2007, probably triggered by exposure to asbestos on building sites or in demolitions. Working again with his former producer Dave Pennefather, he was planning a new album of duets with friends including Mary and Frances Black, Luka Bloom and Christy Moore; recording continued up until Hennessy's last days, and *The two of us* was released posthumously in January 2008. It spent weeks at no. 1 in the Irish charts. In the two months before Christie Hennessy's death, family and friends joined him in interviews about his life and music, and his response to illness, filmed by Bill Hughes; the television film *Messenger boy* was released in 2008 as a poignant tribute to a much-loved man. Christie Hennessy died in a London hospice on 11 December 2007; his ashes were brought back to the Rath cemetery in Tralee on 27 December 2007. His family helped Pennefather produce a successful album, *A friend of mine* (2009), and Hennessy's first album was re-released on CD in 2010. A bronze statue of Hennessy was unveiled in Tralee in November 2009, and the town inaugurated a song-writing competition and music festival in honour of one of its most popular sons.

Hennessy met Gill Erickson at a disco in Soho, London, when he was 18; they married in 1965, and had two daughters, Hermione and Amber, and a son, Tim. All three children are musically talented and worked with their father: Amber plays violin, Tim plays piano and saxophone, and Hermione is a singer, who released the album *Songs my father taught me* in 2010. Produced by Tim Ross, it included three songs written by Christie and a duet with him.

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*Ir. Press*, 7 Mar. 1992; *Ir. Times*, *passim*, esp.: 19 Mar. 1993; 12, 15, 28 Dec. 2007; *Kerryman*, *passim*, esp.: 26 Mar. 1993; 2 Jan. 2002; 12 Dec. 2007; 21 Oct., 4 Nov. 2009; 10 Mar., 20 Oct. 2010; 14 Nov. 2012; *Independent* (London), 13 Dec. 2007; *Ir. Independent*, 15 Dec. 2007; *Sunday Independent*, 16 Dec. 2007; *Guardian*, 20 Dec. 2007; [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org); *Messenger boy: Christie Hennessy* (Mind the Gap Films for RTÉ; 2008), accessed at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVo2LaBSuiM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVo2LaBSuiM)