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# Writing the Songs of our Ancestors:

## A Folk Songwriting Process

BY VINCENT CROSS

*“Those in power write the history, while those who suffer write the songs.”*

—Frank Harte

There is so much history surrounding us each day, but we are often too busy just surviving to really notice. Sometimes, even when something does catch our attention, we sense it rather than see it. We may even lack the knowledge to know what it is exactly that has caught our attention. It’s as if the past is always calling us to notice a fading treasure before it is gone forever.

When I walk the streets of New York City, I see faded advertisements on the sides of townhouses built over 150 years ago; I see graffiti from the 1970s, unearthed by construction companies like old cave paintings, and I wonder what are the historical truths that these soon-to-be-lost artifacts contain? These fading objects, which will undoubtedly be buried beneath the surface of progress, seem to call and ask me not to forget. This would be the best way to consider the collection of songs I wrote and adapted about my ancestor, the 19th-century gang leader

and colony chief, James “The Rooster” Corcoran (aka Paddy Corcoran).

It was in 2011 when my sister in Ireland first emailed to tell me about Paddy Corcoran. She forwarded his *New York Times*’ obituary from 1900, which spelled out his remarkable rags-to-riches tale. His legend begins with his empty-handed arrival in America in 1844, just before the Irish famine began to decimate the peasant population, and ends with his death in 1900, when he left behind a substantial estate in New York City. The *Times*’ brief obituary mentioned how he



VIEW FROM SCHOOL HOUSE IN 42<sup>ND</sup> STREET BETWEEN 2<sup>ND</sup> & 3<sup>RD</sup> AV<sup>ES</sup> LOOKING NORTH.

“Dung Heap of the Universe.” Corcoran’s shanty village at Dutch Hill in the 1800s. Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society.

formed a squatters' colony in Manhattan, initially as a safe haven for Irish immigrants who were "ill-viewed," and through honest work became a truckman and "a champion of the Irish immigrant class." When he died at 81 years of age, a huge funeral took place along the Lower East Side, since "Jimmy," as he was affectionately known, was deeply mourned (*New York Times* 1900). However, there was more to this tale of hard work and frugality than what the *New York Times* reported.

Other newspapers, such as the *Meridian Morning Record*, had more to say about Corcoran's rise to respectability that challenged *The New York Times*' glossy romanticism. Although Corcoran was a "truckman" by trade, he was heavily involved in the early gangs of New York City, and this obfuscated connection was one that established much of his reputation, as he was known to provide refuge to any man hunted by the police. In fact, his fame seemed to rest more on hostility to law enforcement than his rise to respectability, and it was this attitude that appears to have endeared him to the immigrant population making him "... a hero of many a New York melodrama" (*Meriden Morning Record* 1900).

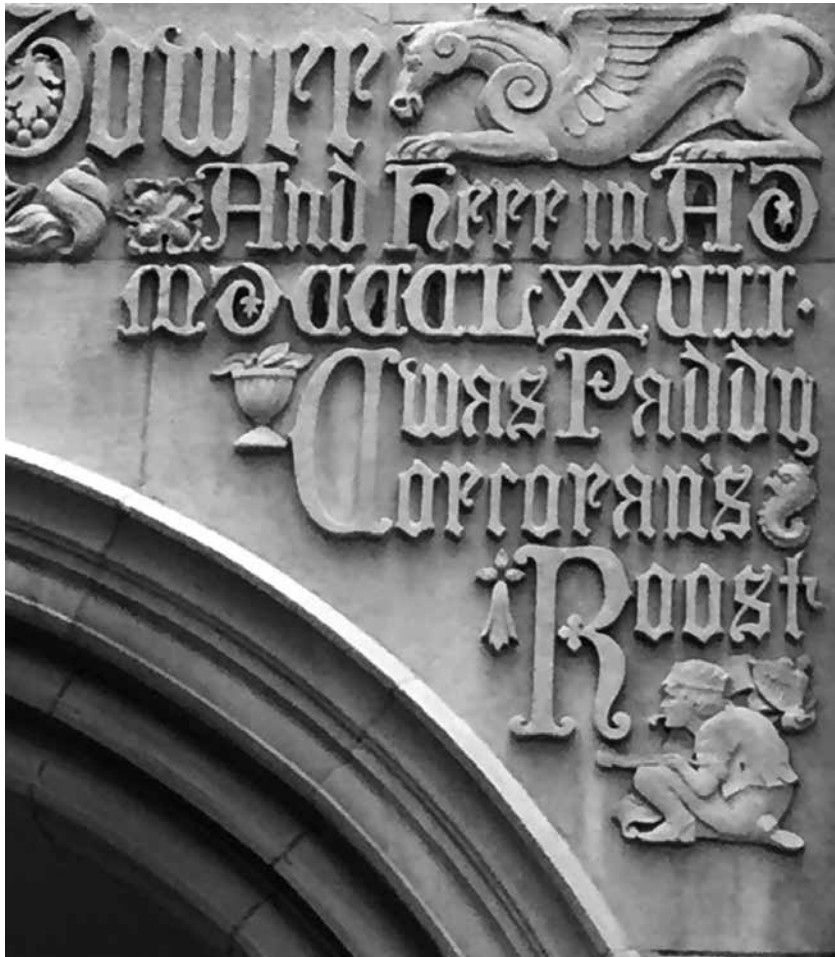
Curiosity set in, as my sister also mentioned that there was "supposed to be a doorway, either granite or marble, in the area that he occupied near Tudor City in Manhattan with his name engraved above it." Intrigued, I agreed to locate it and take a photo underneath to send home to my dad in Ireland. All the while I pondered why I'd never heard of this character that landed in America 170 years before I did. At the time, I was busy establishing myself as a new immigrant, and Corcoran's story ignited a passion to find a way to converse with the past and recover a lost narrative through the medium of song. The idea that I was not the first to travel to America should have been obvious to me, being born in Ireland, but it wasn't. Why had I not heard any fireside tales about Corcoran from my childhood? Had it something to do with my own parents' move from Ireland to Australia and their subsequent return? Yet, I doubted this,



Tudor City (Dutch Hill, 2022). All photos by Vincent Cross.

as how could our link to the past have been severed by that one event. I'll admit I've always had a fragmented connection with Ireland and its colonial history anyway, and this was partly due to my own lack of interest in the collective, tired narrative of Ireland's victimhood under 800 years of British oppression, which was further complicated by

the fact that my mother was English. Now, it seemed Corcoran's story might be the catalyst for me to begin to suture conflicting historical narratives to create a connection between fabulation and archive—maybe, even allowing some sort of therapeutic healing of ancestral wounds. If I could get closer to the voices of the past that were just barely



Left: Corcoran's Roost. Inscription to Paddy Corcoran at Tudor City, 2017. Right: Inscription to Paddy Corcoran (obscured by scaffolding) at Tudor City, 2022.

hanging on, there was also the potential to redress some of the common misconceptions about the Irish American immigrant experience.

It was a bitterly cold winter morning when I made the trip into Manhattan to locate the infamous “Corcoran’s Roost.”<sup>1</sup> It was here that a Gothic inscription was supposed to be—under an archway in what would become the expensive residential area of Tudor City, Manhattan. I looked up at the high embankment and climbed the steps to the residential buildings in search of the inscription to Paddy Corcoran. The towering buildings are situated on a low cliff, east of Second Avenue and were constructed in 1926, comprising the first residential skyscraper complex in the world (Gray 1994). I walked back and forth, confused—not knowing what I was really looking for until I noticed, hidden under some scaffolding and above an awning, an inscription that read:

*Here in 1877 was Paddy Corcoran's Roost*

This fragment of the past was a dangling chain, with links stretching back into the beginnings of the Irish American immigrant story and my own family history. All manner of questions popped into my head: Should I reach up and grab it? What would happen if I did? Would I disturb the universe? Was 170 years long enough for me to attempt to set down Corcoran’s story in a narrative without upsetting living family members? I wasn’t a historian but a musician and songwriter, and the skill set I had might allow me to set his life into song (Cox 2008). I remembered thinking about a quotation by Frank Harte, who famously claimed “Those in power write the history, while those who suffer write the songs” (Moloney 2005). Could I write those songs now after all this time and essentially recover the past? Can archive and imagination work together? I began to imagine I was a broadside ballad writer from the 1800s (these were like the journalists of the past), and started

researching Irish traditional songs that existed during Corcoran’s life, in an attempt to reconnect with the immigrant spirit of my ancestor, through the medium of song. I would see if I could excavate and reconstruct a narrative of the Irish American immigrant experience through imagination, memory, and archive.

A few years passed, and as they do when you’re busy, life’s natural rhythms intrude. In fact, recently I was watching a flock of starlings noisily singing in a tree, and I watched as they all took off in complete silence. It made me wonder about how flying birds never sing, as the constant movement gives them little time to set down their song. I’m sure Corcoran was busy, too, and I drifted in and out of his immigrant experience by rereading his obituary over and over again, as well as other obituaries that contained more information about Corcoran’s brushes with the law and his many court appearances. Incredibly, at 81 years old, not

only was his longevity remarkable, but the historical period he inhabited, 1819–1900, was a time of dramatic upheaval and change: the Irish famine and revolution, British colonialism, the American Civil War, and the New York City draft/race riots were all events that Corcoran experienced directly in ways that I could barely imagine. I pictured his humble beginnings as a fisherman in Balbriggan, north of Dublin; witnessing his father being dispossessed of his land and then leaving for the modern metropolis of New York City. It must have buzzed with modernity, and no doubt, the advent of electricity and the birth of the motor car took place under Corcoran’s ever watchful gaze from his “Roost.” What did he think? What kept him going through these times? Certainly, I cannot ask Corcoran. However, through the embodiment of personal experience, I may emotionally understand the “Roost” as a creative space and craft out of this “liminal” location a framework of songs (Cobb 2016). These songs came over time; consider “A Stranger I Came,” and “A Man after My Heart.”

I’d applied this songwriting process to previous musical projects, such as a traditional bluegrass album called, *Home Away from Home*, and later, with *Old Songs for Modern Folk* (Cross and Good Company 2008; Cross 2016). However, before the process of writing began, I needed to transport myself back into the context of Corcoran’s time. With one obituary and one Gothic inscription, I felt I needed something else. I visited the “The Roost” sporadically—in a way, that was similar to the way that I had visited James Joyce’s grave in Zurich or Mississippi John Hurt’s resting place in Avalon, Mississippi, or even John Keats’ deathbed on the Spanish steps in Rome. It’s like you’re attempting to see through the eyes of the dead; one might even call it ghosting. Later, I would use this idea musically by imitating obscure musical styles, on period instruments, to access what the musician might have heard as they played their instrument. My research took me deep into newspaper archival territory to articles about “The Roost” and the Rag Gang and down to

Chambers Street to find death records and wills. The Roost would have looked over the United Nations building of today, and I imagined how he used this very spot to his advantage against his many “ructions” with the police and other gangs. I also frequented the Five Points—it was here that Corcoran had apparently started and formed the Rag Gang, who would later become another group called Corcoran’s Roosters. Walking the narrow streets, I breathed in the air and saw the low lay of the land, and imagined again how it might have been 170 years ago. It then occurred to me that I had no idea where Corcoran was buried. No articles mentioned this fact, and I began to feel Corcoran’s ghost fading. A search of the death records on Chambers Street brought him right back into focus when I found his death certificate on a roll of microfilm. I remember holding it my hands, stunned to discover that he was buried not more than few stops away from where I was living in Queens, at Calvary Cemetery.

It took six years after I’d originally heard about Corcoran for me to finally make my way to the cemetery. The muggy air contrasted with the drizzle in a discomforting way, as I followed the line of gray stones to discover the final resting place of James “The Rooster” Corcoran. I remembered thinking it was an Irish day, a mixing of memory and desire, as T. S. Elliot would say. I had no idea of what I’d feel when I stood over the grave,

but I knew that it would fall in line with every other feeling and emotion that I’d gathered so far, and that these “emotions” were unconsciously working beneath the surface to be inserted into songs. There was excitement at this force that led me here, to stand over his name and the names of his wife and children. I balanced my phone on a tombstone and took the required selfie. Walking out of the gate, I felt dislocated from the busy world outside. At a traffic light, I glanced momentarily at a stranger behind the steering wheel of a car, and I wanted to communicate that time was something we could control and imagined that somehow the stranger would understand what I meant if I explained where I’d been. Yet, I really didn’t know where I’d been. I only knew that the songs would come, and that they’d offer up another understanding, another way of knowing.

The songs did come, as I imagined Corcoran’s life by reading books about the period: *Gangs of New York*, *Five Points*, *Banished Children of Eve*, as well as numerous ballad collections of Irish immigrant songs. I returned again and again to archival newspapers and even joined ancestry.com, finding a living American descendant on Long Island. She had saved more articles about Corcoran’s criminal past, and this was very helpful in providing a broader understanding of the Corcoran family, as his sons Tommy, Michael, and William were also notorious



Author at James Corcoran’s gravesite, 2017.

members of the gang. William was even shot in the head (he survived) by a policeman, and the Corcoran clan attempted to use the legal system to have the officer convicted. Yet, documents connecting me directly to the family had been lost.<sup>2</sup> Maybe the documents were lost in the fire of 1922, after Ireland achieved its independence. There was really nothing on his life before coming to America, only the stories he had never denied to journalists in America, so I was free to imagine further by writing, “A Man After Me Own Heart.” I gave the project the working title, *The Life & Times of James “The Rooster” Corcoran*, which gave me more scope to step outside of just his story, to include his wife, children, and various gang members. I was writing verses and looking for melodies to marry to sounds and words.

Finding the right musical setting for the stories would be critical. I knew from my experiments with writing songs in various genres, like bluegrass and old-time music, that usually I’d have to learn a new style of playing my instrument or even learn a new instrument. For example, I’d taken a deep dive into the mandolin playing of Bill Monroe for bluegrass—learning how he played and following his fingers, I felt I was inhabiting his sound, which helped me think in that vocabulary. I approached Mississippi John Hurt and his Piedmont guitar playing similarly. I also sought out New York historical albums that might lead me to songs or ideas. Most were recorded in the 1960s mainly, during the folk revival, and I was always disappointed if there was not enough attention to traditional sounds.<sup>3</sup> In search of the “right” sounds, I found myself at the Augusta Heritage Center in West Virginia that July, unraveling minstrel banjo styles of the late 1800s and early 1920s. I was sitting down in front of Travis Stuart, as he was teaching clawhammer banjo to a small class, when he played a tune by Lee Sexton, and my ears perked up. Something about its modality seemed to contain both the old world and the new world. It had a fragmented story already, and I knew immediately that this was the type of melody that could hold a Corcoran narrative. I needed to learn it. I



Author returns to James Corcoran’s gravesite, 2022.

remember slowly picking out the tune with the original words and returning from the camp and reading the articles again, gathering lines from the many obituaries, until I found a title from *The Sun* newspaper: “King Corcoran is Dead” that really grabbed me (*The Sun* 1900). It always seemed to me to be racially tainted, though—implying Corcoran was not really a “King.” Maybe, I thought, it connected Corcoran to King Kong, an ape or savage running amok in the metropolis,

but the name “King Corcoran” works on many levels, aside from the alliteration. Soon a story began to form, and it was clear that this song was about how he was represented by the media in America, and that clarity made it possible to characterize him.<sup>4</sup>

### King Corcoran

King Corcoran was a gentleman,  
He came from decent folk  
He found a spot on the crack of a rock,

And it's there he made his stand.  
He built a shack upon that crack  
From the wood from the East River bed,  
And for sport and recreation,  
Dropped rocks on policemen's heads.

*He'd bludgeon you with an old cart rung,  
The leader of the colony,  
With goats, and pigs, and hens and dogs,  
All a'roaming free.*

Then one day a police captain came  
To eject him from his roost.  
Instead, his wife stripped the buttons  
From the Captain's suit.  
*They hang like decorations  
On the shanty wall.  
The police can have them when they come.*

*And to hell with them all.*

King Corcoran's house was a castle,  
A phrase both bold and true.  
And whoever invaded  
Did so at his peril.

*Chorus:*

*With caustic tongue and ready wit,  
His word it was his bond  
He'd help you out if he could,  
But he'd never spare the rod.*

In "King Corcoran," the rhythm really takes over, and the words took a while to sync. I thought it might never happen that I could play and deliver the words at the same time; however, slowly, and surely the song fell into place. I now had one song, and that was a huge step. I knew now that the next song had to come from Corcoran himself in the first-person narrative voice, with hints of his life before America. If I could create that song, then everything else would sit in between. These two songs would bookend his journey. Knowing that the banjo signified an old-time American sound, I was now searching for a setting that would go further back and connect to an Ireland of the early 1800s. Furthermore, I realized very early that there would be no guitar on this album.

This was a decision that was based on both historical and aesthetic reasons: first, historically, the guitar had not dominated the popular music of the 1800s, and so by taking it out of the mix, I might get to something less nuanced by today's socialized ears. I'd noticed that whenever I listened to historical albums, I could almost tell you when it was recorded by listening to the style of guitar playing. Second, I knew I needed sounds that I'd not used before, and on a visit to Ireland, I followed my nose into a second-hand bookstore in Athlone and serendipitously reached down and bought some vintage traditional Irish vinyl. When I came back to New York, I played one record repeatedly and was entranced by an Irish traditional band called Na Filí.<sup>5</sup>

I listened carefully, and another chain appeared in front of me. I'd seen this chain before and ignored it, but this time it felt right to grab it. The sounds that I heard on the album were very different from the strings of banjos, mandolins, and guitars. There were drones layered on long notes, and rhythmically, there was an incredible freedom to it. Even the idea alone seemed to fit a preindustrial Ireland. I needed to be able to play sustained single notes, and let the voice make a stand. It is impossible to explain the inner thinking further in this essay, but I began to consider the concertina, which I'd heard in Ireland years ago, as its size and cost fit my budget. I knew it would be a gamble, as there were two types of concertina—one Anglo and one English, and there was a lot of history attached to each (the Anglo being the most associated with Irish traditional dance music, and the English more connected to song accompaniment). Not knowing whether I could even get something usable out of either, I chose the English, as I didn't want to be completely sidetracked down a road I would never come out from.<sup>6</sup> I remember sitting down and just droning on and on, layering notes, and hearing singing and a new voice coming into existence.

This new setting brought me closer to an unaccompanied vocal line, and I studied the solo *sean-nós* singing of Joe Heaney and

others, until finally I began to feel Corcoran's voice coming through. Now, all I needed were his words, too, and these words existed in the newspaper article I had read about his visit to the courthouse to bail out his friend Robert Dougherty—the article in the *New York Times* characterized Corcoran's speech and words. Although heavy with patois, you get a sense of the man coming off the page, as he defends his friend for fighting and even offers up the deeds of his own home as bond to release Dougherty on bail (*New York Times* 1899). Now I had "A Man After My Own Heart."

### **A Man after My Own Heart**

Oh, my name is Jimmy Corcoran,  
And the same I'll ne'r disown.

I used to be live in happiness  
Just north of Dublin.  
By trade I was a fisherman  
And full the nets came in.  
We hauled them up by hand  
In the port of Balbriggan.

We'd cast out the line  
And let the small ones go.  
That's what my daddy taught me,  
It's all I really know.

You can't fight the crown,  
So don't take the bait.  
You know you cannot live,  
So, it's better to escape.

It's well that I remember  
The year of '44.  
I eloped on board the Charlotte  
Out of Liverpool.  
As Irish you could travel free,  
If willing to stay below.  
Six weeks of darkness on route  
To America—heave ho!

They call me a Paddy,  
But I'm an Irish gentleman.

A little bit of fighting  
Never did no harm.  
My father he was hunted

Through the mountains and *boreen*.  
A rebel, he was persecuted  
Under the monarchy.

Come all you gallant Irishmen,  
Wherever you may be,  
And I hope you paid attention  
And listened unto me.  
It's not where I'm from,  
But it's where I got my start.

I'll lend a hand you'll understand.  
To a man after my heart.

—X2

The rest of the songs slowly developed from other articles, and I even dug into Paddy's son, Tommy Corcoran's will. You see, there was a large fortune of various denominations ascribed to Corcoran in many of the obituaries (\$25,000–\$100,000): however, the whereabouts of such a fortune seems to have been buried with him. Songs continue to arrive as this “uncrowned King of the shanty people” still calls me. I'm not sure why but, at best, it is as if something needs to be resolved, or at least when I perform the songs that I'm able to feel a sense of connection to the past. I still sense his presence in the City. In fact, the other day in Central Park, I was studying the road horses, and it suddenly occurred to me that Corcoran's estate had included working horses of this ilk. Seeing this living history, I wondered if maybe some of the horses might even be descended from Corcoran's stable, still working the gritty New York City streets. The past is ghosting with the living history moving around and within me. I still visit “The Roost” and stand and peer down on the road below. I imagine Corcoran, 170 years ago, surveying the scene from his rocky eminence, casting disdainful glances at progress passing in the street. I'm sure I'll resurrect him again for a tour when the COVID-19 pandemic has less of a hold on the world. ▼

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Corcoran's Roost was the name given to Corcoran's colony. It was a notorious place in which fights, robberies, and other

illegal activities were common. Allegedly, no policeman would ever enter without a hail of rocks and being set upon by the “hill dwellers.”

- <sup>2</sup> Later through ancestry.com, a DNA connection was found between the direct descendants and my own DNA, supporting a biological connection.
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Folk Songs of New York City sung by June Lazare*. Folkways Records, 1966. <https://folkways.si.edu/june-lazare/folk-songs-of-new-york-city-vol-1/american-folk/music/album/smithsonian>
- <sup>4</sup> The author worked with Milly Raccoon to create a broadside video of the song, “King Corcoran.”
- <sup>5</sup> A popular Irish traditional group from 1973, Na Filí (The Poets) playing an Irish slow air, “An Londubh is an Chéirseach” (The Blackbird and The Thrush), with Tomás Ó Canainn (pipes), Matt Cranitch (fiddle), and Tom Barry (whistle).
- <sup>6</sup> I should also point out that I had an Irish double course mandocello made specially for the album to replace the guitar sound range. Brian Lofthouse was the luthier in Westport, Ireland.

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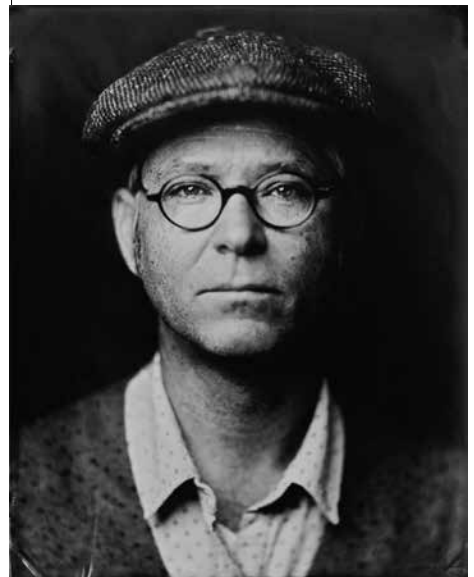
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Vincent Cross is a writer, musician, performer, and educator. Born in Ireland, raised in Australia, and now based in New York City, he was influenced by local traditional players in Ireland, as well as inspired by the contemporary singer-songwriters he encountered on his travels. His four full-length original albums have garnered critical acclaim with charting success for *Old Songs for Modern Folk* (2016), *A Town Called Normal* (2013), and *The Life & Times of James “The Rooster” Corcoran* (2020). He tours extensively in Europe, Canada, and Australia, where he has performed at TelemarkFestivalen (Norway), The Hebridean Celtic Festival (Scotland). Stateside, Cross has performed at the Dripping Springs Songwriter Festival (Texas), the Brooklyn Folk Festival, and the South Florida Folk Festival. Photo: Period tintype of author taken in 2017 at a booked session at the Penumbra Foundation, Manhattan, New York City.



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