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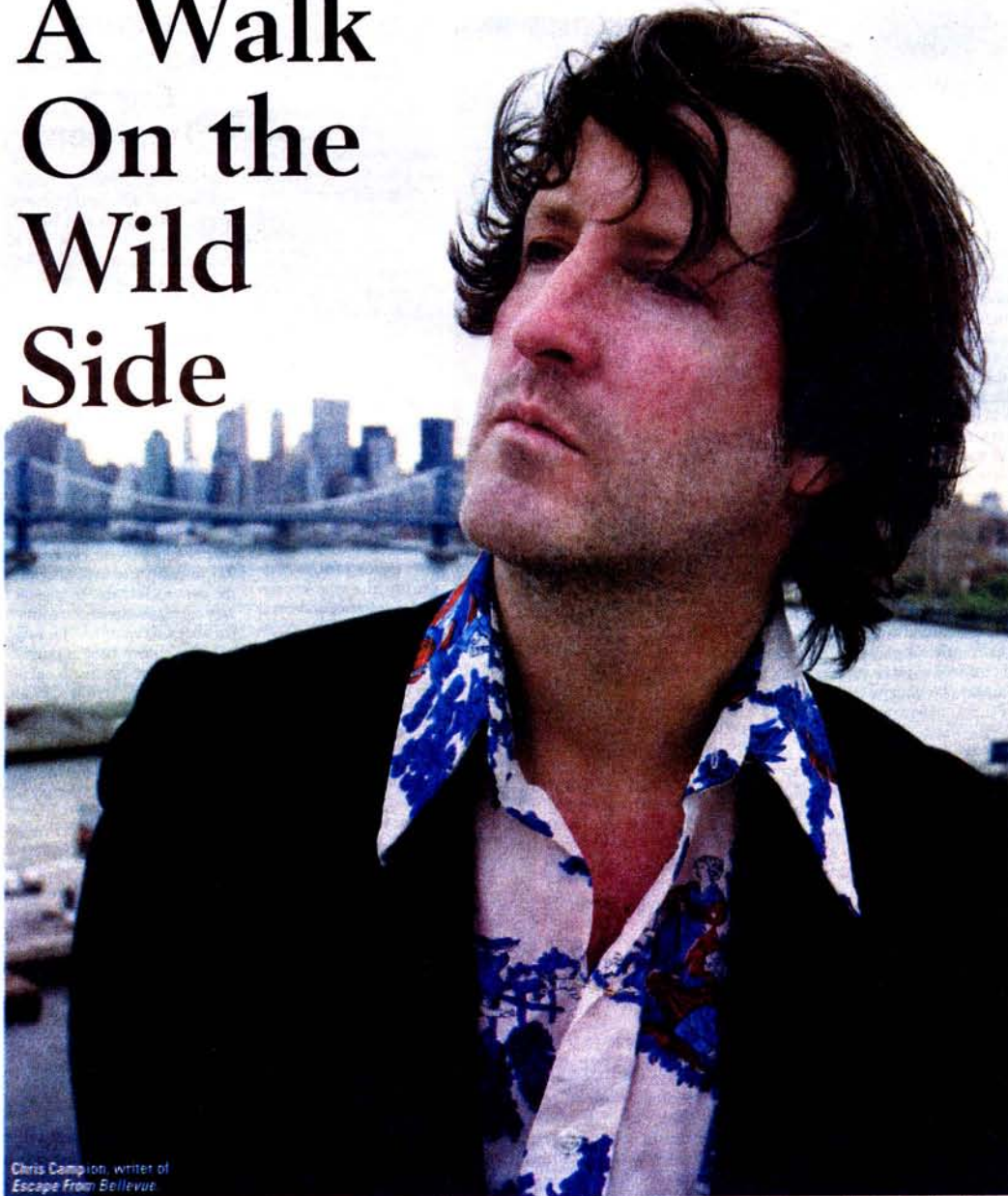


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THE BEST IN IRISH ARTS, MUSIC, THEATRE, BOOKS AND FILM

MAURA KENNEDY

A Walk On the Wild Side



Chris Campion, writer of
Escape From Bellevue

Break on through to the other side, sang rocker Jim Morrison, shortly before taking his own unfortunate advice. Living on the edge can be heady, but you may not like the bill when it's due. Just ask Christopher John Campion, the Irish American author and lead singer of the Knockout Drops, who may just be one of the funniest men alive. CAHIR O'DOHERTY talks to him about his life, his band and his unmissable book *Escape From Bellevue*.

BELLEVUE mental hospital has a storied history in the imagination of most New Yorkers. Back in the 1950s it had already become a catchphrase for Irish American comic genius Jackie Gleason in *The Honeymooners*: "I'm calling Bellevue 'cause you're nuts!" he'd scream at his long suffering wife.

He never did call though, probably because he knew what lay in store for a new arrival. In those days, if you were committed the stigma was so major that most likely you were never coming out. Certainly no one ever expected you to escape from the place.

Meet Christopher John Campion, 43, Irish American author and lead singer with the Knockout Drops. When his rock and roll life and the excesses that fueled it finally came crashing down around him he spent time in the place, talking to the walls or just recovering, and he even did something that's almost unprecedented — he actually escaped.

Some people like to dance on the edge of total collapse, and Campion is one of them. Or rather, he was one of them.

He got wise in the end, and instead of being consumed by his demons he confronted them one by one and even defanged them (slightly) in his brave and unspeakably funny book, *Escape From Bellevue*.

Growing up Irish Catholic in Huntington, Long Island (about an hour from New York City) he lived in a town with a bay, a harbor and a majestic 19th century lighthouse sandwiched between them. It was a small town with 35 bars within a quarter mile radius.

In the 1980s it was, Campion says, the epicenter of horrendous hair metal bands and cheesy synthesizer pop. For him, starting a band meant finding other people who loved U2, the Who, Bowie, Echo and the Bunnymen and all the new wave British stars who weren't often in the hit parade.

When he met his

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A Walk On the Wild Side ²

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Knockout Drops band mates back in the 1980s he didn't know they were about to embark on a 25-year odyssey. They were just Irish and Italian teenagers sipping cheap beer and getting revved up talking about their passions, music and girls.

Privately they referred to themselves as the McKnokout Wops, making "beautiful Italian music with jaded Irish lyrics." After he got sober, being in a band with that name still makes him laugh.

"My parents were second generation and being Irish was a big, big part of my life growing up. It's in my marrow," Campion tells the *Irish Voice*.

"There was a lot of dancing and singing and at some point falling over the furniture at family parties. My parents were Irish Catholics and they listened to the Clancy Brothers and sang traditional Irish songs. My family came over, both sides, and got into Irish politics in New York City."

One of six, Campion had to fight to get a word in at the dinner table, and when he did he had to make sure it was worth hearing.

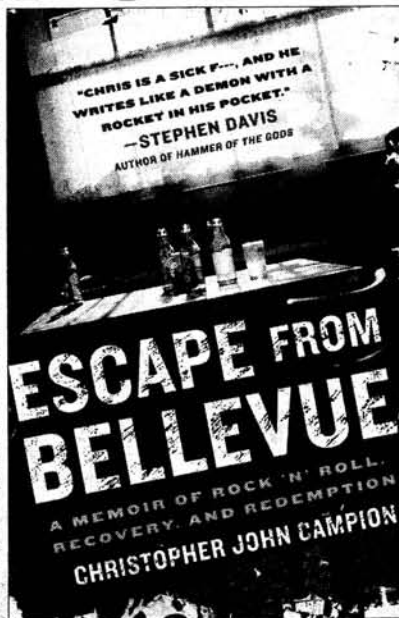
"You had to be damn well sure you had something

that would hold the floor or you would lose it. You had to come with your A-game or the group would crush you. You had a one minute radius to hold the crowd."

It was good training for a lead singer. Everyone in his family can play music and sing, and his older brothers had bands in their garage that Campion grew up listening to.

"I spent my childhood navigating two parties. One was going on in the house with my parents and their friends. They threw these Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton style parties in the 1970s with their love seats and their plaid pants, with Dean Martin playing on the stereo," Campion recalls.

"Then out in the garage my brothers were playing a rock concert with all these suburban kids drinking beer from a keg that was hidden behind a lawn mower. The pot smoke



would hit your nose before you got there. I was 10 years old, and seeing pretty girls in Indian skirts dancing to the music, that's how I cut my teeth."

When he was 14 his older sister returned from a semester in Ireland with a copy of U2's *Boy*. Together with the Clash and other imported bands, their sound changed his life.

"There was a station on Long Island called WLIR

that played them and the Boomtown Rats and the Jam. After that came The Replacements and REM," he says. Bizarrely, one day Richie Blackmore, the guitarist with Deep Purple, moved in next door to the Campions.

"It's not like the guy had some crazy Rick James style mansion with groupies all over the property. He just moved in," Campion recalls.

"As I got into music I grew up watching him, and it made the lifestyle look possible to me. My neighbor is a rock star, I told myself. I can do this too."

In every one of the bars in Huntington there was a live band playing. So it was easy for the Knockout Drops to cut their teeth on stage.

They developed a major following and they moved to New York City. But a series of music business disasters plagued them at every turn.

"When you fuel disappointment with booze and

blow it accelerates the process. We kept having situations where we were getting signed and something would happen. There was a lot of self-pity too; I'm not going to lie to you. I started circling the drain," Campion says.

Along the way to fame Campion lost his faith in people, love and God. The things that used to inspire him left him cold.

At The Red Lion in Manhattan, where he held court every week, his stories about the weird things he'd seen delighted Andy Breslin, who was an owner, and the other patrons kept insisting he should write it all down.

"It all started with me drinking a lot and talking on a microphone. All those stories became the sketch for the musical (*Escape From Bellevue* was a successful musical before it became a book)," he says.

"When I was on the gasline I would make marvelous company for the first four hours, then I would go into the nether regions of my buzz and interesting philosophical musings would come out of my mouth. None of which I would remember the next day."

Escaping from Bellevue, which even now strikes him as a hell of a sentence to say

so matter of factly, was something that the band's audience responded to. When he mentioned the triumphs and tragedies of his life before he sang about them with the band he noticed they often made the song mean more.

"By the end of my drinking I was falling off the stool at gigs. I tried to pass it off as conceptual art. No one bought it," he says.

"My alcoholism was out of control, I was a daily drinker, I would go to the bar in my pajamas, and my off switch was just broken. We were seen as the next big band out of New York City and we didn't break through. In my nightly blackouts I would flip from laughter to tears in a second.

"My girlfriend came home one night and found me talking to the wall. That spooked her so she called 911."

They hauled Campion off to Bellevue. How he got there (three times) and his journey back are the subject of his hilarious, terrifying book.

"I always considered myself a happy guy. But after eight hours of packing booze and blow a different guy would emerge," he says.

Escape From Bellevue is published by Penguin.