

AM HOME WITH THE SWINGS

BEVERY time I look, the pile of ham sandwiches on the china plate in front of me mounts even higher. And Mary Murray-Burke shows no signs of abating, vigorously lathering more butter onto fresh slices of thick white bread.

Between buttering, she fires questions about my journey from Dublin, and how long Joe the photographer's brother has been a priest. When she finally judges the sandwich mountain to be high enough, she throws open the presses and furiously roots around until she finds a jam and cream sponge cake, which she deftly cuts into six pieces.

These are placed in front of us alongside chocolate fancy squares, scones, icing-covered fairy cakes and Kimberley biscuits.

As brother and sister Derek and Dervla laugh at their mother's fretting and reach for the best china plates laid out for this late morning tea, I'm startled by a silver spout suddenly appearing to my left.

It'll be gone cold by now, go on, take a fresh drop, you might as well, urges Mary's husband Michael, with the same enthusiasm that prised my coat from my hands when I arrived, made me my first cup of tea and told Mary the priest just rang.

If Michael is anything like his wife, resistance is futile — so I just nod, sitting here, as I am, elbow deep in sponge cake and sandwiches, beneath the red flicker of the Sacred Heart, which sits above the large stereo and the bulging Trocaire box.

It's two years since Mary and her two children, Derek and Dervla — after some fervent decades of the rosary by Mary at a nearby church — woke up to discover they were an overnight internet sensation, with more than a million YouTube hits for Crystal Swing's He Drinks Tequila.

Its band frontwoman Dervla — who turns 20 in May, but was just in fifth year when Crystal Swing took off — who meets me at the porch when I arrive.

With all the warmth of a seasoned B&B bean an ti, clearly picked up from mammy, she sweeps me past the porcelain Alsatian and Dalmatian figurines and burst of orange, blue, red, pink and purple tissue flowers in the hall, past the main living room, down the corridor past the downstairs bedroom and bathroom, into the television room.

Derek's guitar is on the floor and one side of the room is a makeshift wall of fame, plastered in posters from gigs over the past two years. When an immaculately made-up Mary appears to welcome me — her blonde hair set and hairsprayed into place, her jeans freshly pressed — she invites us up to the front living room.

'It's a humble little home,' she chirps. 'When we were away a lot our house fell behind a small bit. Everything has been here years and years, we've never changed anything.'

Until March 2010, Mary, 48 — who



by Michelle Fleming

Then five years ago, her music-mad children — who used to tag along to gigs when she couldn't find a baby-sitter — took to the stage with her.

But when they made a little music video for their now infamous hit He Drinks Tequila 'for a bit of fun' in their front living room, they had no idea they were about to alter the course of all their lives forever.

'Aargh, I can't even watch it or listen to it. I cringe if someone plays it and have to leave the room — it's the worst thing ever,' groans Dervla, who stands at a willowy six foot, at the mention of the video.

The usually glamorous frontwoman

'I can't watch the He Drinks Tequila video'

wears jeans and a jumper today, with glittery flat pumps. Her verdict of it as 'so cheesy and amateurish' is met with an empathetic nod from Derek between bites of a scone.

The video generated attention in Ireland before going viral. Then, when Ellen DeGeneres played it on her show on St Patrick's Day 2010, there was such a response that the network invited Crystal Swing to Hollywood to perform in the studio.

The rest, as they say, is history. 'It was amazing — but it was like the death of our old life and the birth of our new life,' admits Mary.

'For me, it was a dream to be famous and perform on big stages — then it became my children's dream and I prayed it would happen for them — everything I do is for them. Then it happened.'

Two years on, demand has not slowed for the band. Their schedule is packed, and recently they performed at London's Trafalgar Square on St Patrick's Day, sang in the Caribbean on a five-star cruise liner and performed with Daniel O'Donnell. They also released their new single, Sun Still Shines.

But back at home, they are still just a normal family. Shelves beside the fireplace are filled with the complete set of Royal Britannica encyclopedias, children's encyclopedias, rows of flip photo albums with dates scribbled on the spine, porcelain dolls and a side glass unit packed with dozens of trophies (the Sunday World Media Personality of the Year, Ireland's Best Entertainment Band, Derek's Celebrity Bainsisteoir trophy among them), rows of trinkets, religious icons and family photos.

A disorienting effect is created by the bright red shag carpet, white shiny wallpaper and one white and purple floral embossed feature wall around the gas fireplace; the grey floral suite with crisp white dollies resting on the back, net curtains on the criss-cross taped windows, and the portrait of Pope John Paul II, the



Scones at the ready: From left, Dervla, Michael, Derek and Mary Murray-Burke

old-school blue stereo and two keyboards sitting in the corner.

It's a warm, familiar, comforting feeling, like that nostalgia you feel watching that famous ESB ad from the Eighties about coming home for Christmas. Just like the feeling many get when watching Crystal Swing perform.

Suddenly it all makes sense — the caravan beside their bungalow and the chickens at the end of the garden — they may be one of our most successful gigging bands but Crystal Swing have no need for crude ostentation. The only clues to their success are the CCTV cameras around the outside of the house

and Derek's blue vintage Ford tractor. I couldn't imagine Crystal Swing relaxing anywhere more opposite. Derek, who turns 21 next month, sits under the encyclopedias, philosophising like a man three times his age. He admits: 'I'm a homebird. I'd go up the country but always love to come home at night. I like being single and doing what I want.'

He remembers taking Lucy Kennedy to his debs and confesses: 'I knocked one girl's nose out of joint. I'd said it to her about the debs but then this came up and I thought it would be good auld craic if Lucy came to it. We got a marquee out the back and crowds came from all over

We gave them tea and sandwiches.' Dervla admits she is delighted now their schedule has slowed so she can enjoy a more normal life. 'When I took off it was intense. Hearing my friends talking about going to 18th birthdays and I couldn't go — I felt like I couldn't relate with my friends. Now it's better.'

And, she reveals, she's found true love. 'It's still new, six months. His name is Tim, he's from Carruntohill, we've known of one another for years. 'I've gone on dates with boys before but this is the most serious so far. He's a farmer with cows and sheep. Our first date was seeing Tower Heist

at the cinema, which was useless, then we went out for meals around Cork and it's blossomed.'

Can she see herself as a farmer's wife? 'Absolutely. One day maybe,' she says coyly, to which Derek can't resist teasing: 'She came in the other day and instead of saying one of the ewes was having a lamb she says one of the "Os" is having a sheep. She needs a crash course — she won't be much help in the milking parlour.'

As the banter flows, a proud Mammy listens on. When I ask whether she thinks Dervla settling down is a good idea, she bites her lip but, astutely, says all the right things. 'She's gone out with a few guys and I

was a bit "I don't know" but the minute I saw Tim I liked him and said "yes, yes, yes!"'

'He comes from a lovely family,' she says. 'Tim's shy, like her dad here and I keeps in the background but he's getting on great with the mother-in-law! I'd love to see her settle with a guy like Tim — but it's still early days for both of them.'

Speaking of her husband, how is the background-loving Michael coping with the family's fame? 'Having worked in the warehouse at grain processing plant Goldcorp for 17 years, Michael has now given up work to help his wife and children build their careers. 'When things got

busy I took a leave of absence from my job,' he reveals.

'We were doing 1,600km a week for a year and a half — Dublin twice in one day and Cork from Donegal — I felt gut-racked by the decision she had to make. "Do I go back to caring for my mother or do I look out for my son and daughter and try and create a future for them? I saw she was content so I made the decision I couldn't care for her any more.'

'I had to think of Derek and Dervla and I thought, "they have their whole lives ahead of them and my mother is nearly in her nineties". She would want me to make the decision for them. She was dreadfully sad and

shot to fame two years ago. And that fame came at a price.

'My mother was in respite care when all this broke and I had to make choices very fast,' says Mary, still gut-racked by the decision she had to make. 'Do I go back to caring for my mother or do I look out for my son and daughter and try and create a future for them? I saw she was content so I made the decision I couldn't care for her any more.'

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Practice makes perfect: Working on a new number for the show



Home sweet home: The house feels nostalgic



Wall of fame: The group keep all their clippings

missed me, as I didn't see her for two months bar a day here and there, and she used to cry when I left.

'I had to get my brothers to break it to her as it was too emotional. It was heart-wrenching.'

'But it was a blessing in disguise as I'm not able to give her the medical care and supervision she requires, emotionally and physically. She's never been more content than she is now. She had to make sacrifices too — we all did.'

For a family who spend almost every waking moment together, touring in their burgundy Ford Transit or living in hotel rooms, the Murray-Burkes are an incredibly close unit, keen to hear praise on one another at any opportunity. On the subject of band relations, they look at one another and pause, before Dervla and Derek laugh conspiratorially.

Derek says: 'Myself and Dervla are best friends. We tell each other everything. Mam gives out a bit but she's the boss — we get on with her but it's

'Mam gives out a bit but she's the boss'

the same with all families, there can be a clash of personalities.'

Mammy laughs and says: 'They give me an awful doing and I'm so good to them. They discuss my shortcomings in front of me! I'm a bit short-tempered sometimes. When we're waiting to go on in the stage I think about the show but they draw pictures, none too complimentary, of me.'

'They have to spend a lot of time with me so I might be a bit of embarrassment. It can be frustrating for them but I think I'm a great mam.'

And judging by their grins, that's a matter not up for dispute — as their mother and manager Mary is clearly doing a super job. She is clearly very glad that the family decided to do most of the work themselves.

Mary says: 'At the beginning we knew nothing about the industry. We were approached by a lot of people and we'd heard horror stories about signing on the dotted line. We were frightened out of our lives to make huge decisions.'

'There were one or two cagey characters who we got caught with. One promised us the sun, moon and stars but we realised he was a chancer who would have destroyed us.'

'Hugh Rodgers [their one-time manager] was very helpful but it was too big for him and even the well-established country music managers. 'We did it all ourselves without any PR — we couldn't have envisaged two years ago we'd be still here, but we are.'

Pictures: JOE DUNNE