

THE VAN MORRISON TRAIL

Introduction

I grew up in a kitchen house in Greenville Street in Bloomfield. East Belfast was famous for its rows of kitchen houses. They were small and compact and always kept perfectly clean. I remember my mum and other women in the street doing the 'half moon' wash of the footpath outside the front doors.

These streets were adventure playgrounds for young boys like Van and myself. On a cold winter's night we would pour water along the street, watch it freeze and use it as a slide. In the summer days we used to head up to a nearby unused rail cutting at North Road with strips of cardboard and slide down the steep sides of the dry grass.

Orangefield was just a wonderful place. Hardly a house built on it then, for us young boys it was just perfect. A wilderness, a jungle, we could be Robin Hood one day or the Lone Ranger the next. We used to dig trenches as would-be soldiers in the sand hills of Orangefield.

'Beechie River' which Van featured in one of his songs, was really a large stream, which flowed from Orangefield right down past Elmgrove School. To us, it could've been the Mississippi. We built rafts to sail on it but we didn't get very far, we kept bumping into the old prams and other stuff dumped in it.

Bloomfield was a great place to grow up in. We have all had incredible things happen in our lives, but it's great to come together now and again to revive those landmarks and memories that meant so much us back then. Thankfully some of them are still here, and they probably will still be there when we are gone.

George Jones,
Former band member and friend



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The Van Morrison Trail

Welcome to Mystic of the East - The Van Morrison Trail. This 3.5km trail will take you on a journey through the east Belfast of Van's youth. The trail should take about two hours to complete, so wear a comfortable pair of shoes and be prepared for the weather – it isn't always sunny in Belfast!

The Trail is a wonderful opportunity for you to visit some of the places that Morrison knew as a child growing up in this part of east Belfast. Many of these places, and the people who lived here, were to shape the character and values of 'Van the Man'. You will discover on your journey that some of them are referenced in his lyrics and music.



For a full 'sight & sound' experience of the Van Morrison Trail, be sure to check out the map that accompanies this booklet. You will notice that there are QR codes alongside a number of the locations. Simply scan each QR code into your smart phone to download a short song extract related to that location. For a guide to using QR codes visit:

www.communitygreenway.co.uk/vanmorrisontrail

George Ivan Morrison was born in Belfast on 31st August 1945. He grew up in a home steeped in music. Van's father was an avid collector of American jazz and blues records purchased from Solly Lipsitz at Atlantic Records in High Street. Later Van was to fuse these sounds with 'Caledonian Soul' to create his own unique and distinctive style. Van's mother Violet was a singer and dancer in her youth.

Aged 13, Van formed his first band, The Sputniks, a skiffle group named after the recently launched Soviet satellite. In 1958, the band played at local cinemas, including Willowfield Cinema (closed 1971) on the nearby Woodstock Road.

In 1964, after recruiting some friends he formed a band called Them and opened an R&B club in the Maritime Hotel (demolished) in Belfast city centre. Them played their first gig at the Maritime Hotel in April of that year and became an immediate local sensation as the club's house band. They went on to record two singles: **Don't Start Crying Now** which was a local hit and a cover of Big Joe Williams' **Baby Please Don't Go**, a British Top 10 hit in early 1965, the B side of which turned out to be the biggest hit of all, **Gloria**.



Van is Belfast's most famous musical son. As a Grammy award winning multi-instrumentalist, singer and songwriter, Van's achievements have been recognised with an Ivor Novello for Lifetime Achievement, honorary doctorates from the University of Ulster and Queen's University Belfast and the l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1993, received an OBE in 1996, inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2003 and most recently in 2013 was granted the Freedom of Belfast.

Occasionally Van performs at intimate venues in and around Belfast. Visit the website for more information www.vanmorrison.com



The 1968 album, **Astral Weeks** is considered to be not only his masterpiece but one of the greatest records ever made.



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Mystic of the East - The Van Morrison Trail starts at Elmgrove Primary School. This warm, red brick building on the Beersbridge Road was opened in 1932 and is still in use as a primary school.

As a small boy Van knew this building well. He spent 7 years here from 1950 to 1956. The school was designed by the celebrated architect Reginald Sherman Wilshire around 1930. School children from Elmgrove Primary School feature in the video for the song **The Healing Game**.



**Here I am again
Back on the corner again
Back where I belong
Where I've always been
Everything the same**

The Healing Game





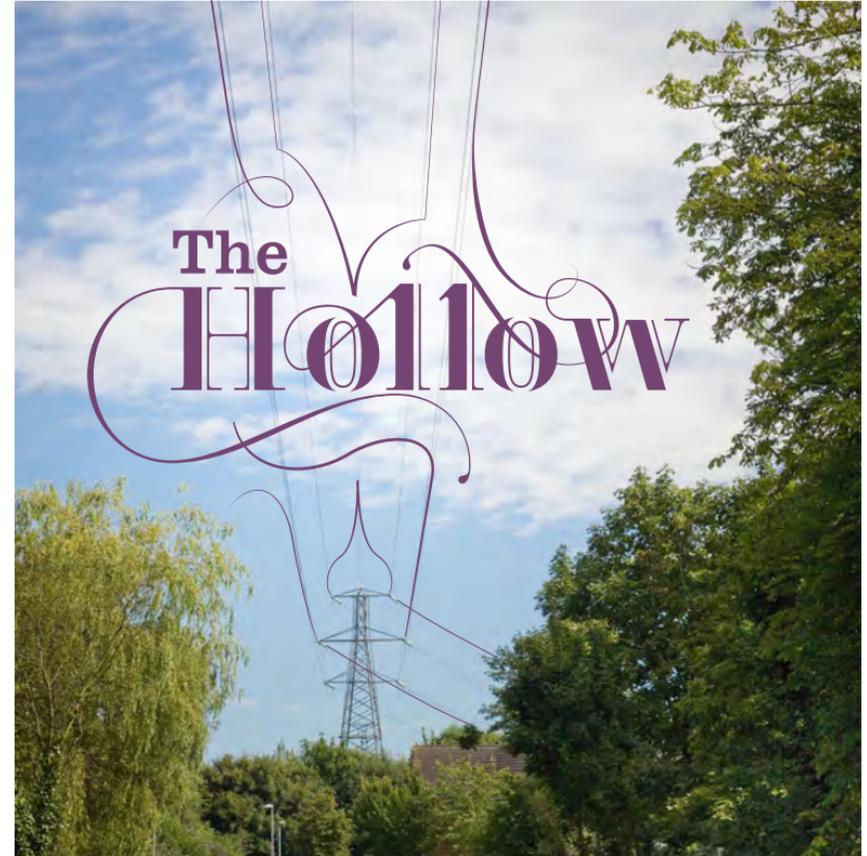
Fans of Van will know about 'the Hollow', he sings about it in **Brown Eyed Girl**:

« Hey, where did we go, days when the rains came
Down in the hollow, playing a new game
Laughing and a-running, hey, hey
Skipping and a-jumping
In the misty morning fog with our, our hearts a-thumping
And you, my brown eyed girl

Released as a single in 1967, **Brown Eyed Girl** became Van Morrison's most played song and over the years it has remained a classic.

Look out for the tall electricity pylons located in the Hollow. Van refers to them in both **You Know What They're Writing About** and **On Hyndford Street**.

In 2011 Van was given a special award by the BMI in recognition of over 10 million US radio plays of **Brown Eyed Girl**, at the time 1 of only 10 songs to have achieved this status.



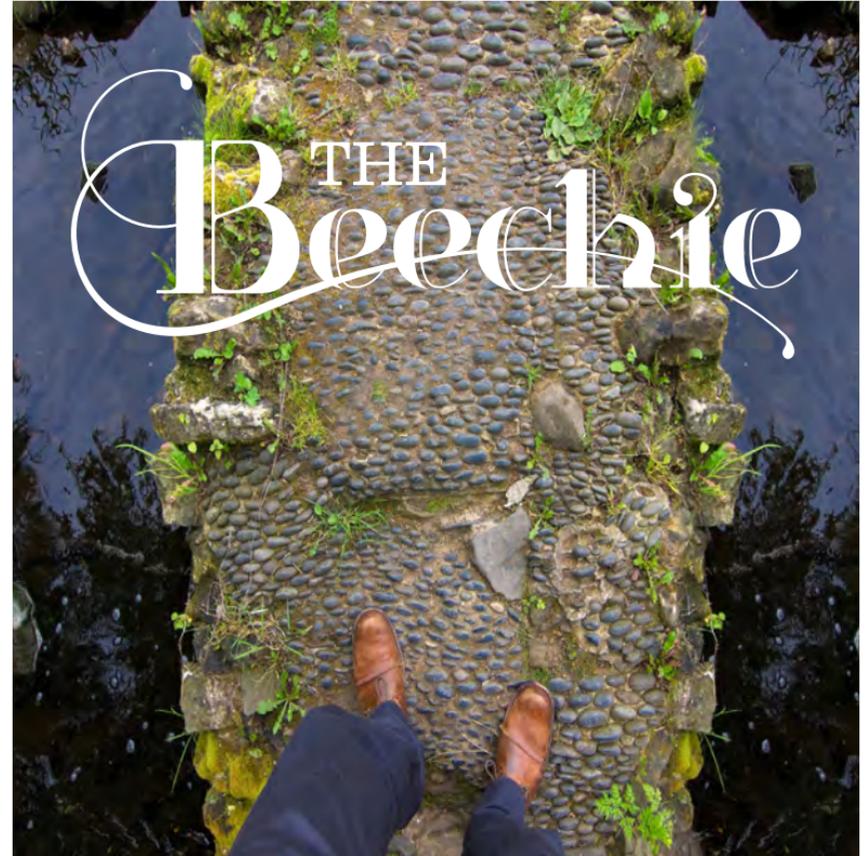
 **Connswater**, an instrumental track from the 1983 album **Inarticulate Speech of the Heart**, refers to a river known locally as the Beechie River. The Connswater River forms in the Hollow, where the Knock and Loop rivers meet, and it flows through east Belfast, down to the sea at Belfast Lough.


CONT'D

Over and over again
And voices echoing late at night over Beechie River
And it's always being now, and it's always being now
It's always now

On Hyndford Street

You will notice the small stone bridge down at the Hollow. Both the bridge and the river take their names from a sixteenth-century Irish chieftain called Conn O'Neill, who held riotous parties at his stronghold in the Castlereagh Hills. Legend has it that Conn and his clansmen often crossed this bridge carrying refreshments for their festivities.



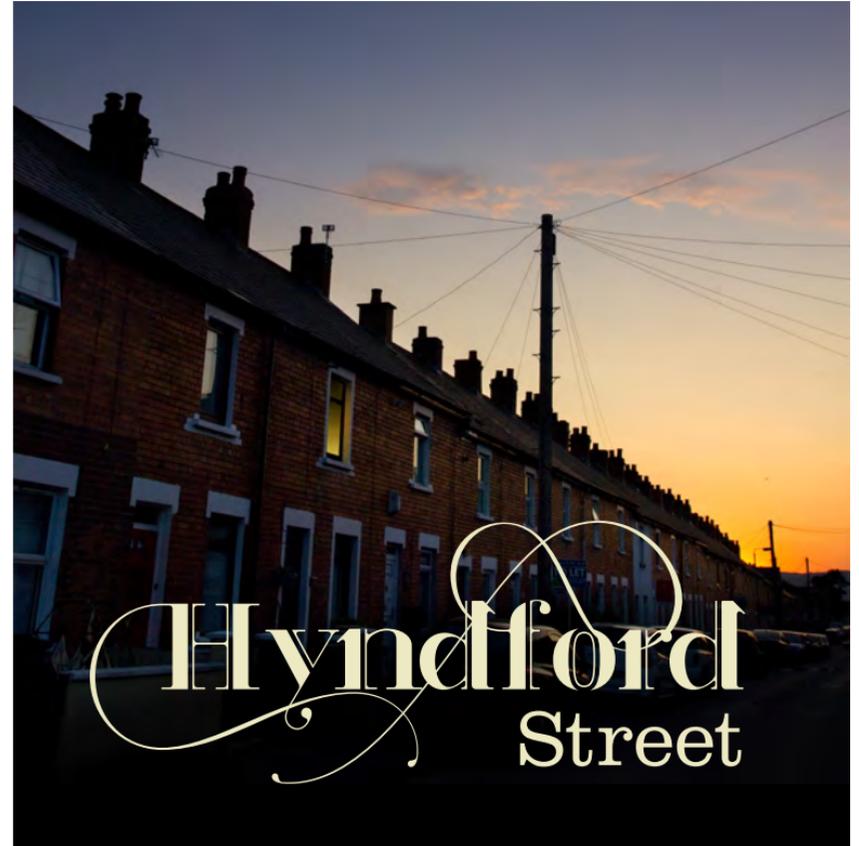
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In the 19th and early 20th centuries east Belfast was a flourishing centre of industry made up of shipbuilding, linen mills, rope making and tobacco factories. Rows of red-bricked terraced houses were built to accommodate the skilled workforce necessary to serve these industries.

Van was born in a small two-up two-down at 125 Hyndford Street. He lived here with his mother Violet and his father George, who worked as an electrician at the nearby Harland & Wolff shipyard. The house is distinguished from its neighbours with a brass plaque.

« On Hyndford Street where you could feel the silence
At half past eleven on long summer nights
As the wireless played Radio Luxembourg
And the voices whispered across Beechie River
And in the quietness we sank into restful slumber in silence

On Hyndford Street



3

CONT'D

A working man

After leaving school and trying a number of career paths, Van decided his future lay in music. To facilitate this he embarked on a window cleaning round, allowing him both the time and the funds he needed.

The smells from Stewart's Bakery on Greenville Road, wafted across the nearby streets in which Van and his colleague Sammy worked.

Van recalls the pony and cart piled high with bricks made of coal dust passing through the cobblestoned streets.

When the coal-brick man comes round
On a cold November day
You'll be on the Celtic Ray
Are you ready, are you ready?

Celtic Ray



What's my line?
I'm happy cleaning windows
Take my time
I'll see you when my love grows
Baby don't let it slide
I'm a working man in my prime
Cleaning windows
Number 36!
Cleaning Windows

4

Orangefield Park has been a public space since 1938 when the land was purchased by Belfast Corporation (now Belfast City Council) from its then owners, the Blakiston-Houston family. During World War II, the American Army was based and trained here from 1942-1944, and a German Prisoner of War camp was set up nearby.

For many of the children living in 1950's east Belfast, the green, landscaped grounds of the park offered a wonderful escape from the narrow, smoke-filled terrace streets where they lived.



On a gold autumn day
You came my way in Orangefield
Saw you standing by the riverside in Orangefield
How I loved you then in Orangefield
Like I love you now in Orangefield
And the sun shone on your hair
When I saw you there in Orangefield

Orangefield



4

CONT'D

Orangefield High School

When I was a young boy 
Back in Orangefield
I used to look out
My classroom and dream
Got to Go Back

Van attended Orangefield Boys' School, as it was then known, until 1960. As a schoolboy, he played gigs around Belfast with a number of different bands including The Javelins, The Monarchs and The Thunderbolts. The line-ups varied but the principal characters were George Jones, Roy Kane, Billy McAllen, Harry Megahey and Wesley Black.

“As we all grew up in Bloomfield, the music took over for us would-be stars. We fancied ourselves as professional musicians even though we never left east Belfast to gig. Our circuit was places like, The Wooden Hut on Abetta Parade, The Willowfield Harriers Hall on Hyndford Street and of course The Brookeborough Hall on Sandown Road and last but by no means least, the infamous hut on Chamberlain Street.”

George Jones



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I think I'll go on by the river
With my cherry, cherry wine
I believe I'll go walking by the railroad
With my cherry, cherry wine

Cyprus Avenue

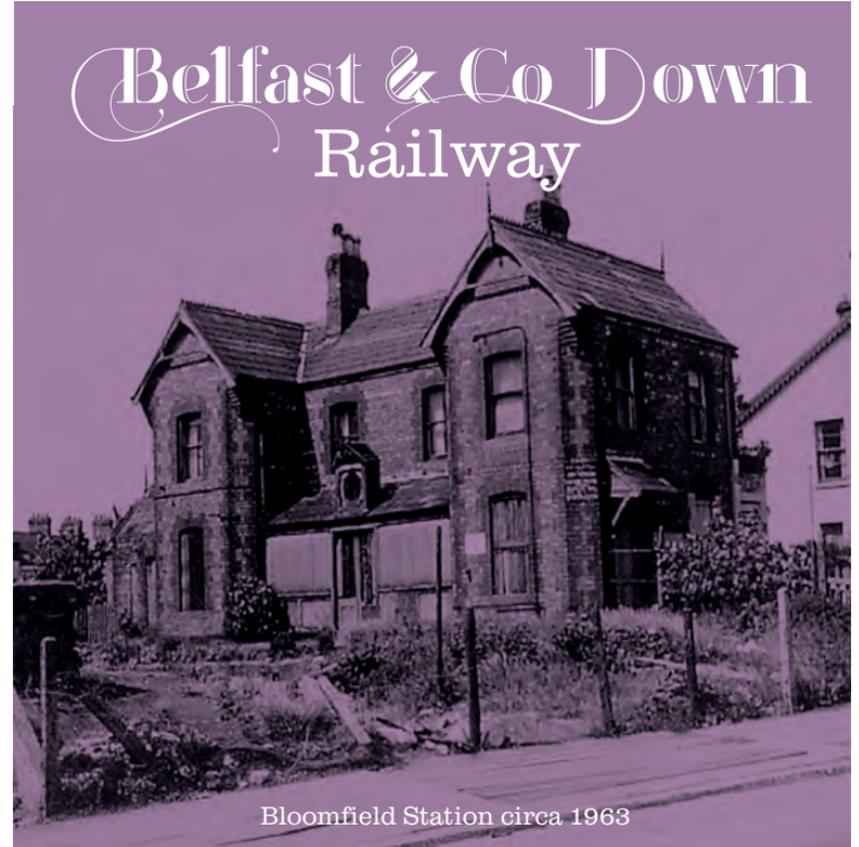
Van often refers to railways in his work, particularly in **Evening Train**, **Cyprus Avenue** and **On Hyndford Street**. We can trace a number of these back to the Belfast & County Down Railway (BCDR) line, which once ran through east Belfast.



Love to hear that evening train go by
Love to hear that evening train go by
'Specially when my baby's on my mind

Evening Train

The BCDR line is no longer used for trains; instead it has become the Comber Greenway, a popular walking and cycling route which runs for about 12.8 km from Comber to Belfast. Bloomfield Railway Station and level crossing (both now gone) were situated at the Cyprus Avenue end of the Beersbridge Road. The station platform stood near its junction with Evelyn Avenue.



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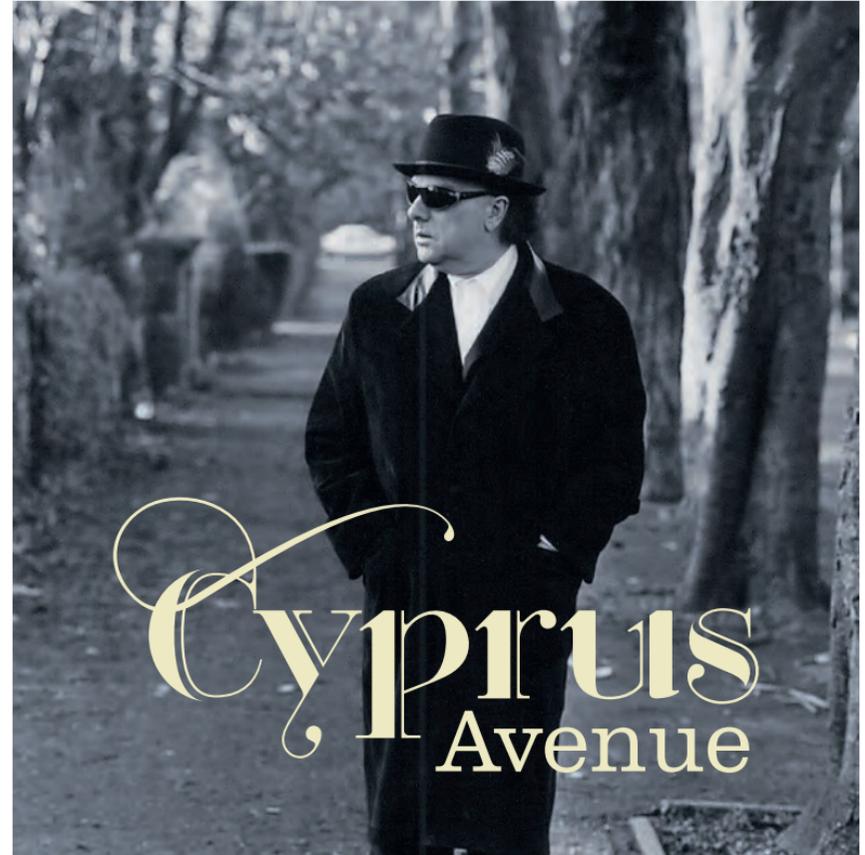
Many of Van's song titles pay homage to familiar locations from his childhood, such as: **On Hyndford Street**, **Orangefield** and **Cyprus Avenue**.

Van described Cyprus Avenue as, “. . . a street in Belfast, a place where there's a lot of wealth. It wasn't far from where I was brought up and it was a very different scene. To me it was a very mystical place. It was a whole avenue lined with trees and I found it a place where I could think.”

There was a stark contrast between the spacious, detached homes of Cyprus Avenue and the small two storey terrace houses of Hyndford Street.



Way up on, way up on, way up on . . .
The avenue of trees
Keep walking down, in the wind and rain darling
When you came walking down, the sun shone
through the trees
Cyprus Avenue



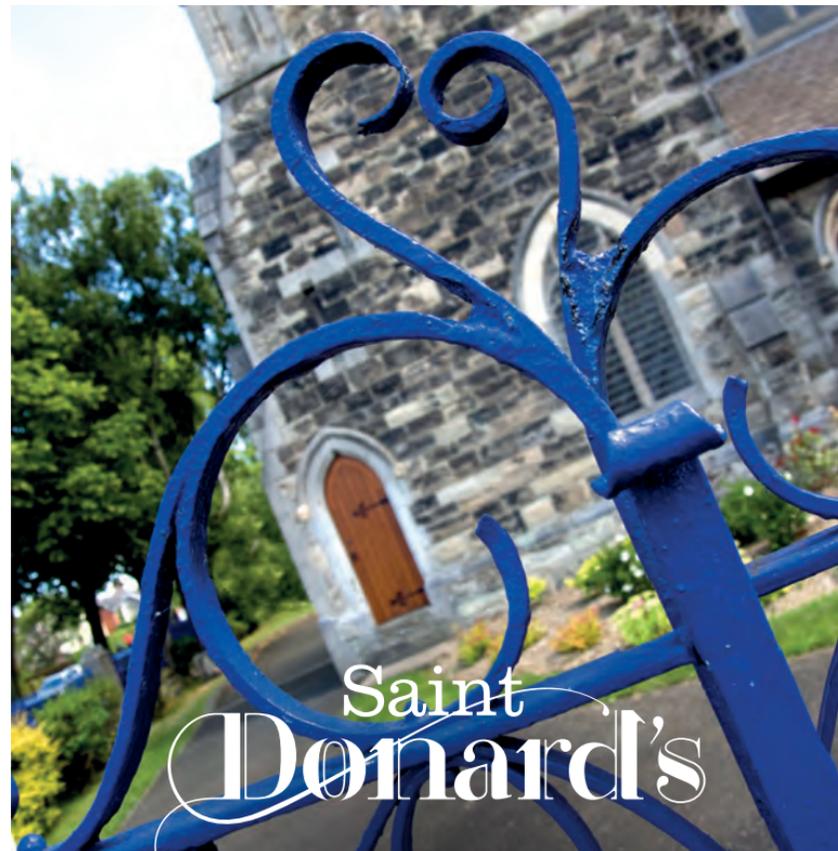
7 St Donard's Church is named after the fifth century saint, a follower of St Patrick who spent a prayerful life in a monastery in the Mountains of Mourne, County Down. Slieve Donard, Northern Ireland's highest mountain, bears his name.

Van's parents were married in St Donard's on Christmas Day 1941. The sound of the church bells ringing can be heard in **On Hyndford Street** and Morrison also mentions the church's six bells in the track **Beside You**.



In the evening
Just before the Sunday six-bells chime, six-bells chime
And all the dogs are barkin'
Way on down the diamond-studded highway where you wander
And you roam from your retreat and view

Beside You



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A Sense of Wonder is stuffed to the gills with wonderful foodie references, such as McIwain's Chippy on the Beersbridge Road. This site is now a Chinese restaurant, but in Van's day, it was a chip shop, known as Davey's Chipper. Here Van and his friends would purchase **pastie suppers**.

Gravy ring is simply the name given to a doughnut that is shaped like a ring and dusted with sugar.

A **Wagon Wheel** is a circular chocolate covered marshmallow biscuit.

Barmbrack (Irish: bairín breac) is a yeasted bread with added sultanas and raisins.

A **Snowball** is a sweet bun covered with coconut with jam in the middle.

In **Cleaning Windows** Van makes a reference to another local speciality - the **Paris bun**. A soft roll with large sugar crystals on the surface.





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Mystic of the East - The Van Morrison Trail has been developed by the Connswater Community Greenway, a £35 million investment in east Belfast.

The Connswater Community Greenway will develop a 9km linear park through east Belfast, following the course of the Connswater, Knock and Loop rivers, connecting the green and open spaces. The Greenway will create vibrant, attractive, safe and accessible parkland for leisure, recreation, community events and activities.

The project has been developed by the East Belfast Partnership and is funded by the Big Lottery Fund, Belfast City Council and the Department for Social Development.



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