

# Paul Charles interview

Northern Ireland-born Paul Charles has, as a music promoter and agent, worked with many of the biggest names in the business, including Buzzcocks, Van Morrison, Tom Waits, Ray Davies, Christy Moore, The Waterboys and Marti Pellow. But for the past 30 years, he's also kept up a second career as a crime novelist and is about to release his 26th book, *Hi Love, You Just Dropped Your Glove*.

**Your latest novel, the third in the Brendy McCusker series, has an intriguing title. Where did that come from?**

It's from this amazing album called *Astral Weeks* by Van Morrison, which is my favourite record of all time. There's a line in the track *Madame George* that goes "He jumps up and says, 'Hey, love, you forgot your glove'". I heard that in 1968 and the imagery of it just hit me.

**As a novelist you've created three different crime series, the Inspector Christy Kennedy and Inspector Starrett ranges and now this, the latest book to feature retired RUC policeman Brendy McCusker. What sets each series apart?**

Kennedy is an Ulster man, but he's living in London in Camden Town. He's someone who's intrigued by the puzzle of the crime – that's his love, dealing with the puzzle and solving the puzzle. Starrett is a country guy, and more of a rural cop, more homespun, whereas McCusker is from Portrush in Northern Ireland, and is more interested in protecting the innocent than convicting the guilty.

**If there was ever going to be a film or TV series based on the Brendy McCusker books, what actor could you see playing him?**

I have an image of what he looks like. He tries to dress well, but his clothes don't hang on him. He has unmanageable, untidy hair – the only thing that can get through it is his four fingers. In my mind's eye, Adrian Dunbar would be the perfect McCusker.

**You published your first novel in 1997. Did you always want to write?**

I've always written. Even when I was managing bands, I was writing lyrics and sleeve notes and I wrote a London column for a Belfast newspaper called *City Week*. Then I tried to write the all-time great Ulster novel, but that ended up in the bin. It wasn't until years later that I found the key to doing what I wanted to do, which is when you're serving the rules of a crime story, you've got to address who did it, why they did it, and how they did it. When you have those three guiding lights, it pulls you as a reader and as a writer through the story. I got that mainly from the work of Colin Dexter, who wrote the *Inspector Morse* books – they were just beautifully written crime stories.

**You met Colin Dexter, didn't you? Did he offer you any advice?**

His big piece of advice was, never worry about the blank page. What you do is you get one person and you put them on a page, then you get a second person and then what'll happen is the first person will start talking to the second person, and it'll be like, why did he do that or why did he not do that? That brings you into the story. It may not be the final story you write, but at least you've started.

**Do you have a routine for your writing, or a set number of words you have to complete each day?**

I don't bother myself or fret over a number of words. I usually write from 6pm till 9pm or until I feel I've said what I wanted to say for that day. It may be 500 words, it may be 3000 words.

**For the past 30-plus years you've organised the acoustic tent at the Glastonbury Festival. That must be a thrill.**

It's a very enjoyable experience because you get to work with acts that you wouldn't normally work with, that you don't represent. Also what's interesting is that we usually give the first three spots each day to new, up and coming acts, so researching that is great.

**You've worked in music for over 50 years now. What are the main changes you've seen through the years?**

The thing I find upsetting is how record companies seem to have either lost the way to promote acts or just resist promoting acts. If you go to a record company now looking for a deal, they'll want to know all your social media, what your numbers are. The other thing is, they'll ask you for a piece of your merchandising and publishing. It used to be that a record company would invest money in a group depending on what level of success they thought they would get, and they would go out and do their damndest to make sure that money came back. That doesn't happen anymore. Now, if you're a young act starting out, you've got to do a lot of this stuff yourself.

**Going back to your books, your 25 previous novels are all being reprinted. If there was a crime fiction fan who'd never read one of your books, which one would you direct them to first?**

Oh, that's like asking a parent which their favourite child is! One that's a standalone novel is called *The Lonesome Heart Is Angry*, that's a mystery set in Ulster in the 60s. That continues to do very well. But if you're more into traditional detective fiction then I Love The Sound Of Breaking Glass, which is the first Christy Kennedy book or *The Dust Of Death* which is the first Inspector Starrett. Or I would say this new one, *Hi Love, You Just Dropped Your Glove* – even though it's part of a series, you can read it on its own.

**You seem to be living your dream. Would the teenage Paul Charles think of the life that you've lived?**

If you'd have said to me when I was 15 that someday you'd be able to work with Crosby Stills & Nash and Jackson Browne and Elvis Costello and Tom Waits I'd have said yeah, right, stop taking the drugs. It's not something you can plan. A lot of it is being in the right

place at the right time. A story I often tell is, I'd always been a major fan of Tom Waits, so I tried to make a connection, but I could never get to him. Then one day I was in Los Angeles, doing my rounds of the agencies, and I went into Tower Records on Sunset Blvd, and there's this big display for One From The Heart, which was the soundtrack album Tom Waits and Crystal Gayle did together, only I couldn't find a copy to save my life. I eventually went up to the counter and asked if they had any copies, and the girl said, "We just sold our last one and you'll never guess who to, I sold it to Tom Waits himself! And don't look now, but that's him behind you." So I went over and introduced myself, and we went and had a cup of tea, which led to four cups of tea, and I became his agent, and I've been his agent ever since. Now, if that's not luck that's written in the skies I don't know what is!