

Dropkick Murphys age well; now they're mature punks

By Scott McLennan
ENTERTAINMENT COLUMNIST

Dropkick Murphys
"The Meanest of Times"
(Born & Bred Records)
★★★★

Back in 1999, when it was clawing its way up the ranks, the Dropkick Murphys rankled some sensibilities with the song "Pipebomb on Lansdowne," a rant about blowing up the Boston nightclubs that canned live music in favor of dance DJs.

Over time, Lansdowne Street came around and is now a vibrant avenue for live music, and the Dropkick Murphys became respected and revered members of not just the Boston music community but also all-around good guys. When the Red Sox needed an anthem to fuel the team's march to the World Series in 2004, the Dropkicks delivered "Tessie." When Martin Scorsese needed a firecracker in the soundtrack to his Boston-based mob film "The Departed," the DKMs handed over "I'm Shipping Up to Boston," resulting in Scorsese winning the Academy Award (OK so maybe that's an exaggeration, but it's just too damn easy to lionize the Dropkicks).

And the post-"Pipebomb" peace is complete as Dropkick Murphys performs Sept. 30 on Lansdowne Street's Avalon.

The Dropkick Murphys' new album "The Meanest of Times," its first on the band's new Born & Bred record imprint and due out Tuesday, nicely illustrates how this gang of punk rockers is still true to the spirit of its blue-collar classic "Do or Die" released 10 years ago, yet not trapped in some artificial prison of youth. The DKMs openly and honestly sing about wives and kids now in the band members' lives, and they likewise look back on the past and give meaning to the experiences of their occasionally ill-spent younger days.

"Famous For Nothing" opens the 15-song outing in manic fashion. All those ideas about friends, family and reconciling the past tumble about an arrangement crafted from the bulldog barks of singer Al Barr and singer/

bassist Ken Casey plus the frantic pacing set by guitarists Marc Orrell and James Lynch, drummer Matt Kelly, bagpiper Scruffy Wallace and whistle and mandolin player Tim Brennan.

The songs on "The Meanest of Times" shift between big, easy-to-grasp, anthems — perfect for drunken sing-alongs — and finely detailed odes with a lyrical dexterity that belies the rough image the Dropkicks project.

Folk music, especially Irish-flavored folk music, has long been part of the DKM dynamic, and on "The Meanest of Times" the band worked the tradition into truly something of its own design with "(F)lannigan's Ball," a crooked tale of tribal shenanigans in Quincy. Singers Ronnie Drew from The Dubliners and Spider Stacy from The Pogues joined the Dropkicks on the opus, artfully passing a torch lit by the musical fuels of Celtic, punk and folk.

Great storytelling is one aspect of folk music that the punks in DKM just keep getting better at. Making pointed commentaries is another trait at home in the punk and folk camps, and on "The Meanest of Times" drives the tune "The State of Massachusetts," which laments the fallout caused by lousy parenting.

Being part of "The Departed" left a mark on the band, as such songs as "Vices and Virtues" and "Loyal to No One" seem extensions of that movie's dark themes of moral decay.

But the band carefully balances the tone of its record, encouraging faith and fidelity over bullying and betrayal. "Echoes on 'A' Street" is as weepy as it is propulsive in honoring the women in the Dropkicks world. "Never Forget" and "God Willing" are a couple more DKM tributes to fallen friends; "Surrender" and "I'll Begin Again" are empowering testaments to resilience and optimism.

The Dropkicks may be beyond the youthful hostility of the "Pipebomb" days, but the band is no less steely and aggressive on "The Meanest of Times" when it comes to showing where it stands.

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T&G Photo/JIM COLLINS

Ken Casey, left, and Marc Orrell of the Dropkick Murphys.