

Let There Be Rocca

Guess which Irish airline took out a full-page advertisement directly across from where this review was due to be published in 1988?

Fifty years ago, George Orwell warned of an immense and insipid monoculture. He got off this planet a few years before Eurovision. Once again, the annual song contest - “one of the biggest and most enduring TV events across the world,” according to co-host Michelle Rocca - proved that nothing breaks the language divide quite like mediocrity, particularly when it’s served up so innocuously.

“Six hundred *million* viewers,” Pat Kenny beamed, clearly unaware why this particular one had tuned in. He should really have said a special hello to plane-spotters: this was going to be their night, one felt, as the VTR¹ showed another of the *Ryanair* fleet gliding majestically above a cloud formation. Viewers also got to see 21 acts, the R.D.S. stage, footage of what the Emerald Isle looked like from the chief sponsor’s cock-pit; and a Hothouse Flowers video (aired so Ms Rocca could visit a hairdresser’s and slip into another dress before that all-important ritual known as “The Voting”).

Most of this year’s songs weren’t that bad: plain dull, rather than rotten. Norway - it’s unfair to single any country out, I know - even Norway has seemingly been making an effort. There were other points to be noted. This year, a good deal of the entries were sung in native tongues, rather than in English (Abba wasn’t prepared to take such a risk after winning the Swedish national song contest in 1974). Inevitably, the usual key-changes appeared - and

¹ *Video tape recorder*

more than once - during several of the closing choruses. A number of them horrid guitar-shaped synths were on show. Greece sang a song that went “Ha-



Abba : worthy winners in 1974...

Ha-Ha-Ha” (the title mirrored my sentiments *exactly*). Unless I’m mistaken, Portugal’s entry - “I Will Return” - had grafted the chorus of “With A Little Help From My Friends” onto the verse of “Save Your Kisses For Me”. Other steals were less blatant. As is the custom, one country received no

votes whatsoever and this year it was Austria’s turn. The Yodelrocker - “not exactly Mozart or Strauss, but an equally-talented man,” ventured Pat Kenny during the build-up - reckoned it had something to do with a man by the name of Kurt Waldheim. But if such things affected the voting, why, then, did Israel do so well? Politics or not, Ireland didn’t win. The bookies - who made Switzerland’s entry the favourite - did. RTÉ put on a good show. All licence-holders beware! Later this year, our national broadcaster will also be footing the bill for Euro ’88 and the Seoul Olympics.

Mike Murphy failed to disguise - or perhaps took delight in revealing - his true views early into the broadcast. “The big attraction of the week has been, not the performers”, he let slip, “nor the composers. But the set.” Which he went on to dub “a technological marvel.” I’m guessing that genetic scientists creating sheep in U.S. laboratories may feel that the R.D.S. stage didn’t warrant *such* high praise. That said, there were *very* many lights. Viewed from above, the

stage must have resembled the sight *Ryanair* pilots behold on their approach into Shannon Airport.

Sadly, there were few choreographed routines to chortle over in 1988. Finland's answer to Showaddywaddy had a game bash; the Turkish contingent ("big sellers in Turkey," Mike Murphy assured us) made a half-hearted attempt; and Spain - a country that promised much in the trailer, when skipping merrily along Dublin's streets - simply failed to deliver on the night. It was left to Denmark to embody the true spirit of this most curious of contests. The Danish entry was sung by a heavily-pregnant woman ("her second time in three finals," Mr Murphy revealed; Mike didn't specify whether he meant that this was her second time representing Denmark in three finals, or whether the woman was pregnant for the second time in three finals). She presented an image worthy of any expectant mother taking part in Eurovision: spiky-red hairdo, green earrings and a turquoise maternity suit. A leggy, high-kicking dancing troupe, meanwhile, cavorted behind in lurid-orange tutus. Yes, it's a *song* contest. But I still can't believe Denmark didn't win.

While one act was clambering off stage and another getting into position, people at home were treated to tourist-trap visions of Ireland. Cue the short clips of arans, curraghs, castles and *craic*. Surprisingly, no mention was made of our literary giants (or had audience demographic profiling prompted an informed decision?). Anyway, lucky old *Jump The Gun* were filmed on location in Donegal. The Swedish entrant had to get back aboard a *Ryanair* plane for his promo. Friendly fishermen - did, I wonder, they possess valid rod licences? - handed the party from Luxembourg a brace of trout. "Chasing" a typical Irish rose along "fashionable Grafton Street" (to quote Mike Murphy), a Dutchman somehow managed to avoid the JCB and jack-hammer that have been digging up one stretch of road near Trinity College for as long as I can remember.

Switzerland's singer² drew the short straw: she had to make the best of a trip to the Bog of Allen.

Once the ballads, belters and rockers which made up this year's contest were done with, Pat Kenny rambled on about music providing "joy" and "jobs", being "a common language", knowing "no frontiers", and reflecting young people's "integrity". While he was delivering this flannel, props personnel wheeled a piano onstage and Liam, the main Hothouse Flower, seated himself at it. Burdened with the "Next U2" tag for some time, the band gambled on a Eurovision appearance. We shall see if it pays off.³ "*Don't Go*," Liam vowed, with a toss of the hair, is a song for "Eamonn... in hospital." Like Pat, he felt obliged to deliver some patter. Liam went on about "a celebration of spring... celebration of people... celebration of unity... how people can be united by pure, simple music." There followed a pure, simple video, costing £100,000 in pure, simple readies. Plenty of people were in it. A variety of nationalities. Liam featured, of course. Shot in different parts of Europe... On a beach... In the snow... During daylight... And filmed in the evening...

Only one ingredient was missing: imagination.

² *Celine Dion*

³ *It did.*