

THE INTERVIEW

THE LONG WAY
TO HAPPINESS

It's taken singer Sarah McQuaid two children, two marriages (and nearly a third) to find contentment. She tells Ciara Dwyer how having a father she never met — nor even knows what he looked like — left its mark on her early years

I'M REALLY glad that I took a circuitous route," says singer-songwriter Sarah McQuaid. "It has led me to what I'm doing now." I met Sarah on a sunny morning in the Morrison Hotel, Dublin. It was one of her few days off from her Irish tour, before she headed off to perform in the UK. These days, when she is not on the road performing — it could be Europe or the US — she lives in Cornwall with her artist husband Feargal Shiels and their two children, Eli, 9, and Lily Jane, 8.

Although in her 40s, Sarah looks a decade younger, with her translucent skin. She has an ethereal glow to her. This may be down to the mint tea she is sipping, but I suspect that it has more to do with the fact that finally she is back on track pursuing her musical dream. Yes, as a mother-of-two and wife, it is a juggling act but she organises her tour schedules around the kids' school holidays so that she is at home for vast chunks of time. She knows that she is lucky.

"Most people who have nine-to-five jobs don't get to spend as much time as this with their children," she says.

She should know because she has been that soldier, too. There was a time when she was frazzled, leaving her children in the nursery for 11 hours a day,

commuting from Wexford to Dublin for work, feeling guilty about it all. Thankfully, her life has slowed down and settled.

Now she is finally doing what she was put on this earth to do — to sing her own songs. Sometimes you can have your cake and eat it, but it was a long time coming.

There is something unusual about Sarah McQuaid — not quite eccentric, but she is not your average woman. She claims that she is not a risk-taker, but all along, as she talks about the trajectory of her life, it is clear that she has been fearless. She has made mistakes, but when she realised that something was wrong, she walked away and began again, even if that meant making enormous changes at the last minute.

She has tried several lives for size — she has had many different careers, including working in a music shop and editing magazines — and her personal life has been equally varied.

This marriage is her second one, but it might have been her third. Many years ago, she was engaged, but four weeks before the big day she called it off. This was not an easy thing to do, and certainly not the norm, especially for a woman, but then Sarah is no ordinary woman. Perhaps this stems from her unusual childhood.

She was born in Madrid. Sarah's mother, Jane Adams Allen, had left her native Chicago to study art. While there, she met and fell in love with a Spanish artist Jose Paredes Jardiel. "He and my mother had lived together for a good while before I was born. He was a manic depressive. She said that when she was pregnant, it was very difficult as he wouldn't let her sleep. She had to leave. After I was born, she tried to get back in contact with him, but basically he didn't want to know.

"I lived in Spain for the first three years of my life. My mother taught me Spanish when I was young and it was my first language. I spoke Spanish before I spoke English. I don't have it any more, but there must be traces of it still there. Some of my lyrics are in Spanish and after a gig, Spaniards often come up to me. They start talking in Spanish, assuming that I understand them, when I haven't a clue."

"My mother wound up bringing me back to the US. That was tough for her. She raised me on her own."

Being abandoned by her father did some damage.

"I remember being very sad as a kid because I didn't have a father," she says.

"There were other kids in school who had divorced parents, but they knew their fathers. To this day I have never seen a proper photograph of him. I went on holidays to Barcelona and I knew that the university there had a copy of his biography. I went to look at it, because surely there'd be a photograph. There was a photograph, but in it he was looking down and his eyes were closed. So I don't really have any sense of what he was like."

She discovered a few facts about him — that he was an influential artist in his day and that he did figurative stuff. "Very 1960s, lots of

naked women exposing themselves. I never met him and I feel bad about that because I thought about him. When I was a teenager I wanted to meet him. I was going to study in France and I asked my mother — 'What if I went to Spain to meet my father?'

"She said that he'd be thrilled to have a lovely teenage daughter that he could show off to all his friends. She was thinking of him taking credit for me. I knew the idea upset her, so I decided to leave it."

Many years later, after Sarah's mother had died, she decided that the time was right to find her father. It was then that she discovered that he was already dead.

"I was devastated," she says, as her blue eyes fill. "I had missed my chance, but like with so many things in life, you can't keep looking back and going, what if? Who knows what would have happened."

The most bizarre moment for her was when she looked him up on Wikipedia.

"The article said that he had one daughter whom he never met, so that would be me, I guess, unless there's somebody else."

But she didn't let this missing father blight her life.

As a child growing up in Chicago, music played a big part in Sarah's life. She was in a children's choir, she was taught the piano and guitar and it wasn't long before she was writing her own songs. She may have been shy, but the minute she would perform, all her inhibitions would disappear.

She remembers going to sleep at night with the door ajar as she listened to her mother sing and play the guitar. Sarah would call out requests. Her mother started up an art magazine and ended up doing a regular art column for the *Chicago Tribune*. Sarah was later to venture into journalism and she credits her knowledge of the trade with this background.

Before she embarked on the working world, she spent her final university year in France studying philosophy. While there, she asked around to see if there was a band which needed a singer and guitarist. She joined one called Mixed Brew, so-called because of all the nationalities in the group, and she ended up marrying the Irish banjo player — Noel McQuaid. They moved back to the US.

When they married, she was only 18 and he 30, but she thought she was very grown up for her age. Eventually they moved back to Ireland,

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LIFE IS GOOD: Sarah McQuaid gets to spend lots of time with her children by arranging her tour schedule around the school year — something that's simply not possible for people who work nine-to-five. She made the choice to make music her career after spending years commuting and putting her young children for hours at a time at the nursery. Photo: Gerry Mooney

to his hometown of Nenagh, Tipperary. They opened a music shop together — McQuaid's — and she went on to write a music book about her unusual guitar-playing style.

"I loved Ireland because I thought that people had their priorities straight. They put their friends before their careers and the people were very warm. This was pre-Celtic Tiger. Now I say that Cornwall is like the way Ireland used to be."

Over the years, Sarah and Noel drifted apart and eventually they divorced. She puts it down to how much she had changed in the decade with him.

"He was a lovely man, terrific and he still is. We're good friends."

She moved to Dublin and started over, doing secretarial work. They sold their house in the US and Sarah used her share of the money to record her first album — *When Two Lovers Meet*. But her music got lost along the way, especially as she branched into journalism. She was working for a publishing house and editing several trade magazines, as well as doing music reviews for newspapers.

During this time, she met a graphic artist called David. They lived together for almost five

years and were about to get married. It was to be a big wedding in the Shelbourne Hotel. Shortly beforehand, she went to the artist's retreat Annaghmakerrig to work on a novel.

While walking in the woods, her friend Susanna remarked that every time she talked about the wedding, it sounded like a death sentence hanging over her.

Sarah admitted that it felt that way and her friend pointed out that it wouldn't be fair to marry a man simply because it was too late to cancel.

"The whole planning of the wedding made it clear to me how little we had in common. I think I lost myself. I was trying to be the person that I thought he wanted me to be."

The hotel told Sarah that it was too late to get the deposit back, but suggested that she could use a smaller room and apply the money towards food and drink and run up a bar tab.

Her relations had already booked their flights from the US and bought their outfits. People came to the party and had a blast. Sarah's mother even sang and played the guitar. But after it was over, Sarah was wise to the consequences of her actions. "I was 35 and my biological clock was ticking. By ending that

relationship, I thought I was saying goodbye to my chance to have children.

"I didn't think I was going to meet somebody quickly enough where I'd get to the point that I'd be ready to have kids."

She was wrong. A few weeks after that party in the Shelbourne, she was at a concert in the National Concert Hall.

The girlfriend who was with her complained that there were no nice men in Dublin. Sarah disagreed and proceeded to drag her to Whelan's bar. She saw a man at the bar —

'I didn't think I was going to meet someone quickly enough where I'd get to the point that I'd be ready to have kids.' Then she met Feargal. 'I got really drunk and said the magic words: "Can I come home with you"'

Feargal — who was a friend of a friend. She introduced him to her girlfriend and left them to chat on their own.

A while later she looked over at the pair, who now seemed bored. Sarah joined them, bringing a man she had met. They all talked away and it wasn't long before she and Feargal sensed that there was something between them.

"I got really drunk and said the magic words — 'I'm really drunk. Can I come home with you?' And you're allowed to say that because I married him."

These days, they live in idyllic Cornwall. Feargal quit his job as a care worker and is now at university studying art.

He minds the children while Sarah is off touring, promoting her third album — *The Plum Tree and the Rose*.

Life is good and they enjoy parenthood and their artistic working lives.

"It's all good," she says.

At last.

Sarah McQuaid's latest album, *The Plum Tree and the Rose* is out now. For her tour dates see www.sarahmcquaid.com

