

# Sarah McQuaid

The DADGAD guitar lady's lifetime of travels now finds her living in Cornwall. Geoff Wallis caught her in Ireland!

"**A**h, the DADGAD lady," a friend responded when I told him that I was about to interview Sarah McQuaid. That open-stringed guitar style is certainly an important element of Sarah's renown in Ireland, but, as we discussed her life and career to date and her plans for the future, quaffing coffee in a riverside café in Boyle, the location of our meeting seemed very apposite. For the café occupies the former gate lodge of Frybrook House, a Georgian mansion constructed for Henry Fry who established a weaving industry in the County Roscommon town, and Sarah, like many a fine singer, well knows how to turn events and life-changes into a fascinating tapestry.

When we met she was halfway through an Irish tour, accompanied only by a driver and soundman, which formed the halfway point in a six-month schedule that had also encompassed Holland, the UK and the US. But there was no obvious lack of energy and her enthusiasm for her music remained undimmed.

Sarah's background is cosmopolitan, to say the least. She was born in Madrid to a Spanish father and US mother and moved to Chicago when she was three. She was educated in Philadelphia and France (where she discovered a passion for traditional music), moved again to Ireland in 1994 (working in publishing for 11 years and also writing on music regularly for *Hot Press* magazine and Dublin's *Evening Herald*), and finally shifted to Cornwall in 2007.

A pianist from the age of three and a guitarist since nine, Sarah was persuaded to adopt the DADGAD guitar style some two decades ago by a French musician at a festival in Brittany as being more suitable to her chosen medium of Irish music. Proofreading Steáfán Hannigan's bodhrán tutor for the late Ossian Publications led to contact with its chief John Loesberg. Her parting throwaway comment, "if you ever fancy a book about DADGAD guitar let me know ..." resulted in the demand "Hey, come here and sit down!" Her *The Irish DADGAD Guitar Book* still sells in more than decent numbers some 15 years since its original publication, though "making the accompanying cassette was agonising – I had to record 32 tracks in one day."

Around the same time Sarah embarked on a solo career in Ireland – a major highspot being a tour supporting Luka Bloom – and having sold her house in the States "thought I could either buy somewhere in Dublin or make an album." The city's estate agents received the bum's

rush and her debut, *When Two Lovers Meet*, originally released on her own label, appeared in 1997 and was reissued by the long defunct Round Tower two years later, by which time Sarah had become deeply involved in her publishing career. Said album consisted almost entirely of traditional songs and tunes, apart from the self-penned *Charlie's Gone Home*, and began a still active collaboration with producer and fellow guitarist and songwriter Gerry O'Beirne. Well received at the time, it received reinvigoration when reissued by Gael Linn a decade later.

By then Sarah was the mother of two small children, keeping contact with the music business via journalism, but in 2006 she was invited to give a workshop at the Strandhill Guitar Festival in County Sligo. "I'd been saying 'no' to lots of things, but they said 'By the way, you'll be co-presenting the workshop with Dick Gaughan' and I thought how am I going to feel if I say no to this?" Dick encouraged her to think again about her musical career and she resolved to do so, determining to start gigging again in the spring of 2007. Gael Linn's reissue of her debut album provided further impetus and resulted in her appearance, without any gigs booked, on John Kelly's hugely influential RTÉ TV show *The View*. As a result the diary was soon filled with bookings.

**H**er reinvigorated solo career had begun and she has been a full-time musician ever since. The second album, *I Won't Go Home 'Til Morning* (2008) which drew deeply from the songs her mother learned while participating in Quaker work camps as a teenager in Virginia, was again produced by Gerry O'Beirne and featured the contrasting fiddlework of Máire Breatnach and Rosie Shipley. In the same year, and thanks to her now Cornish base, she recorded *Crow Coyote Buffalo* as the duo Mama with Zoë Pollock (yep, the same Zoë of 1991 pop chart-topper *Sunshine On A Rainy Day*), an album as equally well reviewed as its predecessor.

Sarah began work on her third album, *The Plum Tree And The Rose* in June (again with Gerry O'Beirne behind the

desk and due for release in early 2012) and her Irish tour saw her exploring the various possibilities of its contents. These range from Spanish traditional songs learned in her childhood, others co-authored with Gerry, a John Dowland piece (originally written for voice and lute) *Can't She Excuse My Wrongs*, a reworking of John Martyn's exquisite *Solid Air* (without the Watkins Echoplex) and the traditional County Down song *The Next Market Day*. She's also due to be touring the UK in November so, should Sarah be passing your way, be prepared for some brilliant musician-ship, a warm and welcoming stage presence and a voice as rich, matured and knowing as the finest thrice-distilled Irish malt whiskey.

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