

On The Road

**Sarah
McQuaid**



Photo - Colm Henry

by Frank Chester

One of the busiest young performers on the folk circuit right now is the Irish-American singer songwriter Sarah McQuaid, who seems, quite simply, to never stop touring. In 2011, she toured Europe, Ireland, the UK twice, and the US twice, making a total of 149 gigs. And 2012 was almost as busy, her final UK tour towards the end of the year comprising 24 shows, seemingly designed to test both her and her car's stamina to the limit.

Thanks to the miracle of modern communication, I managed to catch up with her while she was in Texas, where she told me: "I'll be aiming to do pretty much the same level of touring in 2013, with hopefully a few more festivals in the summer, and maybe look into touring in Canada and/or Australia. Basically I'm spending six months of the year on the road, and that feels about right to me in terms of making a living and still getting to have a home and family life."

Speaking before her recent spell of gigs in the UK, Sarah told me, "I'm very much looking forward to the UK tour. Many of them are repeat bookings, so I'm particularly looking forward to those. The best thing about Scottish audiences is that it generally doesn't take a lot of persuasion to get them to sing along. They sing loudly and with conviction, and sometimes with gorgeous harmonies. The Partick audiences are amazing for harmonies; I could just stop singing myself and listen to them all evening."

"I'm also really happy that there's a nice little five-day run of village

halls. I've worked with rural touring schemes before, and it's always really nice. It's a more general audience than you'd get at folk clubs, because the reason people are coming out to see you is simply that there's something happening in their local village hall and they want to support it. So it gets me in front of people that I normally wouldn't be able to reach."

Sarah is a true cosmopolitan, being born in Madrid to an American mother and a Spanish father. She was raised in Chicago and now lives in Cornwall with dual Irish and American citizenship. This is reflected in her music. She said: "The music I play is naturally influenced by the place I'm living in. I made my first album when I was living in Ireland, and that one consisted mostly of traditional Irish songs and tunes. I've been living in England for the past five years, so I guess it's not surprising that I've found material to write about in the landscape around me."

"I wrote *Hardwick's Lofty Towers* after visiting Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire, and while I was reading about Bess of Hardwick's life I found out that she was buried in Derby Cathedral, so that's how *In Derby Cathedral* came about. I wrote *Kenilworth* after reading about the opening of the renovated Elizabethan garden at Kenilworth Castle. The garden was created by Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, for Queen Elizabeth I, as part of his efforts to try to persuade her to marry him. I thought, 'What a lovely gesture - I've made you a garden, will you marry me?' So I had to write a song about it."

"Once we moved to Cornwall I found myself putting down solid roots very quickly, and I've made some really close friends there. My kids go to a small school and spend so much time outdoors, and it's a wonderfully relaxing place to come back home to after a heavy-duty tour. Really, it was the move to Cornwall that set me on the path I'm on now, music-wise. I met my friend Zoë because our kids go to the same school, and after we'd become friends I discovered that she was

a former pop star. She had a big hit single back in 1991 with a song she wrote and performed, called *Sunshine On A Rainy Day*.

We started writing songs together, and before we knew it we had enough songs for an album, which we recorded under the band name Mama. The album is called *Crow Coyote Buffalo*, and it got great reviews - we were described by one reviewer as 'Two pagan goddesses channelling the ghost of Jim Morrison.' It was produced and engineered by Martin Stansbury, who's now my manager and touring sound engineer. We have been touring together for three years now, and I don't think I could tour at the level I do if I didn't have that support."

"It was through writing the songs for the album with Zoë that I really started to think of myself as a songwriter. I haven't finished any new songs for my fourth album yet, but I have a bunch of them half-written, lots of fragments of lyrics in the notepad on my phone, and some bits of melodies and guitar parts in the voice memos. Once I get some time off this winter and next summer I'll be able to sit down and flesh them out into proper songs. I do want to take my time with the fourth album. The last one - *The Plum Tree And The Rose* - was only just out in 2012, so there's absolutely no need for me to hurry to make a follow-up. I'm really happy with it, and I want to make sure that the follow-up is even better, so I won't be rushing into it."

"*The Plum Tree And The Rose* has been amazingly successful so far. I've had some great reviews in the UK, Ireland, the USA, Holland, Belgium and Germany, and it's been selling well and getting lots of radio airplay. It went to No. 3 on the Folk-DJ chart, No. 5 on the Euro Americana Chart and No. 6 on the Roots Music Report Folk Top 50."

Sarah is an acknowledged authority in DADGAD guitar tuning, and workshops have become a major part of her tours and festival appearances. She wrote *The Irish DADGAD Guitar Book* almost 20 years ago, and it is still selling in music shops around the world.

She said: "In my teenage years I was big into Joni Mitchell and I knew that she used lots of different tunings, so I used to just randomly retune my guitar and then see what sounds I could make. Then when I was 18, I went to live in France and started playing with a traditional Irish band. At a festival where we were playing in Brittany, a French guitarist showed me the DADGAD tuning and told me that all the Irish players were using it. As soon as I started trying out chords and finding my way around the fretboard in DADGAD, I realised that it was the tuning I'd always been looking for. Before that, I'd heard songs by Pentangle and Led Zeppelin, and once I found DADGAD I just took to it straight away."

"I've been playing exclusively in DADGAD for over 20 years now, and I use it for all kinds of material - traditional Irish, Scottish and Appalachian songs and tunes, contemporary covers, old jazz numbers from the 1920s and 30s, medieval and Elizabethan songs, and of course my own songs. I wouldn't exactly call it a traditional or Celtic style, although I do play some traditional and Celtic music. I guess it's kind of my own style that I've developed over the years. I like to leave a lot of space between the notes, and I like to think of the guitar as duetting with, rather than backing the voice, and I suppose that makes what I do that bit different."

I've been trying to get the publishers to let me do a follow-up book that would focus on song accompaniment and that would include songs in other genres and styles - jazz, blues, rock & roll and so forth - but thus far I haven't been able to sell them on it. I live in hope, though."

"The great thing about touring as intensively as I do is that every gig becomes in effect a rehearsal for the next one. If I'm really struggling with a difficult guitar piece, I often find that if I put it aside and don't touch it for a few days, when I come back to it again, it's all there - my fingers have learned what they're supposed to do while they weren't doing it. And then once it's in my fingers, the best thing I can do is

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not think about it while I'm playing it. On the new album there's a John Dowland song from the 16th century called *Can She Excuse My Wrongs*, which I've been playing live since last April. It's very tricky to play and sing because the guitar is playing a countermelody to the voice, and quite often the guitar part is not only a different melody but a different rhythm to the vocal part, so I just have to sing the song and trust my fingers to do their job by themselves."

"When I'm on tour, my husband is at home in Cornwall with our two children. I'm the main breadwinner for my family, so I have to tour as intensively as I do in order for all of us to survive. But I work my tour schedule around the school holidays, so I'm always at home any time they're off school. On balance, I get to spend a lot more time with them than I would if I had a conventional full time job, and of course, I also have cousins, uncles and aunts in various parts

of the USA, so it's great that my American tours enable me to see them as well. When we're on tour, Martin does the driving and I sit in the passenger seat with my laptop in my lap, trying madly to catch up with emails and keep the tour diary and gig calendar on my website up to date."

"There's a lot of computer work to do at home as well. I do all my own booking, and that's incredibly time-consuming. But I do feel

very lucky that I'm able to make a living doing what I love most – writing songs, making albums, performing live – and very lucky that I have the support both from my husband at home and from Martin on the road. I couldn't do it without either of them."

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Photo - Colm Henry