

Tuning in to come full circle

Sharon Ní Chonchuir chats to American singer and guitarist **SARAH McQUAID** as she prepares to perform at the Return to Camden Town Festival later this month.

CULTURE moves in circles. Hundreds of years ago emigrating Irish men and women brought their traditional tunes to America and wove their melodies into the emerging folk music of that continent.

In 1994, a travelling American completed that journey in reverse.

A fan of American folk songs, singer and guitar player Sarah McQuaid came to Ireland where she discovered their source — and indeed a whole new style of music which continues to inspire her.

She said: "I had what you might describe as an 'Ah ha' moment the first time I heard Irish music."

"I suddenly realised where American music had come from."

That American music was the soundtrack to McQuaid's childhood in Chicago.

She said: "My mother was always singing. She also taught me to play guitar and piano." Music was everywhere in her home.

Her mother listened to Appalachian folk music and traditional American songs played Peggy Seeger, Jean Richie and Joan Baez.

In her teenage years, McQuaid delved deeper, learning to sing all sorts of folk songs and play different guitar styles.

As an 18-year-old, she moved to France, where she joined an Irish band — a move that was to change her musical outlook completely.

She said: "At the time, I was finding my way musically and I knew nothing about Irish music."

"But I picked it up quickly and I fell in love with it."

She also found love with the band's banjo player.

The pair moved to Ireland, where McQuaid explored the country's traditional music in even more depth.

During the next 14 years she recorded an album, mastered the DADGAD open-tuning system for guitars and, in the process, drew acclaim for her rich singing voice and distinctive acoustic guitar. Her first album, *When Two Lovers Meet*, was warmly welcomed by traditional music fans in 1997.

A mixture of Irish folk songs and original material, it introduced listeners to an extraordinarily intuitive new singer.

The singer's spare arrangements were true to the spirit of the music.

Her deep, mature voice sang with sincere feeling; her soft guitar provided the perfect backing to the moving lyrics.

Listen to the title song and you'll appreciate the sparseness of her style.

The musician's velvet-tinged voice is complemented by a gently-plucked guitar and, towards the end, by the droning of uilleann pipes.

This might just be how the song was sung in its original context — by a fireside with minimal accompaniment.

McQuaid's sensitive treatment of these traditional songs could explain why her music sounds so honest and so powerful.

Even her original music possesses this quality. Charlie's Gone Home is a ballad that tells the tale of an ill-fated love affair.

Again, McQuaid's mellifluous voice dominates while a guitar and violin meld sweetly in the background.

Despite the enthusiastic response to her debut, she failed to build on its success.

She now admits she didn't really know what she was doing. McQuaid had released the album independently and in an age that preceded Myspace, had no idea how to distribute it.

Meanwhile, an unexpected job offer caused her life to move in an unforeseen direction, taking her away from music.

She said: "I was offered a job in a magazine and as I had no idea how the music was going to work out, I took it — a bird in the hand and all that."

Life presented her with more surprises with the births of two children.

Almost before she knew it, ten years had gone by and she had hardly played any music.

But chance was about to intervene once more and present the singer with the opportunity to return to music.

When she first discovered Irish music, McQuaid also encountered DADGAD open tuning.

This is a method of tuning used by traditional Irish guitarists. She said: "Strings can be tuned to the same note, giving a sympathetic string effect and a lovely full sound."

McQuaid experimented with the tuning until she became one of its most skilled exponents. Eventually, she was asked to write a book about it.

This book, *The Irish DADGAD Guitar Book*, was (and still is) very popular and proved to be a catalyst for her return to the music business.

She said: "The organisers of a festival knew about the book and asked me to play on stage beside Dick Gaughan — one of my greatest heroes."

"How could I refuse?" That performance led to a renewed public interest in her music.

She said: "It was a new beginning for me. I started gigging again. More and more people wanted to see me. It's very heartening."

This time around, McQuaid was aware of the demands of the business.

She found a distributor and re-released her debut album. It's recently been released in Britain and already, the reaction is positive.

The singer said: "I would never have thought there would be much of a market for my music. But people seem to like my stripped-back, acoustic sound."

She has already begun work on a second album which will feature the old-time American tunes she grew up with as well as some

original numbers.

McQuaid doesn't think this represents a change in direction.

She said: "My music is a mixture of American music, traditional Irish music and original material."

"They all have a common feel — something to do with their unaccompanied and simple nature."

She is also more interested in reminding listeners of long-forgotten traditional tunes than she is in writing her own.

She said: "There are so many good songs out there that there is no need to push the process of creating new ones."

"However, if I have one in my head, of course I will write it down."

This autumn, McQuaid will bring her traditional tunes and original music on tour around Britain, Ireland and Holland.

She is particularly looking forward to her performance at the Return to Camden Town Festival on October 24.

With her perceptive interpretation of traditional Irish music and old-time

American songs, Sarah McQuaid has closed the circle.

■ **For more information about Sarah**, visit www.sarahmcquaid.com or www.myspace.com/sarahmcquaid

■ **SARAH McQUAID:** Journey to Ireland uncovered a whole new style of music to inspire her.



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See our special 4-page supplement on the Return to Camden Festival inside *rí-rá*