



SIDE BY SIDE

Gwen Orel met with the Kane sisters when they launched their new album at the Catskills Irish week in July.

The Kane sisters' new album *Side by Side*, which launched at the Catskills Irish Arts Week in July, reflects their love of family and friends. Unlike their two previous albums, *Side by Side* was not recorded in a studio: most of it was recorded in Liz's house in Letterfrack. The house is a space full of high ceilings and the wind whistling around outside from the nearby Atlantic. One track was recorded at producer Ronan Browne's house on a day when the rain made too much noise to record at Liz's home. The musicians mostly sat together as they would in a session. Ottawa Step Valley Dancer, Nathan Pilatzke, who accompanies two tunes, danced on a plank in Liz's kitchen. The two sisters are five years apart, but they share the same loud, infectious laugh, and finish each other's sentences.

"We loved the feeling of sitting in the living room," Liz told me on Friday afternoon, an hour or so before the 25th anniversary concert of Cherish the Ladies (at which both would play) in the Catskills. During the Catskills Irish Arts Week, along with launching the CD, the sisters played in sessions nightly and taught during the day before going on a summer tour of the East Coast, accompanied by concertina player Edel Fox (who also launched her CD with the Kanes on the same night). Irish audiences will be treated to the three on tour when they come back from the US in August (see the schedule below).

Their home place Letterfrack, they explain to me, is tiny, just two pubs and a shop! So a trip to East Durham is really going somewhere different. They love going to up-State New York and the Catskills for many reasons, but especially relish the chance to play with many old friends and make new musical acquaintances too. Several of those friends joined them at the launch at Bernie O's in Cairo, including Patrick and Julie Ourceau, Laoise Kelly. Liz Carroll asked if she could be a Kane sister, Joanie Madden emceed the event.

People over here have been asking the Kanes for a new album since they began teaching at the Catskills, five summers ago. So, it was time to record the sisters agree. And many of the people on it or thanked on it are people they have worked with in East Durham: they first met Donegal guitar player, Daithí Sproule in the Catskills; and the week's artistic director Paul Keating gets a mention. Friends from home designed and took the photographs for the new CD, and in the photos the girls are playing in places they love.

And it reflects their roots, too, but it is people not places that really make a difference in traditional music. Their grandfather, the late Jimmy Mullen, was a huge influence on them. He passed away at age 83, in 2003, and played his last gig just a few months before. Mention too must be made of their County Sligo teacher, Mary Finn. Their grandfather like many of his generation and indeed many players today learned his music by ear, something which we all know leads to a deeper understanding of the subtleties of the music, it has to be felt, it can't be taught mechanically.

Their grandfather was a big fan of Michael Coleman and he introduced the girls to the Sligo fiddle masters music, encouraging them to listen to records from the 1930s. "He reckoned Coleman appeared to him one night," they say. One night after putting away the gramophone records, he said Coleman was at his back door, playing. And, says Liz, "He just loved loads of notes.

Finbar Dwyer was his favourite composer, all the Dwyers." And that has passed down to his granddaughters Yvonne notices, "we do like the tunes that are loaded in with notes don't we? Those tunes that have a nice flow and continuation."

There are plenty of those on the new CD, which emphasises recently composed tunes by Paddy O'Brien, Martin Mulhaire, Paddy Fahey and Finbar Dwyer. These complex tunes don't lend

themselves to a lot of ornamentation beyond rolls, and they suit the Kanes' elegant, long-bowed tone perfectly. There are four original tunes from Liz, and four unaccompanied tunes that show off their strong, emphatic sound. They play in unison, *Side by Side*, organically ornamenting at the same time, finding double-stops together, changing bows in unison. They were never tempted to put in harmony or counterpoint; they began learning tunes and playing in sessions together and this is what feels natural to them.

The new album also demonstrates the sisters' love of key changes. "We changed a lot of normal keys to different keys. We prefer it; it sounds brighter and nicer," Liz says. For example, "*Thomond Bridge*," often done in F major, they play in B flat. They began thinking about doing a new album last summer, shortly after the Catskills week, but, they admit, didn't sit down to put tunes together until a few days before recording. "We have to work under pressure. We don't do anything until late at night, around 11 or 12." Working like that keeps the tunes fresh in their heads, and keeps the feeling of excitement strong for them. The album title reflects their past and their ongoing development too: Liz wrote the original reel "*Side by Side*" thinking about how they've been playing together since they were very young girls;

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but the increasing interest in composition may be a sign of things to come. Liz took up the fiddle first, given one by her grandfather; younger sis Yvonne took it up a bit later, after failing to click with the flute and the piano accordion. Where some older siblings would object to a younger one tagging along, the girls laugh that it was "quite the opposite".

After their childhoods, their training took different paths: Liz studied music formally at University College Cork. Yvonne went right into teaching. In practice, this means that it's Liz who reads music and find tunes in tune books; Yvonne uses lettered notation but learns by ear only. When they're looking for tunes for an album, Liz records them for Yvonne, and they weed them out until they find one they like.

Asked whether they ever fight Liz and Yvonne look puzzled. "It would get sorted really quickly," Yvonne offers. "We wouldn't hold a grudge," Liz declares. When I explain that what I mean is bicker, that many siblings couldn't work together, they laugh. "We're friends as well as sisters, we're very close," they say. Who said what? Hard to say, they overlap until their voices blend into one. It's like that with their fiddling too.

When they return from their East Coast adventure in August they will be straight into an Irish tour with concertina player Edel Fox. Well worth checking out their website at www.thekanesisters.com

