

Liz and Yvonne Kane: *Sisters in Sync*

By Tim McCarrick

The Kane Sisters, Liz and Yvonne, of Letterfrack, Connemara, Ireland, are truly a dynamic duo. First learning fiddle from their grandfather Jimmy Mullen and Sligo player Mary Finn, the Kanes later spent three years touring with accordion player Sharon Shannon as part of her band “The Woodchoppers.” Their first solo album was called *The Well Tempered Bow*; this was followed by *Under the Diamond*, and just this past summer, *Side by Side*. Both full-time fiddle teachers as well as touring performers, Liz and Yvonne succeed in combining their love of playing music with their desire to pass it on to others.

I had the pleasure of chatting with them and seeing them perform in Philadelphia this past summer.

I read recently that you were educated at Kylemore Abbey, so your school is on a million postcards.

Yvonne: Yes, it’s beautiful.

Liz: There were a lot of students from all over the world there boarding. But it’s not a school anymore. It just closed down. It was a brilliant school, a lot of fun.

Yvonne: It was day girls and boarders. So we were day girls. It was run by Benedictine nuns. It was a beautiful setting. We only lived back the road from it — we were about three miles away.

And did you play music at the school?

Liz: Yeah, the music teacher there, Sister Carol, was from Cork. She’s a great musician, a brilliant pianist, and she still teaches piano to a lot of the local kids, and she also plays flute and she sings...

Yvonne: She would have taught us the piano and violin, as in classical.

It’s really fun watching you guys — there will be moments where you look over at each other and there’s some communication, just in the eyes, and a smile, and it makes you wonder, “Okay, what just happened there?” And I know when I play with my brother, we sometimes silently comment on the music — or maybe there’s



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a part that I used to get wrong, but just got right... Is it something like that?

Liz: Exactly. Where we do that note the second time around, let’s go for a variation...

Yvonne: We have a few looks and we just seem to know.

Liz: It’s funny touring now with Adele [last name????] because on my right is Yvonne, and we kind of play off each other. I know what Yvonne’s thinking, and then I look over at Adele and sometimes I think she should know what I’m thinking because we’re so used to knowing what each other’s thinking.

Right. So when it comes to variations, I guess you have to plan them ahead of time, and say, “Let’s try this the second time through.”

Liz: Exactly. And sometimes you wouldn’t always remember them on the night, but you might on the second time around, or the last time around... The tunes are very intricate, a lot of the tunes we play, so to remember every detail and variation, you kind of have to have a little bit of leverage.

I notice a lot of the tunes are fiddle player’s tunes. They’re Ed Reavy tunes and things like that.

Both: They are.

I saw one the other day on the internet — it was G minor — and I thought, this is great, I don’t get to see it or hear it often enough in a lot of the fiddle tunes. So just watching I thought, “Okay, a fiddle player wrote this, whoever it was.”

Liz: Yeah, it’s funny. On our new album we’re gearing a lot of the tunes towards compositions that have been composed by accordion players, like Paddy O’Brien from County Offaly, and there’s



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a tune from Finbar Dwyer there... There’s a lot of Paddy O’Brien selections on this album.

Yvonne: It’s mostly all newly-composed tunes.

Good. So it is a big change from the first two...

Yvonne: It’s not a huge change. I mean we’ve got different backers. We’ve got Daithi Sproule on guitar, and Patsy Broderick on piano, Mick Conneely on bouzouki, and then Nathan Pilatzke — he’s an Ottawa Valley step dancer — he’s dancing a few steps on the album as well. And we also recorded in Liz’s house, as opposed to in a studio. So Ronan Browne recorded the album for us. He’s brilliant — all we did was laugh, he’s the best ever.

Liz: What a gem. He was so cool to work with — he just made it so easy. It didn’t seem all serious like in a recording studio, not at all.

Yvonne: We were literally sitting in front of the fire and playing a few tunes and he was in the kitchen and the dining room recording us.

How do you go about choosing your tunes? Do you ever disagree about what you’ll play and record?

Liz: I went through a phase of being crazy about Sliabh Luachra tunes, and Yvonne was like, “Well, it is a lovely tune, but maybe not for us.” There is, I suppose, a certain type of tune that suits our style, certain keys.

Yeah, so what kind of thing would you draw the line at?

Yvonne: We’d obviously have to love the tune to be playing it, you know, and sometimes we change the tunes., just put them into different keys, so it’ll suit the fiddle a lot more...

Liz: And make them more interesting, and brighter for us...

Yvonne: ...for us to play. When it comes to picking tunes, Liz might pick out a few tunes and play them on the tape, and say, “What do you think of this?” and I’m like “Yes,” “No,” “Maybe,” “Definitely not.”

Liz: The thing is, when I do play them on the tape for you, or vice versa, it’s not until we actually play them together and record them together that we can say, “You know what, that really doesn’t suit us.”

So even if it seems to suit one of you, your combined sound...

Yvonne: We both agree in the end. But we end up loving the tune usually.

Liz: Yeah. And agreeing in the end.

Yvonne: We never would play a tune that either of us didn’t like.

Liz: There’s so many out there, we’d keep going until we find one that we like. Or if we didn’t like them, we’d change the key and make them sound like a different tune.

So are there more polkas and slides or anything like that? Or mostly reels?

Liz: Mostly hornpipes and reels, jigs, song airs, slow airs. We haven’t attempted any polkas or slides, but again it wouldn’t be in our repertoire. I mean, we teach them, but...

Yvonne: We leave that to the Kerry people. Or the Cork people.

Liz: Exactly.

What’s coming up in the future?

Yvonne: Well, we got together with Adele [LAST NAME???]. We first met her at the Catskills Irish Festival five years ago, and we’d kind of been getting up together, the three of us, doing a concert

up at the Catskills, and different sessions. And then last year after the Catskills, we were on the way back to the airport, and we said, “We have to put a new album together,” Liz and I, because it had been six years — 2004 was the last one. And Adele had never made a solo recording. She had recorded before with Ronan O’Flaherty. So we decided that was it — next year the Catskills was going to be the deadline. We were going to have a new album and we were going to do a tour afterward. And it did happen.

Liz: It’s a dream come true.

Wow, you were on a mission.

Yvonne: We were on a mission. We had to have a deadline... We literally got the albums in our hands on the Friday before we came over here. And Catskills was on Sunday.

Liz: We launched it in the Catskills. So when we go back home, we’ll have launches at home — we’re launching in Miltown Malbay, and Galway and Clifton... Bantry, Belfast, Sligo, Westport, London. And Cork, and Ennis... all around the place! As Julia Clifford said, “We get around!” We’re also going to the All-Ireland Fleadh Cheoil in August...

Just as performers this time? You did do some competitions, right?

Ad(s)

Liz: I did, yeah.

And you decided not to continue?

Liz: I didn’t actually mind it really — I didn’t take any notice to whether I won or lost. I kind of just did it for the fun. I had a partner in crime — Mirella Murray, she plays with Cherish the Ladies now, so we grew up together. We went to the same lessons together, and we ended up doing competitions together, the duet competition — she played piano accordion. So when we were doing the duet, we said we’d do the solos, and it was just a chance to get away to the fleadh cheoils and festivals and because I’m older, Yvonne came later on and we always went to the fleadhs and festivals up towards Sligo and Leitrim.

You have a busy time ahead!

Yvonne: And then we go back to teaching. We both teach full-time. We do that for the school year...

So you’re still living in the same area?

Yvonne: We still live in Letterfrack. We moved back there about four years ago. It’s great to be back in Letterfrack — absolutely love it.

For more information, please visit www.thekanesisters.com.

Can you tell us about your equipment?

Liz: My fiddle I got from our grandfather, Jimmy Mullen, years back. I think it might be a hundred years old, it might be French, but it's the fiddle that I've warmed to and I find it hard to play any other fiddle, like all fiddle players. It's got a good warm sound...

Yvonne: We use the Audio Technica Pro 35 mics, usually. They're just little clip-on mics and we love them because there's a really natural sound, no electric sound or anything like that.

Yvonne: So my fiddle was one of Martin Mulvihill's fiddles. He had a good few fiddles as far as I know and it was one of his. It wasn't played in a long time until I got it. It's a very deep tone.

It's a loud enough fiddle, actually, The two of them seem to...

Liz: They combine well together.

They do, yeah. Especially with some of the minor key reels — they need that color.

Yvonne: So many people have looked in my fiddle and they can't figure out where it's from — fiddle makers and fiddle repairers. It's a mystery fiddle, and I love it.

Discography:

Feature albums:

The Well Tempered Bow (2002)

Under the Diamond (2004)

Side by Side (2010)

As guests:

The Diamond Mountain Sessions, Sharon Shannon (2000). Recorded in the Monastery Hostel in Letterfrack, Galway along with Donal Lunny, Carlos Nunez, Steve Earle, John Prine, Mary Staunton, Jackson Browne, The Hothouse Flowers and Dessie O'Halloran.

The Fiddler Fair, compilation from Fiddle festival Mc Carthy's pub Baltimore, Cork (2000).

Behind the Mist, compilation of musicians who have been part of the Bog and Sea Week festivals in Letterfrack over the last fifteen years. (2000).

Idir Dhá Solas, Maighread and Triona ní Dhomnaill (2000).

Providence, Providence (1999). (Liz)

Transcendental Blues, Steve Earle (2000).

The Girls Won't Leave the Boys Alone, Cherish the Ladies (2000). (Yvonne)

Memories from the Holla, Peter and Angelina Carberry (2001). (Liz)

The Pound Road, Dessie O'Halloran (2001)

Mná na hÉireann



[Tim McCarrick works as a music editor for J.W. Pepper. He has written about fiddle playing for Fiddler Magazine and Mel Bay's Fiddle Sessions website. He has nearly 20 arrangements published for school orchestras from Mozart and Beethoven to Gershwin and Led Zeppelin, and he is

also working on a string method book, and that, ladies and gentlemen, is why he never updates the Irish Fiddle website! He lives in Chester County, Pennsylvania, with one wife, two daughters, two dogs, and lots of stringed instruments.]