

KITTY DONOHOE: LOVING THE IRISH WORLD

Singer–songwriter Kitty Donohoe fears she might be kicked out of the Irish world. Gwen Orel assesses the evidence.



So here's the "crime", Kitty put a piano boogie groove under the *Chicago Jig/Chicago Reel* on her new CD, *An Irishman's Daughter*.

"It suddenly came to me, that that's what I wanted to do," Kitty said with a laugh. The tunes, with Kitty playing cittern and David Ramon Vaughan on piano, follow her original song (that sounds trad) *Working for Mrs. O'Leary*, which is set in Chicago.

Playing the cittern brings Kitty to a different composing place than where the guitar or piano takes her, she said. It was also the cittern that

big party, that was magical, mysterious and wonderful." She is proudly third-generation Irish, at least on her mother's side. Her father is Irish-American too, but we don't really know much about the Donohoes as she explains. "We used to joke that they paid a lot of money to uncover the Donohoe family tree, and when they saw how bad it was, paid more to cover it back up again," she said with a laugh. Her mother's family is from Drogheda.

Northern Ireland could be where her father's family is from, she's heard. When she visited Ireland in 2006, she took pictures of signs with her family's name, with its unusual spelling, in Cavan. Kitty said it's easy to believe her father's family drifted down to Cavan from the north.

Her father's influence impacts the CD beyond its name, *The Irishman's Daughter*.

He got rid of the family television when she was a child, she said in an email. After that, she and her family began reading a lot. Her love of words and sense of poetry stemmed from that. Her mother had been studying to be a pianist when she married her father. Once they threw out the television, her father bought her mother a grand piano: "But her only chance to really play was at night when we were all in bed and I'd lay there absorbing the music, which informed my sense of melody."

When Kitty moved back to the US she lived in the Corktown area of Detroit, close to the Gaelic League, and saw the Irish bands that played there. Irish music fans will recognize some of the players on the CD: Cathie Ryan, Maurice Lennon, Dennis Cahill, Jimmy Keane. She knows some of the players from working in Chicago.

The CD is also a family affair: her son Jesse Ackles sings *Bonny Blue-Eyed Nancy*, and her daughter, Callie Ackles, sings the traditional *Lark in the Morning*. That song, Kitty said, was a popular one with all the bands that played at the Gaelic League in Corktown.

But "they sang it differently, almost like a march. I decided to make it more of a cautionary tale."

The spin on the traditional and the personal sums up the CD, whether it's a slow version of *Star of the County Down* or following her original song *Leaving the Land* with the traditional tune *Ships Are Sailing*. She's (at least) three generations out, but she's very much an Irishman's child.

"I decided to make the *Lark in the Morning* more of a cautionary tale"

helped Kitty compose another original song (which also sounds trad) *Abe Lincoln's Army*, about an Irishman who deserts. Despite her oh-so-Irish name, Kitty is not a trad performer: she's a singer–songwriter in the tradition of Christine Lavin and Nanci Griffith. Her music is sometimes bluesy, sometimes folksy, sometimes jazzy.

The All Music Guide has called her a "true treasure, a rare songwriter with tremendous range." *There Are No Words*, a song she wrote about 9/11, received a Michigan Emmy, and was used in the film *A Nation Remembers—the Pentagon 9/11 Story*. She left home at 19 and moved to Nova Scotia, and fell in love with the music there. "Folk music was actually a money-making activity in the '60s and '70s," she said, "with people like Judy Collins and Bob Dylan." She found herself drawn to certain songs that had fiddle or pipes on them: "It kind of resonated with me."

Like those of Lavin, some of Kitty's songs are funny: *Fish on Friday* is about envying the communion dresses of the Irish Catholic girls she grew up with, as an Irish Protestant girl in Royal Oak, Michigan. "I was so jealous, especially of the dress. It was all about the dress. I wanted to wear the bride dress. I can't even tell you how much. They had this

