

# PETE MEETS

## *Billy Teare & Kathleen O'Sullivan*

*Some time last summer I received the following email:*

Hi Pete,  
Hope this mail finds you well.  
My name is Kathleen O'Sullivan, I am a traditional Irish singer, published poet and artist. For seven years I recorded and toured extensively with trad band 'The London Lassies and Pete Quinn'. I now work with Billy Teare, whom you may be familiar with as one of Ireland's premiere storytellers. As well as being the featured artists at ALL major folk and storytelling festivals and venues internationally, Billy and myself work in schools, libraries, museums, heritage sites and community groups across Ireland and the UK .

We have a unique and entertaining programme of stories, songs and poetry. We have performed for children and adults at book/literary/arts events all over Ireland and recently were part of the Beltane festival programme in Louth libraries, which celebrated 'Age and opportunity'. So you can see we are happy to work with all ages and abilities and can tailor our work for intimate workshops to concerts on festival stages.

We wondered if you ever feature interviews with professional tellers for your magazine? If so, we would be happy to chat with you, or answer written questions about Billy's latest collaboration for your Aug mag, ahead of a very busy period throughout Ireland in Oct.



*Well, I didn't manage to catch them live and time rushed by so I eventually resorted to an email 'meeting' in November. Here's the result:*

*I know Billy's work, I've worked alongside him a few times particularly at the Chippenham Folk Festival a few years back, but give me some background as my readers might not know: where is he from, how long has he been doing it, how does he describe himself etc.*

Billy is originally from Ballycarry and now lives in Larne.

As a child Billy performed "shows" for local children, encouraged by his aunts and then started doing comic turns for community groups. He would put together monologues and routines from comedians of the day such as Jimmy O'Dea. He also recited poetry and songs penned by his Grandfather, William Hume, who was known for his poems and musicianship. ( A fiddle on the

Aldfreck Banner, was in recognition of Billy's Granddad as a bard).

From his teens onwards Billy took a keen interest in comedy and along with a friend, formed a duo: Willie and Art - The Mop Heads. Their act "borrowed" from The Goons, Morecombe & Wise and other comedians of the day.

Later, as a solo performer, Billy started entering talent contests in pubs and clubs and from there appeared on radio and TV with some success.

He was still working as a civil servant when he began a stand-up career in tough clubs and venues on both sides of the political/religious divide, along with army camps - equally as tough.

Comedy and variety are evident in Billy's work still. He plays harmonica, jaws harp, juggles, sings comedy songs, performs magic tricks and illusions etc. His work in those arenas is also apparent in his assuredness in front of a live audience.

He made his transition to storytelling more than 20 years ago after being inspired by seeing Robin Williamson back in 1990. He actively set out to see and meet other tellers and gather both written and spoken sources.

He terms himself a storyteller/folk artist and collector of "verbal bric-a-brac". Another phrase he sometimes uses to refer to what he does is "verbal puddle leaping". This is in connection to his tactic as a boy to try to impress the girls by jumping into a muddy puddle, showering them with mud and freezing water. He kind of still holds with that audacious approach in trying to verbally disarm and engage his audience. He is one of those people that totally gets away with it.



*Kathleen; tell me a bit about your background and your work - the London Lasses and what was before that...*

I was with trad Irish band 'The London Lasses and Pete Quinn' for seven years. I recorded on a couple of their CDs and toured England, Ireland, Europe and America with them.

My real, life-long passion however is for unaccompanied song. My dad was from Cork and my mum from Laoise. I learned to sing from her - informally - I just picked it up as she sang 24/7. On stage I say that my mum only sang when she was busy. I was one of nine children, seven boys and two girls, so she was ALWAYS busy and always singing.

All my family played traditional Irish music and/or sang. I grew up with it. I got taken to London sessions in my teens and met some of the greats of the Irish music scene. I was also part of Comhaltas and started going to regional, all Britain and all Ireland fleadh.



*How did the two of you get together and what do you do as a duo?*

Billy and myself met 7yrs ago when we were appearing as solo artists at Sidmouth international folk festival.

We share the same sense of humour and immediately saw the potential in combining stories and traditional songs. Our work together has been mutually beneficial. Through Billy I have acquired a depth of knowledge about stories and folklore that is invaluable to my singing and sense of lyrics. We have visited the home of Packie Manus Byrne, (whom Billy called to see only last week. Packie was just out of hospital, a little frail but in good wit), John Campbell and Colum Sands.

Billy says he has gained too, through my knowledge of singers, songs and traditional music and musicians.

We have hit on an organic method of selecting and arranging material: stories and songs and when we are in front of a live audience, this is what we try to convey.

I grew up in a house where it was natural to have visitors in the home who would sing or play, not as a performance, but in a social exchange. At our gigs, we try to make it as if we are sat at the kitchen table and interacting with friends.

We work with all ages and abilities and have been extremely busy in the last wee while, touring Cork county, Cork City, Meath, Donegal, Roscommon and all around the North of Ireland.

The more we spend time together working, the more we generate new material. We have been reviewing some of it in order to start recording. We were surprised to find we could easily produce 3 or 4 CDs and are excited to make a start on that. We are also toying with the idea of recording some of our live material. We do enjoy the response we get.

*Do you play any instruments?*

Billy is a very good harmonica player and plays jaws harp. I don't play any instruments.

*What form does your show take - ie do you do alternate items or both work together, or...?*

Our shows vary according to the age of our listeners. With school programmes, we usually take turns with Billy telling stories and me doing some of my poetry and increasingly work together on the audience participation. Also, at this level, I will usually introduce ways to make arts and crafts from recycled materials. This relates to storytelling in that some of my little characters are 'Little Red Recycling Hood', 'Plastic Bagpuss', 'Dorothy and the Tin Can Man', the Three Little Pigs (made from milk cartons). There are examples of my work on a moving gallery on the 'Arts and Crafts' link on the website. (The website is being updated constantly).

For adults, we do a bit of everything. Billy is a very spontaneous person and confident in understanding what particular audiences might respond to. We do turnabout for songs and stories and tell some together, drawing inspiration from friends such as Packie Manus Byrne and the late great John Campbell, we also include adapted versions of some of the tales collected by Seamus McManus and work by W B Yeats.

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