

Jason O'Rourke

The Northern Concertina



Step into the renowned Errigle Inn in Belfast on a Tuesday night and you will find a traditional music session in full swing. At the helm, you will find Jason O'Rourke and his concertina. Jason has been a regular and somewhat sought after figure on the Belfast session scene for many years now, though he is also well known throughout the traditional Irish music world far beyond Belfast's borders. After being made redundant from his 'day-job' in 2012, Jason

began to focus more on his career as a musician and writer, and both of these areas of his creative life have flourished. In 2014, he received an Artist Career Enhancement Scheme award from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, and with their support, made an album – *The Northern Concertina*.

This album release is the latest step in Jason's love affair with the concertina and with Irish music, a journey he has been on for more than 30 years. Here, he shares some of the story with us.

"I was born in London and lived there until I was seven. At that time, I remember my dad playing us vinyls of The Dubliners and the Clancy Brothers, and Dominic Behan. There wasn't much else available back then in the way of recorded traditional Irish music and song. When I was about 10, my dad decided we were all going to learn the tin whistle. So we were sitting round the table - me and my brother and my dad - and they seemed to be doing alright at it, and what I was doing sounded terrible. Feeling a bit frustrated, I dropped the whistle and stormed off. My mum met me on the stairs and in a first-class piece of psychology told me I 'probably wasn't musical', so to prove her wrong I picked up an old Hohner melodeon that she was trying her hand at, and taught myself to play

it. She was a clog dancer, and over the next few years I played for her to dance."

"After an interlude of about six years, in which I was playing the drums in various rock bands, I ended up doing a gig in a famous (infamous is probably a better description) bar in Oxford, The Bullingdon Arms, which was run by a Clare man, JB Ryan from Kilrush. As I was packing the kit away, I watched as all these musicians went into the back bar and started playing tunes, and I realised that they were having much more fun than I was, so I started going along to the sessions. It was an amazing place for music; we used to have weekends where musicians from as far away as Scotland would turn up, and everyone would crash

out for a couple of hours upstairs at the bar and on the floor at my place, packed in like sardines. It was like a fleadh, every weekend."

"My parents had bought an old wooden-ended Crabb 30-key concertina when I was about 14 (just before my long-haired-drummer phase kicked in) but I'd never really done much with it. When I first started going to the sessions in the Bully I was playing the bodhrán, but I didn't do that for long, as I wanted to get stuck into the melodies. So I went and rescued the concertina and started to teach myself to play it. I don't remember why I chose it over the melodeon though – it just seemed like the right thing to do."

Jason is almost entirely self-taught. No-one was teaching the concertina in the area he lived, and in those early years, there was very little in the way of recorded concertina music to listen to and learn from. He gleaned what he could from those available (such as some Noel Hill LPs, and a few recordings of West Clare concertina players on the Free Reed label) and from the wider traditional music scene.

"I've been to two workshops in my life," he says, "both by accident, and both of which were very welcome. I managed to get into one of John McMahon's classes at the Willie Clancy Week in 1988 (I think), and the next year I was in Lorient when Micheál Ó hÉidhín did a workshop. I got so much from those two, but that's all the actual teaching I've ever had."

"In terms of influences, the major one has to be Noel Hill. And, of course, there were recordings of other musicians available. I lived on a diet of Mairtín O'Connor, De Danann, Altan, The Bothy Band and Tommy Peoples. And session tapes, loads of them. I was also influenced in my teens by some of the great drummers of the time, such as Neil Peart, Bill Bruford, and Pierre Moerlen. Anyone who has had the pleasure of a car journey with me will tell you that I have an eclectic taste in music though. They could end up listening to anything from Van Der Graaf Generator and the Steven Wilson Band to French Mazurkas, Lau and Pennou Skoulm. I like musicians who aren't afraid to experiment and push boundaries. I was fortunate to catch a concert by Inge Thomson recently; it was great to see her perform, the way she was able to bring so many elements together into a cohesive whole. And I'm still interested in great drummers; Gavin Harrison would be top of my list at the moment."

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The Northern Concertina is not Jason's first foray into recording. He was involved in a couple of recordings made with different groups in the 90s: *Traditional Irish Music From Belfast*, which was a recording of Belfast session favourites at the time, and *Ón Oíche Go Maidín*, which was arranged for set dancing. These were all recorded for Outlet Records, as was *The Bunch Of Keys*, Jason's first solo album back in 2000. He also recorded *Roguary Road* in 2004 with another Belfast based musician, fiddler Ruadhraí O'Kane.

"*The Bunch Of Keys* was fairly representative of the sort of repertoire I was playing at the time, and was a welcome distraction from my thesis, which was totally dominating my life then. I worked with some great musicians on it, and experimented with changing the keys of some tunes (hence the name of the album). I was also enjoying great sessions in Belfast, playing a lot with Ruadhraí O'Kane, so collaborating with him on *Roguary Road* seemed to follow on from that quite naturally."

"It was great to do *Roguary Road* live at the Crosskeys Inn; I think it captures that freshness and energy that you get from live playing, which can be a challenge to get in the studio environment. Having said that, pretty much every recording I've made has been done 'live', in the sense that the musicians were recorded playing together, rather than remotely to a click track. We did have to do that on *The Northern Concertina* for Tim Edey's contribution, though, as he couldn't come over."

"There was a 13-year break between *Roguary Road* and *The Northern Concertina*, a period in my life where I went through a lot of ups and downs, and although I'd continued to play in sessions and festivals, I hadn't taken on any major musical projects. Then, at the end of 2014, I felt that conditions were right to do something again, as I was no longer stuck in the nine-to-five routine and had more time to be creative. The Artist Career Enhancement Scheme (ACES) award is the Arts Council NI's most prestigious individual award,

so getting it instantly drew a lot of attention to me. It is designed to kickstart artists' careers, and it has done what it says on the tin: enhanced my career by bringing me gigs, radio coverage, publicity, CD sales, reviews and interviews. The Arts Council NI has been very supportive throughout. The award enabled me to get into Red Box Studios in Belfast and record with Dónal O'Connor and Cormac O'Kane, who were great to work with. Having the necessary resources for once meant that I was able to devote some time to composition, arrangements, production and so forth. So there are four of my own compositions on *The Northern Concertina*, whereas there was only one on *The Bunch Of Keys*. I'd like to develop this side of my work, maybe collaborating with someone else on the next project."

The Northern Concertina is very much a solo album and the concertina is front and foremost throughout, but Jason is ably accompanied by some trusted musical friends – Teresa Clarke on fiddle and piano, Tim Edey and Stevie Dunne on guitars, and Seonaid Murray on saxophone.

"I've been playing with Stevie Dunne since the 90s. I really enjoy playing with him because he's inventive and he has a great driving style that really gels with what I do. When we were recording *The Northern Concertina* he did three day's worth of work in one day, and it was pure class. I've always loved the combination of fiddle and concertina, and for the past couple of years I've been fortunate to be able to play with Teresa Clarke at least once a week. She's Belfast's best-kept



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Photo: Steve de Paoire

secret I think, and I hope that this album will lead to more people being aware of her. I’m continually amazed by her talent, on the fiddle and other instruments, and her knowledge of music.”

“Picking the musicians was no problem at all. I knew from the outset that I wanted Stevie and Teresa to be involved, because I had plenty of experience of playing with them, and could be sure that they would both do a fantastic job. When I started to think about variety I decided to ask Tim, because of his expertise with the polkas and slides and, of course, his general brilliance. I can’t thank him enough for all the hard work he put in. Seonaid was introduced to me by a friend. She was perfect for the job because she had grown up with traditional music and dance – a background that I suspect not many sax players have.”

“For me, the biggest challenge when making an album is assembling the material. I think a balanced album needs to have a blend of new tunes as well as tunes from the tradition.

As a traditional musician, I want the listener to hear a piece of my music that they are already familiar with and think two things: ‘I love this tune’ and ‘I like what he’s done with it’.”

“*The Northern Concertina* is different primarily because of the way I play, which is very unlike most other concertina players. As Sean Smith recently remarked in the Boston Irish Reporter, ‘It’s a revelation to hear squeezebox from a significantly different milieu’. I also introduced a bit of tenor sax and some new compositions to the mix, and experimented a little with form, turning Andy Dickson’s reel in the key of A into a hornpipe in D, and playing *Sporting Paddy* as a slide – it’s quite funny when you play that at a session and people are scratching their heads because they recognise it but they don’t know where from.”

“I wanted to make an album that foregrounds the concertina as a single instrument with sufficient variety to ensure the music didn’t become repetitive or uninteresting. While Co. Clare is

clearly the spiritual home of the Irish concertina, I also wanted to draw attention to the fact that there are alternatives out there. I think I’ve achieved both of those objectives.”

Calling the album *The Northern Concertina*, draws attention to the fact that it is something a bit different. But is there such a thing as a northern style, and would Jason use that to define his playing? How would he describe his style?

“As I say in the album notes, ‘it’s all about the rhythm’. I’ve played a lot for dancing, and this comes through in the music. For example, I will often emphasise the off beat in a polka or slide, to complement the steps of the dancers, and I put a lot of energy into my playing as well. I don’t use as much ornamentation as other players, which on a first listening gives my style a certain stripped-back feel. But I don’t think my playing lacks complexity; there’s more going on than may be apparent from a casual listening, particularly the ‘doubling up’ of phrases for emphasis (playing them on both

sides of the instrument at the same time, in notes an octave apart). Because of this, the album requires a bit of attention from the listener, or they won’t necessarily get what I’m doing. As far as it being a ‘northern style’, it has some of the trademarks that are associated with the music up here: it’s fast, driving and rhythmic. But I wouldn’t say that what I do is similar to other northern concertina players, apart from some that I have taught.”

Whatever the style, Jason is clearly hitting all the right notes, and the reviews of the album have been extremely favourable. His life has changed significantly over the past few years and *The Northern Concertina* is evidence that the changes have been positive ones. Earning a living through music isn’t always an easy road, but Jason believes that this road is the right one for him. He now has time to devote to his playing and writing, and is already thinking about plans for future projects.

“I’m thinking about a new collaborative endeavour, maybe a trio, which will involve songs as well as tunes, so I’m starting to work on the material for that. I’ve a couple of nice writing projects coming up as well, and some of my work is due to be published over the next couple of months, so I’m keeping busy.”

“Losing my job at the end of 2012 was one of the best things that ever happened to me – although it certainly didn’t feel like it at the time. Plunging headfirst into the unknown is very scary when you have a young child to look after and a mortgage to pay. But losing the security of a steady monthly wage was more than compensated for by the benefits of self-employment. It gave me the freedom to set my own course in the world, spend more time with my daughter, and have the resources to focus on being creative. When I was first made redundant, I was one of those people who had to make tough daily choices about eating and heating, and it was very tough. But I learned a lot from that; about how to live in a sustainable way and manage my resources more efficiently. We don’t need a lot of money to be happy; in fact, I view my real luxury in life as being able to do what I’m doing. It’s not always easy, but it’s way better than the nine-to-five. My pension is non-existent though, so I’ll be playing tunes and writing till I drop – but I’d be doing that anyway, so no worries there.”

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