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STIRRINGS

THE FOLK & ACOUSTIC MUSIC MAGAZINE



*KATE RUSBY &
KATHRYN ROBERTS*

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WHAT'S ON*

the STIRRINGS INTERVIEW

Kate Rusby (20) and Kathryn Roberts (19), from the Barnsley area, have recently combined forces to become what has been described as 'the most exciting duo to come out of the folk music scene for a long time'. They sing, dance (Irish step, Appalachian and clog), play a multitude of instruments, are founder members of Blackadder Rapper & Step (an all-girl cabaret dance team), have performed at several major festivals and have recently made their recording debut on the album 'Intuition'. They talk here to Mel McClellan.

You both come from musical families ... when did you first start playing?

Kate: I first started playing 'cos I was jealous of my sister Emma, who was learning fiddle at the age of seven - I was only five then, but I still wanted to learn to play and I started when I was about six. And I started singing just in the car with my family when we were going places. I can remember singing "The Lord of the Dance".

Kathryn: I started playing flute when I was six - with Mick [Roberts] being a music teacher, he just made me play things really, and I moved onto clarinet 'cos I was bored with flute. I started playing saxophone, then I took up flute again, and then I learnt to play the piano.

What was the first musical influence you can remember?

Kathryn: My mother I suppose...

Kate: I think Emma, my sister, 'cos I wanted to play the fiddle - I had to wait two years 'til I was old enough.

Kathryn: My Mum used to sing at me in the parlour - she used to have me running up and down our street with nothing on, singing mucky folk songs at everyone when I was about two.



Photograph: Bryan Ledgard.

Kate: I did that, in pubs, in sessions - "You sit there with your pop and crisps and sing this lovely song" - we didn't know it was all dirty words and things!

Kathryn: Then they'd put you to sleep under a table.

You grew up with all this - how did you feel about it?

Both: Loved it, yeah, it was brilliant.

You came together as a duo after the "Intuition" project - how did that come about?

Kate: We did a gig at Holmfirth Festival ...

Kathryn: We recorded for a late night Radio 2 thing ...

Kate: ... and John [Leonard, BBC Producer and performer] thought young people needed to be ...

Kathryn: Pushed a bit ...

Kate: Exposed, yeah, 'cos nobody was giving them the record deals they needed - so it was a promotional thing really..

Kathryn: A bit of a novelty idea - to have all young female performers - and then some of the others dropped out so Pat [Shaw] and Julie [Matthews] stepped in so we're all just from Barnsley ... that's a novelty I suppose ... they think you're all down t'pits an' that, flat caps and whippets.

Kate: Scraping with our nails at the coal!

How long were you in the studio?

Kathryn: The whole thing took two days. We were meant to have a morning and then Liza and Nancy should have had the afternoon, but they'd dropped out so we had all day.

Kate: And after that Pat and Julie did theirs and the Deightons came in that evening - but we just had about a day.

Kathryn: About ten hours altogether.

Kate: We were all supposed to go back and record for the second day a couple of weeks later, but I had tonsillitis and couldn't even talk.

Did you enjoy being in the studio - was it hard work?

Kathryn: It was all right, but we came out hating the songs. I did some of them that many times I just hated them - I really hate "Barbara Allen". I refuse to do it now 'cos I did it so much, but it was a good experience.

Kate: It kinda scared me a bit but it was all right by the end of it. I knew I just had to do it and that was it. And you have to do it right, which makes you do it wrong all the time!

What material do you perform on the album?

Kathryn: Some traditional and some contemporary, stuff we were enjoying playing at the time.

Have you had a good response to the album, any feedback...?

Kathryn: Yeah, loads of people have bought it who aren't folkies - they've all come back and said "That's brilliant" and loads of people have bought them for Christmas presents and there's people sending them all over, Belgium and Russia and South Africa - it's really good.

Kate: Everybody really likes it - one of my dad's students has got really bad back problems and he wrote to my dad and said "I've heard it on the radio, can you send me a copy and I'll post you a cheque" so we posted him a copy and he sent us a cheque but he sent enough for another copy as well and wrote this really nice letter saying "It's made my Christmas, 'cos I've had a really, really bad back and I want another one for my friend!"

Kathryn: One man reviewed it and said he wanted to have our babies, he liked it that much!

You both performed individually before teaming up ... what's the first performance you can remember?

Kate: It was at Whitby festival, me and my sister when we were really small and we had to sing "Our cat's got no hair on" somewhere - I don't know why we did it, but we were stood on a table - it must have been in a pub or something - or in the Spa in the cafe bit, and we sang "Our cat's got no hair on" and I was really really scared, but 'cos we did it, a man went round with a hat, and we got about six pence or something to buy some sweets with...

How old would you have been then?

Kate: Probably about five, and Emma was about seven or something - (to Kathryn:) you were probably there doing it as well!

Kathryn: I can remember when I was about six or seven, with my mum, we went down to the Bowling Club bar for a session and I sang a song with her - I think it was one of the Silly Sisters' songs or something - and this woman came and

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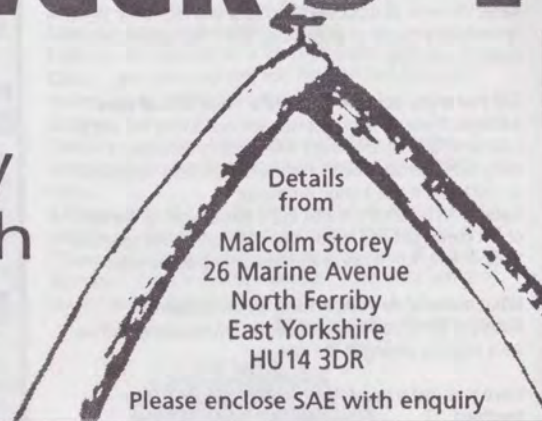
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gave me fifty pence and I was really proud!
Kate: Oh, you got more than me - we only got six pence to share!
Kathryn: It really made my night - but I can't remember before that - apart from being the Angel Gabriel in the school play, and that doesn't count.
Kate: I could never be the Angel Gabriel 'cos I was always mucky with dark hair ...
Kathryn: I was *always* the angel, and I always wanted to be Mary, but they wouldn't have it...

What or who would you say influenced you now?
Kathryn: Uncle Dave [Burland] - just 'cos he's so laid back, not necessarily what he does, his material, just 'cos he's so relaxed and I think "I want to be like that!"
Kate: I don't know - musically I suppose, people like Nanci Griffiths and Mary-Chapin Carpenter and Dolores Keane and people like that.
Kathryn: I like June Tabor - I just like the lowness of her voice.

There currently seems to be a revived interest in traditional music among new young performers. How do you feel about that?
Kathryn: There's a really good scene at the minute 'cos the youngsters all know each other and everybody does things all together. Nobody's - well, not many people are - pretentious. There's the odd one or two...
Kate: Yeah - but everybody's willing to teach everybody else things as well.

Kathryn: We share everything, it's really nice and friendly.
I was going to get onto that because there's now this new folk 'brat pack' - people like Eliza [Carthy] and Nancy [Kerr], John [McCusker], Luke Daniels, the Lakeman Brothers and so on, and you all seem to be mates...
Kathryn: The young people can take it to people that aren't already folkies - it's not dyed-in-the-wool traditional stuff and it's all slightly different, which can appeal to other people, which I think is great.
Kate: I think it makes a difference that young people are doing it as well, 'cos folk's got two images - either old hippies smoking dope with hairbands, or the arran sweaters - so I think it's nice when young people who are just dressed normally, the same age as other people can just listen to it and think it's really good.

Is that how you see it - these two camps?
Kate: I think that's how the general public sees it. Or morris dancers - when they go to Festivals, or when there's a festival in their town, Joe Public sees the morris dancers and think that's what folk music is.
Kathryn: ... it drives them away! That's why when they start morris dancing there's a big long chord on the accordion so everybody can hear it and go away. It's fair warning - they're off! Oh, I've just thought who I've been influenced by - I like Coope Boyes & Simpson!
Kate: Oh yeah, they're brilliant.
Kathryn: I could give it all up and be a professional groupie!

What do you do in the day - are you studying or working?
Kathryn: I teach music. I've got some private pupils, but I'm doing some of Mick's work at the moment while he's doing pantomime, teaching in secondary schools in Dodworth. Trying to build up a few pupils. I've got about eleven or twelve private pupils which brings in a bit of money. And spending the days practising or helping my Mum chase children around the house. That's my life anyway.
Kate: I just practise all day and wash up in the house and that's it. I still can't cook though. That's the only thing I haven't mastered - I'm learning to cook!

How much time do you spend rehearsing?
Kathryn: We do lots separately then two days before a gig we'll ring up and panic and say "Do you think we ought to have a practice?" Then maybe have about three hours or so, and that's it.
Kate: But we've turned over a new leaf.
Kathryn: We going to practise this week and we haven't got a gig for two weeks, so...

Do you see performing as just a hobby or something you'd like to do full-time?
Kate: Yeah, full-time definitely.

You're both also part of Blackadder Rapper and Step. Do you enjoy dancing as much as singing?
Kate: Yeah, 'cos you can act daft.
Kathryn: We get a really big buzz from it. If people are on the same wavelength and they understand your sense of humour then it's great. We danced at Warwick last year, and nobody was laughing when we were dancing ...
Kate: It was in the middle of the afternoon ceilidh...
Kathryn: ... and we thought "Why is nobody laughing?", then we finished and found out that someone was having artificial respiration in the corner, and that's why nobody laughed!
Kate: They'd broken a leg and it wouldn't stop bleeding.
Kathryn: We were just dancing away, thinking: "Come on, laugh", you know. But it's brilliant - a real high and a good laugh.

Are you going to develop that?
Kate: It's just going to stay as a sideline isn't it? That's the hobby.
Kathryn: 'Cos if we have paid work then we have to do that, really. And if we're not there - this sounds bigheaded - but if we're not there, Blackadder doesn't really work.
Kate: But it only works for audiences who aren't traditionalists as well, otherwise they get really ratty.
Kathryn: ...and walk out.

Has that happened? Have you actually upset any of the purists?
Kate: Occasionally - we get backword from it.
Kathryn: But the majority of people think it's brilliant. We're not terrible dancers!
Kate: Nobody down south will book us though, because they know that they'll upset the people, 'cos girls aren't supposed to dance rapper, and they especially aren't supposed to take the mick out of it.

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How often do you rehearse and perform with Blackadder?

Kathryn: We rehearse and perform on the same day! We maybe do something about every three months.

Kate: Sometimes we have ideas sessions, though. We have a brilliant idea and make costumes and stuff.

Kathryn: We just tend to do Holmfirth and Whitby, maybe the odd one in between and that's about it. No, we never rehearse unless we're dancing that evening!

Because you're pretty immersed in the folk scene, do you have the time or the inclination to get involved in the 'teen culture' outside of the folk world?

Kathryn: I like Meatloaf!

Kate: I don't really know what's happening. It got all folky for a bit - everybody was bringing out all acoustic-y folky stuff, people like Hothouse Flowers, but it all seems to have gone back to the ravey kind of ...

Kathryn: Naff stuff.

Kate: Yeah, like that Mr Blobby thing - that's appalling.

Do you go to discos and things like that?

Kate: No, I've never been to a proper disco in my whole life.

Kathryn: I have, at Centre Parcs ... I hate it when you get these serious disco dancers giving it all that ... you know.

Kate: We went into Derby last night. Me and John [McCusker] went, we were doing a gig in Derby with the dance team and we went into town 'cos I wanted a McDonald's milkshake, and there were all these girls who had just come out of the disco across the road, and there was one in leggings, a bra-top and a black chiffon see-through blouse...

Kathryn: ... It was freezing last night ...

Kate: ... and I just thought "get a coat on girl" - they seem as though they haven't got anything else to do.

Kathryn: You go out and you have to fight to get to the bar. It really puts me off.

Kate: I just go to the club, down at home. The Working Men's Club.

Kathryn: We must be very boring and lacking in something. I often wonder if there's something wrong with me.

Kate: I've always been really different from my school friends - I can remember at one point, I must have been about ten, I was really embarrassed about saying I went to folk festivals. But I just grew out of that - by the time I was eleven. I really don't understand why people don't want to do something else other than come in from work, sit and watch telly, and then go out clubbing, and that's it. Sometimes I crave to play something, like my fiddle. It's just a shame that other people don't.

Kathryn: You want to educate them don't you?

Kate: Yes. Tell everybody what fun we have. Come and join me - you could play, sing ...

Would you like to do another record?

Kate: Yes.

Kathryn: We're contemplating doing one this year - if we get round to it. It's just getting organised - it took us five years to work up a duo.

Do you see yourselves continuing in the folk scene as you get older?

Kate: Yes.

Kathryn: If people still like us. I don't think either of us would ever abandon it.

Kate: Oh no, never. My children are going to have fiddles when they're three.

Kathryn: I like the way folky parents bring up their kids anyway, and I want to do that ... we've all got a thousand mothers.

Do you have a view on the current state of the folk and roots scene locally and nationally?

Kathryn: I think it's improving, because of more young people getting involved. If you can manage to draw their friends into the scene and widen the audience. I think it's happening, it's getting better.

Kate: I think it's generally more 'listenable to' with the new people that are coming into it.

Kathryn: A bit more 'easy listening'.

Kate: Rather than sixteen-verse long ballads with one note for the whole song.

Would you consider going professional?

Kate: Yes.

Kathryn: If I could get a teaching job in schools then I would do it.

Kate: I sometimes get work as an 'extra' on TV. Go for days on end and sit there and be told what to do and look at all the good-looking stars and then eat all the food. Get paid for doing nothing!

What are your plans, musically, for the next year or so, as a duo, or individually?

Kathryn: Record an album. Number one priority!

Kate: A Kate and Kathryn one.

Kathryn: Learn lots and lots of songs, do more festivals, and I'm going to do my Grade A on clarinet this year. I'm determined, I've even started the scales. D'you know there's 85 scales altogether? I've only done 40 so far. I just want to give up ...

Kate: We'll just be doing folk clubs and festivals and stuff.

Kathryn: I'd like to go to Hong Kong Festival.

Kate: Right then, we send them rats' tails until they book us. We'll put rats' tails through the post. Book us now thank you. That's what we'll do.

Where would you like to be in five years time?

Kate: Touring abroad - America and Germany and places.

Kathryn: Doing lots and lots of travelling.

Kate: I just love travelling. We both went on a plane for the first time this year, 'cos we went on holiday to Greece, and when the plane was taking off we just couldn't stop laughing.

Kathryn: So we need more practice travelling.

Kate: Yes we do. So that's what we'll have to do.

Kate Rusby and Kathryn Roberts are available for bookings.

Contact them on Barnsley [redacted]

'Intuition', featuring Kate and Kathryn, with Kathleen and Rosalie Deighton, and Pat Shaw and Julie Matthews, is available on CD and cassette (FATCD002 and FATMCD002) from Fat Cat Records, 1 Holly Terrace, York YO1 4DS Telephone: 0904 610899.