

JUMP IN THE WATER

Meet The 19th Street Band, who brought Americana back to its Irish roots on their recent visit to this island. Clive Price reports.

Photo: Clive Price



I interviewed Caolaidhe Davis of The 19th Street Band at The Stokers' Halt in Hollywood, just down the road from his former home. This four-piece from Maryland recently delighted audiences from Belfast to Bangor, from the Belfast Barge and American Bar to the Open House Festival.

Their set list includes covers from *Galway Girl* to *Jolene*, and Cash and Dylan numbers. But their own material shines too, such as *Jump In The Water* with its infectious beat and *It's True What They Say* with wild fiddle reminiscent of Dylan's *Desire*.

This band knows how Americana works. Their new CD and first studio recording *The Things That Matter* reminds you of folk and country classics, but you're not sure exactly which tracks. They have strong Celtic roots, being fronted by a Caolaidhe Davis who grew up by the sands of Hollywood, Belfast. He looks like someone famous, but you're not sure exactly who, a young Joe Strummer or David Byrne?

Caolaidhe is son of filmmaker and country singer John Davis, and brother to Noah, a cameraman on TV's mythic saga *Game Of Thrones*. Creativity runs deep in this family.

“Going to America was my way of losing the safety net of parents’ help and gaining my own freedom”

Caolaidhe went to America in 2005 to pursue a music career. “I wanted to lose the safety net of parents’ help and to gain my own freedom,” he explained. “The easiest way to do that was to jump in the deep end.”

He started as many young adults do in America. “I got a J1 visa, and the only way of getting into the country legally and to pay Uncle Sam was to get sponsored,” said Caolaidhe, now 36. “I waited tables and bar tended for a while.” He missed weddings, funerals and birthdays back home while creating a new life: “Even my uncle, now sadly passed away, said, ‘Caolaidhe don’t come home, you’re building something.’”

Starting a band, Caolaidhe needed a fiddle player. Classical violinist Meghan was serving at an Irish bar in Chinatown, DC, while teaching high school music. Through mutual friends Caolaidhe met Meghan and quickly auditioned her for the band. Perhaps more importantly, they also got married. “I auditioned my wife!” he laughed. Their home was

on “19th Street” in Arlington, Virginia. And so the band’s name was born. “We had our first gig at the bar where I worked,” said Caolaidhe. “We just played and took every gig we could,” said Meghan, 33. Demand grew so much, they gave up their day jobs and have been performing 230 shows a year for the past 5 years. Bass player Brian White came onto the scene around New Year 2016. “I ran sound at a place where they performed,” said Brian. Caolaidhe phoned him to play bass for some shows. They didn’t audition anyone else. “We got along really, really well, and I jumped at the chance. They play for three hours a night; it’s a lot of material to absorb. I’d been in the music scene back home for about 25 years and I’d never seen a band that did what they did. And it was such a relief and breath of fresh air.”

What marks the band’s performance is very much the energetic and entertaining way Caolaidhe and Meghan play together. Like a punk Johnny and June, they share the microphone, walk among the audience, and stand on the chairs!

Drummer and elementary school librarian Patty Dougherty was playing in an all-girl 80’s cover band when she first saw these frenetic folks in

May 2016. She liked them so much, she was tempted to get on stage and drum for them.

“We booked her for a couple of shows here and there,” said Meghan, “then we needed her more.” Fifty-one-year-old Patty has her own energy. Her wild red hair sways in time with the beat. In our interview, she joked away the age difference between her and her band mates like swiping a cymbal, “I’ve been playing music for longer than they’ve been alive!”

As well as playing numbers like *Whiskey In The Jar* and *Dirty Old Town*, what other streams of Irish culture do the band like to flow into their work? “It’s the Irish attitude in terms of writing, maybe the brutal honesty that the Irish have,” said Caolaidhe. Add to that the joy and energy of the Celts, and you have The 19th Street Band.

Check them out at the following website
www.facebook.com/19thStreetBand.OfficialPage