

Maeve Dunphy – an interview by Trevor Hodgett



Omagh singer-songwriter Maeve Dunphy's debut album *Scarlet*, which was released in 2012, was distinguished by her exceptional songwriting, with lyrics which were arresting and often startling and music which ambitiously contained elements of blues, jazz, reggae and country.

Her current CD *Don't Wait Up For Me*, a five track EP, represents a change of direction for on it she collaborates with Artie McGlynn and *The Grooveyard Shift*, on a repertoire which contains only one original, alongside interpretations of four songs by other writers.

We've captured the essence of how we sound live. Some people record very well but in the past I wasn't always one of them but I think I've done it right this time. We didn't do take after take – it was, generally speaking, quite a live recording.

Included are two tracks that Dunphy picked up from listening to Aretha Franklin – *Nobody Like You* and *Muddy Water*, a song of course which has also been covered by the likes of Jimmy Witherspoon, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee and Lou Rawls.

One wonders though if Dunphy might have felt intimidated interpreting songs which had been recorded by the sainted Aretha, knowing that her versions would have to bear comparison to Aretha's.

You have to put that intimidation aside because there's nobody like Aretha. Her versions are gorgeous and I love listening to them but I thought, "I'll never be as good as that but I'll have a go at them anyway."

More surprisingly there is also a Spanish-language song on the album, 'Amapola', sung by Dunphy in what to my monolingual ears sounds like the most perfect Spanish.

I don't speak Spanish but I found some videos on YouTube and wrote the lyrics down phonetically for myself. I didn't get them checked out by anybody who does speak Spanish – so I could be asking for a bag of kittens!

Another track *In My Girlish Days* was originally by the great, guitar-playing

American blues singer Memphis Minnie, whose career lasted from the 1920s to the 1950s. The legendary Maria Muldaur, who Dunphy supported on a memorable tour of Ireland, turned her on to Memphis Minnie.

When I first met Maria she was going, "Oh, darling, I think you should do some of her tracks." And she gave me a CD and I did learn two of the songs and put that one on the EP.

Dunphy regards her experience touring with Muldaur as transformative. Indeed her admiration for the New Yorker, who originally performed on the Greenwich Village and Boston folk scenes with the *Even Dozen Jug Band* and the *Jim Kweskin Jug Band* before becoming a rock superstar with her hit record *Midnight At The Oasis*, is palpable.

The tour was brilliant. Maria was amazing, not just as a performer but as a person. I travelled for a week with her and her band, who were lovely people, and the craic was just brilliant.

Whenever we stopped for meals I would try and sit beside Maria to hear some of her stories but not only was I interested in her, she was interested in me too. It wasn't just one way. She was asking about myself and about my family so we had great talks.

And I never tired of listening to her and her band and how they did their show and the way it could change. You could listen to them over and over and you'd never get bored. It was very uplifting and that rubbed off on me.

Trying to make a living in Northern Ireland playing blues and jazz-influenced music can be depressing and frustrating. Dunphy acknowledges that she has struggled with that reality and the feeling of being an outsider but believes that working and hanging out with Muldaur and her band revitalised her.

Sometimes I get a wee bit disillusioned and feel disconnected from why I chose the music that I do in the first place.

You can feel a wee bit alone in your choice at times. In my teens I was listening to old, old stuff and music from New Orleans and jazz and blues and soul and Otis Redding and I was the only girl at my school that liked anything like that. Everybody else was listening to Bros so it was a lonely choice for a teenage girl and it can still be a lonely choice as you get older. You need to be surrounded by it to feel connected to it again, to make it come alive again and to remember everything that you liked about it in the first place. And that's what was really, really good about that week because they were the real deal and I was soaking it up, the whole week. It did me the world of good.

Remarkably, Muldaur has also declared that she regards Dunphy as 'the real deal.' Dunphy, not surprisingly, is thrilled with the compliment.

I was absolutely chuffed. And I don't like blowing my own trumpet but I'll tell you this wee thing: Maria's piano player heard me do a Robert Johnson song and I was telling the audience that I got it from

[celebrated New York blues singer-guitarist] *Rory Block* and he said, "We've worked with *Rory Block* and I prefer your version!" So that was a huge compliment.

The Grooveyard Shift are led by guitarist Artie McGlynn, long regarded as one of Ireland's greatest and most influential musicians. Dunphy acknowledges McGlynn's greatness and his crucial role in developing the one original song on the EP, the title track *Don't Wait Up For Me*:

He's a master and we are only at his shoulders in comparison. And he really helped me shape that song. Jerome [McGlynn, Artie's son and co-guitarist in the Grooveyard Shift] and I had worked on it and we were missing something when Artie came along and sprinkled Artie magic on it and brought to it what was missing and made it so much better. And I went, "Aha, now it's happening!" He's brilliant.

The Grooveyard Shift frequently play on Monday nights in McCann's Bar in Omagh. The unassuming local provides the perfect, low-key home base for the band. "It's a great music bar and there's a great atmosphere," says Dunphy, "It doesn't have great space and there's no stage so we're all squished into a corner on top of each other but we love playing there."

*Updated by **Trevor Hodgett** from an interview first published in June 2014 on Culture Northern Ireland*

Maeve Dunphy and her band will soon be gigging in Enniskillen.

More information from her Facebook page.