

KATHRYN WILLIAMS

Kathryn was born in Liverpool in 1974, where she lived until the age of 19. Her father was a folk musician, her grandfather was an orchestral conductor and her dog was a west highland terrier.

After doing an art foundation course in her home town, she moved to Newcastle upon Tyne to do a degree in fine art, where she did lots of paintings of dogs and birds in embarrassing situations. Strangely, the market for paintings of embarrassed dogs isn't huge, so when she finished university she went on the dole and wrote songs in bed for a year. Birds and dogs featured in some of the songs, of course, but it became clear that her real talent lay in capturing the tiny pieces of human experience that make life what it is: painful and joyful in just about equal measure.

Kathryn used to just play her songs to her friends in her bedroom, then one day one of those friends booked her a gig without Kathryn's knowledge. So she played it, not feeling able to back out of the commitment she hadn't made. She was terrified, but thought that she would just get through the gig and never do it again. Things didn't exactly go to plan, as someone booked her for another gig that night, then another, then another...

So it made sense to put some songs down onto CD. She made 50 copies of a mini-album on CDRs, painted each cover individually and did all the lettering with letteraset. "It took me weeks, much longer than it took to record the songs". That first album sold out quickly at gigs, and soon afterwards she recorded 'Dog Leap Stairs' for a grand total of £80 and released it on her own label, Caw Records ("it's the noise that a crow makes"). The music press loved it, and several record companies courted her. Kathryn was fairly unimpressed by the A&R men, as they would say things like "I like that song, can you write ten more like that?" so she decided to continue on her own.

In 2000 she released "Little Black Numbers" on Caw. It was greeted with enthusiasm by the music press, and was nominated for the Mercury Music Prize. Of course, that led to a lot more press coverage, and the resulting sales got her out of the debt that running a small label inevitably puts you in.

That whole process also led to yet more interest from record companies, but the difference now was that Kathryn was a successful artist in her own right, and as such was in a much more powerful and informed position. Kathryn ended up signing a licensing deal with East West, where the records come out jointly on Caw and East West, and she retains full artistic control.

Old Low Light (named after a building in North Shields, on the coast near Newcastle) was released on East West / Caw in October 2002. Recorded with the same group of musicians as Little Black Numbers, the album is a natural development from that album. Kathryn's sound has certainly moved on, but not departed dramatically from its course.

Relations, released in may '04 was a new type of project for kathryn. On Relations, Kathryn interprets songs by some of her favourite artists and songwriters in her own personal and inventive ways. Kathryn says she made the album "to help me fall in love with music again", as she had begun to feel a little jaded with the music industry. The album is interesting as it is a songwriter doing covers, rather than a pop idol puppet / talentless idiot. Kathryn explains the process like this:

"Playing the songs in their original form, breaking them down and building them up again as if I had written them was a really valuable experience for me as a songwriter. I found that I could see how songs had been written and worked on. It was like taking a home study course in music appreciation."

Kathryn returned to recording her own material with Over Fly Over, released in 2005 on Caw Records. The record saw Kathryn pushing more experimental boundaries than she has done in the past, with rockier drum beats providing the backdrop to several tracks.

The stunningly beautiful Leave To Remain followed in 2006. After firstly planning 'Leave To Remain' as a stark affair, Kathryn later brought onboard Kate St John, former woodwind maestro of The Dream Academy, and string and woodwind arranger for the likes of Van Morrison and Roger Eno, and thus Kathryn's lyrical genius and crystal vocals were paired this time with lush string and horn arrangements.

Never content to be at rest musically, 2008 spawned another departure in the hugely acclaimed "Two", a duet album with Neill MacColl. Kathryn and Neill first met at the Daughters of Albion concert (part of the BBC's Folk Britannia season) where they had been paired to perform "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face", a song which Neill's father, Ewan MacColl, wrote for his mother, Peggy Seeger. "We just clicked, we didn't need to say anything on stage, we could read where the other was going" recalls Kathryn; "within a few hours of first saying 'hello' to each other, we were saying 'yeah, lets get together and make a record'... which was both strange and kind of liberating." Written, recorded and mixed in a total of three weeks, this is a record in its truest sense: a record of an event. The event is a group of people standing in a room and playing a song together.

At the time of writing, Kathryn has just recorded her eighth album. Kate St John is onboard once again, and the pair have assembled a 7-piece band of incredibly talented musicians to record an album of Kathryn's strongest songs to date. Almost exclusively recorded live in the studio (ie, without overdubs) the record will once again set the standard for others to aspire to, in terms of musicianship, vocal performance and lyric writing. It is set to be one of the key albums of 2009.