

INTERVIEW

An Interview with the River Drivers



by James G. Carlson

March 27, 2015



There is much to be said for the raw, organic and expressive elements of traditional music, both for its artistic quality and powerful conveyances. While it has earned itself an assured place in history, much of it is just as relevant today as it was when it was first written and performed, not to mention it can still teach a great deal about personal struggle, societal progress and decline, political truth, and the human experience in general. After all, times may change, but we remain inherently, irrevocably human. And this is human music. So it is important that some artists work to keep traditional music alive and sing the very human songs which mark our history. One such band, a traditional Celtic and folk quartet based in southeastern Pennsylvania, the River Drivers, has recently released its debut, self-titled full-length album, and it is certainly one deserving mention.

Employing acoustic instrumentation and rousing vocals, the River Drivers recorded one original and ten cover songs. "Blair Mountain," an original by Mindy Murray, has an Appalachian folk and protest song feel to it, and is essentially an earnest nod to the plight of the proletariat. Other songs on the album include Dominic Behan's "Come Out Ye Black and Tans," Seamus Egan and Mick McCauley's "Tell God and the Devil," Ewan MacColl's "Dirty Old Town" and "Hot Asphalt" and "Manchester Rambler," Dick Gaughan's "Erin Go Bragh," The Dubliners' "Whiskey in the Jar," Woody Guthrie and Martin Hoffman's "Plane Wreck at Los Gatos (Deportee)," "Billy O'Shea," and Maurice Lennon's "If Ever You Were Mine."

Recently I had both the opportunity and pleasure to interview the River Drivers. What follows is that interview in its entirety.

To begin, how about a little introduction to the River Drivers?

We are four friends whose lives were on pretty divergent paths - working our day jobs (as hospital administrator, occupational therapist, archeologist and doctor) until one day almost two years ago, Kevin's Aunt Kathy asked if we would get together and resurrect some obscure '60s folk music for a church anniversary. Playing together just felt right from the first time that we did it.

Kevin McCloskey grew up playing guitar and banjo and singing harmony with his Dad, Irish tenor Tommy McCloskey and other really well-known Irish balladeers in pubs and venues around the region. On his own, he sought out the songs that spoke of man's spirit in the face of oppression culminating in a long stint with a hardcore punk band. During these years, Kevin continued to learn as much as he could about the songs he loved playing and the history behind them.

Mindy Murray took her folk-rock background with her when she started medical school in West Virginia. Once there, she got a chance to play with a lot of extraordinary bluegrass and Appalachian mountain musicians. The music reflected what she saw in the eyes of the hard working miners and proud mountain folk that she met in the clinics and visited on house calls. Years later, she would be playing a lot of these songs with her daughter, Meagan.

Marian Moran, Mindy's best friend from high school, has deep family ties to the village of Ardara in County Donegal—home of the Cup of Tae and Johnny Doherty music festivals. It's where her Mom grew up. Inspired by the trad music that she heard at the pubs and other venues in and around Ardara, Marian bought a concertina and a low whistle in a music store in Donegal and began to seriously recapture the tunes she heard.

Meagan Ratini, Mindy's daughter and grade school classmate of Kevin, started out playing the flute and dulcimer. Later in college, while helping run the New Jersey Folk Festival, she met some of the best trad musicians in the region and was swept into playing Irish flute and whistles at local Irish sessions. She picked up the fiddle and expanded her repertoire to include tunes from Appalachia, Scotland, and elsewhere.

After a few months of playing house sessions, we all decided to host a weekly music session for trad musicians and ballad players in a local pub. So for the past year or so, we have had a chance to play with a lot of great musicians who come to our session. At about the same time, the four of us started playing and recording as the River Drivers.

The River Drivers are about to release their debut self-titled album at the end of this month. Most of the songs, I noticed, are covers, other than Mindy Murray's "Blair Mountain." How were these songs chosen? And what do you think these song selections say about the River Drivers as a band?

We are all drawn to songs with themes of social justice and the undying spirit of humanity as a whole—timeless songs with energy, heart and soul that are just as relevant today as they were when they were first written. We felt there was a void in modern music, so we went looking back into the past for songs that express the spirit of the working man as an individual and the power of the working men and women united. Music has had a huge role in social change – both in instigating the change and in documenting it. These are the songs we find, we play in session and we take on the road as the River Drivers. We are keeping a songbook that has over 250 songs so far that we play together as a band --some of the more powerful ones we have recorded for this CD.

It's funny, we each have spent a lot of time listening to obscure recordings, reading books, streaming music, listening to the radio, going to house concerts, and so often we all come up with the very same songs. When you hear a song that really moves you, you know or at least hope that it will move an audience as well. We find the songs that complement the intensity, energy and emotion of our performances. We each bring new songs to the session every week and test the waters to see what the other band members think. Very often, a song will immediately resonate with all of us.

Many of the songs on the album fit into a few musical categories into which one often finds social and political protest songs, working class numbers, and the like. This is especially so in the covers of songs by Ewan MacColl and Dick Gaughan. What main points are the River Drivers trying to express through their music?

When we were putting together the CD, we wanted to include a note that would help the listeners understand why we chose the songs we did. Meagan wrote this for our liner:

"Hundreds of years of songs by and about the disenfranchised all say the samethings in the end—that everyone wants freedom and a fair shake. Just so happensthat the road to getting there makes for some damn good music. It's no coincidence that a lot of these songs have strong opinions, political andotherwise. All the power people lack in life can come back tenfold in their music. We have chosen to respect thatlegacy and let the songs speak for themselves."

Kevin, who has come up with the bulk of our song list says this about his choices:"I'm inspired by stories of men and women standing up against oppression and exploitation, or having the determination to struggle through hard times. I usually sing the songs that tell those stories. I tend to sing lesser known songs in concerts and session but a few well-known songs like Dirty Old Town, Deportees and Whiskey in the Jar ended up on the album because we really enjoy playing them and our close friends really like the way we do them. I've received quite an education by listening to the songs Ewan MacColl, Dominic Behan, Woody Guthrie and others have written or collected and hope that the songs we sing educate those who listen in the same way."

What attracts you most to the musical styles you have chosen to embrace for this particular endeavor, namely Celtic music, Appalachian folk and roots music?

These styles intertwine beautiful melodies and rhythms with the intimate stories of people. We all have a deep personal connection to the music through our families, friends and our experiences. For all of us, they speak of places where our descendants came from, where we have lived and traveled, and where we have worked side by side with many good people. These songs are our"roots".

How did you come up with the name River Drivers?

We were looking for a name that reflected the type of music we do, the people we sing about and the way we play the music. River drivers personify strength, hard work, grittiness and resilience. They did a dangerous a job steering logs down the rivers from the forests to the lumber mills. Many lost their lives or limbs trying to break up log jams.

It was also a good fit because a large part of each of our lives has been spent in the town of Bristol which is on the Delaware River. The river is a big part of the identity of the town and the people who live here. Although there were no actual river drivers historically in Bristol that we know of, it was a mill town for a good portion of its history and many people here trace their family history through the mills. The photos throughout our album weren't randomly chosen places—they're all parts of industrial buildings that were important to the town's past and are threatened with demolition in the future.

All of the members of the River Drivers seem to be multi-instrumentalists. Is this sort of organic instrumentation your preferred direction, or might you branch out a bit in the future?

We let the music and the performance of the band members dictate what instruments fit best with each other and with each song. We often switch instruments in the middle of a song to get the right feel and sound. When we first finished the record, Tom Murray, our producer, told us it really needed bass. Since bass is not usually heard in most of the traditional recordings, there was some skepticism at first. But Kevin pulled out a U-Bass and spent the next eleven hours in the studio adding bass to the songs. It added so much to the feel of the music.

And we all have different styles of playing the same instruments...mountain banjo, bluegrass banjo...etc. We go with whatever style works best. We are also all still learning from each other. Marian and Meagan are session

players who know trad music well, Kevin's got his ballad style and punk edge, and Mindy often plays with a more mountain and bluegrass feel. There are quite a few instruments that we play that didn't make it on the first CD—dulcimer, lap steel, flute, tenor banjo... We figure we have a lot of time and more albums to go before we are finished.

Speaking of which, does the band plan on writing originals for future releases and performances?

Yes. We do have other originals that we play and are working on some new ones but we will always be drawn to roots materials as well.

Sometimes an original just feels right to do. Blair Mountain was one of those songs. The recording we did of Blair Mountain was only the second time that we had played it together as a group.

Your music is more on the traditional side than the many bands out there in recent years whose music only touches on Celtic music to varying degrees, typically combining it with punk and other such genres and subgenres. This is the case with bands like Flogging Molly, Meisce, Catgut Mary, Dropkick Murphys, The Real McKenzies, etc. What are your feelings regarding such musical hybrids?

Kevin wanted to tackle this one: "Liam Clancy once talked about how the Clancy Brothers & Tommy Makem would take very long songs that were normally sung very slow, and shorten them down and play them in a more energetic way. So maybe each generation is looking for ways to make things more interesting and there is nothing wrong with that. In the end it can introduce folks to traditional/folk music who may not have listened to it otherwise. I just hope whoever is playing and singing it (and whatever instruments they're using), puts their soul into it. But I don't see us adding a drum kit and electric guitars anytime soon."

What's next for the River Drivers after the release of the album?

Besides playing local and regional festivals, the River Drivers will be taking a few days off and visiting the Cup of Tae festival in Ardara, County Donegal in May of this year.

We are also planning a concert/festival tour for later this year through the Appalachians and possibly into the Pacific Northwest.

And as soon as we left the studio, we started talking about songs we want to put on the next record.

Lastly, if there is anything I failed to cover, or if there is anything you would like to express or discuss, please feel free to do so now. The floor is all yours.

We've been playing together for about a year and a half now, and when we look back, we realize how very far we have come. I don't think any of us were really thinking that we would be getting as much radio play or press as we have been getting. It's like there was a void that we were able to fill with the songs that we have chosen. It's a neat feeling to rediscover these songs and we really want to give them the daylight that they deserve. We just want to do a good job by them.

Artist [River Drivers](#)

Other tags [CelticfolkAmericanatraditionalroots](#)

