

Kathryn Roberts and Sean Lakeman

Interviewed by Carl Filby



Kathryn Roberts and Sean Lakeman are twice past winners of the Best Duo BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards and have been playing together in one form or another for 30 years now.

They are about to release a new album 'Almost A Sunset' and embark on a nationwide tour. You can read a review of the album on the Unicorn Folk website under 'Music/CD Reviews' and the details of the tour can be found on their website [HERE](#).

What is it like being part of such a renowned musical family? I guess there are both upsides and downsides?

K - There are no downsides. We understand each other well and have many shared experiences which makes us close, both as a family and as musical colleagues. We all take great delight in each others musical output.

I see that Pew Tor is described as a favourite place for Kathryn on the new album and believe that you live on Dartmoor? That must be wonderful but also present some travelling problems for touring or gigs?

K - We live on the western edge of Dartmoor and it has a huge influence on our music making, both in the writing of lyrics and in the general inspiration it gives us. The location does mean we can't really do one-off gigs upcountry due to the sheer cost of travelling but it does mean we end up with some marvellous tours.

How do you manage to combine family life with the lives of performing musicians?

K - Our twin girls are now nearly 16 (GCSE year, slightly stressful!!) but they have been used to us touring for all their lives. We have huge support from Grandparents whom we couldn't function without. The girls sometimes come on tour with us during the holidays when they become very bossy tour managers/ merch sellers.

I see that Poppy and Lily are credited on your new album 'Almost A Sunset' along with Sean's brother Seth. To what extent are your albums a family production?

K - Both our daughters are very musical and artistic, coming from a family where everyone is musical (aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins) they can't imagine a future where they don't perform. They both had things to offer this time but we reckon they will venture out on their own before long! We only tend to ask family to play on albums if they can provide something we cant provide ourselves.

I notice that a couple of your upcoming tour dates are in Leeds and Sheffield. Will you get time to catch up with the Barnsley side of the family at any point around then?

K - Whenever we have gigs in the north we tend to stay with my folks. We both have family all around the country so touring is always a wonderful opportunity to catch up with everyone.

Do you have a favourite venue either in the West Country or further afield?

S – Barnsley Civic is always such fun for us as it's home turf for Kathryn, as far as the South West goes we love playing an intimate gig at a place called Otterton Mill in South Devon. We do an outside gig there in the summer next to the river where otters and beavers paddle about. It's absolutely beautiful.

What are the best and worst aspects of a concert tour in your view?

S – The best is certainly the opportunity to travel together so much is wonderful. It never gets tired. We try not to travel too far between gigs so we can visit a museum, gallery or just take a nice walk. We definitely get our monies worth from our National Trust membership! The worst aspect is the amount of time away from home and our kids. That doesn't get any easier.

Leaving aside the financial aspect do you prefer playing to smaller audiences in folk clubs or larger ones at festivals and for what reasons?

K - Small, intimate audiences are where we feel most at home. There is something really special about sharing a musical experience with people who are close. Seeing someone's reaction to a song can be really emotional and inspiring.

It must have been difficult for you during Covid so how did you cope?

S – To be honest we pulled the big red 'Stop' lever very early. We were on tour through Jan and Feb 2020 and things were just getting too weird. We have a good American friend who is a senior epidemiologist and we asked his opinion and he simply said, get off the road go home and stay there. So that's what we did. We concentrated solely on our kids welfare and making the most of it the best we could. We never really entered into the online gig thing. I just didn't really appeal to us. The whole period was one of musical inactivity but it proved to be a nice break to be honest.

You write most of the songs on 'Almost A Sunset' which are jointly credited. How do you go about the process of writing a song together?

K – I tend to write loads of lyrics and scraps of ideas and then show them to Sean for him to root through. Once we have agreed on which ideas are worth pursuing we head to the studio and start working up the music. I am a voracious reader and am constantly picking up ideas for songs, if it's a good story it generally makes a good song.

S – Yes Kathryn definitely has the eye for an interesting 'tit bit'. I'm more one for putting 'flesh on the bones'.

Do you enjoy collaborating with other musicians and does that extend to writing songs as well as performing?

K - We don't really tend to write songs with other people but we have both had some really enjoyable collaborations. I particularly loved playing in the reformed 'Fotheringay'. Singing Sandy's songs with her original backing band was so special.

S – I get to collaborate with other musicians all the time with my role as a producer. Last year as well as working on our own album and touring I managed to make new albums for The Levellers, a Swedish Americana girl group called Baskery and a Jackson C Frank-esque folk singer called Steve Jenner.

What mixture of new and old material can be expected on the upcoming tour?

S – We always try to strike a sensible balance between the old and new material in a gig set list. Its important to acknowledge that lots of the audience will be coming to see us after liking a previous gig and we are quite aware of which songs stand out from our back catalogue and they will probably be expecting to hear.

K - Likewise we try to keep ourself quite fresh and musically challenged by playing new songs and seeing how they develop on stage over time.

Are there some songs from the early years that you still love performing and are there some that you try and avoid? For what reasons and do these 'favourite' and 'least favourite' songs change over the years?

S – There are a few that we have always struggled to pull off well live. Our writing and recording process means that some songs get worked up 'collage style' in the studio and it becomes very difficult to replicate live on stage. Things like 'LaMoneca' from our 'Tomorrow Will Follow Today' album.

Do you have any favourite upcoming young musicians, from any genre, folk or otherwise, and why do you like them?

S – A Special mention should go to Jake Rowlinson, who sings on the track 'Call My Name' on our album. He's an exceptional young English folk singer based in Plymouth. He fronts a band called Windjammer who are doing really interesting things with traditional songs. His influences are as much rock and pop as they are folk.

Is there any advice you would like to pass on to a young musician?

S – Cherish and respect your influences but ultimately strive to find your own voice.

If you could have any band or artist (living or dead) play a concert especially for you or with you, who would it be?

S – I think we might both choose 'Little Feat' with Lowell George.

Do you have any future plans for performing, song-writing, or other projects post-tour that you would like to share?

S – Right now we have a full year touring and promoting our new album. I also have a few production jobs to fit in around it all.

K – It's also our daughters GCSE year so we have put time aside to make sure we are at home to support them through what will inevitably be a stressful time for them.

Thank you both for your time and good luck with the forthcoming album and tour.