

The Irish Echo

I Draw Slow headed for IAC

February 4, 2016 / By Colleen Taylor



Dublin's I Draw Slow is as American as it gets.

It's no secret that Americans love Irish music. The lesser-known fact is that the Irish love traditional American music just as much. I Draw Slow, a roots band from Dublin, is the paradigmatic incarnation of this reverse-diasporic musical trend. Raised on traditional Irish music, the members of I Draw Slow gave up their native sounds to pursue music from across the pond. But you would never guess their background by listening to their music. These

Dubliners sound as authentically Americana and rootsy as if they had been raised in Kentucky and played at Woodstock, rather than Dublin and Whelan's, respectively. With an upcoming show at the Irish Arts Center this month, I Draw Slow exudes excitement about sharing their new album, "White Wave Chapel," with American audiences. Their only trepidation, lead singer Louise Holden admitted, is the fear of snowfall. Although these Americana Dubliners are not yet accustomed to U.S. climates, their latest album evinces that when it comes to music, I Draw Slow is as American as it gets.

I Draw Slow came together ten years ago as a group of traditional Irish musicians. Brother-sister musical team Louise and Dave Holden grew up on Irish music, as did bass player Konrad Liddy. The final two band members, banjo player Colin Derham and fiddler Adrian Hart, had already established careers as traditional Irish music performers before joining up with I Draw Slow. Under the lead of the Holdens, the musicians oriented their track toward the States and the bounty of folk and roots music found in their cousin country. For the Holden siblings, the songwriters of the band, old time folk and country proved the ideal genre to exercise their lyrical creativity. "We were drawn to old time music, in particular, because it has a lot of crossover with Irish trad, but we found it an attractive medium to write in, particularly from a lyrical point of view," Louise Holden explained. The group became bewitched by the sounds of old time artists Roscoe Holcomb, Doc Watson and the Carter Family, and their first two albums, "Downside" and "Redhills" (2011), flowed naturally from there.

The music of I Draw Slow does not seem like it belongs in 21st century Ireland, but that anomaly is exactly what makes the music special, even magical. Their subtle, polished,

unobtrusive sound accomplishes a single-handed renaissance of the American folk music revival of the 1960s. It is no surprise, therefore, that Louise Holden and her brother draw inspiration from artists like Joni Mitchell and Neil Young, as well as Hank Williams, when they write songs for the group. Louise Holden, however, might push back against the idea that her band's music lives in another time. For her, I Draw Slow is a contemporary, organic development in the transnational folk music genre. She sees her band's music as a "natural evolution" into a "contemporary blend of American and Irish"—one steeped in the history of musical travel from Scotland and Ireland to the U.S. I Draw Slow aim to do more than revive old American songbooks: they try to create new, thematically modernized ones. Their music videos showcase this impetus to update. "Valentine," for instance, a music video for their latest album, is sonically traditional, even antique, but grounded in the present-day through visual and narrative. It creates an interesting juxtaposition of history and modernity, implying that the conflicts of other centuries continue to carry symbolic resonance for our culture today.

The band's 2014 album, "White Wave Chapel," elicits the audible atmosphere of the Appalachian mountains. Louise Holden's smokey vocals dance along with Hart's lively fiddle and Derham's banjo to create a cohesion that conjures that space-in-time that is Appalachia. "Souvenirs" is perhaps the most exquisite song on the album—a truly haunting, melancholic, and gorgeous lullaby. "Springtime" is another lovely folk song and reminds the ear of an early Dylan. For me, what's especially outstanding about this album is the band's ability to narrativize their music. The lyrical complexity is where the Holdens really excel, really master their material. Lyrics are also where the band is its most Irish. Holden identifies the influence of Irish writers like Patrick Kavanagh, Austin Clarke, Joyce and Beckett on her lyric composition. In fact, the way Louise Holden described the thematics behind the album's songs to me is poetic itself. The band fittingly wrote the album in an abandoned chapel in Washington State, and they were able to capture the landscape around them in melody and word. "There are a number of songs on the album," Louise explained, "that draw on the image of that chapel, all bleached with age, pummeled by the wind and waves." The music, she added, "is about the shift in resonance after the love subject is gone." Her description speaks for the emotive and gorgeously melancholic effectiveness of the album as a whole. It's a journey back in history and a journey into the soul.

I Draw Slow's next album is going to be more contemporary, with a flare of Latin American music. Although not out yet, the band will feature pieces from this upcoming record in their American tour this winter. No doubt I Draw Slow will be able to merge their own backgrounds with the culture of Latin America as organically as they have with that of the Appalachians.

There's only one thing left about this band that doesn't quite fit: their name. I asked Louise to explain its meaning, and she said, "It's a duel in which one side is doomed from the start." But nothing about this band is "doomed." Quite the opposite. In fact, ironically-dubbed I Draw Slow seems to have been destined to create and succeed from the start.

Come hear I Draw Slow's Irish/Appalachian sounds at the Irish Arts Center on Friday, Feb. 19 at 7 p.m. or 9 p.m. You can find out more information about their American tour dates at idrawslow.wordpress.com.