

## **KATE RUSBY: a Biography**

Of all the stars in Folk Music's wondrous firmament few shine as brightly as Yorkshire's Kate Rusby.

A remarkable, interpretive singer, Kate's soulful vocals resonate with the wistful beauty of an earthbound angel. Inhabiting a lyric with unforced conviction – no matter how old or how modern – she has that rare ability to transport her audience, of touching them emotionally and making each tune live vividly within their experience and imagination. It's a precious gift attained not by resource to decibel blasting or histrionics but through simplicity, understatement and faith in the narrative drive of the songs she chooses to sing.

### **Early Career**

No wonder then that even as early as 1999, aged just 26, Kate was named as one of the Top Ten Folk Voices of the Century. Everything she has done since, has confirmed the foresight of those who bestowed that honour. From being a nominee for 1999's Mercury prize – almost unheard of for a folk singer both then and now – for her stunningly assured second solo album, *Sleepless*, to 2016's enthralling *Life In A Paper Boat*, Kate has stayed true to her folk and acoustic roots.

This, despite the temptations such early recognition placed in her path:

*“Around the time of Sleepless various people waved contracts at me, all saying, ‘Come with us, we’ll make you a star’. They wanted me to cut a ‘pop’ record, but I’d just reply, ‘you must be joking - why would I do another kind of music just as I am starting to succeed with I want to do?’ I’m from a strong, close family in a small village just outside Barnsley – that whole celebrity, music chart, be as famous as you can hullabaloo is so far from the things I care about in life. So, for me it was the worst idea in the world!”*

Such resolution underlined not only Kate's unwavering love of folk music but also her strength of character. Such clear-headed vision of what was important to her, of who she was as an artist and just where she wanted her talent to take her was, and is, rare in one so young. However, as the years have passed, the wisdom of her choice has been proven every time she has released a new record or set foot upon a stage. Kate Rusby is an artist in her own right, her career trajectory determined by an innate ability to know what is right for her music - and her soul. As such now over twenty-five years into her career she remains hugely popular and mightily acclaimed.

### **Kate's Roots and Family**

Those close to Kate would not have been surprised by her determination to keep the faith or with her award of a Gold Badge from the English Folk Dance and Song Society. They would have pointed out that folk was in her blood from the moment she was born, indeed it is very much a family affair. Kate's parents, Ann and Steve, from being teenagers had played in a ceilidh band while Steve was also a 'sound man' – a skill passed on to son Joe. Hence at

weekends and holidays while her friends were off to Bon Jovi concerts or the local disco, Kate, along with siblings Emma and Joe, would be packed into the back of the family car *en route* to a folk festival somewhere in the UK. To while away the time on the road Mum and Dad would lead the children in family sing-songs: “Us kids would sing along, making up harmonies before we even knew what the word meant...siblings have the same vibrato so the sound they make together is almost inseparable.”

Thus, Kate’s love affair with folk and the tradition had begun: she had been introduced to a wondrous treasury of stories and tunes that have fired her imagination and proved a constant source of inspiration ever since. From the fantastic, through the romantic, humourous and especially the tragic – singing or hearing such ‘castle-knocking down’ tunes enthral her:

*“What appeals to me about the old songs are the stories and the simple way they were written. Some are painfully sad and it is those that draw me in the most.”*

From sing-alongs in the back of the car, Kate was soon treading the boards herself: solo, as a duo with friend Kathryn Roberts, plus stints as singer with Equation and the all-female Celtic folksters – The Poozies. And so her arrival on the larger music scene in 1999 with her second solo release, *Sleepless*, was not a case of ‘overnight success’ but the result of many years spent learning and honing her craft.

During an interview for R2 magazine in 2015, Kate fondly reflected upon the integral role her parents have played in her musical direction:

*“My parents passed on so many songs and continue to do so. They are always humming and singing things I’ve never heard before and from time to time I also remember lines from songs they used to sing. I always pop round and ask them about it and then sneakily pinch the song! No, seriously, they have always been fantastic at passing on songs. I’m very lucky!”*

Now, as a parent herself, Kate keeps this family tradition alive:

*“I have already begun passing this on with our girls, Daisy and Phoebe. They already know a few folk songs ... as well as songs from ‘Frozen’!”*

### **A Composer, Arranger and Collaborator**

From the start of her solo career, Kate has not only been the interpreter and arranger of traditional airs but also of contemporary tunes such as Iris DeMent’s ‘Our Town’ and Richard Thompson’s ‘Withered and Died’ while in October 2016 she performed an affectionate version of Oasis’ ‘Don’t Go Away’ on Jo Whiley’s BBC Radio 2 show.

As a composer herself, the spirit, language and atmosphere of those old tunes have inevitably informed Kate’s own songs. Her writing is so finely attuned to the vocabulary, rhythms and cadences of the tradition it sometimes comes as quite a surprise to discover that songs as

transcendent as 'Daughter of Heaven' or 'Ghost' or 'I'll Be Wise' are not gems plucked from one of Kate's treasured ballad books but indeed brand new, achingly-beautiful originals.

In 2020, Kate's career remains steadfast: surrounding herself with husband Damien O'Kane, her beloved and trusted family (who run and administer Kate's record label, Pure Records) and the UK's very best folk musicians on stage and on record her music has gone from strength to strength.

Four times winner of BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards (most notably, Folk Singer of The Year in 2000 and Best Live Act in 2006) in 2014 she was recipient of the prestigious British Academy of Songwriters, Composers & Authors' Gold Badge Award in honour of her 'unique contribution to music'. A richly deserved honour, it reflected the fact that for over the twenty-plus years of her recording career Kate has released a series of dazzling, critically acclaimed albums that remain true to the tradition and have proved popular with audiences beyond folk's usual remit (2008's *Awkward Annie* climbed to number 2 in the Indie charts, 2016's *Life In A Paper Boat* reached 19 in the U.K.'s Official Independent Chart). Thus Kate has become a 'star' in her own right and – most importantly – on her own terms.

Indeed the crossover appeal Kate enjoys is unprecedented for a folk singer and has been achieved without resort to compromise. When Q magazine famously quipped, '*Folk Music doesn't get any cooler than Kate Rusby*', Kate was not fazed. She had no problem with the attention her Mercury nomination brought nor with appearing on 'Later with Jools Holland' or, in 2006, recording a Top Ten duet, 'All over Again', with Ronan Keating: each incursion into the mainstream has been done with no hint of sell-out and – much to her delight – has only served to broaden the genre's appeal:

*"It's brilliant to get the music out there. Folk music's main problem is that it's so hard to get people to hear it – there are so few opportunities to do so on UK radio. Controllers of radio stations are convinced that their listeners aren't interested in it, that people have this huge stigma about 'Folk' but when people actually get to hear it they usually like it because there really is something in it for everybody. So going on those shows opened up my music and folk in general to people who would never have usually heard it."*

Kate's collaborations with artists beyond folk – Eddi Reader, Blur's Graham Coxon, Idlewild's Roddy Woomble, Ronan Keating and Ella Edmondson have not been calculated career moves but naturally occurring consequences of being a working musician in the UK:

*"I quickly learned that the British music scene is a very small world, when you tour as much as I have done you bump into all sorts of people, some of them are musicians, some more famous than others. But be they famous or not, if something clicks and you would like to work with each other then that's always an exciting thing."*

Alongside the collaborations with musicians have been enjoyable excursions into film ('Heartlands') and television (the BBC's animation of 'Jack Frost' and recording Ray Davies'

'The Village Green Preservation Society' as the theme tune for the series, 'Jam and Jerusalem'): all the result of others, from beyond folk, being inspired by Kate's singing.

How far and wide Kate's music has travelled was acknowledged in 2012 by the amazing array of stellar artists from across the spectrum of popular music who featured on that year's double album celebration of Kate's twenty years in the music business, the appropriately titled *20*.

Paul Brady, Dave Burland, Jim Causley, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Jerry Douglas, Bob Fox, Stephen Fretwell, Dick Gaughan, Grimethorpe Colliery Band, Sarah Jarosz, Aoife O'Donovan, Declan O'Rourke, Eddi Reader, Philip Selway, Chris Thile, Richard Thompson, Sara Watkins, Paul Weller, husband Damien, brother Joe and most poignantly of all her mentor and musical hero, the great Nic Jones:

*"I have such happy memories from those recordings. It was a mammoth task with wonderful guest singers and musicians all over it."*

In conversation, Kate's refreshingly forthright attitude to life underlines her Yorkshire upbringing: disarming and humourous in equal measure her on stage banter is endearing and cheeky, while offstage, in interview, she wastes no time in getting to the point. Her candour as refreshing as it is rare.

Typical was her response to her collaboration with Ronan Keating and the eyebrows it raised among those known humourously within the folk community as the 'Folk Police'.

*"I thought, why not? Ronan's a lovely fella – clued up, hard working, polite, funny – with a cute little bum! What is there not to like? Plus, it gave me a chance to look into that crazy world of pop music and was really good fun. And I got to be on 'Top of the Pops' which I thought was quite cool really – something to tell the grandchildren! As for the couple of criticisms I heard, I don't care. I don't take direction from people I haven't even met."*

Kate is especially touched by the affection she receives from her audience - her 'extended family' – who hold such a special place in her heart:

*"I am always amazed at how many people turn out in theatres up and down the country to come and hear my music. They have chosen to get their tickets, have their tea, get dressed up, get in their cars and travel to come and see me. I have to stop myself thinking about it 'cos I get a bit worried about the responsibility of making somebody's night as good as I can."*

## **Family and Inspiration**

Such determination to give of her best is not lost on her fans. They and all who know and love Kate and her husband Damien O'Kane were thrilled to learn of the births of their beautiful daughters Daisy Delia and Phoebe Summer. In the most blessed ways possible they have

changed Kate and Damien's lives forever.

As for all parents accommodating the new dimension, children bring to family life has been challenging – and as Kate acknowledges very much a 'Team-Rusby' affair!

*"I just kind of bumble my way through it all, but with precision planning of course! Luckily, I have my family living in the same village so between them and school we have it covered. While they were both babies, they just came with us on tour – while they are so young, they are so portable. There is no way I could have kept touring without my family as our work is so erratic compared to normal. After Daisy was born, I rang a nanny agency to enquire if it would be a possibility for someone to help when we were working. I explained the hours and that it's some days on some weeks, then over nights sometimes, different times, etc., - they just laughed at me! So, it's definitely like organising the troops when we are touring and recording. But of course, I wouldn't have it any other way. My girls are brilliant fun."*

Rather than interrupt her music making, both Daisy and Phoebe seem to have inspired and energised Kate. In 2010 she found herself in a very good place: not only was she a Mum but taking time out ahead of Daisy's birth helped focus thoughts on that year's new studio album, *Make the Light*.

*"Pregnancy agreed with my creative side. I wrote a lot. I took some time off touring so had more time than usual to write and ended up with a big bunch of my own songs which I'd never had before. Usually I only write every now and again but all of a sudden I had lots of my own songs."*

Originally planning *Make the Light*, Kate said it was:

*"to be a mix of traditional and my own songs – as my albums usually are," Kate was reminded of a comment Jennifer Saunders made to her that she should record an album of all her own songs. "I thought it was a good idea except when she said it, I didn't have enough tunes. After my wonderful Daisy was born I did – so it became the right time!"*

Kate's first album of entirely self-penned songs, *Make the Light*, proved a landmark event in more ways than one. Not only did it captivate critics and fans alike artistically it introduced her to a different way of working:

*"It was a totally refreshing experience. As the main guitar player Damien and I could sit every evening while Daisy was in bed and work away on the arrangements. Not once did he complain about being bossed about by the 'Mrs', well not that he said anyway! In this way I had a very clear vision of how I wanted the songs to look when completed – I say 'look' because it was more visual than audible. It's very difficult to explain but I see a song like a painting almost, with the different layers and dynamics. Usually I go into the studio with a good idea of how something will turn*

*out, but not quite knowing exactly where - and that's part of the thrill of it: chasing the original picture or vision I had! Bouncing ideas around with Damien really enhanced this process."*

Co-produced by brother Joe, *Make the Light* came at the end of a very busy and productive personal time for Kate – as she was to comment:

*"So much happened between Awkward Annie (2007) and Make The Light – we had Daisy, Damien and I married (12/06/2010) and the album reflects these things. Mainly songs of hope and positivity it is quite different to my others, some of it is gritty, some of it is pretty and some of it is a bit wacky! But what fun we had making it."*

Four more intensely busy years were to pass before Kate recorded that album's follow-up, *Ghost*.

*"Oh crikey! Soooo much happened during that time! For a start in 2011 we released a new Christmas album called While Mortals Sleep (the follow-up to 2008's Sweet Bells) then after that we made 20! The year after we released a Christmas DVD – I love Christmas so it was the next step really. We filmed it in Harrogate at the Royal Hall which is so beautiful and the perfect setting for it. Then in 2014 we released Ghost. So there was no way I was resting!"*

*"The other very lovely thing that happened is we have a gorgeous new daughter called Phoebe. Born about two-thirds of the way through the recording of 20 I was back in the studio as soon as they let me out of hospital. I had a C-section with her which meant two days in hospital. I'm not one for sitting around so had my computer with me working on the album between feeds and nappies. The poor little mite had to listen to the songs while she was inside me and then again when she was out in the world! She's very musical so perhaps that's why. In between the recording of albums, we were touring of course and so I've been fitting time in to be a Mother to our other daughter Daisy too, so busy, busy as usual!"*

Damien's contribution to the genesis of *Ghost* was immense:

*"He is just so fantastic to live with. I like to find a collection of songs that compliment each other, which I did for Ghost. Once I have them I sit down with Damien who is an amazing guitar player who also plays so many other stringed instruments which means there is always a different feel to try. He's also a gorgeous singer who is very sympathetic to the story. It's very rare to find musicians who love songs as much as singers! But when you do come across one it's so exciting – it's as if they can get inside your head and feel where the song is going and so it*

*all falls into place. It's a great privilege to live with one of these musicians and of course Damien co-produced Ghost. He has listened to a lot of dance music over the years and this has given him great ideas for effects and sounds that I wouldn't have thought about – like using an electric guitar! I was astounded by the noises and layers Damien's friend and electric guitarist Stevie Iveson could create from the same instrument, it brought another dimension to my music on Ghost. Bringing in Stevie was Damien's idea – his input allows me to see songs through a different pair of eyes and explore new ground."*

## **A Home-Grown Festival**

Never one to rest on her laurels, 2014 also found Kate, Damien and family embark on a major initiative. In conjunction with the Nicholson family, who run nearby top South Yorkshire visitor attraction Cannon Hall Open Farm, they established the *Underneath The Stars Festival* (named after Kate's 2003 album). Meticulously and lovingly planned, the idea grew from a series of concerts held on the farm in previous years to raise funds for local charities. The inaugural event proved hugely popular, Kate's enthusiasm for the venture palpable:

*"It was just so beautiful and gorgeous. The music was amazing, the tents were amazing, stripy and fab, the food stalls were to die for and the sun shone down! Everyone I spoke to just adored it and thought it was beautiful too."*

Underneath the Stars Festival most definitely struck an immediate chord with its audience who returned in ever-increasing numbers in 2015 and 2016 to establish it as a joyous highlight of the festival season. Its success is also the fulfilment of a long-held family ambition:

*"We have always had a dream of running our own festival and so we kept a little list of all the things we would and would not do when we were grown up enough to have our own. So now all that has come into play: brilliant things all weekend for kids to do, mind boggling crafts and street theatre, loads of workshops, the most exciting food, the bestest beer and drinks and of course the most marvellous music, all wrapped up in the beauty of the site, which itself has been adorned with knitted flowers and little wooden toadstools and such-like."*

Of course, a festival does not arrive out of nowhere and so Underneath the Stars Festival is most definitely a family endeavour: as one concludes, the next is already in the early stages of planning. Kate is the first to acknowledge the hard work it takes to make such an event happen and succeed on all the levels it does.

Underneath the Stars Festival further underpins the importance of 'family' to Kate:

*"Oh my word yes, my family is the centre of everything I do. I couldn't possibly have done it all these years without them: they are all vital cogs in the wheels. I have a skill doing one thing and they all have different*

*skills and it seems to have fit well together all these years.”*

## **Kate’s Love of Christmas**

A perfect example of how her Yorkshire upbringing has helped shape and inform Kate’s work as a folk singer are her Christmas albums - of which there are now five, the fifth – *Holly Head* released in 2019.

*“I adore Christmas, I’m sure it’s a lot to do with me being a Christmas baby, and even more to do with the lovely family Christmases we had when we were young. They weren’t over the top and lavish as we didn’t have much money, but they were magical and luminous! I try to make sure that’s what Christmas is like in our house with my girls, in fact last year (2015) my Mum and Dad did up a dolls house that they made nearly 40 years ago for me and my older sister, Emma. They had kept it all these years and secretly worked on it and it appeared on Christmas Day! Oh my word I wept when I saw it, so beautiful and precious! We’ve never been about diamonds and jewels as family heirlooms, more like Grandad’s old leather pit belt and a homemade dolls house, best way to be.”*

Kate’s total immersion in Christmas means that her Christmas UK tours are highly anticipated by all her fans. There is surely no better way to kick-start the festive season than to attend a Kate Rusby Christmas concert!

The songs that appear on her Christmas albums draw directly from Rusby family and Yorkshire Christmas traditions. As a little girl, nothing summed up the spirit of Christmas better for Kate than gathering with family and friends to sing carols, but not just ordinary carols: Yorkshire carols!

*“I love the traditional carols that we have here in my beautiful South Yorkshire. Hundreds of these are sung across the county and I have been learning them since I was tiny, when we were taken to ‘sings’ by our parents. We would be in the tap room with the other kids, colouring and eating crisps but all the while the songs were seeping into our brains without us realising! A few years ago, I finally got it together to take some of the carols around the country showing them off to places less fortunate than South Yorkshire to share them and to teach them to others. Here we are, years later... It gives me so much pleasure to re-visit a town, miles away from home and for the audience to remember a carol from the last time we visited and begin singing away at the top of their voices with the wild, wild abandon only found at Christmas! I love it.”*

## **2016’s Honour and New Album: Life in a Paper Boat**

2016 proved a landmark year in Kate’s life. As ever, it found Kate frantically busy: planning a

festival, arranging tours and working on a brand new studio album when from out of the blue came a great surprise:

*“A letter arrived from the Lord Mayor of Barnsley asking if I would accept the Honorary Freedom of Borough of Barnsley! I couldn’t believe it! I sat with my Mum and sister and we just kept saying,  
‘Do you think they sent it to the right person?’  
‘Are they sure they mean me??’  
There were a few tears both then and on the day itself!”*

Along with Yorkshire luminaries, Joann Fletcher (Egyptologist), Ian McMillan (poet, writer) and David Moody (former Lord Lieutenant of South Yorkshire) Kate received this prestigious award on Tuesday June 7<sup>th</sup> 2016 at Barnsley Town Hall: one of only 7 people ever to do so.

*“I felt so honoured. I have been spreading the word about how amazing Barnsley and the surrounding area is for all the years I have been touring!”*

Over the course of her career, Kate has become very active in her home county. She is the patron of several charities, a patron of Yorkshire itself, has popularised South Yorkshire’s wonderful carols and helped establish a prestigious festival in the county that attracts visitors from around the world. Above all, as one of the UK’s most successful folk singers ever, wherever she goes, Kate is recognised as a hugely popular ambassador for Yorkshire. No wonder she was deemed worthy.

*“I was totally overwhelmed but incredibly proud. My leather-bound scroll sits proudly in a little glass case in our house for all to see!”*

It was during the award ceremony that, for the first time in public, Kate sang a particular new song from her new album, *Life in a Paper Boat*. It’s a fun-filled song telling tales of much bravery and derring-do (and much guzzling of Yorkshire Tea!) Starting life as a bedtime story for daughters Daisy and Phoebe, it introduced to the world Barnsley’s very own superhero: *Big Brave Bill*.

*“I sang it as part of my after-dinner speech. We had all the councillors joining in. It was such a lovely moment, part of a whole day of cherished memories surrounded by people who all love, adore and burst with pride about Barnsley: just brilliant!”*

And of course, in 2016, Kate did deliver her stunning new record. Produced by Damien, *Life In A Paper Boat* continued the remarkable creative collaboration the two have established. It quickly climbed to number 19 in the UK’s Official Independent Albums Chart and despite what else is in fashion, proved Kate remains a folk singer for whom the wider public still have an ear. As critic Bob Fish (for folk’s sake) declared:

*“Kate Rusby has once again shown that one can marry disparate elements in a way that serves the needs of the song: creating a folk tradition that continues to live and breathe.” - Bob Fish.*

As ever, Kate and Damien had used the recording process to push folk's envelope and keep it relevant. By experimenting more than ever with sounds and effects that can be recreated on stage they composed a full-bodied soundscape.

"I wanted more percussion but not a drum kit. I wanted the percussive sounds to be generated elsewhere in order to emphasise the union between old songs and modern technology because they fit so perfectly together.

However, at times, it is a gritty friendship that can create an uneasy darkness around a song."

"I used to think songs had more space with less going on around them but by widening the sonic perimeter we made a larger space for them to thrive: just like moving the jumpers to make wider goalposts!"

As is usually the case, the album is evenly split between traditional and original Kate Rusby songs. The title track is Kate's response to the migrant crisis that so shamefully afflicts our world:

*"I wrote it after watching the many desperate souls prepared to risk their own lives and those of their very young families to cross the sea in hope of a better, safer life. I wish I had some answers but all I have is a song. The title is fitting for the whole album as it lends itself to so many different images and metaphors, giving me a canvas with scope for a multitude of musical and lyrical brushstrokes."*

Another song for our times is the reflective *Only Desire What You Have* featuring the sublime whistle playing of Michael McGoldrick. Kate's thoughts turn once more to the sea with *The Mermaid*, a quietly haunting tune on which she is joined by guest vocalist Dan Tyminski.

Among the traditional tunes are the quirky *Benjamin Bowmaneer*, the upbeat *Pace Egging Song* celebrating the West Yorkshire tradition of Pace Egg village plays in which St. George combats all challengers while a knight and a sorceress are the lyrical focus of Kate's beautiful cover of Archie Fisher's *The Witch of Westmorland*.

The striking cover for *Life in a Paper Boat* captures the very essence of what lies within and the very way in which Kate approaches song making:

*"It was designed by Matt Lazenby who was working on Big Brave Bill at the time. We asked him to have a think about the album and he came across the painting of Earth by Yorkshire artist David Baumforth. It's gorgeous and captures the moody, beauty of the sea. Matt was suitably inspired and added a few things including a mermaid and an actual paper boat which was made by photographer David Angel.*

*David spent hours making the boat. It all fell into place really but I think it sums up the feel of the record perfectly."*

Kate knew it was perfect because it 'looked like the music' she was making - something she had also said about the songs on 2014's *Make the Light*:

*"I see songs as paintings, it's how I start working on a track. In my mind there are colours and layers. It's hard to explain but I don't hear it, I see it! I know my brain is quite strange, I'm sure that's why I have curly hair: it's all a bit mixed up in there!"*

A beautifully realised album as rich as it is diverse *Life in a Paper Boat* encapsulates all that has made Kate such an acclaimed artist. At its core is her remarkable and distinctive voice that inhabits and illuminates all she sings. Equally, it reflects her devotion to 'the song': traditional or original, Kate never loses sight of a tune's narrative drive, the importance of a lyric is never lost on her. Then her production values: the blend of instruments, her superbly crafted arrangements all combine to create recordings that are almost visual in their power and scope.

For Kate, this record has been special:

*"It was the most exciting album to make in that there was so much experimenting so there were ideas flung all over the place, not unlike my daughters' school dresses at the end of a busy day!*

*You just have to keep trying new things don't you, keep learning?*

*I would hate to be one of those people who just sit and think they know everything. I think that goes for all of us at Pure Records, we are all just still discovering things, it's what keeps it exciting and therefore pleasurable."*

Described as an album that will endure *Life in a Paper Boat* was the perfect way to end 2016 and to anticipate 2017.

## **2017 onwards...**

2017 of course, marked Kate Rusby's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a folk singer: a very special year indeed.

With the challenges and delights of parenthood, albums to record, tours, a family run festival to organise, as ever the future burns bright for Kate: her family, friends, band and fans have much to look forward to and enjoy.

"Phoebe starting school possibly frees me up a little some days to sit and have the headspace to be creative and write if the mood takes me!"

That's the plan anyway: as ever Kate's passion for music remains a given. Fiercely proud to be

called a folk singer, she recognises and appreciates the direction it has given her life: “I play the music I want to play, work with incredibly talented musicians and make a living from doing something I love.”

And the great thing is – whenever Kate Rusby sings - as it has been for the last twenty-five years - not only is the world a better place but some of that love touches us all.

***Based on the original biography by Colin Hall***