

SAFE HOME

Tommy and Saundra O'Sullivan in conversation with Seán Laffey.



It's an hour before sundown at Chris Walsh's Texas ranch and Saundra and Tommy O'Sullivan are sitting on the porch, the very spot where the photo for the album cover of *Safe Home* was taken. They are on Facetime with me and the laughter is flowing across four thousand miles.

Tommy O'Sullivan, you know him from his work with Sliabh Notes and his duet performances with Paddy Keenan, Saundra on the other hand is a new talent. Recording *Safe Home* was the first time she'd ever been in a studio; she could not be described as a veteran of the road either. Not until now that is. Today was the end of their American tour. "We did 30 gigs, 2 workshops and The North Texas Irish Festival, in 60 days," Tommy tells me.

He continues with their back-story. "We'd been going out for a couple of years before I knew that Saundra could sing. It was at a late session in Dingle, things were getting loose, a guitar was being passed around. Saundra sang and I thought 'that's amazing, she has perfect pitch, where did that come from?' She told me she had sung all the way through

a name for it. Tommy and I have been closing our concerts with John Smith's song *Safe Home*; it's a simple song and it is easy for audiences to join in with. I said *Safe Home* sums up where we are, it tells the story of us."

Tommy says that by November 2017 Donogh Hennessy had completed the recording, which they had begun in 2016 in North Carolina at the Studio of Patrick Crouch. "Patrick has a basement studio, it's a big space with a natural resonance, perfect for vocal and guitar. We were blessed to be joined there by Jack Lawrence, who played for years with Doc Watson. Donogh Hennessy got those bare tracks and we added more musicians as they became available. Cathal Hayden was passing through Dingle on his way to a gig at Paudí O'Sé's in Ventry; we had played together at the O'Flaherty's Irish Music Retreat in Texas and I asked him would he put his fiddle on *Lord Franklin*. He told us he'd played the song with Mícheál Ó Domhnaill on Mícheál's last ever live recording. Cathal said he'd be coming down with Maírtín O'Connor and would we mind if Maírtín joined in too? Of course we said yes."

"Safe Home sums up where we are, it tells the story of us"

school, in harmony groups and choirs, she's a natural alto." Saundra adds: "I got a sports scholarship to university, became a nurse and spent a few years in ER flying around in Medi-helicopters, singing was almost forgotten. Our first live gig together was when Tommy and Paddy Keenan invited me to sing in front of 2000 people at the Lorient Festival, it was a nervous moment!" I wondered if she had sung in their pub, O'Sullivan's Court House in Dingle. "No, we perform a mixture of genres: traditional Irish songs, folk songs and Americana. We have a policy at the Court House that it's a traditional music pub, we don't book singer songwriters and we thought it would be self-indulgent if we used the pub to promote our own music night after night."

On a trans-Atlantic flight, it's a case of safe home for one of them, Tommy heading home to Dingle or Saundra flying west to Texas. Saundra says the title came to her in the middle of the night. "Donogh Hennessy had the album finished in Dingle and he was pressing us for

The album shines with folk classics, a selection of three Thom Moore songs, Tony Small's variant of the *Dublin Blues*, which references Doc Watson and a closing snatch of the *Dublin Reel* from Conor Moriarty. The boys from Sliabh Notes join the duo. They were also fortunate to be able to tap into the wealth of 'local' talent who play at O'Sullivan's Courthouse Pub including Gerry O'Beirne, Tom Delany and Eoin Duignan. And there's *Peggy Gordon*, which Tommy says, "I've known it from childhood, it is like I've always known it and I've bent it around to my own particular style." Unbeknown to Tommy there may be a distant family connection; Helen Creighton collected the song in Nova Scotia from the singing of John Francis Sullivan sometime in the late 1940's.

Tommy and Saundra will be Safe Home at the Court House Pub in Dingle during Feile Na Bealtaine, where they will take an hour to launch the album on Sunday May 6th at 4pm. Find out more at www.osullivanscourthousepub.com.