

# Life & Culture

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Images of the Travelling community taken by Sharon and George Gmelch (below), most of which were photographed in Holylands, near present-day Rathfarnham in Dublin, in the early 1970s

## Travelling back in time



SINÉAD GLEESON

More than 40 years ago, two Americans researched the Travelling community in Dublin, and now they have come back for an emotional reunion, and brought an entire archive of images with them

**I**N 1970, AMERICAN anthropology student Sharon Gmelch found herself on a field-training programme in Ireland. Her initial research began in Fenagh, where she was joined by her husband George, an ex-professional baseball player, who also studied anthropology. They undertook what was the most substantial study of the life and culture of Ireland's Travelling community at that time. Both conducted interviews, and George took 2,400 photographs of the community based at Holylands, near present day Rathfarnham, in Dublin. The images form the basis of a new documentary, *Unsettled - From*

*Tinker to Traveller*, and were yesterday handed over to the National Folklore Collection in UCD.

Ireland 40 years ago was a vastly different landscape, but the Travellers were very much a part of it. "When we visited, we were learning about the Irish, as well as the travelling community," says Sharon, speaking from her San Francisco home. "Certainly we were aware that they were 'apart' from the rest of society and were much poorer. What really stood out though, was how frank and open they were. They had opinions and weren't afraid to ask difficult questions."

Sharon and George were intent on asking questions of their own, and knew that establishing trust was critical. Having rented a flat in Rathgar, they decided to assimilate themselves into the community by living on site in a barrel-top caravan.

"Initially, they were a little forbidding," says Sharon. "Children are always the first to approach you in these situations. The women were matronly. The men were yellow-fingered, rough and very wary."

"They had no cognitive category for an anthropologist," adds George, "so we had to get to know them by investing time and talking to them."

In the 1970s, the couple was aware of just one other study of the Travelling community, undertaken by a sociologist. In the weeks before their arrival, there was a suspected sui-

cide at Holylands, and initially the families assumed them to be gardai.

Mutual curiosity evolved into respect and friendship, with Sharon and George invited to nights out at the cinema or pub. While research and interviews were an important element of their study, photographs became an ancillary means of cataloguing the distinct culture. "We realised the value of photos to the Travellers themselves," says George, "not only because had they never owned cameras, but they were a non-literate population. Visually it was a critical way for them to relate to what we were doing."

Last summer, 40 years on from their 13-month stint at Holylands, the Gmelchs returned to Ireland to seek out the families they had met in the 1970s. Filmmaker Liam McGrath discovered the Gmelchs' story while researching his documentary, *Blood of the Travellers*. "Their names kept coming up and I contacted them to get clearance for photos I wanted to use. They came to see me when they arrived in Ireland last year, and it occurred to me that someone should document the reunion."

The Travelling community has long held an interest for McGrath. As well as *Blood of the Travellers*, he directed the critically acclaimed *Southpaw*, about boxer Frankie Barrett. McGrath has a long-established relationship with many Traveller families, but he had other reasons for revisiting the community. "When I

made those documentaries, lots of important themes came up, like suicide and the mortality rate for men, but we just didn't go there. It felt like unfinished business, and that people might feel ready to talk about it now."

Families opened up to the Gmelchs on their return, and George feels the root of the issue is bound up with male identity and changes within Traveller life. "Years ago the men would trade horses and collect scrap metal. Those livelihoods aren't there any more, so they feel adrift. They don't know what their role is supposed to be. Many of the younger men are trying to fill that void with sport, but others are having a very tough time."

Travellers' lives have changed, and Sharon feels that the biggest development has been in the lives of women. "Traveller women have acquired more power; their role has more recognised authority, more security. Women are

more involved in training programmes and outreach groups. They look back at their mothers' lives and see that profound change."

Representations of the Travelling community in media and popular culture are often confined to the singular stereotypes of programmes such as *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*. Ostentatious weddings and gravity-defying dresses are reductive shorthand for an entire culture. The show has crossed the Atlantic, where the Gmelchs have seen and are dismayed by it. "Many of the families told us there are 'no more poor Travellers' any more, and while they are clearly better off, there is still so much to be done."

Their return culminated in resurgent observations and feelings. "It was really interesting to see how a people and a culture had changed, but also to see how vastly different Ireland was," says George. "People were glad to see us, which was heart-warming. You don't want to exploit the people you study, but it was clear that lots of the kids knew us - and there was one George, and two Sharons called after us. It was a very reciprocal relationship. Returning after 40 years felt like a high-school reunion."

"It was better than a high-school reunion," laughs Sharon. "It was a very emotional experience to reconnect with these people."

*Unsettled - From Tinker to Traveller* is on RTE One on Monday at 9.35pm



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## We're not the von Trapp family

TONY CLAYTON-LEA

The Staves can probably look to the future with more optimism than most, but still have to deal with old prejudices

**A**POISONED CHALICE? A spurious title? A hiding to nothing? Who'd be a hotly tipped music act these days? In the past few months, Ireland has been visited by three of 2012's most critically lauded music acts: Azealia Banks, Michael Kiwanuka, and The Staves. Each has been praised to the hilt by those arbiters of taste whose job it is to direct us to the acts "most likely to do". The sting in the tale is statistics indicate that at least one of these acts will, within the space of two years, enter the twilight zone of could-have-been/should-have-been. Take note of the fact that in 2008, on March 2nd, two hotly tipped female singers made their respective debuts in Dublin.

Adele played Crawdaddy, and Duffy played the Academy. We know of the commercial reach of Grammy-laden Adele, but where, oh where is Duffy these days? And so we come to The Staves, three twentysomething Hertfordshire sisters (Camilla, Jessica, Emily Staveley-Taylor) whose combined love of English and American folk has resulted in

as smooth a mash-up of Joni Mitchell, Sandy Denny, James Taylor, Carole King, Vashti Bunyan and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young as you can imagine. With a new EP out shortly and a debut album scheduled for a September release, it's a safe bet to claim that by the end of 2012 The Staves will not only be celebrating a very good year, but also peering into 2013 with more optimism than most.

As sisters who don't adhere to received pop music norms, they confirm that preconceptions are all too inevitable. "Some think we're wholesome, fairly twee," says Camilla. "We get quite a lot of people," says Emily, "saying they thought we'd be really sweet, a family band like the von Trapps." And this from Jessica: "When people find out we're sisters there's a big

'Aaahhh, how angelic, how cute.' But we never feel like that at all."

The Staves also differ in that they are family who have had to learn the dynamics of being in a band, rather than being friends, acquaintances or strangers having to learn the process of how to exist together as a band without tearing each other's heads off.

"I don't know how telepathic it is," remarks Emily, "but when you know someone inside out and back-to-front since the day they were born, then you don't need to see what direction their eyes go in order to understand what they're thinking or what they require."

There have been matters along the way, however, that have irked the trio. The first one is the virtually constant reference to the music of Laura Marling. Signed to London-based indie

**Sister act:** The Staves. Photograph: Iain Griffiths-Jones

label Communion (which was by co-founded by Ben Lovett of Mumford and Sons), the trio understands the point of such references. "We're all fans," says Jessica, "and she's done a lot for our kind of music in that she has opened young people's minds to it. She does her own thing, and she's cool; if people compare us it's nice, although it can be a bit intimidating."

"And it's better that the other comparison," concedes Emily with a sigh, "which was 'Fleet Foxes with tits'." Ah, yes. With boring regularity, the dreary aspect of sexism within the music industry raises its head. We'd all like to think such nonsense no longer exists, but try telling that to three smart young women who have been told by men, in no uncertain terms in the past few years, to, says Camilla, "Stop dressing like we've just come out of rehearsals." The pressures, as such, range from overt to subtle to ridiculous. The latter includes the advice, reveals Emily, "of being seen before we're heard, that we should dress like The Supremes, and then people will listen". Jessica says: "If we were three brothers no one would dream of saying the things some people say to us."

"We're not interested in that," says Emily, "and it's got nothing to do with who we are as people or the music we're making. What to do? You just say no, very firmly, from day one, and continue saying no, and soon enough people will stop asking."

The *Motherlode* EP is released through Communion/Atlantic tomorrow. The Staves play Dublin's Sugar Club on April 24th



## A Tiny Play: 'Don't Take It Personally' by Rachel Feehily

A legal family drama in 600 words

*Two barristers walk on stage from left and right, a man and a woman, wearing wigs and gowns, laden with briefs and texting on their mobile phones. They look at each other at the same time from a distance. Man jerks his head to the woman. She beckons him. They slide up to each other in the middle of the stage outside a courtroom door, which has two steps leading up to it. On it hangs a crooked 'in camera' sign. They put their briefs and phones down on the steps.*

**MARK:** (Pointing a finger.) You're drinking like a fish.

**JUDY:** (Throwing both hands up in the air.) And you're a lazy bitch.

**MARK:** (Folding arms in front of body.) You haven't paid this month's maintenance.

**JUDY:** (Folding arms as well in a defensive gesture.) My business is going down the toilet. I'm living in a bedsit. Why should I pay for your botox and Brazilians?

**MARK:** (Holding up her hand in his face.) Talk to the hand. We're in the list next week. I'll let you whinge to the judge.

**JUDY:** (Turning away.) You're expecting the order for €4,000 a month to continue? Have you seen the discovery? Why don't you go out and get a job you lazy bitch?

**MARK:** I've three children under 12 and haven't worked since 1999. How am I supposed to find a job in this recession?

**JUDY:** You'd no problem leaving the kids with the au pairs and spending all day in the gym when we were living together.

**MARK:** Why don't we let the judge decide? He's not going to be impressed by your behaviour.

**JUDY:** Go ahead. At the end of the day it's division of the assets.

Shagging my secretary isn't a crime.

**MARK:** Doesn't make you look good.

**JUDY:** It's not a beauty contest.

**MARK:** Lucky for you (laughing), I saw your fat, red face earlier.

**JUDY:** (Laughing as well.) You're no looker either, despite all the treatments. If we can't agree, I suppose the house will have to be sold.

**MARK:** (Whining.) I want to stay in the house. I can't move far away from the school and all the kids' friends.

**JUDY:** Well you can't afford to buy me out.

**MARK:** I'm only looking for a right of residency until the kids finish school.

**JUDY:** (Suddenly friendly) ... then a sale? 50/50 split?

**MARK:** (Putting his arm around her shoulder.) Maybe, if you can do something about the maintenance.

**JUDY:** If you're prepared to be realistic.

**MARK:** (Staring into Judy's eyes.) There might be no need for a forensic accountant to look at your business and I wouldn't have to report you to the taxman for all those cash transactions.

**JUDY:** (Holding Mark tightly.) I would rather you were at home minding the children but I can't afford the four grand a month.

**MARK:** (Snuggling into Judy's chest.) I could live on a bit less, get part-time work but I need you to be reasonable.

**JUDY:** I'm the most reasonable man you ever married. (Puffing out her chest.)

**MARK:** You're the only man I ever married. (Looking coy.)

Both barristers look at each other and pull away suddenly.

**JUDY:** (Suddenly businesslike.) Okay, I need to go and talk to my client.

**MARK:** (Similar tone.) And I'm sure I can talk mine into doing a deal on the maintenance.

**JUDY:** No need for the stress of a full hearing.

**MARK:** Who wants that?

(They bow to each other and pick up their briefs.)

**JUDY:** In or out tonight sweetie?

**MARK:** Oh let's stay in darling, I'm shattered. Why don't we pick up a Mexican from Baggot Street?

**JUDY:** Perfect.

They kiss each other passionately and walk off stage together.

■ To coincide with the staging of *Tiny Plays for Ireland* in the Project Arts Centre in Dublin by Fishamble, *The Irish Times* is publishing some of the scripts that made the grade