

Ryan McGiver

The Catskills and the West coast of Ireland blend subtly in his music. Sarah Coxson gets drawn in.

The subtle blue-hued image on the front of singer and guitarist Ryan McGiver's, debut album, *Troubled In Mind* is telling. A contemplative, spare rural landscape with three gawky trees in the foreground; the eye drawn towards a road, stretching into the shadowy night-time horizon. The land is gently undulating. It feels earthed, and silent, and lonely.

"I'm drawn to music that is meditative and melancholic, whether traditional or contemporary in form. There's something about a sad song that makes me happy. And I love music that is rich in texture, subtle layers and lots of space. Points where you can insert your imagination and fill in the blanks." explains McGiver, "I always return to art – whether music, poetry, film – whatever it may be – that has space and allows my mind, ideas to grow."

And such is the territory that *Troubled In Mind* inhabits: an absorbing and plaintive collection of mainly Appalachian ballads filtered through a myriad musical influences and sensibilities. The cover image is an illustrative response to the traditional song *I Wouldn't Mind Dying* – a painting by McGiver's uncle Neil Driscoll; one of those he has evocatively created for each song on the album.

"The concept behind the album was to create a sort of sonic soundscape of my mind and surroundings through the lens of traditional song. And to create a record that – in part – represents the beauty, desolation and sadness of growing up in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains."

McGiver is now back living in his hometown in rural Schoharie County, New York after a few years of working in Manhattan. "I like big open spaces and awkward silences. So the place suits me." The place was also formative in his musical development. While, he explains, most of the traditional old-time and bluegrass has died out in the region over the past couple of decades, a "rather eclectic (and often eccentric) mixture of musicians have moved to the area in more recent times."

"My uncle, Neil Driscoll, is a mountain banjo player and has written hundreds of instrumentals in the clawhammer style. I grew up listening to him and others play at family functions. There would usually be a fiddler there. Often someone crooning a jazz standard or my aunt playing a piece on the Cajun accordion. A big melting-pot of sounds. If you grow up playing traditional music, but not necessarily from a single tradition, the line is often blurred between what is what!"

This blurring saw teen McGiver dabbling with guitar styles – blues, jazz and

folk. "Skip James and Big Bill Broonzy were as big influences as the Louvin Brothers. But I also grew up in 'Classic Rock Country' so Led Zeppelin and Bob Dylan were favourites on the local radio stations."

At the age of 18 McGiver upped sticks and moved to the west of Ireland where he studied and lived, off and on, for about seven years.

"I was mostly playing traditional Irish music at the time while studying the pipes in Galway with the great piper, Emmett Gill. Learning the pipes was a welcome distraction from the guitar. It's an instrument that demands a sort of obsession to master. Needless to say, I didn't entirely stick with it!"

"The place shaped me musically. And personally too. There was a great deal of vibrant, young music in Galway at the time. You could walk down Shop Street on a Friday night and hear Manouche jazz, flamenco, traditional Irish and roots Americana music, all mere steps from each other in neighboring pubs. It was a tremendous mixture of ethnicity and arts for a small Irish city."

Ryan still regularly plays Irish traditional music and is sought after as an accompanist on both sides of the water. Among his collaborators are Guidewires' Pdraig Rynne, uilleann piper Cillian Vallely, Connemara fiddlers Liz and Yvonne Kane and Dublin born Grammy-winning singer Susan McKeown.

"Susan has a wonderful way of bringing together musicians of different genres and making new and interesting music. Through her band I toured and recorded with musicians like Jason Sypher, Allison Miller, Doug Wieselmann, Dana Lyn, Erik Della Penna - lots of veterans of NYC's rock, jazz and indie music scene."

This space between traditional and 'indie' music is one McGiver sees his album existing within. Through McKeown, he first encountered Shahzad Ismaily who co-produced *Troubled In Mind*. Ismaily has recorded or performed with a diverse range of musicians, from old guard Laurie Anderson, Lou Reed and Tom Waits to movers and shakers Jolie Holland, Laura Veirs, Will Oldham and Sam Amidon.



"[He's] a wonderful multi-instrumentalist. We became fast friends. I wasn't very familiar with his music outside of our studio sessions, but felt overwhelmingly drawn to his personality and musical contributions in a studio setting. And the way we could make each other roar with laughter! Ismaily is an extraordinary talent. And an inspiration to work with."

Also fundamental to the man and musician, McGiver is a stonemason. I wonder how the two roles complement or conflict with each other?

"My life as a stonemason takes up a good part of my year – usually standing alone in fields or on building sites, cutting, shaping and stacking stone. I listen to lots of music during this part of the season. The touring musician often finds himself on a new flight or train in a different country or state everyday. The stonemason often works on the same job site for weeks, months or years. The mason is constantly bloodying his digits. The working musician is consciously aware of keeping his hands out of harm's way. So they are very opposite life styles, but I must admit, if I have too much of one, I tend to miss the other! Though there's still a healthy balance to be found.

I worked on *Troubled In Mind* as if I was building a stone wall: slow and steady, taking moments to reflect and breathe – often standing back to take a look at the greater whole while working."

www.ryanmcgiver.com