

## CARA DILLON BIO, LONG VERSION

If you don't know the voice of Cara Dillon, you're in for a treat. If you are already amongst her legions of admirers around the world, you know you have something special in store.

A Thousand Hearts, Cara Dillon's fifth solo album, is another small masterpiece of song and emotion, ethereal and radiant, beautifully honed and perfectly true.

The extraordinary Irish singer makes music that transcends genres and crosses barriers. She has won every folk award going, but confesses to being no purist, making music that reaches beyond the constraints and limitations of tradition. "To me, you can go anywhere with every song. The melody and message is at the forefront of everything I do. I don't really care where the song came from, how old it is, and who did it first. It's whether it strikes a note in my heart, does it haunt me, do I need to sing it?"

Raised in the small village of Dungiven, Northern Ireland, Cara has been singing all her life. "I do believe I am part of a continuing story, a story that's still unfolding, that reaches back through songs I've grown up with, and uncles that emigrated to America, and stuff that happened in my own family, and that reaches forward to stuff that's still happening now."

It has been five years since the world last heard from Cara. She has taken time off to embrace motherhood and combat serious illness. But along with her husband and collaborator, Sam Lakeman (brother of Mercury nominated folk rocker Seth) she has returned with her most gorgeous album yet. "Every time we think we've shut the door and made the world a bit smaller, it ends up getting bigger," notes Sam.

At the end of the 1990s, Cara and Sam left folk supergroup Equation and major label Warner Brothers to sign to Rough Trade and home record her 2001 debut, Cara Dillon. It went on to be the break out folk success of the year. In 2007, after two more outstanding albums, they left Rough Trade to form their own Charcoal Records. Cara was pregnant with twins (Noah and Colm, now 7) and the couple wanted to more control over their musical lives. The resulting 2009 album, Hill of Thieves, proved her most successful yet, top ten in the UK indie charts and number one on iTunes Folk and Amazon World & Folk charts. "It seems that if we please ourselves, we please other people too," says Sam.

When she sings, Cara's voice embraces the divine. In person, she can be blunt and ebullient, with a vigorous and enchanting character. "I am so precious and passionate about our albums, but I am so happy aside from that to dabble and be open and try other things. If you're just a closed book, you don't really learn." Cara's Black Is The Colour was an Ibiza club sensation in a techno remix by 2Devine, she appeared on 2009 Children In Need single All You Need Is Love alongside Peter Gabriel and Terry Wogan, and sang and narrated on the Disney soundtrack for Tinker Bell And The Great Fairy Rescue. "They adjusted my accent occasionally. They were like, 'Yeah, Cara, we love that, but what is *nigh*?' " she laughs in her thick Northern Irish lilt. "So I had to do lots of carefully enunciated 'now's.'" In January 2012, she recorded Come Dream A Dream as the climax for Disneyland Paris's night-time spectacular. "It is the most Disney song you can ever imagine," says Sam. "It goes out to 15,000 people a night. About eight million people have seen it so far. It's bonkers."

She has performed with major orchestras and even formed her own Orchestra Of Ireland to headline festivals. "That is really out of our comfort zone," according to Sam. "Neither of us read music, and we've got a band of people trying to play these very free form traditional songs where we are used to dictating the pace with the ebb and flow of Cara's phrasing, and that's not possible with an orchestra. But it's an unbelievable experience to have this swelling 50 piece string section with horns all pushing up under Cara's voice. It's something you can't replicate any other way."

Here's something not many people know about Cara Dillon because she didn't even know herself until a few years ago. She is big in China. "There was an agent in China, desperate to have us over. We headed out, no idea what to expect, maybe a little reception for 100 expats," recalls Cara. "Turned out, we were there playing in National Concert Halls, 2000 seaters, and they were sold out. They were all standing with their iPads filming the gig, singing along in my accent, that's the thing that really freaked me out. I've not experienced anything like this before. After the concerts, there was Security, I was signing stuff for hours, not being able to go to the loo without a hoodie over my head. It was like a parallel universe. We found out later that our first two albums were used as part of the curriculum for teaching the English language in China. So everybody at the concert had degrees in English, and they were all fuelled up on our music."

The biggest challenge of recent years has been Cara's diagnosis with type A Diabetes at the end of 2007. "It was a huge shock," she admits. "I thought my life's over, I'll never do another gig, this is impossible. I would be lying if I didn't say that every day is a challenge. But in some respects, it's probably been the best thing that ever happened to me. It's true what everybody says, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I honest to God wouldn't change it for the world. Isn't that really weird? I feel lucky that I'm able to experience it 'cause it made me appreciate everything in life a lot more."

When Cara fell pregnant again, with a daughter Elizabeth born in 2010, the couple were forced to take a lot of time off, hence the long delay in finishing and releasing her latest album. "Being pregnant and diabetic is very dangerous, so we dropped virtually everything," says Sam. The rather strange upside is that, in her husband's opinion, it has changed Cara's voice for the better. "She has come down a semitone, so her voice has an even smoother quality to it. She's got such an intense soprano, now it can be more open in the lower range, it gives a bit more light and shade, a bit more dynamic. It's really apparent on this record."

They called the album *A Thousand Hearts* because, says Cara, "every song is about a different condition of the heart. There's songs about leaving home, trying to salvage a broken relationship, mourning, faith, lust, unrequited love, and simple love songs like *As I Roved Out*." The most contemporary song is a sparse, haunting version of *River Run*, originally by obscure Nineties US indie pop band, *Suddenly, Tammy!* "I heard it was I was 19, and I'm 38 now, so it's like a soundtrack to my life." When they contacted songwriter Beth Sorrentino, she revealed it was written about the late *River Phoenix*. "So I suppose it's a song of death and loss and longing, but it's one of those songs that can be anything to anybody. For me it strikes a note, I've left home, my whole family is back in Ireland, it's about leaving the nest and getting on with life, it really touches and pulls at my heart strings."

The oldest song on the album is probably Cara's electrifying version of ancient Celtic ballad *Taimse Im' Chodlahd*. "I'm not really an Irish speaker, but this song, the melody has always really got me. I said Sam we have to do it, it's so beautiful, people need to know that this melody exists. Of course,

afterwards I thought maybe we should find out what it actually means. *Taimse im' chodladh* actually means 'I'm asleep, don't wake me,' so I'm like, isn't that beautiful, how romantic and poetic. And then it goes on a wee bit more and, well, the basic theme is rise up, get your spears and slay the Englishman! I had no idea. I thought we can't sing that, it's just wrong. And then Sam said 'rubbish, it's a beautiful moment from a time long past'. And he is an Englishman, after all!"

Some of Cara's previous albums have featured a who's who of folk musicians. A Thousand Hearts was recorded entirely by Cara, Sam and their band, although a member of the Eagles did drop in and sing backing vocals. "We were in Dungiven for a break with the kids, it was a Sunday night, I got this phone call to my mother's house, 'Cara, Timothy's in town, he wants to meet you for a drink in the pub.' I had no idea who they were talking about. It's a one horse town and I didn't know any Timothy. I was like, 'I have my pyjamas on, I am going to bed!'" She was eventually persuaded to say hello to Eagles bassist Timothy B Schmidt, who was holidaying in Northern Ireland during a break on a world tour. "I was so inspired by listening to him. He's such a gentle soul who really loves music." He told them he kept Cara's album in his car in LA, and it was practically the only thing he listened to for four years. Timothy later added his distinctive harmonies to Bright Morning Star.

"Music is for everyone," says Sam, summing up the couples attitude to the synthesis of styles and influences on their new album. "It's the common language we all have an opinion on. I've got no time for the folk police. As artists, of course we have an appreciation of the depths of music and how highbrow it can get, but we are not like that. We are not shallow. We put every piece of blood sweat and tears into the music we make, that's what matters to us."

"Some folk musicians want to know every detail about a song, and I really empathise with that," adds Cara. "But it's not what's important to me. I just identify with a song, I'm looking for something that touches me deeply, and I feel like I'm the vessel for letting it live on."