

Rose Skelton catches up with Sara Watkins, Sarah Jarosz and Aoife O'Donovan – hot property after their storming international debut at this year's Celtic Connections and about to embark on a UK tour

The Americana Dream

The newness of the music and the just-born nature of the configuration gave the international debut performance by Sara Watkins, Aoife O'Donovan and Sarah Jarosz ("just call us a band") at Glasgow's Celtic Connections in January a sense of urgency and excitement that was obvious the moment the three women appeared on stage. All of us in the audience, including fêted dobro player and producer Jerry Douglas, sat forward on our seats, waiting to see what would be served. There wasn't an empty seat in the house.

What was remarkable was not how good their voices sounded, or how great their instrumentation, but what an elaborate texture their voices made together. This came out most clearly when the three sang 'Be My Husband', a dark, bluesy *a capella* song that Nina Simone first recorded in 1965. The three women stood together, without instruments, clapping a slow beat with their hands, their feet stamping on the floor. As they sang, the range – from O'Donovan's soft high to Watkin's powerful low, with Jarosz carrying the steady middle – gave the song a dimension that was both muscular and honeyed. The same went for a John Hiatt song, 'Crossing Muddy Waters', taking the original – a very male, singular-toned song of particular, flawed beauty – and making it multi-layered and mellifluous.

"I think our voices have very different colours," says O'Donovan the next morning, "especially when we switch

[parts]. It just creates this very different palate. It's unlike anything I think I've ever done before."

The fact of the band's sell-out popularity before they've even played a formal show together comes due to their careers as solo artists and as part of incredibly successful bands. Sara Watkins, at 33, came up through Nickel Creek – probably the most successful and formative of the bands that might loosely be called progressive bluegrass – before going solo while Nickel Creek were on hiatus, recording two bold, beautiful solo albums. As a fiddle player and singer, she blends a hearty country sound with an unpredictable, and slightly edgy, sense of fun.

Aoife O'Donovan, 32, jointly formed Crooked Still in 2001, a band whose combined daring and energy took the traditional string band and folk sound, some elements of bluegrass and turned it into a kind of music that has paved the way for so many other bands in its wake. O'Donovan's voice – like a vital tonic of warm milk and honey – carries with it the narrative depth of the Irish songs she grew up singing with her family, and after Crooked Still went their own ways, she took this onto a solo recording career. On stage she appears slightly shy, self-deprecating, but it's that honesty, that total lack of a screen between voice and listener, that makes you listen to every word.

Sarah Jarosz, at 23, has three studio albums and two Grammy nominations to her name, relentlessly tours with her ▶



Just call us a band – Sara Watkins, Sarah Jarosz and Aoife O'Donovan



band, masterfully – and soulfully – playing banjo, mandolin and guitar. She sings, writes and co-produces her albums. She's appeared on collaborations within the orb of progressive bluegrass, country and traditional American folk music, and her voice lends itself to all of them without, curiously, appearing either purposefully moulded or generic in any way. She has a confidence about her that is at once assuring, but because she, like most in this community who stem from traditional roots music, so loves this music, her sound meets you at your own level. She manages to be both perfectly composed and refreshingly human at the same time.

Having been friends for years, and often saying to one another that they should put some songs together for "that day when," the moment came at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival in Colorado last year. They were called upon, last minute, to open for Punch Brothers, another of this musical circle's genre-bending talent extravaganzas, featuring among others,

mandolinist Chris Thile and banjo player Noam Pikelny. They had just a few minutes together in a bathroom to rehearse before the show before their impromptu debut.

"I think it did just kind of happen," says Watkins. "It was the perfect opportunity to get together... and work some stuff out and realise how fun that was and how complementary the arrangement styles are of our thinking."

Around the table the morning after their show, the sense of relief at this – that these band members are all striving for the same goal – is palpable, and the complexities of the band's dynamics take up much of the conversation. Sitting at their table at the morning-after band-debrief, I feel like looking away. They've not done this before, get up on stage in front of an audience that paid to see them, and hearing them talk so honestly about what they're in the process of discovering is so unique about their band, it feels like interloping. And incredibly good fortune. This is probably one of the first times they've been

asked questions about themselves as a unit, and it feels as if the responses to the questions they will be asked a hundred times by a hundred other journalists are forming themselves in their minds as we speak. Just like the music, it feels raw and fresh and slightly uncertain, and incredibly exciting.

Before their Glasgow show, they had got together in Arizona and taken some press shots. Then Watkins went up to New York City, where Jarosz and O'Donovan live, for a three day rehearsal, and recorded two tracks that are set to be released ahead of their April tour of the UK. They had a day together in Glasgow before the show and in between times they sent recordings backwards and forth. Coordinating even this scant practice time was miraculous, they laugh. "The fact that everybody had the time this year that wasn't already filled with another project seems pretty fortuitous. The stars were aligned," says O'Donovan.

The reception of the news of this union in the Americana music community – before they had even done a show – was ▶



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Ben Minkoff

immense, I say to the women. Gigs have been selling out, before anyone even knew what kind of music they were going to play, before a single review had been written. There had been no details given either, with the announcement of what their show would comprise. "I've been really surprised," says Watkins. "The people who know about it seem to, you know... nobody's told us that it's a bad idea." O'Donovan breaks in: "Don't do it!" They all fall about laughing, as Jarosz steps in.

"I think it's been really exciting. We were joking about how it seems funny these days, you do all these press photos and record before you've even played a show, and all these people buy tickets and we haven't even done it before. So I've been so happy with the buzz and the response."

What is evident from watching them play together is that the level of friendship they have between

them. It's a family vibe; Jarosz posted on Twitter later that day a photo of them all wearing matching woolly hats that O'Donovan's mum had knitted them for the tour.

"Most of being in a band is co-existing well together, musically and socially," says Watkins. "Musically, the fact that we do all trust each other and are fans of each other's musicianship, to have that and a pretty speedy way of communicating and arranging..." O'Donovan picks up the thread: "There's been a huge absence of people taking any sort of suggestions personally, which I think is amazing. Often in rehearsals and arranging songs, if someone has an idea and you don't like the

idea, you don't want to say it because you're afraid you're going to hurt their feelings." They all laugh, knowingly. O'Donovan goes on: "I feel like everybody's been really into each other's ideas but even if an idea doesn't work, nobody's like, my idea didn't work. That actually does happen," she laughs, and in unison, the three musicians say, "all the time." "It's been really nice to be comfortable enough with each other to just keep the ball rolling and really listen to each other and respect each other's opinions. It's pretty cool."

Jarosz pitches in, "even last night after the show, to be able to be so open with each other with constructive criticism, right off the bat. I've been in situations where you're with musicians you've played with forever and you feel weird about actually being honest about those criticisms. I thought that was super cool that we could be that open right away."

Their Glasgow set reached wide across the Americana music spectrum, with bluegrass, gospel, a capella, country ballads, traditional old-time fiddle tunes, covers of songs by Gillian Welch, Emmylou Harris and Jim Croce. Jarosz on banjo and mandolin, Watkins on fiddle, O'Donovan on guitar, and all of them bringing rich vocal textures to the arrangements. Some of the songs were old country favourites, some of them written by one or other of the women, and one written by Jarosz and O'Donovan for this show. When arranging the set, they each brought songs that they loved to the table. "I think in every case, the person who brought the song ended up singing the song,"

Watkins, Jarosz and O'Donovan performing at Celtic Connections in January

says Watkins, "and from there, somebody was naturally drawn to one of the harmony parts." Usually, she says, in a mixed male and female band, the girl takes the high part. "I think we've all enjoyed singing the low part, having three singers with a similar [vocal] range as opposed to if there were a bunch of men in the band. It's been fun finding different blends of harmony that we can do because of the particular voices in this group."

Each of them being highly accomplished songwriters and arrangers, the temptation might have been to each bring pre-arranged songs to the group, and show the others what to do. "That would have been simple," says O'Donovan. "We wouldn't have had to think about it as much, a couple of super-easy harmony parts. But instead we put together almost all of these arrangements specifically for this trio, rearranged songs, some songs we'd never played at all before and some songs we had played but we had completely rearranged for this project."

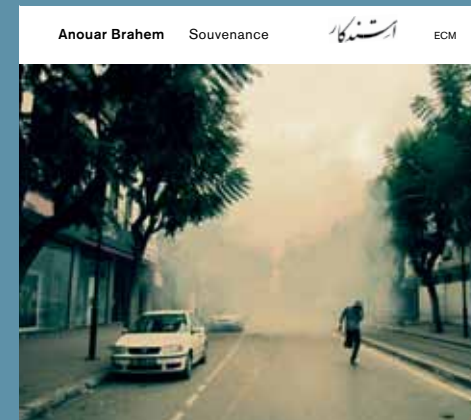
Their dynamic as it comes across on stage echoes how they are as a group off stage. Each plays a vital role in supporting the others in what they do, while adding something that no one else can. O'Donovan adds the sultry sweetness, Watkins brings the jazz, and Jarosz keeps a steady, yet heartfelt, keel. During the interview, O'Donovan is the one who points out the errors she made on stage, says how she feels about things. Watkins is the straight-shooter, politely putting me right, and Jarosz steps in, quietly and confidently, when the questions have drifted into rambling statements. There's an awkward moment during the interview where I fish around for a name for their new entity – what exactly is the collective noun for three highly talented musicians who come together to form a new group? – and I end up mentioning, reluctantly, the word 'supergroup.'

"Yeah, that's..." someone says, "I think that's a little..." says somebody else. "Just call us a band," Watkins replies, setting me straight. "I think that's what we think of ourselves as. I don't like the idea of a supergroup because it makes me imagine a group full of individuals rather than a group of people who are trying to make a unified sound. We're not trying to take turns in the spotlight of this band, we're trying to be a unit."

"We all want it to be good," says O'Donovan. "We're all striving for the same thing, I've been in musical situations where it's pretty clear that not everybody is going for the same thing... The cool thing with us is there is a common goal and it's one that I hope will resonate with audiences."

I tell them they do come across as a unit. "Good," says O'Donovan. "That's what we want to be." ♦

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