



In her blood Musical parents were a big influence on the young Egan, who learnt piano and wrote songs as a teenager

It is a 15-hour journey from Pori in southern Finland to Dublin, and Karen Egan should know — she has travelled it many times in the past three years. Throw in a bout of food poisoning, having to organise band rehearsals and interviews from the other side of the continent, and attempting to keep up with reviews of the opening night of her Finnish-language play *Kippis* — and you could call today a busy one. “I haven’t slept in 48 hours, so I’m exhausted,” she groans, sliding into the chair when we meet for a coffee. “You’ll have to forgive my delirious babbling.”

Prone to frequent bursts of laughter, a large number of the Dubliner’s anecdotes seem to end with the line: “... so I thought, why not?” That willingness to try new things has resulted in a varied career as musician, actress, theatre-maker and comedian. You might say she’s a multitasker. In fact, she has gone as far as to name her second album *Charlatanne* in a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of her creative elasticity. “It’s true,” she agrees, nodding. “I think, oh my God, I’m not a musician, I can’t possibly be a songwriter, who am I to be writing a play? But the thing is, you don’t stop to think about it — you just do it.”

Egan has always loved performance. Growing up in a family of seven children, there were plenty of opportunities to show off at family parties, and her musical parents instilled a love of classical music and tunes from the Great American Songbook. Despite learning piano and composing rudimentary songs as a teenager, she decided to follow in her “hugely influential” father’s footsteps and study law at University College Dublin, eventually qualifying as a barrister.

“I had this bizarre experience in my last lecture before the exams,” she recalls. “I just had this lightning-bolt moment. The obvious thing would have been to go down to the Bar and practise straight away, but I just thought, I don’t want my life to go like that; I want at least to do something.”

A summer spent in Boston waitressing and performing at open-mic sessions in clubs stoked the fire. So when she returned to Dublin, she enrolled in the Gaiety School of Acting. “I have absolutely no regrets,” she says. “I loved studying law and had a fantastic time at UCD and King’s Inns, and I really think it was a terrific education, but I have no regrets at all.” The ensuing years were spent mixing in theatre and music circles, directing and performing short plays, until she was invited to join the *Nualas* musical-comedy troupe. She spent three years with them, performing at Edinburgh Fringe Festival, touring Australia and Singapore, and describes it as a “wonderful experience”. The trio even sing backing vocals on her new album. However, the desire to sing her own material eventually proved irresistible. So she put together a cabaret-style show and

Karen Egan talks to Lauren Murphy

A LAW UNTO HERSELF

Quitting a career as a barrister to ‘do something’ with her life has proved a shrewd move. Now a successful actress, musician, comedian and playwright, the versatile Dubliner — like one of her heroes, Edith Piaf — has no regrets

Photograph by Bryan Meade

performed at Bewley’s Cafe theatre; it proved a hit. “At that stage there were a lot of changes in my life, so I started writing some songs,” she says. “Bit by bit, I just kept on building up my own material, and by about 2006 I brought out my first album [*Very Very*], which had about seven of my own songs and about six cabaret ‘classics’. It was a really exciting time for me, a time of great change.”

Initially, Egan modelled her sound on songs for which she developed an affinity — the music of Jacques Brel, Edith Piaf and “songs from the Weimar republic era”. Her “cabaret diva” style was in line with other fashionable artists of the time: Susannah de Wrixon, Camille O’Sullivan, Caroline Moreau, Maria Tecca. “But they all had these wonderfully exotic names,” she says, chuckling. “So I decided that, rather than be too serious about it, I would create this persona for myself; that I would be half-French, or half-German. It would change with every show. It gave me an excuse and a device for introducing those songs into my repertoire.”

These days, she is claiming a half-Finnish heritage, although there is no such blood in her

family. She does speak the language fluently after three years in Pori, and has “absolutely fallen in love” with the natives. Her move to the city was brought about by her long-term involvement with Finnish independent theatre company *Rakastajat-teatteri*, initially as an artist-in-residence and now on a freelance basis. Her first full-length production for the company, *Kippis*, which loosely translates as

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Cheers, recently debuted in Pori. She acts in the two-woman play, which she wrote in English and had translated into Finnish.

“I really can’t believe I’ve done it,” she giggles. “It’s a fictional piece, but of course I would still be hugely influenced by growing up in Ireland. *Rakastajat-teatteri* commissioned me to write it, and their starting point was the theme of women and alcohol, because it’s a hidden issue in Finland particularly. The two female characters have issues with alcohol, but the play is really about friendship and grief, language and identity. After three years, you get to know a culture and they are very different to us culturally, but it’s not moralistic in any way.”

Although it has been almost a decade since the release of *Very Very*, the follow-up *Charlatanne* was recorded piecemeal over the past two years. She snatched studio sessions with musician and co-producer Cian Boylan whenever she returned to Dublin yet, instead of sounding fragmented, the album is flavoured by her various adventures and experiences in other countries. She wanted to “ditch Dietrich” and move away from the cabaret sound of yesteryear, she says, and the eclectic mix is a worthwhile listen.

“There’s a song in every genre, quite accidentally. There’s a bluegrass song, and a gospel song. The theme throughout is, ‘Who is this charlatan doing all of these different genres?’” she says, bursting into a fit of giggles. “There’s a French pop ballad, a sort of jazz number; then there’s a song that sounds sort of like Debussy. There were quite a few pop tracks on it, and even a kind of jokey hip-hop number. It wasn’t just me and a guitar — although I think that probably will be my next one,” she deadpans. “There is a story going through which kind of makes sense — to me, anyway.”

Her Irish identity remains as important as ever despite her time abroad, but she is unsure where the future might take her. She will return to Finland for further performances of *Kippis* after her Irish tour. This summer will probably be spent in Dublin on other projects. She has appeared as a bawdy cabaret singer in an episode of the BBC drama *Ripper Street*, and is open to more TV and film work.

“If the album [*Charlatanne*] takes off, that would be fantastic, but far more important for me was to create the work and record it. I’m realistic about the business. I know people would be excited if I were 14 and had made this album, because the [music] business is obsessed by youth. But for me, it’s important to make your stamp and say, ‘This is a part of me.’ I don’t have children, so it’s nice to leave something behind for posterity.”

“I always think back to that moment in my last lecture where I thought, ‘I don’t want to be sitting at some dinner party in mid-life thinking I wish I’d done [something else].’ In terms of my life, I have followed a wildly unpredictably path, but I don’t have any regrets. Far from it; I’m really excited about it.”

Charlatanne is out now; Karen Egan plays Whelan’s, Dublin, on Friday