

# What They're Saying about Kevin Burke

## THE NEW YORK TIMES



### A Big Wide World of Music

By JON PARELES  
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Jack Vartoogian/  
FrontRowPhotos

What follows is a selection of some of the most notable world music CDs released over the last year.

KEVIN BURKE AND CAL SCOTT "Across the Black River" (Loftus)

Born in England to Irish parents and now living in Portland, Ore., Kevin Burke is one of the great living Celtic fiddlers. His first album on his own label is a collaboration with the self-effacing guitarist Cal Scott and various guests that's cozy and mature, full of modest tributes to fellow fiddlers. It's all straightforward, songful melody, until Mr. Burke gets to a set of reels that show how many trills, twists and curlicues he can add without losing that singing line.

## STAR-LEDGER (Newark, NJ)

May 30, 2007

Across the Black River  
Kevin Burke and Cal Scott  
(Loftus)

When a country's regional music is mixed with America's, it usually means it gets rocked up, but Irish fiddler Kevin Burke's partnership with Oregon-based guitarist/composer Cal Scott looks to the acoustic sounds of old rural America.

The duo and several guests play Irish jigs and reels, but also play a slow Bill Monroe tune as well as a sweet waltz redolent of French jazz. Traditional music can be the stuff of dust-raising dances, but Burke and Scott refine the rougher edges for a lovely, lively elixir.

-Marty Lipp

## THE WASHINGTON POST

### KEVIN BURKE & CAL SCOTT

"Across the Black River" Loftus  
Friday, May 11, 2007; Page WE09

KEVIN BURKE IS ONE of the greatest Irish fiddlers of the past half-century, but he has lived in Ireland for only five of his 57 years. He was raised in London by parents from County Sligo, and he has lived in Portland, Ore., since 1979. He is thus a perfect exemplar for the far-flung Irish diaspora and weaves the multinational strands of today's "Irish" music into his impressive new album, "Across the Black River," a collaboration with Portland film composer Cal Scott.

Scott composed three of the instrumental album's tunes, including the spellbinding "The Lighthouse Keeper's Waltz," and plays graceful guitar, mandolin and bouzouki throughout. But the dominant voice is that of Burke's violin, which never wavers in pitch or timbre but sings out with a confidence that allows the listener to relax. He plays with less ornamentation than in his younger days with the legendary Dublin group the Bothy Band, but he distills every melody to a full-toned, just-right line.

A nine-minute medley of reels dedicated to Burke's Irish American fiddler hero, Michael Coleman, includes the tune that provides the title of Ken Loach's new film, "The Wind That Shakes the Barley." Backing Burke and Scott on the medley are flutist Michael McGoldrick from the Scottish band Capercaillie, accordionist Johnny Connolly from the Portland trio Bridgetown and bassist Phil Baker from the Portland big band Pink Martini.

Burke underscores the Irish-American connection by playing bluegrass legend Bill Monroe's "Evening Prayer Blues," first as a solo-fiddle lament and then as a trio number that seems to echo County Sligo, southeast London, eastern Kentucky and the Columbia River all at once.

-- Geoffrey Himes

## IRISH MUSIC MAGAZINE

March 12, 2007 - Monday

# Kevin Burke and Cal Scott: Across the Black River

Category: [Music](#)

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**Kevin Burke talks about the busy year ahead of him, which is business as usual unless you count the fact that he's now a record label.**

Kevin Burke is used to being a fiddle icon – although he'd blanch at the term - but he's far less used to his new role as a music "executive". "Basically, I've had to invent a record company which I'm calling 'Loftus Music'. To be honest, I'm not really interested in starting up my own label. It's just when you put out records without another label, you become the label," he laughs.

His move into the business end of things came when Burke and guitarist Ged Foley were producing 2005's "In Tandem". "We released that independently mainly because of the turnaround time," he explains. "We were doing a tour of Germany and discovered that the manufacturing turnaround time for Green Linnet was three months. We were able to get it manufactured much quicker than that and it worked out great, but we had no intension of continuing in that vein. Now that Green Linnet is gone, instead of negotiating contracts with other people and trying to develop a relationship with a new record company, I thought I'd do this new record that I've got coming out with Cal (Scott), in the same way. And the guys in Patrick Street were saying 'yeah, you should put ours out as well' and all of a sudden, I'm a label. Also the distributors and online download people don't really respond too well unless it's a label – you can't really say "it's not a label, it's me". To them, it's a label. So I thought if I have to play the game, I might as well give it a name and a logo, so here I am."

Along with his label, Burke also has three new albums in various stages of release. The most immediate, and perhaps most intriguing of them is "Across the Black River" with Cal Scott. Like Burke, Scott is based in Oregon. Although new to Irish

music, he has been playing in folk, rock and jazz ensembles for three decades. He also composes music for film, which is what brought him together with Burke.

"Cal was working on a documentary, ("The Road to Bloody Sunday") about the political strife in the North of Ireland in the recent years," explains Burke. "Even though he's a very accomplished musician, he's not that well versed in Irish music, at least he wasn't back then. He knew that I was living nearby and we've lots of mutual friends so he engaged me as a consultant. I told him what I knew of music that might be suitable or unsuitable and we struck up a friendship and a musical relationship."

The two began recording tunes for each other, trying out styles, accompaniments, and instruments; an exchange of musical ideas that lasted for almost two years. "Before long we were saying that we've got the best part of a CD and we should put it together and record it and see what happens."

"So we did that and then enlisted the help of a few notables; a few friends of ours. Johnny B. Connolly, a great accordion player from Ireland but who lives here in Portland; then there's Phil Baker, a bass player who seems to be playing with everyone – he's playing with Pink Martini at the moment. I've seen him play in dive bars with blues band and the next thing he's in a very elegant setting playing with symphony musicians so I thought 'well, if he's good enough for that lot, he must be good enough for us,'" jokes Burke. "On one or two of the pieces I really wanted to hear some flutes and there's a guy I know who's the man I'd love to have play on a couple of these things and that guy is Michael McGoldrick from Manchester. So I got Michael involved and he was kind enough to contribute a bit. So that was the full team."

It isn't just the album's line-up that brings diversity to the project, but the tunes as well. "There was a piece that came by with a friend of mine in London, who I know for years and years – he's really a blues fan but he's come to some of my concerts," Burke recounts. "We used to work together in a record shop when we were teenagers or in our early 20's. He was here and started playing it on the piano and I said 'what's that thing you're playing there?' and it turned out to be something he'd written. I said, 'I could play that, I should get that off you', so that showed up on the record. There are all kinds of oddities on it. It just grew organically over time. We didn't set ourselves deadlines and we just had fun playing these different pieces and working them out how we thought was fit."

Before long there was enough to put on a CD."

Having played with Patrick Street since the mid-80's and Celtic Fiddle Festival since 1992, the album with Scott came as a departure in many ways, but particularly in terms of the spontaneous way in which it came together. "Usually with the groups we get together and say 'so what could we do here?' We all throw forth three or four ideas then have a week or two to record them. We don't have this organic process of recording a piece and then coming back to it six months later and to add a bit of this and a bit of that and see what it's like and then try again. Probably because we all live so far apart, it's awkward. But with Cal, when I wasn't touring, I'd drop the kids off at school and then go to Cal's place for a few hours mid-day and then come back and pick the kids up on the way home and go back to the house. We'd do that for a month and then I wouldn't see Cal for three months and when I'd come back he'd say 'hey, I tried putting a mandolin on that piece and I couldn't make it work on the second part but it works great on the first part.' It was good fun doing it in that way."

The process of collecting tracks took somewhere in the realm of three to four years. "It's probably only been a year or two that we decided it could be an album. I was playing with Patrick Street and Ged and touring around so we've had no deadline pushing us. We waited until it was ready and then six months ago we said to each other 'you know, at some point we have to say that this is done.' So we said 'okay, it's done.' We had to get some sleeve notes together and an album together and neither of us do things too quickly."

One thing that became clear quickly though was the choice of title track. 'Across the Black River' is a tune written for fiddle and flute and as Burke explains, "The black river in question is a river that you have to cross to get into the house where my mother grew up in Sligo in a very rural setting. For sentimental reasons, I suppose, I had that in mind and named the tune after that."

Careful listeners might recognize it from Lunasa's 'Se' as well as from Burke's own 'In Tandem' and 1998's live Celtic Fiddle Festival album, 'Encore'. "When we played it with the Celtic Fiddles it wasn't really intended for release, you know the way things happen live. It ended up that the concert was recorded and it was one of the tracks chosen for release. Then last year when Lunasa were putting their latest record together they'd heard me play it somewhere and asked if I'd be interested in having

them record it and of course I was thrilled."

In addition to that track and various reels, jigs, and hornpipes there is also music from a variety of other sources, for example: two waltzes written by Scott, a reworking of a Bill Monroe bluegrass standard and an air written by Phil Cunningham in remembrance of his brother Johnny.

And if that wasn't enough variety, fans of Burke should have happy years in 2007 and 08. A Patrick Street album should be released in the Fall followed by a Celtic Fiddles release early next year with tours surrounding all three albums.

## **CELTIC BEAT:**

Kevin Burke and Cal Scott:  
Across The Black River  
(LM001)

The only words I have for this CD are consummate artistry and joyous music. I could listen to this again and again. Particularly on a balmy summer day.

Kevin Burke and Cal Scott run the gamut on what they can do at their best. And yet this is a very natural release. Not one part of it has the feeling of the contrived or forced. Even while changing genres from the fine "Green Fields of Woodford"/"Seanamhac"/"Tube Station" to the archetypically Parisian "Paris Nights."

I liked the wistful, sad "The Lighthouse Keeper's Waltz." And an outstanding "The Long Set:" "The Boys Of The Lough"/"Crowley's"/"San sa Cheo."

So we never forget great artists ever, there is the elegaic, beautiful "For Johnny" for Johnny Cunningham, written by his brother Phil.

It is a very good thing, cutting across cultural lines, for all Celtic music to get back to its essence, in this case of two great musicians and their associates doing what they do superbly.

AK

# THE IRISH TIMES

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## Burke brings it back to basics



Fiddler on the move: 'Not many people have gone out of their way to play Irish music in places where there isn't any,' says Kevin Burke. *Photograph: Frank Miller*

Kevin Burke is relishing the raw bar and the tune stripped to the bone on his latest album, with Cal Scott, he tells **Siobhán Long**.

'A lot of people came to traditional music back in the 1970s via Planxty, The Chieftains, De Danann and The Bothy Band,' Kevin Burke declares, 'but what many of them might have forgotten is that originally, this music was typically a solo music.' These days, Kevin Burke has stripped the music back down to its underwear, and let it speak for itself.

Raised in London, of Sligo parents, Burke honed a keen Sligo fiddle style that carried some of the echoes of his childhood hero, Michael Coleman, as he parachuted upon some of traditional music's most seminal collectives. Over the years, his musical identity has been inextricably linked with The Bothy Band, Micheál Ó Domhnaill, Jackie Daly, Patrick Street, The Celtic Fiddle Festival and Open House, and lately he's been trading tunes with Cal Scott, a composer and musician living in Burke's adopted home town of Portland, Oregon.

Their debut as a duo, *Across the Black River*, is a master class in eclectic musicianship, coloured by a restraint born of experience and a fluidity that surely owes much to their comfort in one another's company. Burke acknowledges that reaching that point of mutual engagement entailed a languorous and protracted series of encounters, and wasn't the product of some heady, fleeting encounter in the studio.

'Working with Cal was a bit like what I'd imagine it must be like for actors in rehearsal,' Burke offers. 'You know the words, you know the plot, but sometimes an actor can express anger by jumping up and down and screaming, and sometimes it's a lot more sinister and aggressive if he drops his voice and talks real quietly. That can be a lot more effective. That's what we talked about a lot: how we deliver the tunes. Cal's execution of my ideas is stunning. You know how it is: when you talk about wine, you use all these vague terms, and most people don't know

what the hell you're talking about. But Cal can actually do it. He knows what I'm getting at. He can bring those images to the fore right away.

'A lot of it is juxtaposition, like the double bass. It's been used in Irish music before but not in the music I play. I wanted to make it not only compatible, but to sound like it belongs. I wanted to get it to a point where it wouldn't sound right without it. To be truthful, this is a very tailored record, where we tried to bring our very separate skills and made them compatible with each other.'

Anchored by *The Long Set*, a sextet of reels that swing effortlessly from *The Boys Of The Lough* to *Seán Sa Cheo* and *Paddy Ryan's Dream*, *Across the Black River* is a snapshot of Kevin Burke at a time in his career when he's relishing the raw bar, the tunes stripped bare. These days he plays quite a lot of solo fiddle concerts, particularly in the US, and the level of audience interest in hearing the music in all its naked glory suggested that a recording, focused on spacious arrangements of the tunes against a minimalist backdrop, might be timely.

Alongside this blistering set piece of *The Long Set* sit Vincent Broderick's sublime *Last Train From Loughrea*, Bill Monroe's *Evening Prayer Blues*, Scott's *The Lighthouse Keeper's Waltz* and Burke's eponymous tune, *Across the Black River*. The thread that unites them all is a shared appetite for exploring the shadowy corners of the music, shedding light on notes that might have languished previously in the dark, and exploring the lyrical potential of the music.

BURKE IS CONVINCED OF the inherent personality of a tune. It suggests itself to him, insinuating itself beneath his skin. 'I'm a great believer that the wildest reel could have a hint of sadness, and some of the slower tunes have jolly parts too,' he says.

'Nothing is totally sad or totally happy. When I was playing Vincent Broderick's tune, *Last Train From Loughrea*, I felt that, in some ways, it sounds very simple, almost naive, as if it could have been written by a child - or else by someone very wise and experienced. It has the stamp of a very old style of tune, which I really like. Cal was able to put enormous gentleness into the arrangement, because there's a wistfulness about it that I didn't want to lose.'

The Bothy Band revolutionised Irish music. Burke joined the band upon Tommy Peoples'

departure in 1976, and together with Triona and Micheál Ó Domhnaill, Paddy Keenan, Matt Molloy and Dónal Lunny, launched a collective weapon of mass seduction upon the listening public. There followed a trio of timeless recordings: Old Hag You Have Killed Me in 1976, Out Of The Wind Into The Sun in 1977 and a live recording from Paris, After Hours, in 1978. Music spine-tinglingly of its time and timeless, basking in the tunes of the tradition and bathing them in rich, earthy arrangements that put fire in their bellies and pep in their step.

Anyone lucky enough to have crossed the threshold of Omós, the recent concert in memory of the late Micheál Ó Domhnaill at Vicar Street, will have sampled (albeit briefly) the subtlety and finesse of Kevin Burke's fiddle lines. Together with the remaining members of The Bothy Band, whose reunion was long overdue, Burke could hardly contain his delight as the electricity sparking off each of the band members. For many of the punters who packed the venue, it was a breathtaking reminder of the primal power of music.

Interestingly though, Kevin Burke gets even more animated at the prospect of taking the music into uncharted waters, audience-wise, than he is when reflecting on the (admittedly rare) chance he has to play to punters who can recite the tunes, chapter and verse.

"Not many people have gone out of their way to play Irish music in places where there isn't any," he declares. "It's one thing playing it in Camden town, Kilburn and east Clare, but playing it in northern Michigan, or Denmark or Estonia, especially back then [in the 1970s], was really weird. I remember meeting Paul Butterfield, who used to have the Paul Butterfield Blues Band [and played with The Band] in Woodstock way back in the 1970s. We were at a party, and I played a Paddy Fahy tune, and Paul said 'Well man, that's the Irish blues'. That made complete sense to me, but I felt: 'Why didn't he know that before I started to play?' - just as I knew as soon as he pulled out his harmonica, what it would sound like. I just couldn't understand why Irish music wasn't 'out there'."

The irony was that Burke saw all kinds of common ground between the rock, folk and pop music of the time, and Irish music, but it seemed that few others did.

"I used to listen to Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, The Beatles, Otis Redding, Manfred Mann and The Stones," he says, "but when I turned on the radio or television, I never heard Irish music. It made sense to me that the emotion I got out of seeing Joe Cocker singing With A Little Help From My Friends was nothing different from hearing Joe Heaney singing Skibbereen.

"When I heard Bob Dylan, I was even more struck by how similar he sounded to what I heard before. I remember hearing The Times They Are A-Changin', and I was struck by the similarities to what I knew: songs of emigration, with the same kind of atmosphere, but with different words. It was a problem for me that Irish music wasn't on the same kind of footing. Of course these days, it's all changed now. In fact, if people in Spain heard a Spanish tune backed by the uilleann pipes, they'd probably think it was Irish."

HAVING TRAVELLED TO DUBLIN for Micheál Ó Domhnaill's memorial concert, Kevin Burke is keen to reflect on the man and his music, and what set him apart.

"Micheál was an inspired musician," he offers, "and a great intellect - not in an academic way, but in an emotional way. He used his intelligence to seek out and to construct inspiring music, and he usually found it within himself. The last time I met Micheál, he gave me a recording of Loch Lomond, a song that's definitely been around the block, but last night I was listening to it again, and his guitar introduction alone was gorgeous. Before he started singing at all, you're won over. It was just beautiful."

When it comes to the business of recording, Burke has come full circle. Following the demise of Green Linnet, a label with which Burke had been signed for many years, he decided to bypass the intricacies of negotiating a new contract with a new label when it came to recording his last album with Ged Foley, In Tandem. From there, releasing his latest recording on his own label again seemed like a natural progression.

"I just like the idea of it being ours," he reveals with childlike glee. "There's a lot of work involved, but with the CD retailing industry in freefall, it made a lot of sense for me to take this on myself. The fact is that I sell nearly all my CDs at my concerts, and this is a record I'm really proud of. We took a lot of time and effort over the entire project. Having done it, I'm delighted, but it's not something I'd lightly recommend. Still, it's a great feeling: having control over your own music."

Across the Black River by Kevin Burke and Cal Scott is out now on Loftus Music. Kevin Burke plays with Patrick Street in Limerick, tomorrow and Thurs, Listowel, Co Kerry, Fri, Clondalkin, Co Dublin, Sat, Cork, July 11, Dublin, July 12 and Donegal, July 13-14. [www.kevinburke.com](http://www.kevinburke.com).