

Bewitching Musician

Ned Oldham

Singer Alex Caton likes getting at the core of things. She has a background in archeology, broad instrumental skills and a passion for tradition, most evident in her embrace of Old-time music since a move to Virginia.



David Deal

Alex Caton, willowy and blond, white skirt drifting gently in the breeze, stands outside her Charlottesville-area music studio, seeing off her noon guitar student just as her 12:30 shows up. The studio, with its reclaimed parquet floor, windows and cozy woodstove centerpiece, has an old vibe, even though her husband, Dave Contini, built it just over five years ago. There are potted plants, a record player and stacks of records, a piano, an acoustic guitar, a fiddle in its case, an upright bass, and a hodgepodge of chairs and couches for audience seating during studio shows. Stacked in an open loft above are piles of marketing merchandise, including whiskey flasks to promote Caton's well-received solo CD, 2009's *Sinners and the Saved*. The flasks are engraved with the words *Sinner Supporting Traditional Music*, and can be filled, quips Caton's musical collaborator, Pete Winne, with what he calls "singer juice."

Caton, age 35, certainly has plenty of juice in the sense of creative vitality—and its wellspring is her intelligence, broad musical roots and overseas upbringing. The daughter of a Kodak executive, she lived in England and Scotland until she was 13. She started playing the piano when she was four and the violin when she was five, and sang in Church of England choirs. She later moved to Rochester and earned a master's degree in African Archeology from SUNY Binghamton. She then dropped her idea of getting a Ph.D. to pursue her passion for traditional music which gained momentum when she moved to Virginia about 10 years ago and started absorbing the banjo and fiddle-driven American Old-time music that tinges her recent work.

Sinners and the Saved, Caton's second record, was recorded at the vaunted Levon Helm studio in Woodstock, New York. Larry Campbell—longtime sideman to Bob Dylan and Helm—has lauded the CD as "rare and irresistible." The music is earthy and eclectic and "very influenced by the [Charlottesville] area," the singer says, adding: "It is a pretty Virginia-based record." It includes Caton originals, covers of Virginia Old-time and gospel songs, and even a cover of Led Zeppelin's country-tinged "Hot Dog."

Befitting her background, Caton embraces a wide spectrum of styles, and performs regionally in a variety of musical configurations. One night she will sing with the gypsy trio *Las Gitanas*, on another night with Irishman Pat Egan, and more recently she's been touring with Winne, an Old-time stylist.

At home and through the Blue Ridge Irish Music School (BRIMS), she teaches Irish and Old-time fiddle, gypsy fiddle, banjo and guitar. She also has several piano students. She traveled to Ireland with BRIMS this summer for a few weeks of workshops, performances, and a soak in pub culture. Her mother's family came from Ireland two generations back. "I used to play hundreds [of Irish songs]," says Caton. "I still teach it and play, but don't really perform it. So I got out all my old tunes." She holds up a small notebook with the titles and chords for dozens of Irish songs, cribbed in her neat, all-caps print.

For the past couple of years, though, her main focus has been the gig with Winne, touring as a duo, and also playing local shows with a fleshed out band. The paradigm works well she says, because "I play guitar, banjo, fiddle and sing, while he's versatile on banjo, guitar and harmonica." Switching up often on instrumentation, the two produce a textured musical palette, with Winne's Hank Williams-meets-Jimmy Rodgers style complementing Caton's bewitching fiddle-work and plain-spoken but heartfelt vocal phraseology that evokes Appalachian songstresses like Hazel Dickens.

Caton has said that her shift from Irish traditional music toward the Old-time music of Appalachia was like an escape from geographical and stylistic constraints to the "looseness" and openness of a musical heritage that despite (or perhaps because of) her Irish roots speaks to her. Genealogy and geography can be a double-edged sword, but in Caton's case it works. She has an "affinity" for Virginia, noting that in many ways it is like England. "The culture, some of the food, and the language are more English than up north." Of life in Louisa County she says: "We are obviously digging in. This is home."

Still, part of her essential character is to reach out, and that she intends to keep doing. Already this year, she has performed in France, visited Switzerland, sprinkled her late mother's ashes over family ground in Fenton, Stoke-on-Trent, England, jammed in Ireland, studied "chest-voice singing" with Appalachian vocalist Ginny Hawker in West Virginia, and toured with Winne in the northeast.

Next year, she hopes to return to Helm's studio with Winne to lay down tracks for the next CD. Caton says the material will include more originals than *Sinners and the Saved*, and notes that her new songs "seem almost more traditional" than some tunes handed down over generations. Tradition, we say, has to come from somewhere.