

AIDAN O'ROURKE

By Hazel Davis

"I was a wee rascal," laughs Aidan O'Rourke, as he recounts the fiasco of his early school musical ability. "I took the musical ability test when I was about five or six and failed because the teacher was asking me to sing these notes and all I could think about what a sunny day it was and how I could get outside."



"I was a wee rascal" laughs
Aidan O'Rourke.
Photograph by Craig MacKay

Luckily for the world of folk, O'Rourke's talent eventually shone through and once he picked up the fiddle ("learned from an old man who lived near me"), took to it very quickly. From there he entered, and won, fiddle competitions, played in numerous bands including Blazin' Fiddles and Lau, with whom he has just scooped the Best Group award at the 2009 Radio 2 Folk Awards.

Lau – a traditional three-piece comprising Kris Drever on guitar and vocals and Martin Green on accordion – released its debut album, *Lightweights and Gentlemen*, in 2007 to great critical acclaim and won Best Group at the 2008 awards.

As a session player, O'Rourke has appeared on more than 80 albums with the likes of Runrig, Michael McGoldrick and Karen Matheson. Like many folk musicians, he is typically modest about the band's win and its popularity. "The categories baffle me," he says, "I don't understand how you can win one thing and not the other. Why Best Group but not Best Live Group? Not that I think we particularly deserve either of them," he laughs. In the folk world, O'Rourke says, the awards are more about the event than the competition. "it's like a continued celebration of Hogmanay," he says, "and much more about the occasion. I know the majority of the nominees quite well and it's really just an excuse to get together."

Born and raised in the West Highland town of Oban, says O'Rourke, there weren't many opportunities to hear big concerts. But there was always music in the house. "I grew up listening to Irish music, Frankie Gavin, Planxty, De Dannan and also Scottish band like Capercaillie and Silly Wizard, people like that."

O'Rourke started touring with a band from Perthshire while he was still at school. "When I was 15 we went to America," he says, "I had my sixteenth birthday in Baltimore, the day after Independence Day. It was quite an experience as I had never even been to England before."

Despite this early promising brush with professional performing, the young O'Rourke went to university and studied civil engineering. "I just didn't think I would be able to make a living from it," he says, "but I was always playing." On graduation, O'Rourke gave himself a year of playing, "to get it out of my system", realised he was actually rather good and hasn't looked back since.



O'Rourke's new band – Lau, Winners of
Radio 2 Folk awards New Band 2009
Photograph by David Angel

Now based in Linlithgow in West Lothian, O'Rourke started composing in his late teens and early twenties. "I thought it was something that would come naturally to me," he says, "But you do actually have to work at it!. It's not like this wonderful melody just floats across your mind." O'Rourke will spend weeks in his upstairs workspace, "blocking everything else out" and creating works performed and recorded by bands such as Flook and Wolfstone, The Unusual Suspects and recently The Royal Scottish National Orchestra.

O'Rourke officially left Blazin' Fiddles last summer to concentrate on Lau and performs his last gig with them at the end of April. "I was on the road for 220 days a year," he says, "you end up chasing your tail." This April he's also composing for the Fiddles On Fire festival at The Sage, Gateshead, writing a ten-minute piece for fiddle ensemble. O'Rourke says he needs these different strands in his life: "I can't concentrate on just performing. I definitely use different parts of my brain, or personality."

And his education outreach work is still important. O'Rourke has been an artist-in-residence for various Scottish Arts Council projects. "I think folk music is really healthy just now," he says, however, "The education side of things is way better than it was when I was at school. For some time the powers that be made it seem like it was a lesser music form and that classical music was the only form to be taught. It's still hugely important to encourage children as much as we can though," he adds, "in anything, not just music."

O'Rourke's outreach work helps him as musician, he says: "It's a real situation. It brings you down to earth. When I was in Stirling [as a musician-in-residence at the Tollbooth] I was teaching children who had never seen a fiddle before. It was a really difficult area and such a satisfying thing to do.

Never easily reconciled with the plight of a folk-singer, the recording process is another string to O'Rourke's bow. He's been producing records for other people and got involved as a project manager. "I really enjoy getting involved in the physics of the thing," he says.



Accusound's popular flexible neck fiddle microphone
Photograph by Accusound

It was O'Rourke's own quest for a perfect sound that led him to a successful sponsorship deal with UK microphone manufacturer Accusound, who make, says O'Rourke, the "most controllable" mics. "Accusound sponsored Blazin' Fiddles for years," he explains, "It's an eternal challenge, says O'Rourke, as a fiddle player, finding the right amplification: "With voice and flute for example, you can play right into a mic but the fiddle is difficult to capture and can sound so harsh if you get it wrong."

Lau's latest album, due for release on 30 March, "is more of a studio album", says O'Rourke. "We've used the studio as an instrument and started using various bits of new technology and loops and suchlike. But it's still folk. Folk is an outlook not a recording style..."