

Irene Kelley

~Bio~



In few life stories do you find the heroine getting kicked out of her own rock band because of Dolly Parton but IRENE KELLEY proves it ain't impossible.

Latrobe, Pennsylvania is better known for brewing Rolling Rock Beer than as a hot musical breeding ground. However, one does not have the privilege of choosing one's birthplace. Along side the aroma of roasting hops, music was in the air and clearly in the blood of young Miss Kelley.

It was at age 15 that she while a singer in a local rock and roll band, whose musical lifeblood included Led Zeppelin hits of the day that her "metal mama" days met their timely end. She committed the unpardonable sin of bringing a Dolly Parton song to a band rehearsal & extolled its virtues.

"I saw the Dolly television show one day and was totally taken aback by her singing and her songs. I went out and bought some of her records and was hooked," Irene says.

"The band wasn't thrilled with my new direction and I was fired on the spot."

Irene promptly put a new band together and started singing country songs. She didn't even start picking on a guitar until she was 19 years-old. Soon after getting her own "wings of string," she started writing songs of her own. One of her first was "Pennsylvania Is My Home," which she sang in a PBS documentary in 1982. She made a record of the song and sent it out to radio stations that soon started playing it. The song wound up being nominated for the Pennsylvania state song. An enterprising Irene even had T-shirts and bumper stickers made up to help promote her song to the top. Unfortunately, lots of other people had the same idea about their own song, and the state decided to abstain from designating any new "official" songs for a while.

Meanwhile, relieved of her distracting duties with the band, writing became her focus. Irene recalls, "I would sit with my guitar and songs came out. It all happened quite by accident. I would get this great idea and as it kept evolving, I'd write it down. I was really enjoying the process."

She sent some of her "Pennsylvania" singles to music publishers in Nashville which generated a reply from Gordon Payne at CBS Records. Payne asked her to come to Nashville to cut some demos. Just to make it seem as fairytale-like as possible, musicians on her first session included Marty Stuart, Sonny Curtis and Jody Maphis, to name a few.

After signing with the publishing company, she moved to Music City in 1983, promptly scoring cuts by Carl Jackson ("You Are A Rock And I Am A Rolling Stone") and the hit Ricky Skaggs/Sharon White duet "Love Can't Ever Get Better Than This."

Not long after moving to Nashville Irene recorded an album for MCA Records. It yielded two singles: "Love Is A Hard Road" and her own charting version of "You Are A Rock (And I Am A Rolling Stone)." The full project was never released.

Undaunted Irene had discovered that in Nashville songwriting could be "The Career". She dove full time into raising her two children while honing her inner writer. The girls grew and her songs found homes on records by Loretta Lynn, Trisha Yearwood, Brother Phelps, Rhonda Vincent, Claire Lynch, the Osborne Brothers, The Whites, Ricky Skaggs, Carl Jackson and others.

Satisfying as it was, she found that solely sitting on the sideline as a "tunesmith" didn't quite quench the artist's fire. In 1999 she wrote, recorded and co-produced (with Scott Neubert) her own album titled "Simple Path". Initially released on her own label then later on Relentless Records, her collaborators on the project included Darrell Scott, Kim Richey, Claire Lynch, Kim Patton-Johnson, Mark Irwin, Michael Joyce and others.

While performing "I'm A Little Bluer Than That" from Simple Path on the venerable Grand Ol' Opry, a regular listener named Alan Jackson caught the performance on WSM while driving home. Before the song was over he called their mutual publisher asking for a copy of the song. Not only did "...Bluer Than That" make the quintuple-platinum CMA album of the year, Drive, as one of the very few non-Jackson-penned tunes, Alan asked her to come add her lilting harmonies to his version of the song.

In its own gentle way "Thunderbird" trumpets the dawn. From the opening pitch it's a new ballgame. First up is the charming "Highway" written with long-time pal Claire Lynch where she casts her lot and confusion about where life is leading with the endless, seemingly directionless highway. From there, the titles tell a good bit of the story for her: "If I Had Any Strength At All," "Cold All The Time" (co-written with Bill Anderson), the touching tribute to her daughters, "My Sun & Moon," the cathartic "Somebody Let The Water In" and "I Pray."

Subtle, yet leaving no doubt, "Thunderbird" is a clear reflection of a tough patch of life's road not covered and learned from by one of today's most gifted song-storytellers, Irene Kelley.

Simple Path quickly collected heartfelt praise from the press such as:

Music Row Magazine - Robert K. Oermann: "She sings with immense hillbilly heart and writes like a champion. Like so much of what we label 'Americana,' this is simply a simple (and wonderful) country record."

Performing Songwriter - "'Simple Path' is a warm and wonderful collection of bluegrass-tinged country music that's hard to find on the radio these days. It has the timeless sound of a standard; something Dolly Parton or Loretta Lynn would be proud to call their own."

Her new CD, Thunderbird, takes up where Simple Path left off—musically, spiritually and as a chronicle of a life lived. Irene notes, "I think of myself as a very private person but songwriting will have no part of that. All my struggles are in these songs for all the world to hear. Simple Path put out little hints; Thunderbird announces loudly every detail!" Writers are frequently counseled to "write what they know" and the depth of emotion and feel of the real engendered on Thunderbird make plain the stories have been lived in and—best of all—lived through. Irene poetically distills an optimistic wisdom on the other side of dizzying change and heart-crushing loss. As only she could attest, "I have been through extreme changes and loss since Simple Path. I get to write about my life in songs that other people can actually relate to and sometimes find comfort in...now that is a blessed life for sure!"

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