

# Singer-songwriter starts new CD as a man and finishes it as a woman

By Laura Joint



In February 2014, singer-songwriter Yann Fanet started work on a new album. The album was very much a labour of love; self-penned Scottish and Irish folk music to set to the poems of WB Yeats. But when he was half way through the recording he had to put it on hold for several months before finally being able to complete the album in August this year – as Sarah Yann Fanet.

“I started the album as a man and finished it as a woman,” said Sarah. “It’s my second Yeats album but this recording was interrupted by my transition. I did around 60% of the recording in February 2014 as Yann when I was living in England. It was only once I’d moved to Scotland that I was able to carry on again and I finally finished it a few weeks ago, as Sarah.

“To be honest, you won’t notice the difference in the voice partly because I haven’t finished my transition from a medical point of view – I have another year or two until the process is complete – and also hormone therapy doesn’t alter your voice. I notice a slight difference, but people who listen to the album won’t. It is part of the journey to accept myself as I am. Friends encouraged me to continue with the voice I had and listeners would have to accept me as I am.”

French-born Sarah, 46, has decided to tell her story in the hope it helps others with gender dysphoria, especially children, and their families: “I want to raise awareness so that people can look at people like me and say ‘oh they play music, they have a career, a profession’ – so they’re seeing us as people and not just talking about trans-identity.

“When we talk about LGBTI, the LGB have done a lot of work in the last 30 to 40 years to make themselves visible and to campaign for their rights. But for us, this is only just beginning. I want to be part of that and to contribute to trans-visibility so that people are more aware of the condition and accept it more.

“And I really want to help with initiatives so that children don’t have to wait 20 or 30 years or 40 years like I did to deal with the issue. We need to help children and their parents to deal with trans-identity”.

Sarah moved to Kinlochleven last year through sensitivity to her family: “I thought it would make it slightly easier for them,” she explained. “I knew Scotland well, I’ve lived here before in Caithness and I have links here. Kinlochleven in Lochaber is close to Watercolour Music where I recorded the beginning of my album and I wanted to be close to where I had left a part of myself through the recording.”

Sarah finished recording the 10-track album, *In Search of the Celtic Twilight*, at the Watercolour Music studios owned by singer, harpist and BBC Radio 3 presenter Mary Ann Kennedy and her husband Nick. Mary Ann plays and sings on the album which also features fiddler Eilidh Shaw (the Poozies, Harem Scarem), Sally Simpson of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland also on fiddle and Allan MacDonald on percussion.

Sarah is launching the CD on 3 October at a live gig at the Victorian Bar at The Tron Theatre, Glasgow, as part of Glasgoes Poetic. She says there was a time when she thought it might never happen: “When I was diagnosed and started going through the gender transition I thought ‘that’s it, it’s not going to work, I’ll never play music again’.

“But then my therapist in Exeter – which was near to where I lived at the time – told me something very important. She said to me: ‘Be very careful. Make sure that your life goes on during and after transition. Music is a very strong part of your identity so make sure that live music and poetry remain part of your life.’

“So when I first came here I had the copies of the recording sessions I’d done and I listened to them every single day for around 10 months, hoping that one day I could go back and finish the recording. It’s really thanks to Mary Ann and Nick’s encouragement that I was able to do that. And everything is due to the advice of my therapist, Elizabeth Heatley, which is why in the sleeve notes I’ve dedicated the album to her.

“I’m so pleased with how the album has turned out.”

It’s been a long journey for Sarah. Her story begins in France where Yann grew up as a boy wanting to be a girl. Born in Paris, Yann’s family moved around the country before finally settling in the French Alps. Sarah moved to the UK in 1989 and for 20 years Yann worked as a teacher of languages at secondary schools across the south of England.

“All my life I lived with dysphoria,” said Sarah. “I can remember at the age of two wanting to be a girl. But as a child, with a lack of awareness, I just thought there was something wrong about me and that one day these thoughts would disappear. It wasn’t until around three or four years ago that I really understood. That’s when I consulted the clinic in Exeter.”

Finally, after a period of assessment, Sarah was diagnosed in 2014 with severe gender dysphoria. “As soon as that happened I decided with the clinic’s support to go through a transition because my life as a man was becoming unbearable, psychologically. It was making me very ill.”

Gender dysphoria means being born with the body of one gender but with a brain structured in a way you feel you belong to the other gender. It’s thought it might be caused by hormonal factors when the baby is still in the womb. The condition is fully recognised by the medical profession and often transitioning is the only way to continue to live.

Sarah said: “The best way to explain it is that you feel as though you belong to one gender but actually your body belongs to the other gender. It’s like a big hangover. You constantly feel as though your body is in one place and your mind is in another. And you cannot bring the two together. It’s a very strange feeling.

“It causes a lot of unhappiness. The suicide rate in the trans-gender population is very high. Many have depression, which is why the NHS recognises the condition and helps people to transition.

“I am now living in what I feel has always been my true gender. But it has meant leaving my family. It has meant finding a new house, a new profession. So I feel very, very tired – but much happier.”

Music and poetry has helped hugely in the past 18 months. Sarah first discovered traditional Scottish and Irish music after moving to the UK. She started gigging in around 2007 with her band in the West Country and has recorded albums as Yann Fanet – including an earlier CD of songs to Yeats’ poems. During this period Yann performed in Ireland and in the south of England. It was always an ambition to go on tour with this second Yeats-inspired album during 2015 – the poet’s 150<sup>th</sup> birthday: “But with the transition and then feeling exhausted, it was impossible. But I’d love to do that during the winter.

“Putting music to the poems of WB Yeats is something very special,” she added. “Yeats was tone deaf, couldn’t hear music but would have liked to play music. He had a rhythm in his poems which is why a lot of them were called ballads. Some of the poems were built like songs, it’s so clear that he wanted music in many of his poems. So when you read them, the music just comes along. His poetry lends itself so well to music.”

Sarah works as a tour guide and when she’s at home, she loves the tranquillity on her doorstep: “Where I live is so inspiring. It’s one of the reasons I came here at the start of the transition, to help me through. I’ve always loved mountains and the sea and I’ve always loved being in Scotland. So if I ever feel a bit low or lonely or depressed I look out of the window and I’ve got the mountains right in front of me and there are wonderful walks. It’s been the best anti-depressant. And it’s perfect for writing songs.”

As well as a hoped-for tour, Sarah is also looking ahead to her next musical project. But she can’t for the time-being look too far into the future when it comes to her personal life: “I’ve got no idea at the

moment what that holds. I just feel very tired at the moment. But I've got my mind and my heart open. I know that loneliness is something that a lot of people go through after transition and it's not something I want to face for the rest of my life.

"For now I'm just building my support network because I'm still new to the place. But the people here have been wonderful to me. And I feel like one person now. I can see the end of the tunnel at last."

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Sarah's website: <http://www.wordsformusicsurely.yolasite.com/>