

Dublin singer/songwriter Ciara Sidine, 45, has interests as wide as her impressive vocal range. The mother-of-two, who has just released her second album *Unbroken Line*, is already one of Ireland's top literary editors, with Booker prize winner John Banville among the authors whose work she improves.

She also co-founded *Midwives for Choice* with Philomena Canning – who made headlines when the HSE suspended her from practice in 2014 and who presided over both of Ciara's home births. We'll get to that story, and how it inspired one of her songs, later.

Along with song-writing, book-editing and campaigning to repeal the eighth, she is on the board of her local community and arts festival, *Phizzfest*, in Dublin's newly hipster-ish *Phibsboro*.

Not that Ciara, when we meet in a Dublin hotel, is the type to brag about her varied undertakings. Having a family well known for its talent may explain her modesty – her mother is author June Considine and her uncle, writer Dermot Bolger – and Ciara's stage name is a contraction of her surname.

Soft-spoken and understated, she only began writing and recording music in a serious way when she found herself in danger of being swallowed up by motherhood. Her children are Romy, 13, and Ava, 12.

'Regardless of whether you're a stay-at-home mum or if you have a job outside the home, it is just a very intense experience, parenting. It makes you kind of realise that you have to fight a little bit harder for your own space. I think that's what happened for me. And much as I loved becoming a mother, I did realise that ten years could go by in the blink of an eye and that this creative bubbling that had been coming up in me – that I had begun on the path of before I had the kids – could easily not be given any fuel.

So I very consciously carved out a small amount of time – because that's all I could. I was still earning my bread and butter and all the rest of it. I started to really write songs at night,' she says, and many mothers will relate to this squeeze on personal time.

'After a couple of months my husband said, "I have not seen you. I don't see you any more." And I was like, "You're right. This is probably a bit too much." But at that moment the creative desire was very big. I felt a little bit like I was fighting for my voice. Out of that came a body of songs that became my first album.' That was *Shadow Road*

I HAD TO FIGHT TO FIND MY VOICE

Ciara Sidine didn't write her first album until she was 39, but she says she still feels youthful enough to be creating relevant music

INTERVIEW *Patrice Harrington*
PHOTOGRAPHS *Fran Veale*



Rising, her critically acclaimed 2011 debut, which saw her compared to Gillian Welch, Alison Krauss and Maria McKee.

‘So it was worth the fight. Then we managed to get things into a routine where we saw a bit more of each other. But I guess sometimes you just have to take yourself into exile a bit creatively in order to get something over the line.’

Her husband Roddy Flynn is a lecturer of Communications in Dublin City University. The pair met when they attended the same secondary school in Malahide but were just friends for years.

‘Then we became romantically involved in our early 20s. It’s really funny. We’ve known each other for longer than we haven’t known each other.’

Despite having an absentee wife who wrote songs into the night after the babies were in bed, he didn’t dream of talking her out of it.

‘Roddy is one of these guys who is just, “Yeah, that’s great, go for it.” He’s very easygoing. He’s supportive. He’s like, “What do we need to do to make this happen?” Even though he didn’t see me for a while he forgave me,’ she laughs.

‘He recognises, like most partners, that we’re happier for our partner doing what they’re supposed to be doing. Do you know what I mean? If they were stopping themselves doing something because we weren’t into it, that’s not going to lead to harmony.’

Because she was the decrepit age of – shock, horror – 39 when releasing her debut, many of the gushing reviews of Ciara’s rootsy sound still called her things like a late bloomer.

‘It’s really interesting because from a book background, nobody cares. Nobody asks, “Why did you only come to writing now?” A person can get a book published at any age. We don’t sit around in work going, “God isn’t it really weird that they’re in their mid-40s?” It’s kind of recognised that it happens when it happens.

‘Music is slightly different,’ she says. ‘There’s an expectation maybe that we are youthful when we go into music. I feel quite youthful anyway, it’s just my state of mind. I know if I had gone into music in my early 20s, I couldn’t have done the sort of music that I wanted to do. It took me a while to figure out what I wanted my voice to be and what I wanted to write about and actually to have something to say.’

She adds: ‘You are less afraid to say what you think about things as well. There’s a confidence that comes with age, I think that’s fantastic. Music is still quite a boys’ world. It’s still predominantly a male world. That’s something too that maybe as you get older you care less about.’

But Ciara cares deeply about issues affecting ►

◀ women, such as bodily autonomy. Unbroken Line has come ‘much more from a political place’ than her first album.

‘The song Trouble Come Find Me is an anthem for standing up for what you believe in as a woman. And not being afraid to bring on a struggle in order for something to change. It was inspired by a friend of mine who has worked tirelessly for women’s rights.’

That friend is her midwife Philomena Canning. ‘I’d had some difficult experiences with hospital and so it wasn’t an environment I was really comfortable in. After an initial visit I said to Roddy, “I just want to let you know that I am not going to be giving birth in here” and he said, “What are you talking about?!”’

When the couple spoke to Philomena she put their minds at ease – and delivered both their babies in a birthing pool in their house.

‘A lot of women say to me, “I wasn’t brave enough for a home birth”. Well, I wasn’t brave enough for a hospital birth, that’s the truth of it,’ says Ciara, who campaigned against the HSE when Philomena was wrongly removed from practice (a decision later revoked). Now they run Midwives For Choice which has put forward its manifesto at the UN.

‘We want the 70,000 people who give birth in Ireland every year to recognise that because of the eighth amendment they actually don’t have an entitlement to informed consent. Informed consent is the fundamental principle of human rights in healthcare and pregnant women are exempted from it because of the equality that the eighth amendment puts on the life of the mother and the life of the foetus.’

She also believes that Ireland has ‘an unsustainably high C-section rate and the rate of intervention is unsustainable as well. These are also issues that link into informed consent, women having interventions that are not necessary and not fully explained to them... Not that I’m saying a C-section has to be traumatic at all; it doesn’t. But it can be depending on the circumstances.’

She accepts that it’s ‘one of those topics that sometimes we unravel a bit as women because people feel defensive about maybe their choices or what happened with them. But the thing is if you made a good, informed choice for yourself – if that’s an elected Caesarean section – that’s a really good choice if that’s the right choice for you. But you have to be able to make that choice.’

Her music also deals with the lack of choice afforded to women of previous generations. Finest Flower, the first song on the album was inspired



Ciara Sidine has released her second album

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”

by a documentary Ciara watched about women who had been incarcerated in Magdalene Laundries. Particularly the story of one woman who went to breastfeed her 11-month-old son one evening only to find him gone. She never saw him again. ‘For women who had their babies taken from them there was this shared experience which was that they never let go. The love for their babies never abated. Everything was taken from them but nothing could take that away.’

You may have heard Ciara’s version of People Get Ready, which became an anthem for the 2015 marriage referendum. ‘The Dublin Gospel Choir and the Gloria, the LGBT choir, joined us for that. It was amazing.’

Speaking of getting ready, Ciara thought about ‘what I have to say’ before doing interviews promoting the album. Her book clients are amused at how the tables have turned. Patricia Scanlon tweeted: ‘To all writer friends, LOVING an editor having to do publicity!’

‘She’s hilarious. Never misses an opportunity! But do you know, she’s right. It’s really interesting. I worked for many years as an editor before I was doing this and I wouldn’t have known what it was like to be on the other side, but I know now. And I know the vulnerability that comes with putting a creative work out there.’

Ciara has ‘worked on hundreds of books’ since she first took a job in publishing after graduating with a degree in English and Linguistics from UCD. She works for Hachette and edits ‘ten to 15 books a year’ authored by everyone from ‘personalities to literary writers’.

‘Last year I worked with John Banville on a memoir of Dublin city. It was wonderful, a really good experience and a really interesting project to work on. I worked with Joe Duffy on his Children of the Rising book which was fabulous, a fascinating subject. Tana French, a thriller writer, is on my list, and is a very successful and talented woman. Deirdre Purcell is a very respected writer I’ve worked with over the years,’ she says, naming just a few.

‘I did it part-time when I realised I really wanted to pursue music with more intensity. It works pretty well. I enjoy the work that I do. I couldn’t imagine not working with my authors. The kids are getting bigger so there’s a little bit more space there now. Before if the kids are in the house you were pretty much with them. Whereas now they do their thing. So there’s a bit more space coming into it again, which is nice.’

More space to make sweet, sweet music. ■

■ CIARA’S album *Unbroken Line* is out now