**FREAKWATER**: **Revenge of the Cricket**

(from the UK periodical *Country Music People,* March 2006*)*

*Catherine Irwin and Janet Beveridge Bean have been  
performing together for over a quarter-century. Janet  
Aspley remains unnerved as she meets the women behind  
those strange but enchanting harmonies.*

DO YOU KNOW THE STORY of the cricket and the  
ant? It's one of Aesop's fables, its moral a warning of the  
dangers of spending too much of your time enjoying  
yourself and not enough working hard so you can put  
money in your pension fund.

I mention it here because it's the subject of one of the  
quirkiest of Freakwater's often very quirky lyrics. I'll let  
Catherine Irwin, who wrote the song, tell the story as she  
did when I interviewed her and her partner in Freakwater,  
Janet Beveridge Bean, during their European tour last  
month.

"I had a little children's book called the ant and the  
grasshopper - was it a grasshopper or was it a cricket? The  
book always made me mad as a kid because the ant is just  
so ruthless. The poor old cricket just wanders around,  
playing the fiddle. The ant keeps saying, 'You'd better get  
a job! It's going to be wintertime!'

"The ant's just working like an idiot, amassing a huge  
stockpile of sugar cubes, or whatever it is - and he's  
warning the cricket about how he should be buying stocks.

"And then at the end, the illustration was this little  
cricket, and he's standing outside the anthill with a stick  
and a hobo bag. He's standing out there in the snow and  
he's bent over. There's snow all over his head and  
everything. He's looking in through the window and the  
ants are in there, eating turkey. And then on the next page -  
he's dead.

"That cricket should be avenged. It's been a lifelong goal  
of mine."

I offer Catherine my sympathy - achieving this sense of  
closure has taken longer than must have been comfortable.

"Yeah," she says with a deadpan ironic wit that I've  
rarely encountered in interviewees from across the Atlantic,  
"this wasn't easy. But it's over now."

I think it's more than a concern for insect welfare that  
makes this tale one that's so close to Freakwater's heart.

Think of the machine that drives the careers of their  
Nashville counterparts: people who struggle to adapt  
themselves, their image and their art to a capricious market  
so that they can store up stocks for the wintertime when  
they are no longer the next big thing. They're the ants.

And then there's Freakwater, doing whatever comes to  
mind just for the sheer hell of it: they're the crickets.

Not that the snow is falling on their heads just now.  
They and their music have an unpolished, unaffected  
charm that has singled them out from the alt. country  
crowd, so it's not surprising that their latest album,  
*Thinking Of You*, has been critically acclaimed, and not just  
by CMP - it was our Spotlight Album in December 2005-   
because when they arrived in Britain, they'd just completed  
a successful six week US tour.

They are a couple of true individualists and it's no  
wonder they make a unique sound. When I'm talking to  
them I can see how their music is a quite natural and honest  
reflection of their respective personalities, as well as of  
relationship. Later on, I see and hear their commitment to it  
when I watch them perform in Brighton: as each song  
reaches its climax, Catherine adopts a tortured expression,  
her hand poised in the air as if the misery of what she's  
about to sing has arrested her movement in mid-strum.

Meanwhile, Janet, who looks like a preppier, healthier  
version of Debbie Harry, flings back her head and howls.

Catherine's voice is a mournful drone, Janet's a shrill  
echo of the mountains. The effect is strangely old-timey,  
but the musical rawness and simplicity belie the  
sophistication of their lyrics, clearly the output of two  
modern, mature, opinionated women - songs about "how  
much we hate the President" (Buckets Of Oil), "sad little  
songs" about relationships with no future (Sap).

There is something about them of the family singing  
group but not in the sense that they sing like those whose  
voices are genetically programmed to match. Quite the  
opposite, in fact. It's more the way they sing right out in  
an unselfconscious, uncompetitive acceptance of their own  
and each other's vocal personalities.

They agreed with me that their style of harmony is  
idiosyncratic: "I think it must be," says Janet, "because  
people say that a lot. It's the one thing they always say."

Nevertheless, the great brother duets of the Fifties  
provide an inspiration.

"That," Catherine tells me, "is my favourite type of  
singing, like the Everly Brothers, where you can't really  
tell who's who or who's in front. With them, I can't even  
tell what's going on sometimes. They're singing different  
parts, they're combining to make the melody, but neither is  
really singing the melody."

The Everly and Louvin Brothers harmonies may be an  
inspiration, but not an aspiration for Freakwater: "I don't  
know how they do it." Catherine goes on to admit: "I don't  
understand any more now than I did 20 years ago - but I  
like it!"

Their own sound has developed with use and practise. "I  
wasn't a singer," Janet explains. "Neither of us was trained  
or sung in the school choir."

"I don't think you can be trained to do what we do!"  
laughs Catherine.

Janet continues: "We have sung together so long and  
when we started together I didn't have any idea what a  
harmony was or what a third was. I still don't have any  
idea. We just sing and whatever sounds right, we go, hey  
..." Catherine finishes the sentence, "Do that again!"

"I think we're both acting like we're singing the lead.  
We work around each other in odd ways and then we come  
together."

What, I wonder, are the musical values that have created  
this unique sound? It is the wrong question. There's a  
silence.

"I dunno. I can't say," says Catherine, finally. "There's  
no reason. There are things we don't do, I suppose,  
because we don't know how to. It's just me writing songs  
about myself and Janet writing songs about herself."

Then she settles back, looking bored and slightly  
irritated. Janet is more eager to please and searches around  
for an answer: "I feel so stupid that we can't answer this  
question."

Then: "It's just a natural thing, something we do in the  
course of the day and I don't think about the direction of it,  
or the purpose - or the lack of purpose."

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| I wonder if they avoid defining or analysing their music  for fear that if they did, it's untutored charm might slip  away.    "No," responds Catherine firmly, obviously hoping to  put a stop to this daftness once and for all. Janet adds:  "I've never even had the thought that if I think about it too  much it'll slip away. I've never even had THAT thought."    Starting to get the hang of this, I begin to enjoy  Freakwater's complete lack of pretension and their  inability, or unwillingness, to bullshit just because some  earnest journalist is asking them questions. Take their  response to my question about whether they write their  songs - all of which are credited to Freakwater - together.    "No, never," says Catherine categorically. "I don't know  if people really do that. I know a lot of people claim that  they do, but I don't know if they really do or not, or if  they're just lying."    I can see the names of famous songwriting duos of the  past running behind Janet's eyes, Lennon and McCartney, |

Leiber and Stoller, Bacharach and David ...

"I think maybe some people have in the past..." she  
offers in her more measured tones.

Their understanding of and freedom with one another,  
both musically and conversationally, is a sign of their long  
friendship. They often finish one another's sentences  
teasingly.

"We met in High School (in Louisville, Kentucky),"  
Janet begins enthusiastically, "and we started singing  
together right after we ..."

"Dropped out," butts in Catherine tartly.

Were they rebels together, I wonder. "I'm sure there  
were more rebellious people than us," recalls Catherine,  
"but it was a little more than my parents could handle."

Says Janet, "We're not really savvy enough to be super-  
bad. We got into enough trouble, I suppose."

BY 1982 THEY WERE PLAYING in punk bands,  
Catherine in the Dickbrains and Janet in the more subtly  
named Skull Of Glee. Both retain some of the glorious  
"have a go" attitude of the punk years. In Brighton,  
without their band, they announce during their performance  
that they are going to try an experiment to replace the horn  
part on So Strange - then promptly pull out a kazoo. They  
see, they tell me, a real similarity between punk and the  
kind of honest, unpretentious country music that inspires  
them:

"Yes, yes, the bad attitude," offers Janet. "The self  
destructive behaviour," Catherine continues. "The three  
chord songs, the black clothes, the big hair."

Typically, they describe their move towards country  
music during the Eighties as completely unpremeditated. In  
fact, "It wasn't really a move ..." says Catherine. "I don't  
think anything I've done has been that conscious. I was  
playing all kinds of music at the same time."

"We grew up around (country music)," adds Janet, by  
way of explanation. "But I don't think I listened to it in the  
sense that it would be something I'd be that interested in.  
So by the time I met Catherine, I was more into the older  
stuff than the stuff I heard on the radio. I heard the Oak  
Ridge Boys and the Statler Brothers and I didn't really care  
for that much. But then I heard what was really good about  
it and I got the idea that it might be fun to sing. Country  
music's fun to sing."

Naming the Carter Family, Hank Williams, Nina Simone  
and "all people who are good" as favourites, they also  
acknowledge an admiration for Lucinda Williams.

"When she first started making records, I loved those  
records. That was the first contemporary of mine I heard  
doing something I thought was a really good way of  
approaching it."

Over the years, Janet and Catherine have continued to  
make a range of music in other bands (Janet most notably  
in the indie rock outfit, Eleventh Dream Day) and as solo  
artists, with Catherine releasing a solo album, *Cut Yourself  
A Switch*, in 2002.

Their pairing as Freakwater has lasted more than 25  
years: their first recording was released in 1989 and three  
others followed in 1991 (*Dancing Under Water*), 1995  
(*Old Paint*) and 1997 (*Springtime*) before the release of  
*Thinking Of You* last year.

"We've made less recordings than we ought to have for  
someone who's been together so many years - but more  
than I thought we could have. I didn't think we'd ever have  
more than one record out."

Although they have enough of a following to attract a  
number of devoted fans in Brighton, theirs hasn't been a  
partnership marked by huge commercial success - yet.  
Catherine seems hopeful: "A lot of the songs seem to me  
like they should be ..."

"... huge hits," interjects Janet, and they both laugh in  
self-depreciation. "I suppose a lot of them probably would  
not be. They're more political and jagged (than Nashville  
product)."

It's true that the songs are sometimes catchy both  
melodically and lyrically. A favourite, Sap, begins neatly  
with *I know enough to make you laugh, I believe I know  
enough to make you cry, But I just can't make you fall for  
me, no matter how hard I try.*

But Freakwater are too concerned with emotional  
authenticity not to let it stray into darker territory: the song  
continues, *I fell like a thing that falls, I crashed like a thing  
that crashes ...I broke like the kind of thing that just can't  
bend, And it went on and on and on like a thing that just  
won't end.*

I'd love to hear Patty Loveless or Lee Ann Womack sing  
it, but somehow I don't think I'm going to.

All of their recordings have been released on small indie  
labels (currently Thrilljockey from Chicago, where Janet  
now lives) although back in 1996 Steve Earle was keen to  
sign them to his E-Squared label. It didn't work out: "It  
was just a bad offer," says Janet.

I'd heard a rumour that they'd turned the label down  
because they asked them to compromise on their artistic  
freedom, but Catherine is keen to correct me: "If they  
would have paid us enough, we would have. We're for sale  
now, as ever. Everybody knows it - we don't make any  
secret of it."

"It would have been nice to have made some money,"  
adds Janet, wistfully.

Nevertheless, there's no sign that Freakwater have any  
plans to stack up that hoard of sugar cubes any time soon.  
Thinking back to the ant, Janet wonders if Catherine's  
being a little harsh: "He just wants to prepare for the  
winter, is all. He's not really greedy."

"I know," laughs Catherine. "I hate that."