**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 musicfor fear that if they did, it's untutored charm might slipaway. "No," responds Catherine firmly, obviously hoping toput a stop to this daftness once and for all. Janet adds:"I've never even had the thought that if I think about it toomuch it'll slip away. I've never even had THAT thought." Starting to get the hang of this, I begin to enjoyFreakwater's complete lack of pretension and theirinability, or unwillingness, to bullshit just because someearnest journalist is asking them questions. Take theirresponse to my question about whether they write theirsongs - all of which are credited to Freakwater - together. "No, never," says Catherine categorically. "I don't knowif people really do that. I know a lot of people claim thatthey do, but I don't know if they really do or not, or ifthey're just lying." I can see the names of famous songwriting duos of thepast 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."