



PIC: JEANNIE O'BRIEN

talks to **LISA O'NEILL**

By **MARTIN BURNS**

**FOR four years, folk singer Lisa O'Neill served diners in Bewley's Cafe by day and played her songs in the bars of Dublin by night.**

But last November, the 28-year-old from Ballyhaise, Co Cavan, decided to make a go of her musical career – and quit her job making coffee.

Two weeks later, she was sitting in another cafe, having tea with folk rock superstar David Gray at the National Gallery on London's Trafalgar Square.

Now Lisa – whose self-released debut record *Lisa O'Neill Has An Album* sold 1,000 copies in Ireland – is gearing up to embark on a 13-date American tour with the multi-million-selling Babylon singer.

She told how the big break came after revered DJ Donal Dineen passed her tracks on to his singer-songwriter pal. Lisa

explained: "Donal Dineen knows David and put him on to my music. I was going over to London and we arranged to meet up.

"We talked about music we had in common like Bonnie Prince Billy, Bob Dylan, Joanna Newsom and he put me on to people I'd never heard of like Smog.

*"He told me that he would do what he could to help and after several email and phone exchanges, I heard last week that he wants me to do the tour of North America."*

Next month Lisa will fly to Boston for the first date of the tour, which will end in San Diego on March 9. Along the way she'll play New York, Toronto, Seattle and Los Angeles.

Lisa, who is a graduate of the Ballyfermot Rock School in Dublin, said: "I was a big fan of his when I was a teenager, when (Gray's hit album) *White Ladder* came out. He was asking my influences during our meeting –

and he was one of them, but I was too scared to tell him.

"I'm very excited. We're spending two and a half weeks travelling across North America, sleeping on the tour bus and playing gigs in beautiful theatres. It's a bit overwhelming.

### Smoke

"Even if I never get to go back I'll have accomplished something I never thought I would. I'm taking a diary and a good camera and I have to buy a guitar case."

However, Gray is far from the first established artist to spot Lisa's talent. Last March, Domino label folk star James Yorkston wrote a song especially for the pair to duet on.

And six months before he died in 2008, Dubliners legend Ronnie Drew joined Lisa on stage at Bewley's on Grafton Street.

She said: "Ronnie was lovely and he took me outside for a smoke afterwards. We had a



great talk and he told me how much he liked my songs. I was honoured.”

Cork balladeer Mick Flannery is another artist to have taken Lisa under his wing. The pair did a recent tour of Ireland together.

Lisa said: “I’ve learned a lot from Mick. I like his writing and his outlook.

“He brought me around the country to play sold-out gigs where people wouldn’t have come to see me normally because they didn’t know me. That was a great help.”

O’Neill recently recorded a new song, Summertime Blues, for the RTE show Other Voices, to be broadcast later this year.

But despite her blossoming success, Lisa admits she sometimes looks back at her days making tea – and misses her old customers.

She said: “While working in Bewley’s I wasn’t taking my music that seriously. Within weeks of leaving the magic started to happen. But at the same time, weirdly, I miss the job. I miss that little bit of sane that

come comes with having to be somewhere around everyday life. I miss the routine and I miss the people I worked with and the customers – even the eejits.”

After her US tour, the next step will be laying down tracks for her next record. Will it be called Lisa O’Neill Has Another Album?

She said: “I don’t have a title yet but I have plenty of songs for it. I think the next record is going to be more melancholy than the first one.”

UK record labels have also begun taking an interest in Lisa’s career – but the modest singer refuses to be drawn on the subject.

She admitted: “There’s been a bit of talk but so far that’s all it has been.”

● **LISA** O’Neill supports US singer-songwriter Joe Pug at Whelan’s in Dublin next Thursday.





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