



Voyage Of Discovery

From the green hills of the Emerald Isle to the all-American glamour of Los Angeles, Tanya O'Callaghan's eclectic versatility is taking her round the world

Interview: Joe Daly. Photography by Ariel Bradley

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s you read this sentence, there's an excellent chance – in fact, a probability – that it's raining in Mullingar. With a soupy humidity perennially hovering around 90 per cent and a storied reputation for its cattle, the pastoral town in the centre

of Ireland's County Westmeath feels light years away from the glitzy, sun-splashed boulevards of Southern California. And yet tiny, waterlogged Mullingar served as the launch pad for one of LA's hottest session players today – the fiery, dreadlocked tour de force known as Tanya O'Callaghan.

Although the Irish bassist has toured the world, played on television and powered countless studio and live sessions with her propulsive versatility, Tanya was not groomed for music. "Nobody in my family plays music," she tells *BGM*, "except for a couple of cousins. I absorbed it subconsciously from my dad, who had a deep love for music, along with an incredible vinyl collection. He'd been playing those records since the day I was born." While rib-sticking meat-and-potatoes fare such as Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd enjoyed heavy rotation in the O'Callaghan home, so did Willie Nelson, Fleetwood Mac and exotic funk powerhouses like Chic. As is often the case, one man's record collection becomes his child's formative influences.

Tanya left school when she was 17 and enrolled in a local music course, although playing bass was not on her radar. "I went in wanting to be a drummer," she says with a laugh. "I had taken five drum lessons from a friend of mine, and I went into this music course and they only had an electric drum kit. There was no acoustic drum kit, and I just hated it. I tried to play it for a while, and then I saw a local bass player play Primus and I said, 'Right, I want to do that!' I'd never really seen a bass do something so melodic or diverse before, I'd just seen the local rockers playing the root notes. After seeing what the bass could really do, I was obsessed."

When Tanya put together an audition piece for a local music school, it was not with the intention of actually attending it. "A teacher at my school thought I should audition for Newpark Music College to get some more experience, because Newpark is a pretty highly recognised jazz school," she recalls. "The guitar teacher and I took a metal piece and some Jaco that I'd managed to learn, and

put them together for the audition. I thought it was just to get some experience, but I got into the college! I didn't know if I was ready to go to jazz college, but it was awesome."

At Newpark, Tanya honed her chops in jazz and other improvisational styles, and soon she was back in the world of live gigging, bigger and badder than ever. Shortly thereafter, she opened the door to her first big break. "I always say yes to a gig. That's what I learned. So I got called to audition for this television show..." That show was *You're A Star*, Ireland's answer to the *X Factor*. With a sturdy foundation of classic rock and funk, and now armed with fierce improvisational prowess, Tanya stepped confidently into the role of bassist for the show's backing band, a gig that required its players to master various genres in relatively short order and on tight production timelines.

Any musician will agree that a gig that both pays and expands one's skill set is a tried-and-true keeper, but for Tanya, playing on television paid an even richer dividend – exposure. She was soon fielding offers across the board for more shows, studio work and global tours. "I did another concert that's on TV every year called *Childline*, which is a huge charity thing. Basically there were a couple of musicians who were called to back all of the other musicians who'd be on. So I ended up playing with Westlife at one point and then from that I ended up doing the [ex-Westlife singer] Brian McFadden tour. The same year I toured Dubai with Sharon Corr. A friend of mine couldn't do the Sharon Corr gig because he was playing with Boyzone, so I got asked to do it. Small country, you know?"

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BASSISTS

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while I was in quite a few bands at any given time. I've always been of the opinion that you should play with as many people as you can, because that's how I learned. At one point I think I was in nine bands! That came from constantly saying yes to a lot of gigs. Sometimes I'd say yes to a gig and then realise I couldn't play that style, so I'd have to run home and do a lot of woodshedding. I pushed myself a lot when I was starting out."

Although jazz, funk and traditional Irish music occupied much of her professional slate, Tanya had always been an inveterate metalhead – and in particular, a massive Tool fan. Meeting the band after a show in Glasgow in 2007, Tanya mentioned to front man Maynard James Keenan that she planned on moving to the States soon, which prompted the proverbial offer that one could not refuse. "I said I was going to be in the States and Maynard said, 'Hey, well why don't you come and play on some tracks?'"

Maynard had been looking for fresh new voices for his side project Puscifer, and Tanya was all in. "I really liked his experimental outlook. He was trying to involve a lot of people; it really was a revolving door. So I flew out to Arizona with Josh Eustis, a great engineer, musician and producer from Tel Aviv who has played with Nine Inch Nails and a ton of other bands. So basically Josh, myself and Maynard went into Maynard's garage and wrote the songs."

In the span of a week, the three jammed, wrote and jammed some more, ultimately writing a pair of songs that would be released on subsequent Puscifer albums. For Tanya it was that succulent opportunity to play heavy grooves, untethered by traditional

structures or songwriting. She explains,

"On 'Toma' it was just a ton of distortion pedals, hitting the bass and super experimental vibes. [Drummers] Tim Alexander and Jeff Friedl played on it, and it was a great collaboration. It came out on [Puscifer's 2011 album] *Conditions Of My Parole* two years after that. It was amazing to work with someone like that, who's so creative. I love the idea that nothing was prepared, it was just 'Let's go into a shed and write some music.'"

Now one of LA's most in-demand bassists, and sponsored by Xotic and Ernie Ball Music Man gear, Tanya continues to play all over the city and recently completed a tour with the Riverdance company. If pressed to identify the secret of her success, it would be versatility. "I'm very grateful for the experiences I've had playing with a number of types and players," she says. "Obviously it's so good for broadening one's musicality. I bounce between genres because I listen to so many different types of music that I'm constantly baffled by all the different styles. I love it!"

This year will bring Tanya opportunities for more tours, studio sessions and of course, endless opportunities for gigging. She's ready to accept each and every one of them, because – as Tanya well knows – a good musician always says yes to a gig. ■

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