

## Jim Sharkey will bring his Irish Americana music to a Levenelevan brewery in Greensboro

By Grant Britt Special to Go Triad

Jim Sharkey started out on the other end of the camera. Before his musical career blossomed, he was a photojournalist for Greensboro's WFMY (CBS, Channel 2) and Winston-Salem's WXII (NBC, Channel 12). One of his projects, 1996's *Karina's Story*, about a friend and her family adopting a child from the former Soviet republic of Georgia, was nominated for a mid-South Emmy.

But his path to becoming a full-time musician was a circuitous journey.

"I grew up in Ireland, and when I came over here, my thought was, 'I'll spend five years getting good at this music stuff,' but it all fell apart when I came over here."

Sharkey had joined the Navy for five years, but when he came out, he had to rethink his plan.

"You just start thinking. 'Gee, I have to make a living now, and I don't think music's gonna do it.'"

After graduating from San Diego State's film and video production program, he worked for WFMY and WXII in North Carolina, moving to Maine six years later. But that TV market pay was poor, so Sharkey became a special education teacher.

"I was also doing a lot of volunteer work at my kids' schools, and I thought maybe it would be nice to teach a film class or a video class. Next thing you know, I was in the teacher training program. I had subbed for a few special ed teachers and liked it, so I got my credentials and taught in special education."

He liked having a steady job, but the musical cravings he developed as a teenager fooling around with a guitar never left. He had gone back to Ireland on a visit, and had an epiphany at a concert there.

"I thought, 'When I go back, I'll book a few places to play,' and that's what I did. (I) started playing a weekly gig up in Roanoke where we lived, then started to book a few more places. And after that, I thought, 'I've got to give it more of a serious go,' so I stopped teaching, and I've done the music full time for about four years now."

He's now back in North Carolina, settled in Salisbury, touring regionally, with three albums to his credit, debuting with 2015's "Black is the Color," a collection of traditional Irish folk songs. He also released "Sweet Anne's Road" in 2015. His latest, 2017's "Misty Morning Rain," is all originals.

Irish music is popular on a global scale now, but Sharkey recalls a time when it was an alien art form.

"The Clancy Brothers had a big influence on bringing it back, that folk revival was going on in the '60s up in Greenwich Village," Sharkey says. "They had come over here, wanted to be actors, but they thought maybe we'll go down to the Village and play and make a bit of money, and that took off — the four of them singing these songs from their hometown. Next thing you know, Irish people started buying the records, who were immigrants over here, too, because they were missing home and wanted any kind of connection like that."

Sharkey's family had all their records, and traditional Irish music is a big influence, but not his sole focus. His original music has an Irish traditional flavor but uses contemporary settings. His song "Sweet Anne's Road" is about the effects of the war in Afghanistan on a young couple from rural Virginia.

"But it's an Irish tune," Sharkey explains. "The melody is very noticeably Irish, but it's set in Virginia. I love to play just the old straight traditional stuff, but it wouldn't be as true to me to be doing that now, because I've been gone from Ireland for so long, and also, I figure you should write what you're a part of right now."

His sets are mixes of originals and covers, depending on the venue. He favors John Prine and Kris Kristofferson, songs he says have good stories to them, and does a moving version of Van Morrison's "Crazy Love." But if the venue is a brewpub, he'll play more Americana stuff just because he believes people want to hear familiar songs that they may have heard before that spark something in the listener.

But small listening rooms work best for originals. "That's why I like the gig at the Levenelevan brewery, because I get to do mostly my own stuff," he says. "If it's a music venue, I do a lot of my own stuff. But in a brewery or a

bar, I'll do much less. It's nice when people come hear stuff they've heard about."

He's a big fan of Prine's songwriting, his ability to capture a mood or write a mini-novel with just a few well-placed words.

"I'd like to be known for songs that speak to everyday moments in our lives: a grandfather telling his granddaughter a bedtime story in 'The Champion,' or a piano teacher spreading her love of music as in 'The Old Piano.' Even though they may seem like ordinary, everyday occurrences, they're somewhat extraordinary, too, but they might be so common that we overlook them."