

**Art, Sound, Nature:
A Conversation with Irish-Colombian Musician Katie James**

Edmundo Murray¹

A farm in the central mountains of Colombia. A derelict wooden hut and other broken elements may have been the farm's house but now are invaded by the luxuriant vegetation surging over the whole place. Vines and big yellow flowers climbing on the walls. Shrubs trying to block the passage towards a windowless door. Tall tropical trees are visible high over the wooden construction and throw shadows on the magic of a luminous stage (*Toitico bien empackao* online video).

- I was born in 1985 in Inishfree, Co Donegal. My mother is English and my father was Irish. I grew up with my mother in Colombia in the Atlantis community. When I was two years old, with my parents and two older sisters we travelled for a whole year visiting the Canary Islands, Cape Verde, Venezuela, and then settled in Colombia. Sometimes we stayed overnight in caves and beaches, or with farmer families. The idea was to go up to Bolivia, but when we arrived in Colombia my mother had a first-sight love with the country. ... She was searching for alternative ways of living and connecting with nature (Katie James interview, 22 April 2020).

The Atlantis Primal Therapy Commune was established in September 1974 by a group of young British and Irish activists, with Katie's mother Jenny James as its co-founder. After a year spent in a rented farmhouse in the British Lake District, on 10 April 1975 they took up residence in a big house in Burtonport, Co Donegal. In 1976 they moved a short distance offshore to Inishfree island, where Katie was born. Jenny James, born in 1942 in Dartford, Kent, was brought up in a Communist family but her parents left the party over the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. As a teenager in Dartford, Jenny was actively involved in politics, nuclear disarmament campaigning, and the typical mystic and vegetarian movements of the 1960s in search of a new bond with nature.

I'm supposed to be on the Peruvian altiplano milking a llama and learning Quechua or rowing round floating islands on Lake Titicaca; but here I am in verdant, lush Colombia, surrounded by fruit trees (Jenny James 1990: 146).

The Atlantis community's interests focused on emotional therapies and adopted some of the ideas by the psychologist Arthur Janov (1924-2017) from the United States, particularly his "primal therapy". It was a means to elicit repressed pains, particularly the emotional distress experienced in childhood. For their noisy ways, the community members were styled "The Screamers" by their neighbours in Burtonport, who were not always happy with the community.

¹ Edmundo Murray is a retired publishing officer at the World Trade Organization in Geneva, Switzerland. He has been the first editor of this journal and founding member of the Society for Irish Latin American Studies. His most recent books are *Centre William Rappard: Home of the World Trade Organization, Geneva*, co-authored with Joëlle Kuntz, and *Symphony of Flavors: Food and Music in Concert*, as editor.

I don't think there is any room for them in Burtonport. They are a nuisance... I can't live here because I'm so close to them. I can't lie on bed in the night and you hear this horrible screaming, really horrible when you hear it in the middle of the night (Hugh Boyle, a Burtonport neighbour, in Quinn 1979: 0'58").

- The Atlantis community in Ireland ... it was really peculiar for a small Donegal town in the 1970s Catholic and conservative Ireland. Can you imagine my English and atheist single mother with her ultra-alternative lifestyle confronted to such an environment?

The bottling up of pain and poison inside ourselves and the stifling of our love impulses simply does not work: twisted and thwarted, our feelings overflow in one way or another — on to our children and animals, into pollution and warfare, cancer and car crashes, or they stagnate in barren, boring lives. At Atlantis we have brought back colour and natural drama into everyday living (Jenny James 1980: 1-2).

The Screamers... I remember from my youth. That was a group of 50 people who worshipped on an island off the coast of Donegal and who went around screaming their heads off as a release. It was an organised religion and if they had screamed for five years, they would be qualified under these rules to solemnise marriage (Dáil Éireann debates 2012).

Hitching through Ireland, looking at the map, it was right somehow that Atlantis was away on the west coast. It felt like coming to the end of the world. There was nothing beyond it but the sea (Jenny James 1980: 31). However, the future of the Atlantis community would be far beyond the ocean.

- We left Ireland for various reasons. In the Atlantis community, children were born at home and were home-schooled. That was not seen in good light by the Irish people there. The Irish welfare started to look closely at the community. ... And my mother wanted to live in a place where sustainable agriculture was possible over the whole year and where it was not necessary to buy anything. She spoke fluent Spanish and she thought about South America.

Katie and her older sisters Alice and Louise grew up with the peculiar ways of the Inishfree community. Some parents and families of the community members were suspicious of the activities and regarded them as a dangerous sect. Furthermore, the group received bomb threats from the IRA. The authorities called them to be deported. Owing to the fragile situation, preparations were made to start the long journey to South America.

In the Colombian mountains, a woman sings and plays the guitar sitting at the centre of the farmhouse passageway. She smiles looking directly at the viewer — we are part of the song. She sings in Spanish with a formal Colombian “campesino” accent from the Andean region. Her looks are not Colombian though, or at least what most Europeans have in mind when they imagine someone from that country. She wears a sober blue tunic over a black top in contrast with the blond hair falling on her shoulders. Her gestures are that of someone accustomed to play classic guitar but without the rigidity (Toitico online video).



Katie James.

- My father Fred was Irish, from Cork. He came with us to the Canary Islands and Cape Verde, but my parents separated there. He went to live in Venezuela and married there. He had a daughter, Eileen Moloney Monasterios, who is Irish-Venezuelan. ... I am an Irish and English citizen, not yet Colombian. ... I recently applied for Colombian citizenship. When I return from a foreign trip, I feel I am coming back home. ... Culturally, I feel myself very Colombian. There was a time when I had the feeling that I wasn't from here or from there. Anywhere I am seen as a foreign person. ... Most of the times, one of the first questions when I meet with someone is: Hi, where are you from? ... I have always been the different one.

The family's wanderings in the Atlantic and in South America were an amazing journey. Katie and her sisters were small girls and the group had very limited means. They departed from Ireland in March 1987 and arrived in the Canary Islands, where they stayed in different places until November of that year. They sailed south to Cape Verde in a Swedish boat. In January 1988, the group left Cape Verde sailing in the French schooner barque *Bel Espoir*. They arrived in Martinique and from there they went to Venezuela. They crossed to Colombia in April and after so much hitch-hiking and wild camping they finally settled near Icononzo, Tolima department, in the central Andean region of Colombia. The community eventually established an ecological farm in this idyllic setting, which had a strong influence on Katie's lifestyle.

- My first recalling is from the farm we had in Tolima. ... I still need my time in the farm. I need to connect with myself and with the earth, and with the most basic things in life. I love growing things. Sometimes when people see me with make-up before a concert they can't believe that I am a *campesina*, a farmer.

I see our girls growing up, learning to dance and sing and act and play music, earning their living spontaneously by being who they are and never ever knowing the agonies, inanities and hypocrisies of the English school system. ... Three blonde children screamed with delight ... How near we are to living as we should (Jenny James 1990: 33, 92).

However, due to the expiration of their residence permits, in November 1988 the family was deported from Colombia. They travelled through Ecuador and Peru until they could go back their Colombian home in June 1989. Jenny James's book *Atlantic Adventure* is an extremely interesting narrative of their radical journey from Ireland to the heart of South America.

The social clash between the rural and the urban, the food producer and the food consumer, the concerns of the "campesino" apprehensive with agriculture market inequalities, the nonchalant attitude of his wealthy clientele, the simplicity of life in the countryside versus the swift indifference of city dwellers who never stop to think all what takes to bring food to their table. All these subjects surface to the harmonic narrative of the song with a smile in the artist's eyes. I am challenged by the farmer to recognize and appreciate his labour, his dedication to provide for the life of the people in the cities around the world (Toitico online video).

When Katie was established with her family in Tolima, the area was under control of the guerrillas. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC in Spanish) had been established in 1964. Ten years later, under the influence of the Cuban Revolution and Ernesto Ché Guevara's guerrilla tactics, the different groups were unified into an organized revolutionary army following Marxist ideals. A cease-fire was negotiated with the government in 1984 and when the Atlantis community acquired the farm in Icononzo in 1988, the FARC was in total control of the area, including the municipal administration, security and public education (Murray 2006).

They tell us we are now in country controlled by the FARC - the Communist guerrilla force; and that the army don't come in here. They are extremely pushy about us staying. I'd like to be persuaded by them that we've 'arrived', it's so beautiful here (Jenny James 1990: 145).

The FARC leaders initially thought they were spies. After some resistance, they saw the "gringos" in more positive ways. Both the community members and the guerrillas agreed on socialist values of class struggle and egalitarianism. The FARC officers came to think it would be positive for their local and international reputation to have an avant-garde community of young British and Irish people in their territory.

Jorge says the guerrilla movement is very successful and popular and that the army has incurred so much hostility that it doesn't dare to come into any area run by them. He says the guerrilleros would be delighted if we settle here. 'Why?' I asked. It's good for them, he says, because the people's movement is into culture and as foreigners with the 'right' attitudes and ideas, we bring what they want (Jenny James 1990: 146).

Yesterday, I was visited by the FARC Commander for this region. He told me that the day previously he had called a meeting in our local village Rovira, in which they discussed with the local people the fact that forest cutting has to stop; to which end, rather than waiting eternally for Government help to change to other forms of farming, they were going to begin a programme of

communal vegetable gardens with “technical help” from the gringos (that’s us) (Jenny James, Green Letter N° 5, 21 September 1995).

Later on, partly owing to the government’s military pressure and partly to their own financial needs, the FARC enhanced their idealistic views with more material sourcing, including kidnapping ransoms and paid “protection” of farmers and business people, as well as criminal incursions in drug production and distribution activities. Their officers became more aggressive and people suffered murders and forced migration. At one point, the relationship of the guerrilla fighters with the community changed and the community had to move further to other locations. Forced displacement and violence materialized for Atlantis as well, and they had to find a new place.

- The new farm was in the Caquetá department, on the road from Neiva to San Vicente del Caguán, within the FARC-controlled ‘red zone’ during the peace negotiations with president [Andrés] Pastrana. But the FARC commanders told us that they could not house foreigners in their area during that period, so we had to leave that place and go back to the Tolima farm moving plants and animals on *chivas* [rural buses]. ... It was at that time that we heard about the three Irishmen in that region.

On 11 August 2001, three men travelling on false passports were detained in Bogotá's El Dorado airport while attempting to leave Colombia. They were suspected of being IRA explosives experts hired by FARC commanders to provide military training to their fighters. The three men, styled locally *Los Tres Monos* (the Three Blonds), admitted that their real names were Martin John McCauley, James William Monaghan and Niall Connolly and that they had arrived from San Vicente del Caguán. Three years later, the Appeals Court sentenced them to seventeen years in prison. However, at the time of the sentencing they were no longer in Colombia as they had jumped bail and managed to flee the country. They were back in Ireland just eight days after the IRA's historic announcement of its cessation of illegal activity. They were never extradited back to Colombia. The case had major political ramifications, with great damage to Sinn Féin’s reputation in Ireland. Recently, on 22 April 2020, a Colombian court granted full amnesty to the three men.

I had spent yesterday (a Sunday) and all my Sundays in Bogotá in the guerrilla section of the high security wings of various prisons with the three Irishmen accused of being FARC trainers, and talking to many FARC commanders (Jenny James, Green Letter N° 65, 19 June 2004).

- Then we had to flee again due to a very sad event. But the new forced displacement from Tolima was much more difficult. That was difficult... very hard.

The farm in Tolima was finally occupied and evicted by guerrilla fighters. The Atlantis community had to move again. On 9 July 2000, two young members were put to death. Irish-born Tristan Murray García, son of Jenny James’s eldest daughter Rebecca, and his Colombian friend Javier Nova went to the farm to say good bye to their family and friends. They were stabbed and beheaded by FARC guerrillas in Hoya Grande. Later, a couple of neighbours who witnessed the killings and were willing to denounce the culprits were murdered by the same guerrillas.

- We received much help and support in those difficult times. An Atlantis member living in Bogotá, the Irish astrologer Anne Barr, connected us with a family in Tabio (Cundinamarca) who received us in their *finca* during one year. Then we moved to a new place in the Puracé National Park, southeast of Popayán. My mother still lives there.

Since she was a little girl, Katie's context was living between Mother Nature and music. During the family's journey in South America, her mother always travelled with musical instruments to entertain the people in the remotest of mountains and rainforests.

In one village, they [Colombian soldiers] pointed paranoidly at my violin case, stood back as if it would explode, and demanded I open it; when everyone saw it was safe, they all crowded round to see the unknown instrument (Jenny James 1990: 135).

Jenny's violin was stolen later on in Peru, but music stayed forever with her daughters. In 2003, along with her sister Louise and friend Laura Costello, Katie recorded her first album, *Semillas de Paz*.



Katie James.

Seeds of Peace, is the name of our first CD of songs about ecology, peace, anti-drugs, anti-war, anti-formal education, anti-money, and - why not - a couple of love songs. ... Recently in a distant mountain village called Balboa, my 18-year-old sister Katie and I sang for a big group of refugees. It was one of the most beautiful experiences we have had singing in years, no microphones, no stage, just us and them in an open field. We sang for ages, we talked too, we told them we had been displaced as well and that we had lost relatives we loved so much. We all knew what it felt

like and no-one could understand each other better. They were from all different parts of Colombia, but had become one big family (Jenny James *Green Letter* N° 65, 19 June 2004).

- I lived five years in Popayán, a city more or less near the Huila farm, the new place we went after Tolima. With my teenage sisters we were attracted to that different, more urban world. Popayán is a very cultural city. I learned classic guitar in the local conservatoire. That was my first contact with formal education. We also sang in the Popayán choir. ... I play violin and read music since I was nine, and then I started to compose. My mother was my first music teacher. ... At twenty, I decided to pursue an academic career in music. But I was home schooled so I didn't have a high-school diploma. During six months I had to go through a difficult crash course in physics, mathematics, biology and other subjects. I lost a couple of kilos... but I succeeded at the difficult tests to join the university in the ICFES [acronym for Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior]. So I was able to start my university studies in Bogotá. ... I was very happy there. I took classes in singing, guitar, piano and other courses in the jazz and Latin American folk music programme. ... It was very important to complement my previous intuitive compositions with all the musical theory. I graduated in 2012 with an M.A. in music.

The singer addresses the viewer directly and denounces our neglect of rural life. It is a sort of musical conjuration. Her sharp questions are emphasized by the contagious rhythm of the Andean “bambuco”, a genre in 6/8 meter typical of the mountainous region and the fertile valleys of central Colombia. The guitar serves as accompaniment and bass line, and highlights the solos in variations of tempo. But the central feature is the voice, a clear and effortless intonation focusing on the song’s message (Toitico online video).

- I very much enjoy singing and accompanying myself with the guitar. Of course I play with other musicians but I appreciate creating my own music. In 2018, I went to play alone in Scotland, The Netherlands, Italy and France. I like accompanying my singing because it is more demanding with the guitar technique. ... Lately I am focusing more on Latin American themes, especially the music of the Andes. ... I'm in Bogotá since 2007, a big city. ... In the beginning it was a kind of conflict between the urban context and my rural background. Then I understood that I had to find a balance between the two worlds. ... Very frequently I write songs about the contrasts between the city and the countryside. ... I created the song *Toitico bien empacado* after having had the experience in those very different environments.

The song's title *Toitico bien empacado* means “Everything well packed”, and it has many references to food ways. The use of *toitico* (everything) is a diminutive reduplication of *todo* (*todo* > *todito* > *toito* > *toitico*). In Latin American Spanish, diminutives are not limited to nouns and adjectives but they are also applicable to adverbial forms, such as in *apenitas* or *nomasito*. Mostly under Afro-Antillean influence, reduplication is used for emphasis purposes, as in *ahoritita* (right now) and *cerquitica* (very near). On the other hand, *empacado* (familiar pronunciation of past participles such as *empacado*, packed) is a reference to food distribution and packaging. The title points to the different ways foodstuffs are presented in the city and the countryside. City residents seldom perceive the actual features of their acquired vegetables, dairy or meat as they are in natural form. Instead, sophisticated preparations and packaging conceal the real food colours and flavours in

order to preserve it during the longer distribution cycles and, especially, for the marketing purposes of creating a positioning for the brand and customer loyalty.

- People in the city live completely disconnected from their roots in the countryside. They have no idea about the sources of our food and the labour of our farmers. It is difficult to understand why people see it so remote. I wish they could go to a farm and work with their hands for a couple of days. Paradoxically, most of the people in the cities come from the countryside and have farmer parents or grandparents. The connection is not so distant. ... In Bogotá there are so many people who can't even identify a coffee plant! ... I was working in the vegetable garden on the farm with all those fruits and plants around me, and I realized I was humming a *bambuco* tune and then I had the melody and the lyrics. ... The narrator is a *campesino*, a farmer who complains about the ignorance of the people in the cities about the origins of their food. ... This song was a success that I had never expected. It went viral in the social networks and created a strong connection with the public, even if it was not conceived to attract the audience. People connect with the song, not with the accessories such as in a large videoclip production.

The narrator in the song is a *campesino* who grows coffee, sugarcane, maize, potatoes, and a lavish panoply of fruits and vegetables that are used to prepare *arepas* (maize cakes), *agua 'e panela* (sugarcane infusion), *ajiaco* soup and so many dishes of the Colombian traditional cuisine. He tills the soil manually with the hoe and the plow, and he offers his abundant produce to the urban resident. As Katie explains, the song addresses the negligent unawareness of the people in the city regarding the production and preparation of their food, which they find easily in the corner store, well packed and ready to use.

Furthermore, the song has other social and environmental readings. By addressing the audience with *Sumercé* — equivalent to “your grace” in English and formerly used by the slaves to address their masters — a hierarchy is established beyond the geographic boundaries between the city and the countryside. This is further emphasized by the use of formulae such as *Discúlpeme* and *Ay perdón señor*. However, it does not mean a meek or subservient attitude from the farmer, who is proud of his work and agricultural products. The assertion of life in the countryside and the rural values of respect for nature and for one's own roots are rather conspicuous in the song chorus: *Y cuénteme qué sabe de su tierra / Cuénteme qué sabe de su abuela / Cuénteme qué sabe del maíz / ¿O acaso ha olvidado sus antepasados y su raíz?* (Tell me what do you know about your home, what do you know about your grandmother, what do you know about maize, or did you forget about your ancestors and your roots?).

- Now I behave very naturally in front of the public, but I owe that to my mother. When we were small kids she used to organise theatre shows. I was a very shy girl and she helped me very much to confront the public. She always insisted that I had to connect with them. ... The better you know the different art branches the more critical distance you can take. If not, the contact with the work of art is immature, superficial. ... Performing in videoclips has been a good school ... immediately you start watching movies in a different way, beyond the entertainment level. ... Music occurs in time. It's a unique instant connecting with the audience.

I think on the people working at the disgraced seafood market in Wuhan. Humble farmers trying to sell their produce obtained with stubborn effort while the world blames them for the coronavirus crisis. I think about the midwestern rural workers in the United States being manipulated by the grandeur of the politicians' void promises and being scorned by the well-raised and educated urban public in the media. The South American ranchers who lost their land and had to send their small children to work. The silent victims of man-made droughts and floods and the global warming that is killing traditional agricultural resources. The farmers in Europe and everywhere waking up in the wee hours in winter to milk their cows or to feed their cattle just to receive comically low revenues. We buy their products in the supermarket without asking ourselves how they arrived to the shelves. Food and music cycles bring about new ways to narrate production, distribution and consumption. We are not just witnesses but active players in the artistic creation of unconstrained beauty.

Katie James embodies the challenging grievances of the rural workers who toil and nourish the crowded cities of the world. Her *campesina* feelings make us think about the power of art. The power of the message. The power of representation, the cosmos in a song, a film, a sculpture, the instant of light when the connection is real. The hunger behind the delicately coloured fruit in a still life. The intention of the artist to create a work of art (Kant's "design"), the meaningful emotion shared by the artist and the receiver (Tolstoy's "infectiousness").

In her voice, Katie's music becomes art, sound and nature.

List of References

- James, Katie, *Toitico bien empacao*, video by Vladimir Meneses, edition and titles by Terry Valencia, published 25 June 2019: <https://youtu.be/8RZeHO7gBJk>.
- James, Jenny, *They call us the Screamers: The History of Atlantis Primal Therapy Commune*, Burtonport, Co. Donegal, Firle, Sussex: Caliban Books, 1980.
- , *Atlantis Adventure*, London, Caliban Books, 1990.
- , "Green Letters from Colombia" in *Atlantis: An Ecological Community* http://www.macsuibhne.com/atlantis/g1_g5.html/
- Murray, Edmundo, Interview with Katie James, via internet, 22 April 2020, transcript.
- , "Explosive Journey: Perceptions of Latin America in the FARC-IRA Affair (2001 2005)" in *Irish Migration Studies in Latin America* 2006.
- , "Sabrosura: Pleasure, Humor and Tradition in Latin American Food Songs" in Edmundo Murray, Ed., *A Symphony of Flavors: Food and Music in Concert*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015.
- Quinn, Bob. *The family* (RTÉ documentary, 1979, <https://youtu.be/BFV588MZKIY>).
- Aengus O Snodaigh, Dáil Éireann debates – Thursday, 20 December 2012 – Vol. 787 N° 5.