

IRISH VOICE

Parsons Sings "Heart" Out

BACK on May 3, The Blarney Star hosted an excellent night of music by Dublin singer Niamh Parsons, accompanied on guitar by Graham Dunne. The packed house was a testament to Parsons' reputation, and judging by the reaction of the audience, Niamh is welcome to visit New York any time.

Parsons, who has been in the Irish music scene for over 20 years, has played with Arcady and her own band, Loose Connections. She has toured extensively both here and in Europe, building up a loyal fan base along the way.

More recently, she has tended towards solo recordings and has so far released three albums. Her first was a 1999 release called *Blackbirds and Thrushes*, followed in 2000 by a recording called *In My Prime* which was nominated for album of the year by both the BBC folk awards and the Association for Independent Music.

Her latest work, *Heart's Desire*, was released in May by Green Linnet and contains 14 tracks - 12 songs and two tunes by Graham Dunne. Parsons sings with a voice which is as rich and deep as any I've heard and has the same character as that of June Tabor, the English folk singer.

The songs themselves have been collected by Niamh, many through sessions such as the Goinn Singers Club in Dublin, or from the Forkhill Sessions in Co. Armagh.

To understand these singing sessions in Ireland, you have to know something about the great divide between singers and musicians - it's like oil and water, the two just don't mix. Very few musicians enter the world of the traditional singer - in fact, they can be quite daunted by the experience, and it was in singing sessions such as these that Parsons learned much of her material.

The opening track is the well-known "Lagan Love" which Niamh learned from her father Jack Parsons to whom this is dedicated.

The "Rigs of Rye" - a song learned from Robin Dransfield, is a striking air which Niamh handles with great skill. The backing vocals by Terry Coyne work particularly well and only add to what is already a very fine song.

One of my favorite songs from the Planxty era was Andy Irvine's "West Coast of Clare," and with some simple arrangements this song again shines in Parsons' version.

"The Banks of Clyde," an unaccompanied song learned from Rita Gallagher (Co. Donegal) is a solid Northern Irish song in the vein of "The Dark Eyed Sailor," where the sailor returns - from, well, the sea - and setting off in disguise, tests out his girlfriend's fidelity.

"Done with Bonaparte," written by Mark Knopfler and sung to an air played originally by piper Seamus Ennis, fits surprisingly well into this collection. It compares favorably to the many original traditional Napoleonic songs which still exist.

"Broken Hearted I'll Wander" is the second of such songs (Napoleonic) recorded on this album, and Coyne and Gib-

bons also sing on this. The song, again, is from the Northern singing tradition, although different versions are found in Scotland.

"Syracuse," (also recorded by Christy Moore) is a very solid anti-war song, with Graham Dunne on guitar and Dennis Cahill on mandolin and Mick Kinsella on harmonica. Again Parsons sings this with great feeling.

The album is a great showcase for guitarist Graham Dunne, who also tours with Parsons. His playing of "Jenny Picking Cockles/Collier's Reels" and the self-composed "The Brown Bull of Cill na Mona/The Tipperary Temptress" is superb.

Heart's Desire was recorded in a new studio in Clonmannon, Co. Wicklow - which is co-owned by Altan's Ciaran. With engineering by Alastair McMillan (who also works with Altan and Paul Brady) and production by Denis Cahill, it's hard to go wrong.

As Cahill says himself, "Niamh's singing is very natural and very believable, making real the stories she tells in song."

The ornamentation of Parsons' voice and the relaxed and uncluttered backing by the musicians shines throughout this album, allowing the spirit of the songs to come through.

Sadly, the beautiful artwork and drawings in the CD booklet is some of the last work by the late Gwen Sale, artist and fiddler, who was killed in a car accident in Chicago recently.

This is a must for fans of traditional singing. Contact Green Linnet for more details.

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