

Audiophilia

Eleanor McCain — Green Hills of Home

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By Harry Currie



At first glance you might think that this is just another contemporary folk singer meandering through another group of recently scribbled quasi folk songs trying to cash in on the so-called Celtic revival that has gained attention in the past few years. One glance at the title of the CD and the first tune might lead you to think that it's about the level of Andy Stewart's A

Scottish Soldier. But on both accounts you'd be dead wrong. The two principal artists here – Eleanor McCain, vocals, and Brigham Phillips, piano and arrangements – are top-of-the-line Canadian performers, who certainly can hold their own in heavyweight company anywhere in the world.

To start with, there's the voice of Eleanor McCain. A few singers – very few indeed – are born with a vocal quality perfectly suited to the repertoire they choose to sing. Eleanor was conservatory trained, but that only teaches you how to best use the voice you were born with. You can perfect vocal quality, but you can't create it. Frank Sinatra and Mario Lanza are two well-known singers who were blessed with natural voices perfectly suited to the styles of music they chose to sing. After listening to Green Hills of Home I realized

that Eleanor McCain is also one of those fortunate few.

Stating that it is a collection of Celtic songs, *Green Hills of Home* then begs the question: What is Celtic music? And the honest answer is that there are too many different answers, all from the various groups of Celtic descendants in the world who live in many different countries. Those of us who live in English-speaking countries usually consider today's Irish and Scots descendants as Celtic. Of course they are, but part of a Gaelic subgroup. We often overlook the fact that the Welsh, Cornish, Manx (the Isle of Man) and Bretons (Brittany in France) are Celt-descended, though the Irish/Scots/Manx peoples are in the Gaelic group, while the Breton/Welsh/Cornish folk belong together in the Brythonic group. Eleanor McCain has chosen to sing songs mainly from the Irish and Scots traditions, with a little help from Wales, England and Cape Breton Island in the province of Nova Scotia (New Scotland) in Canada.

With my own Scottish background (Currie is an anglicized version of a Gaelic name pronounced MacVurric but spelled MacMhurrigh), I'm drawn to the music of my ancestral home. My own personal description of Gaelic music is that it is a lilting melancholy, reaching more to the heart than the head. The tunes are haunting, fitted to the poetic words of longing like polish to finished oak. That's what you will find when listening to *Green Hills of Home*.

The title song, *Green Hills of Home*, was written for Eleanor by Tim Thorney and Erica Ehm, two prominent Canadian music professionals. The words and music evoke the heartbreak of the McCain brothers split, and the move to Toronto from the green hills of New Brunswick by the Wallace McCain family. This is probably the most heartfelt track on the CD, as Eleanor explained to me: "It was very emotionally difficult to leave NB as we were very much a part of the community. Our roots are there. It was very sad. But I still go back as my closest friends are there. Now my daughter Laura loves it also as she has become close to my friends' children. It's a small rural community and I love the

people and sense of community. The photos for the CD were all taken in Florenceville, NB. This song is close to my heart.” And that emotion sets the mood and style for the whole CD.

Carrickfergus is an Irish folk song with a beautiful melody. Typically full of longing for the town of the title, “But the sea is wide and I cannot swim over and neither have I wings to fly.” This song was played at the funeral of John F. Kennedy. Eleanor’s voice fits perfectly, at times soaring, and double-tracking with herself in all the right phrases.

The Last Rose of Summer is a poem by Thomas Moore who was a friend poets Byron and Shelley. Moore wrote it in 1805 while at Jenkinstown Park in County Kilkenny, Ireland. Sir John Stevenson set the poem to its widely-known melody. Encountering the last rose on the vine, the others all fallen, the singer likens it to lost love, “When true hearts lie



withered and fond ones are flown.” The melancholy in Eleanor’s voice captures the heartbreak, and the glide up to the E in the last verse is breathtaking.

Song for the Mira is a contemporary folk song in the Celtic style, written in 1973 by Cape Breton native Allister MacGillivray. The lyrics express a longing for, and eventual return to, the serenity of the Mira River region of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. It has been recorded over 140 times and has been translated into Scots Gaelic, French, Dutch, Mi'kmaq and Japanese. The song has been sung widely in Ireland. Eleanor captures every nuance of the words and music.

Danny Boy is a poem written in 1910 by English lawyer and lyricist Frederick Weatherly and usually set to a well-known tune from County Derry. Probably the most performed song attributed to Ireland, its genesis, like many folk songs, passed through many contributors and variations. Eleanor treats it gently, lifts it from B flat to C, and brings it to an easy bel canto upward gliss for a finish.

While each of the songs on Green Hills of Home deserves individual mention, unfortunately, space will not permit. It should be noted that Steal Away is by Phil Coulter, and is not the spiritual hymn. The Isle of Innisfree endures in the hearts of many as one of the great songs of Ireland, as does The Skye Boat Song for Scotland. The word "Salley" in Down by the Salley Gardens means "willow" for the tree, still used in parts of Ireland. Canadian Allister MacGillivray's songs Away from the Roll of the Sea and Song for Peace are included, as is Ready for the Storm, written in 2004 by Dougie MacLean, one of Scotland's most successful, respected and popular musicians.

Ae Fond Kiss, appropriately the final song on the CD, expresses Robbie Burns' heartbreak when the lady he loved desperately, left him.

Eleanor McCain's exceptional vocals are perfectly framed by the arrangements and piano of Brigham Phillips, with the subtle inclusion of Anne Lindsay, violin, Jason Fowler, guitar, Ray Legere, mandolin and fiddle, Pat Kilbride, bass, Les Allt, flute, Mark Kelso, drums, John Marshman, cello, Deborah Quigley, uilleann pipes, and Erica Goodman,

harp.

This is a beautiful mood CD. If you have a melancholy Celtic heart, listen to this beside a gentle fire crackling on the hearth, sipping a Bushmills or Drambuie, and remembering a few of the things that have touched your own heart as you wove your way through life. Congratulations to Eleanor McCain and Brigham Phillips for putting this magic into sound.

To purchase or download tracks, contact Eleanor's website:

www.eleanormccain.ca

Arranged and accompanied by Brigham Phillips, piano, with Celtic instruments Retriever Records RR03102 Playing time: 79:03