

New Traditional - Old Songs, March 10

Niamh Parsons and Graham Dunne

By Glenn Weiser

Winter was giving way to spring in the night air as Niamh Parsons, a 40ish Irish singer, stood with a handful of people smoking a cigarette outside of the Old Songs building in Voorheesville after her show. "The first half seemed like five minutes, and the second half seemed like five minutes," she said with visible pleasure in her Dublin brogue.

It's doubtful that time dragged for many of the 90 or so listeners in the deconsecrated church either during a memorable performance of Celtic music last Friday by Parsons, who began singing old Irish ballads at age 8 and grew up in the midst of Dublin's thriving folk music scene, and Graham Dunne, a rock-turned-acoustic guitarist from County Clare who accompanied her. In an evening of musical shape-shifting, traditional songs became contemporary and vice-versa as Parsons' warm, clear alto floated over Dunne's jazzy, flamenco-tinged guitar. Although the purists in the house might not have approved of Dunne's dissonance-laden chord choices, there was no quarreling with the quality of his elegant playing and Parsons' rich, ornamented singing.

Wearing a sleeveless, ankle-length red velvet dress, Parsons offered two sets of songs dominated by the themes of love and war. The duo opened with the Scottish "The Rigs of Rye," which tells of how a young man tests the love of a maiden who is about to elope with him, and it was quickly obvious that she was both an expressive and technically strong singer as Dunne fingerpicked rolling arpeggios on his nylon-string ax. Following was Sigerson Clifford's plaintive "The Boys of Barr na Sráide," a song about bird hunters who leave their seacoast paradise to fight the English and end up dispersed to foreign shores, and "Clohinne Winds," a lovely dream ballad by Briege Murphy, which, owing to the descending chord line in Dunne's arrangement, happened to sound like the old pop tune "A Taste of Honey" at the beginning of each verse. More traditionally styled was "Ye Rambling Boys of Pleasure," which the Irish poet W.B. Yeats once heard sung by an old man, and, unable to remember it all, famously rewrote it as "Down by the Sally Gardens." Other standouts were the grim medley of "Blue Murder" and "He Fades Away," two songs about workers from the U.K. who went to work in the asbestos mines of Australia and, lungs befouled from the job, perished, and "John Condon," a lament for both the Irish boy who at 14 was the youngest Allied soldier to fall in WWI and for the futility of war itself. Dunne also took a few solos, including "Cape Clear," a slow folk melody set against jazz chords, and a pair of straight-up flatpicked jigs, "The Southwest Wind" and the saucily titled "The Petticoat Loose."

Niamh Parsons is a fine, real-deal traditional singer, and with Graham Dunne's forward-looking accompaniment, you could call their time-melting music old Guinness in a new bottle.