

Irish American News

Tradition In Review



By Bill Margeson



Two terrific albums this month. First, however, let us add our voice to the worldwide sorrow at the passing of Gwen Sale. The former Lord of the Dance fiddler was lost to us all last month as the result of a tragic car-pedestrian accident here in her adopted home of Chicago. Married to the great guitarist, Dennis Cahill, this Scottish-born multi-talented lady had recently retired from Lord of the Dance and was becoming a favorite here in Chicago of all who met her musically and personally. She was returned to Scotland for burial. In addition to Dennis, Gwen also left two beautiful children. The loss of this genuinely classy 31 year old lady makes a rent in the cloth of traditional music that will not be mended. Don't ever believe that every cloud has a silver lining. Our prayers are with Dennis and the children, and with everyone else who knew and loved this very special woman.

Now on to happier things.

Niamh Parsons is out with her best album ever. Entitled, *Heart's Desire* it is on Green Linnet and will

be available everywhere. We must note that Gwen Sale designed the beautiful cover and interior for this stunning album. Gwen was also a graphic artist. Wonderful work.

We first heard Niamh several years ago on an album by Arcady entitled, *Many Happy Returns*. She has also performed her vocal magic with a group called *Loose Connections*. Wonderful voice. Alto. Full. Rich. Expressive. Now, *Heart's Desire* is her pinnacle. Deeply traditional, the album is passionate in its simplicity. No big frills and flourishes here. No production tricks. The album is produced by Dennis Cahill. The engineering of Alastair Mc Millan is perfection. This is really important. We regularly mention engineering work here in the column. The reason for this is that we can't count the number of albums that have been ruined over the years by engineers who don't "get it". They don't understand acoustical, traditional music-probably more familiar with engineering rock groups. So, when you hear work like this here, it must be highlighted. This is a decep-

tively simple album. The main ornamentation is in Niamh's outstanding vocals. The guitar accompaniment by Graham Dunne is perfection, also. Niamh wisely lets Dunne take two breathtaking solo turns on a set of jigs and also a set of reels. (Well, he is accompanied by Dennis Cahill- but it is so tastefully done, we only really hear Dunne. We simply feel Cahill's presence on the accompanying nylon string guitar.) Niamh is joined by her sister, Anne Parsons Dunne on a few tunes. Lovely sibling blend. Great harmony work also in the fore on numbers such as *Brokenhearted I'll Wander*. Many of the album's high points are the unaccompanied sean nos selections, most notably, *My Lagan Love*. Only a singer of this quality and creativity would open an album with this sean nos classic. Nervy! Gutsy! And, it works. So much of this album is unadorned. Basic. Yes. We'll say it. Pure. If you want to hear a beautiful voice, performing deeply traditional songs at the height of her power to move and enrapture, then this is for you. This album sets the vocal standard, and is the immediate front-runner for the Female Vocalist Of The Year Award for 2002. We have seldom been so fully captured. We surrender!! Rating: Four Harps Wow!!!

JUNE 2002