

IT'S NEARLY two years since Niamh Parsons' second solo album *In My Prime* was released to considerable acclaim. The sleeve notes to that album contained a brief dedication to her parents Jack and Máire, but sadly, this latest instalment is dedicated to her father alone.

"He passed away just a month after *In My Prime* was released. One of the last things he said to me in hospital the last time I saw him was: 'You know, I still prefer *Blackbirds*,'" Niamh recalls over the phone from her home in Dublin.

While her solo debut *Blackbirds & Thrushes* was a more immediate album than its follow-up, Niamh is convinced he would've grown to like both equally. But her father's parting words also inspired her to pull out all the stops next time round.

"My ambition with *Heart's Desire* was to make an album that daddy would've said: 'Oh yeah, that's the one.' Whether he would've loved it over *Blackbirds & Thrushes*, that's another thing."

Bearing in mind that her first two solo albums were more or less cut from the same cloth, she abandoned her previous role as co-producer, handing the reins over completely to Dennis Cahill. Just as his guitar style — at least in tandem with his musical partner, fiddler Martin Hayes — is understated to an almost spectral state of refinement, his production methods are also characterised by a lightness of touch and a less-is-more approach.

"Dennis was almost invisible. Really, the stuff he did was so subtle, so gentle."

You mean his guitar playing?

"No, no, I mean his direction. For example, some of the songs, if we were doing them live, we would start with the guitar, but he took the guitar out of the introduction to them. Graham was quite miffed at the time, but that's beside the point... 'cos when the guitar comes in, it's really effective."

Though there haven't been any tunes on a Niamh Parsons album since her days with *The Loose Connections*, Graham Dunne has always provided several instrumental interludes during her live shows over the last three years they have toured together. So it was about time up on one or two of them showed up on an album.

Niamh gets many of her songs from traditional singers like those she meets at Dublin's Goinn Singers Club, so it's also not surprising that there are always some that address the subject of warfare. On this new album, *Done With Bonaparte*, *Brokenhearted I'll Wander*, *Syracuse* and *Bramblethorn* all deal with the subject which is a little more than usual. Why so?

"A lot of songs have this as their

theme, because wars were always written about in the history books and there was never any account of the human cost or the emotion even. It was all about 'for the glory of the country' and all of that. The other reason was our present climate, where, while there's always wars in the world, war seems to be very close to us. And the third reason is, I just particularly love those songs!"

Even though *Heart's Desire* is an album of small departures in more ways than one, some things haven't changed. Niamh still has her trademark 'deep smoker's voice'.

"I'm still a smoker, I'm afraid. I mean, people will laugh at this, but if I was to give them up I'll lose my voice. I stopped in 1988 and I couldn't believe my voice. I had so much strength but no control. I know what's involved, so I'll just have to just take six months out. At the moment I can't do that."

■ Niamh Parsons appears with Graham Dunne on August 10 at the 'Folk at the Fram' Festival, Framingham Castle, and will be touring Britain from October 12-19. See www.greenlinnet.com for details.

Heartfelt emotion

Niamh Parsons has just released a new collection of songs dedicated to the memory of her father. JON LUSK talks to her about her latest album.

REVIEW

■ NIAMH PARSONS, *Heart's Desire* (Green Linnet)

THE third solo album proper from one of Ireland's premier league singers builds on her already considerable strengths. As before, she still performs mostly traditional Irish material with the odd Scottish and English song, all sparsely arranged and some a cappella.

There's also one by former Dire Straits songwriter Mark Knopfler as well as a couple of tunes by her excellent regular guitarist Graham Dunne and producer Dennis Cahill. But the best surprise is the exquisite harmony vocals by Liverpoolian singers Terry Coyne and Tony Gibbons. ●●●●○ JON LUSK