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Eileen McGann

In an age when "folk singers," male or female, tend to be more and more idiosyncratic, post-modern, and unpolished, Calgary's Eileen McGann is that rarest and most welcome of exceptions, a young singer with a keen sense of and pride in the traditional music of her Celtic and British ancestors, combined with the ability to write movingly about the beauties of life and nature around her, and blessed with a strong, crystal clear soprano voice that stops people in their tracks and commands attention. Following the path blazed by fellow Canadian singer/songwriters such as Stan Rogers and Gordon Lightfoot, the last decade has seen McGann establish herself as one of the finest singers, songwriters, and interpreters of traditional music on either side of the Atlantic.

A first-generation Irish-Canadian, McGann was captivated by the music of Rogers, Lightfoot, and Don McLean in her teenage years. While working toward a degree in medieval history, she was asked by one of her professors to perform at a St. Patrick's Day banquet, and the embarrassing (by her own description) realization dawned on her that despite her Celtic heritage, she didn't perform a single Irish song. In listening then to her mother's records of Irish operatic singers doing traditional songs, she was drawn to the underlying beauty of the music and the stories it was telling. Since emerging on the folk music scene during the late 1980s, McGann's recordings and live performances have highlighted her stunning ability to deliver

traditional fare as well as her own intelligent, finely honed songs. While her melodies are beautiful, she excels at writing thoughtful, well-crafted lyrics that, as clearly as she sings them, express her thoughts on the environment (Requiem for the Giants"), politics, (Too Stupid for Democracy"), social justice (Reservations"), and many other contemporary themes. She can also write ballads ("Isabella Gunn," "The Knight of the Rose") that have a timeless sound, as if they have been around for hundreds of years - the mark of a superior minstrel. Her first three albums feature a solid mix of both traditional and original music, while newer releases have responded to her fans' many requests for an all-traditional recording.

More than most singers in the world of folk music today, though, her entire catalog is of top-level quality, making it very difficult to pick favorites. These days, McGann *spends* much of her time on the road away from her beloved Calgary, on the slope of the Canadian Rockies. Travelling and performing as a duo with her long-time musical (and life) partner, David K. (Knutson), she continues to win rave reviews and new fans wherever she goes, still in the early years of what should be a long and fulfilling career. As she sings in one of her most popular songs, "I See My Journey."

what to buy: It's a close call between *Turn It Around* ***** (Dragonwing, 1991, prod. Eileen McGann) and her 1995 effort, *Journeys*, and either will be immensely satisfying. *Turn It Around* features "Requiem for the Giants," "The Knight of the Rose," and the title track, but the real head-turner is her version of the traditional "The Fair Flower of Northumberland." Overall, the album matches four traditional cuts with seven original songs.

what to buy next: *Journeys* * * * * 1/2 (Dragonwing, 1995, prod. Eileen McGann) opens with "I See My Journey" and includes "Reservations," "Too Stupid for Democracy," and "In the Silence." Traditional songs include "Braw Sailin' on the Sea," "Bonny Portmore," and "Jock O'Hazeldean," and an added bonus is a rendition of Pete Morton's "Another Train."

the rest:
Elements * * * * (Dragonwing, 1987)
Heritage * * * * (Dragonwing, 1997)

worth searching for:
Two Thousand Years of Christmas * * * * (Dragonwing, 1996, prod. Eileen McGann [& Trilogy]) features McGann, David K., and Cathy Miller performing as Trilogy, harmonizing on a variety of songs from the Celtic and British Yuletide tradition. Something unique and worthwhile to add to the Christmas music section of the record collection.
-John Lupton