

NIAMH PARSONS

Niamh Parsons has come to be known as one of the most distinctive voices in Irish music. Her voice has drawn comparisons to such venerated singers as Dolores Keane, June Tabor and Sandy Denny. The great Scottish balladeer Archie Fisher said of Niamh, "a songstress like her comes along once or twice in a generation."

It has been said that Niamh Parsons may not be the most famous Irish Balladeer, but many feel she's the best. Described in the Boston Herald as both emotionally haunting and tonally as clear as crystal, Niamh's albums have been 'must-have' collector's items for any lover of songs and singing. Niamh has recorded six studio albums and one live album to date. For the last 9 years, Niamh has been playing in a duet with Ennis-based Graham Dunne—there is a spiritual bond between Niamh and Graham when they perform, which draws out the essence of the songs.

Growing up in Dublin, Niamh's music loving parents brought herself and her sister to the local folk club in The Old Shieling Hotel in Raheny, where the young girls were exposed to songs and singing from the likes of The Johnstons, Emmet Spiceland, Sweeney's Men, Dolly McMahon, Danny Doyle and many of the other musicians and singers that were playing in Folk clubs at that time. "My father was a great singer, and on long journeys the family used to sing in the car—I don't remember a time in my life when I was not singing—I love songs."

Niamh developed this love into a penchant for collecting songs. She is always on the lookout for songs that speak to her—listening to new albums, scouring the Traditional Music Archives in Dublin, sharing notes with a network of friends and other singers. Once she discovers a song she likes, Niamh views herself as the vehicle for the music. "For me the song is more important than listening to my voice," she says. "I consider myself more a songstress than a singer—a carrier of tradition."

Throughout her career, Niamh has performed with a wide variety of artists, and has appeared at nearly every prestigious folk festival on either side of the Atlantic. As a member of the traditional Irish band Arcady (led by De Dannan's Johnny "Ringo" McDonagh), she sang on their Shanachie recording *Many Happy Returns*. She appeared before President Clinton and Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern in Capitol Hill, Washington, joined Grammy Award winner Paul Winter for an album and a summer concert in New York, and performed on "A Prairie Home Companion" when the show broadcast live from Dublin.



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GRAHAM DUNNE



Young Dubliner Graham Dunne is a well-known guitarist in the Irish Traditional music scene. He is known for his sensitivity of touch as an accompanist, and his fiery ability as a soloist. Based in Ennis, Graham works as a full time guitarist with Niamh Parsons. For a year he worked with Sean Tyrell with whom he toured Ireland, France and Belgium, as well as working on the music for a documentary entitled "Necklace of Wrens" - a biographical account of the poet Michael Hartnett. In the summer of 1999, he performed in Sean's critically acclaimed musical revival of "The Midnight Court" in Galway's Premier Theatre

Venue, The Town Hall. 1994 saw Graham finish his diploma in sound engineering but he decided he would be much more useful on the other side of the desk. Over the last few years, Graham has found himself accompanying such musical legends as Liz Carroll, Paddy Keenan and Tommy Peoples. He regularly worked with the Mary Custy Band who are based in Ennis, where he can often be found in sessions around the area.

For the past nine years, Graham has been working with top traditional vocalist Niamh Parsons with whom he has toured the UK, Germany, Holland, Italy, Belgium, Spain, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Switzerland, USA, Australia and Ireland.

Graham is also the featured guitarist on Niamh's last four albums - 'In My Prime' which was nominated for the BBC Radio 2 Album of the Year award and also for the AIFM Album of the Year award in the USA. The second album, 'Heart's Desire', received rave reviews upon its release in May 2002. Produced by top guitarist Dennis Cahill, Graham can be heard here delivering two sets of tunes - a set of reels and a self-penned set of jigs. Accompanied by Dennis, these instrumentals add greatly to the album's musical content. In addition, Graham can be heard on Niamh's most recent albums, "Old Simplicity" and Live at Flyde.

In 2001 Graham arranged and recorded a set of jigs with famed piper Mick Coyne, on the album 'Both sides of the Coyne'. Graham also enjoys playing jazz with Mick when he is not touring with Niamh.

In summer of 2002, Graham attended the Louis Stewart Jazz School in Kilbaha, Co. Clare where he played the closing concert as part of a guitar quintet featuring Louis himself.

In September 2004, Graham released his first solo CD - GIOTÁRAÍ - on his own label Gramsham Records.

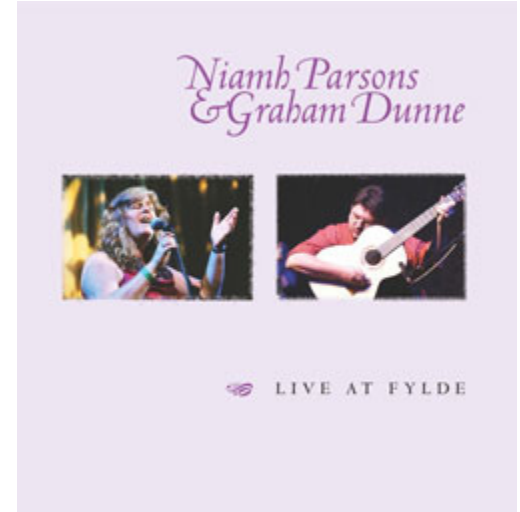
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NIAMH PARSONS & GRAHAM DUNNE LIVE AT FYLDE (GRAMSHAM RECORDS)

Here's an album reflecting in every way the sheer presence of, and unadorned gentle perfection of the totally exemplary performance given by, the gorgeous singer Niamh and guitarist Graham, her touring partner (I hesitate to use the word "accompanist", for so integral - and integrated - is his contribution to the musical experience). Although neither Niamh nor Graham wastes a single note or nuance in their matchless renditions of predominantly traditional songs, there's never a feeling of perfunctory auto-pilot readthrough about their performances, instead we get a quality of stillness, a measured calm that in its very poise builds around it the space for the interpretations to breathe and grow (even the brisk tempo of Blackbirds And Thrushes enables a suitably breezy take on the song's carefree view of love without seeming unduly rushed). But words just cannot describe the rapturous effect on this listener of the definite highlights of this 50-minute set (which was recorded live at Fylde Folk Festival last year by Alistair Russell) - like One Morning In May, An Páistín Fionn, The Kilnamartyra Exile, Ron Kavana's The Men That God Made Mad (this one benefiting from a beautifully controlled instrumental coda, L'Intrada De L'Angestura) and Tom Waits' The Briar And The Rose (with some sublime extra vocal harmonies by guest Tony Gibbons). What matter if Niamh has recorded much of this material before, for the extra intensity of these live readings is palpable, not least in the expression of the fathomlessly deep musical and yes, spiritual bond between Niamh and Graham. I'm convinced that rarely if ever has such unassuming talent and musicianship - in just the one musician! - been so mesmerisingly at the service of a singer in this repertoire - and yet just take a listen to Graham's deftly virtuosic set of solo jigs literally stopping the show halfway through the album! Actually, I'm not entirely sure that the sequence presented on this album preserves the correct set-list running order (I'm willing to stand corrected on this however), but even if that's so then it's an extremely miniscule reservation on what is in every respect one of those hen's-teeth "would've given all to be there" live records (you can tell that by the ultra-enthusiastic reception Niamh and Graham get from the audience).



DAVID KIDMAN

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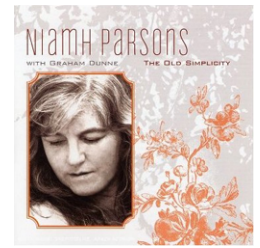
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NIAMH PARSONS WITH GRAHAM DUNNE

THE OLD SIMPLICITY

GREEN LINNET RECORDS GLCD 1232, 13 TRACKS



Let me run a metaphoric game by you. If you had to describe an album and a singer as a food or drink, could you pick a menu to match any given artist? Well for me Niamh Parsons would be a full blooded Spanish Rioja, a deep rich wine, full of character, with a hint of iron behind a complex blend of experience and flavours.

Full grown adult material is always to be expected on a Niamh Parson's album. She's a singer who doesn't need to compromise her integrity by selecting tracks that might get a bit of airtime, or that will appeal to one demographic or another. Her music like a good Rioja is for connoisseurs who know the singing tradition intimately.

This may have the distinction of being the last album recorded on the Green Linnet Label, that alone could bring it cult status but it deserves your attention, it is the last of a trilogy of excellent albums Niamh made for the now defunct Connecticut record company, each one a gem.

Here on 13 tracks Niamh and guitarist Graham Dunne pull of a wonderful double act of sensitivity, edgy realism and deep emotional insights. Take the first track 1917 (The French Prostitute) it's a big ballad, a full story with some great lines and Parson's handles it with sensitivity and a shot of resignation, Dunne plays a gypsy break over a musette accordion, but it feels right when in lesser hands it could have become an empty pastiche.

The album was recorded in Chicago and of course it was natural enough to bring in Dennis Cahill and he appears on high string guitar on the Poor Irish Stranger, where he duets with Dunne whilst Larry Gray adds an occasional bass line. Parsons gives the lads a rest from time to time and her ac-capella You Rambling Boys of Pleasure carries us along in a flawless master class in unaccompanied singing. The title track is a song by Kieran Halpin, a modern song on an old theme, a kindred spirit to the Parting Glass.

There's so much that is good about this album , the pairing of Graham Dunne and Dennis Cahil on Moll and Poll Ha' Penny, Dunne's own Cumha an Ghrá (one for aspiring guitar pickers every where) and then there's a delicate understated first world war ballad John Condon, social comment on A Drinking Man's Wife and much more besides. Add to this some great liner notes and you can see that Niamh Parsons has not skimped on the last effort of her Green Linnet Triptych, this panel stands as darkly gilded as the other two, as complex as the rich ruby wine of Spain, as a parting glass to the fading glory of Green Linnet this is a loving toast to old decency.

SEÁN LAFFEY

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NIAMH PARSONS AND GRAHAM DUNNE

OLD SONGS, MARCH 10

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.

GLENN WEISER

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