

Niamh Parsons, **Heart's Desire** (Green Linnet, 2002)



Nor life I own, nor liberty, for love is lord of all.

When I pressed "play", my first thought was... "Tracy Chapman!" And, throughout the CD, I was impressed with the vocal similarities of this singer from Dublin with the one from Cleveland. Chapman is wonderful, of course, and Rolling Stone called her "one of the most socially relevant songwriters of our time". Perhaps, but I find that Niamh Parsons' arrangements retain the lasting social relevance that is a hallmark of folk music. And they do so because she has drawn on songs that have marched, walked, skipped, and run through several eras, capturing and pressing close the shared hope and tragedy that seem most familiar and painfully prescient with the retelling.

The themes of **Heart's Desire** are soldiers and lovers, how the hopelessness of war deprives the one of the other, the joy of love and happiness of romance, and the loss and sorrow that are liable to follow. The displacement of war is offset in these arrangements, almost combatively, by the prevalent sense of place that is the *sine qua non* of folk music.

Case in point: The absolute best song on this CD is "West Coast of Clare." I would play it over and over even more often than I do, except that the rest of the album pulls from somewhere so desperately near the heart of its title that one has to hear it all. Niamh's treatment of this Planxty song by Andy Irvine is luscious for its tangling of pain and passion into an embrace held close to the chest where it pulses with the indisputable vibrancy of life, even as it bleeds:

"I walked to Spanish Point. I knew I'd find you there.
I stood on the White Strand, and you were everywhere."

It's easy to say that one sheds tears with songs like these, with the stillness and loneliness of a voice that pushes back all other sound, singing slowly, "Sorrow and sadness, bitterness, grief..." but if you put it on in the cold of a quiet house, it'll seem an easier thing to say. This cut of "West Coast of Clare" is the aural symbol of the album's theme.

"Done With Bonaparte" is the most beautifully dreadful cut of the CD. The anguish at the edge of Niamh's voice captures the bitterness and irony, and ultimate defeat in the lyrics from the point of view of a soldier of Napoleon's doomed *Grand Armee*:

"And I pray for her who prays for me.
A safe return to my Belle France.
We prayed these wars would end all wars.
In war we know is no romance."

A similar track, "Brokenhearted I'll Wander," has the agony of an English lover's loss of her cavalryman by "Boney's" (Napoleon's) cannon and canister on the battlefields of Spain. With this version of the classic, is added an apparently more recent but still traditional act of supreme love:

"I will dress in men's apparel and to his regiment I'll go.
I will be a loyal subject and I'll fight all of his foes.
He would think it an honour if I could prevail."

And die on the field where my true love was slain."

There are jigs and reels, a rendition of "Syracuse" that evokes Simon and Garfunkel; and "My Lagan Love" has one of the sweetest, wettest lines of the collection... "her warm kiss is...felicity...", made to ache with the cadence of an Irish work song.

"The Rigs of Rye" has Niamh reaching pure harmonies and higher notes with vocal backers Tony Gibbons and Terry Coyne. The ever-present note of the determination of love rings:

"Oh my father can fret and my mother frown,
and my sisters too I disown.
And if they were dead and below the ground,
I'd still follow you love.
You're no stranger."

And who could refuse "A Kiss in the Morning"? This tune dances down the street fetching a pair of lips to sing and kiss with it. And if you haven't thought lately of a long, slow, open-mouthed kiss, you will when you see the cover of the CD. Since the death of LP's on the battlefield of technology, lovers of beautiful albums have to squint through a plastic case. Take this one out of the case and look at the colors for a while as you're listening. Then open the booklet for lyrics and sketches of the artists.

On the back of the case, notice it'll say "File under Celtic/Ireland". Yes. But file it under beauty. This one is lovely enough to deserve a category of its own.

[Asher Black]

More information can and should be had at niamhparsons.com



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