

THE REEL WORLD

SMALL-LABEL BRITISH AND CELTIC MUSIC



Trish Clair-Peck

New York City has been a center of Irish music in North America since the first wave of immigrants arrived in the mid-19th century, home to a vigorous community that was reinforced by further newcomers through the early 20th century and again most recently in the 1980s. That Irish-American population has produced and supported more than its share of good musicians over the years, some of whom continued to play in very traditional styles while others absorbed influences from the panoply of other ethnic groups with which they shared the streets.

The rock band **Black 47** has been among the most successful of New York's Irish fusion groups, featuring a Pogues-like urban ferocity supplemented by bagpipes, horns, and touches of reggae and hip-hop, writing songs that mix heartfelt populist politics with rowdy humor. *Bittersweet Sixteen* [Gadfly Records 292 (2006)] is a retrospective of the band's career thus far that features live recordings and previously unreleased material in addition to reissued tracks. Many songs are just for fun, like "Funky Ceili," a wry tale of romance and its unintended consequences from the band's early days, and the saxophones-and-swing of "Staten Island Baby." But there's also righteous passion of anthems like "Downtown Baghdad Blues," which intersperses

the melody of "Danny Boy" with a soldier's frustrated rap, and "Home of the Brave," where bagpipes and gunshot-like drums frame a modern Irish immigrant's story of hope and exploitation. Black 47 has moved far beyond folk-rock, but is a great example of one route that contemporary Irish music has taken.

Fiddler and singer **Sheila Maguire** represents another side of New York's Irish music as a daughter of immigrants who grew up studying with a local teacher and winning competitions, but later played with Michael Flatley's *Lord of the Dance* and in a Phoenix-based band. Her self-titled first solo CD [self-released (2006)] is a spirited collection of fiddle tunes accompanied by guitar, bouzouki, accordion, and whistle, mostly uptempo reels and jigs full of bounce and drive in traditional style. While the disc is mostly instrumental, she also showcases a haunting voice on an unaccompanied version of the sad old song, "The Banks of the Lee."

And while the Scottish influence in New York may not be as obvious as the Irish, the family sextet **MacTalla Mór** makes up for it with the blast of double Highland bagpipes. *The New Colossus* [Hahnemann Inc MTM407 (2007)] is splendidly eclectic. There are a couple of familiar pipe tunes and some mellifluous traditional songs in Gaelic, an uplifting title song

BY TOM NELLIGAN

inspired by the Emma Lazarus poem on the Statue of Liberty, and a strong, two-part suite called "No Maker's Mark," which looks at our troubled times and seeks resolution. Bob Marley's "No Woman No Cry" is transformed into a sad, quiet piano ballad that's framed by a reggae-beat pipe tune and an optimistic rap, and "Time Out" sets the pipes to a hot Latin rhythm tapped out by keyboards and percussion.

Shifting way over to the far edge of the continent, fiddler **Trish Clair-Peck** lives on an island off the coast of British Columbia, and there's a wide-open feeling in her music on *Dawson's Tumble* [self-released (2007)], her first release of traditional and original tunes. The music blends Irish, Scottish, Quebecois, and Scandinavian sources and influences with an often elegant touch, as in the darkly moody "Night Crossing," on which fiddle, two violas, and hammered dulcimer combine in a stately air, and the sweet lullaby melody "A Nest for Niall," written with obvious affection for her son.

From the ever-popular pub-rock genre comes Minnesota's **Wild Colonial Bhoys**, the duo of singer/guitarists Geno Carlson and Adam Coolong, whose disc *Irish in America* [Steel Creek 87362 (2007)] is an interesting and thoughtful mix of often fairly loud, largely restless-sounding, primarily original songs focusing on themes of immigration and disconnection. "Days of Rage" is a rocking eight-minute picture of revolutionary fury backed by wailing electric guitar and uilleann pipes, while the title track is a quieter snapshot of immigrant history. They also do a nice job covering Nanci Griffith's "It's a Hard Life Wherever You Go," a comment on bigotry on both sides of the ocean. Carlson and Coolong are assisted by a crew of Twin Cities musicians who include John Wright of Lehto & Wright and Todd Menton of Boiled in Lead.

Down South, **Mithril** is a quartet of multi-instrumentalists from Alabama whose disc *The Return Home* [Flying Frog FF0751 (2007)] is a crisp and sometimes moody collection of mostly Irish-style tune sets thoughtfully arranged for various combinations of fiddle, flute, whistle, harp, smallpipes, and more. Especially clever is the group's pairing of a slowed-down version of the jig "Cliffs of Mohr" with a flute and fiddle arrangement of the Beatles' "Norwegian Wood," an unexpectedly close musical cousin.

We finish up this month with debut recordings from two gifted teenage musicians who sound like they're off to a great start. **Rebecca Lomnicky** is a young Scottish/Cape Breton-style fiddler from Oregon who started playing Suzuki violin at age 5 and won the Junior Division of the U.S. National Scottish Fiddle Competition at age 13. *The Call* [self-released (2006)] is a technically masterful, wonderfully melodic collection of fiddle tunes with simple piano and guitar accompaniment. What's most memorable about it is the many lovely slow tunes that she interprets with heartfelt feeling, putting less emphasis on fast playing for its own sake than many of her contemporaries (although she does a fine job on the quicker sets, too). This would be a worthwhile recording under any circumstances, but the fact that Lomnicky is still in high school makes it even more impressive.

And over in England, singer **Ruth Notman** must be added to that country's growing list of talented young traditional musicians. *Threads* [Mrs Casey MCRCD7003 (2007)] is the first release from this Nottingham resident who has a clear ear for arrangements and an honest salt-of-the-earth voice reminiscent of Eliza Carty, one of her inspirations. One can almost hear her smiling through the frisky "Heather Down the Moor," but she's equally comfortable with moody songs like "Dark Eyed Sailor," which she presents in a slow, emotional version that captures the longing and relief experienced by the sailor and his love. She confidently takes on a pair of much-covered standards, Dougie MacLean's "Caledonia" and Richard Thompson's "Farewell, Farewell," and capably embraces both. Among her noteworthy accompanists are melodeon player Saul Rose and fiddler Roger Wilson.

