ONCE A SINGER ALWAYS A SINGER

Ita Kelly

ONCE A SINGER, always a singer, and so it is for Mary McPartlan, the well known producer and promoter who has worked for many years on behalf of other performers rather than for herself. Last January Mary took centre stage with her new album 'The Holland Handkerchief'—a late debut from a singer who for many years kept her light hidden in the shadow of her other musical work. The launch in Galway was celebratory and was enjoyed by large crowd of friends and followers. Mary was hailed as the next great voice on the traditional music scene. 'Why have we not heard her before?' the critics asked and 'Why has she been spending her time promoting others when she should have been singing herself?' The stage was set for a busy and successful launch schedule and Mary went on to gigs in Dublin, Leitrim and in Omagh, her mother's home town.

Everything was going well and out of the blue came one of life's little surprises, a sharp and unpleasant jolt in Mary's life. 'Just before the final launch in the Creggan Centre in Omagh, I was diagnosed with breast cancer' she tells me sombrely 'and the day after the gig and for the next three months I battled a recovery regime.' She had the cancerous lump removed and embarked on a seven week course of radiation treatment. Now she has to take a powerful anti cancer drug every day for the next five years. She was lucky and she knows it, her cancer was in the early stages and she is now completely recovered. She is philosophical and positive, believing that destiny deals you a hand in life that is unavoidable, but out of which you can grow and learn. She lives a healthy lifestyle, eats organically, exercises regularly and is more determined than ever to go out and sing wherever and whenever she can. 'That's my future' she says, 'my soul was burning for about ten years because of a lack of personal expression, I hadn't really been singing.'

The songs, however were never far from Mary's heart and head and she sang at the occasional session and immersed herself in developing her career in promotions, production and direction yielding some memorable results - the TG4 Gradam Ceoil or Traditional Music Awards, the award winning music series for TG4 'Flosc', and her involvement in the Galway based theatre group, Skehana.

She places much of her passion and inspiration firmly in her roots and her upbringing in Drumkeerin in Leitrim, a place that wasn't particularly musical or traditional and one where there wasn't a lot happening. A marginalized community, it was decimated in the seventies by emigration when it seemed like everybody left. Her home, however was a musical one – her mother, a Tyrone native was always singing and her father loved music. Drumkeerin wasn't particularly musical but the neighbouring parishes yielded some well known names like Packie Duignan, Jack Dolan and Séamus Horan. 'If we had a music teacher or even

Mary McPartlan

an instrument' says Mary, 'I'm sure there would have been three if not four musicians in our house.' Those were the days before the Comhaltas teaching network had reached that part of the country. Like most of her peers, Mary left too, the civil service called and drew her to Cork, but following her initial training she returned to Leitrim and to Carrick-on- Shannon where with a friend she formed a duo called Calypso. 'We were unique' remembers Mary, 'two young women in a Renault 4 with two guitars and an accordion, travelling all over Leitrim, Roscommon and Sligo.' They sang every thing from the popular songs of the day to the solid traditional songs and ballads. From there Mary went to Sligo and finally to Galway where she determined to embark on a new way of life. 'One day during lunch hour I left the post office to do an interview in Curran's Hotel' she remembers, 'and I got the job.' She was to be administrator of the Galway Simon Community for the next five years. Her passion for social causes and her interest in culture were all satisfied in a position that combined organisation with fund raising.

During all her years working, Mary was singing and garnering songs. She was very involved in the

trade union movement and it naturally led her to the songs of Ewan McColl and Pete Seeger. Bob Dylan was one of her most significant influences.

In Galway meeting with like minded people, Mary was one of the founders of the Riabhóg Singers Club along with Seán Ryan, John Cunningham, Paddy Williams and Mike Donohue. Riabhóg provided a forum for singing as well as exposing members and the public to guests who came regularly to the club, Jimmy Crowley, Mick Hanly, Maighréad Ní Dhomhnaill, Tim and John Lyons – the list is endless. It was the precursor of pub venues like Monroe's, the Róisín Dubh and the many others that have sprung up since then. Of course folk music is far more viable now than it was then and there is a market now whereas in the early eighties, it was only the ardent folk clubbers who frequented the trad and folk gigs.

Traditional and folk music has come a long way in the last ten to fifteen years, akin to the boom of the seventies, but now it is more than just a passing phase, it is an art form here to stay, part of the cultural landscape.

In an age where there is so much music and so many recordings it is amazing to find there are still songs we don't know and don't recognise, and this is the area Mary wants to concentrate on now. 'Research and finding these old songs is where I want to be right now' she says. 'The Holland Handkerchief' is a collection of songs that Mary has been living with for years, a bit like old friends. Most of them are traditional, others come from the pens of well known writers like Shane McGowan's 'Rainy Night in Soho', Thom Moore's 'Saw your Running' and Tim O'Brien's 'John Riley'. Francis Fahy's 'Tide Full In' gets a lively revival as well.

'I went back to the 80s to reinterpret old songs' Mary explains, 'and give them new energy, and certainly 'The Holland Handkerchief' and 'The High Walls of Derry' ('Johnny, Lovely Johnny'), they've got complete new arrangements via Shamie O'Dowd and myself and the musicians who played with us, Liam Kelly, Tom Morrow, Danny Byrt and Eddie Lynch.' Máirtín O Connor and Paddy Keenan were amongst the musicians as well and the album was produced by P J Curtis. 'It was an exciting process' Mary continues, 'and I think that more people, more singers should be looking at invigorating and bringing all that great tradition out for the young generation.'

The powerful ballad, after which the album is named, 'The Holland Handkerchief' comes from what Mary describes as 'the eeriest folklore of all' in the singing tradition. The Holland Handkerchief itself was a square of Dutch linen made in Ireland in the 1800s by the Huguenot craftsmen who had fled Europe and settled in small towns in Ireland. The song story is of a dead lover returning from the grave to the girl he loved, and the girl not realising he is dead wraps a Holland handkerchief around his 'aching' head and kisses his cold lips that feel like clay—scary stuff. 'In some of the songs' Mary continues, 'the lover drags the alive partner back into the grave and there are others where the partner having been with the ghost, eventually dies for no apparent reason.'

'Slieve Gallion Braes' is a song that goes back to Mary's early days in that folk duet Calypso, and on this recording Mary with friends Mary Staunton and Martina Goggin deliver a powerful acapella version. 'Ladybird' was learnt at a small festival about 17 years ago. 'One of the most loved songs in my entire life' describes Mary, 'a singer from Wales sang it into a little tape recorder for me in the back of a car we were travelling in, outside a pub in Ballyvaughan – a wonderful rich time of energy, knowledge and learning in terms of song.'

'Rainy Night in Soho' is a splendid transformation of Shane McGowan's well known love song. The musicality of Mary's voice matched by the delicate arrangement of guitars and keyboard, it was released as a single at Mary's Galway Arts Festival concert on July 19th last and there's a video in the making.

Mary is back planning gigs and concerts again, touring with the musicians Shamie O'Dowd and Eddie Lynch. She hopes to launch 'The Holland Handkerchief' in London in December. She has also returned to full time study in NUI Galway taking an MA in Theatre and Drama Studies. She will continue to work in television and theatre and is looking forward to recording another album, but it is the singing that is the most important thing of all. 'I have always been a singer, from day one, since I was born' she says, and 'I've always been singing in my head all those years. I'm a carrier of the music.' She continues, 'I absolutely believe in it as a total expression of one's identity in the most pleasurable way and it's just a great place to work – I'm very lucky!'
Visit Mary's new website is at www.marymcpartlan.com

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