

CD Reviews

BY SEAN SMITH
SPECIAL TO THE BIR

John and Maggie Carty, "Settle Out of Court"

• There's no guarantee, you know, that traditional music gets passed down to the next generation, no matter how strong the legacy in a family. Maybe the younger ones just don't take to it – or even if they do, the quality, the commitment, the verve may not follow.



Fortunately, that isn't the case with fiddle and banjo whiz John Carty, whose daughter Maggie has wholly embraced the family heritage. John is an accomplished soloist and former TG4 "Traditional Musician of the Year" who also

has performed and recorded with the band Patrick Street, Matt Molloy, and Artie McGlynn, and guest starred with The Chieftains and De Dannan – and, for good measure, his father was a member of London's famed Glenside Ceili Band in the 1960s.

Maggie's instrument of choice is banjo, and she shows a deft touch on keyboards as well, as she and her father collaborate on several tune sets, with contributions from the inimitable Donal Lunny on bouzouki, bodhran, and guitar and guitarist Shane McGowan (whose name inevitably necessitates a "Not the Pogues Vocalist" – i.e. Shane MacGowan – qualifier).

Highlights of the album include a hornpipe/slides combination ("The Turn/Carrigkerry/Con Cassidy's"); a pair of barn dances ("The Old Timer/Grandmother She"), the latter collected in Boston; a set of reels ("Blessings of Silver/Seanin McDonagh") that features a crisp John-Lunny duet at the outset; and a concluding pair of Sligo polkas ("Memories of Ballymote/Gurteen Cross"). You can glean John and Maggie's individual talents while savoring the chemistry they have together.

Maggie also shows herself to be an engaging singer on four of the tracks, sounding bright and girlish on "The Nightingale" (of Dubliners and Clancy Brothers vintage, and long a Carty family favorite), suitably reflective and somber on "Down by the Salley Gardens," and with a Cathy Jordan-like glint to her voice for the modal, slightly mystical "Lough Erne Shore." She has a grand time with "The Breakers Go Back on Full Time," a comic-Irish bit of whimsy written by Con Carbon, one of the "Minstrels of the Mine Patch" troupe that entertained Pennsylvania miners in the 19th and 20th centuries. Additionally, Maggie demonstrates the tenor banjo's capability to

accompany songs, especially the muted thumb-picking she employs on "Lough Erne Shore."

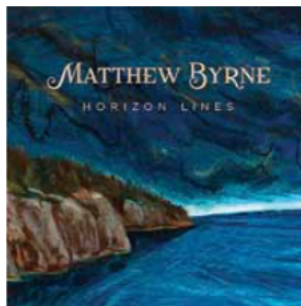
Perhaps best of all is a father-daughter banjo duet on the jig-reels medley "The Frost Is All Over/Tomas Clancy's 1 & 2" – it evokes images of the many hours John must've spent showing Maggie the work that goes into being an Irish musician, and the satisfaction it can bring. [johncarty.com]

Matthew Byrne, "Horizon Lines" • Lost lives, lost loves, failure, disappointment, spirit-crushing hard work – "Horizon Lines" is full of such narratives. So this album must be incredibly depressing, right? Not when the singer is Newfoundland's Byrne, he of the clear, resonant tenor voice, innate sense of pacing and delivery, and outstanding repertoire. Byrne attracted a wide following on the strength of his second album, "Hearts & Heroes," which among other things demonstrated his keen empathy for – and ability to build on – the song tradition of his homeland and its people, not least his own family.

On "Horizon Lines," Byrne once again gives the songs plenty of space for maximum impact, notably on two he sings unaccompanied: "The Woods of Truagh" – a love-in-the-time-of-war story dating back to 17th-century Ireland – and Newfoundland Peter Leonard's vividly told nautical misadventure "Jim Harris." Elsewhere, a small acoustic ensemble (primarily Billy Sutton, Aaron Colis, Josh Ward, and Paul Kinsman) gives Byrne – who plays guitar and octave mandolin – able support, with tightly executed instrumental passages and rich fills underneath, particularly "Long Years Ago," which also includes Teresa Ennis's exquisite harmony vocals; "The River Driver," a lumber camp ballad; and a cover of the Irish Descendants' "Go to Sea No More." Byrne also does a fine solo take on "Sarah Jane," a traditional Irish song of superb lyrical quality – associated with the immortal Dublin singer Frank Harte – about unattainable love.

A feature of Byrne's work is his family's musical legacy. "Long Years Ago" came from his grandmother's singing, "Farewell to Tarwathie" from his uncle (many listeners might associate it with Judy Collins), and "Jim Harris" from his father, Joe, a veteran performer himself who is given the lead on the wistful "Kitty Bawn O'Brien" (written by Cape Bretoner Allister MacGillivray).

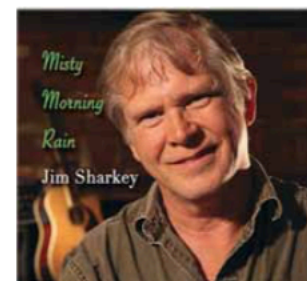
But nowhere is this connection more compelling than on "Adelaide," a Byrne original that recounts a former sailor's attempt to find out what happened to his long-ago love – none other than Byrne's late aunt. Byrne does a masterful job, in both his writing



and singing, of telling the tale in all its poignancy while avoiding mawkishness; the song ends not on a note of regret or despair, but rather a blessed state of closure.

Whether traditional or contemporary, the songs on "Horizon Lines" say much about the times and events that test us, as well as the ways in which we respond – for better or worse – and it is this aspect of our humanity Byrne so effectively mines. [matthewbyrne.net]

Jim Sharkey, "Misty Morning Rain" • Sharkey, a Roscommon native now living in North Carolina, came late to the music biz after a number of years working as a US Navy photographer and special needs teacher, among other things. Since then, he's become a fixture in the Mid-Atlantic and South, offering a mix of Irish folk and Americana, both traditional and original. "Misty Morning Rain," his third album, is all-Sharkey material, some of it co-written with his accompanists (he plays guitar, harmonica, and bodhran).



Sharkey's compositions are much like the voice with which he sings them:

gentle, often introspective, a little melancholy, and attuned to the quieter, slower-paced rhythms of small-town life. He extols the virtues of seeking comfort and fellowship, away from the madding crowd and other sources of tension, such as in "Hot Chocolate," "The Bar on the Square," and "Nothing in Particular," a therapeutic travelogue of sorts ("Carolina coast is where I go, to be alone, to think things through/In the morning, to the corner, I go down for coffee and a bagel too/and the news in the local publication, doesn't bother me I'm on vacation").

He muses on separation and the prospect of reunion in "The Blue Stars Above," "Misty Morning Rain" and – in a retelling of the selkie legend – "The Enchanted Cap," and on the promise and challenge of courtship in the comic, cheeky "Walk Her Home" ("I'd be up for walking her home/Recreating the romantic poems/she's always reading/She'll find me appealin'/If I walk her home"). There are also meditations on tragedy, both global ("Plight of the Yazidis") and personal ("Song for Conor"), and a moving portrait of parental love and mortality in "Fiona," conveyed through a father's words of reassurance over the years.

Cumulatively, "Misty Morning Rain" doesn't have a lot of variation in tone or pace, so you may find yourself checking out from time to time. But it's hard to find much fault with a guy who's telling you to, for goodness sake, take it easy, stop, and think a little. [jimsharkeymusic.com]