

LifeStyle

The Irish Echo's Weekly Guide to Entertainment and Lifestyle

McManus makes his mark

New solo CD of 'Dream Guitars'

A decade ago, at a small club in New York State, I gained an unforgettable insight into the character of guitarist Tony McManus. He had an opening slot for an Irish traditional band before a less than capacity crowd, so an adequate fee, mainly based on a percentage of admissions, was out of the question. From somewhere across America he had flown in to honor his commitment to perform, and despite the paltry payment he knew he'd receive at the end of the evening, McManus gave a bravura performance, full of passion and great touch. Whether in front of twelve or twelve hundred people, his effort is the same.

Born and raised in Paisley, Scotland, McManus has Irish heritage (paternal grandfather), but the accident of blood alone does not make him a much-in-demand accompanist for such Irish musicians as singers Triona and Maighread Ni Dhomhnaill and fiddler Maevie Donnelly. He has an affinity for all forms of Celtic traditional music, and his close attention to the intricacies and subtleties in Scottish, Irish, Breton, Galician, Cape Breton, and other musical traditions has established his bona fides with the elite in each genre.

But it is as a solo performer on guitar that allows McManus to shine fully, and his new solo recording, "The Maker's Mark (The Dream Guitar Sessions)," is an unusual collaboration between guitar master and guitar makers. He plays 15 different guitars from 15 different luthiers on the premise that each instrument brings something unique to the sound he creates with it. The album also supports his belief that "the golden age for the acoustic guitar is right now."

Among the folk arts workshops held each summer at the Swannanoa Gathering at Warren Wilson College in Asheville, N.C., is Guitar Week, and one year a student named Paul Heumiller attended McManus's workshop each day with a different high-end guitar. "It emerged that this was no fabulously wealthy collector but a dealer in the very finest acoustic guitars currently being made," McManus explained. With guitarist Martin Simpson, Heumiller had founded Dream Guitars in Asheville as a one-stop dealership representing some of the world's premier luthiers. Out of that meeting between McManus the teacher and Heumiller the student-proprietor came the idea for this new album.

The opening track of "Inveran / The Devil in the Kitchen / Locheil's Away to France" is a march, strathspey, and reel medley played on a Randy Lucas wedge-body guitar that affords power

and control together. Those guitar qualities grow stronger through McManus's fingerpicking style: detailed, delicate, and driving over the course of two tempo changes.

"Donal Og / The Lea Rig" is a pairing of an Irish song melody, learned from the singing of Triona and Maighread Ni Dhomhnaill, and a Robert Burns's song melody. McManus plays them on a Brian Applegate guitar, and his fingerpicking enhances the instrument's crystalline, chime-like tone and ripe bass.

The Asturian song melody "Chaleneru" showcases McManus's ability to shape and shade a melody to evoke its indwelling beauty, and the Paul Daniel McGill nylon-string guitar he uses is an ideal instrument for digging deeper.

The most outstanding track on the album is McManus's interpretation of "The Maids of Michelstown," a slow reel immortalized by the Bothy Band, who recorded it on their 1977 album, "Out of the Wind — Into the Sun." (For those with good memories, I used it as the outro music for a N.J. radio program I did in the 1980s.) Kevin Burke on fiddle and Matt Molloy on flute memorably shouldered the melody in the Bothy Band rendition, and McManus uses a Marc Beneteau guitar suited to the luminous detail he brings to one of the most beautiful melodies in all of Irish traditional music. This is a brilliant performance from McManus, who dedicates it to the late Micheal O Domhnaill, a founding member of the Bothy Band.

Other Irish tunes performed by McManus are the slow air "Sliabh na mBan," the air-jig link "An Ciarraioch Mallaithe / Muireann's Jig," and the jig-reel combination "The Rolling Waves / Martin Wynne's #1." All bear the McManus stamp: superb technique, control, and expression. It is especially gratifying to hear the guitarist tackle the tune written by Sligo-born, long-time N.Y. resident fiddler Martin Wynne (1913-98), whose reels numbered 1 to 4 were played consecutively and exceptionally by his protegee, Brian



Above: There is no such thing as too many guitars for Tony McManus.

Left: Tony McManus (left) with Paul Heumiller of Dream Guitars.



Conway, on the latter's "First Through the Gate" album in 2002.

The slow-fast-slow alternation of note runs in James Scott Skinner's strathspey "The Laird of Drumblair" presents a challenge to any player, but McManus is more than equal to it, and his pulse-quickenning delivery of Cape Breton's "The Margaree Reel" provides an ideal finish to the track.

McManus offers some tantalizing exotica in the Romania-flavored

"Doina / Parov's Daichevo," played with a sitar-like effect on a Linda Manzer's 42-string guitar he dubbed "the Delhicaster"; the 17th-century madrigal melody "Si Dolce e'l Tormento"; Michel Bordeleau's Quebecois-rooted tune "Reel de la Sauvagine," which McManus plays with galvanizing virtuosity on a Paul Reed Smith guitar; and an Andre Marchand waltz, "Valse des Belugas," where all 15 guitars pop up in choice spots.

Another slice of exotica merits special mention: "N'Kosi Sikelele Afrika." It is the melody to an anti-apartheid song from South Africa, and what distinguishes the guitar version here is McManus's uncanny ability to echo in his playing two voices: one raised for freedom, and the other raised in freedom. When he was 17 years old, McManus joined the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and in his note for this track he writes, "It is satisfying, just once, to have been a member of an organization that achieved exactly what it set out to do."

In closely listening to this album twice under headphones, which I do for every CD I review, I was reminded of an inscription on the back of a fiddle owned by the late Johnny Cunningham. Next to an engraving of a tree were these words: "In life I was mute, but in death I sing."

Tony McManus understands that sentiment. On "The Maker's Mark" he makes the wood of 15 guitars sing. It is a glorious achievement, the mark of a master.

The album (cat. no. 7-4500-2) is available on Compass Records, 916 19th Ave. South, Nashville, TN 37212, 615-320-7672, www.compass-records.com.

Other new albums

New recordings include "Casadh na Taoide," the second release by the sextet Liadan; "Century" by the Kilfenora Ceili Band; "Faces" by singer Deirdre Scanlan (from Limerick, not the former Tipperary-born lead vocalist of Solas), and "The Company You Keep" by banjoist Alison Brown that features guitarist John Doyle, who also co-wrote two tunes.

