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Jim Gilchrist:

Let loose with a galaxy of guitars

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TONY McManus, doyen of contemporary "Celtic guitarists" (should you recognise such genres), reckons that, while violinists may look with yearning to 17th-century Cremona and mandolin players to the Lloyd Loar Gibsons of the 1920s, so far as acoustic guitar-making is concerned, we're in a golden age right now. "There's no need for us to be looking backwards," the Paisley-born guitarist says from his home in Elora, Ontario. "Guitar-makers are being very innovative, and kids have access to instruments that would have been beyond anyone's means when I was s

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tarting out, in the mid-1970s, when entry level instruments were more of a hindrance than anything else. I taught myself to play on a guitar that was warped in more dimensions than I knew there were dimensions." Gratuitous dimensions clearly didn't cramp his style – last year saw McManus receive Acoustic Guitar magazine's Gold Award in the Celtic guitarist category. But his latest album, *The Maker's Mark*, just released by Greentrax, is a showcase for state-of-the-art craftsmanship as well as his own artistry. It originated when he discovered that one of his guitar students at the annual Swannanoa Gathering in North Carolina tended to arrive with a different top-end instrument for each class. He turned out to be Paul Heumiller, proprietor of the Dream Guitars instrument dealership, and something of a kindred spirit. "He was very enthusiastic about the state of guitar building at present," recalls McManus.

As a result of their conversations, last summer saw the Scots guitarist wander into Nashville's Compass Sound Studio, armed with 15 masterpieces chosen from Heumiller's range. The words "child", "let loose" and "toyshop" do spring to mind, and McManus agrees: "It was fantastic. Not only did I have something like 175,000 bucks worth of instruments to play with, but I had Paul Heumiller as my guitar tech."

It may take a practised ear to appreciate some of the finer differences between instruments, but McManus's consummate musicianship over 15 tracks and 15 instruments ensures that *The Maker's Mark* is much more than a mere guitar road-test. Out of this finely crafted cornucopia of rosewoods and blackwoods, spruces and figured mahogany, emerges the often luminous playing we associate with him, ranging from up-tempo jigs and reels – such as the Rolling Waves set he plays on an instrument by the Tokyo-based maker Michihiro Matsuda – to more contemplative material such as the great Irish air *Sliabh na mBan*, drawn from one by the Santa Cruz luthier Jeff Traugott.

The instrument might influence the choice of tune, or vice versa, he explains. "Paul and I talked on the phone about what I'd like to record and what guitars would suit what and he offered me a few choices. For example the Asturian song, *Chalaneru*, I specifically wanted to do on a nylon-strung guitar." Other tunes, however, simply fell from his fingers, as it were, when he picked up a guitar, such as the pairing of Donal Og with Burns's *The Lea Rig*.

He managed to acquire one of the instruments for himself, – a distinctively twanging "sitar guitar", which he fondly refers to as his "Dehlicaster", by Toronto maker Linda Manzer. He recently attended the New York launch of a limited-edition signature guitar Manzer, developed with the contemporary jazz hero Pat Metheny. "Paul Simon bought the first one."

While the sleeve carries enough information about construction and tunings to keep the aficionados happy, McManus hopes the album will appeal well beyond the anoraks – which it does. "After all, if I'm listening to Miles Davis. I'm not bothered by what particular brand of mute he's using. I hope the music stands on its own."

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