

Reviews

Maura Hagan. *Comin' Around*. GGM 75020-41912. info@maurahagan.com; www.maurahagan.com; www.myspace.com/maurahagan (no postal address on packaging)

This album was recorded and produced in Newfoundland, where Maura Hagan, originally from Scotland, made her home until recently. According to her website, she now lives in Edmonton and is thinking of recording another CD, which will have a more “acoustic folk sound” than this one, which Maura calls “blended Celtic & pop”. I am not sure how Celtic this album is – personally, I think the term is applied almost willy-nilly to recordings that happen to use the odd “Celtic” instrument here and there. I would consider that *Comin' Around* fits better into the pop-country category.

The CD repertoire is entirely made up of covers of other songwriters' works. The producer of the CD, Dave Fitzpatrick, wrote three of the ten tracks, as well as providing the greatest variety of instrumental accompaniment to Maura's lyrical singing. Other tracks include Dougie MacLean's “Caledonia”, Andy M. Stewart's “Where Are You” and Ron Hynes' “Atlantic Blue”, to name a few. Almost all of the songs Maura has chosen to record here seem to be a rehashing of the same theme: love and /or relationships.

When I listen to an artist, I look for songs that have messages that provoke or have engaging stories. Most of this CD's material is of a sameness, making the album excellent if used as background music, but not inspiring enough for me to simply sit and listen. One track, and one only, stood out for me – the only one that had any meat on it. “Steady As She Goes”, written and composed by Brian McNeill, was also a song about a relationship; but this one differed from the rest because it was about a woman abused by her spouse. Maura sang this with thoughtfulness, depth and great feeling. It is by far the most poignant and provocative piece on the album.

Maura Hagan is certainly a very skilled singer. Rita MacNeil called her “a world class singer”, which I do not dispute. As a singer myself, I appreciate any female vocalist who does not overdecorate her singing, whose diction is clear,

and who knows how to make the best use of her vocal skills.

The production of this recording is also very good. All the tracks were very well arranged, featuring six instrumentalists (including the aforementioned producer). I particularly enjoyed the whistle accompaniment of Freddie Jorgensen. If you are looking for a CD full of basically routine relationship songs that plays well in the background while you are doing other things, then *Comin' Around* is for you.

Moirra Cameron, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories

Lizzy Hoyt. *Home*. LHCD-1002. Blue Crown Productions, Box 52051, Edmonton, Alta. T6G 2T5; info@lizzyhoyt.com; www.lizzyhoyt.com

Edmonton-based Lizzy Hoyt is developing a solid reputation as a young, up-and-coming multi-instrumentalist. *Home* is Hoyt's second album, released in 2010 (the first, *My Red Shoes*, was released in 2007). Classically-trained from the age of 4, Hoyt has fiddled professionally in country groups since she was 15 (when she sang back-up and fiddled for the award-winning Canadian singer Eli Barsi) and began pursuing a solo career in 2007. She is a versatile fiddler with a lot of technical skill, and her albums feature a variety of different styles, from rags and waltzes to hornpipes and reels. *Home* is produced by Juno Award winner Jeremiah McDade and Hoyt.

Her first album, *My Red Shoes*, included songs, a rag, waltzes, a Cape Breton reel set, a polka, and some old-time fiddle tunes. Listening to that album a few years ago, I felt that, while Hoyt's fiddling shone on the country and ragtime tunes and waltz, the reels lacked “drive” and, perhaps due to the range of styles presented, I did not get a sense of the artist's own style. Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the second album demonstrates a more mature overall sound, with carefully chosen and arranged tunes and songs that give listeners a sense of Hoyt's particular sound. In particular, *Home* has a more noticeably Irish flavour than the first album, which seemed to favour country and Cape Breton styles and repertoire. The album

features a nice variety of songs and instrumental tracks, and she plays fiddle, mandolin and some guitar, and sings.

The instrumental tracks on the album feature both well-known tunes and Hoyt's own compositions. The four tunes composed by Hoyt were highlights of the album for me; the slow reel entitled "Suzy's Reel" (track 13) was particularly catchy. Two tracks feature nice arrangements for fiddle and harp (including an arrangement of "Sleeping Maggie" for fiddle, harp and bodhran) that provide some timbral variety. While I enjoyed the arrangement of fiddle and whistle unison on the first track of traditional jigs, I found the repeated use of this instrument combination throughout the album quite tiresome; less unison playing would add some interest to the tracks. Hoyt's polished sound seems better suited to Irish (or Irish-flavoured) tunes and her own compositions than it does to the Scottish/Cape Breton repertoire; perhaps the style is too calculated and "clean", as the strathspeys and reels sometimes feel like they lack drive and are being pushed along by the rhythmic guitar accompaniment.

Home also shows off Hoyt's songwriting skills, and her songs are well worth a listen. In particular, she was recognized as a finalist in the 2010 John Lennon Songwriting Contest for her haunting ballad "Vimy Ridge", which tells the story of a Canadian soldier during the battle of Vimy Ridge in World War One. Compared with the songs in the first album, which were all sung in a soft head voice and seemed to lack strength, I was pleasantly surprised by the musicality, vocal maturity and song choices on this later album. In addition to Hoyt's songs, the album includes well-known favourites like the old Irish ballad "Star of the County Down", Cape Breton singer-songwriter Alistair MacGillivray's "Song for the Mira", and Dolly Parton's "Jolene". All three of these songs bring out different attributes of her voice, and were highly enjoyable.

Overall, I enjoyed this CD, and listeners will certainly find the variety of songs, tunes and styles interesting. I look forward to hearing what Hoyt brings us with her next album.

Meghan C. Forsyth, St.
John's, Newfoundland & Labrador

Ron Hynes. *Stealing Genius*. BCD205. Borealis Records, 290 Shuter St., Toronto, Ont. M6R 2B2;

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Ron Hynes is a man of contradictions. He's one of the best songwriters to come out of the Newfoundland tradition. And yet I have never felt his singing was remarkable. He loves to talk (hard to shut him up, sometimes, apparently) and to write of family, love and loss. And yet there's nothing about his own family on his website or his Wikipedia page. Powerful, moving lyrics appear in his wake like crabapples falling from a tree. And then he creates an album with the title *Stealing Genius*.

In a recent interview on CKUA (Peter North, July 3, 2011), Ron discussed his creative process for this album. He holed up for a month in a borrowed house, reading Newfoundland authors and writing constantly. At the end of that marathon session he had about 20 new songs, many inspired by the stories he'd been reading. Surely not stealing, but he knows a good story when he finds it. As a result, co-writing credit is given on six songs, mostly for songs directly inspired by authors or poets.

Ron chose to work with the prolific engineer and producer Paul Mills on *Stealing Genius*. Paul has been involved in the Canadian music scene for just about as long as Ron (early '70s) and has been instrumental in creating albums by artists such as Stan Rogers, James Gordon and Tanglefoot. Paul has an intimate understanding of traditional music that ensures that a recording is true to its roots yet has broad audience appeal.

The album opens with "Blood and Bones", a slow and sad yet somehow danceable song about resettlement, inspired by Donna Morrissey's novel *What They Wanted*. It clearly shows the Paul Mills touch, with the addition of a horn section to the band. Vintage Ron Hynes.

"My Father's Ghost" draws me back again and again. The song begins "...his hands were clenched, his clothes were drenched. I knew that he was dead..." and ends "I mop salt water from the floor". Damn song makes me shiver every time I hear it. Be forewarned!

Ron's nephew Joel Hynes was co-writer on the short piece "All For the USA", written for the stage play *High Steel*. It stands out, as it's done a capella, much like some of the best of Stan Rogers' tales. "All For the USA" is about working men who headed to New York and other cities to build skyscrapers. Immediately following is "Home From the USA/Yanks", equally short but upbeat, actually rather silly. It makes

light of the men returning from America, flush with cash and over-proud of their achievements.

“House” contemplates the slow decay of faded love, and “When I’m Over You” the painful recovery from lost love. Then “What If I Stayed?” considers the possibility of redemption. And later, like a breeze through an open window, comes “I Love You More Than God”. It seems indeed to open a window into the soul of the writer, proving that, despite how hard the years may have been, there is still room for pure and powerful adoration.

Joel A. Weder, Calgary, Alberta

The Irish Descendants. *Encore: Best of The Irish Descendants, vol. 2.* FNCD 5552; Been-there-donethat Entertainment, 44 Charles St. W, Suite 1704, Toronto, Ont. M4Y 1R7; irishdescendants.com; michael.greggs@sympatico.ca

For anyone who loves traditional Newfoundlander music, the Irish Descendants have been a mainstay since their founding in 1991. *Encore: Best of The Irish Descendants, vol. 2*, a follow-up to their 1999 “best-of” release *So Far So Good*, reminds us why after two decades they continue to reign among the best of Newfoundland’s traditional music scene. Well-blended and balanced vocals, outstanding instrumentalists, and a well-programmed track list combine to make this CD a welcome addition to the traditionalist library.

A “best of” recording by an outstanding band is going to be strong by definition, and there is not one misstep on this disk. The Descendants’ tight vocal harmonies are prominently featured primarily in their traditional standards, notably on the opening track, “Sally Brown”, as well as the feisty “Black and Tans”, where post-World War I Irishmen challenge the British guards overseeing them, the rollicking “Step it Out Mary” (which I could happily replay over and over again), and the country-tinged cover of the Saw Doctors’ “Useta Love Her.”

A much-appreciated facet of this recording is the marked variety of tracks. Along with the aforementioned up-tempo traditional inclusions are a rousing rendition of the favourite “Lark in the Morning”, humorous disasters that occur when “Murphy Broke the Pledge”, cheeky irreverence in “Mickey Relligan’s Pup”, and the album’s sole instrumental offering, “Providence Reel/Castle Kelly/The Humours of Tulla”. The haunting ballad “Black is the Colour” and the

nostalgic “Misty Morning Shore”, which will make you want to jump in the nearest boat and head for the Irish coast, provide an introspective contrast to the livelier offerings. Also present are Descendants originals. “Will They Lie There Evermore?” is a haunting melody contemplating the fate and future of the fishing industry in Newfoundland and Labrador. “I Know My Name” has a somewhat pop feel with a straight-forward message: everything around me may be changing, but “I know where I come from and I know my name”.

Perhaps my personal favourite track (though it was a very difficult choice indeed!) is “Rollin’ of the Sea”, which originally appeared on *Look to the Sea* (2008) [see review, *CFM Bulletin*, vol. 29, no. 1 (March 1995), p. 48]. I particularly love the steady building of the instrumental introduction as it bursts into the lively verses, “beckon[ing] me to Newfoundland and Labrador”.

With such an engaging variety of styles and excellent performance and production standards, *Encore* is a recording on which most anyone who enjoys Celtic and/or traditional Atlantic Canadian music can find something to appreciate.

Lori Anne Elias, Willoughby, Ohio

The Rembetika Hipsters. *Kafeneion.* SPR003. Allen Baekeland, 421 19th Ave. NE, Calgary, Alta. T2E 1P4; alnjen@shaw.ca; www.rembetikatika.com (no addresses on packaging)

In existence since 1996 in one form or the other, The Rembetika Hipsters have mostly been a five-man band with a regular gig in a Greek restaurant in Calgary. *Kafeneion* (Greek for “coffee shop”) is their third album, but the first they’ve put out in six years, and the work they’ve put in in the meantime really shows. This CD shows how rock-solid this band has become, and yet how each musician’s particular talents can be showcased without jeopardizing the complete sound of the band.

The CD features several traditional Greek tunes, with the band’s own arrangements, some from the genre of folk tunes and several from the rembetiko (underground) genre. But the most interesting tracks on this CD are those composed by the group’s own members, which offer a wide range of genres while still staying in the realm of Greece.

Although with one exception all of the in-

struments are acoustic, the CD is so well mixed that no instrument overpowers any other, and the vocals blend in smoothly. The song titles are accommodatingly written in English, transliterated Greek, and actual Greek.

The first track, “The Seagulls”, is a traditional island piece and features excellent vocal harmonies with frontman Nikos Diochnos and guest vocalist Zoe Theodorou. If it weren't for the original harmonies in the background, one would never know it was not recorded in Greece.

“Uncle George's Tavern”, the second track, from the rembetiko (underground) genre and composed by Giorgos Iosifelis, a new addition to the lineup, also sounds quite traditional, and features choral vocals on the refrain, and instrumental solos which never break the feeling or the rhythm.

“Dhimitroula” is a well-known Greek song in 9/8, switching from 2-2-2-3 in the instrumental breaks to 2-3-2-2 on the vocals. This is sung by Allan Baekeland, I presume, although the jacket does not include the information about who does what on which piece. It's followed by the most unusual track on the recording, “Snakes at the Euxine”, an original piece by clarinetist Lincoln Frey, which is a rocky tune with heavy bass and an edgy, jazzy sound.

“Dreaming Daughter” starts out with vamping bouzouki and violin mixed with sounds of a Greek glendi (feast) in the background; Part II (“A Dream”) is in a 3/4 waltz rhythm, with an arrangement that sounds more like something you'd hear in an English folk cafe, switching to a lively 6/8 for the third part (“Her Dance”), an instrumental with an original clarinet solo winding through it, followed by a more traditional Greek-sounding violin solo.

This is followed by the famous “Baxé Tsifliki”, in a very traditional arrangement, with consummate male vocal harmonies.

The arrangement on the heavy rembetika track “Ferte Preza na Prezaro” is a bit smoother than the traditional versions – although one does get the somewhat lethargic feeling of the hashish smoker. This piece features guest vocalist Zoe Theodorou.

“Michaela Tripticho”, another original track, this time written by violinist Jonathan Lewis, starts out in 3/4 and features a very cool bouzouki solo by frontman Nikos Diochnos, followed by a fun violin solo (by Jonathan Lewis), then clarinet (by Lincoln Frey), all backed up by creative guitar chording. The second part of this piece is a traditional Kalamatiano dance in 7/8,

and then switches to a Northern Greek Mandilatos dance, also in 7/8. Violin and clarinet solos are featured throughout.

“Trexha Manga”, the ninth track, which masquerades as a traditional rembetika lament, is another original piece, this time composed by Nikos Diochnos – it had this reviewer fooled! The arrangement sounds quite traditional, too.

“Mi me koitas sta matia” is a traditional dance tune from the Epiros region, close to the Albanian border, composed by one of the best-known traditional musicians and composers of that region. The arrangement is fairly true to the genre, with interesting harmonies, and call-and-response vocals.

“I Ousia”, in the popular Kalamatianos dance rhythm, is another original piece composed by Nikos Diochnos, who proclaims how little he misses his lost love.

“Eimai prezakias”, a traditional rembetiko piece in the tsifteteli (belly dance) rhythm, is really brilliant, as the rhythm slinks just right, while the violin and clarinet add to the Middle Eastern feeling by sliding silkily in and out of the piece and up and down the scale.

The last track, “Tragic Zeimbekiko”, isn't really a zeimbekiko, which should be in 9/8, but that's OK. It's a very cool piece featuring a bassoon-like instrument (bass clarinet), played by Lincoln Frey, and the weeping violin of Jonathan Lewis.

The CD ends with a phone message, left at 4:00 a.m. Calgary time, from Nikos to Jonathan, from Nikos' family's village of Polydrosos, with musicians playing in the background.

The CD is available at CD Baby, and the band has a blog on www.rembetika.com, where you should be able to find more information on this recording and the current band members, but at the time of this review it was in need of updating.

Laura Blumenthal, Vancouver, British Columbia

Stan Rogers. *The Very Best of Stan Rogers.* FCM 013D. Borealis Records, 290 Shuter St., Toronto, Ont. M6R 2B2; info@borealisrecords.com; www.borealisrecords.com; www.stanrogers.com

“Booming”, “melodious” and “commanding”, they've said of his voice.

“Big” and “6 foot 4”, they've said of his appearance.

“Poignant”, they've said of his lyrics.

And of the man himself: “generous”, “brash” and “brilliant”.

These tropes are the meat and potatoes of Stan Rogers’ posthumous fame, which took off after his tragic 1983 death in a burning plane. By this time he had recorded seven albums of material, three of which were released after his passing. In 2009, his widow, Ariel Rogers, teamed up with producer Paul Mills (a.k.a. Curly Boy Stubbs) to have the first five of his albums digitized and remastered; a selection of those recordings now comprise this “Best Of” release.

From an already-mythologized singer, what can a retrospective album such as this one offer to listeners in 2011?

The collection does, after all, represent the official transfer of Rogers’ catalogue to the digital canvas. Fans who are already intimately familiar with his original releases may appreciate a fresh take on the subtleties through the careful remastering work of Joao Carvahlo. Carvahlo has worked with a wide range of roots and pop/rock artists, including the Rankin Family, Spirit of the West, Blue Rodeo, Sarah Harmer, The Weakerthans, Sloan and Buck 65 – so, digitally speaking, Stan Rogers is now in the company of Canada’s younger musical generation.

For new listeners, this 16-track compilation offers a handy cross-section of tunes from various stages of Rogers’ short career. Selections from his early studio albums include the title track of *Fogarty’s Cove* (which helped to cement his popular association with the Maritimes), as well as *Turnaround’s* “The Jeannie C.”, one of his many songs exploring the lives of fishermen.

However, it is the later studio albums that are the most well-represented, with five tracks from 1980’s *Northwest Passage* (including the classic tune of the same name), and another four from 1983’s *From Fresh Water*. As Chris Gudgeon wrote in his 1993 biography of Rogers, these two albums were meant to represent Western Canada and Ontario, respectively, as part of an unfinished five-part album series about the various geographical regions of Canada. We get a taste of these regional themes on tracks such as “Field Behind the Plow,” with its Prairie imagery:

Watch the field behind the plow turn to
straight dark rows;
Feel the trickle in your clothes; blow the
dust-cake from your nose.

as well as “White Squall,” depicting the Great Lakes region:

But watch the deadly waters glide as we roll
north to the ‘Soo’,
And wonder when they’ll turn again and
pitch us to the rail,
And whirl off one more youngster in the gale.

In addition to these representative studio recordings, listeners will also hear some live tracks from the album *Between the Breaks*, recorded at Toronto’s Groaning Board Pub in 1979. According to Gudgeon, two of these songs (“Flowers of Bermuda” and the famous “Mary Ellen Carter”) were written specifically for that pub recording. Also included is the much-celebrated “Barrett’s Privateers”.

Musically speaking, most of the selections feature the usual combination of instruments known to Rogers’ recordings, with regulars Paul Mills and Garnet Rogers on guitar and fiddle, respectively. While most tracks contain some bass, piano and drums, these were performed by different artists, depending on the year of the recording. The mandolin playing of Grit Laskin can also be heard on a number of tracks, and most selections pulled from 1983’s *From Fresh Water* contain some orchestral arrangements. Of course, none of this information would be new to long-time fans of Stan Rogers. So, how might this release measure up in the ears of newbies? Certainly, the historical and geographical bent to Roger’s songwriting can appeal to anyone interested in Canadiana. Think: a musical teaching tool to supplement a Canadian geography lesson; or a gift for one’s foreign hosts when travelling abroad. Of course, that’s not to say Rogers’ songwriting was trapped in the Canadian past. I was particularly struck by the themes of globalization and environmentalism in “Tiny Fish for Japan”, a song I’d never heard before reviewing this album:

If we want to eat fish, then we’ll open a can,
And catch tiny fish for Japan...
The old guys remember when the water ran
clear.
No poisons with names that we can’t under
stand
And no tiny fish for Japan.

Not bad for 1983. This song could have been written yesterday.

However, if this album is to function as an “Intro to Stan Rogers for Newbies,” then it does have a major shortcoming: the liner notes are restricted to Mills’ and Ariel Rogers’ brief re-

flections on the remastering process. There are no lyrics included, and no context regarding Rogers' life, career or creative process. Listeners unfamiliar with Rogers' work will therefore be getting to know the singer-songwriter purely through his music (not that this is a wholly negative thing, mind you...).

Sija Tsa, Toronto, Ontario

A Peak in Darien

Some of these will be reviewed in upcoming issues; some are outside our purview, but are included as a courtesy to the people who sent them to us, and to inform our readers.

Recordings

La Bottine Souriante. *Appellation d'origine contrôlée*. BCD211. FCM 013D. Borealis Records, 290 Shuter St., Toronto, Ont. M6R 2B2; info@borealisrecords.com; www.borealisrecords.com

Michael Jerome Browne. *The Road is Dark*. BCD209. Borealis Records (addresses above)

Bob Evans. *Dr. Bob's Acoustic Tonic*. ATCD004. Acoustic Tonic Music, 129 Douglas Ave. E, Regina, Sask. S4N 1H2; bob@bobevansguitar.com; www.bobevansguitar.com

James Hill. *Man With a Love Song*. BCD2007. Borealis Records (addresses above)

Jim McLennan. *Six-String Gumbo: Solo Acoustic Guitar*. JM1001. Box 482, Longview, Alta. T0L 1H0; mclennan@telusplanet.net

Mighty Popo. *Gakondo*, BCD210. Borealis Records (addresses above)

The Once. *Row Upon Row of the People They Know*. BCD212. Borealis Records (addresses above)

Steven Palmer. *From Here to Nashville*. #309, 51 Wood Lily Dr., Moose Jaw, Sask. S6J 1H1; stevepalmermusic@hotmail.com; www.spmusic.ca

Mark Perry. *West*. Northern Sky Records, 10812 Old Babine Lake Rd., Smithers, B.C. V0J 2N7; info@markperry.ca; markperry.ca

Stan Rogers. *Fogarty's Cove*. BCD213. FCM 013D. Borealis Records (addresses above)

Oliver Schroer & Nuala Kennedy. *Enthralled*. BCD206. Borealis Records (addresses above)

Denise Withnell. *Rose Petal Pie*. CFA013. Centerfire Music, Box 868, Turner Valley, Alta. T0L 2A0; centerfi@telus.net; www.denisewithnell.com

