

Powerhouse trio sets 'Hair' on fire

McEvoy and O Raghallaighs deliver one of the year's top albums

The first tune change in the medley "Anderson's Reel / Carthy's / Sweeney's Dream" on "Noel Hill and Tony Linnane," the classic 1979 album made by concertinist Hill and fiddler Linnane with guests Matt Molloy on flute and Alec Finn on bouzouki, still sends a shiver up my spine. I interviewed Hill about how that masterwork recording was made, and he said they just caught fire in the studio.

Thirty-one years later, something similar must have happened to Birmingham-born flutist Catherine McEvoy (her parents came from Roscommon, and she lives in Meath now), Dublin-born, Kerry resident fiddler Caoimhin O Raghallaigh, and Dublin-born, Meath resident concertinist Micheal O Raghallaigh when they recorded "Comb Your Hair and Curl It." It's a stupendous album that does not compromise individual virtuosity to attain a fully complementary trio sound. Three masters of their instruments come together at their peak to play music that's invigorating and imaginative. At times their playing seems to reach too far beyond itself, their creativity refusing any circumscription, but the trio's grasp is sure and confident, and that is the deep-dwelling source of the album's strength and sparkle.

The credentials these three instrumentalists bring to the recording are impeccable. In 2008 Catherine McEvoy released her second solo CD, "The Home Ruler," which finished fourth in the Irish Echo's top ten albums list. Her fluid, rhythmic, roll-ornamented, beautifully phrased and paced flute work is rooted in the Sligo-Roscommon style and proves that freshness and liveliness need not rely on wildness and velocity. But on "Comb Your Hair and Curl It," she revels in the risk inclinations of her partners and shows that she, too, can ripple her style when the spirit moves her.

In 2001 "The Nervous Man," the solo debut of Micheal O Raghallaigh, was not only one of the finest albums of that year but also one of the greatest concertina recordings ever made. His follow-up solo CD in 2006, "Inside Out," was nearly as impressive, and his membership in such ensembles as Providence, Tain Ceili Band, and Naomh Padraig Ceili Band solidified his reputation as an excellent ensemble player.

Caoimhin O Raghallaigh, whom I saw perform recently at the Festival of World Cultures in Dun Laoghaire, collaborated with Dublin uilleann piper Mick O'Brien on "Kitty Lie Over," far and away the top trad album of 2003 and one of the best releases over the past seven years. Caoimhin is a master of what might be



Three of Ireland's finest musicians: (l-r) Micheal O Raghallaigh, Caoimhin O Raghallaigh, and Catherine McEvoy.



A monumental recording.

called the "in-between" on fiddle. An uncanny explorer of interstices, he can just as ably tuck in tantalizing notes as leave them out and let space or silence convey the mood. The fact that he tuned down the fiddle to fit better with Mick O'Brien's flat set of pipes on "Kitty Lie Over" is not, in itself, an explanation of their accomplishment together. That album's tempo is exemplary, the rhythm

is pulsing and ripe, and the sound is as unfiltered as their originality. Caoimhin is a fascinating paradox: a deep thinker who disdains too much thinking as he performs. Along with Martin Hayes, he is the most technically advanced sensualist on fiddle in Irish traditional music today.

Of course, the formidable talents of Catherine McEvoy, Caoimhin O Raghallaigh, and Micheal O Raghallaigh could have resulted in a train wreck of insistent methodology, rigid temperaments, and clashing ideas. Not every all-star lineup translates into an all-star performance. But the respect each has for the others' skills has fostered a liberating, harmonious atmosphere in which chance-taking is encouraged. Consequently, there are no rounded corners, filed-off burrs, or unctuousness in the playing. The trio's music places spirit above any restrictive notion of smoothness.

Every one of the album's 14 tracks is superb. I can find no fault whatsoever in what I hear, nor would I be so foolish to try. Indulging in a game of "gotcha" with this album is like force-criticizing

Bernini's "The Ecstasy of St. Teresa." And like that breathtaking sculpture in Rome's Santa Maria della Vittoria, "Comb Your Hair and Curl It" captures rapture.

The repertoire is fairly familiar, and there's no accompanying guitar, bouzouki, or piano. (This "backless" trend appears to be spreading among self-issued recordings, and not necessarily because of small budgets.) But the interlacing of the three melody instruments is done so compellingly that you never miss formal rhythm backing.

In the jigs "Throw it Across the Road / Maid in the Cherry Tree / Jenny Picking Cockles," concertina and fiddle ride on their own exquisite momentum, and Caoimhin in one passage plays fiddle in a granular lower register to set off Michael's lyrically driven concertina playing.

In the reels "Navy on the Shore / Glen of Aherlow / Dublin Porter / Pinch of Snuff," Catherine's breathy style of flute playing literally breathes energy



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