

This month: Kate and Anna McGarrigle

Each month we test a musician with a set of records which they're asked to comment on and "mark out of five" – with no prior knowledge of what it is they're hearing! This month: Kate and Anna McGarrigle take the test with Philip Watson.

FRENCH-CANADIAN singer-songwriters Kate and Anna McGarrigle may be recognised for having produced some of the most poignant, affecting music of the last 20 years, but defining it can be more problematic. Daughters of a Québécois mother and Irish-Canadian father, the McGarrigles create music infused by folk forms ranging from Celtic jigs to traditional French-Canadian lullabys, country and western, and such popular American singers as Hoagy Carmichael and the Everly Brothers. They also favour using traditional acoustic instruments such as fiddles, accordions, banjos and hand-held drums.

While the McGarrigles' songs have been recorded by such artists as Linda Ronstadt, Emmylou Harris, Loudon Wainwright III (Kate's former husband) and Marianne Faithfull, the sisters launched their own recording careers in 1976 with their celebrated, highly original debut *Kate And Anna McGarrigle* (Warner Bros). Since then the duo have produced six albums including *The French Album* (Hannibal), a collection of old and new songs with French lyrics, and last year's *Heartbeats Accelerating* (Private Music), a richer, more textured recording, and their first for seven years. Although live performances in Europe have been sparse in recent years, the McGarrigles played the Royal Festival Hall in July as part of The Chieftains Music Festival.

JONI MITCHELL

"Cherokee Louise" from *Night Ride Home* (Geffen). Wayne Shorter (ss); Mitchell (g, kbs, v); Larry Klein (b); Vinnie Colaiuta (d); Karen Paris (voc).

Kate: It sounds like Joni Mitchell, but I don't know this song.

Anna: Is this from her most recent record? Yeah, it's floatier-sounding than it used to



The McGarrigle Sisters wait for the flash to go off. Photo by Mark Douet

be. She's very consistent in that her storytelling tradition, lack of rhyme, and long, very tight phrasing are immediately recognisable. Even though her music's changed over the years, she manages to stay herself.

Kate: But she's not really been an influence. We didn't listen to a lot of contemporary singer-songwriters, we mostly listened to traditional music. I mean, I don't own a Joni Mitchell record. She's a little jazzier than we are – we tend to stick more to traditional kinds of chords. But she's definitely great, there's no doubt about that.

Anna: Yeah, she's probably the single greatest female . . .

Kate: Composer . . .

Anna: Of her time and beyond it. And her influence on all these new singers like Tracy Chapman is enormous.

Kate: She has an attitude, she has a style, and . . . I'll give it five.

Anna: Yeah, five.

PATSY CLINE

"Sweet Dreams" from *Golden Greats: Patsy Cline, The Original Recordings* (MCA). Cline (v); no personnel listed.

Kate: Oh, that's "Sweet Dreams".

Anna: Is this the original? Is it Patsy Cline?

Kate: (laughing) Great line: "I shall never wear your ring". Her singing is so cultured – every breath, every note – it's like a trained singer. That voice would sit right out in front of the track and there's not one mistake in it.

Anna: And no one can imitate that voice because it's in the genes, it's in the accent and timbre of the people in that area (Virginia). The whole thing is very stylised, too, compared to some of the more naive country music that was being made at the same time. This stuff must have sounded so cool and super-sophisticated.

Marks?



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Kate: Oh, five. The kind of country that I prefer is something a little simpler and less strident, but this is all there, you can't improve on it.

Anna: Yeah, that's a perfect five.

KD LANG

"Wallflower Waltz" from *Absolute Torch And Tuang* (Sire). Lang (g, v); Greg Lister (steel g); Ben Mink (g, mand, strings); John Dymond (b); Michel Pouliot (d).

Anna: (After a whispered conference.) That's very good singing, but we don't know who it is.

It's kd lang.

Kate: Oh, it is. Okay. I don't like the song very much. I have trouble associating her visual image of the big old cowboy hat, the chaps sitting around the camp fire, and turn-of-the-century cowboys out on the range with the warm, very feminine voice that comes out of it.

Anna: Yeah, she's not really a good old girl; she's not really like people brought up in the country or on ranges and farms.

Kate: But I like her background, I like that kind of music – she's using traditional instruments – and I like the fact they really exaggerate the music, every chord is really leaned into. But I'm never really sure if they're quite making fun of it.

Marks?

Anna: Well, certainly the arrangement on that cut was very good. I'd give her a five.

Kate: Yeah, we're basing the five on the *quality* of what she's doing. kd lang is excellent, she's a force.

THE BOSWELL SISTERS

"Shout, Sister, Shout" from *Nothing Was Sweeter Than The Boswell Sisters* (Ace Of Hearts). Martha, Connie and Vet Boswell (v) with a o Manny Klein (tp); Eddie Lang (g); Joe Venuti (vn), Chauncey Moorehouse (vib).

Anna: Well, it's certainly not The Supremes. I don't know who it is.

Kate: And it's too early for the McGuire Sisters.

It's The Boswell Sisters.

Kate: The only stuff I have from that era is Ma Rainey, but that's even earlier, and I really love her because she's so raw. This is very sweet; it's beginning to stylise blues for

a white audience. You can almost hear that Sophie Tucker influence, but it's as if they've studied diction or something.

Anna: When they do those close harmonies and swoops it reminds of some of the soundtracks to the Disney films.

Kate: Yeah, I can't take this too seriously musically. They've already taken something – I prefer to go to where they took it from and make something out of that. And the song kinda went all over the place. I'll give that a three.

Anna: Oh, I'd give it more than that. It doesn't touch you, and it's not really saying anything, but everything was executed well. I'll give it four-and-a-half.

SINÉAD O'CONNOR

"Nothing Compares 2 U" from *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got* (Ensign). O'Connor (v): no other personnel listed.

(Together) It's Sinéad O'Connor.

Anna: Great singer, terrific.

Kate: Her performance on the Grammy Awards was the best thing I've seen on TV for years. She was looking sharp, and it just didn't matter, she was just so intense and so great. It was *raaaaawwww*, and I was really moved by it; it's like she's all in it. There's something of the beauty and the beast in her – she's incredibly beautiful and vulnerable-looking, but at the same time there's something incredibly raw and animal about her.

Anna: Yeah, she's exciting, and I'd have to say that I agree with Sinéad's comments on the Gulf War – more power to her. I think people tend to be more outspoken over here than we do in Canada or America. If you had opened your mouth and said something negative about the Gulf War you would have been a marked person.

Marks?

Kate: Six.

Anna: Sure.

Kate: Because she took a song written by a great songwriter and a terrific personality and she made it her own. That's real ability.

THE NOLANS

"I'm In The Mood For Dancing" from *The Best Of The Nolans* (Ditto). No personnel listed.

Kate: I've got no idea. Who is it?

It's the Nolan sisters.

Kate: Well, I've never heard of them. I get the feeling that these kids were groomed by their parents in the way the Jacksons were by theirs. They're making a living I suppose, but this is too poppy popular music for me. And the word "dancing" seems to come into the song an awful lot; you certainly know they're in the mood by the end of the song. It's as if they're trying to sound like no one in particular; I don't hear a personality in the vocals.

Anna: It was well done, but it's like a generic hit – you think you might have heard it, but you haven't.

Marks?

Kate: Oh (pause). Well, the Boswells' cut was more interesting because you could at least hear the individual voices. On this track I can't really hear whether it's two voices, five, or 12.

Anna: The song is not terribly good. Without being impolite: two.

DOLLY PARTON/LINDA RONSTADT/ EMMYLOU HARRIS

"To Know Him Is To Love Him" from *Trio* (Warner Bros). Parton/Ronstadt/Harris (v); Ry Cooder (g); Albert Lee (g); David Lindley (g, mand); Kenny Edwards (b); Russ Kunkel (d).

Kate: (immediately) This is *Trio*, right? Yeah, we have this record.

Anna: Yeah, it's very nice. It's a beautiful tune.

Kate: Phil Spector wrote it, didn't he? He wrote it for his father. What's interesting is that they're all very different personalities as singers. Linda's not really a country singer, Dolly's *definitely* a country singer of the old mould, and Emmylou's a new brand of country singer. The record was good, but this track I found a little slow.

Anna: Yeah, this was a nice rendition, and their vocal blend is very beautiful, but the modulation I'm not too sure about.

Marks?

Anna: It's hard for us because we're biased – both Linda and Emmylou have recorded songs of ours. Okay, again, because it's just a cover and I'm biased in favour of the Teddy Bears' original . . .

Kate: Yes, in my opinion the original was more exciting . . .

Anna: I'd have to say four-and-a-half.