

# Mary McPartlan, press pack

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## Mary McPartlan, quotes

**BBC Radio 2**, week of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Sep 2004:

Mary McPartlan's, **The Holland Handkerchief** reaches **NUMBER ONE on the Top 10** from record shops all over Great Britain.



The Holland Handkerchief, the album



Rainy Night in Soho, the single

'...Mary McPartlan has one of the great voices of Ireland... "

**THE LIVING TRADITION**

'...McPartlan's voice is gloriously earthy...'

**THE IRISH TIMES**

'...A voice that pins you against the wall...'

*Essential Folk Album of the Month,*

**5 \*\*\*\*\***

**MOJO**

'...What the hell she's been doing producing other people when she can sing like this? ...'

**FROOTS**

'...Incredible debut and a potential Irish album of the year...'

**5 \*\*\*\*\***

**SONGLINES**

'... One of the year's finest traditional albums...'

**BBC.co.uk**

# Mary McPartlan, pictures



Mary McPartlan with Shane MacGowan  
Mary's new single *Rainy Night in Soho* was written by MacGowan



## Mary McPartlan, a biography

Mary Mc Partlan, who has lived in Galway since the mid-Eighties, was born and reared near Drumkeeran, Co Leitrim. Her singing career began in the 1970s, with the folk duo *Calypso* and she has been a well-known figure on the Irish folk music scene for many years, both as a producer/director/organiser and as a singer.

She was one of the founders of the Galway singers' club *Riabhóg* and she initiated, developed and co-ordinated the TG4 National Traditional Music Awards. She co-produced two award-winning music series, *FLOSC*, for TG4 and was a founding member and producer of the Galway-based theatre company *Skehana*. She was also administrator of Galway Youth Theatre and administrator of the Galway Simon Community.

Mary performed in the Druid theatre/Sean Tyrell productions of *The Midnight Court* in the 1990s. She established her own PR and arts consultancy agency, called Mac P Productions/Gael Ocaídí Teo, in the early Nineties. This company offered a creative link between the traditional, cultural and arts sectors and the business community.

During the past 10 years Mary McPartlan:

- Initiated and developed a cultural exchange programme between Ireland and Argentina in 1999.
- Was commissioned by Galway Municipal Theatre to research and direct a series of traditional based art forms for Summer Shows at the Galway Town Hall theatre.
- Was commissioned by the (then) Department of Arts, Heritage, Culture and the Gaeltacht during Ireland's Presidency of the EU in 1996 to devise and direct an Irish Cultural Performance of leading musicians, dancers, singers and writers as a special event for the meeting of European Ministers of Culture.
- In 2002, researched and directed the opening of *Glór*, the Irish National Music Centre in Ennis, Co Clare, presenting three generations of Clare's distinguished musical heritage.
- Co-ordinated the singing participation from Ireland at the second International Voice Festival in Lvov in the Ukraine in 2002.
- Co-produced the documentary *Nan*, two half hour programmes on the life and singing of Nan Tom Teamín De Burca, which was shown on TG4 in December 2003.
- Was commissioned by the Entertainment Corporation of New York New York, Las Vegas to produce a four-hour Irish show based on the history of Irish music, song, dance and culture. This show ran for three months during the summer of 2003 at the *Nine Fine Irishmen* venue in Las Vegas.
- Was Music Consultant for the Scannain Dobharchu production of *Lochrainn Ceol* Christmas Music Special on TG4, 2003.

Her debut CD, *The Holland Handkerchief*, was launched in Galway on the 30th of January 2004 and was followed by a series of concerts in Drumkeeran, Dublin and Sligo

# The Holland Handkerchief, CD Reviews

**BBC Music Online** ([www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk))

29<sup>th</sup> Sep 2004

## **Mary McPartlan**

The Holland Handkerchief, (Mac P Productions)

With this debut album arriving in her 50th year, you could say Mary McPartlan has been a little backward in coming forward as a singer. A busy career in theatre and TV production is one of the reasons that her remarkable lived-in voice has so far only been heard in a few back-street clubs of Galway and the surrounding area, but *The Holland Handkerchief* is likely to change that.

Her tendency to bend notes betrays a fondness for both the blues and sean-nós, and this tasteful and varied selection of largely traditional Irish songs puts her in the same league as Dolores Keane and Niamh Parsons.

An obvious highlight is the charged, spooky title track which kicks off the disc, establishing her as a compelling story teller. The version of Shane McGowan's wonderful "Rainy Night In Soho" is effectively understated, and it's interesting to compare her take on "Aura Lee" - full of sentiment, though never sentimental - with that of fellow Galway singer Sean Keane. On the more upbeat side, "As I Roved Out/Joe ODowd's Barndance" strays into the kind of territory frequented by The Dubliners, and "Saw You Running" could almost be Kirsty MacColl. "Slieve Gallion Braes" is the oldest song in her repertoire; performed with just two backing singers, it harks back to her early days in the mid 70's, when she was part of a duo called Calypso.

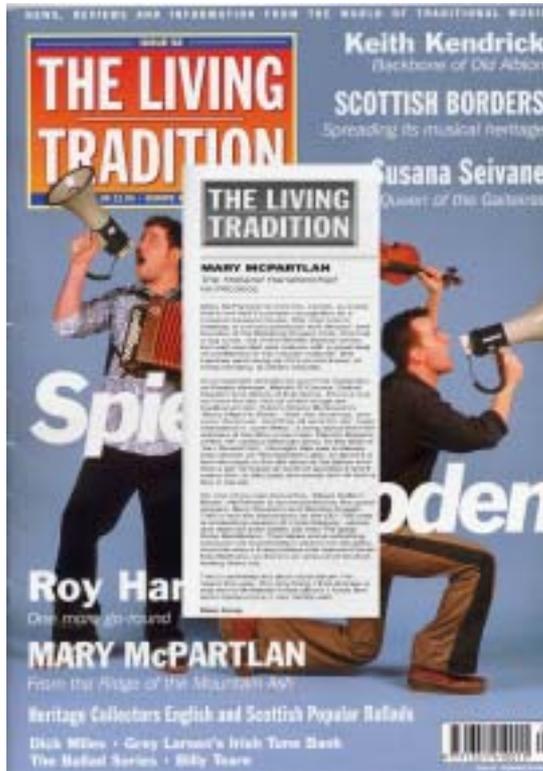
The other arrangements include everything from the stark unaccompanied take on "Lord Gregory" to the driving electric folk rock of "The Holland Handkerchief", and come courtesy of Dervish's excellent fiddler/guitarist Shamie ODowd. Having initiated Ireland's TG4 National Music Awards in the mid 1990's, Mary had the luxury of being able to call on a who's who of Ireland's traditional music scene to play for her. So the starry cast of session musicians includes the likes of Uilleann piper Paddy Keenan and accordionist Mairtín OConnor, who help to make this one of the year's finest traditional albums.

**Jon Lusk**

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**The Living Tradition**

Oct '04



**MaryMcPartlan**

The Holland Handkerchief, MCPRCD001

Mary McPartlan is from Co. Leitrim, a county that's not had its proper recognition as a musical treasure house. She now lives in Galway, is a musical producer and director, and founder of the Riabhóg Singers Club. She has a big voice, not in the Shirley Bassey sense, but well rounded and mature with a great deal of confidence on her chosen material. She handles each song as if it's an old friend; at times tenderly, at others robustly.

Accompanied at times by such fine musicians as Paddy Keenan, Máirtín Ó Connor, Cathal Hayden and others of that stamp, this is a tour de force for her. Not all of the songs are traditional Irish; there's Shane MacGowan's 'Rainy Night in Soho', 'Saw You Running', and even 'Aura Lee'. And they all work for her.

I was interested in 'John Riley', a song about the Irish soldiers of the little known San Patricio Brigade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Mexican army. At the start of 'As I Roved Out', I thought this was a Galway City version of 'The Spanish Lady'. In fact it's a feminist reply to the old story of the fellow who tells a girl he'll give all sort of goodies if she'll marry him; in this case she sends him off with a flea in his ear.

On one of my favourites, 'Slieve Gallion Braes', McPartlan is accompanied by two great singers, Mary Staunton and Martina Goggin. This is one of the best tracks on the CD. The best is a haunting version of 'Lord Gregory', where she does an ever better job than the great Dolly MacMahon. That takes some admitting because I've loved Dolly's version for decades. And she was a Furey before she married Ciarán MacMathúna, so there's an amount of kindred feeling there too.

This is definitely the best vocal album I've heard this year. The only thing I've found strange is that this is McPartlan's first album. I hope she soon makes more; I can hardly wait.

**Mick Furey**

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**Songlines**  
Sep-Oct '04



**MaryMcPartlan**

The Holland Handkerchief \*\*\*\*\* (5\*)

**Incredible debut, and a potential Irish album of the year**

Rarely can there have been a debut album as compelling as *The Holland Handkerchief*, released by the Leitrim-born, Galway-based singer, Mary McPartlan. Blessed with a distinctively evocative and welcoming voice and a strong sense of her own musical personality, Mary and her close collaborator, the stunningly talented multi-instrumentalist Shamie O'Dowd of Dervish, have conspired to produce a gem of a recording, thoroughly reinforced by the redoubtable production skills of PJ Curtis. Add to this instrumentalists of the calibre of accordionist Máirtín O'Connor, uilleann piper Paddy Keenan and fiddler Cathal Hayden and success is utterly guaranteed.

Apart from that voice, the power of *The Holland Handkerchief* lies in Mary's choice of material and the quality of Shamie's arrangements. As well as the remarkably vibrant opening title track, there are many other places on the album where everything just simply falls into place. One is Tim Edwards' 'Ladybird', in which the sheer expressive resonance of Mary's voice is highlighted by the eloquence of Eddie Lynch's piano accompaniment. Another is Mary's version of the Tim O'Brien/Guy Clarke collaboration, 'John Riley', where Shamie proves he might have an alternative career as a blues harmonica player and then demonstrates he could sub as a slide guitar player too on an atmospheric rendition of 'Aura Lee'. Then there's a dazzling largely unaccompanied vocal performance of 'Slieve Gallion Braes' to close an equally alluring album and one that should already be considered as Irish album of the year!

**Geoff Wallis**

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**fROOTS Magazine**  
June 04



**MaryMcPartlan**

The Holland Handkerchief, MCPRCD001

She's long worked behind the scenes in Ireland as a music producer for theatre and television... and you instantly wonder what the hell she's been doing producing other people when she can sing like this. Earthy, with a real sense of the soul of traditional song, I'd even go as far as saying she's the best Irish singer I've heard since Dolores Keane (though a voice in my head is yelling "Niamh Parsons" even as I type). That McPartlan also has some of the cream of Irish musicians grouped around her - including Paddy Keenan, Mairtin O'Connor, Liam Kelly, Tom Morrow and Cathal Hayden - in addition to Dervish's excellent Shamie O'Dowd as musical arranger and P.J.Curtis as producer-ensure this will surely wind up as one of the very best albums of the year.

Her other forte seems to be resurrecting and rejuvenating old material, most disarmingly, one of Shane MacGowan's very finest sentimental songs, 'Rainy Night In Soho', though lively arrangements of The Holland Handkerchief, Johnny Lovely Johnny, and As I Roved Out (a complete with show stopping contribution from Cathal Hayden's banjo) aren't far behind. It's a shrewd, neatly balanced repertoire and in some ways surprising repertoire... an eerie Peat Bog Soldiers; a pounding version of John Riley, the Tim O'Brien/Guy dark song about the San Patricios Irish brigade who swapped sides to fight for the Mexicans against the Yankees; a welcome reminder of the old Midnight Well song Saw You Running; and a gently jazzy Aura Lee over a tune later purloined by Elvis for Love Me Tender. And she proves her credentials as an unaccompanied singer with stunning versions of Lord Gregory and Slieve Gallion Braes, the latter helped along by some spine-tingling Mary Staunton and Martina Goggin harmonies.

Few are the albums that can satisfy the hardcore folk element while achieving clear mainstream appeal - and the likes of Dolores Keane and Mary Black have faltered. I do believe Mary McPartlan has succeeded.

**Colin Irwin**

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Mojo  
June 04



**MARY McPARTLAN \*\*\*\*\* (5\*)**  
The Holland Handkerchief. MCP1

**Essential Folk Album of the Month**

**An extraordinarily mature and moving debut album from an Irish mother of four**

SHE'S GOT a brilliant supporting cast of musicians-ex-Bothy Band piper Paddy Keenan and master box player Mairtin O'Connor among them -- but ultimately it's the voice that pins you against the wall.

Whether she's delivering the heart-tugging unaccompanied ballads, Lord Gregory and Slieve Gallion Braes, the sinister Peatbog Soldiers, Tim O'Brien's alt country stomper John Riley or the jazz-infused Aura Lee to a tune more often applied to Love Me Tender, McPartlan's singing has the depth, surety and instinctive emotion you only tend to hear from generations of traditional singers.

I'll go further and say I've not heard an Irish singer with as much natural soul since the young Delores Keane, and her transformation of Shane McGowan's, Rainy Night in Soho.

This is a sentimental Irish album in the good old way.

**Colin Irwin**

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### **The Daily Telegraph**

7<sup>th</sup> June 2004

Why would someone want her first CD to sound as if might have been issued 30 years ago? The answer in the case of Mary McPartlan is that her freshness as a recording artist is misleading. If Peat Bog Soldiers is one of several examples of songs that recall the smoky, beery folk clubs of the 1970s, it is worth remembering that McPartlan was, by then, already singing in public.

During her career as a music producer, and despite the fact that she never got round to making a record of her own, McPartlan's robust and supremely expressive voice was no secret to those in the know.

Her overdue debut, *The Holland Handkerchief*, is instantly enjoyable. McPartlan's singing is mature and assured and the respect she commands among Irish musicians is clear from the presence of session men of the calibre of Mairtin O'Connor and Shamie O'Dowd.

While it may be a little late to suggest the dawning of a bright new career, McPartlan can feel she has delivered the album that was always in her, without ever resembling an old pro going through the paces.

**Colin Randall**

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### **The Living Tradition**

May/June '04

...Mary McPartlan has one of the great voices of Ireland. She sings with passion and a natural clarity. Many have been waiting for a long time for her to record an album, and now the waiting is over; we can safely say this is a classic.

Mary has gathered together some of Ireland's most accomplished musicians who have blended together with ease on this recording to make "*The Holland Handkerchief*" an early contender for album of the year...

**Quote from editorial**

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### **Channel 4 TV Tele Text, New Roots**

April '04

**There is something about Mary.** Now then, we get loads of CDs here and to be frank a lot of them are tosh. But occasionally, very occasionally, one comes in and knocks our socks off. One of these rare records is *The Holland Handkerchief* by Mary McPartlan (MacP 001). I know little about her, bur dear Lord, she can sing.

She's Irish, is equally at home on trad and contemporary songs and has grouped top-line musicians around her. There are hints of the great Delores Keane in the rich, unforced vocals of Mary McPartlan's, *Holland Handkerchief*. She sings with the instinctive soul of a genuine traditional singer, although it has a very fresh sound, with Paddy Keenan and Mairtin O'Connor among the superb backing musicians. Yet, best of all is her radical rework of Shane McGowan's, *Rainy Night in Soho*, changing the song entirely. TOPS.

**Colin Irwin**

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## **Paythereckoning.com Web Site**

March '04

McPartlan has had a distinguished career as a music producer, both in television and in theatre. This, her debut solo album, confirms that in addition to her skills in recognising musical talent and ensuring it is presented in the best possible light to the audience, McPartlan is a mighty talent in her own right. Irish music has its fair share of iconic female singers - Dolores Keane, Margaret Barry, Delia Murphy to name just three.

McPartlan's voice, her passion and her consummate control put her on a par with singers of this calibre. The Holland Handkerchief is an explosive first outing, a mature and well-rounded singer who has waited for the moment and if others around her have been impatient for the off, we hope they'll agree that the wait has been worthwhile!

McPartlan's reputation is such that she's been able to assemble a blue-chip cast of supporting musicians. In addition to her main musical sparring partner, Shamie O'Dowd (guitars, bass, fiddles, harmonicas, vocals), McPartlan is joined by Mairtin O'Connor (accordion), Paddy Keenan (pipes), Liam Kelly (flute, whistle), Tom Morrow (fiddle), Eddie Lynch (piano, keyboards), Cathal Hayden (banjo), Fergal Gallagher (string bass), Danny Byrt (drums, djembe, percussion), Mary Staunton (vocals) and Martina Goggin (vocals).

The songs are a mixture of traditional, contemporary folk and a few left-fielders (such as Saw You Running and Aura Lee) which showcase the breadth and range of McPartlan's style. Needless to say, we at Pay The Reckoning were immediately drawn to the more traditional material. The opening number, The Holland Handkerchief, which features Paddy Keenan's wistful piping over an increasingly rocky accompaniment by O'Dowd, is an attention-grabber and sets us up nicely for the surprising cover of Shane MacGowan's "Rainy Night In Soho". A departure from the Pogues' normal raucous shenanigans, this song has appealed to us since its first appearance many moons ago; brimming with sentiment and yet avoiding sentimentality, it's an honest love song, whose pay-off - "You're the measure of my dreams" - is arrived at obliquely out of a stream of almost mundane speculations about times gone by. It's good to hear MacGowan's talents as a songwriter receiving recognition from a singer of McPartlan's standing.

Elsewhere, a moving version of Johnny Lovely Johnny competes for pole position with a spectacular rendering of The Lovely Sailor Boy. However the keynote song on the album is a mesmeric Slieve Gallion Braes where Mary Staunton and Martina Goggin harmonise subtly with McPartlan on a song which has long been one of Pay The Reckoning's favourites.

Bound to cause a stir in the Irish music world, The Holland Handkerchief is an auspicious debut by a major-league talent. We can't commend it too highly and would urge all our readers to get their hands on it and to sing its praises to their friends.

**Aidan Crossey**

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**LiveIreland.Com Web Site**

March '04

We love this album. This is a great voice. Strong, clear alto. The regular reader will know we favor the altos, mostly because we first fell in love with traditional music through the singing of Dolores Keane. This, plus the fact we are sick of quivering, nasal, sopranos weakening the tradition. Mc Partlan is a strong, intelligent talent with great chops. The more we listen, the better she gets. Repeat here. We adore this album, and this voice. You will, too. Great backup musicians make this a stunner. More!

**Bill Margeson**

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**Hot Press**

24<sup>th</sup> Mar '04



Those of us in the trade have long been familiar with Mary McPartlan as a producer, director, PR ace and general impresario. But there was something else about Mary that only a select group of friends and acquaintances knew: the lady can sing. Happily, thanks to this impressive debut CD, the rest of us now know it, too. Solid, strong and tender, her voice is at its best on "big" songs like 'Lord Gregory', 'Slieve Gallion Braes' (in a gorgeous a cappella version with Mary Staunton and Martina Goggin on harmonies) and the powerful title track. Shane MacGowan's ode to nostalgia, 'Rainy Night in Soho', gets a fine airing here too, as does the grand old chestnut 'Aura Lee'.

**EIGHT/TEN  
Sarah McQuaid**

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## Irishmusicreviews.com Web Site

20<sup>th</sup> Mar '04

### MARY McPARTLAN

The Holland Handkerchief , McP Productions MCPRCD 001; 51 minutes; 2003

It is rare to discover an album whose influences are so obvious yet retains its individuality so compellingly, but such is the debut by Mary McPartlan, *The Holland Handkerchief*. The inspiration of the singing of Sandy Denny and Dolores Keane can clearly be discerned, while these ears also detect elements of Anne Briggs and even Mary Coughlan, yet, ultimately, the strength of Mary's own musical personality shines through. Unquestionably, this is the product of Mary's choice of material and the influence of her musical director and arranger, that stupendously talented multi-instrumentalist Shamie O'Dowd of Dervish (although I detect the masterly touch of the album's producer, P.J. Curtis, in several places). For instance, it is unusual to encounter an Irish album that includes so many songs associated with the musical heritage of the lands across the water, England and Scotland (*The Holland Handkerchief*, *Lord Gregory*, *Lovely Sailor Boy*, *Peat Bog Soldiers*). Equally, Shamie's arrangements are redolent at various times of Fairport Convention (*The Holland Handkerchief* and *Johnny Lovely Johnny*), MoR-period Dolores Keane (*Rainy Night in Soho*), De Dannan (*Lovely Sailor Boy*), the original Home Service version of *Peat Bog Soldiers*, Rumours-period Fleetwood Mac (the guitar introduction to *The Tide Full In*), though the cover of Thom Moore's *Saw You Running* is perhaps a little too close for comfort to the version Thom recorded with Janie Cribbs when both were members of Midnight Well.

If this sounds damning, I would refer you to my opening sentence and then add these following points. Firstly, Mary's distinctive, welcoming voice is strong enough to press her own imprimatur on her material. Secondly, Shamie's arrangements still contain enough originality to render comparisons with other musicians or versions resoundingly irrelevant. Thirdly, the standard of musicianship is so much higher than might be found on so many other albums (as one might expect when the personnel includes Shamie himself, his colleagues Liam Kelly and Tom Morrow, and instrumentalists of the calibre of Máirtín O'Connor, Paddy Keenan, Cathal Hayden and Eddie Lynch, not forgetting singers Mary Staunton and Martina Goggin). Lastly, the quality of P.J. Curtis's production and Kenny Ralph's engineering is simply staggering in terms of its clarity. Then there are the places on the album where everything just falls into place. One of these is Tim Edwards' *Ladybird*, where the sheer expressive resonance of Mary's voice is highlighted by the eloquence of Eddie Lynch's piano accompaniment. Another is Mary's version of the Tim O'Brien and Guy Clarke collaboration, *John Riley*, where Shamie proves he might have an alternative career as a blues harmonica player should he ever tire of Dervish and then proves he could sub as a slide guitar player on an atmospheric rendition of *Aura Lee* (I spot the influence of Mr Curtis here). Then there's a stunning largely unaccompanied vocal performance of *Slieve Gallion Braes* (Mary Staunton and Martina Goggin join in part way through).

Finally, to add some biographical detail, Mary originates from County Leitrim, though there's a strong Tyrone element in her background (her mother came from Plumbridge on the edge of the Sperrins). Mary has long been based in Galway city, where she co-founded the Riabhóg Singers Club, and was also instrumental in developing the TG4 traditional music awards. She's a great singer and *The Holland Handkerchief* is well deserving of your attention.

### Geoff Wallis

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**Sligo Weekender**  
17<sup>th</sup> Feb '04



**The Holland Handkerchief**  
**MaryMcPartlan**

The best traditional Irish songs have challenged even the most accomplished vocalists, but it seems nobody has told this to Mary McPartlan.

She deals with some incredible complex Irish songs with disdainful ease, winding her strong, supple voice around the tune she is singing and in the process creating a song worthy of comparison to any Irish singer of any era.

"The Holland Handkerchief" is an album full of strengths. The vocals, the musicianship, the choice of songs are all largely faultless.

From the opening epic title track Mary's playful way with the songs she has chosen is obvious to the listener.

The second song, "Rainy Night in Soho", came from the pen of Shane McGowan, but even he would have been hard pressed to imagine such a stunning version coming from the words he was writing. In creating this CD, Mary was very astute in her choice of help, particularly in enlisting the services of Shamie O'Dowd from Sligo, who has an unrivalled ability to arrange even the most familiar songs into something fresh.

And he has worked wonders on many of the songs on this album. From "Johnny Lovely Johnny" to "As I Roved Out" to "Peat Bog Soldiers", Shamie and Mary have worked some genuine magic.

Mary's popularity meant many musicians were happy to lend their support to her long-overdue debut. Mairtín O'Connor, Paddy Keenan, Liam Kelly, Tom Morrow, Eddy Lynch, Cathal Hayden, Fergal Gallagher, Danny Birt, Mary Staunton and Martina Goggin make the sleeve notes for the album read like the who's who of traditional music in the North West.

**Robert Cullen**

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The Irish times, The Ticket  
 5<sup>th</sup> February 2004

**MARY MCPARTLAN**  
 The Holland Handkerchief RMG ★★★★★



The sleeve notes hint at a meitheal coming together for the making of this heart-stopping CD from music producer - and now, finally, recording artist - Mary McPartlan. And it's a heavy meitheal band with a difference: shot through with enough vim, vigour and unfettered passion to fuel those lethal marathon singing sessions that lop years off your life while adding wings to the spirit. McPartlan's voice is gloriously earthy, as she breathes in her material for all their life-giving powers. Shamie O'Dowd's multi-instrumental contributions are a revelation of style and panache, his and McPartlan's vocal harmonies gelling fearlessly. Mairtín O'Connor, Paddy Keenan and James Blennerhasset cosset and challenge with grinning ease. But the songs rule: *The Tide Full In* is a perfect snapshot of voice, geography and history in faultless synchrony.

Siobhán Long

**MARY McPARTLAN** \*\*\*\* (4\*)  
 The Holland Handkerchief RMG

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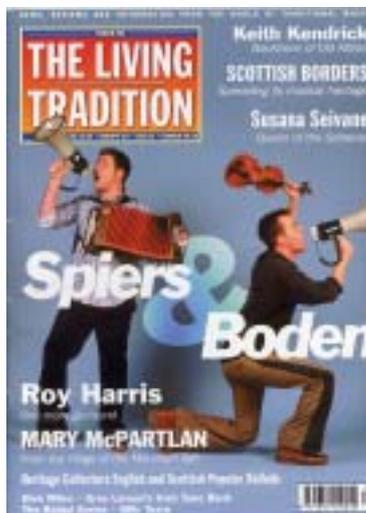
**Siobhán Long**

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## Mary McPartlan, features

### The Living Tradition

Oct '04



### MARY McPARTLAN

#### From the Ridge of the Mountain Ash

By Steve MacGrail

It's sometimes believed that traditional music just happens *naturally* in Ireland, that all Irish people love it and have always been ready and able to warble a song or strike up a tune at the slightest suspicion of a dropping hat...Likewise, it's maybe believed that because Ireland does indeed produce so many consummate performers in the traditional arts, then fame (if not actually fortune) ready accrues to an instrumentalist or singer because he or she is good. But it isn't like that, of course. The whole of Ireland isn't in thrall to its traditional music – 'diddly-dee' it's dismissively called by some Irish people – and although things are vastly better than they used to be, there can still be obstacles in the way of getting into those oul' songs and tunes in the first place.

Somebody who experienced some of these obstacles early on is singer Mary McPartlan from County Leitrim, now living in Galway City. Her journey as a performer has been that taken by many: small gigs in parochial halls, singing a chart number one minute and a big ballad the next and doing it all for the love of the thing – although perhaps with the dawning realisation that song could or should actually become a life's work. Mary and thousands like her have kept Ireland's music alive and have enhanced it, too, helping to make it probably the richest traditional music culture in northern Europe, and one that would be hard to surpass anywhere on earth. Her story, in a way shows (amongst other things) how Irish music has changed and developed over the last half century.

She was born in 1955 in the border county of Leitrim. Leitrim has the smallest population of any Irish county, just 25,000 people. It's beautiful, with numerous loughs, hills and high moors, but little of it is useble for agriculture. Coal used to be mined in the county and in fact, Mary's father was a miner until an accident saw him working on the roads instead; this job he had to abandon eventually as his back problems worsened, and he was left having to wrest a living out of the poor soil of the family's tiny and remote smallholding at Drumkeeran – tellingly, 'The Ridge of the

Mountain Ash' in Irish. There stood the two-roomed thatched cottage in which Mary and her five younger siblings grew up.

"It was difficult to make anything of that ground, but my father was so good he could get crops from where nothing should grow. He farmed meticulously, his calves always got the best prices at fairs. He was a tough man, well respected locally, and if there was ever a problem it was always 'send for Patsy McPartlan!' Leitrim had a much bigger population in the early Fifties but then there started really savage emigration. Some of my own family eventually left. But there was a sort of compensation, I suppose: if a place is economically devastated, perhaps people cling on tighter to their sense of place and their identity. That was the Leitrim I grew up in".

And what an identity Leitrim had as a locality for traditional music! It was once home to Turlough O'Carolan, and in the twentieth century the great whistle and flute players Josie MacDermott, John McKenna and Packie Duignan all hailed from there, too. (Mary would one day be a friend of Packie's, whilst her brother would go on to help run Drumkeeran's annual John McKenna Festival). Yet despite all that, the music was scattered and it wasn't always easy to access it.

"No, it wasn't" says Mary. "I mean, if it comes to wanting to get to it, there isn't any real public transport in Leitrim *now*, never mind then. We had no transport, I walked everywhere until I was 21. And at school there was no chance to be playing instruments or anything like that, not even much singing, it was awful, awful! It's so different now, all the nephews and nieces are learning, there's organizations like Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, private tutors, everything".

That she found music was down to her mother Betty. "She was an extraordinary, beautiful woman. And gentle, Tyrone people have that softness, I think... She came like a breath of fresh air into a village that was dark and nothing happening. I know she was deeply lonely until I arrived, that's why I became her friend as well as her daughter. She had a love of music, just a few songs, a favourite one was *Caroline of Edinburgh Town*. Somehow, we six had an inborn love of music, too. My father wasn't musical but was a great storyteller and a larger-than-life character, too. He and the neighbours would swap stories round the fire and we had to sing – how we all survived the pipe smoke I'll never know!"

Yet given that her mother had only a small repertoire, and school was no help, how ever did Mary manage to learn any songs?

"I tried to find them in books and magazines, anywhere I could, or learn them orally, I can't read music. I'd hear them on the radio and try to copy them down. Things improved when I went to secondary school because I found songbooks there. I'd learn anything, my music was all over the place, so when I got involved with a little group when I was 18, it was everything from James Connolly ballads to John Denver. *But then came Planxty, Bothy Band and Dolores Keane!* That was just wonderful, I got a little record player and songbooks. And I left home at 18. After that I was totally in charge of my destiny".

She got a job as a civil servant, in the Post Office. "First, I was sent to Cork, I hated it and prayed to get back to Leitrim. After six months I did, but you go where you're sent, so after that I went all over Ireland. I still sent money home, I did for years. Then one day I went to Galway for a guitar, I loved the place and vowed it would be my spiritual home one day – and six years later there I was back in it".

By this time, naturally, she'd already been experiencing the ups and occasional downs of singing in public. "I was known as a good singer so I was called on quite a lot, singing from graveyards to weddings to people's houses. I've learned tons of stuff

over the years and forgotten tons more, Janis Joplin, Johnny Cash and the rest. For a long while I was very much the Country/traditional/folky performer, press the button and off I went. Reaching gigs got easier, I had a dear friend Mary Gilhooley who I performed with (she sang and played guitar and accordion), she had a little car. I remember some of the gigs, like every Friday night in Carrick-on-Shannon, we got £12 between the pair of us. But then our jobs split us up, we'd only meet during holidays. Good times though..."

She explains that gradually her attitude to singing was changing. She found herself more focused on traditional music and its history and she went to more and more sessions. However, something else was working on her, driving her even deeper into Irish culture generally: this was her growing involvement in politics and the labour movement.

"In the civil service I was always a shop steward, working particularly for better pay and conditions for women. That was the early 1980s. That led me naturally on to human rights work. I became very involved with the Sligo Trades Club, there was a great music tradition there. I learned political songs, Woody Guthrie, Ewan McColl – and Christie Moore, of course – and wonderful English singers like Cyril Tawney...An of course, many of our big Irish ballads are already politically weighted, we were an invaded country, imperialism crushed our culture sometimes, like the Famine. So, politics was all around in the music".

Possibly linked to all this, she was becoming more disaffected from the civil service. "I left the Post Office in 1983, I just wasn't fulfilled there. I became involved with the Simon Community in Galway and became their paid administrator for five years. We were advocating for homeless people non-stop. That, too, helped to change my approach to singing, making me surer than ever that I should focus on the whole development of music, and writing as well, in our culture. Basically around 1990 I decided to dedicate myself to this completely – to being what I'm from and what I am. But I couldn't quite see how, like just doing more music or dropping out or whatever. You see, I've never not worked full-time. When you're the oldest in the family, and a woman, coming from a very deprived marginalised place, the work ethic is bred into you – intensively".

Although she couldn't imagine how living as a traditional musician might turn out, she had had at least some experience of it. She had been part of a group (Sean Ryan, Ray Weldon, Paddy Williams, John Cunningham, Amanda Lacey and the late Mike O'Donoghue). There'd been tours in Ireland, Germany and Switzerland, too, with Brendan O'Regan, Sean Ryan and Johnny 'Ringo' McDonagh. In these, obviously, her contribution had been song. Surprisingly then, her next move wasn't into yet more singing: instead, she turned towards the theatre.

Along with Sean Tyrell and Sean Keane on the musical side, she was asked to participate in Galway's Druid Theatre staging of *The Midnight Court*. (This is a pretty earthy nineteenth century poem that cheerfully tackles sexual repression in Ireland). Ultimately, there were ninety performances of the show, and it toured the island three times. This whetted her appetite, and she went on to be the musical director of several other shows and plays.

Helping set up a singer's club was something else that engaged her energies. The club –An Riabhóg (The Pipit) – became a celebrated venue for unaccompanied singers such as Frank Harte, Páidraigín Ní Uallacháin and The Voice Squad and many more. "It was a great performance base in Galway City, but it also helped create a bigger performing scene in the city. It ran for twelve years, but increasingly instruments began to appear and unaccompanied singing became more isolated. New venues opened, numbers fell, so we closed it. But I'm proud I was part of it".

Nineteen ninety two was a crunch year for her as regards singing. "Yes, I started having babies, wasn't that great! I have four children now, and that's obviously reduced my singing opportunities. Paddy my husband is very patient. He works for Eircom, Ireland's telecommunications company, and he's been the steady breadwinner whilst I bring in a few erratic small payments from the arts community – *exploited as we are!*"

Despite such a long time singing, she had never made a recording – until now, 'The Holland Handkerchief'. She was finally persuaded to do it in 2003 by musical friends; these, it turns out, were the likes of Cathal Hayden, Paddy Keenan, Mary Staunton, Máirtín O'Connor and Shamie O'Dowd, to name just a few; meanwhile, James Blennerhassett did the recording and engineering. The CD is every bit as good as would be expected from such a fine singer with such powerful backing.

And Mary's future? "Well, I've always deeply regretted not going to university. I have such a love of books and studying – but now I'm going to do an MA! That's one thing...And I intend to tour with Shamie and Eddie Lynch and other musicians. I really like their approach to accompaniment, I give them the song and they'll work on just what they hear, not taking in any other influences. I'm going to get an agent – and basically, I'm going to sing! And I want to sing at Celtic Connections and at Cambridge, oh, and my big dream is Glastonbury one day. I want to be involved in developing Ireland's traditional culture – and I want to stay true to my own sense of singing and all that singing represents for us".

**Steve McGrail**

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## fROOTS

Oct '04



## MARY McPARTLAN

*It took her 50 years, but was worth the wait, reckons **Jon Lusk**.*

With her debut album arriving in her 50th year, you could say Mary McPartlan has been a little backward in coming forward as a singer. A busy career in theatre and TV production is one of the reasons that her remarkable voice has so far only been heard in a few back street clubs of Galway and the surrounding area, but *The Holland Handkerchief* {see fR252} is likely to change that.

Mary's singing has a gutsy lived-in quality, and her tendency to bend notes betrays a fondness for both the blues and sean nos. An immediate highlight of the tasteful and varied selection of largely traditional Irish songs is the charged, spooky title track, which establishes her as a compelling storyteller. The version of Shane McGowan's wonderful *Rainy Night in Soho* is effectively understated, and it's interesting to compare her take on *Aura Lee* - full of sentiment, though never sentimental with that of fellow Galway singer Sean Keane. On the more upbeat side, *As I Roved Out*/Joe O'Dowd's *Barndance* strays into the kind of territory frequented by The Dubliners, and *Saw You Running* could almost be Kirsty MacColl.

The arrangements include everything from the stark acappella of Lord Gregory to the driving electric folk rock of The Holland Handkerchief, and come courtesy of Dervish's excellent fiddler/ guitarist Shamie O'Dowd. He's joined by a starry cast of session musicians, all of whom help to make this possibly the year's finest traditional Irish album.

Just as her songs are full of stories, Mary tells a good yarn herself. The long and winding road which led her to make her first recording has been full of diversions, as she explains over the phone from her Galway home. "My singing was always to do with a social aspect of my life. I'd had a great interest in it, and I was very good at it... but I never ever saw me not working and having a full-time job. That's the way I was reared."

As she was the oldest of six siblings who she inevitably played a big role in caring for - and grew up in poverty in an isolated part of Co. Leitrim, the idea of becoming a professional singer just wasn't on the agenda. "We lived on a tiny little farm that didn't provide any income for my father, who did work when he was much younger, but then he had an injury and we were almost dependent on welfare. Maybe once a year, he sold a cow or whatever. From that point of view, the attitude was, as soon as you're reared, and after doing second level college, get a job."

Nevertheless, music was ever-present, and she attributes the gift of singing to her mother's side of the family. "My mother comes from Co. Tyrone and she's one of 12 children. All of her brothers and sisters either sang or they played instruments. My grandparents played fiddle and accordeon, and my uncle sang an awful lot of songs from the Tyrone region, so there was a very natural instinct in all of my family to sing. We would have played instruments, but there was never any opportunity to learn an instrument. In Leitrim there were no teachers, there was no time to do it, there was no nurturing of playing the instruments. And we talk about that a lot now, because we regret that."

Aside from such strong musical roots, her early family life also gave her a passion for storytelling, which later fed into her career in theatre and her music. "I grew up in a storytelling house where there were all these ghost stories told. These great tales of the jilted lover, and the family interfering with two lovers because the girl was too poor for the boy or vice versa. Or they fell out with each other, and if one lover died in anger or resentment, or died of a broken heart, the lover came back and tried to bring the other lover into the grave. They might have brought the lover alive into the grave, or they might just have met the lover  
- like in *The Holland Handkerchief*- and took them on a journey."

Mary's own journey to becoming a professional singer began in the mid-1970s, when she formed a singing duo called *Calypso* with Mary Gilhooley. "We went around all the clubs and pubs in a section of Leitrim, Sligo, and Roscommon and sang our songs that ranged from Kris Kristofferson and Bob Dylan to Irish ballads, playing guitar and accordeon... so there was no way I stopped being a performer, or repressed my love of singing. But it was never going to be a commercially viable pursuit for me." Thus when Mary left home, she found a civil service job which entailed living in several

parts of Ireland until 1983, when she moved to Galway. "I knew in my heart that my soul was in Galway. I'd gone there in my early twenties to buy my guitar, and I went 'I have to live here, this is where I belong!' I eventually got transferred there and, as soon as I did, I became heavily involved in the arts, in politics and in the music directly."

Mary worked for the rest of that decade with a charity for homeless men, while also pursuing her singing more seriously on a part-time basis, playing with many well-known local traditional musicians, and even embarking on several short tours. In 1990 she became self-employed and set up her own PR and arts consultancy, and around the same time became a founder member of the now-defunct Galway singers' club, Riabhog. In 1992 she also had a major singing part in the Druid Theatre Company's highly successful production of *The Midnight Court*, although she had to take a break when her first child arrived.

While off paid work, she came up with the idea of what would eventually become Ireland's TG4 National Traditional Music Awards. After several years of 'knocking on doors', they became a reality, and in the process, Mary herself became a TV producer. There were many other subsequent projects, including production work for the acclaimed theatre group Skehana. Yet all this seemed to take Mary further from her first love of singing-to the chagrin of many friends who were begging her to do something serious with it. "I'd always had a lot of creative frustration within me, and I realised it was because I wasn't allowing myself to sing as much as I should be singing. I spent my time developing and nurturing others."

It was a Skehana workshop run by an Australian director called John O'Hare that she attended last August which finally got the ball rolling. "His method of teaching young actors was around finding a deep sense of truth and honesty within themselves, to allow them to move forward, and he actually had a profound affect on me. From there I just found this great strength of moving forward... and one of the nurturing activities that I took on board was to return to the place of my birth, which was a remote place in Leitrim called Comalth."

The two-room house she'd lived in was by then a ruin, with only the walls still standing, and beautiful trees growing where the kitchen table or a bed had once been. "In those walls I discovered childhood joy, childhood memories... I sat there and I sang my songs, and I nurtured myself. And then I took a photographer from Galway and I dragged him up the mountain and I said 'I want you to photograph me in this space, I was very happy here as a child'. And then I went away and I made music!"

After that experience, the process of finding the right people to record with just seemed to fall into place; with her long history of working in the arts, she wasn't short of contacts. And you can see the results of the photography session on the cover of *The Holland Handkerchief*. It's a musical autobiography of sorts, an achievement which taught her a lesson she's keen to share with anyone searching for something meaningful within, or looking for the 'truth within themselves'. "Do not be afraid, it's the place to go. And you must go there deeply to be good at what you're going to do, and also to give you strength to do the best you can."

**Jon Lusk**

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## Irish Music Magazine

Sep '04



### MARY McPARTLAN

#### Once a singer, always a singer

*Ita Kelly catches up with Mary McPartlan, a lady who took a long time in making that first album.*

Once a singer, always a singer, and it is for Mary McPartlan, the well known producer and promoter who has worked for many years on behalf of other performers rather than for herself. Now she has taken centre stage with her new album 'The Holland Handkerchief', a late debut from a singer who for many years kept her light hidden in the shadow of her other musical work. The songs, however, were never far from Mary's heart and head. It is the great feeling about songs and singing, you need nothing but yourself to express them and to enjoy them. So Mary sang at the occasional session and immersed herself on developing her career in promotions, production and direction, yielding some memorable results; the TG4 Gradam Ceoil or Traditional Music Awards, the award winning music series for TG4 'Fiosc', and her involvement in the Galway based theatre group, Skehana.

She places much of her passion and inspiration firmly on her roots and her upbringing in Drumkeerin in Leitrim, a place that wasn't particularly musical or traditional and one where there wasn't a lot happening. A marginalised community, it was decimated in the seventies by emigration when it seemed like everybody left. But her home was a musical one, her mother, a Tyrone native, was always singing and her father loved music. Drumkeerin might have been shy about music, but the neighbouring parishes yielded some well-known names like Packie Duignan, Jack Dolan and Séamus Horan. "If we had a musical teacher or even an instrument" says Mary, "I'm sure there would have been three if not four musicians in our house," but those were the days before the Comhaltas teaching network had reached that part of the country. Like most of her peers, Mary left too, the civil service called and drew her to Cork, but following her initial training she returned to Leitrim and to Carrick On Shannon where with a friend she formed a duo called Calypso. "We were unique" remembers Mary, "two young women in a Renault 4 with two guitars and an accordion, travelling all over Leitrim, Roscommon and Sligo." They sang every thing from the popular songs of the day to the solid traditional songs and ballads. From there Mary went to Sligo and finally to Galway where she determined to embark on a new way of life.

"One day during lunch hour, I left the post office to do an interview in Curran's Hotel" she remembers, "and I got the job." She was to be administrator of the Galway Simon

Community for the next five years. Her passion for social causes and her interest in culture were all satisfied in a position that combined organisation with fund raising.

During all her years working, Mary was singing and garnering songs. She was very involved in the trade union movement and it naturally led her to the songs of Ewan McColl and Pete Seeger. Bob Dylan was one of her most significant influences. In Galway meeting with like-minded people, Mary was one of the founders of the Riabhóg Singers Club along with Seán Ryan, John Cunningham, Paddy Williams and Mike Donahue. Riabhóg provided a forum for singing as well as exposing members and the public to guests who came regularly to the club, Jimmy Crowley, Maighréad Ní Dhomhnaill, Mick Hanly, Tim and John Lyons, the list is endless. It was the precursor of pub venues like Monroe's, the Róisín Dubh and the many others that have sprung up since then. Of course folk music is far more viable now than it was then and there is a market now whereas in the early eighties, it was only the ardent folk clubbers who frequented the trad and folk gigs.

Traditional and folk music has come a long way in the last ten to fifteen years, akin to the boom of the seventies, but now it is more than just a passing phase, it is an art form here to stay, part of the cultural landscape. In an age where there is so much music and so many recordings it is amazing to find there are still songs we don't know and we don't recognise, and this is the area where Mary wants to concentrate on now. "Research and finding these old songs is where I want to be right now" she says. 'The Holland Handkerchief' is a collection of songs that Mary has been living with for years, a bit like old friends. Most of them are traditional, others come from the pens of well know writers like Shane MacGowan's 'Rainy Night in Soho', Thom Moore's 'Saw You Running' and Tim O'Brien's 'John Riley'. Francis Fahy's 'Tide Full In' gets a lively revival as well.

"I went back to the 80s to reinterpret old songs" Mary explains "and give them new energy, and certainly 'The Holland Handkerchief' and 'The High Walls of Derry' ('Johnny, Lovely Johnny'), they've got complete new arrangements via Shamie O'Dowd and myself and the lads that played with us". Those lads include Máirtín O Connor and Paddy Keenan and the album was produced by PJ Curtis. "It was an exciting process" Mary continues, "and I think that more people, more singers should be looking at invigorating and bringing all that great tradition out for the young generation."

The powerful ballad, after which the album is named, 'The Holland Handkerchief' comes from what Mary describes as "the eeriest folklore of all" in the singing tradition. The Holland Handkerchief itself was a square of Dutch linen made in Ireland in the 1800s by the Huguenot craftsmen who had fled Europe and settled in small towns in Ireland. The song story is of a dead lover returning from the grave to the girl he loved, and the girl not realising he's dead wraps a Holland handkerchief around his 'aching' head and kisses his cold lips that feel like clay. "In some of the songs" Mary continues, "the lover drags the alive partner back into the grave and there are others where the partner having been with the ghost, eventually dies for no apparent reason."

'Slieve Gallion Braes' is a song that goes back to Mary's early days in that folk duet Calypso, and on this recording Mary with friends Mary Staunton and Martina Goggin deliver a powerful acapella version. 'Ladybird' was learnt at a small festival about 17 years ago. "One of the most loved songs in my entire life" describes Mary, "a singer from Wales sang it into a little tape recorder for me in the back of a car when we were travelling in, outside a pub in Ballyvaughan, during a wonderful rich time of energy, knowledge and learning in terms of song." 'Rainy Night in Soho' is a splendid transformation of Shane MacGowan's well-known love song. The musicality of Mary's

voice matched by a delicate arrangements of guitars and keyboard, it was released as single and music video at Mary’s Galway Arts Festival concert in July 19<sup>th</sup> last.

‘The Holland Handkerchief’ has received excellent critical review since its release in January and is being distributed by in Ireland by RMG and in the UK by Proper. Mary has performed a series of concerts in Ireland and has planned an extensive winter tour for both Ireland and the UK.

Mary’s future plans include a return to college and full time study in the area of theatre, continuing her work in television, recording another album and of course singing, the most important part of it all. “I have always been a singer, from day one, since I was born” she says, and “I’ve always been singing in my head all those years. I’m a carrier of the music.” She continues, “I absolutely believe in it as a total expression of one’s identity in the most pleasurable way and it’s just a great place to work, I’m very lucky!”

Visit Mary McPartlan’s new website which is at [www.marymcpartlan.com](http://www.marymcpartlan.com)

**Ita Kelly**

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# Mary in from the shadows

**F**OR YEARS Mary McPartlan has worked in the background, making things happen but often while hiding her own talents under the proverbial bushel. She arranged gigs, produced multi-genre shows, brought traditional musicians to South America, and introduced sean n6s singers to the former Soviet Union. Most importantly, she initiated the TG4 Traditional Music Awards.

She knocked on doors, pleaded with sponsors, and convinced all the people who mattered. She drew together a panel of adjudicators and steered the awards through their difficult early years. Yet she was, as usual, an anonymous figure at the awards ceremonies themselves. Then one night at the end of January, Mary McPartlan stepped into the spotlight at the Warwick Hotel in Salthill and led her 10-piece band through a dozen or so songs.

The occasion was the launch of her long-overdue debut album, *The Holland Handkerchief*. The warmth that greeted her was absolutely genuine. Among her audience were many of those whom she had helped along the way. They came to pay

## Jigs & Reels

Mary McPartlan

their respects but left in pleasant surprise at the quality of what they had just heard.

*The Holland Handkerchief* is a happy coincidence of art and craft. The choice of material is excellent, with a well-judged diversity adding spice and interest. *Johnny Lovely Johnny* is here, as we might expect, but so is Shane McGowan's *Rainy Night in Soho*, which we certainly wouldn't.

Lord Gregory, an ever-present in Mary's repertoire over the years, is included as is Thom Moore's *Saw You Running* and the old Elvis song *Aura Lee*. *Ladybird*, a stark tale of industrial decay told through the eyes of a child, is sung over a plain piano background and shows that



Mary McPartlan, whose debut album, *The Holland Handkerchief*, is on release now

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Pat Ahearn

## Mary in from the Shadows *Jigs & Reels - Mary McPartlan* By Pat Ahearn

For years Mary McPartlan has worked in the background, making things happen to others while hiding her own talents under the proverbial bushel. She arranged gigs, produced multi-genre shows, brought traditional musicians to South America, and introduced *sean n6s* singers to the former Soviet Union. Most importantly, she initiated the TG4 Traditional Music Awards.

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The old Delia Murphy song, *The Lovely Sailor Boy*, teeters on the blink of parlour sentimentality, but has a charm all its own. The other Delia Murphy inclusion, *As I Roved Out*, is matched with Joe O'Dowd's Barndance in a rollicking workout. Old pals Mary Staunton and Martina Goggin join for an *a capella* version of *Slieve Gallion Braes*.

The Holland Handkerchief may be Mary McPartlan's baby but its musical success owes a great deal to Shamie O'Dowd, the album's musical director. Máirtín O'Connor, Paddy Keenan, Cathal Hayden and others add some great touches to the tracks but O'Dowd provides the heartbeat.

Hats off, too, to producer PJ Curtis for his sprinklings of stardust.

**Pat Ahearn**

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**Hot Press**

24<sup>th</sup> Mar 04



Extract from **Feeding Frenzy**

By Sarah McQuaid

...Lots of launches lately. Producer, director and PR ace **Mary McPartlan**, whose new CD *The Holland Handkerchief* is reviewed elsewhere in this issue, gave it a great send-off at the Cobblestone on February 19. Doing the honours was Leitrim playwright and poet **Vincent Woods**, author of *At the Black Pig's Dyke*, who recalled his childhood friendship with Mary and how they shared their growing awareness of music and song back in the 1960s and early '70s. **Mike Allen**, General Secretary of the Labour Party, was there, as were casting director **Máirín**

**Hughes**, RTÉ producer **Peter Woods**, NUJ Irish General Secretary **Seamus Dooley**, celebrity chef **Kevin Dundon** of Dunbrody House and **Nicholas Carolan** of the Irish Music Archive.

Also there were the owners of Las Vegas venue The Nine Fine Irishmen, which for three months last summer hosted a four-hour show put together by Mary on the history of Irish music, song, dance and culture. Naturally a large contingent of traditional musicians was present, and messages of goodwill came from as far away as Venezuela and Argentina, where Mary initiated and developed a cultural exchange programme a few years ago...

**Sarah McQuaid**

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**Sunday Tribune**  
8<sup>th</sup> Feb '04



### **The Soil that bears fruit at last**

*When Mary McPartlan first left Leitrim, she was a casualty of poverty. Now she has returned as a celebrated musician, mirroring a new-found confidence in the country, writes **Susan McKay**.*

Mary McPartlan has a glorious voice and sings with a passion that has, for years, left those who heard her longing to have an album to take home and listen to, over and over.

Last weekend, in Drumkeeran, Co. Leitrim, she launched her first CD. In the end, it wasn't the constant nagging of her friends that brought it about. It was an episode in Las Vegas involving a dancer in leather knickers and a long red wig.

"I was commissioned to put together a show for a new Irish pub in the New York, New York casino" she says. "I brought together brilliant people like the piper Paddy Keenan and the *sean nós* dancer Roisín ní Mhianin. The show was based on the history of Irish music. But there was a clash of cultures. Corporate Nevada is fantastic in its own way, but it is just so excessive and plastic. And here we were with this roots music. In the end, the image they used to promote the show was this character in a red wig, doing bad Irish dancing on a table. I realized it was time to look into my own heart and discover what was there."

She made the journey back to her own roots. "I'd drive out from Galway to the remotest Leitrim. I'd climb the hills to the side of the mountain of Comhalt. I'd sit in the ruins of the tiny thatched cottage to which my mother carried me home as a newborn baby through the snow. There was no road to the house.

"I'd touch the stones and visualize myself there with my brothers and sisters. I had a feeling of complete calm and composure. I came away feeling energized and really happy". She describes the album, *The Holland Handkerchief*, as "autobiographical".

There is a dramatic version of the title song, "The Holland Handkerchief", with the fierce rhythmic strumming on guitar and bass by Shamie O'Dowd and the wild, haunting pipes of Paddy Keenan. There is a sweetly lyrical and delicate version of Shane McGowan's 'Rainy Night in Soho'. There are heartbreaking harmonies on 'Slieve Gallion Braes', with its angry lyrics about "tyrannizing landlords who would not let us stay". There's jazz in 'Aura Lee', a traditional love song to the same air as Elvis's 'Love me Tender'.

She's backed by the best of musicians, including virtuoso accordionist, Mairtín O'Connor, brilliant fiddle player Cathal Hayden, pianist Eddie Lynch and two members of the band dervish, Liam Kelly and Tom Morrow. There is also drummer Danny Birt. The producer is PJ Curtis. All this is a measure of her high standing among the elite of Ireland traditional musicians.

The Lyrical sleeve notes are by local poet Vincent Woods, a close friend of McPartlan's.

McPartlan also sings, and when she describes her Leitrim childhood in the late 1950s it becomes obvious why she sings it with such intensity.

"My father had dreadful acreage on which nothing would grow. He raised thin cattle and sold them at the fairs. We grew potatoes and churned butter.

"At Christmas you'd get a pencil and an orange. They were very hard times. The poverty made me very angry" She looks out the tall windows of the new and incredibly luxurious Lough Allen Hotel at rain falling on rushy fields and sips a good cappuccino. This is a different world.

She grew up surrounded by music and, as a teenager, formed a band with her friend Mary Gilhooley.

Most of her siblings had to emigrate. She became a civil servant and discovered Galway in the early 1970s, "a place of total magic".

And to Galway she moved in the 1980s and made her name as a producer and director on television and in theatre. She also worked for the Simon Community and is a committed trade unionist and political activist.

The music was always central. She listened to Bob Dylan, Ewan McColl, Peggy Seeger and Joan Baez and sang at "all the fleadh's in Ireland". But she never considered singing as a career.

"It was ground into me as a child that I had to be the provider; the responsible one. I'd send home money from my brown pay envelope. Everyone from my generation was leaving Leitrim and it was collapsing under the strain."

Back in Drumkeeran's community centre for the launch last week, McPartlan was surrounded by family, friends and neighbours.

She recalled the centre used to be the domestic science rooms in which "Mrs Taylor taught my how to boil spuds and put my knife on the right and my fork on the left." Mrs Taylor wave up from the hall, where after the music, a great spread of tea and sandwiches was laid out on trestle tables. "I'm proud to be from Drumkeeran" said McPartlan, and Drumkeeran was clearly proud of her.

"This is undoubtedly the best album to come out of Drumkeeran in decades" joked local singer songwriter Charlie McGettigan.

"I had to go away to come back" says McPartlan. She isn't the only one returning. Leitrim is enjoying an artistic revival and its population is rising for the first time since the famine.

In McPartlan's case, the return is imaginative – she continues to live in Galway with her husband and children. Her daughters are Galway girls.

"I've been captured by excitement of Galway", she says.

"I'm very much rooted in the city now but I followed my childhood back to Drumkeeran. I still love the community I came out of and I always will.

**Susan McKay**

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# Coming out from the backstage shadows

Mary McPartlan is used to the entertainment world, with a record as a theatre producer and director. Now she is taking to the limelight as a singer. **Siobhán Long** reports



**A** collection of songs that span three decades, mostly from the 1970s and 1980s, but also including more recent work, is the focus of the new CD, *The Holland Handkerchief*. It is a collection that she admits is hugely autobiographical, populated by songs she's collected over an eventful three decades as an employee of the old Posts and Telegraphs and during her more recent incursions in the picaresque worlds of music and theatre. "I was very involved as a trade unionist, and it brought me into contact with a lot of people," she says. "I was very involved in the music scene, and it brought me into contact with a lot of people, and it brought me into contact with a lot of people."

**'I always knew I was a singer, and the time came for me to be true to myself'**

McPartlan's career has been a mix of theatre, music, and television. She has worked with playwrights like Tom Hickey and Maeliosa Stafford, and has produced and directed several plays. Her most recent work is a play called *The Holland Handkerchief*, which is a collection of songs that she has written and recorded. The CD, *The Holland Handkerchief*, was conceived last October, made in a whirlwind three months and launched last weekend.

"The sense of place and belonging, on the side of a small mountain, at the top of Drumkeerin, is where I returned when I made this album," she says. "Happiness and a childhood sense of belonging is in every one of us, but it can get lost along the way. You don't have to sing or make a CD to do this, but I think it's really important that all of us find that space, to feel free and know oneself."

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**Coming out from the backstage shadows**  
*Mary McPartlan is used to the entertainment world, with a record as a theatre producer and director. Now she is taking to the limelight as a singer. Siobhán Long reports*

All politics is local – and so is music. It's a sense of place that roots the best music, whether from east Texas, west Clare or north Leitrim. For Mary McPartlan, her Co Leitrim roots, particularly around Drumkeerin, define her as a singer, scaffolding her songs. Singers, like actors, face a music-industry ageism that tends to ghettoise anyone who fails to conform. McPartlan has never loitered in audition corridors or outside record-company doors. Instead she's forged a career in the world of theatre and traditional music, working as a producer and director with playwrights such as Vincent Woods and Michael Harding, actors such as Tom Hickey and Maeliosa Stafford and musicians such as Paddy Keenan and Nan Tom Teamín De Burca. Now she's stepping out of the shadows, airing her own vocal cords for a change. Her debut CD, *The Holland Handkerchief*, was conceived last October, made in a whirlwind three months and launched last weekend.

"The sense of place and belonging, on the side of a small mountain, at the top of Drumkeerin, is where I returned when I made this album," she says. "Happiness and a childhood sense of belonging is in every one of us, but it can get lost along the way. You don't have to sing or make a CD to do this, but I think it's really important that all of us find that space, to feel free and know oneself."

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with songs from Europe and America” she says. “I was very influenced by Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger, Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan. When I lived in Sligo, the Trades Club was the place to go, and ironically I used to go to listen to Joe O’Dowd, the great fiddle player, and the inspiration for the making of this CD came from Joe O’Dowd’s son, Shamie, who helped me give a new voice and a new interpretation to all of the songs that I have sung over the years.”

In some ways it’s surprising to hear McPartlan insist that *The Holland Handkerchief* is autobiographical, as she wrote none of the songs. But history can speak as fluently for the singer as the writer, she suggests. “All of the songs are connected to various aspects of my interests, my political philosophies, in terms of human rights and civil rights, and also my great love of songwriters like Shane MacGowan and Thom Moore,” she says. “Being warmed by the space in north Leitrim and Sligo environs, and having worked for so many years as a producer and director in the traditional-music industry, I was surrounded by goodwill and expertise to help me make this CD under the gentle guidance of P.J. Curtis.” Gathering the songs forced McPartlan to trawl the past, retracing her steps to where the best stories lingered. “I hadn’t sung out publicly for at least 10 years,” she says, “and I wanted to revisit the 1980s, where my time as a singer was most vibrant. So some of the songs are of that time: *Johnny Lovely Johnny*, *Ladybird*, *Saw You Running* and *Lord Gregory*.” Her background in theatre fuelled an appetite for songs with strong visual elements, too. “I particularly wanted to sing *The Holland Handkerchief*, because I love the drama and I can visualise so much folklore in folk song. Like every song on the CD, I have given it a new interpretation, and it’s Shamie O’Dowd’s beautiful arrangements that make it special.”

Sligo and Leitrim had a musical identity long before they had a political one, and McPartlan leans on a particularly capable gathering of local musicians on the CD, including Dervish’s Tom Morrow on fiddle and Liam Kelly on whistle and flute, with Galwegian infusion courtesy of master accordionist Máirtín O’Connor. McPartlan’s passions run far beyond singing. She’s a zealous campaigner for better supports for traditional musicians, having witnessed so many talented players eke out livings because of the paltry earnings to be garnered in Ireland. She is particularly anxious that the newly formed Special Committee on the Traditional Arts will ensure that those whose music has generated so much revenue for Ireland will finally get their just rewards.

“The lack of appropriate initiative and acknowledgement by successive governments to support and subsidise a specific section of Irish traditional musicians and singers is shameful,” she says. “Taking a look at the system applied in Aosdána would be a good place to start.”

McPartlan makes no secret of her stake in the future health of traditional music. Having entered the belly of the recording beast relatively late in life, she has no intention of sitting in the back row, silently hoping for recognition.

“I have to be very honest and say that in the last year in particular my frustration has grown and grown. I love working for television and in the theatre, but the opportunity to do what I think I have great potential to do does not present itself in any way as much as I want –or, in fact, as much as I deserve. I think I deserve to work more because I have lot to give, but I don’t think the opportunities present themselves enough. All I know is that I am trying to pursue truth and honesty in my work. I always knew I was a singer, and the time came for me to be true to myself. It’s time for me to look within myself for expression, and *The Holland Handkerchief* is the outcome.”

**Siobhán Long**

## Mary McPartlan, acknowledgements

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