

Eithne Ní Uallacháin

Bilingua

by Fiona Heywood

THE LIVING TRADITION

Eithne Ní Uallacháin is widely regarded as having been one of the finest Irish traditional singers, with a voice that is instantly recognisable and immediately captivating. Once heard, Eithne's renditions of songs remain with the listener in a way that most other singers just can't manage. She sang from her soul, and the raw beauty and emotion she crammed into each song was immeasurable.

Fifteen years after her untimely death, Eithne's voice can be heard once more on the release of *Bilingua*, an album of songs that she had been working on before she died and that her family and friends have lovingly and sensitively completed. *Bilingua* takes you on a beautiful and emotional journey and is a fitting celebration of the life and work of this remarkable singer.

Eithne was born into an Irish-speaking household in the late 1950s. Her father, though from Dundalk in Co Louth, was immersed in the traditions of the Donegal Gaeltacht and had a good repertoire of songs and a love of the Gaelic language, local history and music. "I was born into a passionate, intelligent family," said Eithne, "whose passion for the Irish language, for literature and for learning, was the foundation stone on which all my music was based. My father's love of song steered the course and purpose of my life."

Eithne soon developed her skills as a singer and flute player and became involved in the traditional music scene in Coleraine (while she was a student there) and back home in Dundalk. It was here that she met a young Gerry O'Connor and began a relationship with him that would develop into a lifelong partnership. They began playing together at sessions and festivals

throughout Ireland and, in Gerry's words, "grew up together, while on the road having fun."

In 1987 they recorded their first studio album together on the Gael Linn label. *Cosa Gan Bhróga* saw them team up with Belfast flute player Desi Wilkinson to create an album of traditional tunes and songs mainly from the Oriel region. After this, Eithne and Gerry began spending more time performing and teaching around Europe and it was during a weekend in La Chapelle Neuve, France, that they met Breton guitarist, Gilles le Bigot. This was the beginning of another lasting friendship and musical partnership for both Eithne and Gerry and the start of a change in direction for Eithne.

Gerry remembers: "Eithne became friends with Gilles and discovered that his free form, fingerpicking guitar style worked well to accompany her traditional

songs. The song led rather than the accompaniment and there was an organic development in the studio with him - he would hear things and just know what to do with them. Lots of other bands have a different approach to guitar styles, but that is what worked for her - voice led accompaniment, driven by the melody rather than by the arrangement. It was also really when we went to Brittany and listened to some of the Breton melodies that Eithne saw the potential for writing herself. Up to that point, it was mostly traditional material that she had sung."

Eithne and Gerry began working on their second album, *Lá Lugh*, and Gilles le Bigot played with them on some of the tracks. Along with songs from the old collections and others learned from traditional singers such as Len Graham and Sarah Makem, Eithne sang two traditional songs for which she had composed new melodies, *Mál Bhán Ní*

Chuilleannáin and *Oíche fá Fhéil Bhríde*. She was continuing to move gradually in a new direction.

Lá Lugh developed into a group project and they recorded further albums, *Brigid's Kiss* (1995) and *Senex Puer* (1997), with Eithne developing her writing more with each album. Her son, musician and producer Dónal explains: "She was really finding her feet in that process of marrying traditional words with her own new melodies. Then, on the last couple of *Lá Lugh* albums, there were songs that she had written new words to as well."

Gerry explains further. "Eithne wouldn't have had a very strong musical education but she was a creative person in many ways, always thinking outside the box. In 1993, she did a tour with Capercaille in Germany and spent time with their singer, Karen Matheson. Eithne was interested in the way Capercaille approached traditional music and how they developed their ideas - she came back from that tour on a high and started writing material soon after that. She kept diaries (not in a strict 'diary' sense, more like notebooks) where she would write down her thoughts and feelings, taking themes and working with them - she would have a string of words written down and then try to make a melody line work around the feelings that she had. It was a slow process, often with words crossed out and replaced, but she would get the idea down and then see if she could make something of it. We have put some extracts of these diaries on the website and they helped in the writing of the sleeve notes for *Bilingua*."

"Eithne was also involved with a reading group who spent time reading and analysing mythology and books of poetry and philosophy and these discussions often provided inspiration for her writing. There was spirituality in her songs as well - and joy."

During the 90s and throughout this process of writing and album-making, Eithne was struggling with bouts of depression. Despite this, she returned to the studio to begin work on a new *Lá Lugh* album and her first solo album. Gerry explains how she was eager to record the material. "She needed to get the album done - I didn't realise how important it was to her at that time. We rushed Gilles over to work on some of the tracks and although he wanted to take more time to prepare, Eithne

asked him to just come over and do what he could. So he did and he and Eithne worked very closely together on it. We didn't realise just how close to the end things were."

Dónal also remembers that time well. "In the spring of 1999, I accompanied my mother to Homestead Recording Studios in Randalstown, Co Antrim. She was suffering from depression at the time and had been through some serious periods of ill health over the previous 4/5 years. Despite the debilitating nature of her illness, she was determined that her creative output would flourish. Shaun 'Mudd' Wallace was invited to take a more active role in the production of the album and I was increasingly called upon for accompaniment ideas and acted as a sounding board for Eithne's creative composition processes. During this period of recording, Eithne completed the vocal takes on some of the tracks and had recorded guide vocals on the remainder - but this was to be her last visit to the studio. On leaving Randalstown that April, she impressed on me how important it was to her that the songs be completed. In May 1999 she took her own life."

The family was devastated. Gerry remembers that time and how hard it was to even think about completing the albums. "At the beginning it was very difficult - things fell apart. I lost my partner, my friend and my companion - we were married to each other in many ways and it was a difficult time for me to get on with life. But in one of her letters, written before she passed away, she said she wanted the songs to be finished and released and that she reckoned she had done as much with them as she could at that point. So we decided to take Eithne's songs from both the *Lá Lugh* and her solo recordings and combine them to make one Eithne album - *Bilingua*. I didn't have the energy to think about the album then, and I couldn't really face it for a long time, so Dónal did a great job pulling it together - I don't know how he did that."

Dónal had planned to go to the US that summer to play music, but instead he decided to move into Homestead Studios to do some part time work with Mudd. Dónal tells the next part of the story. "In the course of being there with Mudd, we would sit down in the evenings and listen back to what had been recorded with Eithne and we decided to press ahead



Photo - Bobby Harvey



Eithne and Gerry



Eithne, Gerry and kids



Gerry, Eithne and Desi Wilkinson



Photo - Jim McGinn

“...she resonated with the individual, and that’s what she does with a song, she makes it resonate with each person...”

to try to finish it. Half of the final vocal takes were done. But the ones from her solo album were just guide vocals, done to click tracks or a bit of percussion with some of Gilles’ guitar. We had to edit bits together to make the final tracks. I put down some more piano and we brought in John Fitzpatrick to do some string arrangements and Nicky Scott to put down some bass parts. And once we had all that recording done, we went ahead and mixed it that autumn.”

“I suppose it was a strange enough time to be working on the album, so soon after her death, but it was therapeutic. We wanted to try to get it finished and get it out there. Once we had it mixed, I passed the ball back over to the record companies. But there were some contractual issues and the ball kind of got dropped. Last year we got moving on it again and we were delighted that Gael Linn agreed to take it on. *Bilingua* has a natural home there – Gael Linn released *Cosa Gan Bhróga* back in 1987 and had since re-released it on CD in 2013. Gael Linn is also more of an Irish language organisation than

a record company so it seemed fitting.”

“The mixing of the album was finished in 1999. Between one thing and another, the master tapes were lost, so when it came time for release, there was no opportunity to go back and add in lines or adjust anything, we just mastered it.”

For something that is now relatively old, the sound on *Bilingua* is remarkably fresh. Dónal agrees: “I think that was down to the creativity in Eithne’s writing and the fact that it probably was a very forward-sounding album at the time. The quality of the songs and the performances stood it in good stead for the years to come.”

Gerry, having found the process too painful at the start, explains how the timing for the launch of the CD felt more right now and how the contributions of a lot of people helped to make it come about.

“Dónal did a lot of work getting the album into good shape. He also set up a website for Eithne

and we have all been able to contribute to it. We asked several female singers who knew Eithne, or were influenced by her, to write us something we could use - it was easier to get others to talk about her than to have me doing it. It was their writings and reflections that encouraged me to go further with it. The timing of it seems right now – between us we have the skills that we needed to proceed. And I wasn’t doing it on my own – that was the important thing. Everybody came on board to make it happen.”

And the finished result is an exceptional release – 11 very varied tracks, ranging from the traditional, to those adapted and reworked by Eithne, to her own new creations. The CD comes packaged in a 40 page book which gives lyrics, credits and notes on the songs – parts of which come from Eithne’s own notes and others from the memories of Dónal and Gerry. There are many photos included and also the aforementioned reflections from singers such as Pauline Scanlon, Muireann Nic Amhlaoihb and Maighread Ni Dhomhnaill. It is a beautifully

created product which gives some insight into the music Eithne was creating at that time.

It is impossible to convey in writing the depth of feeling in the material here, or the emotional impact it has on the listener. There are songs about grief and sorrow, but also of hope and light. Gerry explains: “She was drawn to songs that have an emotional impact, though not always in a heavy way. The songs have a resonance, but I think that is what she did when she was alive – she resonated with the individual, and that’s what she does with a song, she makes it resonate with each person.”

One of the most impacting songs on *Bilingua* is *Grief*. It begins with Eithne singing a section from an ancient ‘keening’ song (a traditional Irish song of grief featuring a stricken voice in search of release). This develops into Eithne’s own response, with powerful words that are at the same time austere and yet hopeful. “*Grief can be translated from the light into the darkness; In the belly of the shadow with all its shades digested; Its true colours will unfold.*”

Another of the big songs on the album is an English version of the traditional song *I Am Stretched On Your Grave*, sung to a tune by Eithne. The vocal line is recorded on top of a track which features Eithne’s breathing, creating a rhythmic background to the song. It is a powerful effect that Eithne had heard used by a Scandinavian vocal group and that she had decided to apply to this song. As well as this, she recorded the vocals for this track in a way to make them sound like the voice is coming at you from all directions – a clever and effective approach and one which now adds even more emotional impact to the album.

Those songs must have been difficult to listen to after she was gone. “They were,” says Gerry. “I sat down and listened to the album after it was finished and I nearly froze – I was paralysed by the emotional content. That was part of the reason I couldn’t deal with the album then.”

Dónal agrees: “It was pretty emotional, with the content and subject of some of the songs being quite dark and touching on death quite a lot, but those bits were part of the project and we just had to get on with it. *Grief*, rather than only being about grief and loss, is actually more about hope and the inspiration you can draw from it.”

Another beautiful song on the album is *The Fisherman*. This originated as a tune by Gilles le Bigot and Eithne was captivated by the melody so decided to put words to it. She had recorded one verse as a guide vocal and had planned to return to add more verses but sadly, this wasn’t to be. On the recording, the one verse is placed within a beautiful instrumental arrangement and is one of the disc highlights despite it being ‘unfinished’. Another highlight is the achingly beautiful *Táim Cortha Ó Bheith Im’ Aonar I Mo Lúí*, where Eithne’s sings both the Irish and the English translation and Gilles works his usual magic on the guitar. It really is stunning.

Dónal draws attention to the final track on the album, *Winter Snows*, and says that this song illustrates best the creative course on which Eithne’s composition was steering before her death. She had been writing more and more and left books of poetry and song lyrics behind that hadn’t yet got to the point of having melodies written

for them. “That was firmly the direction she was going in,” says Dónal. “On this new album she really honed that skill of writing her own words and new melodies and was becoming very adept at writing a whole new song. She also drew on ancient texts and then married her own words in and around that – *Winter Snows* being a good example. She was keen that there would be modern instrumentation on that track, hence the electric guitar. I think as traditional musicians we can be bound by what has gone before and sometimes it is hard to break out of that – those concerns weren’t really tethering her anymore, she was just pushing ahead and doing her own thing.”

Bilingua was launched in Dublin in December 2014. It has been widely acclaimed as a great achievement and an exceptional album of songs. Those who knew her are once again able to hear her charming voice and learn more about her creative work, but in addition, a whole new audience is being exposed to the songs of Eithne Ní Uallacháin.

“Yes,” says Dónal. “It has been getting good press, with many reviews and lots of radio airplay. One of the reasons I pressed ahead with it is that I believed in the music and the song and just wanted people to hear it and now they are getting that opportunity. And it seems to be crossing into other worlds; opening the gate to her singing and her tradition for people who may not have had that opportunity before. We did an interview recently for BBC Radio Ulster’s Arts Extra programme, and Arts Extra wouldn’t be known for its traditional music coverage, so the album is unlocking little locks like that. I think it is a good way of opening the door to that world for people. I think she would be pleased.”

Gerry also says that there has been “a fantastic resurgence of interest in her songs and a great reconnection with friends and colleagues who we have lost touch with for various reasons. And for others who knew her it is fantastic too. They are seeing and hearing more about her, creating more of an awareness of who she was and what she was doing.”

Though parts of her story are sad, and while Gerry confesses that there is a bittersweet kind of feeling because she is not here to enjoy the recognition she is now receiving and to see people enjoying her creative



output, he knows that there is so much to celebrate about the life of Eithne. “Her story is not a one dimensional narrative. She was naturally buoyant, a person you would enjoy meeting, with an air of easiness about her that was attractive and light-hearted, frivolous in a way. Underneath, there was an empathy for things around. We had great fun together, with lots of great memories. We would always have the family around us, on tour and in the studio – that was important to her. They were fun times. The exuberance of it all is what we enjoyed. She was a colourful, creative spirit and remains as a very positive, enlightening, resourceful, musical influence.

You can live with that – and enjoy it.”

I will leave the final word to Dónal, whose strength and determination made sure this project came to fruition. He sums it up perfectly: “I am immensely proud of *Bilingua* and quite often wonder what Eithne would make of how it turned out. It is an album which questions and comforts me in equal measures and, having ferried this secret treasure with me for 15 years, I am very happy that the wider public will now get the chance to be inspired, challenged, uplifted and engaged by this wonderful collection of songs.”

www.eithneniuallachain.com
www.gael-linn.ie



Photo - Bobby Hanvey