

**Traditional Music /** By Daniel Neely

## Fine Carroll originals predominate on CD

The great Liz Carroll is back with a new album, "On the Offbeat," and it is a delight. What she's given us here (behind a fairly unassuming plain green wrapper) is a disc of superlative music that features some wonderful original tunes, a bunch of incredible co-conspirators and some top class fiddle playing from one of the best.

For those who might not know (and sure, there certainly aren't many in the trad community who don't, so take note if Irish traditional music's not always on your radar!), Carroll stands tall not simply among the finest fiddlers in the United States, but in all of Irish music. From Chicago, she made her mark early on with All-Ireland titles and built from there: solo albums such as "Kiss Me Kate" (with Tommy Maguire) and "A Friend Indeed" (with Marty Fahey); two Trian albums with Billy McComiskey and Dáithí Sproule; significant work with Mick Moloney and with groups like Green Fields of America and Cherish the Ladies; and more recently, albums on "Lake Effect," "In Play" and "Double Play" (the latter two with John Doyle) have made her something of a household name.

Carroll really does represent the best in Irish American music, and has, of course, been recognized for her achievements: she was given the prestigious National Heritage Fellowship Award in 1994, was the first Irish-American traditional musician to receive a Grammy nomination in 2009 and was named TG4's Composer of the Year – one of Ireland's most significant prizes for a traditional musician – in 2011.

She brings all of this to bear on "On the Offbeat." The album gets off to a quick start with "Barbara Streisand's



Liz Carroll. PHOTO: JAMES FRAHER

Trip to Saginaw/Michael Connell's." Carroll starts off the track with a sense of motion, a bowed ostinato that simulates the chug of a locomotive and its "whistle" (which develops into a rich, trailing melodic fragment) before breaking off into glamorously-titled first tune, aided by Trevor Hutchinson's (of Lúnasa) propulsive bass. Like almost every tune on the album (and both on this track), it's a Carroll original and it's great, made all the better by the way she bounces along in playing it.

Carroll switches gears on the second track, "The Fruit and the Snoot/On the Offbeat," (again, two Carroll originals) which finds Carroll & co (Hutchinson, Seán Óg Graham [guitar], Catriona McKay [harp], Natalie Haas [cello], Winifred Horan [fiddle]) exploring alternate meters and degrees of exoticism. Spain? Romania? The vibe travels around, but ultimately finds a dynamic groove in a full, angular and deftly constructed high energy arrangement.

A similar, an almost eastern European/gypsy jazz feel permeates "The Wolf/The Duck" (which Carroll describes in her liner notes is "an imagining of different tunes for some of Prokofiev's protagonists"). There is a mischievous humor in her playing in this track's first tune that to me recalls Carl Stalling at his wryest; however, this sense is quickly forgotten in the second tune, it's bright, airy feel presenting itself as though the negative image of the first.

"Never Far Away" stands out as one of the album's finest and most

beautiful tracks. Melodically resonant with the style and pacing of Turlough O'Carolan's music, the tune conveys a grace and stability that is complemented by McKay's delicate support on the harmonium. Late into the track, Horan and Haas join in on violin and cello, adding an ethereal element unmatched elsewhere on the album.

Again, Carroll shows her humor on "The Yellow Tinker/The Yellow Pantsuit." The first tune, a lovely old reel, is presented almost as a solo air to which a few really interesting melodic wrinkles are added. Then, she stops short, bends the line (as if to turn it backwards) and fires into a wonderful reading (with excellent variations) of the tune played at full bore. When she reaches the second tune (another of the album's many Carroll originals), the track's character changes. After a full break, Hutchinson, Graham and Carroll fire back in, picking up the pace left at the end of the first tune. It's great stuff.

Singling out a few tracks for review here is difficult as there are several worthy of discussion ("Liam's Childs / ...," "Tinsel" and "Miss Cathy Chilcott / ..." to name a few). Ultimately, this album is a must not just for trad fans, but one for anyone who loves good music. At times reminiscent of her own early solo work, and sometimes doing things that would make a group like Lúnasa proud, "On the Offbeat" is one you'll want to get your hands on and your ears around. To learn more about Carroll or to purchase the album, visit [www.lizcarroll.com](http://www.lizcarroll.com).

## Christmastime offers quality Irish albums



Eileen Ivers. PHOTO: MEL DI GIACOMO

**Music Notes /** By Colleen Taylor

For many of us, December means searching out those classic Irish Christmas albums. My own family cannot experience the season without "Clancy Brothers Christmas" and the Chieftains' "The Bells of Dublin." While the Clancys' "Buala Bas" and the Chieftains' "Wexford Carol" are old staples that should not be skipped over on our Christmas playlists, I would argue some of the best Celtic Christmas music has been released within the past few years. What's more, these Christmas albums represent some of the best releases within the Irish music sector generally. Here are some albums and shows your holiday season should not go without.

Top of the list is Eileen Ivers's most recent release: "An Nollaig: An Irish Christmas." This fiddler rocks the house at every show she plays, but when it's the holiday season, the Irish-American rock star is in her element. This album presents a joyful fusion of Irish tunes, bluesy accent, and holiday bells. Her version of "Do You Hear What I Hear?" is a perfect example: Ivers rewrites this Christmas hymn as an upbeat, rhythmic masterpiece that one can't help but bounce along to. Following the trend of her album "Immigrant Soul," "An Nollaig" is a

creative mixture of genres. "Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring" combines Ivers's fiddle with a Gospel choir, and "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" highlights not only some expert playing from Ivers, but the soulful vocals of blues singer Tommy McDonnell as well. Ivers manages to make her one instrument sound like four, transforming traditional Irish music in order to capture the Christmas sound. This album cannot go unheard, just as Ivers cannot go unseen this Christmas season. I caught her Christmas show two years ago, and it was the highlight of my holiday. Ivers and her band, with McDonnell on some incredible vocals, lit the theatre on fire with their infectious energy. Catch her if you can. Ivers's band just finished up a holiday show in New Jersey and now head on to Pennsylvania and Virginia, where they'll be playing on December 20th and 21st.

Fellow New Yorker Joanie Madden deserves mention as well. The Cherish the Ladies annual Christmas concert at Tarrytown Music Hall is a teaser for Christmas Day at the start of December. Every year, these ladies pack the hall and treat their fans to some traditional Christmas songs, as well as some of their own original tunes. Don't worry if you missed their Christmas

kick-off this year: Cherish the Ladies will be playing at the Mineola Irish American Center on Dec. 22. The band released their second Christmas album in 2009, entitled "A Star in the East." The album not only offers some beautiful, traditional Irish instrumentation with Christmas classics like "What Child Is This?" and "God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman," but a new Christmas jingle or two as well. Madden takes the vocals for "Rise Up Shepherd and Follow," a gleeful re-introduction of an old American Christmas folk song. This album is one of Cherish's finest.

The most recent release from Ashley Davis is also a Christmas one. "Songs of the Celtic Winter" (2012) is a beautiful, wistful realization of "the magic of Christmas." English representative Kate Rusby has also released an excellent holiday album of late, entitled "Sweet Bells." The title track transports the listener nostalgically to a Christmas two centuries past, and the whimsical backing accordion give extra flavor to Rusby's happy singing voice.

Finally, the compilation album "A Celtic Christmas," produced by podcaster Marc Gunn, offers a more diverse interpretation of Celtic Christmas, involving Canadian, American, and various other folk influences.