

By Jim Motavalli

The singer Liz McNicholl, born in Ireland, resident in Norwalk, is not easily pigeonholed. She's Irish, but not an Irish singer, per se. One could get the impression from many of the Irish performers resident in the U.S. that everyone over there listens to jigs, reels and traditional ballads, but in reality it's country music and soul that you're likely to find in the record shops. The Irish have even heard rap.

Liz sent me her first CD, *Grand Central Station*, and I was first attracted to her big, clear voice, then her songwriting. "Grand Central Station" (one of two originals on the album) is a wonderful song about the harried New York commuter that Liz once was. And her choice of covers was inspired, too, particularly her take on Tom Paxton's 9/11 song "The Bravest." Jeff Wignall and I both gave that one a lot of airplay on WPKN, where I've also hosted several live performances by Liz and her excellent band.

There was never any doubt that I'd welcome Liz to be part of the Weekly's Song Project. Liz and her band (Morgan Eve Swain on fiddle, Chuck O'Donnell on guitar, Fred McKay on bass) perform regularly all over Connecticut, and are regulars at the Gaelic American Club and Colin's Pub (both in Fairfield).

On a good night—and they are mostly good nights—you'll hear John Prine and Joni Mitchell covers, fiddle-guitar features featuring Chuck and Morgan Eve, and heartbreaking Irish ballads.

So what would Liz sing for this project? As it happened, I had just been to the Great High Mountain Tour in New York and encountered the Reeltime Travelers. They're a crowd-pleasing band with a great repertoire of uptempo fiddle tunes and Appalachian mountain music, but in the quietly brilliant songs of guitarist Martha Scanlan they have something more.

I gave Liz two Martha Scanlan songs, "Hallelulah" and "Little Bird of Heaven," and she chose the first one. "Hallelulah" fits her voice perfectly. It's about an old Chevy truck, and it's about escaping the city for a better life in the mountains. The composer e-mailed the words to me about an hour before we recorded, and that helped us get its beautiful poetry straight. Sample lyrics: "400,000 miles of broke-down truck/I crawled out of Nashville on broken-down luck/Falling apart at the hems and the seams/She's painted the color of broken-down dreams/Rust and the race wears thin as a dime/My '58 Apache gets to work on time."

The whole group can make the session at Greg Packham's Fairfield studio, and we also add harp player Mike Stone, a New Haven attorney who's heard me talk about the project on the radio. Greg sees the size of the band and thinks we'll have to record the music first, vocals second, but he changes his mind and decides to record it all live when he hears how quiet the song is.

The Reeltime Travelers' version of the song has a long fiddle solo in it, but we decide to break it up with a short blast on harmonica, followed by Morgan Eve's fiddle. I suggest that perhaps the song can end with an acapella fiddle chorus, but that idea doesn't go over. Instead, the group decides to sing the last chorus unaccompanied, which works wonderfully well.

The first take has some minor problems with the lyrics, and I take the opportunity to ask Mike to make his harp solo a bit more, well, "lonesome." He does this admirably on the near-perfect second take. Greg adds a bit of echo on the harp, which makes it haunting, indeed.

There's some tidying to do. Morgan Eve says she couldn't hear Chuck well, and so her solo was "dragging horribly." She re-records it in one take, and we also add backup vocals by both Chuck and Morgan Eve on the choruses.

It's all done in three hours, and everyone is very pleased with the results. Liz plans to add the song to the group's repertoire, and I'm looking forward to hearing them sing it at Colin's Pub.