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# Her Folksy Parlor, Crowded With Family and Friends

By JON PARELES

When the Canadian songwriter [Kate McGarrigle died](#) on Jan. 18, 2010, she left behind an extended musical family and a quietly magnificent catalog. Both were at the center of “A Celebration of Kate McGarrigle,” tribute concerts on Thursday and Friday nights at Town Hall.

[Ms. McGarrigle](#) wrote 20th-century parlor songs: folksy-sounding, latter-day descendants of Stephen Foster tunes, hymns, waltzes and popular arias. They often featured vocal harmonies from Anna McGarrigle, her older sister, fellow songwriter and performing partner since the 1970s, and from other family members in the studio and onstage. Yet within those cozy settings, Ms. McGarrigle was bold and sophisticated, musically and emotionally.

Her structures skipped beats, made sly harmonic turns and took startling melodic leaps. Her lyrics could be wry and flinty or painfully intimate, like her biting, tearful and terse “Go Leave”: “She’s better than me/Or at least she is stronger/She will make it last longer/That’s nice for you.” In songs like “First Born” and “Walking Song,” Ms. McGarrigle was also the rare pop songwriter who addressed not only love and romance but also family and long-term companionship.

Family and friends surrounded the McGarrigle sisters in shows like the one recorded for their 1998 album, “The McGarrigle Hour,” and their Christmastime concerts. This tribute concert — which was filmed for a documentary — was one more reunion, fond with glimpses of mourning. The lineup included Kate’s children, Rufus and Martha Wainwright; her sisters, Anna and Jane McGarrigle; and Sloan Wainwright, Rufus and Martha’s aunt. There were also collaborators and admirers, among them Emmylou Harris, Norah Jones, Justin Vivian Bond, Krystle Warren and Antony Hegarty (of Antony and the Johnsons).

Along with the Wainwright siblings there were other second-generation songwriters: Teddy Thompson and Jenni Muldaur. Anna’s husband and two children also joined in, and the backing band included the longtime McGarrigle sidemen Chaim Tannenbaum and Joel Zifkin. It was a large, motley ensemble; Mr. Wainwright wore a sequined tuxedo, and the other musicians sported rhinestone accessories.

The songs were all by Kate McGarrigle with a handful of exceptions: “Over the Hill” and “Swimming Song” by Kate’s ex-husband, Loudon Wainwright III; Ms. Harris’s own farewell to “Darlin’ Kate”; and two Anna McGarrigle songs, “Heart Like a Wheel” and “Kitty Come Home,” which was written in the 1970s as a postdivorce welcome for her sister but on Friday became an angelic elegy.

The set included Mr. Thompson performing “Saratoga Summer Song,” an early-1970s tune unearthed for “Tell My Sister” (Nonesuch), a new McGarrigles collection. And it included the last song Kate McGarrigle wrote, “[Proserpina](#),” retelling the myth of Persephone for its tension between a prodigal daughter and her baleful mother. Its introduction was the frail recorded voice of Kate herself, with Rufus Wainwright taking over.

The music got the familial treatment: vocal camaraderie with a constantly changing cast of harmonizers, and thoughtful, homespun arrangements that alluded to bygone styles and always had a clarinet or a banjo on hand when needed. But instead of Kate McGarrigle’s voice, with its reedy understatement that could be tartly matter of fact or openly heartsick, there were other approaches: Antony’s tragic intensity (perfect for “Go Leave” and “I Cried for Us”), Ms. Jones’s relaxed melancholy (in “Over the Hill”), Ms. Warren’s contralto resolve (in “I Don’t Know”). Mr. Wainwright slowed down his mother’s tunes, crooning them with an operatic sustain that moved them toward the art song; Martha Wainwright gave hers a tinge of vaudeville sultriness.

Ms. Wainwright took on songs that drew their lessons from intra-family messages: “Tell My Sister” and, among the encores, “Matapedia,” which begins with a middle-aged man briefly mistaking the young Martha for his memories of her mother. “My mom wrote this song about me and other things,” she said, introducing it. At McGarrigles concerts with her mother, she continued: “I sang backup on this for a while. And I wish I weren’t here singing the lead on it.”