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## Music/Theater/Dance

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Article published Friday, December 17, 2004

### Folk group, singer bring melodies to the Ark

By **TAHREE LANE**  
BLADE STAFF WRITER



Finvarra's Wren

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Back-to-back nights of terrific music fills the bill at the Ark in Ann Arbor tonight and tomorrow.

Finvarra's Wren, a group encompassing Irish, Scottish, English, and American folk traditions, will present its rousing annual solstice show tonight. Tomorrow, Maura O'Connell, chanteuse and long-time friend of the Ark, will perform.

Finvarra's Wren is led by Jim Perkins, an anchor of Detroit's folk and Irish music scene since the late 1960s when he played coffeehouses as a teenager and then Irish pubs.

Perkins, 55, will tell a tale relating to the "dark season," toss out snippets of poetry, sing, and play guitar, banjo, harmonica, mountain dulcimer, and tin whistle.

He'll be joined by his wife, Cheryl Burns (Appalachian dulcimer and bodhran), Marty Somberg (fiddle, guitar), and Terence McKinney (uilleann pipes and whistles). All are from southeastern Michigan.

Rounding out the sound will be three offspring who have won many awards at Irish competitions: 16-year-old Alison Perkins (fiddle, tin whistle), Asher Perkins, 14, (button accordion, concertina), and Siobhan McKinney, 12, (Irish harp).

Foot percussionist Nic Gareiss from Mt. Pleasant will dance on several tunes.

"There's high-spirited Irish dance music and some lovely old songs," says Perkins, "and some newer songs that speak to the same feelings about how people have dealt with the dark times through the ages."

Group members search for and perform little-known traditional songs, but also write original music that sounds traditional. They'll do wassail songs gleaned from England, the Orkney Islands, and Kentucky - an example of how tradition moves, Perkins notes.

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And they'll perform a Yorkshire tune that was sung long ago to the spirits in apple trees; it ends with shouts to chase away bad spirits that could ruin the harvest.

Centuries ago, people would stay up all night at the solstice, singing and doing rituals in hopes of bringing back the sun, he says. "This [concert] is our little ritual."

•

Tomorrow, the Ark hosts Grammy-nominated Maura O'Connell, who's been performing there for two decades.

O'Connell, 46, is a songstress with 10 albums to her credit. She has taken on the thankless task of teaching people that the word "singer" does not have to be preceded by country, pop, Irish, jazz, blues, or any other genre.

"Several years ago, I had T-shirts made that said 'Just a Singer,'" she says. The concept isn't always understood, she notes with some frustration. She neither writes songs nor plays instruments.

"I'm a vocal actress," she says. "I try to get inside the song." And all styles are fair game, but the ones that make it into her playbook often have a poignant story or a character. "I can deliver it in a way that can give you a cushion."

A higher-range alto, her voice is deeper than it was in her 20s when she sang with DeDanaan, a traditional Irish group. "It's big. It's loud," she says of her voice. "I have to control it sometimes. I'm also quite funny on stage."

O'Connell was born and raised in County Clare, Ireland, in a home where her mother loved opera and the four daughters sang. At 21, she joined DeDanaan, but the style wasn't a good fit. "I didn't want to be bound by somebody's idea of how a song should be sung."

She became enchanted with the terrific musicianship of the American group New Grass Revival. "They didn't seem to be bound by their instruments."

In 1986, she moved to Nashville and began performing and recording, often with dobro player extraordinaire Jerry Douglas as musician and producer.

Her newest album, "Don't I Know," is her most eclectic collection yet. It's anchored by a Tim O'Brien song about death and letting go of a loved one. "It's got huge dignity," she says.

The mother of an 8-year-old boy, she'll be accompanied tomorrow by John Mock on electric bass and Don Johnson on acoustic guitar.

Doors open both nights at 7:30 and concerts begin at 8. Tickets for tonight's Finvarra's Wren show are \$13.50. Tickets for Saturday's performance of Maura O'Connell are \$22.50. The Ark is at 316 South Main St., in Ann Arbor. Information: 734-761-1800 or www.theark.org.

Contact Tahree Lane at: tlane@theblade.com or 419-724-6075.

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