

## The Tenor, John McDermott - A Natural Giving Man

By Elizabeth Kelly

Within the first 15 minutes of our conversation it was quite apparent to me why Irishman John McDermott transitioned over to a career of public singing. He states quite plainly that he feels called to sing, that he genuinely enjoys "singing a story" to an audience in a manner which he learned from his father. Yet, I also believe he sings because it is one of the most intimate ways he is able to connect with various communities of people and ultimately with his own humanity.

Singing is his way of giving back to the people, teaching a little Irish history and tradition along the way, and reviving the soul within.

The final embrace that John gives those traditional Irish melodies, as they make their way from the depths of his heart to the ears of his eager audience, is reflective of a man who sings with an open natural spirit. He is the common every day man, with no airs or attitudes, here in our present day world; yet at the same time he is something plucked out of Ireland's past. Here today perhaps to show and remind us of all the beauties that lie within the Irish culture, tradition and heart.

Singing is John's gift, his calling. And through responding to his calling he has found so many ways to give. He gives in plentiful amounts: through his music, as a creator of and participant in

charitable work, to his family, and simply by serving as a reliable friend in need.

John continually manages to share his financial successes along the way with those in need. His charitable foundations mainly focus on the support of homeless veterans here in the U.S. and Canada. He has specific interest in this category of charitable work as his father, Peter, was a WWII veteran and his mother, Hope had a brother whose military experience included time as a prisoner of war. Additionally, Hope set an example for the McDermott clan by devoting 27 of her years in a community service capacity, serving meals at a homeless shelter. John also inherited his parents' concern that veterans, those that put their lives at risk for their country, get far too little appreciation and care. He hopes his foundations will help alleviate this type of neglect.

Recently John reached out to help a friend set-up a Canadian-based division of his foundation, the DORE Foundation. DORE has enjoyed tremendous success here in the U.S. aiding individuals diagnosed with learning disorders, such as ADD and ADHD. The foundation endorses a therapy and cure derived through specific basic physical exercises, not through the use of drugs. More information can be found at the DORE Foundation web site, [www.dorecenters.com](http://www.dorecenters.com).

John indicates that he inherited his father's voice and his mother's looks. He derived his joy of singing from both of his parents, as his father introduced he and his 11 siblings to music and the history of music and both parents encouraged the ritual of conversation followed by group singing, nightly, in the family living room. Eventually the entire neighborhood joined in these humble festivities. The gift of voice, inclusive of both storytelling and singing, was the prime source of family entertainment in the McDermott

household as there was no TV to view. Hallelujah.

John continually memorializes both his parents, Hope and Peter McDermott, who passed away in recent years, by retaining his father's hat and cane and his mother's scarf, close by his side, during his onstage performances.

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John really is an example and reminder to all of mankind, of how much we can bring to the

I might add I believe that one of the problems that exists in our society today is that many have bought the notion that if music is aired continually on the radio then it is good music. I do not believe this is always the case and sadly much great talent has gone unnoticed as a result of this attitude. Frankly, I believe the quality of the Irish Tenors' music to be of a high value, yet we aren't commonly on the radio. We are uncommon, unusual, not

popular or mainstream music. Yet, when we engage in a live performance, audiences accept our music with open hearts. Our music is real, blue collar. The story is real and it has so much heart. So, in spite of current circumstances in the music-marketing world we are successful after all. We are quite fortunate. In the creation of this album and thankfully in the creation of future albums there will always be so much to choose from, as we pull from the archives to bring the music back to life, during this era of classic Irish melody revival.

**What is the origin of the famous Danny Boy?**

The lyrics we know were written by Frederic E. Weatherly, an English lawyer as well as a songwriter. Apparently, Weatherly met up with and had an extensive conversation

with a Scots Historian, one who particularly specialized in the history of the 1700's. This gentleman's perspective, of that particular era in Scotland, aided Frederic in the creation of the words for Danny Boy.

Danny Boy is a Scottish lament, specifically the lament of a mother for her son. It relates the ritual of the eldest son of a Scottish household, being called by the pipes to prepare for battle and come defend the nation, during times of warfare. The pipes used here were the bagpipes, not uilleann pipes.

In forming the words to Danny Boy, Weatherly contemplated what a mother might say to her son upon hearing the pipes call.



table, whether we be a simple shepherd of the fields, a parent, an office or factory laborer, a coal miner, a forest ranger or alas, a musical entertainer.

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**So, John what's the meaning behind the title of Sacred, the new CD by The Irish Tenors, John McDermott, Anthony Kearns and Finbar Wright?**

Sacred is meant to be a spiritual album, not a religious album. It is not an album of hymns, but one of reflection. It is diverse. Each of us has approached the creation of this album in his own personal way, inputted his own personal perspective. We all believe that there is nothing to take from our album but the positive.

In just a few simple phrases, Danny Boy, recreates such a moment.

The historic irony of this particular song is that it was written by an Englishman, one who most likely never stepped a foot in Ireland. The setting is Scotland. One of the reasons we easily know this is that "the glen" is a prop of Scotland not Ireland. Finally, the Irish are the final adopters of the melody.

At about the turn of the last century, many Irish melodies, including Danny Boy, were brought into America and made popular here. John McCormick helped make this happen. An interesting side note though, John's true forte was always opera not Irish Music. Most folks don't seem to be aware of this.

Also, much Irish music reappeared in American Civil War songs, as a lot of Irish were fleeing from Ireland at that time to the U.S. and Canada. Some of these popular tunes with an Irish root include "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" and "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean".

**What was your past career, before music?**

I worked for an extensive number of years as a circulation sales manager with the Toronto Sun.

I enjoyed my work at the Sun and truly had no plans of leaving the newspaper business at the time. But certain events and moments transpired that led me to truly believe I was called to sing the traditional melodies of my Irish heritage, the songs my dad taught me, full-time.

Your musical career, please reconfirm how it all began?

As I indicated previously, singing informally with family began at quite an early age. I attended St. Michael's Choir School in Toronto and maintained a friendship with several of the guys I met there. We formed a band we called the Mistletones. We sang for a hobby, not professionally or on a stage. We started with going door-to-door to people's homes to sing for fun, in exchange for refreshments, during the Christmas holidays. Eventually are main focus became seniors' homes and children's hospitals. Over 20 years later we are still close friends and look to get together on Christmas Eve afternoons to sing in this capacity.

The beginning of my professional singing career stems from the recording of an album for my parents, commemorating their

50<sup>th</sup> Golden Anniversary. The 12 recorded songs, on this custom-made album of traditional Irish folk music, all in some way symbolize we 12 McDermott children. Upon hearing the album, "someone" sent it to EMI records. EMI placed the album on a shelf for about a year then chose to release it on their classic label, Angel. Due in part to the great timing of EMI's release, as this genre of music was on the upswing then, the album, called Danny Boy, enjoyed amazing great success. What a surprise this was for me at age 38 in the year 1992.

Initially EMI asked me to tour in order to promote the album. But I refused. Then they came back to me after a year and asked again. This time I said "yes". I was fortunate to have my first tour experience with the Chieftains, which added another major dimension to my public singing experience. From that point on I never looked back.

My belief that I was called to this profession is not simply due to my quick success, but more importantly due to the fact that my success as a singing artist allows me to help and work with other artists, to help those in need. This is truly great.

**How did the Irish Tenors: John McDermott, Anthony Kearns, Ronan Tynan, and Finbar Wright, meet?**

I was in the process of preparing for a solo live show, as the Irish Tenor, for PBS. But, prior to the airing of the performance our respective producers started talking and agreed it would be beneficial for we tenors to perform as a group. So we all met, got along well and decided to make a go of it. This was in 1998. We later performed our first show together, which was recorded in 1999. We definitely all have our own unique talents which blend well together as a team.

**Why did you leave The Irish Tenors back in 2000?**

I had some tough things transpiring in 2000, namely multiple family deaths, including the death of my mother, Hope. I simply had to get away.

**Naturally.**

**Please tell us about the McDermott Family?**

My parents were both Irish born and raised in Ireland. Dad is from Donegal and Mom is from Antrim. My siblings and I were born and raised in Glasgow, Scotland. We lived there until 1965. We then moved from Scot-

land to Toronto, Ontario. Both of my parents were in their 50's at the time of this move to Canada and well settled in their lives. But due to the economic situation in Ireland and Scotland they felt that such a move would be best for the family, so we moved.

We are a family of twelve children. I am number nine in the line-up.

Two of my siblings have passed away as well as both of my parents.

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With regards to my perspective on sibling relationships, I truly don't understand scenarios where siblings have no patience with one another. We need to have patience. My brothers, sisters and I have always looked out for one another. I am fortunate in that I've always had the complete confidence, yesterday and today, that an older and a younger sibling, are looking out for me. This sense of security reflects in how I now approach my day-to-day life.

Finally, I believe it is the events not the memories that shape us.

**And your wife?**

My wife and I met wife aboard the *Tall Ships* in 1984. Her name is Agnieska, which means gift of God. She is part Polish/Russian. But I will look to save this story for another time.

**Favorite Foods?**

I love to fry up minced ground beef in a pan, then pour it, grease and all, on to a slab of heavy rye bread, add a layer of mashed potatoes, and then finally top it with another slice of rye bread. This is one of my favorite meals.

**How utterly revolting, do you truly not drain the grease?**

Yes. Really it's great though.

**How wonderful for you.**

**So, how else do you spend your leisure?**

I love to sail my laser sailboat, which is about a 10 to 12 foot length boat. I also enjoy cross-country skiing, squash, and golf.

**How is it that you ultimately came to the U.S.?**

In 1995 I came to the New England area to help Tom Kelly with a shelter for homeless veterans. I have family in New York and Long Island, including cousins.

I also have an office set-up in Boston, McDermott Entertainment.

Presently, touring is the main event. My wife and I typically spend three months of the year here in the U.S., three in Canada, and the remaining months in Europe or elsewhere. As we have

no children this type of lifestyle is doable for Agnieska and I.

**Solo Career Plans?**

EMI Records will be releasing a "Best of John McDermott" CD shortly.

I recently completed a new Christmas album, called Stories of Love, scheduled for release in 2006.

I recently finished "Just Plain Folk" with the legendary artist and friend, Michael P. Smith.

Finally, DORE Center is a non-drug treatment and therapy center for individuals with learning disorders, including ADD and dyslexia. It has been successful here in the U.S. in places such as Boston and Denver and now the treatment center is moving

into Canada. I'm helping support my friend, Winford Dore in this expansion effort.

**What do you believe to be the admirable traits of the Irish?**

Our understanding of human nature and our complete open-armed approach with welcoming and expressing hospitality towards our fellow man.

Dad always said, "Don't ever judge anyone; always give reasonable doubt. If you see a hurdle in front of someone, rather than watch them run into it, move it out of their way."

For more information on John McDermott and the charitable works he is connected to, visit, you guessed it, [www.johnmcdermott.com](http://www.johnmcdermott.com).