

Eddi Reader – The “Eddi Reader Sings The Songs Of Robert Burns” Interview

Part 1 – Eddi talks about Culzean Castle, Celtic Connections and making the “Sings The Songs Of Robert Burns” album

The Where And The When

The Eddi Reader interview took place at the Leicester Guildhall in the early hours of Monday August 25th 2003. Eddi and her band had played a Sunday evening concert in the adjacent Leicester Cathedral. Many thanks to Harriet Simms and Sarah Wells for setting up the interview.

Background To The Interview

Back in the late eighties, Eddi Reader was a member of the London based band Fairground Attraction who enjoyed a UK # 1 single with the *folk/pop* tune “Perfect.” The band released two studio albums before going their separate ways. The second recording, the *grossly misspelled* “**Ay Fond Kiss**,” was a collection of *leftovers* that opened with Sir Walter Scott’s “Jock O’Hazeldean” and closed with Robert Burns’ “Ae Fond Kiss” [correctly spelled].

Reader, a Scot, launched her solo career with “**Mirmama**” [1992] and one of her 1996 “Medicine” CD singles featured the non-album songs, “John Anderson My Jo” and “Green Grow The Rashes,” composed by Robert Burns. In the late Spring of 2003 Reader’s sixth solo recording, the much anticipated “**Eddi Reader Sings The Songs Of Robert Burns**” was released in the UK. The album is to be released in the United States by Compass Records on February 3rd 2004.

On Friday 3rd May 2002, at Culzean Castle [pronounced *kuh-lane*] in Burns’ native Ayrshire [Scotland], supported by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Reader sang a trio of Robert’s songs in concert as part of the inaugural **Burns And A’That** Festival at Culzean Castle [#]. And that’s where we’ll begin.....

Folkwax : How did the Culzean Castle invitation come about.

Eddi Reader : Stewart Nesbit who works for Unique Events in Edinburgh called me up. He also plays guitar for The Proclaimers. I’ve known Stewart for years and he said, “*We’re putting on this concert for Robert Burns and we’re looking for people to come and sing his songs with the orchestra. Would you know any Burns songs.*” I was thrilled and thought, “*Great. Yeah, I’ll do it.*” In the early months of 2002 he phoned back to ask what songs I would perform. I said, “*I know “Green Grow The Rashes,” “John Anderson My Jo” and “Auld Lang Syne,” The Tannahill Weavers version. I’ll do them.*” He went “*That’s good.*” and then said, “*So, you’ll turn up with your arrangements.*” I went, “*What do you mean arrangements?*” He said “*Well you’ll have to have the music written out for the orchestra.*” I said, “*I don’t know how to do that. I can’t do that.*” I could have maybe done the guitar parts at a push. He’s going, “*Oh no. We’ve only got two weeks to get this together,*” so he called Kevin McCrae who arranged the Burns album strings. I sang down the phone to Kevin, “*Green Grow The Rashes,” “Auld Lang Syne” and “John Anderson My Jo”* and he wrote the arrangements. One of them – “*Green Grow The Rashes*” – he copied from a record I did and had the cello do the guitar parts. I loved his arrangements of “*John Anderson My Jo*” and “*Auld Lang Syne*” so it all worked out really well.

FW : Was the Culzean concert the first time that you’d sung live with an orchestra.

ER : Yes. I was really excited about the prospect, but I didn’t want to do Burns in any voice that wasn’t my own. I was wondering how that would have worked out. It worked out fine and was really good, and a lot of people really got it the way I got it. It was kind of earthy, mixed with romanticism.

FW : You played Culzean Castle again this year.

ER : Yes, I was invited back. After that first concert at Culzean Castle, Colin Hynd of Celtic Connections invited me to do a full Burns concert with an orchestra. **[Ed. Note.** On 24th January 2003, aka Burns Night Eve, Eddi performed at Glasgow’s Royal Concert Hall in a concert billed as “**Eddi Reader Sings Robert Burns.**” Due to demand, a second concert took place on February 2nd]. This year, I did one gig in the town of Ayr. This was in the Spiegeltent and we had the orchestra, the folk band, and the songs we’d done at Celtic Connections. It was really tight in the Spiegeltent. It was quite a small space, but it

was great. Then I went to Culzean, and I sang two songs with the orchestra. “Willie Stewart” and “Red Red Rose.”

FW : Towards the end of Fairground Attraction you recorded “Ae Fond Kiss,” and you’ve already mentioned the Burns songs on the “Medicine” single. Was it inevitable that you’d record this album.

ER : Well, I’ve always recorded traditional material. I recorded “The Blacksmith” for “**Mirmama**,” and “I Loved A Lass” [Ed. Note. as “I Love A Lad”] on “**Candyfloss And Medicine**.” If I get a good traditional tune, I treat it in the same way as I’d treat a song that Boo [Hewerdine] had written yesterday. I don’t have a different voice for folk songs, and another voice for pop songs. I’m trying, really, to be as authentic with it as I can be. A lot of people have said – Geoff Travis [Ed. Note. Owner of Rough Trade Records who release Reader’s recordings in the UK] has said “*I’d love to hear you do a traditional album*.” He’s said that for years, but I usually just get into songs because they mean something to me. I don’t know what happened with the Burns thing, I think it just became easy. Someone had suggested I do a concert, then I thought, “*Why don’t I record this. It would be lovely if it works*.” And it did work. To sit down and deliberately plan a traditional album, I don’t think I would have done that.

FW : Do you want to offer any comment on Kevin McCrae’s input to the Burns project.

ER : His background is in classical music. He’s a trained cellist and had worked in the string section of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. He felt quite frightened to be conducting them. That was a big deal for him I remember that. We kind of warmed to him. The other players - Ewen Vernal, John McCusker, Boo and Colin [Reid] and I, we were just a bit more *freeform*. It was deliberate on my part that those guys were there, because I didn’t want to be swamped by classical musicians. I didn’t want it to be, Eddi Reader at The Proms [+]. I didn’t want it to be that for Burns either. I wanted it to be earthy and in the tradition of Scottish roots music, rather than Scottish classical music. We thought he would argue with us about how we played the music, but in fact he was really accommodating. Overall, he was fantastic and we understood that he was actually one of us, albeit classically trained.

FW : Presumably he had an appreciation for roots music.

ER : Of course. And the orchestra too. A lot of the players applied to do the job. I think they can do that at the Royal Scottish – they’re based at Henry Wood Hall in the west end of Glasgow. They see what’s coming up, and can apply for it, be it a Russian trip, or a Chinese trip - or me doing Burns at Celtic Connections. A lot of them put their name down for it because of Culzean Castle. A lot of them had the same kind of sensibilities too, so it was nice. Everybody was interested. The whole project wouldn’t have gone anywhere if not for the enthusiasm of every one of them.

FW : You’ve recorded, toured and co-written with Boo for many years. How long have you known John McCusker.

ER : About two years. I’m trying to think when precisely, and I can’t remember. I did something for Kate Rusby and that’s when I met him. He was great. Kate Rusby is a great singer and I really love her. The two of them make a great couple. I knew that John was well versed in traditional tunes that I might need at the end of some of the Burns songs, like “Willie Stewart” – I have “Molly Rankin” at the end. I’d said to John and Phil Cunningham, “*Is there something you could come up with. We need a jig here. I don’t want it to be all singing. I want to get the atmosphere of being in a bar*.” A bit of Scottish pub atmosphere. “Willie Stewart” I see as quite a fraternal song. His blokes – Burns and his friends - always partied together, and I wanted a song at the end that they could dance to. They picked “Molly Rankin” which, as it turned out, is a contemporary tune.

FW : Did you feel the Celtic Connections concert was a natural extension of what had happened nine months earlier at Culzean.

ER : Yeah. The Culzean thing worked, so this thing should work and it did. There was a part of me that thought it was territory I shouldn’t really get involved in, because I’m not well versed in every aspect of traditional Scottish music. Neither am I a comprehensive student of the history of Burns, but I’ve got off on something about him that I relate to, and I resonate with him as a muse. I resonate with his love of nature, and his love of the countryside, and the love of the people that he met, and the funny comical

nature of the West of Scotland that I was raised in. I imagined him beside me kind of going *"Go on, do it hen" [*]*. When I was onstage at Celtic Connections I was kind of oblivious. I thought, *"I've got to just forget everything. I've got to forget that there might be critics in the audience that think Burns should be performed in a certain way."* I had to forget about everything. Mostly I was singing for my mother, and for my cousin, Maureen O'Hara. They hate anything classical. They hate Robert Burns. That was where I was aiming. I wanted to aim it at folk that didn't know how good he is. I'm talking about working class people. I think Burns talks for those people - the ordinary man. My sister said, *"I'll no come and see you sing this time, because I don't like Burns."* So I said, *"Just come and support me."* At the end of the concert they were greetin' [~] and they loved it.

FW : When you came to make the album, was it obvious that Boo would produce it.

ER : What I did was, I left it with him. We'd done all the arrangements, the recording, and it came to the mixing stage. I gave it to Boo and he went to Jon Kelly's house. Jon Kelly produces The Beautiful South and other bands, and he's also a big fan. I left it up to Boo to produce the final mixes, and figure out what sounded best. Listening to his suggestions for example, for the placing of "Green Grow The Rashes" on the album. It was about letting go, giving it away, and hoping that it would set sail on its own. You have to do that with albums. It's a kind of a wee trick. Even if I sat for hours I could never pick the right mixes, because I'd never let it go. It would never be finished.

FW : Did you record more than eleven tracks.

ER : Yes. We recorded fourteen or fifteen. "Green Grow The Rashes" didn't make it. We recorded two versions of "Ae Fond Kiss." We've got one that has a lot of strings on it, and we've got one that's has a bit more band and is freeform.

FW : Was the recording of the album at CaVa Studios in Glasgow conditioned by the fact that you needed a bigger room to accommodate the orchestra.

ER : No. No. They were the ones that were giving us the best deal. We know that studio. It's kind of the only one we know really in Glasgow. They are used to working with the strings. There is a room that they use, so it was set up for it.

FW : I guess this is the first full album that you've recorded in Scotland.

ER : Probably. Yeah. God, I never thought of that.

FW : The album cover picture has me fascinated. There are four pictures of Burns. Why not just one large one.

ER : The original idea was that I was going to have one picture of Burns at the corner of me. Colin Dunsmuir was the photographer. He's got a great passion for photography. He took reams and reams of pictures, and then we saw this picture that was all blacked out at the back. There were a couple of versions of it, and one was really black and it looked like a bust of Burns. The original idea was to have Burns picture on a poster on a wall, pasted, like fly posted. Then we made twenty copies of the Burns picture and there are various shots of the alleyway with them strewn all over the place. But it was also trying to be a wee bit irreverent. The whole album is about getting rid of our resistance to Burns. I think that he's perceived as a wee bit stuffy by a lot of people. There didn't seem to be anything youthful about him or vital. I think, somehow, there was a desire on my part to represent Burns. Like acting a part – the fact that I'm not male, didn't help – I wanted to do it as if he was doing it. What I wanted was to make Burns contemporary.

To be continued.

Footnotes.

[#] – The web site for the 2003 **"Burns And A'That"** Festival is located at <http://www.burnsfestival.com/site2003/DOCS/index.html>

[+] – Inaugurated in 1895, and one of the UK's annual classical music highlights, the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts mainly take place at the Royal Albert Hall in London. The 2004 season runs from mid July to mid September and includes over 70 main Prom concerts.

[*] – *hen* is an affectionate term used in the West of Scotland that means, a woman.

[~] – *greetin'* as a Scottish term can be translated as crying.

Arthur Wood

Kerrville Kronikles 01/04

[2400 words]

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Eddi Reader – The “Eddi Reader Sings The Songs Of Robert Burns” Interview

Part 2 – Eddi talks about the songs on the Burns album

*In last week's episode Eddi talked about being invited to sing at the 2002 **Burns And A' That** Festival, the subsequent fuller concert of Burns songs at the 2003 **Celtic Connections** Festival and how she went on to record “**Eddi Reader Sings The Songs Of Robert Burns**” in the Spring of 2003.*

FW : Did you deliberately pick some of the songs because of the subject matter.

ER : No. No. I just came across them. I bought lots of books in charity shops and started reading up on him. I got a great book called “**Tinder Heart**” by Hugh Douglas [**Ed. Note.** ISBN 0750919035, Sutton Publishing, 1998], which totally enthralled me. It really touched me more than I've ever been touched by a historical figure before. The writer managed to take Burns, as a historical figure, and make him alive and vital. The book is actually about the women in his life rather than Burns, so what was wonderful about it, was it informed the reader about the reality of life back then. Also what it felt like to be a woman that would be in love with Burns. I started to feel that I resonated with it. I actually decided at that point that I wasn't singing this album for Burns, I was singing it for Jean [Armour – Burns' wife], Clarinda [aka Mrs. Agnes McLehose] and Peggy [Chalmers]. I felt that I was representing the lassies. So I was saying, “*This is how passionate this man was.*” I feel the same when I do songs by my partner, John Douglas, who is from the Trash Can Sinatras. Or if I do a song written by Boo. I know the passion these people have as writers, and I want to represent it. There's something extra that happens when you do someone else's song, and you understand their passion for it, because you then stand up for them.

FW : That's because you understand where the writer is coming from.

ER : Yes, but sometimes you are doing it more intensely than you would do for your own work.

FW : In terms of reading Hugh Douglas' book could you trace songs Burns would be writing in parallel with the women he knew.

ER : Yes. “Of A' The Airts” is another song that was recorded that didn't make the album. I actively found the song after reading the passage in the book about how he had decided, finally, that he would settle with Jean. He was building a house in Ellisland for them, and was looking out the window at where she would be over in the west. That song came to him while he was building the house. The book even presented quotes from some of the people that worked on the house. They had been passed down through the years – there were amazing, lovely touches in the book like “*Ach, he was a fair man. He only shouted sometimes.*” You can imagine him shouting. He got really upset because the roof was falling down and it took ages to put right. So he started shouting at the builders and the masons.

FW : In terms of the Scottish language and style that Burns writes in, did the thought cross your mind to translate the lyrics, or were you set on presenting the songs pretty much as he had written them.

ER : No. No. That was definitely an issue. I definitely felt that I didn't want to do anything that I didn't understand myself quite fully. But then I was willing to learn new phrases. I've got a lot of friends from Auchinleck and Cumnock – my friend Ian who drives the van for the Trash Cans, he's a wonderful poetic man. He has this wonderful language that is kind of dying I suppose, but there's still a lot of people that have those hard Ayrshire dialects. Like “*Are you gettin' fu' and unca happy.*” *Unca* has become this word that I know now, and I didn't know what *unca* was, and now it has become vital to me. It means, “*Are you getting drunk and very happy.*” In a song there's phrases that I'll sing, for instance in “Ye Jacobites” –

"Your doctrines I must blame" I'll say that rather than, *"Your doctrines I maun blame."* Which is what Burns wrote.

FW : In terms of the lyric booklet a number of Scottish words are defined. Is that something that you pitched for.

ER : Yeah, I really wanted that. Mostly it was about relating it to somebody like myself, who didn't really understand what Burns was about – even after living all those years in Scotland. I wanted English people and Australians and Canadians and French people to understand.

FW : You were trying to make it universal.

ER : I was. I wanted them to know what they were dealing with. And see how great it was really.

FW : In the CD liner booklet the year that Burns composed the song is noted. Did you arrange for that.

ER : Yeah. I find it romantic that that was when it was written, and to look at how relevant it still is. Take the love song "Ae Fond Kiss" – how many people are in triangles, and in relationships that are unrequited, so it's just as relevant now.

FW : You've already mentioned "Brose And Butter." It's the oldest Burns song on the disc, but the speed at which you deliver the lyric is – presumably you know what Gaelic mouth music is, because your interpretation reminded me of that style. Was that where you got the idea.

ER : No. A band called Ossian had played it, and I remembered Billy Ross singing it [Eddi sings the opening lines], and I remembered the rhythm of it. When I flicked open the book at the lyrics – you were asking earlier about finding the lyrics, and most of it was to do with those charity shop books I bought. They would flop open at pages and I'd realise that Burns had written something I already knew. I just hadn't realised before that he had written it. Like "Charlie Is My Darling." I felt dumb finding that out, and I was ashamed in a lot of ways, but proud of it too because I felt like I was an alien coming down and discovering this man's work. Feeling like he was vital, in me anyway. So with "Brose And Butter" I just remembered that when I was about seventeen I heard Ossian perform that song. I've never forgotten that. When I opened the book and found that song it was great for me, because I began thinking *"Oh my God, there's definitely an album here."*

FW : "Brose And Butter" has got a bawdy lyric and "Charlie Is My Darling" has got a bawdy lyric.

ER : I didn't know about "Charlie" being so bawdy. It's great though.

FW : It must have been something you picked up on. Was it deliberate on your part to retain the bawdy elements.

ER : Definitely the earthy bits. His earthiness is vital to who he is. He's a bloke that would use the word "**cunt**" and I loved that aspect. My dad is a contract welder and he would use that word as well. There's nothing refined about Burns in a lot of ways.

FW : When you were recording "Charlie Is My Darling," you seemed to be having great fun, right from the start of the track.

ER : You mean *"Fog-horn, I said Leg-horn."* That's Ian Carr. He is such a brilliant rhythm guitarist. He's one of these guys whose guitar is an extension of his body. That was one of his count ins. He didn't want to count 1 – 2 – 3. He's a thrilling, mental guitar player and he turned that song into - I used kind of a bluesy chord when I made a work tape of all these songs for Boo and John [McCusker]. John went off and got Ian Carr who he works with anyway, and Ewan Vernal, plus he said to me *"Phil Cunningham would be great,"* because I said to John specifically to get me a traditional band. In his own career, John mostly plays traditional music, and he got these great people. Ian Carr I'd never worked with before and he's from Carlisle, I think. I've never heard such mad guitar playing. Where I was playing a bluesy A Minor, with a seventh on it, during "Charlie Is My Darling" on my work tape, he brought it back to me as

this multi-chorded blues tune. It felt like a Louis Armstrong stomp and I thought, "*Burns would love this.*" Tom Waits too. It sounded really manic.

FW : The opening track, "Jamie Come Try Me." Lyrically, it was a little ahead of its time.

ER : I absolutely loved the idea of "Jamie Come Try Me." This lassie asking the boy to come and try her. "*Come on, don't be shy*" kind of thing. I thought it was quite bold. The person I got that song from, was Savourna Stevenson. She's a harp player. She was telling me all about "Jamie Come Try Me" and when she was telling me this, she looked really beautiful. She had long brown hair and blue eyes, she's a very passionate woman, from a classical music background, but she's also like Nigel Kennedy and Evelyn Glennie. She has been brought up in the classical world, but she's a bit of a hippie. She gets to do outrageous things musically. She told me about the song, so I sought it out. Savourna sang that first little line [Eddi hums the melody] and then I heard Jean Redpath's version. I bought Jean Redpath's album just so that I had it – I didn't want to stray too far from the original. Jean Redpath's version [Eddi sings in Redpath's style] was quite static and I loved the way Savourna sung it to me, as a non-singer. So I thought "*I'll do this as a non-singer and I'll just jazz it up a bit.*" Part of me regrets that, because the tune that Jean Redpath sings is really beautiful, so I was a bit tied. To stick to Jean Redpath's melody meant losing some of those chord shapes and the improvised things.

FW : The youngest song on the album is "Winter Is Past." The song is almost prophetic, because, of course, the following year Burns died.

ER : He collected that one. He must have resonated with it. I'm sure that happens. Boo will tell you. You are writing stuff and you find that it's explaining your life for you, and it's revealed to you. So you end up singing the soundtrack to your life. I'm sure Burns was in touch with some kind of psychic, unconscious thing. He could tap into it. If he could come up with the songs and poems he wrote, I'm sure he was pretty spiritual and out there.

FW : Where to do you go now with the project.

ER : The story of this whole project, has been folk phoning up saying "*We'll do it. We'll put it on.*" Belfast wants to put it on with an orchestra. I'm hoping that it will gather momentum and we'll get Manchester and other cities to put it on with an orchestra.

FW : You mentioned tonight that you wouldn't be singing again until early next year.

ER : I have to stop because I've worn myself out vocally, and I didn't realise that. I've just discovered this, but I'm in good hands with the Royal Scottish Opera's specialist. He's going to sort me out and get me back into shape. In recent times, I've moved back up to Scotland – did the Robert Burns concerts and the album.

FW : Well, for one thing, there's a climate change after all those years in London.

ER : It has been a change of everything. My life has totally turned around this year, but it has been a great experience.

FW : Finally, could you talk about "Wild Mountainside," the one non-Burns composition on the album. It certainly fits with the other material.

ER : It really does. John Douglas wrote that song. Part of the whole Burns experience for me anyway is - my part in communicating him is to say, "*He can talk to you, whoever you are.*" Whether you are seventeen, thirty-five or fifty. He's absolutely now, not just something you visit in a museum. John was born and brought up in Irvine, where Burns spent a year of his life and he's very typical of those poets I keep meeting down there in Kilmarnock and Auchinleck, he's just quite unassuming and in love with the culture that he comes from.

FW : So how old is the song.

ER : It's very recent. Let me think, he wrote it about six months before I did the first Culzean Castle gig. He wrote it for me, and was sort of calling me home. It was like a wee present. It just fitted. It started being important that we did it in amongst the Burns stuff just to prove - or at least, to say that the writing is real, and that over two hundred years later, the culture is still breathing and alive in the Ayrshire countryside. They are still thinking like Burns and looking like him.

FW : So the legacy has been handed on.

ER : Yeah, they are still there. The world has changed, but it has stayed exactly the same in lots of ways.

Footnotes.

Reader's web site is located at <http://www.eddireader.com/> In addition to her half dozen official releases, in the Merchandise Section of Eddi's site, you can purchase the albums "**Live**" [2001], "**Driftwood**" [2001] as well as a quartet of reasonably priced, double CD *official bootleg* recordings made in Edinburgh, Newcastle, Leeds and London during her May/June 2003 UK tour in support of the Robert Burns album.

Arthur Wood
Kerrville Kronikles 01/04
[2350 words]