

A Brief Encounter with Kate Price  
by Jay Freeman

The solo musician sat in partial shade under a tree, in the middle of the main walkway that winds through the Novato, California, Renaissance Faire, much nearer the top of the hill than the bottom. She was garbed in leafy green and hooded against the sun in the same color, not playing at the moment I wandered up the path. Her blonde head bent intently over a flat, squarish, musical instrument mounted on a stand, and what could have been a surrealist's vision of an acoustic guitar stood propped at her side.

I paid immediate attention for two reasons: First, she was pretty. Second, on inspection, the instrument appeared to be a hammer dulcimer -- whose sounds I much love -- though larger than the only ones I had ever seen close up. As I drew nigh, two more of our Faire expedition happened to pass. "That's Kate Price!" one said with enthusiasm, "She's great!"

I remembered Price's name from approving remarks on the Loreena McKennitt fan electronic mailing list, "old-ways", and from a posting she herself had once made to that same venue, but I had never heard her music, and I regretted not having picked up on the fact that hammer dulcimer was one of her instruments. I stepped closer to listen. She was between numbers, with only two or three people standing around.

The amiable Price was not only willing but also eager and pleased to chat with her audience. Conversation came naturally. A remark that I had read her posting on old-ways led to discussion of Loreena McKennitt, whom Price had met and admired, and of the list itself. Price is not on old-ways, but had been shown a run of postings by a friend, at a time that the "is-she-or-isn't-she" aspect of the paganism thread had been active and contentious. It was interesting to hear the first-hand perspective of a performing artist who has also had fans speculate about her religious and spiritual practice. She mentioned her embarrassment at the shock of a long-time gig and concert fan, a devout Christian, who had heard speculation that Price was a Pagan and reacted with horror. I took great care to avoid even the appearance of asking any questions about the matter, myself. Yet I could not but notice that the cover on her latest CD doesn't help; it shows black-robed Price, with a shaft of sun turning her yellow hair bright white, peering intently around a moss-coated gray stone wall. Oh, well, a black robe doesn't prove anything. Maybe she's a nun.

Price was interested in McKennitt, and asked some questions that I was able to answer from the FAQ, and from general discussion on the list. When I mentioned that McKennitt had been fey enough even to leak her sizes for intimate apparel, Price blushed and made some

comment about expanding the facts list on her web page. I decided that the best conversational gambit was to change the subject.

We talked about sources for libretto. Price knew of Yeats's romantic poems, of course, and played her own setting of "The Stolen Child". It was quite different from McKennitt's -- which Price had heard -- and from Heather Alexander's -- which Price had not, though she knew of Heather's work and had heard several cuts from her CD, *Wanderlust*. I expressed regret that no one since Judy Collins had set "The Song of Wandering Aengus", and Price said that she'd do that, though in context that did not make clear whether she had a specific future plan or merely whether it was the sort of thing she liked to do.

I had to leave then, to rendezvous with others of my group, but later in the afternoon, as I tramped back up the hill in pursuit of more things to spend money on, Price recognized me and we chatted again. (I am not particularly memorable: I was not wearing my fangs, and had not put on the Coyote mask. Yet somehow, the combination of black Medievals, Indy Jones hat, shades, and long walking stick topped with the carved head of an owl, caught her attention.)

She played an instrumental, and I enquired about the instruments. The large hammer dulcimer was of Persian ancestry, and similar in size, shape and sound to its Chinese cousin, the Yang Chin, as played by Lisa Gerrard of Dead Can Dance. Price knew of Dead Can Dance but had never been able to get tickets for any of their concerts.

I asked curiously about the other instrument. "I've seen ten-string guitars before, but only when the lead in a rock band has a really bad night." That got a laugh and a lecture: The other instrument was a "hummel", a Scandinavian creation with six fretted strings and four that are merely strummed. Price's was tuned to an unusual scale, I believe she said "Aeolian".

Kate Price has two CDs in press, *The Time Between* (1993) and *Deep Heart's Core* (1995). They are distributed through The Access Music Label (AccessCDs@AOL.COM), and produced by Priceless Productions, POB 91555, Santa Barbara, CA, 93190. I bought both, and have been listening as I write. The hammer dulcimer work is wonderful, though the slightly unfamiliar tuning and particular choice of backups does not make possible an easy comparison with such other artists as Joemy Wilson.

Price's voice is lower and slightly throatier than McKennitt's, and does not demonstrate the tremendous dynamic range in volume -- no stirring crescendos. Yet this feature may reflect as much choice as ability, for the two artists have music of rather different flavor. It is hard briefly to characterize what makes an entire repertoire unique, but if McKennitt suggests open spaces, strong winds and breaking sea, then Price conjures up breezes that irregularly rustle the leaves in the deep forest, and small streams that mysteriously

purl and eddy about stones and cattails, until their half-understood voices are lost in the distance. If McKennitt's muses are sidhe and selkie, then Price's are nymph and dryad.

The recordings are well done, with backups that expand and support the material presented, and Price does have a band, but her solo work, unaccompanied save by herself, is complete and enjoyable. Evidently she does not always play the Novato Renaissance Faire, for I surely would have noticed her previously. I asked to be put on her mailing list and hope to enjoy her performances in the future.

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