



Kate McGarry: The Turtle, The Paradox, and The Big Yes

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By [Dr. Judith Schlesinger](#)

It's a busy time for singer Kate McGarry, with European and U.S. tours, CD release festivities, imminent professoring at the New York Manhattan School of Music, and recording with the new vocal group, Moss. Her newest CD, *The Target* (Palmetto, 2007), hit *Jazz Week* at #37 and rose to #18 barely two weeks later; it's also climbing fast on the college charts, reflecting the broad appeal of McGarry's beautiful voice and rangy material. Married since 2004 to guitarist and band mate Keith Ganz, McGarry brings something new and refreshing to the music scene: true talent without pretension. As pianist/composer Fred Hersch puts it, "Kate McGarry is a singer of great warmth and emotional connection who is blessed with a magical voice and a curious musical mind. She really has it all".

All About Jazz: Tell me about your Russian tortoise.

Kate McGarry: That's Turbo, aka Buddy, also Tur. When I get mad at him I call him Turbo F. Ganz: "Turbo F. Ganz, you get back here right this moment!"

AAJ: You can talk to a turtle?

KM: No. Not really. Keith thinks he interacts more. The thing about Turbo is that he directly reflects what's going on with Keith. It happens all the time. One day the turtle would be like hiding under a thing, and the whole day Keith is like hiding under a thing. It's really wild. Another time, Turbo's up and running around, and Keith is up and running around.

AAJ: Who starts it?

KM: The turtle seems to reflect Keith.

AAJ: I'm relieved to hear that.

KM: But I look to the turtle for signs of what's going on with him. Turbo doesn't make any noise, which is a good kind of pet, but he's not cozy.

AAJ: You can't really cuddle a turtle.

KM: No. And our bacteria's not good for him. You can't touch him, and their bacteria is bad for us, so you have to be careful.

AAJ: It's not your usual pet. So what inspired you to buy a Christmas turtle for Keith?

KM: 'Cause he always talked about them. He relates to turtles; he has a deep love for things that move slowly and at their own pace.

AAJ: I wanted to get into that paradox thing we talked about earlier, because the more I listen to you, the more I'm struck by it. When you first hear your voice, it's sweet and girlish and pure, with that little rasp in it that makes it so wistful. But then you notice how sophisticated your singing is, and your placement, and your ideas, and it's "Wait a minute: what am I listening to?" It's innocence, but it's sophistication; it's free with a definite shape. So talk to me about paradox.

KM: For me it's always been true that when I have an experience of something that felt absolutely like core--really true--it would almost always come in conjunction with something that was the opposite, a situation you'd think was ugh, the worst of the worst of the worst. But right at the pinnacle of that, the cap's off the head and it's all open and wow and OK. The apparent paradox is when you get a little bit above, where you get a bigger view, you see they're not really in opposition.

AAJ: They're a necessary part of each other.

KM: Yeah, there's something about the tension between the two. In music, my interests are both in purity of sound, or less is more, plus the *intricacy* of sound--like, what was that horn player doing there, what was that line, how did he massage that change? I think it comes from the wish to express something really fully, and yet really simply too.

AAJ: And now, a couple of history questions. You grew up in Hyannis, Massachusetts as number six of ten kids. How did that influence your path?

KM: I think my growing-up circumstances had a big impact on my music because there were so many of us, and it was a very chaotic and crisis-driven household. Mom was very ill most of the time since I was little, and so to some extent she was just out of the picture, except that she needed a lot of caretaking.

AAJ: What did she have?

KM: She had Addison's disease: all the adrenals, all the glands, everything shut down, so she lived on cortisone her whole life. And was severely depressed--not able to get up. But one thing we always did was make music together, the whole family. That was one place where we could be together. My mother and father, both, have the most beautiful voices. And for them, singing was the people's entertainment.

AAJ: So music was a way of taking care of each other?

KM: Yes. Also, they were very religious, so we would sing the Rosary together, especially when things weren't great--that was the thing that would pull it all together.

I have an early experience of the power of singing. When Tricia, my second-to-the-youngest sister, was really little, she had a terrible fever that wouldn't go away. She was up at 105, and it went on for days and days. We were worried about brain damage. The priest came, and we gave her cold baths, but the fever just wouldn't go down. At one point my Mom brought us all up to her room. She put Tricia on her bed on a blanket, and we all held hands around the bed, and we said the Rosary.

AAJ: Did you sing it?

KM: Well, it has singing *in* it, but I remember it as singing. Maybe it was just because it was afternoon, but at the end of it, there was this beautiful golden light coming through the window on Tricia, and she was bathed in sweat. Her fever had broken. And I remember that the whole time we were doing it, whatever the words meant, I knew that I was calling out to something larger and joining with it, and saying "Don't you hear me?" And the answer came back right away: "I hear you." And from that time--I was about six years old--I knew that when you call out, something is listening.

AAJ: Whether or not you're actually inside a church.

KM: Church, shmurch--it always happened most strongly outside. And from that time, to me, the human voice calling out--in whatever form--felt like a connection to a larger body, and a larger body of which we were all part. That was my experience of it. And I started very young; my Mom says I was singing "Hello Dowee" at sixteen months.

AAJ: Hello Dowee?

KM: Yes: "Hello, Dowee" and "tiger up, fudders." I didn't know how to say whatever --"tie her up, fellers?" That was my favorite song early on. I don't think I ever considered any other vocation.

AAJ: It sounds more like a calling than a career choice.

KM: Yeah. To my family, music was one of the healing arts. It was just as good as being a doctor.

AAJ: Except you can't listen to your doctor at three o'clock in the morning.

KM: Right.

AAJ: Is anyone else in your family a musician?

KM: My youngest brother, Eddie, is a wonderful songwriter, and a fireman. He lives in Boston and has three kids. He writes kind of folksy songs about connection. My oldest brother was a professional musician who raised his family for quite some time singing in bars, singing covers and

his own music. He's very creative. Now he and his family are living with my parents as the main caretaker for my father, who has advanced Parkinson's, and my mom, who's not able to get around at all. My other brother--we have three brothers and seven sisters--is an actor who's going to be on PBS on May 14 [2007]. He's in the Alexander Hamilton story [*American Experience: Alexander Hamilton*]; he plays the one who killed him, Aaron Burr. So the guys are the only ones who've done things in music, and though the others have sweet, sweet voices, they don't sing professionally. But whenever we get together, we usually end up singing.

AAJ: Back to history: you went to University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and you got your BA in African American music and jazz.

KM: At the time, in the late '80s, the degree was called *Afro-American music and jazz*. I'm so glad I could have this educational experience, because the focus was where it should be: historically, on the roots of the music in Africa, and its original beginnings as the slave trade came to America. How the music came out of the field songs and the legacy of horror and pain, the roots of jazz that are found in black sacred music. This is really where the whole tree is--from that came the blues and jazz.

AAJ: ...and rock and roll.

KM: Yes. It was about making sure people understood where it all was from. We got a lot of history, and I'm glad, because jazz education now is cut off at the neck: just learn the scales, blahblahblah. I was just invited to be part of the Manhattan School of Music, and I'm hoping to bring some of that to teaching. Cause it's missing the soul, you know?

AAJ: How do you teach soul?

KM: It's about listening. That's what jazz education is missing.

AAJ: I'm curious about the ashram thing--you spent 2 _ years singing Indian sacred music. What's left of that experience in your music today?

KM: The main teacher at that ashram took an interest in the creative healing power of sound. Ann Hampton Calloway came and talked, she's part of the same group, and Kenny Werner--I think that's part of where he got his thing from.

AAJ: I brought it up because of something you told *Hot House Magazine*: "I spent most of my life as a seeker. Now I'm a finder."

KM: It's true. Once you look at what you have, it changes everything.

AAJ: The finder thing is when you permit yourself so see what you've gathered.

KM: Yes! Look at the damn harvest! Have some food!

AAJ: And speaking of spiritual food... Compared to all the cynical crap out there, your lyrics--" like "The Target" and "She Always Will" and my favorite, "Going In" [from *Mercy Streets* (Palmetto, 2005)] have so much substance and sincerity. That brings us back to paradox, since you're being profound and entertaining at the same time. It's not like sitting through some dreary lecture on the meaning of life--your philosophy rides in on wonderful music.

KM: Thank you!

AAJ: OK, here comes the inevitable Influences Question. I know you studied with Archie Shepp; you mention Fred Hersch as your big brother, so you've picked up stuff from him as well. I've also read that your main influences are Ricki Lee Jones and Joni Mitchell. They do sound like people you'd admire.

KM: Oh, sure. As much as James Taylor. The influences of the '70s, for me, started off with the singer-songwriters. But then, as my older brothers and sisters were growing up and bringing more music into the house, I was hearing funk, I was hearing George Duke and Stanley Clarke and Earth, Wind and Fire. Then there was this beautiful record of Al Jarreau's called *Look to the Rainbow* (Warner Bros., 1977)--that one got me through some hard times in adolescence.

AAJ: I think he was a social worker before he became famous as a singer.

KM: I did know that. And you get that from his lyrics. I felt his care, I felt like he cared about *me*. He's also such a free, free improviser. I didn't even know him as a jazz artist, because I saw him on *Saturday Night Live*. At that time I didn't know jazz from anything else.

But when I was taking piano and organ lessons--with my Mom, we would go together--my teacher was giving me Bill Evans solos to learn. He tried to make a piece for me to audition with, since he'd had another student who got into Berklee [College of Music, in Boston]. And that was a big, big deal. But we couldn't afford Berklee--and thank God we couldn't, because I'm so glad I didn't go. Back in 1981 it wasn't good for vocalists; you just didn't get what you need there. It's much different now.

AAJ: Tell me more about the Bill Evans solos.

KM: I couldn't play them for anything, but they started putting the possibilities into my ears. I remember when he died--someone came into the practice room to tell me, and I had his book in front of me. I was learning the solo to "Time Remembered." Then I started listening to Keith Jarrett in high school; I played *My Song* (ECM, 1974) over and over again. Someone gave me a Billie Holiday record, but I couldn't get with it at that time [sings the hokey choir part on "God bless the child, that's got his own."] What is *this*? It sounded so corny to me.

Later, my teacher Dr. Horace Boyer was a drop-the-needle guy, and this was the lesson: it was Carmen [McRae] singing "When Sunny Gets Blue," from the album *Bittersweet* (Koch Records, 1964). Do you have this record?

AAJ: No. But I'm going to get it.

KM: Hands down, this was the record that I learned jazz from. It was an album of ballads, and she played piano on a number of the tracks, and it had a lot of guitar on it as well. I would listen to a phrase over and over. [Sings] "When Sunny gets blue"--Sunny, Suh-uh-nee--what is that? The embellishment of jazz. To me, of all the jazz singers, Carmen's the great storyteller. I listened to the way she phrased things, and the way she'd arpeggiate; you could tell she understood the harmonic structure of the song. Then after Carmen it was Sarah [Vaughan], Anita O'Day, and Ella [Fitzgerald], and Jon Hendricks.

AAJ: Which brings us to your singing: I really appreciate your honesty and directness. We live in a world where using the words "troop surge" instead of "troop escalation" is supposed to sugarcoat the reality of war. In the midst of all this dilution of language and meaning, your music is an antidote: it's a straightforward, bullshit-free zone.

KM: Thank you!

AAJ: Remember we talked about your version of "Heather on the Hill" and how much I like it? I had this whole scenario constructed in my head --"She must have loved someone who loved that song, and they died, and that's why the song hits me so hard." So I took the *Target* CD to my voice lesson [with Thom Filo]. After I played the song for him, I asked what you were doing that was so powerful. I'll tell you what he said, and you tell me if that's what you were actually doing.

KM: OK.

AAJ: Thom said, "It's powerful because she seems less interested in her voice than in her message. It sounds as if she's making up the words as she goes along, like she's talking, which creates a real intimacy."

KM: That's it. The song is about the story, it wasn't about the voice.

AAJ: He even pointed out some places where you were running out of breath.

KM: It wasn't a technical accomplishment in any way. I've studied a lot of different kinds of singing--like *bel canto*--and professionally, I've been asked to do a lot of strong, belting things. But what comes out most naturally is a kind of speech singing, which is more about telling the story.

AAJ: I happened to be sitting next to your teacher, Jeanette LoVetri, at your IAJE [International Association of Jazz Educators] gig. She's a very dynamic lady.

KM: She taught me since I moved to New York. Luciana Souza and Theo Bleckmann pointed me to her. It's been really great work, developing chest and head voice and separating them. She's like a fine-tuning auto mechanic who can really recalibrate a voice. I've seen her take people who are hoarse to the point of not being able to speak, and within ten or fifteen minutes, effect a *huge* change in their voices. I'm certified in her method, which has been really useful in strengthening my

sound. If you ever heard the very first record I did in 1992, you'd know how much she's helped me. It was like [sings like Minnie Mouse]; fortunately, it's out of print.

AAJ: You and Keith work together all the time, and musically you often double each other. I have this image that you're sitting over breakfast, eating pancakes, passing the syrup and making up the lines in "Lola" ["Whatever Lola Wants," from *Mercy Streets*, (Palmetto, 2005)]. I just love the wit in that.

KM: Keith wrote that when we were driving to a gig. I asked him, "Can you write me an arrangement for Lola?" He just heard these interlocking parts, and he wrote it while he was sitting there, without even checking it on anything. He wrote it down, and it's perfect--you feel like you're out there sliding on the flamenco floor.

AAJ: So when you double, it's mostly him first?

KM: I just learn it from listening to it, on those arrangements which are his, like "The Lamp is Low." On "Aquelas Coisas Todas" [on *Mercy Streets*], [guitarist] Steve Cardenas and Keith and I just sat in a room and soloed over the song. We took eight bars of each person's solo and put them together.

AAJ: It's such a great band. You just got back from a European tour, yes?

KM: Yes, and we're going to Europe again. We've been asked back, and this time someone else will book it.

AAJ: Got a manager now?

KM: No--a booking agent in Europe, which is nice. The hope is to try to have this become sustainable: something that doesn't take out of you more than it gives to you. Right now, we're trying to get over the hump of achieving recognition and selling CDs. We were the most-added jazz album throughout the country--we came in at 37 on the chart. That was nice, although it was *Jazz Week*, not the *Billboard* chart.

AAJ: But it does go higher than 38...?

KM: Yes, it starts at 50. We entered at 37 with one week out. We'll see what happens. Hopefully we'll get up there. And we were also the most-added to the CMJ or college chart.

AAJ: There are lots of crossover possibilities here. If you pull the songs off it, you can almost have several totally different records.

KM: I know. Isn't it wild? I have people saying "pick, pick, pick" what you want to do. Get in a can! I've given up--I'm not gonna do it!

AAJ: Don't! One of the nice things about Tower Records going bankrupt is that you no longer have to worry about fitting in a bin. Some artists are simply unbinnable. And now to the bonus question: anything you'd like to say about anything?

KM: I would like to say... I had a moment yesterday where I was really feeling a lot of pressure because the bass player e-mailed from Japan and said "My plane's not getting back until late in the afternoon the day of the show so we can't do the rehearsal" and blahblah... These things are always happening--it always feels like crisis potential--and Keith and I look at each other and say, "Do we need this?" We don't know if it's worth it--all the angst I had about trying to make things work out right, having to do more and more --oh, it's not worth it if I'm going to be like that.

AAJ: Not if you're going to lose stomach lining over it.

KM: No. But right then, everything gets down to its most practical. It becomes: OK, that means we just do the rehearsal the day of the show. Take charge, and it's done. Set it down. I think that what you need comes through the process of doing something that's really difficult: how else am I gonna get that, unless I go through something this hard?

AAJ: So we're back to paradox: you have to do the difficult to get to the easy.

KM: Yeah. And whether or not I'm able to sell a lot of records, I want to have access to what I want to do musically. I'd like to record and have people make the money back, but I also want to play wherever I want, and be asked to collaborate. That's what I would like to have happen.

AAJ: Your work with Fred Hersch has been wonderful--the *Leaves of Grass* concert and tour and CD, and the recent Lincoln Center gig called *The Songs of Fred Hersch*. You've also collaborated with [composer/arranger/bandleader] Maria Schneider and the Jazz Tap Ensemble. Then I heard you sang with [pianist] Chick Corea...?

KM: They just put it up on my website. It was 2001 and Chick's 60th birthday celebration at The Blue Note [in New York], and I was sitting right in front. Chick and Bobby McFerrin came out and did the most amazing set that was so beautiful, and the last song was "Smile." Bobby's got the lyrics in his hand, but he's not singing them--just "doo-doo-doo," and Chick was playing it, and they were filming the whole thing. And Bobby does one chorus wordlessly, then looks around and says "Anybody know this song?" He didn't know me from Adam. And my hand shot up--it was a huge yes. I'd never actually sung the song before, but everybody knows "Smile."

So I just started to sing it, and he sat and let me sing the whole song. And then they continued. They liked it so much, they left it in the DVD. And that part keeps playing on BET all the time. They sent me the clip; it's now on YouTube too. It's such a sweet, sweet moment.

AAJ: And there's more of that in your future, I bet.

KM: That night I felt "This is how things can be if you allow it"--saying yes, yes, yes. Always saying yes.

_Selected Discography

Kate McGarry, *The Target* (Palmetto, 2007)_Kate McGarry, *Mercy Streets* (Palmetto, 2005)_Fred Hersch, *Leaves of Grass* (Palmetto, 2005)_Solar, *Suns of Cosmic Consciousness* (Aztac, 2005)_Kate McGarry, *Show Me* (Palmetto, 2003)