

# McIlwaine, McElderry perform in St. Paul

By Michael Anthony  
Staff Writer

Downtown St. Paul on a Saturday night looks like a scene from "The Last Picture Show." The sidewalks are deserted and, except for the few bars that are open, the action seems to consist solely of people driving around in cars looking for something to do.

The only party who has profited from this, one assumes, is the man who sells the "For Rent" signs that adorn all the vacant movie theaters and many of the small retail shops in the area. This man has been doing land-office business the last year or two in St. Paul.

Nonetheless, there are occasional signs of life at the old World Theater on Wabasha. Garrison Keillor's "The Prairie Home Companion" radio show is performed there, and a series of concerts sponsored by Per-simmon Productions, a nonprofit organization promoting women in the performing arts, has been given at that theater this spring.

Headliner for the concert Saturday night was the singer-guitarist Ellen McIlwaine. The supporting act was local singer Maureen McElderry, whose specialty is country music of the '30s and '40s. McIlwaine worked alone, accompanying herself on piano and electric guitar. McElderry was backed by bassist Molly Mason and fiddler Mary DuShane, two



Ellen McIlwaine

members of the Powermilk Biscuit Band, an ensemble that performs regularly on the Keillor radio show.

McElderry, like a number of young musicians and singers today, here and elsewhere, is an archivist. Some archivists cherish the rock and roll of the '50s, others (like the local band, the Wolverines) the pre-swing band music of the '20s and '30s. With McElderry, it's old country music. And there is a small but devoted audience for all of them, though the large part of that audience is too young to have experienced this music the first time around.

Surely this is a new phenomenon in popular culture. Was there, for example, a sizable audience in the 1940s for various sub-genres of pop and folk music of specific earlier decades? One doubts it. The reasons for the rise of the archival performer must be as much sociological as musical. Old music must represent what seems like a simpler, more carefree way of life than what is perceived as life in 1979.

In any case, McElderry has chosen a type of music she is well-suited to sing. She has a good sense of rhythm for the up-tempo numbers and a big, flexible, expressive voice with a little bit of sob in it that's just right for tearful ballads such as Hank Snow's "You're the Reason I Don't Sleep At Night." Her pitch was not always true Saturday night — or was that a yodel she was suppressing? — but she definitely seems at home with the material, and some of these songs, such as "The Girl Who Loved the Man Who Robbed the Bank At Santa Fe Got Away," a kind of later-day "Frankie and Johnnie," ought to be brought out of the archives more often. DuShane and Mason gave her excellent support as well.

One would prefer to hear Ellen McIlwaine in a club of some kind than in a theater, though the World is fairly small and the singer established an immediate and easy rapport with the audience. McIlwaine, who toured extensively several years ago with Lily Tomlin, was known initially as a

blues and folk singer. Her wide range of material now includes as well a number of rock songs. She has often been compared to Bonnie Raitt, but her voice is much bigger and more versatile than Raitt's. She has a kind of pop belter's voice, a happily lusty sense of humor and great skill as a guitarist, her skills on which instrument she seems almost too willing to display at times in a rather showy fashion. It was obvious, however, that she was determined to dazzle the audience as an instrumentalist, and that she did. The audience gave her a standing ovation at the end.

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