

# Hugh McGowan: soaring into the New Year on the 'Fast Lane'

By Chiemi  
Contributor

Somerville artist Hugh McGowan's music soars. There is just no other way to put it - whether describing the tones of his true tenor voice or the stellar licks of his illustrious guitar playing, the latter more often serving as a type of countermelody to his tunes, rather than simply a bed of chordal background. It is this doubly melodic characteristic which seems to most distinguish McGowan's style.

## Seven-Year Spirit at The Burren

McGowan has been hosting the Tuesday open mic at The Burren. Before he began performing at The Burren, this Quincy, Mass. native lived in Los Angeles for over three years. He returned shortly after The Burren opened.

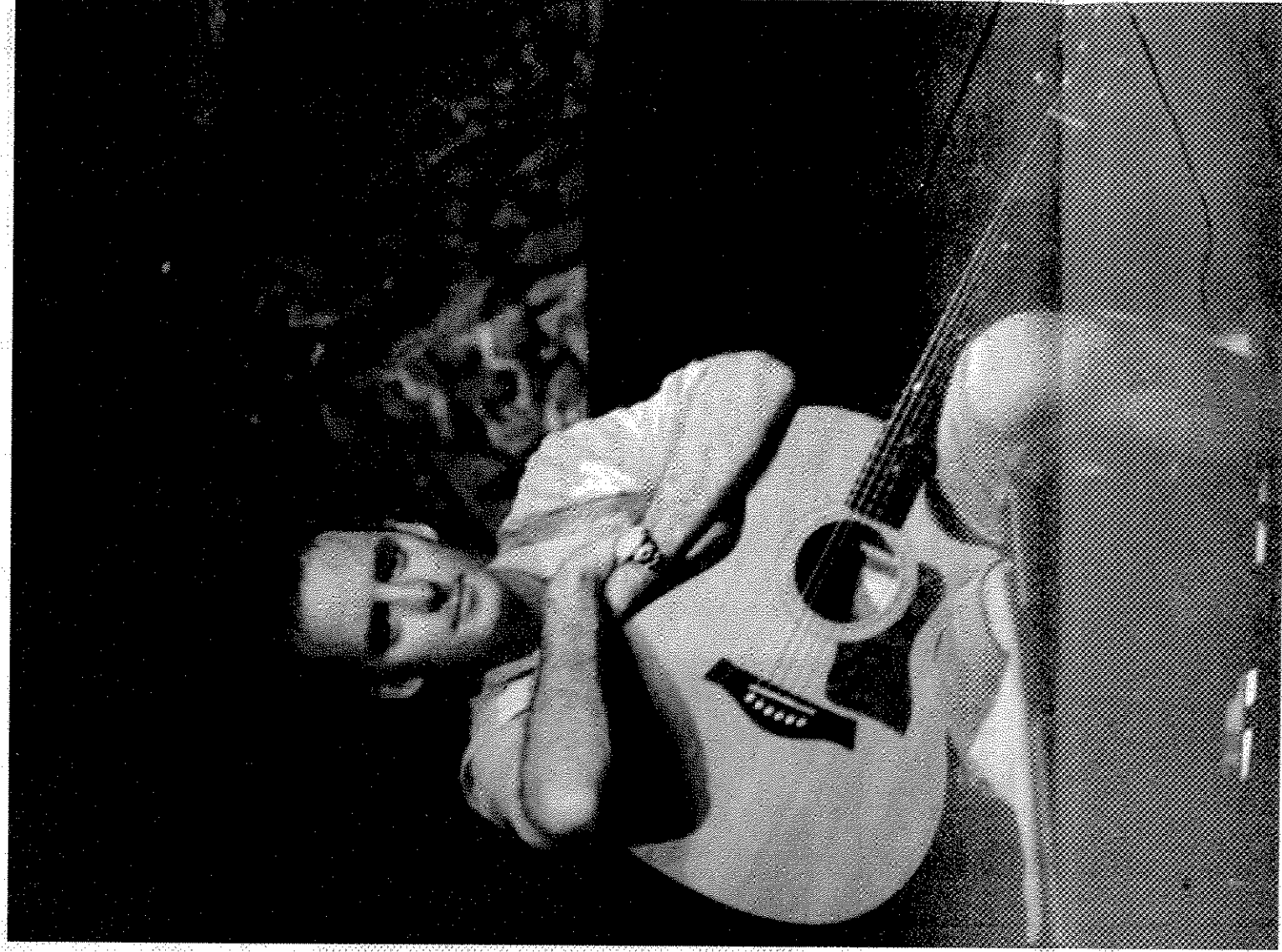
"There was originally no 'Back Room.' I had a chat with [owner] Tommy McCarthy - he and I discussed doing an open mic. The first Tuesday that we discussed doing it was St. Patrick's Day, we didn't go for St. Patrick's day because we reckoned that that's open mic night for everybody. The first Tuesday after that was the first open mic night. Tommy liked the idea of ten guitar cases lined up...."

Upon being asked what keeps McGowan coming back every Tuesday night, he explains, "It's never gotten dull." Plus, he adds, "The Burren has been a great place to learn to control a room. It's like rock-star training."

## The Burren Project

In March 2004, "The Burren Project," a CD compilation of 14 selected individuals from the Backroom open mic was released at a showcase event at the pub venue. McGowan's song, "poet's absolution" (all of McGowan's titles are unfettered by caps), was recorded as the first track on the piece. The CD, recorded and produced by Sammy James, featured local artists such as Lisa Locke, DeepC, Brian Donnelly, Pete Spiegel, Michael Van London, Bill Johnston, Brian Leonard and Jordan Carp. The eclectic nature of the Project reflects the creativity fostered by McGowan's open-minded and free-spirited hosting style. It contained ballads and rock to experimental pop funk. On any given Tuesday at the Backroom, one can experience all of these, including spoken word at times, beat box and the surreal chanting of Brian Donnelly, as well as a variety of instruments (in addition to the more traditional guitar or piano) - djembe, saxophone, mandolin, harp, viola, or didgeridoo.

McGowan himself was actually unavailable to perform at The Burren project release party due to a prior engagement - he was touring with Boston alternative popsters, The Push Stars led by Chris Trapper with bassist/key-boardist Dan McLoughlin and drummer Ryan MacMillan, friends of his and one of McGowan's favorite bands. Fortunately, his trusted roommate, Sean Kenneally, another regular Burren performer, was kind



Hugh McGowan

enough to step in as the host.

## The Crow's Nest

McGowan released a new album this past year (on his

# QUIZ

\*Answers to the questions on page 6

1. The Apple Computer
2. Three wheels and four horses
3. Allen Lane
4. Thriller
5. Anne Hathaway and he was 18 years old and she was 26 years old
6. To grow a beard and he would get more votes
7. The Bahamas
8. Pinot Noir Wines
9. Dave Garroway
10. Her squeaky voice

own label, Laurelín Music), which was recorded and mixed by Sammy James - "Hugh played guitar and sang. Sammy did everything else." Brian Donnelly provided the cd cover artwork.

"This place is hers" starts the CD with a soft noted bang, presenting a lullaby with a bit of a kick and delightful keyboard interlude. "Cheshire" follows brightly with something to say and the added texture of what sounds like pan flutes.

"Lolita," which is a favorite of many fans, comes next with its telltale guitar introduction in an alternate tuning. "Poet's absolution" is steady, with its thoughtful words and crisp percussion. "standing in advance" rises and falls, to this listener's ear, pausing for a luminous breath on the word 'dreaming,' carried out. The title track, "the crow's nest" begins with subtle high-pitched orchestration and then the golden sound of a gong struck and allowed to dissipate its tone into the singing

electric guitar notes that follow. McGowan's voice tentatively enters the mix. The song climaxes and McGowan interjects some haunting "oos" that seem to hang suspended, as the music ends with another gong.

In "words we've heard before," McGowan quietly describes war. "Aerlingus 104" carries with it the feel of a waltz but with bittersweet lyrics. McGowan said he wrote it on a note pad at JFK upon a loved one leaving. "Venus" swings in with its distinctive guitar line while McGowan addresses cosmos, including heavenly bodies. "Sense of it all" gently closes the CD, with McGowan's voice recorded in a manner causing it to sound a little farther away than in the other songs - as if standing in a long hall and turning to sing a last goodbye to the audience, the "World."

"The Crow's Nest" is available wherever you may find McGowan, or on the web: [www.hughmcgowan.com](http://www.hughmcgowan.com).