

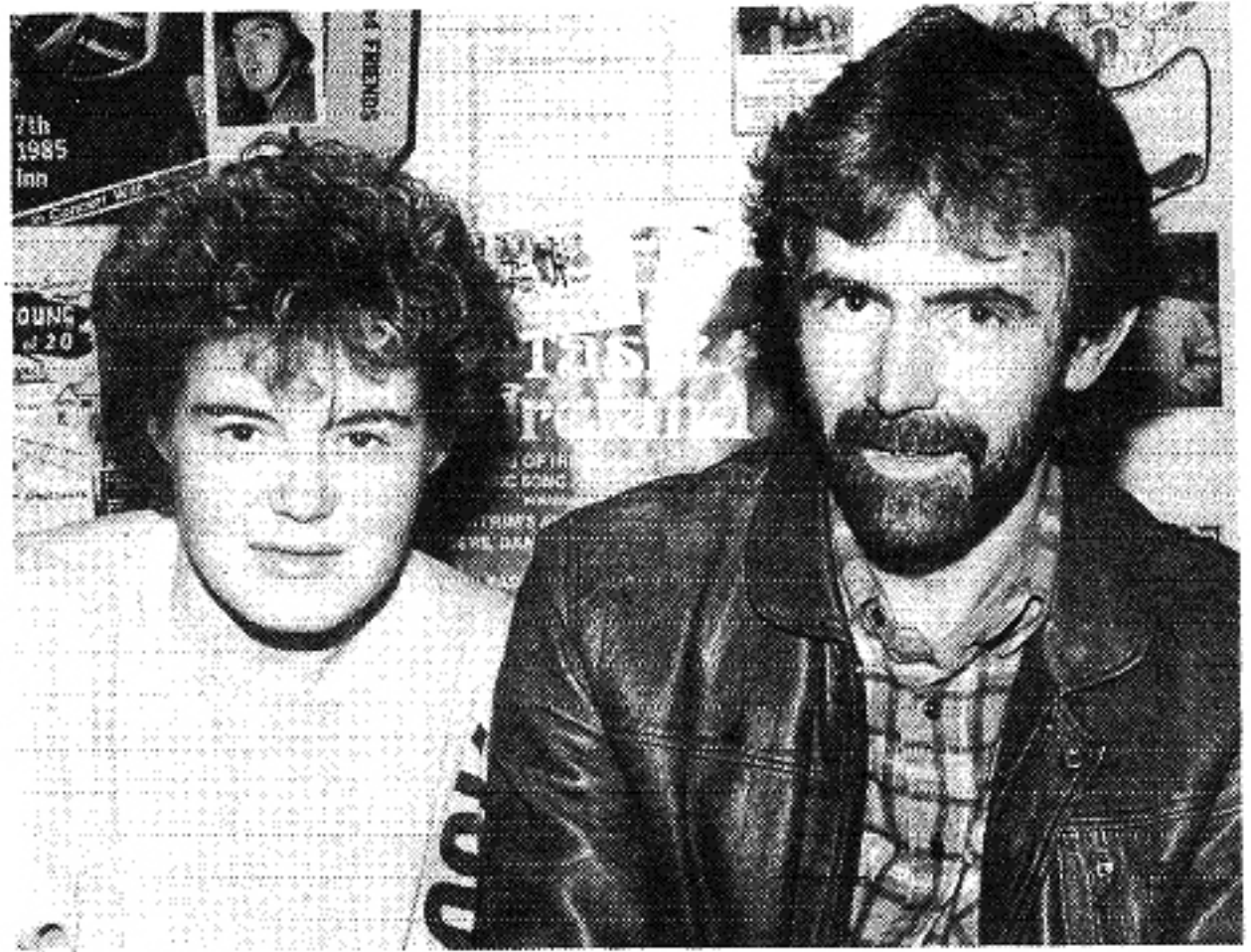
Drumshanbo man Charlie McGettigan is considered by many music 'heads' to be one of the best song writers in Ireland today. His own group, 'Jargon' — now defunct — and Maura O'Connell, have had 'hits' with his songs. In 1984 he came third in the National Song Contest. Last summer, his "Bingham's Boys" was chosen as one of the Northern Ireland soccer team's World Cup songs, and in 1985 he was commissioned to write "Jamboree" and "Sing A Song Of Joy" to commemorate the International Irish Scout Jamboree in Portumna.

His recently released album, "Songs of the Night (and other stories)", has been given extensive airplay on R.T.E., Radio Ulster and Radio Manchester. Here's how it was made.

In February 1985, Charlie McGettigan set off for Randalstown (near Belfast) armed with his guitar, two hundred songs in his head and an ambition. That ambition took eighteen months to fulfil. Recording an album is a slow business. Just as the farmer can't get a hen in the morning and expect to have chicken salad for lunch, so singer/musicians like Charlie McGettigan do not expect recording sessions to yield instant results.

The twenty-four track studio at Randalstown had all the elements needed to make a good album, and Shaun Wallace — the owner of the studio and producer of the album — would be the pivot of a concept which Charlie had in mind.

"I spent the first day", says Charlie, "in the studio recording thirty songs on an ordinary tape-recorder with just guitar and voice. The next day was analysis day, after which the thirty songs were whittled down to sixteen. Then the arrangements for each song were discussed — the type of introduction, the middle section, the end, where to use strings, guitars, drums, percussion, keyboards, backing vocals, etc. A track sheet was then drawn up for each song".



Charlie McGettigan with Maura O'Connell. They have completed many concert tours in the last few years.

# The Anatomy of a Disc

"A 24-track studio has 24 individual tracks which can be used to record twenty four individual sounds, whether they be instruments and voices recorded separately or collectively on each track. We wrote down, one to twenty four, what we wanted instrumentally and vocally in each song. Generally, the first six tracks are taken up with drums. Each element of the drum-kit has to have a separate microphone — one for the bass drum, the high-hat, the snare drum, tom-toms, floor-toms and high-toms. We then recorded a rhythm track and a phantom vocal for all sixteen songs. The rhythm track consisted of a piano, bass, guitar and drums with each musician playing either in a separate sound-proof booth or behind a high screen which cut off the overspill of, say, the drums onto the guitar track. The phantom vocal is just a rough vocal so that the rhythm section has something to follow".

## Ulster Orchestra

So, with the rhythm track recorded, the first week's work came to an end, Charlie returned to his full-time job in the Arigna power station and to a string of performances around the country. During the following three weeks, he listened to a tape of the rhythm tracks.

Revisions, alterations, new ideas took shape in his mind — an imaginative understanding of that which is desirable in that which is possible. Charlie and Shaun were now operating by dissociation. But a sort of telepathy was going on between them, so that when they returned to the recording studios, the ideas which had been like a vagabond knocking at the back door of their minds, gained respectability when pooled together. String sections, hardly considered beforehand, now became an essential ingredient. Eleven musicians from the Ulster Orchestra were employed on five tracks. Their violins, violas, cellos and oboes gave an enriched form and texture to the songs.

Their contribution took one day to record at a cost of £500. After the strings had been laid, Charlie's thoughts turned to percussion. The percussionist dwells in a very specialised field. His job is as different to the drummers as the cobbler's is to the shoemaker's. He includes in his repertoire such instruments as tambourines, bell-trees, bangers, gongs, triangles, kebassas, maraccas, and even the asses jaw, a virtual aural kaleidoscope. Synthesised percussion was also used. The sound of pulling one's finger out of a bottle was programmed into the synthesiser and repeated for use in one song.

### Brass

"We cheated a bit", says Charlie, "when recording the brass section tracks. Wherever we wanted a full brass section we used Keith Donald (ex 'Moving Hearts', now Mary Coughlan Band) who played every part for four saxes and four clarinets, which when mixed down gave a full brass section sound. Ex-Freshmen star, Billy Brown, played a vintage sixties Hammond organ, and Enda Walsh, on electronic keyboard, added some effects here, a little tone there, and a beefing up of the string section here and there".

The backing vocalists' track was recorded next. Rosie Hunter (ex 'Sunshine' band, now with Van Morrison), Mary Lou of 'Harvest', Davy Sloan and Charlie himself combined to show that plurality can

become unity. A little bit of studio technology called 'over-dubbing' helped to multiply the voices to a choir of twelve.

The actual recording sessions were now almost over. Only the main vocal track remained to be recorded for each song, and that would be another week-long job. A year had passed, a fairly long term in recording terms — six weeks is the norm — but then Charlie had also to keep his day job with the E.S.B. and his live performances pedalling in tandem. And one gets the impression that even if he was full-time, six weeks would only serve as an apprenticeship for the real task in hand.

Then came the 'mix down'. That literally meant arriving at the best balance between the sounds from twenty-three individual tracks, as the main vocal had yet to be recorded. The 'mix-down' was a slow, tedious job. More 'echo' was needed in some places, the tone had to be altered in others, the vocals had to be 'brought up' louder here, the instruments 'brought up' there. All the time, the producer Shaun Wallace was using his discretion in seeking the ideal balance. That ideal balance was transferred from the 24-track tape, 2" in width, to a ¼" reel-to-reel tape — the Master Tape.

### U.S.A.

Charlie picks up the story: "I made a whole lot of cassettes from the master tape and I hawked them around the various recording companies here. When I was in the U.S.A. with Maura O'Connell in early 1986, we spent a week in Nashville where Maura recorded her latest album. In my free time there I brought my tapes to a lot of recording companies. The reaction was very positive. Better than here. It was an impressive tape to walk in with because at that stage most artistes would just have an ordinary tape with their vocals and guitar on it. I had the finished product".

In Nashville, Charlie received six month options on five songs from his album. That meant that the recording companies paid him a fee for the right to use the five chosen songs either as Charlie had recorded them or else

they could use another artist to record them. By now, Charlie had spent £5,500 of his own money on bringing the recording project this far, and that was considered very good value for what he had achieved. A deal was struck with Marcus Connaughton of Bus Records. That company would spend another five to six thousand pounds on bringing out the record. Several meetings followed with artist Jeanette Burke of Carrick-on-Shannon whose work is also a feature of this magazine. She designed the "sleeve" of the album, creating a collage of characters from the usual ideas suggested by the songs. Charlie was delighted with Jeanette's work. "Up to that point I had been getting a bit browned off listening almost endlessly to the album on playback. Jeanette's sleeve design rejuvenated my interest in the whole thing again. The printers of the sleeve did the unintentional but original trick of printing the first thousand sleeves backwards, and I've had numerous enquiries from the proud holders of these sleeves who have deciphered cryptic messages of all kinds in such things as the clocks on the sleeve appearing backwards, and so on".

### Release

Five thousand copies of the album (six cassettes to one record album) were released last August and the tiring round of interviews, T.V. and radio performances, as well as a tour, had then to be undertaken. The album has generally been well received by the music critics, but its real success has been in the record shops. 2,500 copies of the album have been sold already, and the record company is now pressing another batch of them.

Plans for another album are being given an airing. "My first album", says Charlie, "was a showcase of different aspects of my music. I'm now going to take one of those aspects and carry it through in my next album. I think it could be in the country rock field because I enjoy that at the moment. But I'm fickle about music. To-day, it's country rock; to-morrow, I could hear Tommy Guihen playing the concert flute and I'd say: 'God, I'd love to make a traditional album'."