Charlie McGettigan

Leitrim Guardian Personality of the Year

profiled by Tommy Moran

Charlie McGettigan's first contact with Drumshanbo was when he spread Laird's Mixed Fruit Jam on the pan loaves in his father's groceryshop in Ballyshannon and brought them along to the local school where they formed part of the lunch for needy children – bread and jam and cocoa.

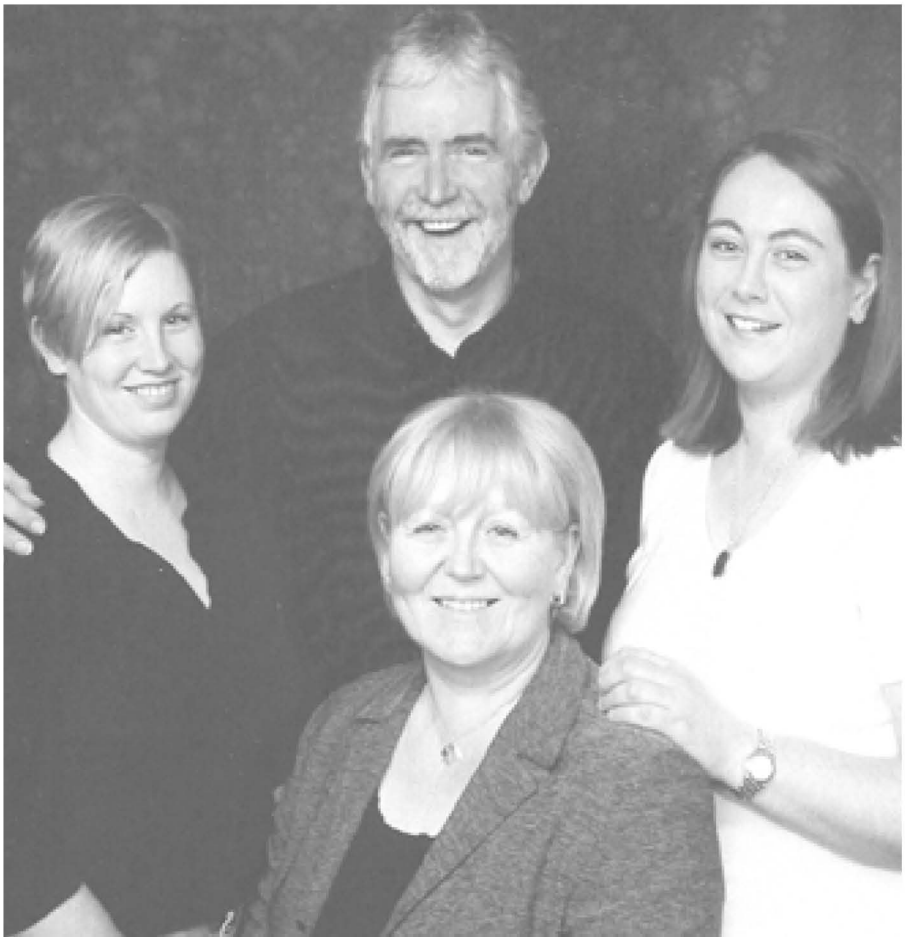
His schooldays were long over before Charlie got a proper look at Drumshanbo–this was when he reluctantly took up a job as a clerk in the ESB Power Station at Arigna–a place he had never heard of till he read the ad in the paper. What in the name of God would Arigna and Drumshanbo and Leitrim be like?

Thank God that Charlie and his wife Goretti made that decision to move to Leitrim, a year after their marriage in 1972.

The McGettigan shop in Ballyshannon was where Charlie spent his younger years weighing and packing bags of tea, sugar, clarendo, spuds and even calf-nuts. It was where many local women bartered dozens of free-range eggs and pounds of 'country' butter for their groceries, typical of rural Ireland at the time.

In the midst of all of this grew a love of showbusiness–especially when the circus came to town. Charlie was in awe of the synchronised erection of the big top, the exotic names on the circus posters and the ability of the clowns to

Charlie & Goretti with Ciara & Tara



Chief Executive of the ESB Joe Moran, with Charlie, Brendan Graham & Paul Harrington

make people laugh. Like so many other youngsters he often dreamt of running away with the circus to join this magic world. He never did – but years later he recalled it in one his songs *The day the circus came to town.*

He marvelled too at 'the man in the radio' and all the sponsored programmes; the travelling shows like 'The McFaddens' that came for Summer seasons to nearby Bundoran with their 'portable theatre' (a tent); the visits of big stars like Bridie Gallagher and Eileen Donaghy to Ballyshannon; the Summer Shows of people like Frank Carson and Brendan O'Dowda. Charlie's mother, Maura imparted her own love of theatre, often telling him about the great shows at the Theatre Royal which featured stars like Noel Purcell, Maureen Potter and Tommy Dando and even Bing Crosby & Bob Hope! Charlie's mother was born and raised in Dublin.

Little did he think he would be a show-business star himself one day – but he made a start by getting a summer job in a Bingo Hall in Bundoran, just to be near the buzz.

He often watched the Assaroe Ceili Band or the Richie Fitzgerald Ceili Band head off into the night and wished he too could go on stage. The showbusiness bug got even stronger in the early 1960s when he listened to Buddy Holly, the Everley Brothers and Cliff Richard and the Shadows on Radio Luxembourg. Despite his pleadings his father refused to buy him a guitar, but he finally persuaded his friend Arthur Greene to buy one for £3/10s. This was out of a £39 County Council Scholarship Arthur had been awarded. Charlie knew Arthur might be good at the books, but he'd never manage a guitar – so Charlie got his hands on it and taught himself to play in a month. Eventually Charlie's father bought him an electric guitar for Christmas – but no amplifier. But Charlie was undaunted, plugging into the back of the radio and blowing countless fuses.

Next step was to form a trio with John Hannigan and Johnny Ferguson, who was shortly replaced by Jimmy Rafferty. Their first gig was at a Children of Mary Social in the Abbey Ballroom – but they got into trouble when it was discovered Jimmy had borrowed the tannoy system from the Church for the amplification. They called themselves 'The Reinbous', they thought it looked better than 'The Rainbows', because The Beatles didn't spell their name as 'The Beetles'. They were learning fast. They advertised 'The Reinbous' as a relief band – but Charlie says most of the relief came for the dancers when they stopped playing. They even paid to get in to play relief for Paddy McClafferty who was one of the big Donegal Showbands of the time.

Charlie spread his wings on Christmas Night in 1965 when he got a chance to play with Cyril Curran in faraway Rossinver. There was plenty of excitement but no pay. But when Cyril gave him ten bob for playing on St. Patrick's Night he knew he had it made. Sean O'Brien booked The Reinbous for his summer pub sessions – and they sang most of the songs from the Guinness Book of Irish Ballads. But it was a good apprenticeship too, because Charlie gradually learned a selection of backing techniques for the singers who came up from the audience – these techniques were to be so important to him later.

Charlie's trio finally got to do relief for The Mighty Avons in the Astoria Ballroom – surely a step up the showbusiness ladder. They now called themselves 'The Tom Fitzpatrick Four' – but they kept

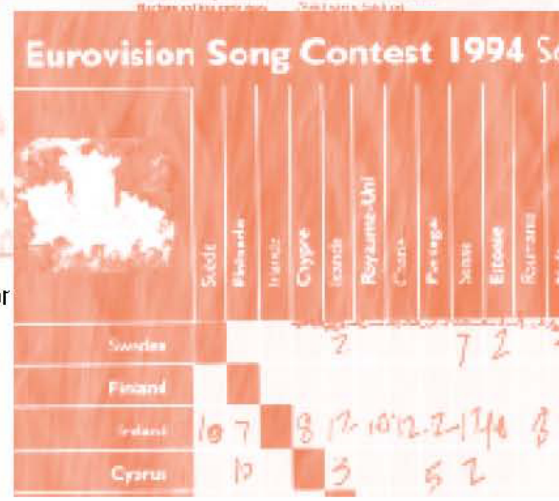
telling the punters that Tom was away on holidays! Another showbusiness gimmick! A switch in the trio saw Jimmy Gallagher join. He advertised himself as 'Donegal's Answer to Johnny McEvoy'. Further bookings came in Brady's pub and one night they spotted Luke Kelly and Hugo Quinn there, so they polished up their act. They were getting tips from other bands too–Sean Gallagher from the Richie Fitzgerald Band and later of The Quarrymen was of particular help.

While Charlie was serving his musical apprenticeship during these summer days in Bundoran, another musician was also serving his. In opposition to 'The Tom Fitzpatrick Four' at the nearby Hollyrood Hotel was a young singer called Paul Brady, who was accompanied nightly by a young piano player called Brian McEniff. Yes–the same Brian of the McEniff Hotels and of the GAA–manager of the Ireland team in the 2001 Compromise Rules against Australia.

After the Leaving Cert in 1968, Charlie took up a job with the ESB in Dublin and his favourite haunt was Slattery's of Capel St where he revelled at the talents of Liam óg Ó'Floinn, Donal Lunny, Al O'Donnell and Frank Harte. A hard earned £29 was spent on an acoustic guitar and Charlie concentrated on mastering it over the next six years, during which time he had stopped performing publicly, but was still going to plenty of concerts and sessions with his then girlfriend Goretti Gallagher, whom he had first fancied back home in Ballyshannon.

Charlie had spent some time in London–where he took his first drink–but he and Goretti settled in Dublin after their marriage in 1972. Then that internal ESB advertisement and subsequent interviewsaw him head for Drumshanbo. Angus Dunne met him in Carrick Station and he had his first Leitrim lunch in Paddy Donnelly's. Shortly afterwards Charlie and Goretti bought one of the ESB houses in Grattan Avenue and settled down to Leitrim life.

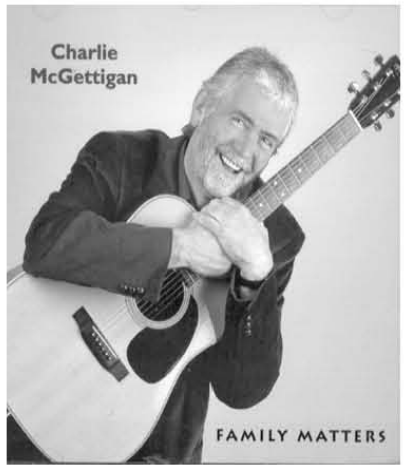
Pat Maleady got Charlie to sing at a session in Terry McGowan's (now Berry's Tavern); he played volleyball with Sean Lynch and other GAA fellows in the Boys Club and gradually got to know the locals. He spotted a 'kindred spirit' with a flowing beard just like himself–this was Eamonn Daly, a man he was subsequently to share many a stage with. Then he met Tony McGowan–Goretti had become friends with Phil and Tony's first hello was to put Charlie into a Ballad Group for the GAA Scór with Eamonn Daly, Peggy Barry and Ann Maleady. They sang *The Tunnel Tigers* and *Only Our Rivers Run Free* and were an instant success when they qualified for the Connacht Final in Claremorris. Tony put Charlie in for the 'Amhránaíocht Aonar' as well, but he was disqualified for singing a Scottish song–*An old Maid in the Garret*! But Fr John McGowan of Sligo was impressed with the Allen Gaels Ballad Group and booked them for the St Anne's Centre Folk Club in Sligo. It was here Charlie met Brendan Emmet for the first time–they would later tread the boards together.



Charlie persuaded his kindred spirit Eamonn Daly, to form a duo and Noel Henry the local Bank Manager advanced them £384 to buy amplification from Josie Creamer of Ballinamore. They spent three years on the pub circuit as 'Jargon', before being joined first by Brendan Farrelly and later by Brendan Emmet. When John Sorohan brought Liam Ó Murchú and *Trom agus Éadrom* to Drumshambo, Jargon was augmented by Tommy Guihen, Teresa Smullen Tony McGowan. Packie Duignan, Seamus Horan and a host of others.

That was the night Eamonn Daly came under the spell of Orla Peyton who was appearing in the show in her own right, Smitten, Eamonn was soon to leave Jargon, marry Orla and Jargon's loss was Leitrim's gain. They went on to become one of the most sought after duos on the music scene and Orla and Eamonn's vocal and instrumental talent continue to entertain at home and abroad.

Eamonn's departure shattered Charlie but he recruited Gerry Grennan and Liam Gilmartin and after performing at Letterkenny Folk Festival, Jargon were given a record contract with Polygram Records. Their big hit was *Bailieboro and Me*–composed by Charlie. At this time he had written a number of songs, but told no one until he tried them out on the audiences first. Radio and TV appearances–including The Late Late Show–followed, as did success in the Cavan Song Contest. After long persuasion, Maura O'Connell who was with Dé Dannan, eventually agreed to record one of Charlie's compositions and his show-business life snowballed from there. He spent two years touring with Maura, driving the long miles from places like



the Banna Beach Hotel in Kerry to be back at work in Arigna. It was exciting, but tiring–but it was hard to turn down gigs like the concert for the 50th Anniversary of the BBC and the temptation to launch his first album–an ambitious, self-financed project, with the Ulster Orchestra providing the backing.

Concert tours were to follow with Leitrim's Eleanor Shanley, spending Charlie's summer holidays and weekend breaks in venues across Europe. At the Tonder Folk Festival in Denmark, Charlie remembers Eleanor getting no less than five encores, stealing the show from legendary singers like Tom Paxton. Charlie considers Eleanor to be the most under-rated talent in this country. How right he is.

Charlie became friends with another songwriter, Brendan Graham, who had composed *Rock 'n Roll Kids* for the National Song Contest in 1993. The

song, performed by Paul Harrington didn't make it through. (By coincidence, Charlie was on the judging panel that year). For the 1994 contest, Brendan asked Charlie to perform the song with Paul, he felt the guitar and Charlie's voice were what was needed.

Charlie was reluctant. He and Goretti had bought a house in Ballyshannon and planned to move back to their hometown with their children Shane, Tara and Ciara. Goretti said to give it a try, so Charlie met Paul Harrington on the Saturday morning, performed on 'Kenny Live' on RTE on the Saturday night–and was astounded when they won Eurosong '94 some weeks later at the NIHE Concert hall in Limerick. Paul and Charlie and The Rock and Roll Kids were on their way to the Eurovision. The house in Ballyshannon was sold. The McGettigan's decided to stay in Drumshanbo. It was Leitrim's lucky day.

The people of Ireland held their breath, the people of Drumshanbo watched and prayed as the votes poured in for Paul and Charlie. It was a runaway success. Ireland won. Charlie McGettigan formerly of 'The Reinbous' and the 'Tom Fitzpatrick Four' and 'Jargon' and the Allen Gales Scór Balled Group was now a Eurovision star! As they finished their encore of *The Rock 'n Roll Kids*, Charlie found time to shout 'This is for Drumshanbo!' to the TV cameras that beamed it across Europe. This was 1994–a great year for Leitrim with the reopening of the Shannon-Erne Waterway and the winning of the Connacht Senior Championship–the first since 1927.

The Chief Executive of the ESB, Joe Moran, gave Charlie a year's leave of

absence and sent him off on a merry-go-round that was to keep spinning for 12 mad months. It was an endless whirlwind of TV stations, airports, and hotels, as Paul and Charlie and Brendan Graham flitted around Europe, often appearing on TV Shows in three different countries in the same day. The Big Breakfast Show with Zig and Zag, the Gloria Hunniford Show, Pebble Mill at One, The Late Late, TV show after TV show. The Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds, ensured an easy flow through diplomatic channels and invited them to many Government functions, at which they met, among others, Mrs Bhutto, Prime Minister of Pakistan. Mrs Bhutto made a special presentation for performing her favourite song *Uptown Up tempo Woman*.

At home the Leitrim team were being feted by supporters everywhere–and Charlie was delighted to be included in the invitations. Winning the Connacht Championship meant as much to Charlie as winning the Eurovision. Typical of the man.

After a year Paul and Charlie went their separate ways but will be performing again together with other Eurovision winners for 'Round Tower'–an accommodation for poor people suffering from Aids. The interval act from that 1994 Eurovision–Riverdance–went on to become one of the greatest showbusiness sensations of all time.

Charlie, Goretti, Tara and Ciara were to have their lives shattered in 1998 when their son and brother Shane was killed in a tragic accident in Boston, where Shane had gone on summer work. It was the cruelest of blows. How could such a tragedy hit such a fine young man, such

Shane McGettigan

an exemplary family. Shane is still very much part of the family, his presence is still felt. One of Charlie's proudest moments was when he had seen Shane run on to Croke Park from the subs bench to play with Leitrim in a National League game against the Dubs. But everything Shane had done in his short life had made Charlie and Goretti and his two sisters proud. They can be proud too that the Drumshanbo GAA pitch and the Connacht Club Football Championships are now both named in his honour.

The courage of the McGettigans, the acceptance of their loss, despite the inner heartbreak, gave inspiration to many.

Over all the years since arriving in Drumshanbo 27 years ago, Charlie McGettigan has somehow found the time to be a rock in the community. Anything that was for the good of the town or the parish then Charlie was part of it. His immense talents have been put to good use by the Drama Group, the Church Choir, the tours to England to raise money for the Mayflower Community Centre, the club Scór committee, the Tóstal Festival, the Joe Mooney Summer School, an endless, endless list of charity performances and fund raising ventures and guest appearances, not only in Drumshanbo, but in every corner of Leitrim. The man who performed before millions on Eurovision is not two proud to perform before a handful in Ballinaglera, Ballinamore or Bornacoola.

North West Hospice is one of Charlie's favourite charities and his Christmas gig for the Hospice with guests like Eleanor Shanley, Tommy Fleming and Mark Roberts is a sell-out each year. He has cycled to Lourdes for the Irish Handicapped Children's Trust, has participated in sponsored cycles for the Alzheimer's Society–there is literally no end to the good Charlie McGettigan does, all without the slightest fuss.

Charlie is in big demand by other artists and during 2001 has toured with the likes of Niall Toibin and Conal Gallen. TV appearances and guest spots are continually in his calendar. And hand in hand with all of this, his songwriting continues, as do the release of his best-selling albums.

The *Leitrim Guardian* is immensely proud to have Charlie McGettigan as its Leitrim Personality of the Year, as the ambassador for the County and its people.

We thank Charlie for his contribution to all things Leitrim and we congratulate Charlie and his wife Goretti, who shares in all of her husband's giving and their daughters Tara–who continues the family musical ability with a BA Mus–and Ciara, who is studying History, Politics and Sociology at NIHE, Limerick.

We honour the memory of Shane McGettigan–an integral part of a most special family.