



# A Pint of McGuinness

**An interview with Celtic Heartbeat co-founder and U2 manager Paul McGuinness.**

**T**his phone call to Dublin wasn't to catch up on U2's year, but to talk about Celtic Heartbeat, a record label set up by U2 manager Paul McGuinness, Clannad manager David Kavanagh, and music publisher Barbara Galavan. It was McGuinness himself though that, without any prompting, started the conversation about that particular Irish institution.

"U2 are recording at the moment with Brian Eno," explains the manager in his cultured Anglicised accent. "There's the possibility of a soundtrack album later this year, but it won't be like a real U2 album. And the band, of course, is Number 2 in England this week and Number 1 in Ireland with a single from the *Batman Forever* soundtrack, 'Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me, Kill Me'.

Do you have much say as to their musical direction?

"Not really. I respond and criticise as they make their music but I'm not part of the creative process at all. I'm just a constructive critic."

So, you haven't been able to lead them up your Celtic path?

"No. It wouldn't do me any good leading them in any creative direction. They're absolutely independent of me in that respect. Yet, interestingly enough, they've recently been working with Christy Moore on a song called 'North and South of the River', about the peace process in North Ireland. He's performing that at the moment, but he hasn't released it yet.

"Dublin is that sort of town — musicians of different genres tend to hang out together and collaborate. There's a big phenomenon here at the moment called *River Dance*, which is one of the Celtic Heartbeat albums. The guy who wrote that, Bill Whelan, produced a couple of tracks on a U2 album in 1983. There's a lot of interplay between the different kinds of musicians in Ireland, partly because the live business is very healthy and the record business slow.

"Irish people go to three times as many

gigs as English people, but only buy half as many records, which is a tragic statistic. Celtic Heartbeat is a response to those statistics, an attempt to market music that's already in existence to a wider audience."

McGuinness' interest in Celtic music goes back to the early 70s, when he had a friend in the traditional Irish rock band Horslips. His signings won't be confined to Ireland. He's currently trying to entice legendary Breton Alan Stivell and his guitarist, Dan Ar Bras, on to the label.

"The idea of Celtic Heartbeat is to produce a strong brand in the tradition [of] labels like Wyndham Hill or Navada, but with more exciting music, and yet one that record buyers will identify as a Celtic label and take a few chances on. We're trying to connect the music to the audience using the techniques of mass marketing that I've become familiar with through the management of U2. But these records are quite different. Pop records are like vegetables — very perishable. If you don't sell them quickly, you'll never sell them. Celtic Heartbeat is more like the book business — we're building up a catalogue."

*The Celtic Heartbeat Collection* is proof enough that the label has already attracted a welter of talent; right from ex-Planxty acts like Liam O'Flynn and Andy Irvine, to fiddle player par excellence Maire Breatnach, and chantress Frances Black.

"They were all current releases, and we just went around looking for the best we could get that wasn't already committed overseas. The A&R environment that this Celtic music exists [in] is very chaotic. There [are] a lot of fly-by-night operators who don't pay royalties or observe their obligations.

"We're trying to overcome that by paying the proper royalties and advances, and making sure these records get to the marketplace at a reasonable price. Sadly, what happens to a small label product released only in Ireland by the time it gets to a store in Wellington, it's doubled in price. We're bring-

ing our product [out] at normal album price, which should give us a strong advantage."

*The Collection* concentrates on the poignant, melancholic side of Celtic music. There's no drunken anarchy in the Pogues or Dubliners style.

"That may be coming. I'd love to find music like that. It doesn't all have to be contemplative or melancholic. Watch out for the next batch, which includes an all girl group from Donegal called the Screaming Orphans, who were discovered by Maire Brennan from Clannad. She's producing them."

Is there a plentiful supply of good Celtic acts in and around Britain?

"I think so. Now that we've launched the label there's a lot of interesting stuff coming in. Yesterday we got something from someone called Ocras (Gaelic for work). It was traditional music, but to a contemporary dance beat. It was like Deep Forest from the Celtic Mists. I hope we'll make a record. So, the definition of Celtic music is very broad."

In April, Billboard reported that of the 15 albums in the World Music Chart, 10 of them were Celtic related. *The Celtic Heartbeat Collection* was at Number 3. Why the renaissance?

"Partly marketing. The music's there already, and that's the renaissance, which is a bridging of the gap between the music and the market with a bit of intelligence. Of the first six albums we've released in America, every single one has done 25,000 and some have done a lot more. The *River Dance* album is on the verge of a massive crossover — we're expecting [it] to do half a million in Britain — and the *River Dance* show opened in London."

Has this early success been unexpected?

"No, because I'd seen it work already in America, where Clannad and Enya have had enormous success. The American market was wanting more music like that."

Why is Celtic music going down so well in America?

"It's got genuine emotional content. If you listen to most new age music, it's like modern elevator music. Compare that to the simple emotional power of a Clannad record and there's no comparison. We're not selling music to just Irish people, especially when Enya's current album in America has sold four million. It puts the whole thing into context."

GEORGE KAY



Alec Finn

Bill Whelan

Frances