

Independent WOMAN

In tune with past and present

IT STARTED slowly, gathered momentum and pace as it progressed, and ended late, colourful, noisy and triumphant. It was the last day of The Bothy Band's Irish tour, culminating in a gig in the national stadium. They hadn't played in Dublin for eight months, and the rapt stadium audience received them well

The day began hours earlier in Mulligan, the record company not the pub when the band in the person of Donal Lunny arrived, sat on a pile of boxes, smoked cigarettes (up to 30 a day), drank coffee and talked. He plays guitar, bouzouki, bodhran and sings. The other members of the band are Matt Molloy, flute; Paddy Keenan, uilleann pipes, whistle and low whistle; Kevin Burke, fiddle; Tríona Ní Dhomhnaill, vocals, clavinet, harmonium and bodhran, and her brother Michael, vocals, guitar, harmonium and organ.

That's eleven instruments between the six of them. In addition, individual members compose and produce. Each is a well-known traditional Irish musician in his/her own right, and the majority of the present line-up came together as The Bothy Band in 1974.

Michael O'Domhnaill thought of the name. The bothy is the name given to the wretched huts of Irish migrant workers picking potatoes on Scottish farms.

Sad songs

Their only entertainment was their music, fiery dancing and sad emigrant songs. The present incumbents identify with the same tradition. Matt, Paddy and Kevin are the hard core of the group, with Donal, Michael and Tríona giving balance and counterpoint.

They have been on the road since March 1, and have just released their fourth L.P., "Afterhours." This was recorded live over nine days in Paris, and involved endless listening to the tapes, selecting, rejecting, mixing. It was published by Mulligan Music, a company set up by Donal Lunny, Michael O'Domhnaill and Seamus O'Neill in 1970. Mulligan Music aims to provide a platform not only for the Bothy Band but for Irish music in general, from traditional to rock.

Mulligan H.Q. is a bustling place to spend the morning. People pop in looking for tickets for the night's concert, Girl Friday Nell switches gracefully from English to Irish as she takes repeated telephone calls, there is a big poster of Paul Brady on the wall, and Donal reveals that they are distant cousins.

There is a huge black and white poster of an old woman on another wall. I ask who she is and am told it's Sarah Makem, Tommy's mother.

It's time to go to McCullough-Pigott for a record signing session of their new L.P. Donal decides he needs to wash his hair, produces a bottle of Earth Born shampoo and a blue towel from a plastic bag and disappears. Niall Stokes of "Hot Press" meanders in and out, and a hand come to deliver a tape. They're called "New Venture," and they're young, platform crepe-soled, hopeful.

We leave, and Donald takes a lift with me, he says he had a car once that he bought for £90. On the way he reads Julian Vignoles interview with the Band in the current issue of "Hot Press." He's pleased: "Fine, he's positive about all the rumours that have been circulating lately about the Bothy Band being finished and break-

by Anne Dempsey

ing-up. I'm going to tell everyone at the stadium tonight that it's not true."

The band has been apart for six months to give everyone an opportunity to recharge their respective creative batteries.

Before the break they had been on tour constantly, Ireland, England, Europe and America. Donal muses on the fantasy world of being on tour: "On a high at end of the night when the music ends, usually very hungry, a few jars, something to eat, next morning up as late as possible, living out of a suitcase, if you have a suitcase. Then the laundrette bit, the next place, setting everything up. You don't really see cities. There isn't time, you see a few streets, the place where you're playing, and the inside of the hotel."

"People probably think we have a great life, and there is the basic romance of playing your music and doing what you want. You tend to live from day to day, and it's true that you opt out to a certain extent."

On a practical level, some of the tours had been very badly organised. The band has been through its share of managers and administrators, some of them apparently with no feeling for their music at all. Last June, they arrived in France to find only four dates booked outside Paris. It was the final straw and they decided to call it a day for a while.

Touring

Much later in the day over steak and kidney pie, red wine and salads in Solomon Grundy's Matt Molloy gives his opinion that the decision to break up for a while was the best thing that could have happened to them: "We had to manage on our own."

Donal agrees, says there's been a great injection of freshness and enthusiasm since, which they began to explore on the current tour: "In the future we hope to achieve with perhaps two tours and one LP per year what in the past we have tried to do with constant touring. It has taken a long time to mature and decide what we want, but I believe we're getting there now."

At McCulloughs we're joined by Matt, Michael, manager Kevin Flynn and his wife Mary. People stare and hover, but few come forward. The group stand round, plainly ill-at-ease with this p.r. exercise. One youth asks if there is any reduction for students: "There should be really,



Mr. Michael O'Domhnaill of the Bothy Band signs a copy of "Afterhours" for a young fan.

A day in the life of THE BOTHY BAND

we're the only ones who buy your records. I'm in the scouts myself, and all the students from Germany last year knew your music and knew more about you than we did."

The Bothy Band's music is mainly for export, with about a third of record sales from the Irish market. Apparently our national inferiority complex is to blame. We buy what the media plays, and the media in the main, including urban pirate stations, play hits from overseas. Most of our record shops are reluctant to stock traditional Irish artists outside the tourist season from May-September.

There is no sign of the rest of the band arriving. I learn that Paddy Keenan is at home making reeds for his pipes from Spanish bamboo, a highly skilled job. Kevin Burke is on his way from London, due in at 4; nobody volunteers on Tríona's whereabouts.

Thrown out

Signing over, we repair to a local hostelry where the chat is of music, dance hall bouncers and the youth of today. A man from McCulloughs says you have to practically nail the instruments down to stop them being stolen. Donal recalls with satisfaction that many the time he was thrown out of McCulloughs in his youth.

Michael signs his Irish coffee quietly. He has said earlier that he gets restless when not on tour. He has spent the last few months making an L.P. with Kevin Burke, and he's off soon

to Brittany, Denmark and America: "I like long tours. I can pease myself up for them, that way of life becomes normality for me."

Personal details are hard to come by. I learn through persistence that Matt is married with two small children, and that he left a good, permanent, pensionable job with Aer Lingus to join the band. Paddy Keenan is married and lives in Dublin. Kevin and Michael, both currently of no fixed abode, are single. Tríona, when I meet her, volunteers that she was married but is no longer. Donal Lunny is married with a nine-year-old son, but lives amicably apart from his wife.

The talk over lunch is about the give-and-take of being in a band. Matt: "We respect each other musically, and we care enough about the music to work things out. The conflict and problems come in when a tour is going badly, and we feel insecure, but this last tour has been very good."

They depart to do a sound check at the stadium and I depart to do similar things on the same front. We meet again an hour before they're due on stage upstairs in Garvey's pub. I find that Kevin, Paddy and Tríona really do exist. Kevin, born in London, speaks with an English accent in contrast with his music, and says he is playing well at the moment. He went to Egypt for a few months, and didn't bring the fiddle with him, "a very conscious decision. I needed a break."

Paddy Keenan is not so forthcoming: "Put down my name, then write under it 'no comment'" he said, and strode away. Tríona Ní Dhomhnaill is unsurprised: "Paddy doesn't give interviews, you could say he talks through his music," she says. She in her turn refuses to be trapped into a discussion about being the only woman in a five man band: "there's nothing to it."

She has spent the last few months organising groups at "The Meeting Place", a traditional music spot in Dorset Street. She is delighted at how well they have gone, and leaves soon herself for America where she hopes to work some with Linda Ronstadt, who has expressed great interest in her music.

It is, I venture, a rather insecure existence: "The only time to live is in the present," says Tríona firmly, "the past is gone, and the more you plan for the future, the more your expectations are disappointed."