

# MEET THE RADIO PRESENTER

Robert Heuston in conversation with the critically acclaimed Kathleen Biggins for Irish Music Magazine.



**Robert:** Can you tell our readers a little about who is Kathleen Biggins, your Irish American background and your significant contribution to both Irish Music and broadcasting?

**Kathleen:** I was raised in Elmsford, New York, to parents from the Bronx and Brooklyn. My paternal grandparents were from Ballinrobe, Co. Mayo; my maternal grandmother was from Shanballymore, Co. Galway and my maternal grandfather was from Ballinallee, Co. Longford.

We always had Irish music in the house, by way of recorded music, like the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem. Like any good little American Irish girl, I took step dancing lessons, which meant a few "At the Feis" albums on the turntable as well. Shortly before he died, my maternal grandfather mentioned he used to play the whistle while his sister played the tambourine. That was news to my mother and me! Another sister, my great Aunt Bea, used to play melodeon around Longford with fiddler Paddy Reynolds, from Dromard. Bea, by the way, is still with us at the grand age of 105.

I was always interested in radio, and when I got to Fordham University, the first thing I did was knock on WFUV's door and join the news department -- then the quickest way to get on the air. We had always listened to *Ceol na nGael*, the 3-hour Irish music program, in my house growing up, and when one of the students graduated, I stepped in. About a month after that, the other co-host left, and Patti Ann Browne (who went on to become an anchor at Fox News Channel), joined. We co-hosted the program until we graduated two years later. To this day, the show is hosted by students.

Simultaneously, there was an hour-long show on Monday nights called *A Thousand Welcomes*, and when that host decided to leave

in 1986, I assumed that show, too. About a year later, it was moved to Saturday mornings and extended to three hours. It's now on Sunday mornings, and I'm still at it.

**Robert:** WFUV (90.7 FM & [www.wfuv.org](http://www.wfuv.org)) have been broadcasting to an Irish audience since 1974 from Keating Hall on the Rose Hill Campus of Fordham University in the Bronx. Tell us a little about the station and how it has evolved?

**Kathleen:** WFUV has been broadcasting from Fordham University since 1947, and from what I'm told, there has always been Irish music on the station in some form. In 1974, Mary McGuire and Gerry Murphy, two students, were given three hours on a Sunday to play Irish music in order to raise money for the station. The money came in like gangbusters, and the format stuck.

Nearly 50 years later, the show is still going strong, still run by students and has expanded to 4 hours. In 1977, a student named Kathy Gonoude, began *A Thousand Welcomes*. It featured traditional music and a 5-minute lesson in Irish, by Dr. Seamus Blake. Kathy eventually moved on 10 years later. Mary Snow assumed the show for about a year, and after that, I took over. As for the station itself, it has grown from a student-run outfit to a nationally-recognized, listener-supported station with members from all 50 states and around the world, thanks to its diverse musical format and of course, the Internet.

**Robert:** The MidAtlantic Region of Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann proudly recognized your outstanding contributions to traditional Irish music, song and dance at WFUV. How significant was this award for you?

**Kathleen:** It's a thrill of a lifetime. I don't play music myself, so it was an exceptional honour to receive the Gradam Comaoine Award by Comhaltas. I'm always happy to announce events held by the various local branches. I'm especially heartened by the organization's commitment to passing the tradition down to the younger generation. I love watching how respectful kids are of the older generation, listening intently at sessions, soaking up the tunes. How lucky we are to have an organization that curates the tradition like that. Comhaltas has been a big supporter of *A Thousand Welcomes* over the years, and I am forever grateful.

**Robert:** What's involved in preparing your show each week and maybe describe the challenges you faced during Covid 19?

**Kathleen:** There really isn't much to it: I play what I want to play! I try to keep as current as I can with new releases -- all digital these days, a leftover from lockdown. I scan the Irish American papers and Irish Music Magazine (of course!) for new releases, and musicians reach out to me as well. I also get tips from listeners. It takes about two hours to put the setlist together: Sometimes it's organized thematically, but mostly I just let the tunes and songs fall where they may. Add in the odd interview, and voila! A show is made.

I'm still #WFH, which the station has graciously allowed me to do since the beginning of COVID-19. It took about 2 months of re-runs before the Irish shows were ready to launch in May 2020. Our chief engineer, George Evans, spent hours on the phone with me trying to align my technical capabilities with the station's and he had to do that with every on-air host at the station. From beginning to end,

it takes about 8 hours to do a three hour show, which is roughly what it was pre-COVID.

**Robert:** Which Irish Traditional and Folk musicians have made a significant impact on your life?

**Kathleen:** From the very beginning, it would have to be The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem. Their albums were what we had in the house when I was growing up. My mother was a lovely singer, and she knew all the Irish American ditties from going to Rockaway Beach, the Catskills and Spring Lake on the Jersey Shore in her youth.

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The first traditional album I bought with my hard-earned babysitting money was *The Mist Covered Mountain*, by De Danann, when I was about 15. The album cover intrigued me, and the music more so. From there, I discovered Planxty and the Bothy Band.

By the time I went to college, I began to discover the music of my American Irish contemporaries like Joanie Madden, Eileen Ivers, Brian Conway, John Whelan, Jerry O'Sullivan. I loved listening to the music and hearing the stories of Felix Dolan, James Keane, Mike Rafferty and Martin Mulhaire -- all so kind with their time and talent. I consider myself privileged -- as should all Irish traditional music lovers in the New York area -- to have such talent right at their doorstep. It should absolutely not be taken for granted.

**Robert:** You are also a writer and producer of the CBS World News Roundup Late Edition at the esteemed news outlet based in New York City and have won a Writers Guild Award for your work. What are your career highlights?

**Kathleen:** I've worked at CBS News for as long as I have been doing *A Thousand Welcomes*. I've supported some of the best newsmen in the business covering basically all of the major news stories for the past 30+ years. I've been to the Olympics in Nagano, Japan; covered political conventions; interviewed Senators and members of Congress and other political figures; numerous sports and entertainment figures, and the list goes on.

Receiving the Writers Guild Award this year was a particular highlight. I was awarded that for the script I wrote for the "World News Roundup Late Edition" the day of the condo collapse in Surfside, Florida. All in all, it's been a career -- it still IS a career, and I owe it all to that knock on the door of WFUV all those years ago.

For more <https://wfuv.org/users/kathleen-biggin>

