

**2020 (Re)Collections
Oral History Project**

The Reminiscences of
Joe Gibson

LIBR 588
University of British Columbia
2021

Preface

The text that follows is a transcription of an oral history interview with Joe Gibson, conducted by Katie Powell on 22 March 2021 as part of the UBC LIBR 588 course project titled 2020 (Re)Collections. Readers are reminded that this is a transcription of a spoken interview.

Oral History Transcript

Narrator: Joe Gibson
Interviewer: Katie Powell
Date of Interview: 22 March 2021
Location: Remotely via Zoom
Duration: 01:04:33

[00:00:00]

KP: My name is Katie Powell and I am here today on the 22 of March 2021 interviewing Joe Gibson remotely via Zoom. I'm currently speaking to Joe from White Rock, British Columbia, Canada which is on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the Coast Salish Peoples, of the Semiahmoo and Kwantlen First Nations. I'm speaking to Joe today I believe from Letterkenny in County Donegal in Ireland.

JG: Perfect.

KP: Joe would you mind saying your name and that you consent to the interview being recorded?

JG: Hi my name is Joe Gibson and I do consent to the recording of this audio/visual recording today. Yeah and I have been made aware of my options.

KP: Perfect, and thanks again Joe for agreeing to talk to me today and sharing your experiences as a performer living amidst this huge change we have all been experiencing this year.

[INTERRUPTION]

KP: So before we get to our world today and some of those issues, I wanted to ask you a bit about your journey to becoming a musician as a profession and kind, of what that journey looked like for you.

JG: Okay, I have always had an interest because music was always around me growing up. My father played the accordion and though my mother is not a performer per se, she would always sing in the house and was a good singer. But you will never hear her sing, you know? So yeah, music was always surrounding us growing up in that way. And it was always very apparent that the traditional culture was important in our house, much like in another house where supporting a certain football team would be important. Those values were not instilled in us at all. So when my father arrived home with a small fiddle one evening that he bought from someone in the pub and offered it to me to learn, I took to it straight away.

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JG: I was immediately interested and as soon as I got a tune, it was like, yeah, I need the next one and I need the next one. And there was just this hunger. And that was at the age of seven/eight. And then I supposed, Katie, knowing me, I am an extrovert kind of a character

anyway. So the whole idea of music growing up and that—I want to say I my day because I’m so old—but in my day or in my time in school, it wasn’t overly popular at the time. For example, I would have been the only person in a class or in many of the years that actually played traditional music. And it would have been a reason to be picked on, so to speak. But it was also, it got you out of classes and such. So very early on I saw that it was like useful to be the musician in the class, if you will. And then when others were going to teenage discos, you know, I was going with my father to sessions in the pub. And even though I didn’t drink or didn’t partake in any of those kinds of aspects of the pub, being in the pub and around that atmosphere of music, and just meeting other people. Other parents would bring their kids in Sunday sessions of an evening or going to Fleadh, and you would meet people. And it was so conducive to meeting people. Like, where, by contrast, if you are in a teenage disco, you have to be confident to go and talk to people. Whereas in a session, you just have to ask someone, “Oh what was that tune you just played?” And there, instantly, a conversation is born. And instantly a new friend from many parts of Ireland. So at a young age, I got to travel straight away. Are you still there? Okay, sorry it just froze briefly.

[00:04:00]

JG: Yeah, so that element at a very young age instilled a great appreciation of value in the culture. And then at a slightly later age when people started asking me to play for money, a lightbulb kind of went on, saying, Hang on a minute! You mean I could actually maybe do this as a profession, get paid for it, and never feel like I’m working? This is something of interest to me. Because also at age fourteen or so, I would have helped my father on the construction site. I spent long days sweeping up, and you know, breaking a sweat and working, you know? Now I continued to work in a lot of professions for a while, carrying on the construction career with me father until unfortunately the crash in 2008, when that stopped. But then we moved into commercial shops and stuff. There was always an element of working for a day.

Then, I think around 2012-2013, I said, you know what? I can’t keep balancing a nine to five and trying to make a real go if it as a career. And at that stage, I was getting offered to travel to places like France and Germany. You know, to play traditional music. Because again, even though there were other people playing music my age, in the Irish scene, there’s a demand around the world to have an Irish musician for St. Patrick’s Day or have—it wasn’t a need for who that musician may be, it was just, Okay we are having a festival in wherever, Canada, America, but we need some Irish musicians there—that was the criteria. It wasn’t the criteria that we need Joe Gibson. It just meant that we need someone who can play Irish traditional music.

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JG: Whereas, in other artforms, it’s really hard you had to make a name, you had to make a name. So there was a level of accessibility there straight away from the culture and from the very fact that you are Irish. I’m just being aware now that I have my flag up from St. Patrick’s Day. But that value and all of those factors just came together for me, and I said, no I think I can really make a go of this and become a performer or an artist. Which brought on a whole other conversation with family members about, you know, Are you sure you want to do this? Maybe you should think about a real job. But it is a real job, you know? It’s just an attitude around that.

So yeah, that's kind what of brought me to where I am today. And that was the transition, if you will.

KP: And so you mentioned the fiddle as your first instrument, but you play—you've over time you have taught yourself others, right, since then?

JG: Yeah, well it's like anything. I started the fiddle—the fiddle is my first instrument and is my instrument. And when I talk to people about my musicianship, I proudly say I am a good fiddle player. Because I spend a long time really working on it and really going to other tutors and developing my style of playing. Whereas the guitar came later as kind of a release. Because I was studying and going to different tutors and wanting to become better at the fiddle. I just picked up the guitar as a think to just smash and just, okay this is fun, you know? This is, I don't have to think. But as in any form of education, you start to get addicted to knowing more. You know, life is no fun if you just stop at one level. It's the journey.

[00:08:00]

JG: So whilst I continued to develop the fiddle and as I am teaching more now, I continue to develop my own playing as well as the kid's playing. Because I see myself in them and then I realize—wow, that's what I was doing wrong—and then I become a better teacher. But then at the same time, lockdown has afforded me to really look at the guitar and how much of a guitar player I want to be. You'll notice how I haven't mentioned signing. Singing is way down the list of my abilities. You know, there are people that are naturally good signers. It's something that I feel I have to work on harder, you know? But my interest is always broadening and I try to pick up more instruments. The room right now, there's at least three kinds of instruments lying around that I will pick up occasionally. The banjo is a new instrument as well. So, to be seen in the stream in the coming weeks.

KP: And then, I guess this question also tucks into what you were mentioning before about when you transitioned to performing within Ireland and abroad in Europe, but when did Sailor Bill as your band become a band? As a group?

JG: Well, you see, the music thing, music is such a universal language. You can play traditional music; you can play any sort of music with anyone and call it what you want. But at the end of the day, music has a core set of rules and as long as you know those rules, you can converse with anyone. So I always had an interest in not labelling it as much what I want to do, you know? I do play trad, that is my number one. And then folk, and then a bit of rock, country, whatever.

[00:10:00]

But I was actually in the process of thinking about—okay it was around the time I was thinking let's make this a career—and I thought, wedding is a really lucrative market for entertainment. So what I was actually doing at the time is I was going to design a platform where—now people have already done this and ran with it since then so I'm not worried about giving away ideas—but what it was is that if you were getting married, a lot of people had ideas about what they wanted at their wedding, but couldn't find it because not a lot of people know a lot about music, you know,

other than musicians. So for example, if you wanted, Oh I want a jazz quartet for this time and I want a band with this kind of feel. Because the musicians are there, but they are just not organized. Creatives are not always a well-organized bunch. They are more about being creative and lucid, you know?

So, what I was doing was designing this platform and then as I was talking to a few musicians, they said, “Oh why don’t we do a couple of gigs just to see how that goes?” And before we knew it, we then—this was in 2010 when the band actually did its first gig. Boxing Day 2010 I think. Or 2009. No 2010 Yeah—And then, I also realized that I’m only twenty and I don’t really want to just go straight at the mortgage and the house and stuff. So I said I’m going have a bit of fun. So one idea went out the window, and ten years of partying as it where and just Sailor Bill became a way to enjoy the aspects of youth, whilst at the same time providing an income. And actually, we got quite known for that. We became known as a party band. You would book us not because we were great musicians.

[00:12:00]

JG: You would book us because we were the musicians that had a drink to the wee hours and didn’t really count the time we were playing. So that was fun until you know, a good few years of that had passed and I was like, okay, now let’s maybe really think about making Sailor Bill something more than just that. And that’s when the creative and the writing—because it took a long time. I was always quite happy to play music, but never quite comfortable to play my own music. That was a big journey for me to go from—you see you can play a folk song that has been written and been around for years and it’s past the test, if you will. People like this music so they don’t mind you singing it—But to sing something that you have written that is quite reflective on something that you may have done and experienced, that took a long time to actually overcome. So I wasn’t worried about overcoming it until eventually I thought, Okay I do want to showcase or put together all this information and all this experience. Be it traditional music, country music, folk music, jazz, whatever it may be. But trying to gather what makes me sound the way I do and put it down on records. So that was a journey that kind of took place. But yeah, something like that, I suppose. [Laughs]

KP: And I definitely would love to talk a bit more about what COVID has meant in terms of writing for you or that creative process. But I want to ask you before we kind of jump to the present day, and you described this a bit in the earlier years of Sailor Bill, but before COVID changed.

[INTERRUPTION]

KP: Um, before we get to the present day, one other questions I wanted to ask you about, kind of normal times, I guess, where do you usually play or what does your typical schedule look like for your band, before lockdown changed everything?

[00:14:00]

JG: Well I mentioned making music a career, so to be a band that plays your own music and covers and to make a decent living is not—especially if you are not moderately famous—it's not as easy, you know it's just not that easy. Because a lot of people in Ireland, even bigger bands, will have a nine to five job. So their concern of the final amount at the end of the week, it wouldn't be as big. So typically Sailor Bill would play—Now in the last couple of years, I said in the early years was all about partying. The last few years was all about making it real and making it viable. So Sailor Bill was on quite a good trajectory of raising profile and becoming more of a band of note. Like on average, we were doing two to three gigs a week with residencies and stuff. And those gigs would have taken place in some of the bars that you would have frequented when you were here. I remember you were in Voodoo one night, when you were in Letterkenny, you had your first Guinness, well not your first Guinness in Ireland, but your first Guinness with me in Ireland. So year, bar like that in the local area, and then going to some bigger clubs, again weddings, and then every so often we would be fortunate enough, especially in the last few years to maybe go away and do a tour. Because I had been touring—it's much easier to tour just under the Irish label and bring a fiddle with you—than it is to bring a full rock band and set up that. So we had actually been breaking into that market. But then I would also have to play. So I would have been doing—and actually when you met me first, I was doing twelve to fourteen gigs a week. I was a resident in Galway. Now that's when you can make some money. Now that might sound like a lot, but it is only four hours a day.

[00:16:00]

JG: So that was the kind of lifestyle that I quite of enjoyed, doing a little bite of work—but it's not really work—and then the rest of the day is your own. So yeah, I was developing that here in Letterkenny where I could be playing. We had a jam club one Thursday and I had a two piece with another girl in town, I did my own solo stuff, and then in the week end it was the whole band. So most of the week was booked out somehow. Therefore giving me a full salary and at the same time affording me my days to do as I chose. The only downfall is that you are out quite late. You know?

KP: Right, yeah. And so, I'm curious if you have looking back, do you have in your mind one of your favourite or most memorable gigs that stands out to you?

JG: Yeah [laughs], well the early gigs with the band were all very fun, but to call them memorable would be a stretch because as I said, there were a lot of parties and stuff. Now, you met me when I played with a guy called Michael Carey. We were Carey-Gibson. There was many a night that I enjoyed there because on a musical level, we had both come from a similar background. And even though we never rehearsed—Okay so I met Michael Carey—this is to give you an example of how things work in Ireland—One of the most memorable gigs that turned me onto touring. It's one of those remember where you were when you got the call. I was sitting in the car in Derry with a girl that we were supposed to get back together I suppose after a break. I got this phone call from this guy I had never met before. And he asked, "Is this Joe Gibson the fiddle player from Donegal?" And I said, "yes." "Would you be interested in doing a tour in France over the weekend?"

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JG: And I said, “yeah that sounds good, when?” And he said, “Oh you need to meet me tomorrow in Dublin Airport. Send me a picture of your passport.” No I’d never met this guy. Obviously when this happened, then it was like, no I’m just going to stay single and move on, you know? So we flew out to France and we did our first gig in a chapel, or in a church. It was such an intimate gig, such an enjoyable gig, but we had until this point had never played a single note together, yet delivered a performance that was convincing that we had. And I’ll never forget that gig. You know, for loads of reasons, but that was a big gig and that was under the traditional umbrella. So then again after that he asked me to move to Galway and I moved to Galway. That’s when I met your guys down there, and met so many people and just to broaden the horizons. Now to have a similar experience where the band had a memorable gig, was just two years ago when we got to take the full band to Denmark to play the night before Johnny Logan was playing. And the night after – Johnny Logan is a three-time Eurovision Song Contest winner from Ireland.

KP: Oh wow!

JG: That was his own gig and there was five hundred people at his gig and we were on the next night and there were six hundred at ours. Now, it wasn’t because Sailor Bill was playing, but it still was a cool fact. We were playing in the same arena, or the same size as someone so famous. And I remember just everything was great, a great soundman, the soundman that did sound for Rory Gallagher [Irish musician] on tour throughout Europe, you know, little things like that that just mean so much to a musician.

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JG: So I remember being on stage and just being like this is pretty cool, you know? And as well, when you do a gig like that, you are booked to play what you want to play. Not what, say for example, playing in a pub, you have to play the Irish hits and you have to play this, and you have to do certain things, and the barman might be shouting at you to keep up the tempo or, you know. So yeah, those were two gigs that really stood out for me, upon reflection.

KP: That’s so interesting. I wouldn’t have really thought about that, but the difference in terms of creative freedom for you and your fellow musicians about what you want to play in a gig and how that can be very different depending on the setting.

JG: Oh yeah. A lot of the time, in normal times, if we are playing a wedding, the couple have booked you because they like you. But we play such a varied set, so sometimes you could be playing a more country set, or sometimes a very Irish set, or sometimes a very rock and roll set. You know, because we do change quite a lot, even though there is a kind of a connecting thread, a tenuous thread at that, but you know, when someone like that books you and you want the gig and you want to work—it starts to become more like work when they are telling you what they want, you know? But when you get booked for a festival, you are being booked more on what they have heard online and the stuff that you choose to put up. So you can really showcase what you are all about at events like that. And that’s why, musically, that is the dream. Because at that point you are playing most true to yourself. You know? So that’s a cool element.

[00:22:00]

KP: Yeah that is. And, thinking I guess about favourite gigs or memorable gigs, do you remember or could you share a bit about what that last normal gig before COVID was? Do you remember?

JG: Uh, the 13th of March 2020 the last gig. Where were we playing? I think, Downings, there's this little pub in the seaside town in Donegal. It's a tiny pub and a lot of people from Northern Ireland travel to Donegal for their weekend holidays. So, it's not exactly the locals we are playing to, but anytime we play there, and we play there a lot, it's always jammed. Now, it's a small pub, but there could be a hundred people in it and they are all really crammed in. And it's perfectly set up for us as well, for a band, because you have this little place in the corner where usually people will be sitting, and there's a TV screen or whatever, but it doubles as a stage. So even though it's jammed, the people aren't actually on top of you. So we like that. But that would have been the last gig and usually by the end of the night we would have had people on tables, you know it's a lot of fun. So yeah. I think that was the last gig. Oh you've frozen again.

KP: Oh. There we go, back. Can you see me and hear me?

JG: You're back.

KP: Great.

JG: I can see you. Am I freezing on your end?

KP: I think it might be me, I think it's my internet. So my apologies. But I can still hear you just fine. So I'm curious to know, when in that early March, or perhaps earlier, can you share a moment of when you feel like you recall COVID-19 first entering your awareness?

[00:24:00]

JG: Well, we'd actually travelled to France in late February and obviously—I think it was actually in February when the first case was recorded in Ireland—Now, since before Christmas, we'd been hearing about it in Wuhan in China. When you hear about things like that in Ireland, you never think it is going to hit here, you know? Because we had the SARS, and we had bird flu and we had all of these swine flus and stuff and I don't think any of them actually touched down in Ireland, but they never became such a global think either. So when this happened first I remember being quite nervous about travelling to France because we didn't know much about—and we didn't want to be inviting the risk of us being the reason it comes back, you know? Yet we still went, had a great time. But there was a general sense of anxiety around everything. And the reason I remember is because we played the last gig, I think it was the 12th of March, and we had been booked to play another bar in another place where there is no stage and people are literally just on top of you all the time—and it's a great place to play, but it's a sweatbox for

young people just going crazy and they would be on top of you. Given the fact of the threat of this virus, I was like, no I'm not travelling out to do a gig. This will be over in a couple of months; you know what I mean? You're talking about locking things down. I'm not going to be irresponsible and go invite this trouble on me. In retrospect, I would have loved to have done that gig. It would have been another gig. [Laughs] You now? But I remember in that month, I remember the anxiousness of everything.

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JG: Like, for example, they didn't lock down, they just said no big gigs, no parades, nothing, but it was a few days, like I think on the thirteenth and fourteenth and fifteenth, because I think St. Patrick's Day was a Tuesday, if I recall. It was locked down by the fifteenth, but I was still offered to play on my own on the thirteenth and fourteenth at a local pub. And again, I turned those gigs down because there was that anxiety. I have a brother with Down Syndrome and I wouldn't want to invite those kinds of risks on my family. Because at that stage we weren't doing the whole social distance thing, we were just living as normal. Yeah, I could definitely feel the anxiousness about everything, because at that stage we knew so little about it, you know? All we knew was that this virus was hitting everywhere and people were dying. Granted, not as many as, you know, but they were still dying, so we didn't know.

KP: In terms of once those lockdown restrictions came into effect, do you remember some of your thoughts in those early first days or first weeks?

JG: I remember very clearly because, Katie, I have nothing but time to reflect on every moment. [Laughs] You know, there have been positives and there have obviously been huge, huge negatives. One of the things, for example, for the years, like especially the last three years, life was flying. I mean it was busy being in Sailor Bill. We were on a track to do bigger things. We were releasing new songs. We used to dream about being played on the local radio station. We were getting interviewed every other month. You know, things were starting to move. But these great things were happening, but they were passing without any time to think about, you know? But I wasn't actually doing anything new or creative. We did Sailor Bill's album in 2015 and we planned to release it.

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JG: So when the first lockdown came, there was that, We're all in this together thing. That phase? I was quite happy to say, You know what? Let down the tools and relax because it was, we had marvellous weather for a good two months. I just got in the van and drove to the beach and spent days just roaming about the coast of Donegal. And I was just like, I haven't done this in ages. I'm loving this.

And then because I was playing so much, I started to find for a couple of years I wasn't practicing at home, I wasn't playing at home. You just didn't want to play when you got home, you just were fed up with music. Whereas all of a sudden, this hunger was growing again. I need a way to get this out. So I wrote more new songs in that first lockdown than I had written in probably of my music career—and jotting down ideas—So I really enjoyed the first lockdown

because I had believed at that stage that by end of summer we would be through this. And the government had agreed to give us support, so financially we were safe. We don't have any kids, and we don't have mortgage, so I was free to enjoy the first lockdown. So yeah, I did enjoy that element of it. But things started to change when you stated to realized that this isn't going away. You know?

KP: Yeah. And did you find, I mean, continuing on that thread of creative energy for you have you found then that has been a through line for you throughout the different phases of lockdowns? Or has it ebbed and flowed?

JG: Oh yeah. First lockdown I have tons of little voice recordings on my phone of ideas and I might do this idea, and new songs I haven't quite finished yet.

[00:30:00]

JG: And revisiting old songs. I didn't want this to pass without having some—

[INTERRUPTION]

JG: —so yeah, I didn't want it to pass without any value. So yeah, I recorded an EP, a few songs and that. And then through the summer I took full advantage of that. Writing more and starting to develop this online streaming thing. And this was a whole new thing that I had always said I wanted to do in trying to develop an online presence, but never got around to it. And this was the perfect opportunity to do that. But the novelty of said streaming wore off, you know, because in a gig you play a song and you instantly know if people are enjoying themselves or not. You instant know at the end there's a clap, or maybe there's no clap but there's nods, you know? Whereas, in a stream, there is at least a minute delay before someone reacts. So if I finish a song and you hit like, there is a minute lapse before I see that like. Now, I've gotten used to it and one of the great things is that people are getting to know one another in our streams and they are communicating with each other and it's almost like being in a pub. And they are like, okay we are going to go to Joe's stream and meet up with Katie and Melissa [friend of interviewer] and they are going to talk to each other. And I'm seeing this happening, and that is my little methadone to the heroine of music, or that social interaction that we miss. More so than playing, watching those comments come in and having a read with different names and that is so helpful to myself and Kevin [bass player in band], I think, because it is that little bit of social interaction. It does take us out of ourselves a little bit. Not quite as much as we would like, but it is what we got to deal with.

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JG: But the second lockdown leading up to Christmas, I suppose I had written a few songs and then was taking the opportunity to record them, so I did quite a bit of recording in that runup. And then the runup to Christmas and all that and everything was busy, so time was passing. So I didn't really notice the time passing, it wasn't really hitting me yet. But it really did hit me in January. January was a tough month for me personally. Because normally January is always a quiet month for us because we have been really busy at Christmas and we like to take it chill, but

I think a lot of people, musician or not, all realized it's January, it's 2021 and we're still in this. So that was a pretty rough period. You know? And I needed to make a change then, because it was hard. It was hard to get out of that funk. It was getting me down, mentally. And I am fairly mentally strong, I like to think. But to look down the barrel of another year of this, it was tough. So that's when I decided then to start running, to get out of the house and taking on challenges to, again, fill that achievement column, you know? Plus getting out in the air running, mentally would clear things up. I also could stand to lose a few pounds because I embraced a lot of lazing about and a few pints during lockdown. [Laughs] So, yeah.

[00:34:00]

KP: I know speaking for me, the streams have been such a wonderful thing to be a part of as an audience member. What were some of the challenges, I guess, of getting those up and running or the process that you had to get through, either technology or just shifting how you perform, things like that. Does that make sense?

JG: Yeah, kind of. I suppose, to be honest, we are still learning. We probably have learned, and we still haven't implemented the results. To start streaming was just put a phone up and just play. People still do that and that doesn't suit me. I wanted it to be the best sound. I wanted to make sure that whoever my listeners are, they are getting the best we can provide. Granted, on St. Patrick's night was not the best that I could perfect [laughs] because I enjoyed St. Patrick's night way too much. So developing the sound kept me interested and I'm still trying to develop that. Now to develop the performance element, because sometimes we get a really great response by views or people watching. But it's really hard to understand the metrics of all that unless you have advanced degrees in marketing. Because as a musicians we have had to—musicians have to become sales, marketers, t-shirt designers, we have to record stuff, you have to do everything. Videos, we have to make our own videos, like, we can't just do the music. Which is what we should be doing, we should be focused on the music and other people should be looking after that stuff.

[00:36:00]

JG: But indie artists have to really up their game and become multi-skilled people. Like for us to try to attract attention for example, for a Sunday stream to new viewers, I'd have to go and open up some kind of poster maker and do graphics. I've never done graphics before. I always hired someone to do my graphics. Now I'm doing graphics. I don't want to be doing graphics. It's not what interests me. But if I want to get more people to come along—

And then I need to look into how Facebook puts me out there. And Facebook has been really hard on musicians lately because of copyright. To give you an example: we were doing really well and then I got this new streaming system where I was able to, say, cue up videos to make things interesting. And obviously I'm not going to play someone else's music because I know about musician's rights and royalties. So what do I do? I take the videos I have pre-recorded and pre-released and use them as lead-in things. But the problem is, the company that holds my rights on my behalf—like Facebook uses bots to identify copyrighted music, right? So whenever I play a track from Sailor Bill's album, a bot will say this is copyrighted, you can't play it, and block my

stream from views. So this happened a lot before Christmas last year and it has been really hard to climb back from whatever Facebook has done with its algorithm to our streams because it is just limiting the ceiling somehow. And again, I'm not an advanced marketer, I don't know how to do these things and it's just another thing that I have to sit down and go through and I'm seriously thinking if I move to YouTube and start streaming there, it might be a better thing. But again, I don't know if there are as many people on YouTube that would sit and watch a livestream the way Facebook has designed it.

[00:38:00]

JG: So these are [illegible] stuff we have to go through to try to get our music out there. But, that said, it's wonderful to know that, for example, I don't know how many people you watch with, but I know Melissa sits with her sister and potentially her family. I know that our guitar player sits around the kitchen and puts it on the screen and there are at least five people there in the family watching us on a Sunday. It may be one figure watching one phone at the IP address, but there's five people tuned in and enjoying us. And that in itself is class. Like my whole family gets together now on a Sunday. Well, my mother, my father and my brother, they have TVs in each room in the house because they all watch different programs, but on a Sunday, they gather in the living room and watch me and complain to me on Monday about whatever I have done wrong!

KP: [Laughs]

JG: But you take that and you may have ten, twenty numbers on the screen, but that could translate into thirty, forty people, real people. And you are only talking to the person who has the phone. [Laughs] So that is hugely beneficial. But to try to make that something that is worth more, a little bit of return on it or something, or get new fans, it's a constantly—you have to work constantly—bite and scrape and scrape. It's, yeah, it's a minefield. But it's one that we will endeavour to improve upon. We have ideas in the pipeline that—I have accepted that I might not get to play live gigs this year again and its only March. To realise that is not nice. It's not really nice at all. But I'm having to think what I'm going to do for me.

[00:40:00]

JG: You know, so's I can go up another level, you know? I want to make a stream that—when this I all over, we will still stream. Because you guys in Canada, I have friends now that I have known for years but haven't been in contact with and now there is a way for you to connect with me and my music. So I would be a fool to just cancel that and stop showing you my music on some sort of a regular basis. Maybe not on a weekly basis, but potentially monthly. Or even take the set up I have here and bring it to a live gig in a pub. There are so many ways to keep that connection and build that connection. So that's why I need to spend the time and motivate myself to get better at it because no one else is going to do it for me. You know?

KP: I wanted to ask you also, since it is so fresh in your mind: about your St. Patrick's Day streams and how exciting that must have been, or how that felt getting the band back together!

JG: Well, yeah. So obviously most of those streams, except the one late on St. Patrick's Day were all pre-recorded. So that was fantastic because we are in lockdown but you can get together to play for a broadcast, that is one of the exceptions. So I don't know, did you see the RCC [Regional Cultural Council] stream with the full band? Now in true Sailor Bill fashion, we misunderstood the request. We were allotted forty-five minutes of recording time with top-notch gear. Like if you had to pay for what we got – this is something we wanted to pay for pre-COVID to get these kinds of videos made of us playing live together. If you had to pay for that it would cost thousands.

[00:42:00]

JG: But they paid us to come be part of a performance. Now, it was a token gesture, but we didn't care because it meant we got to play. But they allotted us forty-five minutes, meaning we want four songs, you'll probably play each song four times and pick the best version. But call it a breakdown in communication or whatever, but they said forty-five minutes to me, so I worked out forty-five minutes, that's ten songs. So I went in and we recorded ten songs. And they say afterwards, We are only going to use four. I said, Oh, well, pick the best four and give me the rest. So the great thing about that is: A. We literally got to play a gig with four songs. And now over the next coming weeks, I will have a series of videos or another concert which I will be able to release to you guys once I have it all organized and mixed and stuff like that. But it's like a full series of surprises that we will get to give out to our fans that will get to listen to our music. We have always wanted to record, so I'm looking forward to doing that, but I haven't got the raw material yet to work on that.

Now, it was fantastic to sit back and watch that on St. Patrick's Day. There was the excitement building knowing it was coming. And to watch it and see the response. And we got messages from people—like we got a message from the Minister of Diaspora. We've seen the message that they sent to the RCC, it says who are Sailor Bill? Got to hear more of them! And it was like, Yes! This is exactly the kind of person that needs to know about us. And by doing that, we got to do that.

[00:44:00]

JG: And Emerald [Emerald Guitars] is obviously the maker of my guitar and I have been playing them for years. They finally asked me to go down to their place and play. And now since that has happened, there have been conversations about maybe Joe should get a new version or something. So there has been a lot of great things about those—and I don't know if you caught that, there was another stream that we did that I was involved in doing, where we asked the traditional musicians that are involved in our branch of Comhaltas [Society of the Musicians of Ireland] to submit recordings of themselves so that we could just put something together for St. Patrick's Day. Now I got three hours-worth of music, well, maybe four hours worth. People made videos in their homes and I had to edit it all down into a movie. I'm not a movie editor, I'm a musician who has had to learn how to use movie tools and cut and splice all this stuff together and make it sound as good as possible. So that was a project that we did, it went out and now it has raised over a thousand euros for a foodbank in Letterkenny. So watching all these projects

going out on St. Patrick's Day was very gratifying, it was giving me a buzz that I haven't had in a while.

And also we were having a few drinks while these things were happening and we thought it would be a good idea to go live at ten o'clock. I don't know if you were watching that, I think you were watching that night? Yeah, I don't know if you were watching the end [laughs] where the signals weren't going from the brain to the hands anymore –

KP: [Laughs]

JG: – but I think everyone could appreciate the amount of work that went into that day, it was St. Patrick's Day. But yeah, never-the-less, that stream got deleted. [Laughs] But yeah, it was a really great kick to do all that and to witness it. It was one of the things that, you know it advertised that Sailor Bill are doing this.

[00:46:00]

JG: Because even though we do it, this is one of the issues with Facebook and stuff, they don't show your streams to as many people as you would like. Unless you know that we are going on, you have to look and find us. Whereas for other people it will pop up on the news feed. So I don't know how to fix that or figure out how to get us out to more people who are interested in us. Eventually, we'll learn that too.

KP: Just all that work navigating the platforms and all of the logistical pieces –

JG: And once you figure out how to navigate the platforms, what do the platforms do, they change their operating—like we were doing great in, I think it was August, September, it was around that time last year when they brought in—because up until then, DJs and Karaoke singers, and all this not music, okay DJs are musicians too, nah there are some DJs that are great music, but what they were doing was playing other people's music, right? Karaoke people were just playing other people's music and singing over it. So they brought in this legislation to say you cannot play someone else's music if they are not getting a royalty for it. Which is fair enough. But for the likes of me, who would actually use his own music who is copyrighted, they didn't put in the infrastructure so the little bots and the people could communicate and say, well actually he is playing his own copyrighted music. So on numerous occasions Facebook has blocked my streams for copyright infringement. And I look and see Sony Music has the copyright to this and I think, no they don't!

[00:48:00]

JG: But my music is copyrighted through a platform called TuneCore, which obviously is underwritten by Sony. And if my music is playing anywhere, these little bots will find it. If any royalties come in, they will come to me. But Facebook has not put in a platform or a way for me to say, Okay, I am going to stream tonight and I am going to use these songs in my stream and then negate that issue. They just put these bots to work and muting streams, and it is really angering the music community. So, it's because it—legislation, like technology is so far ahead of

legislation and it is just so desperately trying to catch up. So, these things don't help us in the short term. We're like the pioneers of streaming now. I mean streaming has been around a long time, but you know, everybody now is having to become a professional marketer on internet crap.

KP: Wearing all the hats of the music industry in one.

JG: And get paid the least amount. Don't get me started on Spotify.

KP: [Laughs] I wanted to ask you, now shifting to reflecting on the future, and kind of looking into our future post-COVID or new normal, no-lockdown times. What do you want your first performance to look like when you can be back in front of an audience?

JG: To be honest, I don't know what it is going to look like and I am kind of worried because when governments finally roll back on lockdown levels, they may open restaurants and they may open restaurants, they may open bars, but they won't allow the dancing and the music will be the very last thing that will be opened up fully.

[00:50:00]

JG: And I'm wondering when they are going to do that and how they are going to do that. Like when is it going to be okay to mix again, you know? I'm okay with wearing a mask into a shop. No problem, I actually love that idea, you know? I don't want to be spreading stuff to these people and you know—I really don't know what that is going to look like and I think it is going to be upon us before we have time to think about it in the sense that eventually the bars will call looking for gigs. I worry then are they going to use the excuse that they have been closed so long that they are not going to want to pay what they were paying. I'm worried how the musician fares out of all of this. Because nine times out of ten, in every element of the music industry, the musician is the last one to get paid and is always paid the least.

So I'm hoping that some form of supports or some system comes into play because I can really just imagine a lot of venues and a lot of places just saying, Okay we would love to book you but we can't pay what we used to pay. And that is going to suck for the musicians that works full time as a musician. And the problem is then a lot of musicians don't work full time and a lot of musicians will just take the gigs for the sake of playing and they will completely undercut the likes of ourselves. So, my view is to make connections in this time now, so that should it come back—festivals are going to come back. They are big organizations and they generate a lot of interest in different companies.

[00:52:00]

JG: So my idea is, okay I'm going to try to get booked in the States or get booked in Canada or get booked somewhere where Sailor Bill can play. And if the local bars don't want to pay what they used to pay for having us? Well they don't get us. I'm not going to do it, I'm just not going to do it. I'll play on my own, and do that if I have to. But things are going to probably change for Sailor Bill for quite a while. But I'm hoping that we will secure some festival dates abroad and

that will be our springboard to maintain interest as such. But, I don't know. I know that the guys are dying to get playing again, and I know that they would probably jump at the chance.

I think, if I was running the country, a lot of musicians would be taking social benefits and stuff and would be working as well, and I think now is a time for the government to step up and realise that our culture, the Irish culture is one of the big reasons that people travel to Ireland. I think what they should do is introduce some sort of stipend system where you get this much every week and at the end of the year, you work out what you have been paid. If you happen to owe the government back money back because you have made so much? Fair enough, it's good. Pay them because you are making good money. But if you are not, then you're not. Because right now, or before what was happening was if you weren't working, a lot of musicians were on the social benefit. And they were just saying I'm not working or playing because they were afraid to get caught because they weren't making enough at the bars. But you know, it was happening anyway, so I think they should just legitimise it and give musicians the opportunity to continue playing and continue working that way.

[00:54:00]

JG: If the government introduces something like that, that will benefit the bars, the musicians, and the culture, and the tourism. It would be such a smart move because it is already been happening for years, people have been illegally accepting social benefit, I suppose, and playing in venues. So just legitimise it. And problem solved. Because the bars will be able to say, we'll get back to paying you what we were paying you before, but in the short term, can you work with us on this? That would be an acceptable give and take. But people need to realise the value of the music, you know? Because everyone is missing it. You know? When you want to celebrate, we're there. When you want to grieve at a funeral, we are there, you know what I mean? It's a way for people to feel emotions without talking about emotions. So yeah. We need some appreciation as well. [Laughs] If that makes any sense.

KP: It absolutely does. Thinking about the idea of emotions and music, is there a song that you feel captures -- and I guess this is a very difficult question to pick one song -- but do you feel there is one song that resonates with this past year for you?

JG: Well, there's been a lot of songs, but there was one song that has captured my imagination lately and I do think--it's called a Song for Ireland, you may have heard it it's a popular folk song. And I'd always wanted to learn it. So I actually learned it recently.

[00:56:00]

JG: But the more I've thought about the words and the lyrics in the song, it seems to me--the song is about a person that has immigrated and is missing Ireland, missing the aspects of Ireland. So it talks about the pub sessions and the friends and a lot of things we as people are really missing at the moment. So, I thought this song might be one of the ones that captures it. So I guess you'd like to hear it?

KP: That would be wonderful. Thank you.

JG: Well, let's give it a rattle, and so. Can you hear that okay?

[Sings with guitar]

Walking all the day near tall towers where falcons build their nests
Silver winged they fly, for they know the call of freedom in their breasts
Soar Black Head against the sky
Between the rocks that run down to the sea
When living on your western shore, saw summer sunsets, I asked for more
And I stood by your Atlantic sea and sang a song for Ireland

[00:58:00]

Drinking all the day in old pubs where fiddlers love to play
Someone touched the bow, he played a reel, it seemed so grand and gay
Stood on Dingle beach and cast, in wild foam we found Atlantic Bass
When living on your western shore, saw summer sunsets, I asked for more
I stood by your Atlantic sea and sang a song for Ireland

Talking all the day with old friends, who try to make you stay
Telling jokes and news, singing songs to while the time away
Watched the Galway salmon run like silver dancing darting in the sun
When living on your western shore saw summer sunsets, asked for more
I stood by your Atlantic sea and sang a song for Ireland

Dreaming in the night, I saw a land where no one has to fight

[01:00:00]

Waking in your dawn, I saw you crying in the morning light
Sleeping where the Falcons fly, they twist and turn all in you e'er blue sky
Living on your western shore, saw summer sunsets I asked for more
I stood by your Atlantic sea and I sang a song for Ireland
And I sang a song for Ireland

[End of singing]

KP: That was beautiful. Thank you so much Joe.

JG: There you go now. So I just thought that the words in all and the tale of that song is reminiscent of the times that we miss so much. It fits, for me anyway. So cathartic there we go [crosstalk]—lethargic means

KP: [Crosstalk] Thank you.

JG: –tiresome.

KP: Now I wanted to ask for anyone who is listening to this in the future, where can they find your music and you online?

JG: Search Sailor Bill is probably the easiest thing. Or @SailorBillBand and then from there you have Joe Gibson and Joseph Gibson. Yeah, pretty much YouTube, Spotify, Facebook, Instagram, it's all there.

[01:02:00]

JG: Just start off with @SailorBillBand and it should take you there somehow!

KP: Perfect. And is there anything else that you wanted to add that we haven't talked about in our conversation?

JG: No, I think we have covered it in depth [laughs]. I guess I just hope that we can get out again soon and we can all come out of this and race out of it, as it were, back to normality. Open the floodgates, you know. But yeah, I think we covered a lot.

KP: We did! Well thank you so much again for your time talking to me today. I really appreciate it.

JG: No problem Katie.

[END OF INTERVIEW]