

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

The Reminiscences of  
Kevin Monaghan

LIBR 588  
University of British Columbia  
2021

Preface

The text that follows is a transcription of an oral history interview with Kevin Monaghan, conducted by Katie Powell on 24 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: Kevin Monaghan  
Interviewer: Katie Powell  
Date of Interview: March 24 2021  
Location: Remotely via Zoom  
Duration: 36:11

[00:00]

KP: My name is Katie Powell and I am here March 24, 2021 interviewing Kevin Monaghan remotely via Zoom. I'm currently speaking to Kevin from White Rock, British Columbia, Canada which is on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the Coast Salish Peoples, of the Semiahmoo and the Kwantlen First Nations. Kevin is speaking to me today from Letterkenny, in County Donegal in Ireland.

KM: Hello!

KP: So Kevin, would you mind saying your name and that you consent to this conversation to be recorded?

KM: Yeah, I'm Kevin Monaghan. Hello, and I consent to the recording –

KP: Awesome!

KM: — of this interview.

KP: Perfect, thanks Kevin, and thanks again —

KM: And so does Harry [a dog sleeping nearby] as well.

KP: [Laughs] Aw.

KM: He's passed out. [Laughs]

KP: So thanks so much for agreeing to talk to me and I'm really curious to kind of hear about some of your experiences and thoughts, especially over this last year from the perspective of someone whose livelihood is around performance and engaging with people in public group spaces. But before we get to our world today, I wanted to also just ask how you came to be a musician. If you could briefly share a bit about your journey to becoming a musician.

KM: Well it started in my primary school a friend of mine played the guitar and we wanted to start a band. He had a great idea to start a band and to do that we needed a bass player and we needed a drummer. So another friend bought a drum kit and I got a bass guitar. I didn't even know what it was at the time when I was setting out to get one. My dad took me to the local shop

and we got one and I just absolutely fell in love with it. I was practicing away and we eventually got our first gig at a school concert about two years later, maybe.

[02:00]

KM: Me and the guitar player — the drummer actually gave up after a short time, but we got another drummer. Me and the guitar player kept going and I just absolutely loved the buzz from playing in front of people. It's just, a lot of fun. And it just kind of grew. It's such a good way to meet people as well, and just start up conversations. Some of my closest friends at the moment, I met, we just started talking through bass. Just like, oh you play guitar? I play bass, oh brilliant! Just sitting yapping and talking about guitars and different pedals and effects, and amps and musicians and bands and all that kind of stuff. It's just kind of kept on going since then. So I was about twelve, I think, when I got my first bass. It was actually, funny, I was in the newspaper this week, it was kind of a back in the day section and it was a picture of a later school concern, not the first one, but it would have been my second last one I did in secondary school. From 2006, so that was blast from the past. I just go the paper today and when I had seen it I was like, oh my God! [Laughs]

KP: Oh that's so great!

KM: I'm so old!

KP: [Laughs] What was your band's name back then?

KM: It was Cottonmouth. C-O-T-T-O-N-Mouth. Cottonmouth.

KP: That's awesome.

KM: And I actually played at two, at that school concert the second band was made up of the music class I was in. Our teacher just kind of forced us all into a group to play and for some strange reason—I don't know who named the band—but in the paper it says, Two Hundred Years of the Redemptorists. So I have no clue where that one came from at all. [Laughs] But it was a blast from the past to see that today, actually.

[04:00]

KP: That's so cool. So when did you join the band that is now Sailor Bill? What's your backstory connection to the band today?

KM: I went to college in Leeds in 2010, or I finished in 2010, sorry, started in 2009. I was a one-year course. So I left my band that I was in at the time—Murphy's Law in Ireland—When I came back from Leeds I was looking for a new band to play. The guitar player Sean Quinn, who you met when you were over, he was the guitar in Murphy's Law with me and Joe, the singer, fiddle player, guitar player of Sailor Bill, was looking for a bass player—And he actually asked Sean to play, but Sean wasn't really interested, but he suggested me. So I met up with Joe one evening and the rest of the band and we had a practice, and it went well, and I got offered the

position. That was nearly ten years ago. It was 2012, I think, so nine years, right around March-April. It was right around March and April when it started. It was a long time. [Laughs] We've been living together as well since then as well. Oh no, sorry, it was 2011, I was getting the dates mixed up. We moved in together in 2012, so that's where that one came from. We're living together nine years, but in the band for just about ten years. It originally started on Boxing Day, Sailor Bill.

[06:00]

KM: They had a different bass player but it didn't work out so I ended up coming into the fold just a couple months later. And it's been going since. We did our first album, which took about four years, five years to do. And we finally released it, so that's been great. It's been a hell of a journey, travelling. We've been to Switzerland, we've been to Denmark, we were nearly going to France at one point, but that kind of fell through. And over to Scotland a few times. So we've had quite a bit of travelling in it and again, there was talks about maybe going to Canada last year for a little tour, we were in talks with a guy. But due to the whole pandemic, it kind of fell through, sadly.

KP: Yeah. Thinking about all that touring you guys have done, do you feel like you have one gig that stands out as like, perhaps your most memorable? Either with Sailor Bill or even before?

KM: The ones in Denmark were pretty special. Just the size of the theatre, it was a really big theatre. I can't quite remember how many people were there, I think I was at least five or six hundred people in attendance, so that was really cool. And a full-on stage, a whole light show, and just the size of the bass amp I was using as well. It was one of those big fridge speaker cabinets, the height of me, with eight speakers in it. It was pretty sweet. And we also had a special drummer player playing with us that night, Patti Ballinas from Majorca. She had flown in and played with us. We didn't actually have a practice with her, but she is such a great drummer and it was a really, really fun gig. That would definitely be one of the highlights. There's been a few from whenever we are playing in the town on St. Patrick's Day.

[08:00]

KM: Those ones are usually pretty special as well, just because the pubs are full and everyone's had a couple of drinks and stuff and kind of go a bit nuts.

KP: [Laughs]

KM: Those ones are always good.

KP: And would you say you have a favourite song to play? Of all time that you are like — Yes, we are playing this one tonight!

KM: Yeah, I always enjoy playing Ride On with Sailor Bill, the Christy Moore song. We kind of rock it up a little bit more, do it more Free Bird-esque. And Free Bird would also be one of my favourite songs to play, just because we get to go nuts and rock out for a couple of minutes. It's

great, a lot of fun. I'm definitely more of a rock-oriented bass player, whereas Joe is more traditional folk. So it's nice to let the hair down as such at different times.

KP: One thing I was curious to know more about—thinking that just over a year ago—what stands out to you about that last gig before lockdown?

KM: I just remember being incredibly scared of the next couple of gigs getting cancelled and thinking oh God this could be the last one. It was, I think it was the thirteenth of March was our last gig of the band and just before St. Patrick's weekend. We had four or five gigs lined up for that weekend. So I was just really scared and nervous to lose all of those and just praying, please, please don't let this thing be as severe as everyone as making it out to be. So it was a tinge of sadness, definitely. Bit of anxiety.

KP: Yeah.

[10:00]

KM: Because that's a lot of gigs to lose on a weekend, so I was really expecting to be playing them and counting on the money and stuff like that as well. So a bitter blow.

KP: Yeah, and such a busy time for the band, that particular time of year.

KM: Yeah, exactly, that's when the music kind of starts up again in Ireland. After Christmas and all that, January and February are normally very quiet and St. Patrick's weekend is the start of the year again, of the season for music playing. So it was very sad.

KP: Yeah. Do you remember before that, can you recall when COVID-19 first came into your awareness?

KM: Yeah it would have been probably January February and seeing videos on YouTube and the articles in the news this Chinese virus, that seems crazy. I remember clearly thinking, it will never make it here, it can't be that bad of a thing to spread across the world. There's been foot and mouth and those viruses before, but they have never ever had this level of impact on us. So yeah, definitely a month or two before our gigs were cancelled I remember hearing about it and seeing it and never thought it would make it this far—[cross talk]

KP: [Cross talk]—Yeah. And I guess, in those first few days or weeks or even months, I guess, of lockdown, do you remember what stood out to you in those times or what you were thinking?

KM: Mostly, I hope we can play again by the summer. I guess that was the goal and what we were led to believe as well after we started the first lockdown.

[12:00]

KM: That it's going to be a couple of months and then by the end of the summer we were hoping to be back up, the country was hoping to be open again. And the bars and stuff. And then that's

when we started streaming and that was a nice little saviour. It forced us to think of other ways to try and play, I guess— [cross talk]

KP: And— [crosstalk] —Oh, sorry go ahead.

KM: —No that was really about it, yeah.

KP: I guess thinking about those streams—which I would love to talk more about too—what has creativity looked like for you in lockdown? Have you felt inspired to be creative?

KM: It has led to a bit more practice on my part. Especially at the start of it. I bought a drum kit around Christmas time, an electric one. So I threw myself into playing that for the first month or so of lockdown. It was a lot of fun. A very, very different instrument to play as well from the bass. [Laughs] Yeah it was good, I got a lot of practice in. Definitely become a better musician since all of this has happened. But I still can't really display it too often, sadly. [Laughs] Although, I think myself and Joe haven't used it to its full potential. We live next door to each other so we really should be practicing together a bit more I think. Trying to write some more songs. And in that aspect, it has been good. Not being able to go out and leave the house has been good for the playing.

KP: You mentioned earlier about some of the recording and writing you guys have done this year. Can you say little bit about what that process was like?

[14:00]

KM: Yeah. Joe has given us some music at times and I just come up here to my room with my set up and just play the music on and I just play around or mess around with it then on the bass trying to put my own lines to it. And then back to him and see if he likes it. He normally tries to change little parts here and there or do this maybe or do that instead. So, if I like it I'll listen to him, and if not then I'll tell him where to go. [Laughs] But it's been good that way, yeah.

KP: And you guys went into the studio to do a couple of those tracks, right? Or was that pre-COVID that you recorded some of it?

KM: The album was recorded pre-COVID, yeah. Joe recorded his songs; he wrote a couple of songs but we haven't actually done the Sailor Bill version of them yet. He's done more acoustic traditional versions. But we do intend to do full Sailor Bill versions hopefully in the near future. Like, "Your Guiding Star" is one of the songs he wrote so I have my bass line for that, but it has not actually been recorded yet. Been looking forward to doing that for the second album, whenever that comes out, or whenever it's actually recorded or started. Yet to be determined.

KP: And so I wanted to also come back to those livestreams that you mentioned before, too. When did those first start and how did they come about?

[16:00]

KM: Joe did one on St. Patrick's Day and then our first one was a couple of days after that, I think. We just did it in my flat. We set up speakers and stuff and just streamed through our Facebook page. We just figured it was something to do to take our mind off being stuck in the house and not being able to leave or do anything. And try to keep our chops up, stay tight playing together-wise, and it was a lot of fun the first couple of nights. I played drums on one of the nights for one song. [Laughs] The neighbours called the guards on us. One night the police were here.

KP: Oh no!

KM: So that was an odd one. The guards didn't arrive until after we finished playing—because you are allowed to make noise up until 11:00 pm over here. So we stopped by eleven and the guards landed at around half-eleven after we had everything packed up and that. It was like, what are they doing here? It was two squad cars and the paddy wagon as we call it, the arresting van that they put all the criminals and crooks into. [Laughs].

KP: Oh my gosh.

KM: Yeah, but the guards were really nice, they were just like we got a noise complaint, we have to check it out. We were like, oh we were streaming in there, but we're finished. We finished at eleven, maybe five past eleven. So they just said okay, no worries and left us alone. It was scary for a wee moment, like why? The neighbours could have just come down and knocked on the door and just told us keep the noise down and we would have turned it down. And we learned from that then, now our streaming platform has gotten a lot better. Joe has a brand-new desk and we now have in-ear monitors as well so we are not actually pumping out any volume, apart from his singing, is the loudest thing anyone could hear. So, it's been good for the neighbours that way on the estate.

[18:00]

KP: What was it like as a performer, as someone used to being in front of a live audience, what was that like to shift to having a virtual audience?

KM: Very, very different. Yeah, very different. Just finishing a song and then there is silence. You just look around at each other – did we play that okay? Did people even like it? Did anyone enjoy it? And then you see a couple of comments coming in and you think, thank Jesus for that! It's still a little jarring to get used to, that. It's very, very different, yeah. Because you can feed off of the energy of a crowd as well when you are playing out as well, when you are playing out live in a pub. You can kind of tell if people are enjoying it or aren't enjoying it. Or at least there might be one person there who is liking it, and you can focus on them. [Laughs] But it's just us, it definitely led to a few moments of, why are we even doing this? What's the point? We're looking at each other, trying to get motivated. It was hard, especially the first few months. It's a lot better now, we've gotten past that. But it was definitely tough the first few months.



KP: Do you feel like there is anything, other than the experience of changing to having that virtual audience, but anything that's been really surprising, or dare I say, a positive about the livestream experience for you?

KM: Yeah, a lot of people that would watch us in the streams aren't from the town, or aren't local people to us. You know, we have yourselves over in Canada, we have some people in Switzerland, Denmark, England, Scotland that watch us. Some people in America and a lot of these people we have never actually met before, they just found us online through streams and websites. Even there's a lady from Austria as well, Martina, who came across us one night and she has been tuning in live for months.

[20:00]

So that's been really, really good to actually get essentially new fans and the people aren't forced to watch us. Like, if they are in a pub and we are the band that's on, they can leave or sit there. But these people are actually choosing to tune in and listen and comment and stuff, so that's been really nice. Like you are actually connecting with people a little bit more than the live audience. Because times when you are playing live I guess, people that come up, they are drunk and they are just leaning over saying, oh you are brilliant, you are brilliant! And you just think, ah you're full of shit, you're just drunk. [Laughs] You would be saying this to anyone that was up here. You would be screaming at the jukebox if it was there in the corner. So a bit more reassuring, I guess.

KP: And I guess this wasn't for a live audience, but can you tell me a bit about your recent St. Patrick's Day gigs, getting the band back together, I guess, last week?

KM: Yeah, Joe came to me about a month ago, I guess, and said we have a gig. I was like, what!? Where? When? How? What? No way! And the whole band, the whole band, yes! So the RCC, the Regional Cultural Centre—kind of a place that runs concerns in our town—they were organizing this whole St. Patrick's Day event from local musicians. And we're one of the ones lucky enough to get picked to do it. We had like two practices in our house one evening with the guitar player and the drummer. The drummer was just playing on the cajon in the kitchen, so it was a bit different as well, doing that. It was just so fantastic to get out and play with the full band again.

[22:00]

It was similar enough to the Denmark gig. You know, we had the full light show even. The whole thing was being recorded as well. They had ten, twelve cameras on the go at once, just all over the place. It was actually pretty nerve wracking when you got in there, there were just cameras everywhere watching us. But it was great to do and we've a lot more footage than was actually broadcast, so hopefully we will be able to release some of those songs over the next coming months, and maybe even use it to try and get more gigs and festivals and stuff. That's what the band is aiming for in the future, is to do more festivals and more big concerts and stuff like that. Like the Denmark gigs, for example. So it was very useful that way. And for us to have rented out that space and then hire the lighting engineer, the sound engineer, and the cameras and

stuff probably would have been two or three thousand euros. So it was fantastic to actually get the opportunity to do it and to get paid for it as well. The icing on top of a very tasty cake.

KP: [Laughs] And was that entire program unique to the unique circumstances of St. Patrick's Day this year, or is that a concert that is usually put on by the RCC every year in some kind of shape or form live?

KM: No I'm pretty sure it was unique to this year, yeah. I think they always have artists in, I'm sure they would have had some kind of traditional act, traditional Irish music act, in playing on St. Patrick's Day, but I think this was very unique to the day and the current climate, yeah. It was fantastic to do.

[24:00]

KP: Thinking, I guess, about performance and hopefully, with an in-person audience, looking forward to when we are out of lockdown and in some sense of a normal or new normal, what would you love that first performance to look like?

KM: Oof—anywhere. [Laughs] Any pub, any bar, I guess. There is a couple of places that we love playing. There is a bar in our local town, McCafferty's, where we used to do every single Sunday we had a residency. Just playing in there again would be great because it was usually a really good gig. They have lovely Guinness in there, which I would also dearly, dearly love a pint of. It's been so long since I've had a pint, a proper poured pint from a keg on draught. So that would be really nice. Yeah, just anywhere. I would just love to play if we had the full band. It would be magical to be back. Definitely have a far greater appreciation for it as well now as well, because it has been taken away for over a year now at this stage, pretty much.

KP: Well, as an audience member, I feel like would equally look forward to getting to experience those shows. Do you have, we've talked a little bit about like creativity in lockdown, or what that has looked like for you in terms of your musicianship. But do you have any other dreams or goals for your own musician or creative practice, or for the band that you would love to see happen when we come out of lockdown?

KM: I guess, because of us doing the streams, we have been playing a lot more of our original music, which we weren't doing as much as a band before.

[26:00]

KM: We have changed drummers a few times, we have changed the guitar player since the album was actually recorded, so it was always tough to get time to practice with the band since the drummer and the guitar players were in full time employment doing other stuff. So it would be really, really good to actually get to play our original music more often now and kind of every night, get to play five or six songs in the setlist. That would be fantastic. We always did our own versions of cover songs and stuff, but it's never quite the same as playing your own music and seeing people enjoy it and like it. That would be really, really good to get done.

KP: I guess, looking back on this last year, is there one song that you feel is very meaningful, or encapsulates a lot of the things or experiences you have had in lockdown?

KM: Um, I guess there's a piece that I play during the streams, it's the one I'm going to play at the end of the night for you, it's a solo bass piece by Stu Hamm. I always play it whenever Joe is going to the bathroom or he has to go get a beer or something, but it is one that I had learned a long time ago on the bass, and I just never really played it. I never played it live, especially. And it has been really fun to play that one and show off a little bit I guess, and hopefully we can try to incorporate it into the live band setlist whenever we actually do get back onto the road again. That would be nice.

KP: Well, is that a good segue to maybe hearing the song?

KM: Yeah, can do, yeah.

[INTERRUPTION]

KM: So this is called "Love Thing" by Stu Hamm. [Plays bass]

[30:00]

KP: That was great, thank you! One question that came into my mind as you were playing is: do you still have that original bass that you got when you were a teen?

KM: Yeah I do. It's at my home house so I don't actually have it here, but it's down the road about a fifteen-minute walk. It's still surviving. It was actually the one that was in the paper today. [Laughs]

KP: Oh nice!

KM: Yeah.

KP: And do you have a name for your current bass?

KM: The one I was just playing is called Stu after Stu Hamm. Then my other main bass, the blue one is actually in Joe's house at the moment is called Bruce. And he will be fifteen on the fifth of March. So a big birthday coming up for him.

KP: [Laughs] Happy birthday Bruce.

KM: I do have a couple more basses. The fretless here, Frankenstein is what it's called because I have a treble bar and different pickups on it and stuff. It's just been a lot of different work done to it, so hence the name Frank. Short for Frankenstein. And then, I have, actually I have Sean Quinn's guitar here as well. The Wife, as he called it. He left it here, he's actually moved to Sweden recently enough. Lovely Fender Stratocaster.

[32:00]

KP: Oh nice.

KM: He's had this for about twenty years I'd say now and very, very close to it. So, been looking after it for him. But yeah, named most of my basses, all of them. I have Leroy under the bed as well. It's a stick double bass. Leroy!

KP: Now Kevin, if anyone listening to this interview would like to find your music and the band's music online, how can they do that?

KM: Sailor Bill Facebook. Sailor Bill Band Facebook. We're also on Spotify, Sailor Bill. The album Hard Horizon. And that's really about it.

KM: Spotify and Facebook. Or you can contact the band on Facebook and order the cd from us or stream it on Spotify. Either or. We don't really have a YouTube as such, so, something we need to work on, to get on more platforms. [Laughs] Get more stuff out there.

KP: And is there anything that we haven't talked about, about your musicianship and your experience in COVID-times that you wanted to also still share that we haven't really covered?

KM: Um, I'm not sure. It's definitely been a bummer of a year in that regard, not getting able to play. But it has been good for the practicing. The mix of it is that the hunger has kind of grown to play and get out live again.

[34:00]

KM: I would say there is definitely points in the last few years where it has felt a little bit kind of, [sigh] we're doing this again, playing in the same pubs and doing the same shows and that. But the band was growing just before COVID hit. We were starting to do bigger and better things so the hunger is definitely intensified for those better bigger gigs when we do get back. Definitely want to do a lot more practicing as a group and push it and promote it a lot better. I think we have learned a lot in this year about promotion and the online aspect of stuff, especially through the streaming and trying to promote our streams on a weekly basis. That's probably about it. [Laughs]

KP: Great, well thank you so much Kevin for chatting with me today, I really appreciate it.

KM: No problem, no problem at all.

[END OF INTERVIEW]