



# Christmas Fiddle and Fun: A Conversation with Eileen Ivers

## Transcript

[MUSIC: EILEEN IVERS' "GRATITUDE"]

GINA MARIE ROGRIGUEZ (00:05):

This is Gina Marie Rodriguez, and you are listening to the Jersey Arts Podcast. Today we're starting this episode with a song "Gratitude," from our guest, American Fiddler, Eileen Ivers. Eileen Ivers has been called the Jimi Hendrix of the Violin. Now, I may not be a musician, but even I know that's high praise, a master of the violin, which is also known to be a fiddle dependent on the way in which it's played. Ivers is known to be the preeminent exponent of the Irish fiddle in the world today. Grammy awarded and Emmy nominated, Iver's has guest starred with over 50 orchestras, toured with the likes of Sting, Hall & Oates and the Chieftains, founded her own group called "Cherish The Ladies," composed for movie soundtracks like Gangs of New York and performed for presidents and royalty worldwide. There's not much she can't do. Lucky for me, she's also a blast to talk to on today's episode in advance of her upcoming Christmas show, A Joyful Christmas at the Raritan Valley Community College. Eileen and I chat about her history with the violin, her multiple math degrees, and the joy of sharing love with music.

EILEEN IVERS (01:11):

Thank you. Thank you for your time and previewing the concert. It means a lot, so thank you.

GINA MARIE ROGRIGUEZ (01:16):

Oh no, of course. I'm really excited about it. Christmas is my favorite time of the year, so I love all things Christmas. Concerts, movies, musicals, anything that I can do to talk about Santa and the season.

EILEEN IVERS (01:30):

Good for you. I'm in agreement with that. Good woman!

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GINA MARIE ROGRIGUEZ (01:34):

Good. Before we talk about the show though, I know you have this show coming up at the Raritan Valley Community College. I want to talk about you for a little bit. I think you are so cool. I've spent my time now watching a lot of your videos and listening to your music, and you have such a stage presence, and you can tell that you love what you do and you just ooze this coolness, and I'm excited to be talking to you. So thank you for taking the time.

EILEEN IVERS (01:59):

I will take that all day long, Gina, thank you for that.

GINA MARIE ROGRIGUEZ (2:03):

Of course.

EILEEN IVERS (2:04):

I appreciate that. Thank you.

GINA MARIE ROGRIGUEZ (02:05):

I say this often, but as someone with no musical inclination, I love music, but I have no inclination towards it myself. I'm captivated by you, but I'm possibly more captivated by the fact that you had advanced degrees in mathematics, as someone who cries over trying to do the simplest math problem. I kind of wanted to touch on that for a second because music and math are related, and I'm wondering if these two things have coincided in your life and how, and if not, theoretically, would you prefer to teach me math or the violin?

EILEEN IVERS (02:37):

Oh, great question. Love it. And fresh from just prepping our 14-year-old son there this morning for his algebra test today. It's funny, the math and music, I think they're very well connected, and you're right. My dream of aeronautical engineering back in my way back in the college days was something I really kind of wanted to pursue. And then the love of music just totally took over and the bug of live performance and hopefully really reaching out and affecting people and doing something in that realm just totally was then I figured out eventually the passion in life and the calling in life, but math enters into it all the time. I love, even if we do masterclasses along the road to say that to kids, because music

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and arts in school is huge, as you probably well know, Gina, and I'm a huge believer in that, and whatever we can do in our small way to advance that concept we love to do.

(03:38):

But yeah, it's the logic of math. The beauty of math. You could get into the ratios of harmony and harmonic scale and all that. Yes, that data certainly plays into music, but just the other way, counter melodies work and the way maybe arrangements work. And it's funny that band and I have been rehearsing for obviously a very different show, our Christmas show coming up and all of that enters into each rehearsal, wait, wait, that harmony, let's do this, or let's bring this in there. Or arranging just the way the music might go into an improvised section and whether it comes back to the structure. So all day long math is a part of everyday life for sure.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (04:16):

I hear that all the time. And they used to tell us that in school, you can't survive without math. And then I grew up and realized, okay, but you taught me nothing that I actually, how do I do my taxes? That's the kind of math that I really need to know. But if I had understood at the time the connection between music and math, I might've actually given it a little bit more care.

EILEEN IVERS (04:39):

I know, I know. And it is true. Something like as boring as taxes, okay, well, that's to wonderful accountants as we know, but even just a logic of creating our life to make that make sense is math a lot is all math, right? So just the way we structure things for sure plays into it. But yeah, every day.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (05:00):

I love the way you think. So you mentioned that you realized at a certain point that music was the calling, but what was that like when you were a child? You were already studying music. Was it more of a hobby at the time? At what point did you realize, oh, I need to be doing this for the rest of my life?

EILEEN IVERS (05:17):

Great question again. I think, you know, [it's] funny with immigrant parents, God bless both parents from Ireland and their journey and their struggle, they really instilled in my sister and I, education is key and get that degree and go as far as you can. And that was wonderful. So I kept rebelling of the idea of music because it wasn't like the real career. It just popped into my head, Regina Carter, a wonderful jazz

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violinist once said, until she got medical insurance her mother felt "okay, you could be a violinist," that kind of thing. But those responsibilities of life, but then finding your passion and calling, it's a part of it. So for me, kind of kept thinking, oh, I will always have music as a side thing and whatever that meant. But then I started touring like Hall & Oates. I was on the road with those guys for about a year in my mid-twenties and something that eventually led to Riverdance where I toured with the company for three years solidly at the end of the nineties.

(06:20):

And I think it was really during that period that I thought, you know what? I love this. I feel I do have a calling. I have something to say. I left Riverdance after traveling all over the world, and it finally came to our backyard in New York on Broadway, and I said, it's time for me to leave. I couldn't believe it, but I knew in my spirit I wanted to start my own group, which I started about, oh gosh, well over 20 years ago now, and just wanted to put that energy into performance and playing with in theaters and symphonies and festivals and creating shows. And that was the time it really changed for me. And I haven't looked back and gratefully haven't looked back since.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (07:02):

I love that. I was going to say, once you've been in front of an audience and you've felt that energy, I can imagine that it would be really difficult to go back to, I don't know, a nine to five sitting in an office and where's the applause? I finished the work. Can everything please tell me I did a good job.

EILEEN IVERS (07:19):

I always think that wouldn't it be great if everybody in everyday life had that applause? Because my sister's an amazing, compassionate home care nurse. She should be getting applause after every visit of, yes, you've helped this amazing patient. But whatever I think we can do in life to make a difference, use the gifts we have to get out there and do something good. That's a great day.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (07:41):

Absolutely. But a moment of applause for your sister though.

EILEEN IVERS (07:44):

Thank you, Tina, and for you.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (07:46):

Oh, thank you. Yay. My day has been made. I've received the validation in life that I need.

EILEEN IVERS (07:52):

And for those listeners, right, everybody doing our best in life, go applause, standing O's all around.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (07:58):

Exactly. We do all need that.

EILEEN IVERS (08:01):

Oh, yes.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (08:02):

You studied, I don't want to butcher his name, but your teacher was Martin

EILEEN IVERS (08:06):

Mulvihill.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (08:08):

Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit about studying with him?

EILEEN IVERS (08:11):

Thank you, Gina. Yeah, Martin Mulvihill, God rest his soul now. He was a fellow from the southwest of Ireland, County Kerry area, County Limerick border, and he just was a simple gentleman who loved music, loved instilling the culture and heritage, and these kids from around the Bronx where I grew up. Then he taught in Jersey and around the Tri-State area. But he taught mostly by ear, really understood the importance of the kids getting together and playing music together. So he would teach fiddles button accordions, flutes, whistles, the banjo entered into it, all these instruments, put little bands together, got us into these competitions that helped hone our craft. A big competition was these called Flock Hills, which is Gaelic for basically music festival where you'd kind of hopefully qualify in New York area and then be brought over to Ireland and compete with the kids from England and Ireland.

(09:08):

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So those growing up years were really important to really understand the music as any deep tradition should really be about getting back to the masters of it in the last a hundred and more years of our music is very deep. It goes back hundreds of years, of course. So to really get into the past, understand that, hone your craft, and then eventually make it your own and find your own voice in the music. So he was a huge part of my life. I loved chatting about him, so thank you for bringing him up. I think all teachers are incredible if they instilled the love of that in you, whatever that may be, and the respect, and to understand where it's come from and the idea behind it, and he was great in that way for sure.

[MUSIC: EILEEN IVERS]

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (10:16):

I learned only recently that the violin and the fiddle are the same instrument. It's just in the way that they're played is the difference.

EILEEN IVERS (10:24):

Correct.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (10:25):

So my question, and I don't know if this makes sense, but do you play both then or do you find yourself in, you are a fiddler and you stick to fiddle?

EILEEN IVERS (10:35):

Great question. Yeah. There is this blurred line. Once years ago on an interview, I heard Itzhak Perlman refer to his amazing instrument as his fiddle. So it's funny, it really does go interchangeably in a way, and coming to mind, just a tune that we've been working up in our Christmas show is the wonderful "Ode to Joy" which then goes into Beethoven's piece into "Joyful, Joyful We Adore You" with an Irish reel at the end of it, which is a 4/4 time that we put into a really upbeat, joyous kind of groove that you really, it's very infectious groove, but coming from that beautiful Beethoven melody of Ode to Joy. So I guess as I'm playing Ode to Joy, I definitely am thinking more in a classical realm of just really pretty long notes. That's under a jig rhythm, by the way. That is jig rhythm, so we really do blur the lines in this show a lot, but so at times it does go back and forth. When we play with symphonies, I might be doing a pocket bells any kind of riff into a reel. So there's blurred lines all the time, but I think that's the cool thing about

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music, the instrument and play what's in your brain, what's in your heart. There it is, and whatever people want to call that, they can call that, but you're kind of playing it from what you know.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (12:02):

That was really fascinating for me to listen to, but also to watch you. I wish that our listeners could see you making all of these hand gestures, air violin. Yes. I love the air violin, so thank you. That was entertaining for me. There's something that I read about you that you had used music as a way to connect to your roots. Am I getting that right?

EILEEN IVERS (12:24):

Yes, sure.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (12:25):

What has that journey been like for you? I'm all about understanding where we come from and who we are, and I think all of us should be able to connect to our roots. So what has that journey been like for you?

EILEEN IVERS (12:37):

Oh, very humbling, very full of gratitude because I think as we know, so many Americans might not be able to trace their roots, get back to that. That's very, when you can, it's very, very powerful and you learn a lot more about yourself, about really just the pride of where you've come from. I mentioned earlier my parents were both from Ireland and every year as kids, we used to go over as a family to Ireland. My dad used to work for the airlines, so it was an easy kind of thing to shoot over there fairly inexpensively and spend the summers, leave the Bronx behind and the humidity of New York and go over and run around the fields of the west of Ireland and County Mayo and get to know the grandparents so well, and all my cousins and that. And then really, I always feel like there's nearly a foot in each land, and I've always felt like that it kind of fuels your way.

(13:39):

You think about life, the way you think about certainly music, I've learned so much about that, but I'm also very proud to be American. And what just popped in my mind, we played the Grand Old Opry back in March. That was our debut, and it was an amazing amount of emotions. We were doing what we do, which is Irish music, but also the parallels that it has into American roots music. And I'm standing on this

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incredible stage in this hollowed circle, a powerful moment, and thinking of my parents who we just lost mom in the last year, and both parents gone now, but just feeling them with me, feeling their story, the ones that came before them, all the stories coming to that moment, Gina I tell you, it was unbelievably powerful. And after the first tune, 4,400 people in the grand old Opry rose on their feet and gave us a standing ovation, and it just was like, that's it. I can die happy, because that moment came so full circle, no pun intended, standing in that place, in that circle and feeling all the emotions of the past and what we've done, and I think I've done in my musical journey in life to play and represent the music in that way on that hollowed ground really came together. So I think, yeah, a lot goes to know our heritage is great. Many Americans find it through different ways, and it's powerful and it's important. If we can.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (15:11):  
First, I'm very sorry for your loss.

EILEEN IVERS (15:13):  
Thank you.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (15:14):  
But that I can only imagine. I've never been in that situation before, but it sounds just the way you speak of it, you can tell how powerful that moment was. So congratulations for having been able to live that.

EILEEN IVERS (15:27):  
Thank you.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (15:29):  
Speaking about connecting to your roots, I believe you also offer educational programs about that very thing. So I'm wondering what is that? Can you tell me who those programs are for and how you approach that?

EILEEN IVERS (15:43):  
Thank you, Gina. Again, the power of education and boom, music as well. So the band and I, we love doing these kind of programs. If we're brought into a theater, a performing arts center, sometimes during the day, the wonderful presenters will gather their local schools and they'll come in. A recent performance I just thought of in Alaska, we had over 2000 school kids come into this theater up in

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Fairbanks, and it was incredible. So we speak about that, the violin and the different music that could be portrayed on the violin from different cultures around the world. Our drummer will show different grooves, some African grooves, and how maybe an innately African groove works with an Irish tune. So we kind of explain again, how we're all very, very similar. And music does connect us. It connects the human emotions in life. So we'll go through maybe then how a Cajun tune can sound like a Celtic melody and a Native American thing that's also infused in Cajun music and French.

(16:48):

And again, just these little ways that it's all connected. Bluegrass comes from Irish, comes from African roots music and African rhythms. It's wonderful to just show this through music and not just the chatting, just to show how all of these lines come together. And man, the kids, they get it. They love to hear the music, they clap to the downbeat. They're singing the songs that we ask them to sing back to us, and it is very, very powerful. They come up and ask for our autographs at the end of a program like that. So it's touched them in a wonderful way, and that's very powerful, and we feel really blessed to be able to get out there and do programs like that.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (17:30):

That's so sweet. Did you say what age group that you typically work with?

EILEEN IVERS (17:33):

Typically? Elementary school. We've done high school as well. I've even popped into college classes and chatted about the music and obviously from all kinds of different perspectives. But it's wonderful to be allowed to come into these beautiful spots and just chat about things and open kids' minds.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (17:49):

I remember when I was, it was probably elementary school, we used to have, they'd heard us all into the cafeteria and we'd have these special presentations and anytime it had to do with music, I know I was really excited. Even though, what did you just say? You said something about the downbeat and my non-musical brain is like, what does that mean? When were they clapping? I know innately, sometimes you can feel when to clap. I feel like I know how to clap. I know how to move, but if you told me or asked me to count music, I have no idea. Before you said something about four times, I'm like, oh, that's too hard for me.

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EILEEN IVERS (18:30):

No, it's not hard. Your heart and your mind would know it, and you promise it will. I promise you, I should say, if you hear, say, attune them, so if you're tapping, say, that's an Irish reel, 4/4 times, just four on the floor, basically. 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, and you'd, see your head's bobbing, exactly. You're feeling it. You're feeling where it would be where that beat lies. And it's so funny, they often say an Irish musician, if you stop their feet from tapping as they play, they couldn't play. And it's so much a part of your body as you play the dance music, the jigs, the reels, hornpipes of Irish music, your whole body feels it, and you do tap on that downbeat. So that downbeat is just grounding the whole tune in there. And the audience, they instinctively feel that because you're feeling it, and it's such a powerful feeling that it breaks that fourth wall and they get it, and they're with you. And that adds to the joy of these performances, I think. And yeah, it, it's a very powerful tool.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (19:39):

Absolutely. See, now I feel like I got both my math and my music lesson.

EILEEN IVERS (19:42):

There you go. The day is complete!

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (19:45):

And I got more applause. I wish people would see us. I wish they could see this conversation, but at least they can hear us. Thank God for that.

(19:56):

Okay. Entertaining myself now. There was a quote, I'm going to butcher it. I was watching something the other day. I think it was a video from the nineties about musical theater, and I absolutely can't remember who said it or the exact quote, but it was something along the lines of, "I can write pages and pages of dialogue, but one violin in the pit can capture more emotion." I feel terrible for not being able to credit who said that, but I love it because music is so powerful, and that's the entire conversation that we're having here for me, not necessarily understanding 4/4 time or not understanding the mathematics that goes into music who caress, because we feel it, as you were saying, you just feel it. I love that about music. I love that about performance and that you can share that with an audience.

EILEEN IVERS (20:47):

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Oh, it's incredibly powerful, Gina. It really is. And that's a great quote, and I'll tell you and your listeners a quick story that popped into my mind. There's a great movie called *Some Mother's Son*, little known film. It was about the 1980s Irish hunger that was going on. It was like a hunger strike with these prisoners and a brilliant movie, Helen Mirren starred in it. And I played the violin to it in a Dublin studio. I was watching the action, and it's a very, it's about a mother standing by as her son is basically starving himself for a political activist, kind of, right? And I won't say too much because the movie, if anybody, it's just an incredible movie. And when I was playing after the acting was all done and it was in the can, but the music was being put onto the score, I was watching this scene and it was toward the end of the movie.

(21:44):

And obviously the dialogue was incredible throughout the whole, the story is incredible based on true stories, but just to put then the music on top of what was there and watch the acting of the Incredible Helen Mirren, but I was playing the violin and sobbing at the same time, and I heard in my headphones from the producer, thank you, Eileen. That's what it needed. So it is funny, it was a completion of that thought of the dialogue that was in this incredible movie of the story of this movie. But music just can bring sometimes out that words might not be able to. So I certainly just add maybe a little touch to that. But it brings people together, and that's the exciting thing about these shows. And this time of year coming into the theater, we're all crazed in life. We're running around here and there, but for two hours, two and a half hours, whatever it is, we're together.

(22:37):

We center ourselves through music, through the power of it all, share the emotions together, and hopefully they'll leave the theater, with our Joyful Christmas show the hope is, being totally refueled, getting out there, feeling the light, the joy of the season, the contemplative times we'll go in. It's not all like "Yeehaw" joy of four on the floor downbeats, but a lot of it will also be just kind of going over and thinking about heavier thoughts of that and having that fuel our soul and just sharing that together. That's a very powerful thing about live music and art, I think for sure. And what we enjoy.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (23:13):

Yeah, absolutely. That's a well-rounded performance to be able to ride the emotional rollercoaster of life in one sitting. It's huge. And again, that's the power of music. That's the power of art as a whole. We can see that in the visual arts, in the performance arts, in music, everything. I guess I'm feeling really

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grateful this morning. I woke up in a good mood, and I love art, and I love that there are people like you who can contribute to that, because life is tough sometimes. A lot of the time. Life is tough, and we need that reprieve. So thank you for doing the work that you do because it is very important.

EILEEN IVERS (23:58):

Oh, listen, thank you. And obviously, as you as well, to take the message out there and to the people who come into the theaters who understand that it is important to feel and to share this together. We came out of a horrible period where we weren't allowed to, and those lights of the theaters were dark. Even though, thank God we came so far away from that, that's still a thing back there. Let's make sure we realize it's important to get out there and to share feelings again and again. This time of year is a wonderful time to kind of nearly reset, get back to what it's about, and go out and be stronger in the world around that. So if live shows can fuel that, that that's very powerful.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (24:41):

Back to this time of year, what can audiences expect from your Christmas show? What kind of music do people, do you encourage them to get up and dance? Is this more of a sit and listen show? What's it like?

EILEEN IVERS (24:56):

A bit of all of the above. I think there's times where we get into even some bit of poetry that just highlights maybe part of the Christmas story in thinking about the incredible blessed mother and what she went through as a human. We get back into just something as raw as that, that makes you think, wow. If you had an angel appear to you and this was thrust upon you, what would that be like? So we found some amazingly old Celtic beautiful hymns and songs and carols of the tradition from, gosh, 12th Century Ireland to some very old tunes to the Basque region in northern Spain that kind of infuse that Christmas story throughout. So at times, there's some slow, beautiful tunes, contemplative readings, and then it's definitely juxtaposed with Go telling on the Mountain Cajun style into couple of reels that are just the roots of Americana.

(25:56):

Comes out in our show. It's a six piece band, which I pulled together our own band, and I guest vocalist, Caitlin Maloney is joining us. So lots of songs, lots of obviously tunes pulled from Irish tradition, from Americana Roots where the band, and I love to, again, blur those lines of roots music and how it's all

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connected through this incredible story of Christmas. So yeah, we're loving it. We're probably just finishing rehearsals now. The last one next week will be our last rehearsal for it. We've been working on this since late September, so I take it very seriously. I love to really put a lot of thought and energy into the arrangements, into the emotions to really put a full show together. Gina, as you said, you want folks to leave there feeling that that was an amazing night.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (26:46):

Eileen Ivers will bring her show "A Joyful Christmas" to the Raritan Valley Community College at the Nash Theater in Branchburg, New Jersey on December 15th. For more information, be sure to visit [rvccarts.org](http://rvccarts.org). If you liked this episode, be sure to review, subscribe, and tell your friends. A transcript of this podcast. Links relevant to the story and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found at [jerseyarts.com](http://jerseyarts.com). The Jersey Arts Podcast is presented by Art Pride, New Jersey, advancing a state of creativity since 1986. The show was co-founded by and currently supported by funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts. This episode was hosted, edited, and produced by me, Gina Marie Rodriguez. Executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Isaac Serna-Diez. And my thanks to Eileen Ivers for speaking with me today. I'm Gina Marie Rodriguez for the Jersey Arts Podcast. Signing off with gratitude. Thanks for listening.

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