

Celtic Woman fiddler Mairead Nesbitt talks about group's success

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By [Kevin O'Hare, The Republican](#)

The Celtic Woman phenomenon has not slowed down.

Nor has the group's dynamic, charismatic, feisty fiddle player Mairead Nesbitt, who enlivens the troupe's shows with her vibrant stage presence and masterful musicianship.

Celtic Woman, the all-female ensemble that blends styles ranging from classical to traditional, from ethereal to pop, staged its first performance in 2005 and hasn't had time to look back. Favorites of PBS viewers coast to coast, their television specials have been seen by millions. The group has sold more than six million CDs/DVDs worldwide, enjoyed a pair of Top 10 album debuts and a DVD that was No. 1 for 95 consecutive weeks.

They are currently out on the road once again with the four-month "Songs from the Heart" tour.

The group will be performing on March 12 at the Mohegan Sun Arena in Uncasville, Conn., and again on March 16 at the Oakdale Theatre in Wallingford, Conn.

The ladies tour about eight months a year, usually five or six nights a week.

Nesbitt, an original member of the group whose long blonde hair and camera-friendly smile complement the more reserved yet elegant vocal stylings of Lisa Kelly, Chloe Agnew and new member Lisa Lambe, says that the sometimes frenzied pace of the roadwork is worth it.

"We're pretty exhausted all the time off stage," she said with a laugh. "But it's worth it because the audiences are so fantastic, you get great support."

Nesbitt comes from a musical family of six children and two very musical parents in Ireland. She started playing piano at age four and moved on to violin by the age of six, studying both classical and traditional styles. She recorded her first album at the age of 12 and by 16 she was playing with the RTE National Concert Orchestra.

She was invited to join Celtic Woman by her friend David Downes, the group's musical director, arranger and composer. He had been musical director for the acclaimed stage production "Riverdance." She had been the violinist with "Lord of the Dance." Downes and Nesbitt had known each other for years.

“At the time he asked me, we were doing a play together at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin,” Nesbitt recalled. “He rang me up and asked me to do just one night of a concert that would be called Celtic Woman. We didn’t think it would be going on six years later (laughs).”

From the start, her role was envisioned as that of the charismatic fiddler. As the New York Times wrote about Nesbitt in 2007: “In her corset-laced gown, her long hair whipping wildly, she positively gyrates around the stage. Celtic Woman’s gentle sexiness tips over the edge whenever she appears.”

“It was part of the plan when they asked me,” Nesbitt said. “They wanted a specific thing and they knew I did it, I guess ... It just seemed to fit ... from an entertainment point of view and from a musical point of view.”

The group is smooth and virtually flawless in terms of appearance, production and sound.

Is it too smooth?

“Nobody’s ever said that to me,” Nesbitt said in a fast response. “I don’t think we’re too slick or too produced or too anything, I think that people pay a lot of hard earned money especially in a recession as well to see a top class show.”

“We never ever put it forth as strictly an Irish show, it was always a fusion, like a world music show, a fusion of classical, contemporary, traditional and pop. We perform music by modern American composers like Jimmy Webb and Billy Joel as well as 18th Century music that I play from America and classical music. It’s important to have something for everyone. We never said it was supposed to be a spit on the floor kind of thing.”

And despite her affection for her native land, she doesn’t have any nostalgic desire to be playing in Irish pubs.

“No, I don’t miss that at all,” she said with a laugh. “I was never one for playing in pub sessions (known as ‘seisiuns’ in Ireland). I hated them actually. I find them noisy. People just go to drink and have a good time and that’s perfect. But the kind of sessions I played were just music sessions and they were really quite serious affairs that you were only invited to go into if you were able to meet a certain musical standard ... When I go home now I only play in one session that’s in a pub, but it’s a very musically oriented session, and I only play there because my brother plays there and it gives me a chance to have a few tunes with him. It’s in Dublin, the Wishing Well, a great little pub, they have a designated little room for the session with a fire, it’s really lovely.”

Nesbitt has played with some of music’s biggest names, including Emmylou Harris, Van Morrison (“fantastic, but a perfectionist for sure”) and Sinead O’Connor (“Definitely one of my all time favorite singers, incredible.”).

And her influences run from Bach to Sting, and perhaps most surprisingly – to Jimi Hendrix.

Yet her heart, undoubtedly is with Celtic Woman and the current tour.

“We always include some new songs along with five or six of the all time faves that people know and love, like ‘You Raise me Up,’ ‘Danny Boy,’ and we have a new rendition of ‘Amazing Grace’ as well.”

Other songs fans can expect to hear are Joel’s “Goodnight My Angel,” and Irish classics such as “Galway Bay” and “My Lagan Love.”

Asked what she hoped to be doing, five years from now, Nesbitt had no hesitation.

“I’ll still be playing and I’m sure Celtic Woman will be going strong – I just want to be happy, healthy and play music. That’s my biggest joy.”