

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

HONORARY CONFERRING

Friday, 18 March 2022

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **DR KELLY FITZGERALD** on
18 March 2022, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of
Literature, *honoris causa* on **ANDY IRVINE**

Deputy-President, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In recognition of his outstanding achievements as one of Ireland's greatest musicians, cultural innovators and an outright outstanding artist in the creative field, University College Dublin is proud to honour the exceptional career of Andy Irvine. His presence has had an impact on this island and further afield for the past six decades. Andy has played a seminal role in the incorporation of a number of musical genres and in the creation of this popular music based in, and influenced by so many elements from the world of folk and traditional music.

A wise man once said nothing gives the illusion of permanence like tradition. When one experiences an aspect of intangible culture, they immediately either accept it as familiar and part of a known repository that is already established, or else it is labelled as other, different or perhaps even exotic. Most noted perhaps of Andy Irvine's many musical talents is his instinctive ability to integrate innovative elements into the world of tradition. This he continues to achieve, in a manner whereby his audience is at once at ease and receptive as if this has always been the practice. He was not dismissive of previous traditions but found an approach to build on what had gone before, while at the same time keeping the integrity to the core and alive.

Where are the beginnings of such a man and does that knowledge allow us to understand better how he was so well-placed to colour our aural landscape? Andy was born in St John's Wood in London in 1942. He was welcomed into a bombed city in the midst of World War II. One can only imagine the London of this time where the streets are filled with British and Allied servicemen in the mix with civilians. They were all doing their part for the war effort which required an extraordinary behaviour in order for the ordinary to subsist and endure. Coming from a musical family of Irish and Scottish descent, Andy was to develop his love of performing as a child actor in television and film.

Like many people of his generation, including members of the Beatles, Andy became involved with the skiffle band revival in Britain in the 1950s drawing on American folk music, blues and jazz. In my own fieldwork in London I have interviewed men, in particular, in their late 70s and 80s that reflect on their own skiffle band participation as one of their happiest moments in life due to the approach to the music and the freedom they felt from coming together and playing in a way that allowed them an absolute and total release.

The impact of Woodie Guthrie was felt by many people in Britain and beyond at this time, and again, Andy Irvine brought influences such as this to another level. Something we must not forget is the importance of incorporating social justice and the desire to help the ordinary man and woman with their own daily life and this is something that remains constant in Andy's work. As this transnational folk movement brewed in Britain and the United States, Ireland had its own parallel cultural developments, in particular the collecting work in the west of the island.

In 1962 Andy Irvine came to Dublin and we can view this as an edifying moment that was to have cultural repercussions for years to come. His arrival can be seen as adding something 'other' to create a perfect, cultural storm. It would not be amiss to mention that 1962 is, of course, the year Gay Byrne presented the first

edition of *The Late Late Show* on RTÉ. Ireland was ready for change, for something new.

The sheer physical materiality of musical instruments that Andy brought to Ireland after his travels, most often referred to in popular memory as the Greek Bouzouki, was revolutionary. A moment for the history books here is when Dónal Lunny discovered the bouzouki under 'a pile of instruments' in Andy's flat and after he was playing it for so long Andy eventually told him to take it home with him and, of course, the rest is in the chronicles of traditional music. Irish society was moving into a time when the transmission of music was becoming more and more professionalised and managed in a way where it became possible to make a living from it due to album sales and concert tours. Young people were hungry for new experiences and were open to novel encounters.

Irvine's musical partnership with Dónal Lunny, Christy Moore and Liam O'Flynn as Planxty can be seen as a groundbreaking moment that progressed and popularised Irish folk music which expanded the imaginative frontiers of what could be referred to as traditional music. The ability to bring this dynamic approach to the field is a testament to the truly collaborative interactions

amongst the members of Planxty, all of whom are highly revered for their involvement in the band and for their solo efforts.

Another landmark collaboration occurred when Andy Irvine partnered with Paul Brady on their seminal recording in 1976. This is often affectionately referred to as 'The Purple Album' when people speak of their 'all-time' favourite album at the time of what might well be called a renaissance in Irish traditional music. I was always particularly drawn to Irvine's influences which are included on the recording and some of them came from Sam Henry's *Songs of the People*. The impact of earlier collections shone through but Irvine and Brady together allowed older tunes to emerge while giving a fresh and renewed musical spirit.

Art and the making of art should serve to quiet the mind and open the heart. The combination of heart and mind that music and song allows is the essence of any art form. When it comes to Irvine's playing this recognition is the foundation of what he is drawn to in creating his repertoire. And always, social justice is not far behind. He engages deeply with a curiosity of the lived life where love is sought and experienced, while also being dismissed and embittered.

A core strand of UCD's current strategic plan is concerned with 'empowering humanity'. Engaging with the creative at its most fundamental levels will ensure it is integrated into the community and society. The aesthetic qualities found in folk songs cut right to the quip on human behaviour. Our stories of love, loss and betrayal will continue on as long as humans inhabit the earth. In UCD our cultural collections reflect the people, in particular the Franciscan Collection in the UCD Archives and the National Folklore Collection, and through such repositories we are able to examine the human condition in its very rawest state. Hopes, dreams as well as fears and anxieties are laid bare. In all of Andy's innovations his outpouring of music and song has not deviated from examining the human occurrences that lie at the foundation of life.

Throughout his extraordinary career, Irvine has remained an accomplished singer, storyteller and commentator of music and songs. He may be referred to as 'enjoying the life of a precariat bohemian' but all too often such perceptions allow society to diminish the role of the artist. Let us envision a world that recognises and values the importance of our artists and the wealth they endow on a flourishing democracy and impartial society. The skilful maestro, Andy Irvine, truly merits this recognition from UCD as he has made and continues to make music and song catalysts for change in society.

Praehonorabilis Pro-Praeses, totaque Universitas,

Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina
habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad Gradum Doctoratus
in Litteris; idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.