

Transcript

Onomatopoeia

EP - New York's Resident Know It All

[TAPE] Sound from Ryan's Daughter begins to play

ELIZABETH ERB: It's Monday, at Ryan's Daughter. An Irish pub on Manhattan's Upper East Side. A place that - on first entry - welcomes you like a regular.

Melissa Brice sits perched at the end of the bar. She's in her mid-30's. Her brown hair is coiffed and rests just behind her ears. She's incredibly focused. Setting up her laptop and microphone for tonight's game.

[TAPE] Melissa is heard talking to patrons

Melissa *is* a regular - she hosts the bar's weekly trivia game.

By day she works at JP Morgan staring at spreadsheets.

But at night, Melissa is a master emcee - asking the trickiest trivia questions.

[TAPE] Theme music begins to play

I'm Elizabeth Erb and this is Onomatopoeia - a podcast about the people and places of New York City. In this episode, New York's "resident know it all."

It all started six years ago when the owners of Ryan's Daughter approached Melissa with an idea. Bar trivia. Only catch was, she had no experience.

MELISSA BRICE: *And I was like, yeah, of course, like that sounds great. Had no experience doing it. Um, innately, shy person.*

SEBASTIAN BARRERA: *The owners of the bar at the time knew that Melissa um is a “know it all” so they asked her to host the trivia.*

EE: That’s Sebastian Barrera. A manager and bartender at Ryan’s Daughter.

SB: *And um, we slowly but surely, just by virtue of being open, and Melissa being a fantastic host, we started getting more and more people and the place would be absolutely jam packed.*

MB: *It took us about two years to like really foster what the initial intention was. People to come in on a Monday, which is a hard night for bars. To have fun, get drinks and foster a sense of community. And, and I can't underscore that enough, like this sense of community is the most important aspect of what trivia is at that bar.*

EE: “Trivia By Melissa” exploded. On this Monday night, dozens of people are waiting for the game to begin

[TAPE] Patron Erin Byrne saying "it makes Monday's less Monday"

Melissa commands the upstairs bar. She holds the microphone with the confidence of Las Vegas lounge singer. Her eyes are glued to her laptop.

[TAPE] Music begins to play

Her games are structured in four rounds.

Current Events. She reads five newsletters a morning to prepare.

Theme Round. Which changes weekly.

Common Bonds. Where players are asked to find a common connection between three different items. It takes her two months to write these questions.

And finally the Jeopardy round - which consists of questions from episodes of Jeopardy. No need to answer in the form of a question.

MB: *I tend to try and write as much as I can at the beginning of the year when everyone is hibernating.*

So it is a very time consuming process. You're just constantly writing and writing and writing and writing questions.

And I've got all of the questions I've ever asked, written up in a spreadsheet, like this huge Google doc and they're just sitting there. It's 10,000 questions that have been written.

[Tape of Melissa asking question]

MB: *For bar trivia, you don't want anyone to feel stupid. You don't want anyone to feel like they've, they've come out and embarrassed themselves. You know? And sometimes that happens because the questions I write are hard. I don't know how to make them easier. Six years in, I keep trying. They stay hard.*

EE: So hard they've even stumped players who have appeared on "Jeopardy." Like Austin Rogers, who in 2017 won more than \$400,000 over 12 games.

[TAPE] Tape from Jeopardy, Johnny Gilbert announces Austin

EE: In the middle of each game, to make players feel a little better - a little smarter - whoever is bartending steps in, with free shots.

[TAPE] Jim Zele, a bartender is heard with patrons

SB: *And whenever she asks a question that was too hard, whenever we did the free shots, I would come in and ask a really easy question. Like. You know, what's the color of the sky?*

[TAPE] Melissa is heard talking with players

EE: Sometimes the players outsmart Melissa - and come up with an answer she never expected.

MB: *We did get a really good one. One of our common bonds questions that just came through, uh, the question was: What do these three things have in common? It was law, arts, and eagle. And the answer is martial. Martial law, martial arts, martial eagle. Um, one of the teams didn't know and they just went things that are endangered? And just, that one made me laugh a lot.*

EE: Like most things, “Trivia by Melissa” pivoted to a virtual setup during the pandemic. Now, in accordance with the New York City guidelines, Ryan’s Daughter is open for in person trivia. Being able to host in person is a relief for her.

MB: *The difference between being in person and being online is so vast. The amount of just feedback and energy you get from the room, the amount of entertainment that you get from the people and everyone's shouting and excited, and boisterous. It was just missed.*

EE: Melissa is back where she belongs. Doing what she does best. She plans to host trivia - well - forever.

[TAPE] Sounds from bar are heard

MB: *I get paid to go to my favorite bar. And hang out with people who I genuinely like being around. And then they give me free drinks! It's amazing! It's so good. I don't know how I've done this. I've scammed the system. It's amazing.*

[TAPE] Theme music begins to play

EE: This episode of Onomatopoeia- was created by me, Elizabeth Erb. Onomatopoeia is a production of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. Joanne Faryon is our executive producer and professor. Original theme music by Lee Feldman. Other music by Blue Dot Sessions. Our graphic was created by Sunni Bean. Special thanks to Columbia Digital Librarian Mitchell Wilson.