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1.***The peculiarities of folk music in Wales***

Wales is the only Celtic nation with a completely unbroken tradition of harp music, where the music, technique, and style have been passed down orally from harper to harper over the centuries. Wales is best known for its large-ensemble choral singing. But this principality lying along Britain's southwestern shore also has a proud Celtic tradition of smaller, more tightly knit bands that perform native instrumentals and folk songs. Wales is a land of song, sung either by male voice choirs or crowds at rugby matches. But there has been singing of all manner of songs in all manner of places, from the *Canu'r Pwnc* chanting of scripture in chapel to the scurrilous rhymes sung in pubs. All that is commonly known about Welsh poetry is that it comes in forms of mind-boggling complexity. But there is a great variety of metre and tone. Bands such as Pigyn Clust are mining these veins in new and startling ways, juxtaposing melodies, and verse forms.

In Ireland and Scotland, because traditional music is better established, the orthodoxies too are stronger. While musicians improve technically - and there are some phenomenally accomplished players and singers - there is little innovation, beyond often misguided collaborations with musicians from incompatible traditions. If the Chieftains finally stopped coming to town then a similar band playing similar music would soon fill the vacuum - Lunasa, for instance. Should Aly Bain, the Boys of the Lough's fiddler, lay down his bow then Catriona MacDonald would step in.

But in Wales musicians are rediscovering, recreating and reinterpreting their traditional music, which is crucial to the development of their culture. Of all the Celtic countries it is Wales where the traditional music is most interesting and most vital.

The bardic and eisteddfod traditions have long dominated Welsh music and, partly as a result, the Celtic music boom which propelled Irish, Scots, Breton and even Galician music into the international spotlight, somehow left Wales behind. Several excellent artists have made inroads through the years, notably the harp-playing brothers Dafydd and Gwyndaf Roberts of Ar Log, the singer/harpist Sian James, 70s group Plethyn and fiery dance band Calennig.

The Welsh have a drastically different style of playing, largely due to the nature of the music itself. Their music is ornamented through theme and variation, a more classical style, rather than through the sort of ornamentation heard in Scottish and Irish music. Due to this love of Baroque-like style, the Welsh adopted the triple harp as their national instrument, taking advantage of the three rows of strings to play a wide variety of variations on traditional Welsh melodies. (Triple-strung harps have two diatonic rows on either side, and a row of accidentals up the middle, which the harper plays by reaching between the outer strings to play).  
 The harp is of course the instrument most closely identified with Wales. But though it's accorded the highest respect there, the fiddle and the accordion are perhaps embraced with greater affection. CDs sampling the traditions of both have recently been released, but for many listeners these will be introductions rather than surveys. The squeezebox anthology *Megin* (bellows) is especially good. The range of repertoire, and even instruments, is remarkable, from the robust melodeon dance music of Meg and Neil Browning from North Wales to John Morgan (clearly influenced by harp players) whose duet concertina combines the gravitas of a church organ with the delicacy of a flute. The inclusive nature of this selection is significant too; players from the south-eastern, urban, (post-) industrial region rub shoulders with those from the Marches, the rural and largely English-speaking area running along the border. It even includes the *Brecon Hornpipe* and *Dic y Cymro* played by John Kirkpatrick - the most famous of English box players who lives on the eastern side, in Shropshire. So the CD draws on and expresses the complex reality and the richness of Wales, recognising that music will not be confined by city nor countryside, language nor national boundary.   
 Those instrumental traditions were not well known, and the fiddle certainly suffered in the religious revivals of the 19th century, when many were burned. But at least they did not disappear completely. The bray harp, the instrument of medieval bards, then the peasants of South Wales, and bagpipes - of which there were various local kinds - were not so fortunate. Tunes and references to players remain and in recent years Ceri Rhys Matthews and Jonathan Shorland have recreated bagpipes and researched their repertoires, while William Taylor has reconstructed the smaller bray harp. Such enterprises are academically fraught, but musically very exciting. That there are no masters from whom to learn the nuances of phrasing, accent and the trick of grace-notes - those details of performance which distinguish traditional music - is a grave loss, but it does give the contemporary musician enviable freedom.

Ned Thomas had noted in his revelatory book *The Welsh Extremist* that 'when two Welsh speakers meet the topic of conversation is the state of the language'. What Welsh traditional music was played tended to serve the cause of a culture in crisis, rather than express it. So like a cramped toenail, it grew inward. "Between about 1980 and 1990 there was almost no awareness of what was going on elsewhere," a Welsh musician recently told me. "Wales became Albania."   
 In modern times a whole gamut of outstanding bands are making their presence felt, including The Kilbride Brothers, Rag Foundation, Aberjaber and folk-rock band Blue Horses, Fernhill.

***2. Plethyn***

This trio from Powys in mid-Wales, together for 25 years, are celebrated for close vocal harmonies laid over a spare instrumental mix of guitar, mandolin, tin whistle and concertina. Siblings Linda Healy and Roy Griffiths, along with their friend John Gittins, have pioneered a more intimate singing style, based on the Plygain choral tradition. Nowhere is that more apparent than in Plethyn's a cappella rendition of the Welsh traditional song "Cainc Yr Aradwr" ("The Ploughboy's Song"), from this outstanding 1994 album, whose title is Welsh for "Yesterday's Cider."

***3. Boys of the Lough***

Boys of the Lough are one of the past masters of celtic music, combining members from several celtic traditions with a long history; where other celtic groups last a few years, the Boys are now in their third decade and retain two of their earliest members. Like that other long-running act the Chieftans, their music tends to the formal; impeccable technique and sensitivity, with large, sometimes classical-style arrangements, and very tight ensemble playing. They lack the fire and roughness of other groups; the overall feeling is of a group of skilled, well-integrated musicians playing together for the pure pleasure of it.

The history of the Boys has several twists and turns. The group was formed in 1967, as a trio of Cathal McConnell, Tommy Gunn of Fermanagh and Robin Morton from Portadown. Tommy Gunn later dropped out and the remaining duo recorded "An Irish Jubliee" in 1969. At the sametime, Shetland fiddler Aly Bain and singer/guitarist Mike Whelans were playing on the Scottish folk circuit. The two duos met up at the Falkirk folk festival where they played together and some time later, in 1971 came together for good. Dick Gaughan of Leith replaced Mike in 1972 and this lineup recorded the first 'official' group album in 1972. Dick, in turn, left in 1973 and was replaced by Dave Richardson of Northumberland, bringing in new instruments including, cittern, banjo and mandolin. This lineup continued for several year, touring widely in Europe and America and releasing 6 albums, two of them recorded live. Live at Passim's was recorded at Passim's in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Wish You Were Here comes from a tour of the Scottish Highlands and Islands. Robin Morton left in 1979 and was replaced with Dave Richardson's brother, Tich, on guitar. Tich was killed in a road accident in late 1983. After some time, the band came together again with new members Christy O' Leary and John Coakley and have kept that lineup ever since.

## Current Lineup

Aly Bain Fiddle

Cathal McConnell Flute and Tin Whistle, Vocals

Dave Richardson Mandolin, cittern, English concertina, button accordion

Christy O' Leary Uileann pipes, tin whistle, mouth-organ and vocals

Chris Newman Guitar

***4. Rag Foundation***

Woollard's band, Rag Foundation, from Swansea, is one of several groups of young urban musicians who have come to traditional music in the way they have come to the Welsh language, through questioning their identity, their cultural distinctiveness. They have been described by the trade press as the most dynamic band to emerge from Wales for many years. Their current albums 'Minka' and 'South by SouthWest' have been critically acclaimed by press, TV, radio and festival organisers. They have toured extensively in many countries as far apart as Canada, Latvia, India, Holland, Egypt, Hungary and France as well as the UK. Woollard's own story is quite remarkable: introduced to traditional music by a fiddle player recording a session for a trip-hop outfit he was in, he began researching songs of his region, came across Phil Tanner… and discovered he was his great uncle. But Woollard's style owes as much to Tom Jones and Shirley Bassey - the total commitment to the song of the working class, pub singer of South Wales - as it does to folk music. When Rag Foundation performed for the first time in London the people running the venue were surprised when two busloads of young urban ravers pitched up too. "We have this following of clubbers who come round with us," Woollard explained. "What we're doing is dance music, which is what they're into. Ours is just an older version of it." Even so, it is the power of the traditional song that inspires Rag Foundation, and Woollard inhabits rather than exploits the material. "I want to bring these songs to an audience my age, but I don't want to stick drum and bass all over them. It's in the performance. If you're honest in your delivery what you're singing about will come across."

## *5. Fernhill.*

Since they formed in 1996, Fernhill have become important cultural ambassadors for Wales and its music, having toured in 20 countries including performances for the King of Swaziland and the President of Mozambique. 'These daring musical deconstructionists have become the prime movers in a crop of talented bands injecting new life and an exciting contemporary dynamic into traditional Welsh music' .

LIVE BAND LINE-UP  
Julie Murphy *vocals*   
Richard Llewellyn *guitar*   
Cass Meurig *fiddle*   
Tomos Williams *trumpet*   
Andy Coughlan *double bass*

Paradoxically they only had one Welsh member when they achieved national attention, bagpiper and guitarist Ceri Rhys Matthews from the Swansea valley. Yet Essex-born Julie Murphy has lived in Wales for many years and, totally absorbed in the culture and history of the country, sings confidently in the Welsh language when the occasion demands it. Not that they play exclusively Welsh music. They also perform English folk songs, impassioned Breton tunes and vibrant French songs while fully embracing the modern roots ideology, introducing the influences of their many travels, notably African and Eastern European music.

Julie Murphy met Ceri Matthews at art college in Maidstone, and when the course was over she returned to Wales with him, learning the language and absorbing the culture. Although she had no folk background to speak of, Murphy developed a natural feel for performing traditional songs, and she and Matthews started working as a duo. They met Jonathan Shorland in 1986 when they were on the same bill at the Pontardawe folk festival. Shorland joined them on stage playing the pibgorn, a Welsh horn pipe, and they started working together with three other musicians as a music and art group called Saith Rhyfeddod.   
 Raised in the New Forest, Shorland had become obsessed by reed instruments as a devotee of David Munro’s music programme on Radio 3 while at Aberystwyth University. He became an expert in Celtic traditions, learning to make bagpipes and travelling extensively in Eastern Europe and Brittany, playing regularly with Breton musicians. He is said to be the first person to introduce the bombard into Welsh music.

Murphy teamed up with Blowzabella’s ex-hurdy gurdy player Nigel Eaton, resulting in the experimental Whirling Pope Joan project which made a big impact with its alternative rhythms and challenging material. Also involved in the project was Andy Cutting, a melodeon and accordion ace from Harrow brought up in a family steeped in English traditional music. When invited on a British Council tour in Gaza, Murphy invited Andy Cutting to accompany her. When in 1996 Tim Healey of Beautiful Jo Records invited Julie Murphy, Ceri Matthews and Jonathan Shorland to contribute to a compilation of Celtic music, they roped in Andy Cutting.  
 The result was Fernhill, who have subsequently toured extensively and produced a series of fine albums which reaffirm the rich spirit of Welsh folk music while moving boldly into new areas. Mixing oboe with bagpipes, diatonic accordion, guitar and numerous other instruments they have challenged all preconceptions about folk music, recognising no dividing line between Welsh dance music and the roots music of Kenya, Pakistan or any point beyond.   
 They now work mainly as a trio of Murphy, Matthews and Cutting, but all are involved with other musicians as they strive to break down further barriers between musical style and the audience it appeals to.  
 They have recorded three critically acclaimed albums; the latest, Whilia, was a top twenty album in the Folk Roots poll 2000. Fernhill created a new musical landscape from the indigenous dance rhythms and folk poetry of Wales. Julie Murphy's passionate singing combined with guitar, fiddle, double bass and trumpet produces a sound both gutsy and enchanting.

In 2001 the band contributed a performance to the film 'Beautiful Mistake' about the Welsh music scene which includes performances by James Dean Bradfield, Catatonia, Super Furry Animals, and Gorkys Zygotic Mynci. Julie Murphy also collaborated with ex velvet underground member John Cale; he accompanied her on a track from her solo album Black Mountains Revisited (a MOJO folk album of 99).

### 6. The renaissance of Welsh traditional music

Manic Street Preachers, Catatonia and even Tom Jones assure Welsh people that their identity is not naff. Gorki's Zygotic Mynki, Super Furry Animals and Datblygu prove that indeed it's cool - and that singing in Welsh is no obstacle to commercial success. People are beginning to remember that the Velvet Underground founder member John Cale's first language is Welsh (earlier this year he was in Cardiff working with musicians who prefer to perform in it).

**Neil Browning** is part of a growing movement in Wales, one that is not out to preserve the old folk music, but to make it come alive, to breathe again. While he has a great knowledge and respect for the old tunes and the old ways, he is not hestitant to push it as much as the song requires.

Neil has contributed three pieces to the festival. The first is straight traditional music for accordion, guitar and bodhran. The second is an original tune that is decidedly contemporary, adventuring into a global turf while still maintaining a distinct Welsh air to it. The third is another traditional tune (title unknown), but with the accompaniment of classical guitar, it takes on a new and different feeling.

**Nansi Richards** plays orally learned melodies and variations with clarity and passion. Her variations are vibrant, ringing out with the sound only a triple-strung harp can make. She also plays the more common single-strung harp beautifully on several of the tracks.

There are many reasons for this renewed self-confidence; the growing appetite for the music of other cultures, a degree of political autonomy and, not least, the success of those who did devote themselves to the cause of Welsh. They may not have produced much great music, but they assured that not only is the language surviving, people can converse in it in some security, relax and just get on with life.

So they are beginning to look about them, hack their way through the overgrown and almost forgotten paths to the spring of their traditional music. It's still flowing. The new Rough Guide to the Music of Wales CD opens with a harp tune by Llio Rhydderch, who was brought up in a master-pupil teaching tradition that stretches back to the fourteenth century. There's also a recording she made of her teacher Nansi Richards, who was steeped in the aesthetic and technique of eighteenth century harpers. What is striking and refreshing about both players is their power. If you find most Celtic harp music plinking and fey, the strengthas well as the beauty of this ancient music will be a welcome surprise.

The Welsh tradition is untouched," says Neil Woollard, gleefully. "So the music is more open to interpretation. I know we've got the perfect opportunity here, setting the parameters of what you can do.

Tradition" is the organic element of world culture. Pop music by its very nature is disposable. The only future for a great pop song is as nostalgia. The tradition however is timeless and recyclable and is renewed as each generation discovers its roots. - Billy Bragg, musician