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# American Influences at the National Eisteddfod

By Dr. Mark Rhodes

In the Nov-Dec 2017 issue of *Ninnau* I asked how we come to develop our sense of national history and identity. In many ways our identities and heritages are performances. Metaphorically or literally we don costumes, sing anthems, or speak the language as representations of our nation.

One institution that has come to define so much of Welsh identity both in Wales and across the diaspora is the eisteddfod. While there are some ongoing controversies – or at least inconsistencies – in the heritage and history of the festival, I focus here on how American folk music, activism, and popular culture feature strongly in the National Eisteddfod. Below, I explore examples of American influence upon Welsh folk music and in the next issue of *Ninnau*, I will expand upon these to reveal the lasting impacts of Paul Robeson as well as other African American and Afro-Caribbean themes.

Naturally, there are serious reservations throughout the National Eisteddfod of English and England's influence. However, one of my first observations at the 2017 National Eisteddfod in Anglesey (my first eisteddfod) was the sheer amount of American influence. From brass bands on the mainstage playing *Eye of the Tiger*, to dance groups moving to Rhianna, or to Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and Cat Stevens infiltrating folk performances, American culture was everywhere.

Additionally, people often assign American equivalents to top Welsh artists and bands. Besides the blatant connection of the band Bob Delyn, the well-known Meic Stevens is



The *Ty Gwerin* folk music pavilion – seen here at the 2017 National Eisteddfod on Anglesey

often referred to as the “Welsh Bob Dylan”. As a featured artist in the folk music pavilion, *Ty Gwerin*, Stevens played to an overflowing standing-room-only in 2018. And while he may be referenced as a Welsh Bob Dylan, this reaches beyond his musical style to his cutting lyrics often aimed at the British State. For example, “*Dic Penderyn*,” tells the story of the coal miner falsely accused of murder during the Merthyr Rising of 1831, hanged, and made a martyr of the Welsh working class.

Interestingly enough, however, Stevens musical connections to Led Zeppelin indicate a possible misnomer. Stevens, favoring the heavy slide blues guitar, indicates some stylistic connections to Jimmy Page. John Paul Jones wrote the string arrangement on Stevens first album, solidifying the link between the English band and Stevens. But the connection between Bob Dylan's maneuvering of folk, pop, rock 'n' roll, and storytelling at least reveals where the *idea* of the Welsh Dylan emerges, whether or not Stevens was directly influenced in the three years between Dylan's

first album in 1962 and Stevens' in 1965.

Another folk group with clear American influence, who happen to be touring the US this March, is Calan. Performing both at the 2017 and 2018 National Eisteddfodau, including in the headliner supergroup, *Pendevig*, Calan brings together elements of rock, pop, and rap into their traditional five-piece band. They sing, clog, and play the harp, accordion, fiddle, acoustic guitar, bagpipes, pibgorn, and other traditional and modern Welsh instruments. Like the supergroup *Pendevig*, which brought together 15 stars of Welsh folk music in 2018, including all the Calan band-members, Calan aims to bring traditional Welsh music into the twenty-first century by delivering existing folk melodies (and their original work) to younger audiences accustomed to the Anglo-American music scene.

The artist Iestyn Tyne, who is also a member of *Pendevig* as well as the band *Patrobas*, responded to some of these observations via a recent email conversation:

The impact of American pop culture is a very real thing, and



Iestyn Tyne, fourth from the left, 'plays' a blue butterfly net during a final song of the *Sea Shanty Battles* in *Ty Gwerin* in 2017.

more so, as you say, than English pop culture. This may be because English culture is unfortunately connected – historically and in the current day – to the oppression of Welsh culture. In the same way, you see far more Welsh poets drawing inspiration from American and European poetry than from the poetry of our next-door neighbours. There's also an element of romance there – the unknown and distant land / Eldorado...

Despite an emergent pattern of American influence, this doesn't mean England and their music scene escapes any influence in Wales, as I already hinted with Meic Stevens' *Led Zeppelin* influence. The pop group Eden, stars of the 2017 Eisteddfod dubbed the *Welsh Spice Girls*, also demonstrates a clear English impact. Eden, particularly with their three-women dance group, heavy pop bass, and powerful lights and pyrotechnics, clearly draws from the Anglo-pop scene in their performative style. Their recent come-back tour in parallel to the *Spice Girls* reunion only served to reinforce this connection. However, like Stevens, or Calan for that matter, Eden also brings together traditional elements. Most prominently during their 2017 mainstage show was a song where three additional performers came onto stage with the flags of Wales and St. David and began clogging along to the heavy bass rhythm of the pop group.

So, how has Welsh identity and performance dealt with the heavy American influx into the National Eisteddfod? The Cardiff-based musicologist Dr. Sarah Hill also asks in her 2007 book, *'Blerwytirhwng?' the Place of Welsh Pop Music*, “How can Welshness be defined if it is expressed through an adopted Anglo-American cultural product?”

The pervasiveness of pop, blues, gospel, spirituals, and American folk clearly influences the heritage of the Eisteddfod. Iestyn Tyne described this influence as a cyclical pattern—one that should be welcomed rather than resisted within the broader Welsh folk and traditional scene, since, of course, most American folk, pop, and country music comes from a rich legacy of European American and African American music traditions:

I think also that American folk / country / bluegrass music, which in part descends from the folk music of the British Isles, has come 'round in a full loop and now influences a number of contemporary folk groups in Wales—bands such as *Cowbois Rhos Botwnnog* and *Plu*. It is definitely due to the smashing of a few narrow-minded ideas and rules around 'what it's acceptable to do with folk music' that this has been allowed to come about. Long may it continue. *Pendevig* of course draws many influences from jazz, funk and drum 'n bass – not exactly native Welsh traditions either.

Welsh identity and Welsh heritage today have several traces back to American influence, particularly in the music scene. By looking at the performances at the National Eisteddfod each year, we see so many of these different cultures which add to the richness of the festival, and in the next issue of *Ninnau*, I'll turn my attention away from the folk music scene and towards two of the featured events of the 2018 National Eisteddfod in Cardiff Bay which further broaden these cultural impacts.

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## Welsh Number Plates

A great response to the request for photos of Welsh license plates.



Photos sent in by Phil Humphries

Please continue to send photos of license plate with a Welsh connection. Additional photos were received and will be published in following issues of *Ninnau* [ninnaupublications@gmail.com](mailto:ninnaupublications@gmail.com)

### Tramor

Welsh-American Acoustic Project



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