

Brian McNeill

Q: In French language, we use different words "folk, trad, roots, world music" for rather similar notions, but there is no consensus about their precise meaning. What would be your definition for each of such words ? Do you think there is a consensus in your country about their meaning?

A: First of all, they are very similar in the way they are used and not everyone uses them in the same way.

I would say that folk is a construct that really began around 1900, with the great collectors all over the world looking at all the great national traditions. I would say Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles, and people like them, talked about collecting folk music, which meant simply music of the people. The term folk then developed further with the term folk music, which meant anything that could be played outside a concert hall, with a guitar, or a banjo, or something very simple as backing.

Trad is quite simply traditional music and that has a more precise definition. It means any piece of music or song for which we do not have an actual known composer, therefore it belongs to an entire group of people. That group of people could be a nation, it could be a group of people defined by a language, or it could be a group of people defined by class. It encompasses folk by its definition and has a huge grey area where it overlaps with folk.

Roots is a much more 70s and 80s onwards thing and it means music which has its roots - literally - in folk or traditional music, but has naturally provided offshoots. So roots music can mean Americana, for instance, music that grew out of simply American folk song. Some would say roots music also implies the basic kind of American country music. Some would say roots music is anything which takes folk or traditional music as a base and quite simply begins with it.

Much of my own music is based on that and the idea that being given part of the tradition means if you're going to write or play something then you're automatically going to take it a step further and I suppose in many ways roots music defines much of what Scottish music has been, in particular for the last 50 years.

World music, certainly in the British Isles, has a very different meaning. It means music that came from pretty much anywhere else except the British Isles. So for instance you can have something that came from Senegal or Mali - particularly African music. The music of Youssou N'Dour or Salif Keita for instance, is world music. It recognises the links between the tradition that forms that kind of music and the things that form the kind of music that we know as folk music.

The main thing to understand about all of these terms is that they change from person to person as they use them. Certainly in terms of the media and the way people look at music in the British Isles, people would look at anything that was essentially played acoustically, as being, quote unquote, folk music. If there's a consensus, then it is a very broad one, in that you will find that people who are talking about these terms will interlink, although world music is perhaps the exception to that because world music has the definition of being not from Britain, not from here.

Q: How would you name your current repertoire - folk music?

A: If you were someone who didn't know my repertoire and came to it as a stranger, folk music would probably cover it. But it's much more complicated than that. I would name my current repertoire as having grown from folk music and grown from traditional music. I always take the tradition, if you like, as my mentor. I do so many different things it's probably difficult to find one description that fits them all.

I'm a multi-instrumentalist and also a singer songwriter and I'm also an interpreter of traditional song - although I don't do that very much because I feel that other people are more proficient at that than I'll ever be.

Like anyone else who's a creative artist I'll take whatever I use as a starting point and build on that. In my case I have built on Scottish and to a lesser extent Irish traditional music and made my own music out of these things, built on the models of jigs, reels, Strathspeys and slow airs. I would also also say that I have written my own songs around traditional models. For instance, the first song I wrote is called Lads o' the Fair and I knew what I wanted to write about and I took for a model an

Irish song called The Rambling Suiler. I took the rhyme scheme and the metre from that and found it made the material I wanted to use sound exactly right. I've let other influences come in, for example rock or jazz, but they've not been big influences - I would say the tradition has been my main influence and if you came to a Brian McNeill concert I would say what you would hear would be something identifiable as folk or trad, but at the same time you would have to understand that it had moved on from that.

Q: 51 musical years, that's a lot. Can you briefly explain how you started playing music (what instrument for what kind of music; were other family members also playing music and if so, what). What have been your main evolution steps (instruments; kind of music; being member of which bands).

A: First of all I had no family members who played music. I'm an only child and neither of my parents was musical in the slightest, although my mother who came from Austria, would occasionally burst into The Merry Widow, in German, or some light operetta. The first instrument I ever had, when I was about seven years old, was a laud that my mother brought from Austria, where it's a very common instrument. By the time it got to me it had only one string and the first piece I tried to play on it was the theme of an American TV Western series called Have Gun Will Travel, and I was kind of taken with that. Then when I was at high school I had classical violin lessons, but such was the nature of the teaching that I didn't stay with it. I spent my teenage years in rock bands and was a very bad lead guitarist but quite a good bass player! Later, at university, I had kept enough of my violin teaching to be able to take a fiddle off the wall in a pub in Falkirk and accompany a wonderful old man playing the harmonica. He taught me a couple of jigs and reels and I was hooked! In 1968 when I started at Strathclyde University I heard an album by Dave Swarbrick called Rags Reels And Airs and that changed my life. I learned that album from beginning to end! Then in 1969 we started the Battlefield Band and had to earn some kind of money because our college grants were so low. The band then was me, Alan Reid, Jim Thompson and later, Eddie Morgan. We found we could get a few pub gigs around Glasgow and we needed a repertoire, so we began playing anything we could with what instruments we had! I left Battlefield in 1990 and spent time doing solo gigs - which was a huge change after being in a band - and then came Clan Alba, with Dick Gaughan, Patsy Seddon, Mary Macmaster, Davy Steele, Mike Travis, Dave Tulloch, Gary West and Fred Morrison. We had a huge sound on stage and while I hate to use the term, it was a kind of Scottish supergroup; totally unwieldy but we had some wonderful gigs, the one I remember best being Glastonbury Festival. I've toured with Tom McDonagh, Tony McManus, Dick Gaughan and my great friend and mentor, the late Iain MacKintosh. The band I play in now is Feast of Fiddles, including Chris Leslie, Peter Knight, Ian Cutler, Tom Leary, Garry Blakeley and Phil Beer, with Alan Whetton, Dave Mattacks and a full backing band. There are 12 of us who get together and tour once a year and play occasional festivals and that scratches the band itch for me. Of course the lockdown meant this year's tour was cancelled, along with my other solo commitments.

Q: What instruments are you playing now ?

A: The instruments I play on stage now are fiddle, octave fiddle, bouzouki, mandocello, mandocello/bouzouki doubleneck, guitar and baritone guitar and English concertina. For recording I also use a hurdy gurdy, bass guitar and keyboard.

Q: Can you explain in detail what an octave violin is?

A: The octave violin is developed from an acoustic violin and is the same size, with thicker strings and tuned like a normal violin but an octave down. The instrument I play is built by Bridge Violins, developed by Paul Bridgewater and Ceris Jones. It is a fibreglass instrument and

depending on the processors I use it can sound like anything between a viola and a double bass, although I tend to keep it very much in the low cello range. It forms a big part of my repertoire and is perfect for so many different things. For certain melodies it is a wonderful thing and carries the resonance of Scottish slow airs very, very beautifully. It's also a great instrument for accompaniment and adds a string layer of depth to all sorts of arrangements, particularly of traditional tunes and, like concertina, is a type of musical glue that other instruments come together around.

Q: You are of Scottish origin and you live in northern England. Do you consider yourself now mainly as a Scotsman, or as a citizen of Great Britain where cultural barriers are (perhaps slowly) disappearing? In the particular case of music, do you make a big difference now between English and Scottish folk music?

A: To say I'm Scottish leaves out half of what I am. My mother was Austrian, my parents were married in Austria and came back to Scotland after the war. German is the first language I spoke at home until I went to school and it has served me well as a touring musician.

Scottish music is what fired me and I will always be true to that as my first love. I was also influenced by Northumbrian music, which I first heard from a friend at Oxford University, Angus McGregor, playing the Northumbrian Pipes. Of course the differences and the similarities between different music are something different musicians can make more or less of as they feel like it. For my money, I'll say what I've always said - a good tune never stopped at a line across a map. As to how I regard myself now, I would say I consider myself as a citizen of the world first, a European second and a Scotsman third. British, as a nationality, is something which basically I don't find a useful appellation at all. I think the regional aspects of the music of the British Isles are in themselves probably more interesting if they're looked at separately rather than in any way as a British entity. That's not to say, of course, that you don't have wonderful practitioners of Scottish music who are English, or Irish, or Welsh and the other way round, of course, and the fact that we all have recordings these days means that the geographic loneliness of these traditions, if you like, has gone.

Q: What are your main musical activities during the lockdown - for example through the web - and what are your projects for after the lockdown?

A: First of all I'm having something of a rest and enjoying that, as this is the first time in something like 50 years that I haven't been on the road fairly non stop. I've decided to use the time in lockdown to write - I also write novels and short stories - and I've also decided to record a CD reading my short stories with music around them, which is something people who read my stories have often asked for but I've never had the time to do!

Musically, the ideas for new songs are coming through and I'm considering what I'll do for my next album. I'm not doing any online concerts - the business of being in front of a live audience is what excites me most and I've decided to use this unexpected time to prepare for that. But more power to those musicians who are doing that.

Whether you think it's bad timing or good, my new album - No Silence - was released on Greentrax just as the lockdown came into force. It is receiving good reviews and a lovely reception from my following, and I am very pleased with it as a piece of work.

After the lockdown I intend to go back to touring - possibly in a more measured way - and my work which has been cancelled this year is fortunately being carried over the 2021 and I look forward to that.

Q: Looking back on what has been your life and livelihood - and maybe more than that - how would you sum up what you've done in the past half century?

A: The real reason we started the band, was that we were just out of university and everyone kept telling us, you need a job, you need a job and I thought, I don't want a job, I want a life, something I can immerse myself in. I looked around and the only thing that absolutely captivated me and made me really want to get up in the morning and really immerse myself in it, was traditional music. I

liked all kinds of music, always listened to all kinds of music, but something about traditional music spoke to my heart - if that doesn't sound too wet!

It spoke to my heart and it made sense of a lot of things that were happening around me at the time. It was an antidote to the modern world in some ways but at the same time it was completely applicable to the modern world. The dance tunes were 18th and 19th century rock and roll and the songs were just as applicable to anything happening when we started the band in 1969 and through the seventies; the concept of struggle against authority, against injustice, all of these things. And suddenly, in some way, I had a bible to live by. And I thought, the minute it stopped being fun, the minute I stopped being nervous about going on stage, stopped feeling it mattered, that would be the time to stop, because at that point it would be just a job. And when music becomes just a job, then it's not good enough.

Interviewed by Jacqueline France for Le Canard Folk: May 7 2020