

Gareth Bonello & Ben McManus in Conversation

Video Transcript

GARETH: *Cyfarchion*, everybody. My name is Gareth Bonello, and in the window this way, or possibly this way, is Ben McManus. I'm in Cardiff, and Ben is over in Aberystwyth. The Smithsonian has asked us to do some programs, do some songs, do some talking about the 2009 program in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, which featured Wales as a host country, and so we met up last week and recorded some songs. And also, we did do an interview outside in Ben's garden in Aberystwyth, but unfortunately it was a bit windy, so the audio was unusable, so we're having to do the interview again, this time via "dreaded Zoom" so our apologies for the Zoom.

BEN: Modern day of recording, sign of the times.

GARETH: Exactly. But hopefully the content will be interesting enough to distract you from the monotony of looking at yet another Zoom interview. So, we're just going to talk a little about the year of Wales in 2009 when we went over to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. I was very lucky to be invited over, and performed there under my stage name, The Gentle Good. And we're also going to talk about Ben's time working as an intern in the Smithsonian archive, and his more recent work looking at archives and metadata for his master's. So, we're going to do a quick interview, and it's going to be cut with some of our musical performances. So, yeah, so there we go. I don't know who wants to start asking the questions. Do you want to?

BEN: Yeah, I guess maybe we can start talking about the 2009 Festival. As that's how this interview came about, I guess.

GARETH: Yeah, let's start from the start.

BEN: Yeah. So, you went over for the 2009 Folklife Festival, and was involved in various performances. So, yeah, I just wanted to start with, what's your favorite kind of memories or performances you saw when you were over?

GARETH: So many stand out. I think, there were so many people there from Wales, you know, it wasn't just a handful, it was a real cohort, a planeload of Welsh people, all went over, from all different sorts of Welsh traditional crafts, as well as music, poetry—song, dance, poetry. There was also people doing things like slate splitting, traditional Welsh recipes, there were people talking about traditional hunting and fishing techniques and things like this. So, there was a lot to take in.

But I think for me, I really enjoyed some of the more traditional music that I hadn't heard much of before, so there was a— Sian James was there, for example, with Parti Cut Lloi, singing *plygain* and traditional songs, vocal groups from mid-Wales, which I wasn't that familiar with before that point, so

that was a real, really interesting group to see. And also, it was just so great to hear such a combination of fiddle, pipes, guitars, harps, all combining in sort of different performances, to play traditional Welsh tunes, many of which I hadn't come across before. But, overall, the whole thing was just a fantastic experience, and a real opportunity. It's the first time I really felt like I could showcase some Welsh culture to an audience which was really fascinated and really interested in it.

BEN: So, you think it kind of represented Welsh culture well?

GARETH: In terms of, if you're talking about the folk culture of Wales, a lot of the most prominent practitioners were there. And, so you got a lot of first-hand information, you got a lot of really memorable performances. There was one unfortunate point in that there was— unfortunately the visa restrictions at the time didn't allow for people who had previously been arrested to go to the States. Which meant that actually a lot of the cohort who were involved in language protest and civil rights movements, and had at some point been arrested, weren't able to go. So, I think we were missing then that element at the Festival, which was a bit of a shame, because that is such a big part of contemporary Welsh culture as well. It's kind of one of the more prominent aspects of the last forty or fifty years, is that whole rights movement, especially for the Welsh language. So, we were missing that, but obviously that was no fault of the Smithsonian. But in terms of the crafts and the practitioners, certainly, there was a wealth of information and a wealth of knowledge there.

BEN: And our friend here in Aberystwyth, Cara, mentioned a funny fact, because she knows a lot of people who went over, that if that plane crashed, a lot of the prominent part of Welsh culture would have gone down with it.

GARETH: Yes, you would have lost a lot of really vital practitioners, really. A lot of artists, a lot of craftspeople, and all of our knowledge. So, yeah, no, they were definitely the right people to ask over.

BEN: How well was the Welsh language represented there, as well?

GARETH: The Welsh language was really represented, I thought, you know. Specifically, in the music as well, particularly in the music, I would say. I mean, there was poetry workshops as well, in which Anuerin Caradog, making a lot of effort to teach people Cyghanedd, the Welsh poetry meter, through the medium of English. But at the same time, teaching about Welsh language. I for Ap Glyn as well, translating his poems into English and working fantastically to do that, so there was a lot of interaction, and there was a lot of interest, a lot of fascination, from the people attending the Festival. They were interested to hear the language, maybe hadn't heard it sung before, as well. And, certainly, myself and Gwyneth Glyn, and Gai Toms, we were performing on sort of a, more of a singer-songwriter stage, and that was a place, where you did get to go, you could sit down and you were pretty much guaranteed to hear Welsh language music. And the response from the audience was really, really heartwarming and really, really insightful as well.

BEN: Yeah. And I guess the Folklife Festival kind of represents a couple of cultures every year. And, I remember you saying the Latin American side was the other half of Festival that year. How did you find that side of it?

GARETH: I loved it. It was such a contrast, I think. So, the Latin American music was the focus. So, you had so many fantastic bands from all over Latin America. Performing such a variety of different music, you get from South America, but also from Central America, and also from places like New Mexico and California. And, I was just blown away, really. I remember watching Grupó Cimarron doing a song called “Orinoco,” and they were so good that it made me cry. I may have been slightly sleep deprived, and a little bit hung over, but it was more than that. It was just that they were brilliant. Every single musician was brilliant. And in the evenings back at the hotel—we were all staying at the same hotel—and often in the evenings, you know, you’d have all the different Latin American bands, and all the Welsh bands, all jamming and performing and having a go. But it was just a joy to wander around listening to all those amazing bands.

BEN: Ah, sounds great (laughs). And, I guess how this project between me and you has come about is from Betty, at the Center for Folklife, has come across some of the recordings. And half of which still need to be digitized. But it would be fascinating to hear all the Latin American recordings as well as the Welsh side of things. Yeah.

GARETH: Oh, absolutely. And, like you say, that’s the interesting thing. Because I can remember, when I was performing, that there were people there recording. And I always did wonder what happened to those recordings. I think that I realized at the time that they were going to end up at the Smithsonian archive. What I didn’t also realize was that there was a plan to get them sent over to the UK to be stored at St. Fagan’s and possibly the National Library, you know, in Aberystwyth, as well. And I know that that hasn’t happened yet. And that’s one of the reasons I think that Betty and the Smithsonian were keen for us to do this, which was just to kind of flag up that there are these recordings, only some of which have been digitized. You know, it would be really great if those recordings were made available. So that people could access them, listen back to the recordings, and have a look at what was going on, back in 2009.

BEN: Yeah, I just think it is such an important collection for Wales, it would be great to get accessible copies of it over here for people to hear, eventually.

[Music: Gareth and Ben play traditional Welsh tune, “Marwnad Yr Ehedydd” (The Lark’s Lament)]

GARETH: Yeah, The Lark’s Lament, “Marwnad Yr Ehedydd.” That one’s a traditional Welsh folk song. And the first verse is, the first verse is the only verse that survived from the original tune. And it’s about hearing that the lark has been killed on the— has died on the mountain. And the singer says

he'll take a group of men and arms to the mountain to bring the lark home. And then, subsequently, other people have written verses for the— to continue the story. And, you've got a hawk which is the main suspect, hanging around, and its wings beat, and its heart beats like the heart of a murderer. And then, it does get a little fantastical after that point, and you get the fairy folk coming along and making the lark a coffin out of crystal, taking it off the mountain. But it's considered to be— the lark's considered to be a sort of a symbol for one of the last princes of Wales to rise up against English rule, which is Owain Glyndwr, so the song is considered a lament for Owain Glyndwr. He is the lark, and the hawk would be the English king.

Yeah, but it's a very popular tune, but not one you hear everywhere. For myself, and Gwyneth Glyn, a wonderful singer who was also present at Smithsonian 2009, we did many performances together, and Gwyneth is an amazing songwriter, playwright, performer, singer, actress, you name it. But we did that one, and I think that was my favorite that we did together. And I bought a banjo when I was over in Washington. And that one went particularly well with the banjo. Bu, I couldn't quite get it how I liked it, so I was keen to hear it, with the— maybe with the clawhammer style. Which you've obviously mastered on the banjo.

Ben: (laughs)

Gareth: I had a feeling it would work in that— with that approach.

Ben: Yeah, I think it fits so nicely in the clawhammer style. It was so nice to play along to. Yeah, it actually worked really well.

Gareth: Yeah. It's a good one for blasting out, that one. You know, it's a good one to sing. Me and Gwyneth used to do a harmony. But, yeah, that banjo, I bought it in Washington, and it's still with me. It's a real memento from the time. I bought it at the House of Musical Tradition. And it was a great icebreaker because I could say I bought it in Washington and everybody would go "ooh," and people would be asking me questions afterward about, you know, Welsh music, but also wanted to see the banjo and talk to me about banjos. People even tried to show me how to do some clawhammer.

Ben: Yeah.

GARETH: I didn't quite manage it. Your internship was quite a bit, few years later than the year of Wales and the Festival. I can remember when you were playing. Was it 2016?

BEN: Yeah, yeah, I went over in 2016.

GARETH: And what were you doing, what did your job entail, and how did you get on?

BEN: So, yeah, it was quite an experience. I was basically working in the Ralph Rinzler Archives, which is kind of in the same office as the Folklife Center, and, yeah, they've just got a huge backlog of analog recordings that still need to be digitized. So I was over there for a year and just helping to digitize some of the musical collections, which was fascinating. Mainly on reel-to-reel tape, but having a massive interest in Appalachian music, and they knew I had an interest in that, so a lot of the recordings they were giving to me were old recordings of some of my favorite musicians, and old fiddle tradition bearers, and things like that.

Yeah, it was a whole array of stuff, and then there was a load of really random recordings as well. Some of the Smithsonian put out records of anything, like, train sounds to rain sounds. And I remember one of the funniest tapes I did was a group's expedition into the Amazon rain forest. I think it was a collection of five or six reel-to-reel tapes. And at the beginning they were all really excited to be doing this expedition, and then by the last tape they're all completely fed up with, like, hauling this equipment through the rain forest. (laughs) Cursing the equipment. But, yeah, there was a whole array of amazing recordings in the archive.

GARETH: So, obviously you've got a fair idea of how important archives are. And what do you feel it would be to make them more accessible to people? Because it seems at the moment, you tend to get specialists who go in and know where to look, or, really, people who are really super keen to find things. But then it's less commonly known that those archives are available to everyone, you know? So what do you think could be done to make archives more accessible?

BEN: Yeah, I think that's one of the common things that people get wrong about archives, is they're not shut off from everyone. They are accessible and for the people, really. Yeah, and I guess in the modern day there's been a lot more effort to make things available online, which will attract people who won't traditionally go into an archive. I think promoting the online aspect is the way at the moment. And then that kind of leads into the research I'm doing at the moment, into metadata use in the backend, for audio and video collections and how you can use it to make collections more accessible, by kind of highlighting keywords, or key descriptions of characteristics of the file. It all gets quite technical. (laughs) And then—

GARETH: And that's the masters that you're doing at the moment, isn't it, in the University of Aberystwyth?

BEN: Yes, so, really an MPhil (Master of Philosophy) which is technically a master's. (laughs) A research master's. Yeah, I'm just in the finishing stages of it now. And that's been quite an interesting project to be involved with. And yeah, I just think online access is the way at the moment. And the more descriptive you can make a file, the easier it will be for people to find it.

GARETH: Mmhmm. Because I know that during lockdown, lots of institutions that rely on archives, such as libraries and museums, have been looking for new ways to connect to people. I know we both did a project for the National Library which was Archwilio Ein Archif Sain / Exploring Our Sound Heritage, in which they sent us files from the archive, and then we responded and wrote songs. We both wrote a song about different aspects from the audio archive and I think— do you feel like there's also, along with making the files available, there's also this impetus and pressure on the institutions to find innovative ways of engaging people who might not ordinarily approach an archive?

BEN: Yeah, yeah, I guess that's been one aspect that's been really good for archives, and I guess this project's come about from that kind of way of thinking as well.

[Music: Gareth plays cello and Ben fiddle for instrumental song "Elk River Blues"]

GARETH: You've been teaching me some Appalachian tunes.

BEN: (laughs) "Elk River Blues" is by Ernie Carpenter and is written kind of about, kind of— I think the army came in to help the government build a dam, and floods his region, and making him having to move out. I think he profited from it in the end. But yeah, the tune's kind of, I guess a lament to his old home, although his valley got flooded?

GARETH: That's normally played quite a bit faster than the way we played it. But I think you're right, if that's the subject matter, then it seems quite right to have something that's a little bit more somber, in a way.

BEN: I really like it slowed down like the way we did it. I mean, it really is nice sped up as well. Carpenter was from Braxton County, I believe? So, that was a West Virginia tune, just to clarify.

GARETH: We're meant to ask about the pandemic. How has it affected you, or your musical plans, even your creativity? You know, are you finding yourself inspired at all, or are you just in a bit of a rut? All these kinds of things.

BEN: Yeah, I guess, I mean— I've been in a bit of a rut musically, because I haven't been able to go out and play in sessions. It's definitely been hard finishing off this dissertation, where I'm just in this room all the time, writing. Or when I'm not writing, I'm practicing in here or whatever, so mentally it's been hard, staying positive. I guess if I didn't have this dissertation to do, I probably would have gotten on recording the album. But yeah, not being able to go out and being able to play with people has been the tough part because I'm so used to that.

GARETH: Especially the way, especially the music you play, it's a very social scene, isn't it? Like, you get together in pubs or in other spaces and jam with people, yeah?

BEN: I've had a couple nice tunes on the beach every now and then, which has been great. Like, distanced obviously. But yeah, there's nothing better than sitting in a pub and playing tunes.

GARETH: No, that's true.

BEN: Yeah. How have you found the aspect of being locked in, so to speak?

GARETH: Yeah, it's been up and down I think. It's been such a long period now. I was in a similar boat to you in the start. I was finishing my PhD, and so I had a lot of writing I had to do as well. But that's been out of the way since the end of May. And I had a whole summer of gigging planned, and that's all gone out the window, obviously. No performances. And so I've done some online gigs and things. I think they're fine, and they are fun, but they're not the replacement for the live performance, are they?

I have been lucky with finding little projects to do. Like, doing this one, the one we did for the National Library, recording something in response to an archive, putting things online. I wrote a piece for the BBC National Orchestra of Wales with the principal cellist, Alice Neary, inspired by some Glamorganshire folk tunes. So I've been busy with those kinds of things. But they're kind of a little bit of a stopgap. And I'm eager now to start— to write more new material and to start performing again. But it is difficult when you spend all your time within the same four walls to get inspiration to do anything, really, isn't it?

BEN: (laughs) Yeah, well.

GARETH: But I do feel lucky because I think, you know, compared to the difficulties many people face, I've been very fortunate. And I'm able to still work, even if it's working from home.

BEN: Yeah, yeah. Oh, crazy times indeed.

GARETH: And so the other thing I wanted to ask you about was your sort of downtime activities, after you've finished your work for the week in Washington, because I know you actually spent a lot of time exploring the musical traditions of the surrounding area. So, could you tell me a little bit more about what you got up to?

BEN: Yeah, I mean, before I went to America, I was seeking out people in Britain who played that kind of music anyway. So I was kind of in that mindset of finding people.

GARETH: When you say "that kind," you're talking about old-time Appalachian—

BEN: Finding people playing old-time Appalachian music. So, when I went out there, I was like, yes, focusing on digitizing collections. But also, personally, I want to go out and find the source, so to speak. And, yeah, I met some amazing people who drove me all around the Appalachian area, so West Virginia— I was in West Virginia a lot, North Carolina, Virginia, and yeah, it was just amazing. And people were so inviting. I was getting invited to all kinds of old-time gatherings. And, and it never stopped. It just kept going, and there was always another jam, always another festival. It was incredible, yeah.

GARETH: So, take us into my— what I think it is you are doing, you're kind of doing two things. You're exploring the oral tradition of the music that you're interested in, in the area. You're learning tunes directly from people who play them, or possibly wrote them or got them passed onto them, in the family or that kind of thing, and you're kind of also engaging with the sort of more formal archive, in your work in the Smithsonian. I think that is what the Smithsonian archive does really well: it captures that oral tradition and archives it so that you can hear it, if you're not as lucky as you and you aren't able to visit these people and learn directly from the tradition. And what do you think the difference is between those two things, those two ways of learning? Sort of the oral and the archival?

BEN: I don't know. I always find that learning things from the oral tradition sticks with me a lot better. I don't know why. Even though with archival recordings, you can listen to them over and over again, there's something a lot different between going out there and physically learning a tune, that's been handed down that way for a couple hundred years or something. And it's just quite an experience as well to go out and do that. A lot of people who I met at festivals and played with who learned firsthand from people like Tommy Jarell, who is one of the great Appalachian fiddlers— yeah, there's just something special about that whole process. (laughs)

GARETH: Yeah, yeah. And, that's the thing as well when you have— when you learn things from, in that setting, it's not just that you're learning the tune. It's not in isolation. You're possibly in their house, or in their neighborhood. You're in an area that is associated with where the music comes from, surrounded by people who are part of that culture as well. And it's kind of all about other stuff. You're somehow sort of absorbing all that, whilst you're learning your tune, aren't you?

BEN: Yeah.

GARETH: So, I think it's really fascinating, to me personally as a folk musician, you know. I really love the opportunity to learn tunes directly from people. But also, I do find archives an invaluable source of inspiration and also information and things that you just can't find if you don't know where to look.

BEN: Yeah. So, you've worked on various projects as well, with musicians from India and China. What were those projects like? (laughs) In comparison to the Appalachian?

GARETH: Yeah, it was similar. Especially the most recent project I've been working on, in Northeast India, involved traveling around Meghalaya, learning and writing music with Khasi musicians. And I had to learn a lot about the Khasi music tradition and the oral culture first, and then would spend quite a bit of time jamming with people and visiting them. And also we stayed in touch afterward and, yes, certainly, definitely shaped the way I think of musical collaboration. And it made me think about how, someone like me, sort of a white Westerner, artist, going to somewhere like Northeast India and working with Indigenous people, like the Khasi people, made me think about all the sort of different questions and issues that kind of interaction raises, which I think, maybe, possibly, is sometimes glossed over or given enough consideration, before embarking on these kind of intercultural exchanges.

There was already— the link between Wales and the Khasi hills is a missionary one. And I think there's a lot to unpack there. There's evangelical fervor, there's colonialism, there's the British Empire, there's the Welsh relationship with the British Empire, the Welsh relationship with the Khasi people, all of these things. But by doing the music, we were able to kind of get to know each other and discuss all these things as part of the process. I think it led to a really interesting musical collaboration which is ongoing. And I hope that it will carry on. I think doing it this way, having a sort of considered approach, and making sure that it's more of a kind of a dialogue between the two cultures rather than a one-way flow going one way or the other, is definitely the way. For me, it seems like the way forward in these sort of cross-cultural collaborations. Especially when it's so attached to culture and identity.

BEN: And is that what your— kind of what your PhD was about, then?

GARETH: Yes, yes, so the PhD involved, running a— setting up a musical project, basically working with different artists, poets, musicians, based in and around Meghalaya. And, then we kind of used the creative process as a way of discussing the history between Wales and the Khasi hills and cultural issues arising now, and all kinds of different things. Sometimes related to the historical links, sometimes completely abstract having to do with folk tales, things like that. But, I think, hopefully there's an album going to come out later in the year, and depending on all this COVID nonsense, hopefully it will come out later in the year.

BEN: Nice (laughs). Yeah, I guess when I was visiting West Virginia that was what I noticed— so many similarities between Wales and West Virginia specifically. Mainly just because of the coal mining boom in the late 1800s, early 1900s. And I know a lot of Welsh miners went over to West Virginia for work because it was so well paid. So many people up there with Welsh last names, and— Morgantown, where a lot of musicians were— which was funny, because I grew up in a place called Morganstown, in South Wales. (laughs)

GARETH: Yeah.

BEN: And then that's led to a nice little project as well, because West Virginia Public Broadcasting has been quite interested in these connections, and I'm helping with a project at the moment, which is another thing that's been put on hold by COVID, but they're going to be coming over to Wales next year to kind of film Welsh traditions and music and things like that. But yeah, that's a nice project that came out of it, too.

GARETH: Did you find any musical connections between Wales and West Virginia? You mentioned obviously the coal mining connections. But have you found any kind of tunes that reminded you of Welsh tunes or hymns, or things like that? I'd imagine they would have been quite prominent.

BEN: Yeah, not too much on the music side. I think I was just so focused on learning as many Appalachian tunes as I can, I didn't really go out there to find any real Welsh musical connections, unfortunately. That's definitely something I'll be looking into though. (laughs)

GARETH: Yeah, because I wouldn't be surprised. You know, certainly, in Shillong, the hymn book is full, you know— the Khasi hymn book is full of Welsh hymns.

BEN: Wow, yeah.

GARETH: And, I'm sure if you investigated that line in West Virginia, I'm sure you'd find the same thing.

BEN: Yes, yeah, I'm sure. (laughs) That should be another project I should get into.

GARETH: So, what are your plans? Your master's is sort of winding to an end now, isn't it?

BEN: Yes, so I'm handing it in at the end of next month, at the end of September 2020, and then, post-master's, I'm just going to take a bit of time out from education and finally focus on an album I've wanted to record, for kind of two years. Which is going to be, probably, a lot of Appalachian fiddle tunes, but then, slightly differently, I want to get a kind of Welsh harp player on there and just kind of add some instrumentation and tunings to the traditional music that's not usually on there. So, kind of an alternative take on time. I've been trying to learn a style of banjo playing, clawhammer, on the guitar. And then that sounds really interesting when you put it on open tunings.

GARETH: Yeah, yeah.

BEN: Clawhammer guitar on there, maybe some cello. Hopefully we can get you on some cello on there. Yeah, that would be cool. Yeah, so that's kind of what's next.

[Music: Ben on banjo and Gareth on cello playing “Old Aunt Jenny with Her Nightcap On” instrumental]

GARETH: That’s the Kentucky tune, “Old Aunt Jennie,” isn’t it? “With Her Nightcap On.”

BEN: (laughs) Yeah, “Old Aunt Jenny with her Nightcap On.” Which I assume— I don’t know. It could even mean she’s having her drink of whiskey before bed, or she’s actually got a cap on?

GARETH: Yeah.

BEN: I’ve never worked out which one it is. (laughs)

GARETH: I suppose it’s probably left ambiguous, isn’t it? What I like about the tune, especially, “Old Aunt Jenny,” is it has this kind of crooked nature, where it’s sort of— it’s memorable but you have to memorize it. You can’t just— some of the changes don’t seem right, or— I mean there’s no right or wrong, obviously, in music, but they don’t— in terms of the meter or number of beats in the bar, there’s an extra couple at the end of certain sections. And you kind of have to know the tune to know that, don’t you?

BEN: (laughs) So I guess it’s sort of a harsh move on my part to make you learn what is called the crooked tune, as one of the first Appalachian tunes you try to learn? But yeah, I think it adds an extra bar on the end? Making it a bar of five-four instead of four-four, I guess?

GARETH: Right.

BEN: But, yeah, that’s kind of commonly known as a “crooked tune” in old-time music.

GARETH: I like it. It gives a tune character, you know?

BEN: It’s great, yeah. It’s kind of like an extended melody almost. Well, I’m glad we got the interview redone. It’s a shame that we couldn’t use the original footage of being outside, with the sunflowers in the background and everything. (laughs) But yeah, this has been a great conversation.

GARETH: Yeah. Thanks, Ben. It’s been really nice chatting with you again. And yeah, I’m looking forward to when we can meet up and learn some more new tunes together.

BEN: Yeah, definitely.

GARETH: So, should we say goodbye to everyone out there who may be watching?

BEN: Yeah, definitely. Thanks for listening, and I hope you've enjoyed our conversation, and just the Smithsonian being a great institution in general.

GARETH: Thanks to the Smithsonian, and to Betty particularly, and I hope you enjoyed the tunes. Any questions, I'm sure that we'll put our contact details and all that kind of stuff with the post as well. So, get in touch with us if you want to ask anything.

BEN: Great.

GARETH: Excellent. Ta-ta!

BEN: Bye-bye!

GARETH: [Welsh goodbye] *Hwyl fawr!*