

**Gorsuch, Jasmin (University of Edinburgh), 2016**

**Essay about the Current State of Celtic Folk Music and the Role of YouTube**

In this essay, I shall discuss some present developments of traditional Celtic folk music that are happening on youtube. My goal is to deliver a snapshot of where we presently are in terms of the Celtic folk music revival. I will begin with a reflection on the issue of *authenticity* in traditional folk music, and particularly folk song. A short discussion will follow on what role youtube and its folk musicians are playing in terms of folk music publication and education. I will introduce Canadian folk singer Jesse Ferguson, who I discovered on youtube and find particularly admirable. Although I will occasionally refer to the Livingston model, it would go beyond the scope of this essay to do a comprehensive analysis about how it may apply to this young musician; and instead of focussing on whether he can be considered a core revivalist, it is more important for me to point out the *functionality* of his (and others') video clips. This includes some of my own insights about the current state of traditional folk music and its struggle to remain heard among the vast jungle of musical genres. And last, but not least, I will offer some possible solutions to a very real problem.

***What makes folk music authentic?***

According to its lexical definition, the word *authentic* has a variety of uses, but it always implies that something is real or genuine. If we start out with looking at more tangible, concrete objects, such as fine arts, the answer to whether a

piece of art is genuine, or authentic, or an original, will most likely be (with some exceptions), a clear *yes* or *no* answer. I am in no ways suggesting that is easy to determine whether a painting is a fraud, or not, but we can expect a definite outcome. For example: an original Jackson Pollock painting was created by Jackson Pollock, whereas a fake one was made by someone who underestimated the complexity of their endeavour. Here, authenticity is determined by authorship. The question is simply: *Who* made this piece of art?

Since music is part of an 'intangible cultural heritage'<sup>1</sup> as it has been framed by the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003, it becomes apparent that the quest for authorship and origin of songs and music is undermined by its own nature; music is inherently *fluid* just like water. Water requires a container to take shape, songs and music need a medium, i.e. the musician to provide its necessary *shape*, so it can be heard.

Nevertheless, not every part of music is intangible, such as musical notation and printed songs. In his book *Fakesong – the manufacture of British 'folksong' from 1700 to the present*, Dave Harker seems to define *authenticity* almost exclusively through authorship of the songs. But not only were most folk songs orally transmitted until they reached print, to make matters worse, it was the mediators themselves who made changes to the songs. Even when authorship of the poem is

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<sup>1</sup> Gary West, *Voicing Scotland* (Luath Ltd. Press, Edinburgh 2012) p.27

undisputed, as with Robert Burns' songs, the melody to the song might be *stolen* from another well-known tune. For example, the tune for the Robert Burns' song *Ye Jacobite by Name* was taken from the previously known song *My Love's in Germany* (there is a lovely version by Silly Wizzard on youtube). In my opinion, limiting one's perception of authenticity to authorship in the genre of *folk music* has a slightly cynical undertone, since most people are well aware that folk songs very often are of anonymous origin. One cause for confusion about authenticity and authorship in Celtic folk songs lies possibly in the fact that poetry and song have always been virtually the same thing to the Gaels.<sup>2</sup> Maybe from our modern perspective, it is difficult to fathom the idea of an *orphaned* poem without having a perhaps dead, but concrete author.

Bruford goes on saying, 'looking at it from another angle, though many Irish poets could write out their works in Gaelic, few of the Scottish ones in the seventeenth and eighteenth century could, and we know only their works from orally transmitted versions often written down a century or two after they died, so that poems written for their aristocratic patrons have been preserved, in effect, as folk songs.'<sup>3</sup> There you have it: traditional Celtic folk songs, as we know them, are a complete fabrication of our own fantasy because they were written down and performed by the aristocracy! Indeed, the old song collection books, such as the collections *Songs of the North Vol. I & II*, or *Beauties of Scottish Song* (which I recently purchased), were

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Bruford, *Work Songs* (School of Scottish Studies 1978-79), p.4

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4

written for the aristocratic piano, and not for folk instruments. Unfortunately, it went completely beyond the scope of this essay to dive into the area of which instruments were exactly played by common people, and when the guitar appeared. But I do understand that the appearance of the guitar is rather new since none of the older musical folk song notations that I have thus far seen (1800's or early 1900's) contain any guitar chords, nor do they mention the word *folk song*. In fact, the compound *folk-song* was not used before 1870 in England, and did not become common usage until the 1880's.<sup>4</sup> This is getting quite intriguing; because how could a song, such as *Parcel of Rogues*, which was written in 1791 be performed as an *authentic folk song*, when in fact the word *folk-song* was not even known until almost a century later? Well, it is possible, as I will attempt to show by introducing the folk musician Jesse Ferguson.

Since music is an intangible object and fluid like water that will adjust its shape to its container, perhaps we need to look for authenticity elsewhere – for example in our emotional reaction to traditional folk music. My personal reaction when I first listened to Celtic folk music was that I felt as if travelling back through time. For a modern-day listener this old-sounding music can have a timeless and somewhat innocent quality about it, which appears in stark contrast to the noisy and overproduced tunes of popular music. Therefore, I suggest to take a look at the emotional reaction here, and pose the question: why does this older sounding type of music entice such romantic projections onto an undefined past? These projections might not even be so much of intellectual nature, but

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<sup>4</sup> David Harker, *Fakesong: the Manufacture of British 'Folksong' 1700 to the Present Day* (Open University Press, 1985), p.85

rather emotional. While this concept may sound like an elusive one, there are numerous references in history that point to an underlying theme which spreads beyond our topic of folk music. It is the notion that in some former time, long ago, people lived a life of purity and innocence – just like in paradise; a time before everything went *all gaga!* For Erich Fromm, for example, it was the Industrial Revolution which he saw as the main cause for *the fall from paradise*; he and many others fell prey to the romanticized idea of the *Noble Savage*, and to the idealized view about the simple life of the peasantry – free from clutter and perhaps more *authentic* to human nature. The great-nephew of Charles Darwin, the pupil of Parry Standford, was interested in *unconscious, purely melodic, folksong* because he agreed with Sharp that it was a spontaneous, unself-conscious, unwritten musical utterance, limited in its scope...often of supreme beauty, and containing in embryo all those principles which are the basis of the fully developed art of music.<sup>5</sup> Much more could be said about the emotional reactions and projections that make folk music sound authentic, but I will leave it at that and move on to more practical concerns.

### ***What Role Does youtube Play in the Current Folk Scene?***

There is no doubt that youtube is playing a vital role in our ever-changing music scene. With as many videos as there are stars in the sky, it is literally impossible to have an overview on all the music revivals and trends that are currently happening on youtube. But in regards to folk music, it can certainly be regarded as a pivotal force due to its nature of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.209

being accessible to anyone, free of charge. A great number of the videos are recorded by ordinary *folks* in their home; and, there are plenty of tutorial videos which teach us how to play certain folk songs on the guitar, or tutorials on mandolin, bouzouki, accordion, you name it. In fact, when I started to play the guitar a few years ago, almost every song which I learned to play was through watching youtube videos. This is how I discovered Canadian folk singer Jesse Ferguson. In his video performances, which simply show him in his house playing an instrument to accompany his song, you can always clearly see which chords he plays. That is very important to me, since it has been nearly impossible to find a guitar teacher who knows any Celtic folk songs! Here in Scotland I have had two private guitar teachers so far, one with a music degree from Reed School of Music, the other (my current teacher) graduated with a music degree from Napier University, but neither of them knew any Scottish folk songs! I have generally not met that many people in my life who really know or listen to Celtic folk music; yet there is the occasional person who feels mysteriously intrigued by traditional music, but they lack information and/or education about this genre. Keeping this in mind, youtube is an excellent platform for promoting folk music, because in addition to its entertainment purpose, it also offers education, tips, and direct communication with the performer and their fans (or enemies), all at no cost.

But is there also a downside? If we regard youtube as an agent

of borderless globalization, and if we accept the sceptical notion that under globalization, national culture and identity are eroding, one could view the whole *youtube-business* with a rather sceptical eye. Now, traditional Scottish or Irish folk songs are also performed by people on the other end of the globe, and people who have never been to either country, let alone speak English as their native tongue. Consequently, they do not sing with an authentic Scottish or Irish accent, and sometimes their foreign accents are quite audible. Livingston's description of the folk-revival community could not be more applicable to youtube when she points out that the networks of individuals that form social movements are distinguished from other groups commonly studied by anthropologists (e.g. kin ship groups, village communities) *by their fluidity of membership, their impermanence and their ideological focus.* (Winthrop 1991) which, for our purposes, is centred on a particular musical style. In addition to these traits, revivalist communities are non-territorial; their membership may span local and national boundaries, and they often bring together people whose paths might never have crossed outside of the revival.<sup>6</sup> I could not agree more with this statement, because that is exactly how I came across Jesse Ferguson.

### ***Jesse Ferguson, or: The Bard of Cornwall***

Jesse Ferguson is a Canadian folk singer from Cornwall,

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<sup>6</sup> Tamara E. Livingston, *Music Revivals: Toward a General Theory* (University of Illinois Press. Society for Ethnomusicology, 1999), p.73

Ontario, Canada, who grew up in a musical family with his father teaching him how to play the guitar. On his webpage biography it says: “Through playing music with his father and the rest of the family, Jesse learned that music can be a vital part of everyday life—not something reserved for special occasions or for highly trained elites. Music brings family and friends together for good times and provides a bond between the generations.” And further: “In his early teens, Jesse was given a mandolin and enrolled in music lessons, but he soon decided that formal music study wasn’t his path and that learning *by ear* in the folk tradition was the direction he would take. In his late teens, Jesse played music with greater dedication, and began experimenting with song writing. As with most songwriters, his early attempts bore a strong similarity to works by his influences: The Beatles, James Taylor, Neil Young, Tom Petty and Blue Rodeo, to name a few.”<sup>7</sup>

In this description we can see some of the themes we have learned about in our course; such as that he was raised in a musical family, that he rejected formal music training, and rather learned the songs *by ear*, just like the Gaels did, and of course, the pronounced non-association with *highly trained elites*. Perhaps that is the reason why his performance is of such high quality; he does have a special talent for singing and for getting the most out of a melody. His singing is very natural, his guitar accompaniment in total harmony therewith, but

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<sup>7</sup> Jesse Ferguson, *Jesse Ferguson Music* (2016) <<http://www.jessefergusonmusic.com/blog/the-origin-of-the-bard-of-cornwall-title>> [accessed 25/11/2016]



never distracting from the actual song. Jesse seems to share a quality with his forefathers, since among Scottish Gaels, as in Ireland, the words of a song are never dominated or obscured by the air (Ó Madagáin 1985:192), and for these reasons Gaelic singers on both sides of the Atlantic are inclined to articulate the words with great clarity.<sup>8</sup> His singing is very clear and audible, and there is the sense that he is simply telling a story through song. In the delivery of a song to the audience there is awareness that words are essential to the understanding of a song.<sup>9</sup>

Jesse's repertoire includes a wide range of Irish, Scottish, and American folk songs, which were recorded on four CD albums between 2009 and 2014. His main instrument is the guitar, but he also plays the mandolin, or sometimes bhódran to accompany his singing. His greatest asset though is his full-bodied voice, which sounds incredibly soothing and calm. Some of his most impressive performances are Robert Burns songs, such as *Ye Jacobite by Name*, *Parcel of Rogues*, and especially his version of *Now Westlin' Winds*, but also his delivery of Irish songs is quite interesting, as in *Haul away Joe*, where he uses a bhódran to accompany the song. I could go on and on about the many songs and video he has posted, but it would probably be better to give it a listen and decide for yourself which songs, with which instruments are most

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<sup>8</sup> John Shaw, *A Story in every Song, Gaelic Singing and Broad Cove Parish* (McGill- Queen's University Press, 2001) p.25

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25

appealing.

I was lucky to receive a response when I contacted Jesse several weeks ago. Below you can find our email correspondence and a short interview, which I conducted with him. I had designed six questions that I considered relevant. With my first question, I wanted to find out whether Jesse also pursued another career, or if he had studied for a music degree (remember my guitar teachers who I mentioned earlier?) So, it turns out Jesse is an English teacher by profession, with a love for poetry and history, especially when it is related to Scotland due to his ancestry. We can see by his profile, and of course hear by his music, that he might very well be a *revivalist*, especially in his home province of Ontario.

Another characteristic of musical revivals is the reliance upon informants or historical sources in formulating the revival tradition's repertoire, stylistic features, and history.<sup>10</sup> A lot of the statements Livingston makes seem to relate and apply to Jesse Ferguson, including the notion that he himself talks about folk music as being *a reaction against the empty, over-commercialized scene of contemporary pop music*. It is just like Livingston proposed when she says:

*“By oppositional character I mean that revivalists tend to posit their tradition as a cultural alternative to certain mainstream or dominant musics. ... In other cases, the revivalists may position themselves in opposition to highly mediated commercial*

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<sup>10</sup> Livingston, *Music Revivals*, p.71

musics.”<sup>11</sup> The perspective that folk music offers an alternative to over-produced popular music is rather prevalent and deserves a little more attention. As I hinted before, I do believe that traditional folk music is not in its best shape because so few people know about it. Plus, it cannot be assumed that folk music, let alone traditional Scottish folk songs, are being taught as part of a music course of studies. But that is only part of the problem; the other part lies in the difference between *art music* and *functional music*. One of the main reasons, I believe, why modern-day pop music is so much more widespread than certain other music genres, such traditional folk, lies in its functional purpose. I would like to share some personal experiences to demonstrate what I mean by that (and I am sure it has been noticed by music scholars in some way or another): When I first came to Scotland a few years ago, I took on a little job at Aldi grocery store. Starting at 5am, myself and several colleagues prepared the store before opening. Most mornings the radio was on blasting with beats of popular music, such as Lady Gaga, Tyler Swift, Katie Perry, and the like. Despite that I would never listen to that kind of music in private, it did not take long to genuinely enjoy it. It really had an energizing effect on body and mind, and whether the lyrics were simple and repetitive was completely irrelevant; it fulfilled the function of creating a cheerful and *awake* work environment by playing music that appears not highly individualized (catering to a

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.82

diverse but youthful staff), and perhaps not as artistically demanding as the poetic songs and ballads that Jesse Ferguson plays. Another situation in which I recently experienced modern functional music was at Edinburgh Leisure Centre, where I tried out some fitness classes, such as *Zumba* (the contemporary version of aerobics – just faster, and faster...). You can probably already guess that the music played in these courses was not folk music! It would not *do the job*: this is where we need some heart-racing, techno-like, South-American rhythms. Again, the music has a clear purpose, with entertainment being of lesser concern, and artistic value, such as lyrics or melody, being of no concern at all. Nevertheless, the type of music utilised for such a course is indispensable, not just for the energy it delivers, but also to synchronise the movements of the group.

The list of present day functional music is endless, and although, one could argue that unlike the Gaels, we do not sing anymore while working, the music we are surrounded by (*overproduced* pop music helping us to produce more stuff), does fulfil a function. This is where traditional music very often fails under the pressure of convenience. In a way, it is a bit ironic that in past, the majority of Gaelic songs were functional songs, and not *art music* for entertainment only, whereas today, Celtic folk is rather *art music*, and pop music will frequently be used to serve a function. Not exclusively of course, as we can see with *Pachelbel's Canon in D-Major*, which

has secured its niche as the most popular *being-on-hold* piece ever! Also here: it fulfils a function. Just imagine calling your bank, and when you are being put on hold you can hear Jesse singing *What's right and what is wrong, by the law, by the law...*; it is a lovely song, but perhaps not the most conducive choice for such as purpose.

Nevertheless, there is hope on the horizon, but I believe we should start looking at the functionality of folk music in regards to our time and our needs if we want to preserve, revive, and enrich folk music. In what way can folk music serve a practical purpose? One of the reasons I chose Jesse Ferguson as the artist I wanted to introduce is because of the immense educational value his videos offer. As already mentioned, Jesse also does tutorial videos in which he teaches how to play various songs on the guitar as well as other instruments. Therefore, one function that can easily be connected to folk music is that of being learned and played by the (hobby-) musician. Folk songs are ideal also for beginning music students.

“The domestic homes of the people of Scotland have served as the stage for a great deal of *performance* of tradition down through the spaces we inhabit as the heart of our daily existence, and it is in the home that our material and creative culture merge into one.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> West, *Voicing Scotland*, p.50

It is also at home where most musicians can practice alone – and now they also have the possibility to learn an instrument, or a song, from their screen

Another function we can find for Celtic folk music (particular songs), is their relevance to history, and numerous other academic disciplines, as outlined in my research proposal. In other words, I can see the videos of folk musicians like Jesse Ferguson to be used in schools and Universities for educational purposes. I am pretty sure that such videos, if shown in a class of young students, would inspire the one or other to start learning an instrument themselves.

### ***Interview with Jesse Ferguson***

Hi Jasmin,

I'll write my answers below each question. Would you please send me a copy of your finished paper, once it's done? The subject is near to my heart.

Thanks,  
Jesse

1. As I learned from your web page, you grew up in a musical family, learning how to play the guitar through your dad from a very early age etc. But did you also study music at University in Ottawa, or did you pursue a different career initially?

JF: I took biology and English literature at university. My profession has been to teach English at the university level. That said, my love of music led me to take a music appreciation class at university, where I learned more about the Western musical tradition. Of course, my love of English literature, in particular poetry, ties in with my love of traditional ballads.

2. What is your primary source for finding "new" traditional songs that you might want to play? How did you go about it in the beginning of your singing career? (I mean in the time

when folk songs weren't as easily accessible on the net) i.e. Antiquarian book shops, libraries, folk festivals, archives that contain old songs & musical notes?

JF: My initial sources were music my father played: some Celtic, some traditional American folk and some contemporary country and rock. However, in my late teens and early college years, I was able to see a lot of local bands that were blending traditional folk and contemporary rock influences. This happened in pubs around Cornwall, Ontario, and at the Glengarry Highland Games in Maxville, Ontario.

3. Did you learn traditional folk songs also at your school? And is it usual for Canadians to know some folk songs? Or is it rather a fringe group?

JF: We learned a handful of Canadian and French folk songs at school. In general, Celtic music is popular in the Canadian east coast as well as in my particular region of Ontario, but it's somewhat of a niche interest in the rest of the country.

4. Do you see folk music as a countermovement to popular mainstream culture? Or is it just another music genre? I guess what I am trying to get at here, is, whether folk music goes beyond just being a "genre", but is also connected to a lifestyle and/or political view?

JF: Many people come to folk music for political/hereditary reasons ("I come from Scotland, so I listen to that music", etc.), and I think it started out largely that way for me (my father's side is of Scottish ancestry), but since my teens my appreciation for it has gone beyond liking it out of family "obligation," so to speak. I definitely see folk music as a reaction against the empty, over-commercialized scene of contemporary pop music. I still enjoy some pop music, but there's no doubt that most of it is only of temporary interest. I'm also deeply interested in history, and in anything that can tie my experience to that of past generations.

5. What is it for you, that makes folk music authentic? Is there anything that can make folk music immediately inauthentic?

JF: I think that folk musicians have an easier time being authentic, because there's so little money to be made with it. There's little temptation to sell out. For instance, on my YouTube channel I don't even turn ads on, since it doesn't seem in keeping with the spirit of folk music. Authenticity is hard to pinpoint, but when someone performs for the love of it, rather than for fame and fortune, that's a good start.

6. Last, but not least: where do you see traditional, Celtic folk music heading in the near future? Is a new folk revival just around the corner, or is it rather on the demise, making room for the new?

JF: I don't see folk music disappearing anytime soon, but certainly it can never be as central to Western culture as it was before the advent of modern pop music, and easy access to musical recordings. That does, in a sense, sadden me. But the beauty of the Internet, and in

particular YouTube, is that those who are still interested can develop a sense of community. I feel that my work sharing these songs with anyone who has access to the Internet is the best help I can be to the tradition.

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