

Let's put up a stage: Experiencing Speyfest, a Celtic Music Festival in Scotland

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Abstract

In July 2022, the music festival Speyfest celebrated its 25th event, returning after two years without a festival due to the COVID-19 pandemic and only weeks after the death of festival founder, Sir James Alexander MBE (1955–2022). Utilising ethnographic fieldwork and incorporating interdisciplinary approaches from ethnomusicology, geography and tourism studies, this chapter critically examines the festival from the perspective of researchers who were performers and workshop facilitators at the festival. Recognising Alexander's initial desire to develop an event whereby local musicians experience and perform with professional artists, we reflect on the expression of culture, authenticity, and meaning with particular consideration for the conceptualisation of 'Celtic' music as a musical and commercial term. We critique how the event has changed the ecosystem of traditional music around Fochabers, particularly in terms of the resilience of local music community. Central to the study is a consideration of the Fochabers Fiddlers, an ensemble founded by Alexander in 1980 that, for the festival, not only include locally based members but also members who have left the area but return to perform with the group at the festival. This chapter demonstrates how community festivals and events impact on both place-making and the development of a community of musical practice.

Introduction

Fochabers is a village in Moray, Scotland, on the east bank of the River Spey. With a population of approximately two thousand inhabitants, the area has a rich musical and cultural history, of which Speyfest has become an important part. We first travelled to Fochabers in 2016, as part of a performing group from Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) involving lecturers and students. In addition to performing, we facilitated workshops and participated in many of the other activities of the festival. Developing friendships with local people, we returned subsequently in 2018, 2019 and 2022, documenting and critically examining our experiences in the context of understanding Speyfest as a community festival. Reflecting how festivals and events 'generate community values, customs and particular types of behaviour' (Jepson & Clarke, 2014, p. 1), this chapter draws on our experiences to critically reflect on the development and impact of a community festival on the musical life and identity of the place.

While Fochabers may appear isolated, the community, particularly of musicians, is connected to a wider Scottish and Celtic music world. Local musicians no longer learn and engage in musicking solely in the local area with some young musicians travelling to Glasgow and

Edinburgh to pursue further education, several of them studying music. Mirroring other community festivals, many local fiddlers return for the festival and celebrate their connection to this place (Ekman, 1999; Quinn, 2006), while the festival itself is part of a wider musical network and cultural economy (Connell & Gibson, 2003; Gibson & Connell, 2005). This reflects geographer Doreen Massey's contention that 'what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of relations, articulated together at a particular locus' (1993, p. 66). Speyfest is an intensified coming together of people engaged in cultural activities that construct and create both Fochabers as a place and the image and identity of Fochabers to those who are present for the festival. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) notes, a festival can be an intensification of local culture as places become re-enacted, re-presented and re-created. Similarly Niclas Hell and Gayle McPherson recognise that 'Festivals often embrace local community identity and engage local groups who come together for a common purpose, sometimes centred around shared values and belief' (2022, p. 254). The focus, in the example of Speyfest, is on a shared engagement and participation in local, Scottish and Celtic musics. Informed by international examples, this chapter recognises that 'The complexity, creativity and meaning embedded in staging events in rural areas offer locale-specific insight into the importance of community participation and placemaking' (Aquilino et al., 2021, p. 138).

Benefitting from both backstage and front stage perspectives,¹ we recognise the importance of the event for the local community, particularly with regards a mobilised community of musical practice, who share a repertoire of melodies from a continuously evolving tradition. As well as consideration of the mediation and mediatisation of the music at the festival and an examination of newspaper and internet sources, this chapter is primarily based upon our ethnographic reflections and fieldnotes, elements of which were published on a blog on our website (<https://www.alouthlilt.com/blog>, accessed 21 August 2023). Ethnographic methods contribute to a greater understanding of participants' experiences, reflecting a challenge to the dominance of positivist, quantitative-based studies (Getz, 2008). Although such an approach is not without challenges including the positioning of the researchers on the participant observer spectrum (Jaimangal-Jones, 2014), the value of such an approach is outlined by Setha Low, who states: 'The ability of ethnography to produce precise descriptions and nuanced analyses from multiple perspectives provides the flexibility and creativity to address the complexity of contemporary social relations and cultural settings' (2017, p. 2). This responds to the 'need to develop a deeper understanding of the interconnections between festival-tourism activity and the social and cultural contexts within which the festivals take place' (Quinn, 2003, p. 330).

Fieldnotes 'inform both interpretation and representation, understanding and analysis of experience – in and out of the field' (Barz, 2008 p. 206) and we quote these notes so as to include our voice as it was in the field. In the course of experiencing the festival, we have had many conversations with other performers, festival organizers and attendees, who have shared their viewpoints in an informal manner. These are valuable in shaping our understanding and gaining different perspectives on the event. Our approach was purposefully not developed through formal interviews or questionnaires, with the exception of interviews recorded for the production of two short documentary films about the festival made with students.² As Immy Holloway et al. note, 'It should be the aim of researchers in

¹ Used here in a literal sense in relation to our experiences as both performers and audience members, these terms also reflect the development of a frontstage-backstage theory in relation to tourism (MacCannell, 1976).

² *The Road to Speyfest* (<https://www.alouthlilt.com/the-road-to-speyfest>) was completed in 2017 and *Finding Fochabers* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBKYXhoskzA>) was completed in 2019 and integrates footage

the event setting not to impose their worldview on participants through a highly structured interview or questionnaire, but to understand social reality and emotional associations from the emic/experiencing point of view' (2010, p. 77). Acknowledging a tendency in the analysis of ethnographic interviews to prioritize the subjects' own point of view (Dickson, 2006), in writing this chapter we align our experiences, the statements of those we met, and scholarship of both festivals and Celtic music(s) to achieve a more complex examination of Speyfest as a community festival. Creating documentary films required reviewing many hours of footage including interviews with various stakeholders and constructing a narrative that both reflected the festival and engaged viewers. Sharing our blogs and the films on YouTube and social media, allowed members of the community we were researching to engage with our reflections and raised awareness of our interest in understanding local culture amongst the community. The duration of our study, extending across six years, allowed for the development of a dialogue with the community and the opportunity to revisit questions that emerged in our analysis.

Space, Place and Music

Spaces and places are constructed both materially and discursively and 'every place or region "arrives" at the present moment trailing long histories: histories of economics and politics, of gender, class and ethnicity; and histories, too, of the many different stories which have been told about all of these' (Massey & Allen, 1995, p. 9). Driving through Speyside, signposts for whisky distilleries along the Spey River are intermingled with signs for fishing, and the large fields betray rich land on which barley is one of the main crops. A planned village, founded in 1776, Fochabers' history is dominated in part by Alexander Gordon, 4th Duke of Gordon (1743–1827), whose castle on the edge of the village is a tourist attraction today and is a reminder of the class divides that once existed. Scottish composer William Marshall (1748–1833) is another notable former resident of the town who worked for the Duke in the castle, representative of the local musical traditions. In the 20th Century, Baxter's Food Group became an important employer in the region. Through the George and Ena Baxter Foundation, they support various initiatives in the region and that contribute to the community. Signs and imagery around the town reflect the importance of fish in the river and the local fiddle tradition. Speyfest and the local ensemble The Fochabers Fiddlers contribute to the construction and expression of an identity and an image for the area that distinguishes it from other places. Speyfest is part of both local tourism and local culture, the narrative of which includes the whisky, Gordon family estates, fiddle traditions and Baxter's Highland Village and yet, Speyfest is an expression of contemporary Scottish culture that reimagines tradition and heritage in a modern, amplified and commodified soundscape.

A number of distinctive communities exist within the contemporary Scottish soundscape that, in the context of traditional and folk music, include a variety of festivals. Folk clubs in Scotland developed during the 1950s as part of an international revival of folk music (Munro, 1996; Bean, 2014). The distinctiveness of Scottish folk clubs, in comparison with other parts of the UK and Ireland is sometimes difficult to distinguish, particularly in the early decades but the development of Scottish lyrics (albeit it set to popular American melodies), the focus on travelling singers such as Jeannie Robertson (1908–1975) and Willie Scott (1897–1989), and a gradual move away from American influences towards native Scottish traditions are part of the scene's development. The National Association of Accordion and Fiddle Clubs was established in 1971 and there are several related festivals in addition to other activities

captured and edited by DkIT students at the festival in 2016 and 2018. The authors acted as supervisors and producers for the film project.

(<http://www.boxandfiddle.com/about.html>, accessed 30 June 2023). With a greater focus on instrumental dance music, there are currently over seventy accordion and fiddle clubs that reflect the development of Scottish dance music and the popularity of musicians such as Jimmy Shand (1908–2000). *Fèisean* [festival or feast] were established in the current form in 1981 as a community festival on the Scottish island of Barra and now take place throughout Scotland and focus on Gaelic arts traditions with an emphasis on young people (Mattarasso, 1996; Westbrook, Anderson, Brownlee, & Gregson-MacLeod, 2010). The development of the Shetland Folk Festival in 1981, inspired by local musicking activities of Tom Anderson (1910–1991) in particular,³ and Celtic Connections in 1994, are important in understanding the artistic programming of Speyfest in relation to the broader Scottish music festival culture. Following Thomas Turino’s definition of ethnomusicological study as ‘ongoing dialectical interactions between individuals and their social and physical surroundings realized through observable practices,’ (Turino, 2008, pp. 94-95), Speyfest provides an interesting and appropriate occasion for the study of contemporary Scottish musical practice that is described as ‘folk’, ‘traditional’ and ‘Celtic’ musics.

<Figure 1.1 here>

Figure 1.1. Performing at the temporary fiddle in Fochabers. Photograph by the author.

Experiencing Speyfest

We left Glasgow early on the Thursday morning, taking a bus first to Aberdeen and from there to the town of Fochabers. The bus stopped opposite a large floral display in the shape of a fiddle. There we were met by John, Calum and James at the bus stop in the middle of the village. The men were taken on foot to a hotel on the main street. The women, a few doors further up, to a temporary B&B in which the walls were covered with memorabilia of previous festivals. We were driven, by car, to a B&B approximately five miles out of town. We planned to meet later for a session preceding the opening of the festival during which we played with local musicians. (Fieldnotes, 28 July 2016).

There is a strong sense of community at Speyfest which was communicated from the first moment of landing in the village, being met by our hosts and, later, through a session. Although not officially part of the festival, each year we have participated in a music session on the Thursday night at Spey Bay Golf Club. This informal event serves as an opportunity for the community to gather in advance of the festival, particularly those returning home for Speyfest, with many bringing instruments and participating. This session and the placement of the floral display in the central public space of the town are important reflections of connecting with a community beyond the ticketed tented village where the concerts and most other activities take place. The floral fiddle in particular reflects the assertion that ‘public space projects succeed in creating an image or identity that supersedes the ‘local’ and appeals not just to residents but to ‘outsiders’ as well, so that ‘the local’ and the locality will become visible’ (Sofield, et al., 2017, p. 3). It is similar to Tamworth’s Golden Guitar statue in

³ The musical traditions of Shetland and the work of Tom Anderson are detailed by Peter Cooke (1986).

Australia (Gibson & Connell, 2005), which provides a visual marker in a public space that highlights the importance of the festival to the place.

We were introduced to volunteers and other locals on a first name basis as we encountered them; their roles were sometimes ambiguous – ‘they are helping with Speyfest’. There is a reliance on local support and people who do not usually operate B&Bs to open up their homes to provide accommodation. Nevertheless, it was evident that the festival had grown over the two decades requiring suitably qualified personnel to take on particular roles. James Alexander was ‘the boss’ and held the license, but structures, AV, food and security are provided by specialised service providers. Alexander was also prominent as a host who cared for the artists and took time away from the setting up of the festival space to drive us to our accommodation.

The last day or two prior to the festival was a time of intense activity. Stages were erected, fencing put in place, lighting and sound transported to the field. Much of the village was undisturbed by the event but the sports field behind the school was transformed. Volunteers, including some of the local musicians, mixed with experienced professionals as every effort was made to be ready on time. Long before the first notes were played, security guards took their posts at the gate. There was a clear boundary between Fochabers and Speyfest but this boundary was porous. The sound of music from the PA drifted over the barriers to the nearby campsite and houses.

Incorporating two of Arjun Appadurai’s five dimensions of global cultural flow (1990), Speyfest can be analysed as part of an ethnoscape involving the movements of large numbers of people including tourists (Appadurai, 1996, p. 33), and mediascape that create and disseminate information and images (Appadurai, 1996, p. 35), to understand how place-making is influenced by external influences and desires to reach and attract people beyond the local. Drawing on the work of Wallis and Malm (1984), Owe Ronström identifies a facet of festivalisation as a companion to “mediaisation”, in which music and musical behaviours are adapted to the festival format. In 2022 we noted:

It was the sound of the bagpipes that confirmed we were in Scotland! Skerryvore, the Red Hot Chilli Pipers, and Rura presented traditional music evoking a rock music aesthetic. Guitar, drums and bass provided a backline to an eclectic mix of reels and pop music covers, from ‘The Ginger Grouse Jigs’ to ‘Let Me Entertain You’. The sound built gradually through each evening, often beginning with a local group, through duets and small ensembles until the chairs were cleared away. The performers engaged directly with the audience, changing their tone and mode of speech as the evening progressed, to encourage dancing, cheering and loud applause (Fieldnotes, 24 July 2022).

Throughout each festival the repertoire shifted from recognisable Scottish and Irish music that was both old and newly composed to a vast array of modern compositions that embraced a wide range of musical aesthetics. Unlike pub sessions or folk clubs, the bands embraced the stage space, the large audience that may be seated or standing, and the powerful amplification that seemed, along with the bands themselves, to encourage an ever-increasingly loud response from those in attendance. Reflecting Brocken’s comments on folk festivals as ‘the best medium for presenting the eclectic and idiosyncratic in folk music’ (2003, p. 125), the programme for each Speyfest we attended demonstrated an awareness of new artists alongside the established. Scottish and Irish traditional musicians such as Aly Bain and Phil Cunningham, Sharon Shannon, and Flook were recognisable from other festivals and events

internationally. Up and coming (women) Scottish artists such as Siobhán Miller, Mairearad Greene and Anna Massie demonstrated efforts to move towards gender balance, while bands such as Skerryvore, Rura and Mec Lir reflected bands that were performing with an energetic approach that attracted young audiences. In subsequent years, we became more aware of groups who returned and their developing profiles.

While the main performance tent had formally arranged seating plans for headline artists, the seats were removed for the Stomp, a type of late night rock event where bagpipes, drums and electric guitars combined to create an energetic contemporary soundscape that inspired lively dancing from a largely youthful and, by then, largely alcohol fuelled audience. At all times, the experienced security team maintained a gentle control and we never experienced conduct that was overly disorderly or threatening, ensuring a safe space for all attendees until and beyond the end of performances each night.

Economics and ‘Celtic music’

Although Speyfest grows out of community initiatives, it requires a significant budget involving sponsorship, commercial artist fees, production costs, advertising and insurance. As Andrew Leyshon has noted, ‘The making of music is not only a cultural and sociological process, it is also an economic process’ (1998, p. 9). A UK Music report, *Wish You Were Here* (UK Music, 2016) estimated the value of music tourism in Scotland as £295m in 2015, with 928,000 people engaging in visits associated with festivals, concerts and other music-related events, which in turn helped to sustain 3,230 full-time jobs. In Fochabers, there is a boost not only for accommodation providers, including the local campsite, but local eateries including a fish and chip shop and an ice-cream shop, both of which were award-winning local companies.

Describing music festivals as ‘in the broadest sense the oldest and most common form of music tourism’ (2005, p. 210), Chris Gibson and John Connell state: ‘Music festivals have become more common features of economic strategies centred on tourism and regional development, since the internationally famous Woodstock, Monterey and the Isle of Wight popular music festivals in the late 1960s’ (2005, p. 210). Alexander consciously brought the commercial world of Scottish music to Fochabers to show the young musicians some of the opportunities and pathways that music provided. Referring to the larger entity ‘Britain’, Michael Brocken notes:

It is essential that folk festivals come under the academic microscope for they continue to present some of the most important musical events within the British musical calendar. They are not restricted by the social mores of folk clubs, but, rather, exist as an embodiment of resourceful musical programming. They continue to attract thousands of visitors and artists from all over the world and are, in a real sense, the future of folk music’ (2003, p. 126).

While Brocken points to a visiting audience, our experience at Speyfest is that it serves a local community in the first instance. The artists who come to perform at Speyfest influence the local audiences and performers, contributing to the cultural capital over and beyond the economic dividends that accrue to the area. Indeed, the number of visitors is sometimes limited by the availability of local accommodation.

Alexander described Speyfest as ‘a celebration of Celtic music in its widest sense [...] basically an overall celebration of Celtic traditions, with music being the main reason for it’

(2016). The difficulties defining ‘Celtic music’ are consistent through a number of studies. A critique of the term ‘Celtic music’ was developed by Scott Reiss (2003) and further explored in subsequent writings on Scottish (Jenkins, 2004; McKerrell, 2016), Irish (Motherway, 2013), Breton (Wilkinson, 2016) and Cornish (Hagmann, 2021) traditional musics. ‘Celtic music’ is not a synonym for ‘traditional music’ but can encompass a large range of musics from the tradition through ‘New Age’ and ‘Contemporary’ musics that engage in processes of innovation and musical fusion. Authors including June Skinner Sawyers (2000, p. 4), Kenny Mathieson (2001, p. 4), Reiss (2003, p. 145), Desi Wilkinson (2016, p. 14) and Lea Hagmann (2021) point to the term as a clever and commercially successful marketing strategy. Martin Stokes and Philip Bohlman argue for a ‘long history’ of ‘a pan-Celtic market in music recordings and publishing’, pointing to Michael Coleman in the 1920s, through the Chieftains and Alan Stivell from the 1960s and Altan and Capercaillie in the 1990s (2003, p. 17). Although Reiss suggests that ‘Celtic music only exists after it is produced and marketed; it has no existence outside its commodity form’ (2003, p. 158), festivals provide a space for ‘produced musics’ to be performed while spaces also exist on the periphery for a community to share traditional musics, such as house sessions. A community of ‘Celtic music’ performers and consumers are part of a transnational community that share a common or related aesthetic.

Despite the enlargement of an imagined ‘Celtic music world’ in recent decades, the early dominance of Irish traditional music and the continuing associations between ‘Celtic’ and ‘Irish’ musical identities are pertinent (O’Flynn, 2009, p. 44), but it is important to acknowledge processes across Scotland, Wales, Brittany, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, extending to Galicia and Asturias in the north of Spain and latterly embracing Cape Breton and other diasporic locations as far away as Australia. The expression of a Celtic identity can be considered within the processes of revival, which often involve rebelling against the mainstream and can abandon concerns of authenticity to develop different styles (Livingston, 1999; Bithell & Hill, 2014). Revivals can include both conservative and innovative groups (Livingston, 1999, p. 71), often involving the selective use of history (Hill & Bithell, 2014, p. 13). In the context of Celtic music, such divisions may be considered under the headings of ‘Celticism’ and ‘Celticity’. Michael Dietler describes Celticism as ‘self-conscious attempts to construct ethnicized forms of collective memory and communal identities that are territorially bounded and imbedded in overt political projects and ideologies’ (2006, p. 237). Wilkinson (2016) uses the francophone variant *Celtitude* in place of Celticism, recognising political, economic, social and cultural implications at play in the development and revival of Breton musical traditions that embraces both local activity and a wider pan-Celtic perspective. Writing about Cornwall, Hagmann’s employment of Celticity moves away from Celticism’s focus on ancientness, ethnicity and territoriality with underling political agendas towards a global idea of Celtic identity that can be more inclusive of those who do not claim racial, genealogical or linguistic connections. Hagmann recognises that Celticity may be aligned with New Age spiritualism with a sense of collective ritual while Celtification can be employed to make music and dance more commercially attractive or marketable. Pride in a Scottish identity and appreciation of global musical developments are both evident at Speyfest, with acts that either explicitly reference their identification with national or ethnic identity or demonstrate a desire not to be bounded by parameters of such identification.

Noting that most contemporary music festivals are explicitly commercial (2005, p. 213) and drawing on various international examples, Gibson and Connell state that ‘festivals are thus not always reflections of local identities and musical expressions, especially as commercial considerations have become dominant’ (2005, p. 215). The marquee at Speyfest was full on

the opening night in 2016 when the headline act was Barbara Dixon, perhaps better known for her performances in musicals and popular music than her involvement in folk music. Dixon's presence alongside a wider variety of other artists under the general term 'Celtic music' helped attract many locals whose first love was not fiddles and bagpipes. Similarly, in 2019, Alexander noted the appeal of Eddi Reader, who performed to a sell-out audience on the Sunday (Gossip, 2019). In 2018, there was a more local focus with a celebration of James Alexander. The 2022 presented acts that could be deemed more traditional in their aesthetic, such as the Friday night that featured accordion and fiddle duet Phil Cunningham and Aly Bain before the Red Hot Chilli Pipers, whose rock music aesthetic incorporating highland bagpipes attracts a wide audience.

Discussing the mediation and mediatisation of Scottish traditional music, Simon McKerrell engages in a critique of the terms 'folk',⁴ 'traditional' and 'Celtic', paying particular attention to the contexts for performance and increasing commercialisation and commodification of the music. He notes how 'the increasing commercialisation of traditional music leads to the commodification of authenticity and belonging' (2016, p. 123) arguing that 'The term "Celtic music" is regarded with disdain by most performers I know of Scottish traditional music. However, it has been enthusiastically taken up by those with an interest in marketing or promoting Scottish traditional music both at home and abroad' (2016, p. 124). Echoing writings that focus on Irish (Reiss, 2003) and English (Winter & Keegan-Phipps, 2015) music scenes, there is a potential disconnect between the sense of community and the music scene but as noted by Timothy Taylor in the afterword of Stokes and Bohlman's collection of essays on Celtic music, 'Celtic musics, commodified or not, are real musics made by and listened to by real people caught up in real practices in real places' (2003, p. 282). At Speyfest, members of some of the commercial bands proudly perform as part of the Fochabers Fiddlers, the community ensemble. Others, such as Rura's Jack Smedley from nearby Cullen, who was a pupil of another fiddle teacher Donald Barr and his ensemble the Strathspey Fiddlers, celebrated their connection to the place and local community in their performances.

The conflict between musical identity and commercial pressures is outlined by Susan Motherway, writing on the globalisation of Irish song traditions, who notes: 'The explosion of Celtic music festivals and the branding of goods as Celtic have been recognized by these musicians as commercial marketing strategies that do not hold any musical value. While performers may allow individual tracks to be included on compilation albums for selling purposes they are not willing to label their solo albums as Celtic' (2013, p. 51). The growth of outdoor summer music festivals with large amplified stages has created new spaces and contexts for performance that has challenged and motivated artists to adapt. However, while many artists have adapted their presentation sound and style to suit these spaces and related audiences, as outlined by McKerrell in a Scottish context, many of the musicians also maintain strong links to local, grass roots traditions and also participate in informal music sessions, gatherings and community activity.

Celebrating the Local

Although ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin points to the potential of seeing things globally and removing some of the politics and parameters of place and location (1993, pp. 16, 17), an

⁴ As in England (Winter & Keegan-Phipps, 2015), the use of the term folk appears to encompass a wide range of acoustic and semi-acoustic music with the term 'traditional music' referring more 'to music that has some sort of connection to the oral tradition and to cultural expressions of authenticity' (McKerrell, 2016, p. 123).

argument that is reinforced through various definitions of ‘Celtic music’, the narratives of place at Fochabers presents an opportunity to critically engage with trends and definitions in musical traditions, testing a macro world of music within a small locale. Individuals are often crucial to the development of a community as they create the impetus for the establishment of events and activities. We recognise Alexander as a ‘sentinel musician’ and cultural mediator (Shelemay, 2022; Kearney, 2022), whose vision grew from community musicking to the development of the festival, benefitting from his engagement in a network of professional artists and desire to connect the local with the global. The celebration of Alexander before and after his passing, contributes to a narrative of active, collective memory focused on the present that sometimes includes or forgets the local historical fiddler William Marshall, an important composer in the development of Scottish fiddle music who was born and is buried outside the town.⁵

At our B&B, a book about fiddle player William Marshall sat on the coffee table. When we first arrived, James drove us to our accommodation, passing Bellie Churchyard where he indicated Marshall was buried. On subsequent trips, visits to the graveyard and the Fochabers Folk Museum and Heritage Centre, which had been closed for renovations during our first trip, informed us of Marshall’s importance. Marshall is buried on the edge of town but we encountered limited references to him or his music during our visits to the festival. Engagement with the stories of Marshall inspired Daithi’s song ‘The Ghosts of Fochabers’, which featured in the soundtrack to *Finding Fochabers* (Ooi, 2019) and which we included in the workshops in 2022, generating further engagement between us, the local community, and local heritage.

While there were a number of highlights each year at Speyfest, one of the most popular events was the performance by the Fochabers Fiddlers. We wrote:

Surrounding their director, James Alexander who took his seat at an electric piano, the fiddlers filled the stage. They played a lively mix of old and new music including both interpretations of popular music, such as ‘Five Thousand Miles’ by the Proclaimers, and tunes composed by Alexander (Fieldnotes, 31 July 2016).

Echoing Bernadette Quinn’s (2009) acknowledgement that ‘community festivals emerge as small-scale, localised endeavours founded by people in place-based communities who are interested in celebrating something’ (Ryan, 2015, p. 235), Speyfest reflects the potential for growth driven by a community. Founded by James Alexander in 1980, the Fochabers Fiddlers is comprised largely of pupils from Milne’s High School aged 12-18 years old (www.fochabersfiddlers.com, accessed 23 August 2023). The impetus for starting the group was a trip to the Shetland Isles organised by Alexander with David Ferguson, the then minister of Bellie Church, inspired by the work of Tom Anderson and the Shetland fiddle culture. The fiddlers have travelled to America and Germany and return each year to perform at the festival in Speyfest. The decision to try and raise money for a minibus in 1994 led to a fundraising initiative that was to become Speyfest. According to Alexander, ‘we put together a two-day mini farm fete if you want and, as part of that, a group of fiddlers, pupils of mine, played on the back of a lorry’ (McCallig and Conroy, 2016). The festival grew subsequently to include a variety of stages and welcome well-known, professional acts. There was a desire

⁵ The importance of considering both remembering and forgetting is foregrounded in the work of historian Guy Beiner (2007; 2018).

to encourage young people and include contemporary bands in the line-up of the festival. According to Alexander:

I had been thinking about a festival for some time, hosted by Fochabers, but different from all the other festivals that were around here like The Traditional Music and Song Association, folk festivals, something that would involve ‘Celtic Music’ in its wider sense, even some of the more cutting edge contemporary bands at that time like Wolfstone. Young people were starting to associate with these bands. What intrigued me was that these bands were keeping old tunes alive but with a total different backing to them (Ooi, 2019).

Alexander’s reference to backing refers principally to the use of guitars, keyboards, percussion and a range of other instruments that often bring a popular or rock music aesthetic to the performance of a musical style traditionally heard on and associated with the fiddle. This musical exploration remains to the fore in Speyfest’s programming and is evident not only on the stage but in performances by The Fochabers Fiddlers.

Despite a desire for reflecting contemporary trends, there remains a strong regard for tradition and transmission at Speyfest. A particular highlight at the 2016 festival was the presentation of a fiddle to a young fiddle player. The fiddle, made by local man Charlie Armour from a tree in the village that was cut down, represented the selection of a young musician who was excelling in the development of his craft and his connection to the local place. (Fieldnotes, 31 July 2016). For Speyfest, the ranks of the local fiddlers are swelled each year by returning emigres, maintaining a connection with their homeplace and the tradition established by Alexander through their musical performances. It is notable that many graduates of the Fochabers Fiddlers have pursued the study of music in Higher Education.

The success of Alexander’s vision is evident in the presence of local performers, including Alexander’s former students, in the programming at Speyfest. The band Tour Bus Fortune have performed several times at the festival and feature fiddle player Ian Grigor, an early pupil of Alexander and member of the Fochabers Fiddlers. Fellow Fochabers Fiddler Colin Campbell, a local farmer and pharmacist who also learned fiddle from Alexander, performed a newly composed collection of songs entitled ‘The Moray Suite’ in 2022 celebrating the local area. The performance included images and multimedia referencing local culture and incorporates local dialect. Involving local musicians, many of whom had also learned from Alexander, the performance was an explicit evocation of local culture in musical form and spoke directly to a local audience while also entertaining visitors to the area. A younger band, Kilderkin, performed in 2019 and 2022 and feature fiddler McAuley Ross, another pupil of Alexander.

Alexander had already stepped down from his position teaching at Milne’s High School when we first travelled in 2016 but his successor, Alexander Davidson, continued the fiddle group and they continued to appear at the festival. Mhairí Marwick, a former pupil of Alexander, began teaching locally and established another young group, the Arc Fiddlers, who performed at the festival for the first time in 2017. Marwick was also one of the organisers of the Fochabers Fiddle Week and a series of concerts held in the Fochabers Public Institute, extending Alexander’s legacy and his aims for developing a music scene and ecosystem in the community. Marwick helped compile a collection of Alexander’s compositions published in 2020 (Alexander, n.d.), while other former students Ashleigh McGregor and Raemond Jappy took on the role of Chairperson and Treasurer on the Speyfest committee, stating their desire to continue James’ legacy and stay true to his vision.

While Speyfest demonstrated an engagement with old and new repertoire from Scottish and other musical traditions, often it was an aesthetic influenced by globalisation and commercialisation rather than the local. The regularity with which leading musicians and bands come to perform in Fochabers, notably for Speyfest, also impacts on the evolution of the local musical aesthetic. In *When Piping was Strong*, Joshua Dickson defines musical aesthetics as ‘a society’s evaluation of their own music, culturally embedded and expressed in a variety of ways both verbal and behavioural’ (2006, p. 211). The impact of festivals on musical style and participation at a local level and on local traditions is interesting. Writing in a Norwegian context, Chris Goertzen (1997) recognises the impact of festivals, in the context of competitions, on local fiddle styles and identities. This resonates with the perceived impact of Fleadhanna Cheoil on regional styles in Irish traditional music, whereby competitors follow trends in musical styles in an effort to be successful in competition, leading to a homogenisation in the soundscape (Kearney, 2013). While there is a strong local fiddle tradition that has a documented history to the eighteenth century (Alburger, 1983; Neil, 2012), the traditions on display at Speyfest relate more to a wider Scottish or indeed Pan-Celtic musical soundscape and identity, which reflect to the initial aims of Alexander (Ooi, 2019).

Edutainment and Inclusivity

A field can be transformed into a complex space of venues, stages, bars, classrooms and eateries in which people who may not normally meet and intermingle to share and experience culture. In an Irish context, Ciara Moley (2016) notes the different types of festivals and the various activities that can take place as part of a traditional music festival and how these relate to and shape place, community and identity. Festivals are essentially a social space in which communities are formed and reformed and Turino notes the role of festivals as ‘a primary way that people articulate the collective identities that are fundamental to forming and sustaining social groups, which are, in turn, basic to survival’ (2008, p. 2). Speyfest is particularly important to the Fochabers Fiddlers but has also provided opportunities for other local musicians to engage and be part of the local music scene.

Engaging with the relationship between festivals and a sense of place, Michelle Duffy (2000) notes the potential for non-involvement by local people in festivals. Unlike some other music festivals such as Tamworth Country Music Festival, where most of the performances are free and in the town-centre streetscapes (Gibson & Connell, 2005, p. 231) or Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann where there is a significant public engagement in playing music in a variety of spaces (Kearney & Burns, 2022), the performances at Speyfest are largely confined to the festival site and the festival is dependent on fee-paying crowds for sustainability. The mix and diversity of acts at the festival is noteworthy in terms of attracting audiences, developing an identity and sense of community, and promoting musical culture in the area. Many locals attend the opening night and there is a special reception for sponsors, many of whom are local. There is free admission to the craft day on Saturday and the family day on Sunday. All age groups could join in participatory activities such as céilí dancing. Alcohol was very evidently present at the festival but generally well-marshalled. The few who engaged in less than social behaviour were quickly warned or removed and the space always felt safe and supervised. The bar was an important source of income for the festival. In keeping with the ethos of the festival, the produce was local and offered a chance for customers to sample local beers, whiskies and gins (see also Haahti & Antti, 2014). On Saturday, other local craft and food producers also displayed and sold their produce and there were cookery classes and demonstrations. The festival events on the Sunday afternoon embraced all ages in a

comfortable setting, with seating arranged around tables on which many families arranged their picnics. Children were amused by clowns and displays of birds of prey while adults could engage in relaxed conversation.

<Figure 1.2 here>

Figure 1.2. Adèle Commins facilitating music workshop at Speyfest. Photograph by Steph Gilchrist, Wild Child Photography.

Many festivals include spaces for music education (or are preceded by summer schools or workshops), competitions and opportunities for non-professional and community groups to perform in front of large and appreciative audiences, which can help develop confidence amongst a community of musicians. Speyfest was founded initially to provide opportunities for the young Fochabers Fiddlers to gain experiences of and with professional traditional musicians. In each of the years that we attended, we facilitated music workshops and reflected:

The workshop participants, many of them quite young, arrived in good time, the majority carrying fiddle cases. Some of the older teenagers were very willing to help and some local teachers also attended. We divided the participants into groups based on the different levels to learn tunes, bringing the groups back together to learn songs and dances. (Fieldnotes, 29 July 2016).

During the first two years, our own students from DkIT took on the role of tutors. In 2022, two sisters who had participated during our earlier visits, Erika and Briony Stewart, joined us as support tutors and performed with us for our performance on the main stage. Each year we aimed to teach new repertoire, even though only some of the participants returned; we also included newly composed repertoire inspired by our visits to Fochabers in 2019 and 2022. Each time the workshop participants took to the stage at the festival to perform what they had learned. The goal of the workshops at Speyfest was to develop a short performance and give a platform to the workshop participants.

The workshops led to a first performance at the festival for many young local musicians, which encouraged them to continue their musical studies. The festival also featured a Young Performers Competition sponsored by the George and Ena Baxter Foundation.⁶ In the weeks preceding the festival, a number of preliminary rounds were held to select qualifiers. Each year we noted that the young performers were confident and assured. The competition helped generate additional local interest in the festival, as well as providing an opportunity for young musicians to participate in the festival. Reflecting on the development of the competition, which was an idea of former treasurer John Mehigan, George McIntyre of the George and Ena Baxter Foundation commented:

We wanted to support something around young people and when the Speyfest Young Entertainer of the Year was devised one year ago we were very keen to be involved and we were asked if we would sponsor the event. It was extremely successful in the

⁶ The competition did not take place in 2022, due in part to challenges related to COVID-19 restrictions that had been in place that had impacted on local activities.

first year and this year it has gone from strength to strength. The confidence that the young people have shown here today has just been overflowing and this year in particular has just seen an expanding, there has been great variation, there has been dance, there's been fiddle music, there's been pipe music, and the youngsters have just so much confidence. (Ooi, 2019).

While the Young Performers' Competition and Workshops demonstrated a desire to involve young people, Speyfest also included a non-denominational Celtic Kirk service, which had been started by Rev. Alison Mehigan when she was the Church of Scotland first minister of the united charge of Bellie and Speymouth and was influenced by Alexander's own deep faith and involvement in the church as a member of the Kirk Session. Moving the Kirk Service to the tented village from the tenth staging of the festival brought members of the community who had not previously entered into the festival space. At the service, we recognised that many of the volunteers at Speyfest also played a prominent role in their church community, reflecting the role that churches play in communities and their engagement with festivals and events (Dowson, 2014). Although Alison had left the area when we first attended in 2016, the event continued, led by her successor, along with the Roman Catholic priest Fr Tad Turski, and other community figures of different denominations. The service included special activities for children and involved a number of artists who provided music for the service. We were invited to participate on each occasion we attended – the request did not require any religious music but rather something to express ourselves. Other elements were led by Alexander and a small choir who led congregational singing. Following Alexander's death, the religious music was performed by his former student Mhairi Marwick and members of the Arc Fiddlers. The religious event is disruptive (see Dowson & Lamond, 2017) and brings together in one space, communities who usually attend separate, or no, religious ceremonies. Although there is a strongly Christian emphasis, there are efforts to acknowledge different beliefs and traditions.

The Spectre of Death in the Community

John Mehigan, treasurer of Speyfest, became a close friend of ours and would regularly keep in contact. Prior to Christmas 2016, Daithí received a phone call from John, who wished to inform us that James was ill and the prognosis was not good. Despite only meeting John and James at the festival, we had already established a strong friendship with them and others in the Speyfest community. At this point, we were already interested in developing our research on the musical heritage of the area and Daithí had arranged to return to experience Fochabers' Fiddle Week during Easter 2017. While there, he visited James at his home and they had a long conversation about life and music. James expressed his strong faith and desire to continue living and playing music, as well as his desire for Speyfest to continue to develop. Although there was a sense that we might not meet with James again, we travelled again for the festival in 2018. The weekend included a special tribute to James and he was joined by a number of his musical friends for a very special concert on the Friday night that reflected his immense contribution to Scottish traditional music and music education in Fochabers. Amongst the performers were his school friend Dougie Laurence, as well as prominent Scottish fiddlers Charlie McKerron, Paul Anderson, and Gregor Borland. Former students of James' included Mhairi Marwick and Raemond Jappy along with many Fochabers Fiddlers also performed.

The revelation that James was terminally ill brought about an upwelling of emotion in the Speyfest and wider Scottish music community. After twenty years, Speyfest was established but it was still very dependent on James' involvement, not only as chairperson but also in

identifying acts and rallying supporters. His ill-health was an impetus for many including Aly Bain and Phil Cunningham to return to the festival, to celebrate his contribution not only to Speyfest and music in Fochabers, but also in recognition of his wider contribution to music in Scotland, for which he had already been awarded an MBE and inducted into the Scottish Traditional Music Hall of Fame at a special event held in Fochabers in May 2017.

James lived for five years after his prognosis, giving his family and friends time with him and allowing the wider music community to honour him. Speyfest celebrated his presence and he continued to be its figurehead. There was a hope that James would be present for the 25th Anniversary but plans were disrupted by COVID-19. In 2022, when the festival returned after COVID-19 and a period during which James passed away,⁷ the event was poignantly opened by James' grandsons. Many of the newspaper headlines about the festival focused on the many tributes to James. In the aftermath of James' death, his daughters and former students came to the fore in ensuring the future of the festival, joining some of the parents who became involved in the festival through their children's engagement in learning music with James. The festival was underpinned by the Fochabers Fiddlers. They had changed over the previous decade from a continuously growing group of local musicians under James' direction to a dispersed community of fiddlers with the confidence to continue without their leader. Leadership came from within and the structures that James had nurtured. Speyfest brings these musicians back together each year, creating a space in which they celebrate their connection as a community and the music that has developed locally.

Conclusion

Music and music festivals play an important role in the identity of places and communities. Speyfest was initially established to provide local musicians in Fochabers opportunities to hear and perform with professional artists from a wider Scottish and international music scene. The festival has grown significantly since but has not lost its connection to the local community and, principally The Fochabers Fiddlers. It is an important social event that contributes to their continuation and resilience, particularly since the death of Alexander, who was a pivotal figure in the establishment and development of the festival and musical community. Our experience demonstrates how Speyfest connects the local community with an international network of musicians and audiences interested in Celtic music in its widest definition, while retaining a sense of local pride by programming and celebrating local musicians.

The musical sounds and aesthetics presented at Speyfest are integral to understanding the festival. Presenting itself as a festival of Celtic music, Speyfest reaches out to an increasing global community of artists who, to varying degrees, incorporate Celtitude and Celticity into their musical identities. The role of economics in the development of the term 'Celtic music' and the impact of festivalisation on musical aesthetics mirrors the importance of festivals to local economies and their promotion of identities linked to local heritage and culture. The music performed at Speyfest is contemporary, informed by modern musical aesthetics influenced by a broader pan-Scottish and pan-Celtic commercial music scene that verges into rock and pop music aesthetics. The local community of musicians have embraced these aesthetics and, although the historical significance of local composer William Marshall may

⁷ James Alexander passed away on 29 April 2022.

be forgotten, the current generation continue to express a local identity through performance at the festival.

Speyfest demonstrates the parallel importance of music as a community and commercial activity. The festival remains organised locally by a voluntary committee and is dependent on commercial sponsorship to programme a range of community and professional acts. The involvement of local volunteers and musicians connects the privatised space of the festival with the local community. Efforts at inclusivity and engaging with the community are evident in activities such as workshops and the religious event. There is a desire to make space for different groups within the community, who can contribute to elements of the festival without necessarily participating in or enjoying all aspects. Touring musicians, contracted security and production teams contribute to ensuring the highest standards for a safe and enjoyable festival experience. By providing a platform that is inclusive of both local and touring acts, Speyfest has impacted significantly on the ecosystem of traditional music around Fochabers, particularly in terms of the resilience of local music traditions, impacting on the sense of place and the development of a community of musical practice in Fochabers.

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