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Osian Cleaver - Music's influence on Identity

Hi, my name's Osian, a musician and writer from Swansea. Having grown up immersed in Welsh culture, two things I'm particularly passionate about are music and the Welsh language. When it came to planning out my dissertation, I became particularly interested in how such an upbringing may have shaped my identity. Having now graduated my Music Technology course at Swansea College of Art, here's a short snippet of my dissertation based on the influence of music on Welsh cultural identity.

Fig 1 *Osian Cleaver*, (2021)

Shaped by everything we see, read, hear, and believe - Identity is what sets each of us apart and makes us unique. Our identities are fluid and ever-changing - sculpted by our experiences, interests, and interactions. When delving deep into the theoretical rabbit hole that is identity, I came to wonder whether art, particularly music, can truly influence our identities, personalities, and beliefs? Yes, is the short answer - but that doesn't make for a particularly interesting read!

Attempting to reinforce my argument, I searched for a link between Welsh music and Welsh cultural identity. When talking of key Welsh musical talents, people often mention Tom Jones, Shirley Bassey, or the Stereophonics, but often-over-looked is the incredible Welsh language music scene. From Welsh protest icons Meic Stevens and Dafydd Iwan, to 80s post-punk icons *Datblygu*, this article will attempt to highlight the influence of Welsh language music on cultural identities across Wales.

It seemed only natural to start with cultural icon Dafydd Iwan, a singer and political activist who eventually went on to be the president of the political party, *Plaid Cymru*. For those unfamiliar with Iwan, his powerful Welsh language songs played an undeniably important role in the fight to protect Welsh language and culture throughout the 1960s and 70s. His now famous tracks *Yma o Hyd* (1983) and *I'r Gad* (1977) have been regarded as a "concrete example of the power and influence of popular song" (James, E.W 2005). When analysing Iwan's work, my focus was to uncover any potential references to Welsh identity and culture.

Fig 2. Iwan - *Carlo* (1969)

Another of his influential tracks, *Carlo* (1969), was written to rebelliously target Prince Charles and his new title as Prince of Wales. In this tongue and cheek song, Iwan attempts to highlight what he believed were the key elements of a Welsh identity. The song contains clear, obvious references towards identity and is a solid example of Welsh identity reflected through music.

We've now established that Welsh identity is mentioned throughout Welsh language music, but is it always as obvious and bold as seen with Iwan's lyrics? In the song

Tryweryn (1979) fig 5 Welsh singer/songwriter Meic Stevens wrote an emotional, descriptive tribute to the village of Capel Celyn in the Tryweryn Valley, North Wales. Meic Stevens is a much-loved singer songwriter from Pembrokeshire and became known throughout the 70s and 80s for his catchy psych-folk pop songs. He may be nearing his 80s but it's not unusual to find Stevens touring pubs and clubs throughout Wales' towns and villages.

Fig 3. Lyrics: Stevens and Jones - *Tryweryn* (1979)

Although *Tryweryn* (1979) references fewer characteristics of Welsh identity compared to Iwan's *Carlo* (1969) the song references the culturally significant event of Tryweryn. Taking place in the 1960s, Tryweryn saw the Welsh village of Capel Celyn drowned to create a water reservoir for Liverpool. Stevens' hard-hitting descriptions and emotive language serve to create a hard-hitting impression of the event and its implications in the 1960s.

The last band I will mention are Welsh post-punk heroes *Datblygu*. Known for their painfully honest lyrics describing the bleak reality of Wales in the 80s and 90s, *Datblygu* have been hugely influential in the music scene in Wales. Sadly, this year, saw the passing of the band's singer David R. Edwards, more commonly known as Dave Datblygu. With the loss of such an important figure, tributes came flooding in from the Welsh music and cultural scene such as Gwenno (Singer), Huw Stephens (Radio DJ) and Elis James (Comedian). Gwenllian Anthony from the popular contemporary Welsh indie-trio *Adwaith* (Established in Carmarthen in 2015) explained how *Datblygu* and Dave himself "directly and indirectly influenced us in our music, words and attitude." (*Welsh Art Review*, 2021). Through this we can see a perfect example of the impact that *Datblygu*'s music on the art, music, and identities of artists across the Welsh music scene.

Fig 4. *Datblygu* (2020) – *Cwm Gwagle* [Cover]

So, have these artists truly influenced Welsh identity? Or is it only the Welsh music scene that has been influenced by these icons? Last year, Dafydd Iwan's *Yma O Hyd* (1983) hit number one in the *iTunes* chart, an effort organized by the Welsh cultural and political organization *YesCymru*. Additionally, *Tryweryn* is an ever-growing symbol of oppression for Nationalists within Wales, making Steven's song relevant to this day, and *Datblygu* are highly regarded for their lasting impact on Welsh identities. This process has taught me that music is a truly powerful device. Although I have now finished my studies, I look forward to exploring further the impact of Welsh music on us. I have no doubt that modern Welsh bands such as *Adwaith*, *Mellt* and *Bandicoot* will make a huge impact on us over the coming years and inspire the next generation of Welsh language musicians.

Bibliography

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Images

Fig 1 Cleaver, O. (2021) *Osián Cleaver* [photograph].

Fig 2 Iwan, D. (1969). 'Carlo'. In: *Carlo/Y Dyn Pwysig*. WD 913 [Lyrics]. Welsh Teldisc; Wales, UK.

Fig 3 Stevens, M. & Jones, H. (1979). 'Tryweryn'. In: *Caneuon Cynnar*. C485G. [Lyrics]. Recordiau Sain Cyf; Wales, UK.

Fig 4 *Datblygu* (2020). *Cwm Gwagle*. [Front Cover] Ankstmusik; UK Used by Permission AnkstMusic.