

“I find myself listening more”

I've only been to Ethno England once. I was persuaded to join Ethno England by a friend of mine who's been coming for a few years now. He was saying "you have to see what this Ethno deal is about, it's international, it's a big thing, and I was like "ok fine", I'll just see. So I went, and it was a great experience. I particularly liked the fact that it was very collaborative, and you get to talk to people from all over the world, which is nice because normally when I'm doing folk music with other people here, I'm normally the foreign one.

I took part in everything that they offered; aside from the music making in the day, there were things like the walks in the countryside, a cooking thing... The things that happen in Ethno, is both the very official things and the not so official things. On the second night there was an open mic, and E was singing this wedding

song, so I asked her to teach it to me. We actually sat at the side of the road, you know very rural Oxford, to record ourselves singing this, because E had taught myself and M. It's these little moments like this, they were very meaningful.

Within the programme I had the chance to not only learn wonderful songs and tunes, I also had the chance to teach as well. I shared a waltz that I had just learnt. V was saying this kind of music you just taught us, is something that she could relate to. She said the music sounds quite similar to the stuff that she plays anyway. Even though we had a bit of a language barrier, it was an interesting situation where we could ..we had that something in common even though it is not really something in common, it is just something we could relate to.

What changed for me came out of something that happened in the school funnily enough. E shared a song that is indigenous to Australia and we had a conversation with the children about indigenouness. The Ethno experience is...it's very retrospective to myself, because I start thinking about how I'm related to another person. We were talking about ownership and trying to negotiate that ownership. It made me think a lot more about my life story so far because I'm from Singapore but my family is part indigenous there as well, so I have this thing going on as well.

It comes out in writing my PhD. I'm writing as an outsider to my field, and I think I've naturalised myself well there, but at the same time I'm also being very mindful about not presenting my views as being like "oh this is it" you know... there's always something that's hidden



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underneath and that conversation especially when E was singing the indigenous folk song and talking to the children about what does indigenous mean... that little conversation, it was not very long, but it had me thinking.

What I took away from Ethno is how I approach other kinds of folk musics, seeing the boundaries of which is able to be experimented. While we were trying to turn all these separate tunes into a set to be performed, at one point somebody said let's try playing these two tunes at the same time. Sometimes people may not appreciate that, being too experimental, but what's interesting is that this participant personally was willing to experiment with this new concept of playing two tunes at the same time, it was an interesting process.

Another thing that I took away was how to work together on a tune or a song or a set without using much language. With a collaborative thing, communication is kind of paramount. There were some participants who spoke English but didn't have the vocabulary to express what they had in mind and it was interesting to work with that, and it was great to see what comes out of it, despite the differences that we might have.

I started off playing music as a hammered dulcimer player, trained in Chinese traditional music. The dulcimer teacher and I had no common language, so our lessons were mostly a lot of observing and trying to figure out what he was saying. And the experience working with songs where perhaps the participants maybe didn't know the right vocabulary to express themselves reminds me of that time when I didn't have the vocabulary to express myself in these lessons in my teenage years. If I were to go back to my teenage self, having had this Ethno experience, I probably would have handled that language barrier that I had with my teacher better I think.

There was a lot of trying to see the intention behind something. When I am learning I see something it's sometimes quite face value and I think I understand it... That barrier of not understanding in the first place you have to kind of read between the lines and explore the other person's intentions. One thing is to listen more. Not just hearing, but listening between the lines, in the same way you read between the lines and trying to catch what the person is expressing through body language and whatever. I think I lacked those skills as a teenager to be honest.

I was trained to arrange music but to write every part down on a piece of paper, like orchestration and all that, and I've learned a completely new process of how to get around doing that with Ethno. Not everyone may read music - I don't read music very well. So this is quite refreshing, this whole process. I tried it with my band where the most we would write is forms - like Chorus, ABC and the chords - and it worked out really well. It's great because it is a way for us to kind of work with a more culturally neutral medium. One of the things I've noticed is that I find myself listening more because I wasn't reliant on what was written down.

It was overall a very nourishing experience. We are learning new tunes from other places that I never really imagined, I think that that would be my number one. And it is not only that I learnt the tunes that they taught us, but I went back home and then I found more tunes that I liked because like I went on YouTube searched for these tunes, I was like, oh, and this is recommended for me, so I'm going to hear that one, and I like that one too. So it kind of opened up new possibilities and I would say that would be the one thing that I would take away the most is the exposure to many other musical traditions.

As told to: Lauren

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**“a very nourishing
experience”**
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