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## Interview : Chris Jones

"...an incredible kind of emotional charge..." **Adam Walton, BBC Radio Wales**

There are some adjectives that I already feel I have worn through on this site - honest, authentic and evocative being the main three - making this article somewhat of a challenge.

Chris, especially on his last album *Dacw'r Tannau* and a recent Georgia Ruth Radio Cymru session, has very much asserted his right to be described using those three words - his rich baritone voice and folk virtuoso playing on guitar and bouzouki are the necessary foundations for his renditions of Celtic folk songs sung in English and Welsh, but it is the soul put into them that makes them sublime.

His last release was described [on this site](#) as: 'Yearning, resonant, grounded in real human stories, beautifully performed; *Dacw'r Tannau* ... what folk music should be.'

I met up with him in Caernarfon, he was immediately intelligent and articulate, and it was perhaps one of the most interesting hours of conversation I have ever had. Certainly I have met few people with such a passion for what they do. My intent was to find out how he had become a 'contemporary folk balladeer', and what he planned to do next.

It's a fascinating story - perhaps full of chance, but also a sense that whatever happened, music was something within him waiting to be brought out. His interest in folksong started at school:

*"It's a lifelong thing - when I was a little boy in primary school in Cwm y Glo there was a radio programme of folk songs for children and the whole class would sing along. That is definitely the origin of my liking for singing."*



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*"I was never caught up in the Eisteddfodic tradition, I was interested more in art - indeed I went to Bristol in '88 to study Fine Art. At that point the only performance I had taken part in was singing before rugby matches, I'd go down to Cardiff to watch rugby, to the pubs you can go to before the game famous for the singing."*

We diverted briefly to the singing in pubs around Anfield for hours before a Liverpool match, the depth of repertoire and the camaraderie, before getting back to Cardiff and the rugby:

*"There was a place on St Mary's Street - a Berni inn - groups of friends would sit in the snugs and sing competitively against others - but it also brought people together - even the bouncers would come down and sing in their suits like an impromptu male voice choir."*

*"At this point I already knew loads of folk songs by osmosis - my grandfather was a stonemason and had taught me to cut and carve stone when I was about ten years old, I used to sing as I carved from then on; and I grew up in a house with loads of music, all sorts of traditional music, and American folk records sent by relatives."*

It was not until he went to university that these influences came together, for social reasons and belonging, as much as a desire to perform:

*"The West Country was very rich in trad English singing in pubs in the late eighties, and Bristol had two very genuine Irish pubs - especially The Plough and Stars. I found these places quickly. I am working class and Welsh first language - the adjustment to city life was not easy - my feet even hurt for the first few weeks from walking all the time on the concrete pavements!"*

*"Added to that Art college can be a quite pretentious place - I wanted to get out and socialise elsewhere. I became increasingly fascinated looking at what was going on around me in the city culturally, and by the singing in the pubs I was going to, English, Irish and Scottish songs - the latter two from Irish friends - and by listening to Dick Gaughan, who was a big influence."*

He becomes animated describing the sessions he went to - one particularly in East Street where the thriving community has now

been displaced by a huge supermarket - he talked about the place and people with vivid, alive detail. Community and where music comes from is vital to him:

*"Folk music - in the 60s was about social consciousness - it is now de-politicised, it used to be about class and culture - now the bond has been weakened to the place where the music actually comes from."*

*"Folk music belongs to the people, and it is, or was, about their lives - and there is a loss when this connection is broken. It was about struggle - personal and political. If you remove the music from the community, from its roots, then you are left with songs that have lost the tradition and their sensibility."*

*"Much has been lost, it has been stripped away from the music; and bluntly, for me, if you haven't got anything to say (anymore), there is no point in me listening."*

We then talked about his experience of being a BBC Horizons artist (he was in the first selection in 2014):

*"I was surprised to be chosen - I was 45 - but it was an overwhelmingly positive experience - I made all sorts of contacts, and got to see how the broadcasting industry works - it was a challenge but I enjoyed it."*

He was impressed by the high quality in the group of acts he was with - he was especially positive about [Climbing Trees](#) as musicians and people. Thinking of his age in this group I then asked who *he* had learnt most from muscially:

*"I learned mostly by singing - I started out singing unaccompanied and every single sound is important. When you have to get it right, you learn quickly."*

*"I learnt an instrument when I was 22 - I inherited a Spanish guitar nobody else wanted in a shared house - then the next year I was meant to have a building site job and it didn't materialise, and I spent the summer living on a boat for three months, skint with nothing to do but learn the guitar. (Laughs) Even then I was using open tunings without realising it - tuning by voice, the only real influence on my guitar playing at that time was Dick Gaughan."*

*"I loved and love Meic Stevens - perhaps the most significant songwriter in Wales, not just in Wales though he stands up there with all the best - Bob Dylan et al. - and two triple harpists Nansi Richards, and Llio Rhydderch - I have my own triple harp and had some lessons with Llio Rhydderch. In my recent session there were two triple harp tunes transposed to guitar. That (last) influence is definitely there!"*

We discussed how he had aimed for an earthy feel to his last album, to keep as far as possible away from any 'diddly dee' or twee feeling. With this in mind I asked who he rates in folk in Wales at the moment (and this question was specifically folk as he sees it - we had a long, warm discussion about artists and bands at its edge and beyond, 9Bach included); perhaps unexpectedly Chris focussed in with real heartfelt enthusiasm on a young band he appeared with last year, [Band Nantgarw](#) (see video below), as epitomising his conception of it at its best:

*"Just in their organic playing they go against all that stripping out of politics and life from folk music. Their clog dancing was brilliant, wild. I really rate them - they have the right spirit."*

He explained the meaning of the Welsh word *parchus* - *polite and respectful* - feeling folk in Wales is often too constrained by this as an attitude. He sees folk music as being about real human self-expression, that is what he loves about it and wants to protect.

He has plans for a new EP and album, slightly held back at the moment by a minor hand problem he is due to have surgery for very soon. He is frustrated by the lack of venues in North Wales but is always hungry to play the music and songs he loves to an audience; he is actively looking for an agent for the first time, and you get the feeling that with half a lifetime of learning, absorbing and perfecting he is just getting into gear.

Chris Jones - genuine and forthright, and a truly superb musician and folk storyteller.

If you have a spare £5 you should buy [Dacw'r Tannau from his label SAIN](#). To help convince you here is [our review of it](#), and [another](#). You won't find a bad one.

To book Chris Jones for a gig - see [his Facebook page](#), and if you want to see him live following his [Twitter feed](#) is perhaps the best way to see where and when he is performing.

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Chris Jones, Next Market Day



### **Band Nantgarw Live**

Nantgarw live @ Calan Mai, Cardiff 01/05/2016 1...

