

## Review: *The Groove Is Not Trivial*

Tommie Dell Smith

Film. Cleveland, OH: Verite Productions, 2016

*The Groove Is Not Trivial* does indeed groove. Not only does Alasdair Fraser, noted traditional Scottish fiddler and star of the documentary, expound on his vision of the essential and evanescent nature of the underlying pulse, the groove, of Scottish music, the film flows with the fiddling of Fraser and his music campers. Directed by American documentary filmmaker Tommie Smith, this film combines extensive interviews with Fraser, footage of performances with collaborators such as American cellist Natalie Haas, and extensive documentation of classes at his music camps. Brief interludes of archival images and film combine to chart Fraser's self-articulated commitment to a new idea of Scottish musicality. For instructors, this well-produced documentary offers a range of theoretical questions, topical issues, and identitarian quandaries with which classes can engage, making it a welcome addition to the oeuvre of university classroom resources. In addition, the depth and extent of Smith's filmed interviews with Fraser, his musical collaborators, and his students provide a rich, if necessarily sculpted, ethnographic text with which scholars, fans, and practitioners can engage.

Fraser's skill as a teacher appears in the different approaches he takes with students at his music camps in Northern California, the Isle of Skye, and Spain. Fraser has gradually expanded his pedagogical efforts since 1983, when he opened his Valley of the Moon Fiddling School in Northern California. He has offered classes at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic college and cultural center on the Isle of Skye, for over 30 years, and in 2008, opened a camp in Spain. At Sabhal Mòr, Fraser focuses the primarily Scottish campers on the Scottish landscape as a primary source of individual musicality. He invites one camper to look out at the hills and play the topography she sees, and after days of struggle, the woman expresses something genuinely hers. In such moments, Fraser seems to argue that, when playing truly Scottish music, authentic musical inspiration emerges only from the Scottish landscape, perhaps a feeling amplified by Fraser's own distanced relationship to this landscape given his permanent resident in California. At his Northern California home, far from the Scottish Highlands and Islands, Fraser focuses his campers' attention on "the groove," on feeling music in the body rather than perceiving it visually through sheet music. Bereft of sheet music, the students stand and bob while playing as they attempt to heal themselves of what Fraser calls the "wounding" of conventional instruction in violin that, as he sees it, curtails joyful, confident, and truly individual performance.

A primary impetus for Fraser's radical approach to reclaiming a Scottish musicality arises from formative experiences in his youth. Born in 1955 in Clackmannan, Scotland, Fraser characterizes the era of his youth as a period of "cultural cringe," an antagonism towards, and retreat from, overt signs of Scottishness like accent and traditional music. His music instruction emphasized western art music and formal methods of instruction, and the oppositions between this style and Scottish traditional music was cemented while he was at university in Edinburgh. He wondered at the relegation of Scottish tunes to local pubs, which he visited following days of playing western art music in his

university orchestra. The contemporaneous ascendancy and commercial dominance of Irish traditional music in Edinburgh prompted Fraser to question the scarcity of Scottish music in Scotland. As he says in the film, he began working on “how to play in a Scottish accent.” Following his move to California, the reverence for Scottish music he found there further encouraged him to define his Scottish musical accent, even as he explored other musical genres. His return to Sabhal Mòr, and especially the section of the documentary closely tying his brand of Scottish musical nationalism to the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, suggest his determination to create value in Scottish culture and encourage other Scots to reclaim connections to Scotland’s land by using it as a source of unique, genuine musical inspiration.

A brief section in the middle of the film sets out a series of historical events and attitudes that led to the devaluation of Scottish musical culture. Footage of a burning fiddle shown at the beginning of the film, and the story of a fiddle-burning priest on the Isle of Skye reappear as evocative signifiers of cultural destruction that will be familiar to practitioners and scholars of traditional musics on the Atlantic edges. The English colonization of the Highlands and Islands, and the cultural decimation precipitated by the forced outmigration that followed, forms the core of the narrative chosen to support Fraser’s argument for cultural erasure and enduring cultural shame. As he says in the documentary, “There’s an injustice here [in Scotland], taming of a race so they could be controlled. If you want to suppress a people, you hit them in the culture where it hurts.” As someone who grew up in the Lowlands, Fraser’s search for personal musical authenticity and his decision to locate his teaching on the Isle of Skye affirms his personal experience of this suppression, and his views that the Highlands and Islands are sites of cultural integrity and even solace with which he can engage for personal inspiration and promote as a font of musical inspiration for others.

In a tantalizingly brief coda, we see Fraser beginning a third music camp in northern Spain. The footage of Fraser playing music with Spanish campers and the brief accompanying interview clips suggests Fraser is connecting to musicians whom, like his fellow Scots, he perceives as afflicted with the musical and social constraints of “cultural cringe”. The portrayals of Fraser connecting with the temporary communities of musicians he creates through his camps offers, for instructors and scholars, a fertile site for interpretation, though the documentary does not – and is not designed to – offer this sort of theorizing.

Through extensive original interviews, compelling musical performances, and deft interludes of historical narrative and news reports, director Tommie Smith weaves a riveting narrative of one musician’s mission to salvage his own relationship to his cultural heritage, and in so doing, connect musicians from around the world to their music through genuine embodied encounters. With Fraser’s vision and political leanings coming through so strongly and shown as so completely interwoven with his musicality, the film amounts to a fine ethnographic text.

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