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B B Skone tracks down a virtuoso Scottish fingerstyle guitarist to his home near Fishguard

The incredible string bard

‘A mix of Jimi Hendrix and Segovia in a kilt!’ is how one reviewer described acoustic fingerstyle guitarist Ben Edom and his music. No ordinary description – but then, Ben is no ordinary man.

Not many guitar players have served on an Arctic trawler, won the British National Canoe championship, helped build the Australian yacht that challenged for the America's Cup, run a dairy farm, or even practised as a kinesiologist.

Ben has done all these things and more, and usually with his guitar close to hand. (I may be exaggerating slightly here, for canoes and guitars don't go together unless you need an emergency paddle).

Ben's love affair with the guitar began when, at the age of eleven, he won a national art competition and bought one with his winnings.

I asked him why he didn't buy art materials with the proceeds, as he obviously had a talent for painting.

Smiling Ben replied: “It was 1963 and music was just beginning to get interesting and as I had won the £10 through my own ability it set me off on an unusual relationship with guitars, because it was not anything to do with anyone else's agenda.”

Now 28 guitars later, I was sitting in a room in his lovely house overlooking Fishguard Bay, discussing music with a man who is not only, according to a review from the Edinburgh Festival ‘a phenomenal player who takes you on a journey through many different styles and lands, while retaining a strong, modern Celtic feel to his work’ but is also someone who thinks deeply about his music and relishes the opportunity to discuss it.

Right up my street really but, to mix metaphors, I was soon out of my depth and up that creek without even a battered ukelele for a paddle.

“Music is almost a substance,” Ben remarked. “A substratum of reality which we all connect with to some degree.”

“People who are true masters of music, and I do not consider myself as one, they swim in this river of music which exists continuously.”

“Music is just there and comes as a completeness. It is an extraordinary thing which I experience from time to time. You need a high level of integrity to enter that river and stay in it.”



Master of many different styles.... Ben Edom.

I followed his drift but thought he was being too modest, for if you listen to his music (his album *Spindrift* is available from www.benedom.com) you will discover breathtaking performances of Celtic, classical, flamenco and contemporary fingerstyle virtuosity.

Yes, he does have a tremendous technical ability, but for Ben that ability is a means to an end – his warm and sincere personality shines through in his music and he demonstrates a deeply held belief in its ability to lift the human spirit.

“My job is to provide music to anyone who will listen and not try to be too clever. Getting that subtlety like, say, BB King who bends one note and holds it for a bar works for him but doesn't work for me. You have to find your own way,” continued Ben.



"Although I play other people's tunes I don't copy them, I perform them my own way but I learn them because they say something I want to say."

And whatever he 'says' with his music, whatever delicious fruits he lays before us to enjoy, are deeply rooted in his Celtic, and specifically Scottish ancestry.

"My father was a naval man but wherever he was, if he heard Scottish pipes playing, tears used to fall down his face," Ben explained. "Watching the White Heather Club was an unmissable ritual. The Corries, The Spinners – this was the folk music I grew up listening to."

Growing up in the '60s Ben obviously had other influences such as The Beatles and was lucky enough to be taken to concerts by Segovia and Julian Bream. Maninas De Plata's brand of flamenco was a particular inspiration.

Ironically, perhaps, after spending several years in Scotland and Wales, it wasn't until he moved to Australia in the 1990s, that he became reacquainted with Celtic music and began performing again.

"I was absolutely overwhelmed by the response to Scottish music there, music I hadn't heard for years," Ben said.

He played at the same music club for five years, meeting his partner Debra Carey there, and they began playing together in duos and bands. Debra plays the clarsach – the Scottish small harp.

Eventually they moved back to Scotland and continued where they had left off down under; for the next ten years they were in great demand playing concerts, ceilidhs and the like for weddings, functions, festivals, and house parties from the Orkneys to Oxford.

Even though Ben has played at some of the UK's leading festivals including the Cambridge Folk Festival, Celtic Connections, and the Ullapool Guitar Festival, he prefers the intimacy of house parties.

He explained that "at house parties you are eyeball to eyeball with a relatively small number of people who are really listening. The music has to be precise. Though I know for many people listening to the music it is the atmosphere they get, not a note by note analysis."

One person who did make a note by note analysis was the great John Renbourn who, as serendipity would have it, walked into a festival gig when Ben was playing his own arrangement of West Wind, a tune made famous by John Renbourn himself.

Generously, not only did he commend Ben on his playing but recommended a studio where Ben could record the *Spindrift* album, a suggestion others were making at the same time.

Ben has made other albums since, including *A Crofter's Heart* with Celtic Soul and appeared on the compilation CD

The Complete Songs of Robert Burns, but *Spindrift* remains his finest showcase.

It is a beautiful album, on which he is joined by Debra on clarsach. Ben plays all the guitar parts on the record as well as bodhran and, unsurprisingly, the diggeridoo.

One of the guitars he plays on the album has seven strings and he has become recognised as one of the very few seven string fingerstyle guitarists in the UK.

Hmm I wonder, like gurning five string bassists and wild hair flowing twin neck guitarists, isn't this just a show off's gimmick?

Ben chuckles, too polite to point out my ignorance, and explains: "I love the sound, like the deep sound of a 'cello's bottom string, and it is good for solo work when there is no bassist. I also like to play a bit of Bach. He was a man who wrote good bass lines and you need to get down below that low E."

"Both Celtic and contemporary music work well with the extra bass."

Of course I know Ben is no show off; he is unpretentious with a great love of his music. And a man who relishes a challenge.

He continued: "Deciding to play a seven string guitar was a difficult decision to make, you have to completely rewire your brain because adding that extra string throws out everything you already know."

Now he is living in Pembrokeshire and thinking about performing again, I wondered if he would be adding Welsh tunes to his existing Celtic repertoire?

"I love hearing spontaneous Welsh singing," Ben replied. "Welsh tunes are different, the singing is so complex and the harmonic interaction demands complete inner silence. It is not built on the top line like Irish and Scottish music in which there may be different styles but the same top line."

"Welsh music is an enormous joy – the harmonies and interactions with the energetic pings on different notes make it wonderful to listen to."

Then with typical modesty Ben added: "It is way beyond me, which is a big change because all through my life I have thought 'I could do that'."

At the risk of sounding like the '80s Ben Elton character who used to tell those who were better informed than he was 'don't do it like that, do it like this', I think I know a man who could. A man whose music blends passion, beauty, pride and humour in every note.

Look out for his upcoming gigs.

BB SKONE

- **BB Skone presents the local music show @7pm every Sunday on Radio Pembrokeshire.**
- **Check out BB Skone's Pembrokeshire Music Show page on Facebook.**

