

FILM REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE FILMS

Smith, Tommie, dir. 2016. *The Groove Is Not Trivial*. Verite Productions. Digital. 60 minutes. www.thegroovemovie.com.

RONNIE GIBSON
University of Aberdeen

The Groove Is Not Trivial (Tommie Smith, dir. 2016) is a video-documentary profiling master Scots-fiddler Alasdair Fraser and his “personal quest for self-expression.” It combines original interview material with archival content to give insight into Fraser’s biography and cultural perspective, rooted, as it is, in the politics of Scottish nationalism. In addition, discussion of his experience as an emigrant musician is of particular interest, given the emerging issue of globalization within Scots-fiddle studies.

Alasdair Fraser is renowned for his spirited and compelling performances of Scottish fiddle music and his fiddle camps in California and Scotland. Growing up in Clackmannan, Scotland in the 1950s, he initially worked in the oil industry and enjoyed music as a hobby, becoming a full-time professional musician only after emigrating to California in 1981. The “groove” referred to in the documentary’s title is a central component of his approach to performance, which is defined by a focus on rhythm and the need (real or imagined) to energize dancers. Another important aspect is the idea of “finding your voice” musically: he speaks of finding his voice in the classically oriented violin culture of Scotland in the 1960s and 70s, and participants at his fiddle camps describe the revelation

of exploring their individuality under his tutelage.

The result is compelling, as evidenced by footage of a group performance at his Californian fiddle camp, Valley of the Moon: smiling musicians of all ages bob and sway as they play enthusiastically without reference to sheet music. Indeed, the group is explicitly “not an orchestra,” described instead by Fraser as “an anarchic bunch of fiddlers” — a further signal of his reaction against the musical aesthetic of mainstream music education in the UK.

His Scottish fiddle camp on the Isle of Skye is presented in the context of the Gaelic cultural revival in Scotland, the history of which is outlined in a strongly-coloured colonial-nationalistic narrative that concludes with the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. The combination of culture and politics is problematic because camp participants need not necessarily share Fraser’s political views. However, he makes no apology for his open support of Scottish nationalism and utilizes ideas of “Scottishness” in his teaching, such as the wild Highlands, whisky, and haggis, to communicate his vision of the music. Indeed, his personal politics are highlighted in footage of a performance to mark a visit to the camp by the First Minister of Scotland, Alex Salmond, in the run-up to the Independence referendum: Fraser is seen leading participants as they play his composition, “The Referendum.”

Interestingly, the group performance at the Californian camp was much more energetic than that in Scotland, and this

was reflected in the atmosphere conveyed at each camp more generally: the Californian camp was clearly modelled on an American summer camp, including the freedom of being away from home and among nature. While the natural landscape was also a significant part of the Skye camp, the attendant weight of history and cultural heritage shaped participants' experiences differently.

The difference in performance affect between the camps also reflects participants' felt connection with the music, and the phenomena of performing Scots-fiddle music at "home" and abroad. The practice of heritage within "home" and diaspora communities always differs, but this documentary demonstrates how the musicians in California have taken ownership of the music they perform rather than being deferential to practices in Scotland. Indeed, Fraser's own ex-patriot motivation for exploring his national culture was described by Paul Machlis, who has collaborated with Fraser since his early days in California and observed the creative stimulation felt by Fraser as he explored old collections of Scottish music away from "home."

Fraser's status as an emigrant musician is significant within Scots-fiddle studies. The globalization of Scots fiddling has been noticeable for many decades (if not centuries), but unlike other Scottish exports such as country dancing and pipe banding, narratives about the practice have yet to adequately address the phenomenon. Defined by some stakeholders as a closely delimited repertoire of historical dance tunes (mostly reels and strathspeys) and associated performing practices, this seemingly essentialized description belies the diversity of practice subsumed under

the Scots-fiddle banner. Ultimately, this documentary celebrates that diversity and provides a valuable insight into the globalization of Scots-fiddling through the perspective of Fraser's performance and teaching activities.

Recent success by North American entrants at the premiere fiddle competition in Scotland incensed some supporters of the music, who claim ownership on the grounds of nationality; but as with country dancing and pipe banding, Scots-fiddling is now practiced far beyond national boundaries. The organization Scottish Fiddling Revival (F.I.R.E.), regulates regional and national competitions across the US, supporting Scots-fiddling on a larger scale than similar organizations in Scotland, and competitors feel as much right of ownership as supporters in Scotland.

The dialectic between tradition and individuality inherent in Scots-fiddle performance, while only eluded to in the film, is at the core of Fraser's approach to performance. As demonstrated in the film, he creates a space at his Californian camp for participants to explore their creativity, in contrast to a dogmatic approach to teaching regional practices. Studies of the repertoire are complemented by arrangements of recent compositions, with the emphasis on the individual participant rather than a stifling tradition.

This video-documentary uniquely profiles an emigrant Scottish fiddler and will be of interest to a wide range of stakeholders, including researchers of traditional music, music education, and Scottish culture, with the relationship between culture and politics brought into particular relief by reference to the 2014 independence referendum. 🍀