

COME WITH ME TO A PLACE WHERE MUSIC REALLY LIVES...

Imagine a place where a life in music could be encouraged and supported from the start. Here, mentors could work with children and young adults to help them ambitiously develop their creativity, giving them the tools to be inventive performers, collaborators, thinkers, leaders and entrepreneurs.

Thanks to this support, young people would gain the resourcefulness and resilience to express themselves with confidence, manage their careers, and gain crucial skills that they could then pass on to others in turn. It's utopian thinking, clearly – but I've found out in recent months that this place exists. I've discovered that all this activity already happens across many organisations, in the country where I live – and still can if we continue to support **and finance** youth music development in Wales.

As a music journalist for the Guardian and the Observer with twenty years experience of working within the music industry – many of those years in London, with work internationally – I've never met young people who've had the amount of opportunities and enthusiastic support that they get in Wales. In recent months, I've met young record label bosses, promoters, composers, MCs and artists under 25 whose lives have been changed by expert guidance, welcoming networks and, crucially, funding.

I've also spent time with dynamic organisations, institutions and individuals keen to share their success stories within the wider United Kingdom and beyond – and have seen how closely people are working together in Wales to make big things happen. As someone who was once a young person growing up in Wales learning music, who returned to her home country in the last decade as a parent, I have felt part of an exciting, progressive nation in recent years, seeing our devolved government's commitment to understanding and promoting the value of the arts in the 2014 Wellbeing Of Future Generations Act and more recently the Welsh National Plan for Music Education.

But although I have met enthusiastic people of all generations excited and heartened by the activity in Wales in 2024, many stress that this is a fragile ecosystem needing desperate attention from within and outside our country's borders. "The young artists and music organisations we support are doing brilliant work," says Rhian Hutchings of Anthem, the youth music fund established in 2018 following a Welsh Government report exploring ways to support young people's music-making and learning in Wales – an organisation which has become a vital cog in the nurturing and development of agile partnership working across the country.

"But I also see that everyone is right on the edge at the moment," she continues. "Projects get funded but funders can't afford to keep the money coming. Budgets are being squeezed. Young artists are reaching for a career that doesn't pay them enough to pay their rent. We need commitment to a longer-term vision for the music industry in Wales, and we need to value creativity. It is the lifeblood of our culture."

And behind words like these – of course – is the heart and the soul of our music.

COME WITH ME TO A PLACE WHERE YOUNG PEOPLE IN MUSIC ARE BROUGHT TOGETHER ONLINE – WHERE THEIR LIVES START TO THRIVE

On a dark Tuesday evening in February 2024, I'm surrounded by the smiling, eager faces of young people. They're from Bethesda in Gwynedd, Talgarth in Powys, Talgarreg in

Ceredigion, Llanelli in Carmarthenshire, Gorseinon, west of Swansea and the suburbs of Newport and Cardiff: a patchwork of faces on a screen from all over the country.

For one night only, I'm joining Anthem's youth forum online, now called Anthem FFWD, set up in 2021 to bring together under-25s involved with music across genres in Wales. Fifteen members a year are given paid consultation roles and meet regularly to talk, plan and collaborate. The idea behind it was to support Anthem's work, by finding out what is needed in youth music from those who know best: the young people themselves.

Brilliantly, it's led to much more than that. Anthem FFWD's helped foster creative partnerships, like the making of new music, live showcases and short films. It's also sparked new directions for these young people's careers – and it helps that young people were instrumental in its institution.

Take the development of the Anthem Gateway, an online resource of opportunities, industry links, and other information for new artists following their trails. One of its developers was former Forum member Josh Whyte, known as Blanko or his recording name, Blankface, an artist who mixes hip hop, R&B, grime, trap, soul, afro and gospel in his music. He's also a creative producer and co-founder of NxtNow which puts together emerging music creators and innovative brands. He worked together with Aisha Kigwalilo, a neo-soul and R&B artist who performs as Aisha Kigs, producing her music and landscape-and-glitterball-filled videos in Wales.

“So many artists who've gone through Anthem have come out on top of their game,” Whyte says today. Last year he won a Race Council Cymru National Black History Wales Youth Award, and has recently been working as a production coordinator at National Theatre Wales. “Working with Anthem helped me realise that music could lead to so many different, less-known-about careers,” adds the Cardiff-born and raised Kigs. Part of Cardiff collective Ladies Of Rage, a network supporting women and non-binary artists and creatives in MOBO genres, she's about to film for Backstage on ITV and is launching her debut EP, Fire Hazard, at Cabaret at the Wales Millennium Centre in April. “It made me realise you can be a data analyst, project manager, accountant, writer, as well as a performer, and start things from the ground up with so many inspiring people – [and] Anthem has given so many people some of their first opportunities.”

Many more people from across the country can attest to this tonight. There's Latin-influenced singer-songwriter and producer Adjua, who ran the Diff Ambition gig series for Anthem in 2023 and has recently recorded a session for BBC Wales. There's Celtic folk artist Mari Mathias from West Wales, whose work reinvents Welsh language traditions “I've thrived being involved with Anthem and gained the confidence to do lots of things like compose for theatre and run events,” she smiles, her enthusiasm filling the screen.

Then there's Fruit, the impressive non-binary grime MC still living in the Bannau Brycheiniog, who grew up in rural social housing; they're now setting up a community interest company to give “other people the opportunities I never had.” There's drum and bass and EDM dynamo Right Keys Only, who's just launched her new band, Keyz Collective, in dazzling live shows, around being an incredible champion for disabled artists through her major Amplifying Accessibility project for Arts Council Wales.

The variety of genres people perform in this forum is brilliantly wide, opening up opportunities for new ways of working. Indie-rock musician and events promoter Dafydd Hedd, from Bethesda, links up Welsh language artists across North and South Wales, while

Swansea-born contemporary composer and sound artist Tayla-Leigh Payne, raised in more traditional Welsh language state school music education, has discovered access to new ideas, programmes and schemes. “It’s helped me develop a new creative voice,” she says.

Anthem’s also given musicians the agency to engage in policy and research. Violet Hunt-Humphries, founding member of psychedelic funk and soul band Nookee, ran a four-month consultation for Anthem in 2022 with young creatives which fed into the development of the Anthem Gateway. Anthem also supported a research and development Welsh language project, Amlen, through its Atsain fund; Keziah (Kez) O’Hare, a hip hop-influenced multi-instrumentalist from Llanelli who performs under the name Kawr (Giant), is the co-lead officer of the project.

Anthem’s way of working is revolutionary, she reckons. “We’re all making the change – and everyone here’s so anti-gatekeeping! The people here encourage you, invite you to do things, open up their contacts, share so much. I think the government needs to be influenced by us and wake up to what’s happening actually.” The patchwork of faces on the screen smiles, and the chat screen fills with agreement. “It doesn’t feel like we’re pitting ourselves against each other in a race in Wales. It feels like we’re all in this together to be heard as a nation, regardless of genre, regardless of what people are performing. ”

The interweaving of so many disparate, enthusiastic elements is the key to the power of youth music in Wales. This collaborative spirit also happens away from screens at events Anthem runs, knowing the importance of people meeting in the flesh, having chance encounters and conversations, firing up new possibilities. A big one for them is the Atseinio [Echo] conference, co-run with Beacons Cymru, a Wales-wide organisation supporting the next generation of young people aspiring to work in the music industry, as part of their SUMMIT music industry conference.

It’s here we go now, to Cardiff’s Utilita Arena, to see how Anthem acts as a central cog in this wheel of partnerships and connections. It’s a wheel around which many other groups act as solid spokes, spinning together, making motion, travelling forward.

COME WITH ME TO A PLACE WHERE YOUNG PEOPLE IN MUSIC ARE BROUGHT TOGETHER IN PERSON – WHERE COLLABORATIONS ARE CELEBRATED, AND STARTED

The Utilita Arena is buzzing on this rainy Wednesday morning. Our MCs for the day are warming up – Anthem’ FFWD’s Right Keys Only and presenter Bablu Shikdar, who works with the brilliant Larynx Entertainment collective in Wrexham, who work to support and showcase MOBO musicians in Wales. It’s been a brilliant few years for independent Black artists in Wales like Gwynedd’s Sage Todz, Newport’s Lemfreck and Cardiff’s Mace The Great, and Larynx has a similarly energetic, entrepreneurial drive that Shikdar embodies with so much enthusiasm and generosity.

“Bore da, pawb!” he beams. “Welcome to the music conference designed and delivered by young people for young people!”

A one-day conference showcasing the work of individuals as well as youth music projects across Wales, enthusiastic professionals attend and speak too, all wanting to champion the same thing – a brighter future for youth music. Everyone’s all energy and no ego up at the podium. Aisha Kigs talks about how much different things seem to be for Welsh artists, on the ground, in recent years, how it feels “like we’re at the beginning of something, and we’re being that change”. Beacons Cymru project officer Yasmine Davies, from the rural

Rhymney Valley, talks about the success of their projects that enable “entrepreneurial spirit” like the brilliant Forte, which runs a programme of masterclasses, exploratory songwriting sessions, and assistance with recording, marketing, rehearsals, live showcases and wellbeing.

She then reminds people of the elephant in the room – the pressures on finances – but adds how we have the tools to change things right here. “Things may look bleak from a funding perspective, but I know we’ve got the right people in this room to help find a way forward.”

Excitingly, the energy bubbling through Wales is being noticed and supported by organisations across the UK. Cardiff-born Matt Griffiths, the leopardskin-shirted CEO of national UK charity, Youth Music, can’t let his enthusiasm be contained as takes his slot. “Wales gets it”, he beams from the podium, adding that it has “a strong identity and authenticity resonates with people – like the best music.” They’ve put £812,633 into projects in recent years, he adds, because “we believe in the young people here – the proposition in Wales is just irresistible.”

Oliver Morris from UK Music, the umbrella organisation representing all sectors of the music industry in the four nations, adds to me over coffee that it does feel like something particularly special is going on here. Welsh-speaking and living in his hometown of Aberystwyth, he’s “always been very proud of what Wales tries to do in terms of policy and being different and leading the world in many ways”, he begins. “But right now, the country’s a really interesting incubator for ideas. It’s an exciting place to live and to make music.”

Another Welsh-born executive working nationally and internationally, OneFest organiser Sandra Bhatia, says similarly as part of a panel on access to the music industry in Wales. “Networks of intelligence are being harnessed here on an impressive scale,” she says. “And it may be because of its size, or its character, or its personality, or all three, but Wales understands the power of a network – and how you’re as good as your last relationship in this game.”

As the day motors on, new relationships are fostered through specific subject sessions and creative activities (if you haven’t seen tables of strangers building plans for the careers of young people out of Post-it notes, Plasticine and Lego like I did, you’re frankly missing out). I also learn about specific projects, like Future Blood in Pontardawe, a weekly music development session where composer, producer and member of Prodigy-supporting dub and breakbeat band Red Snapper, Rich Thair, offers young people the chance to develop performance, improvisation and production skills. It’s free, packed out every week, and has transformed the arts centre on an otherwise quiet night.

Thair’s model reflects what he thinks young people want. “It’s an outlet for people to mentor each other and look after each other. And I’m not a teacher. I’m a guide. I just leave them to do what they want, and the sessions work because the energy comes from the ground up.” Future Blood has now taken its work to Swansea too, working with the exciting new Grand Ambition collective at the city’s Grand Theatre, an exciting partnership begun in 2022 with Swansea Council.

I also meet managers from the brilliant Sound Progression in Cardiff, an organisation working with eight youth centres in the capital to give young people from socio-economically disadvantaged or diverse backgrounds access to music. They run after-school workshops and daytime provision and its collective has a stage at the

Immersed! festival at the University of South Wales. “It’s our trust in these young people that matters,” says Sound Progression manager, Carole Blade. “And for young people to know whoever they are, wherever they’re from, they have value.”

The Atseinio day ends with a note from presenter Shikdar, which echoes, appropriately, in my mind as I head off into the late afternoon. “We’ve got to have the courage to do things we want to do when we’re scared, things we want to do that offer such opportunities for self-development.” He’s right. In difficult economic times, Wales knows that to keep on creating and collaborating as best as it can is the only way to give young people the chance to give their lives – internally, socially, personally and professionally – a bold tune.

COME WITH ME TO A PLACE WHERE YOUNG PEOPLE OF SCHOOL AGE ARE BEING GIVEN NEW MUSICAL BEGINNINGS

But Anthem’s work for 16-25 year-olds doesn’t sit in a bubble or a silo. It hopes that a love of music can be fostered and encouraged long before that, hence their close connection with the new National Music Service for Wales, following the publication of the Welsh National Plan for Music Education in 2022.

Launched by the Welsh government to kickstart music education after the Covid-19 pandemic, it intends to help children and adolescents become alive to the possibilities of what music can do. It gives them increased access to early music experiences, instruments, live performances and opportunities to make music with others, in ways that improve equity, diversity and inclusion, as it understands music’s importance to lifelong health and wellbeing.

Anthem has been working closely with the National Music Service to ensure that pathways between music-making in early life and early adulthood are connected and consistent. They also co-run an Open Forum event which takes place in different venues across Wales to help connect the dots across Wales, so projects and ideas driven by the new plan, from different parts of the country, can be presented and disseminated to inspire others.

Last Autumn, they were in Bangor; today they’re in the venue space at Yma at Pontypridd, a new centre for culture, creativity and the arts in the Welsh Valleys, full of tables of people from government, education and outside organisations sharing stories over many cups of tea and coffee. The beaming National Music Service for Wales co-ordinator, Mari Pritchard, reports on how a thousand new schools have registered on their new Charanga Cymru digital platform, full of resources for class music-making, and how sustained work with folk development organisation Trac Cymru and the National Eisteddfod helped this happen.

“It matters to us that our work and events like today are not just a talking shop,” says Pritchard. “They’re about exploring the energy we have to collaborate right around the country.”

We’re shown so much evidence of that energy today. There’s a film of a project mixing young musicians from CF Music Education with the orchestra of Welsh National Opera, while Loz Collier from Welsh big band collective the Siglo Section talks about rocking up with the band and all their brass instruments to six schools in Welsh Valleys. “They didn’t have a clue what was going on,” he laughs, “and we blew their tiny minds!”

We hear about the focus on building ensembles from Aeddán Williams, the hugely engaging Professional Lead for Music at Rhondda Cynon Taf, who has built up a jazz group from the ground, led by the interests of kids, harnessing the skills of current staff. “It’s important to think what your goals are and why,” he says, full of energy and verve. “You have to build from where you are, instead of jumping into new territories for the sake of it. Give players responsibility, respect and space. Lean into their strengths and work on their weaknesses in the background.” He reminds us how important charismatic, encouraging role models are to young people – who then come in, and perform a brilliant rendition of Herbie Hancock’s Watermelon Man.

This idea of enabling creativity from children themselves, rather than adults disseminating their ideas, is thriving elsewhere. The National Eisteddfod team talked about how their musical exhibits at this year’s festival week will be more about encouraging play rather than top-down education. Also, their support of Merched yn Gwneud Miwsig (Women Who Make Music) has enabled young Welsh-speaking women to make fanzines, attend workshops and perform gigs, including on international showcases. Ty Cerdd is full of eagerness about new ways of collaborative working too, talking about their support of new composers, and how they’re encouraging young artists who’ve never written in Welsh before to apply for commissions.

A session run in the afternoon by Evan Dawson, Chief Executive of National Youth Arts Wales, begins with an important analogy for us all - the audience today, as well as wider government and other funders – to dwell on. His organisation looks after the national youth choir, orchestra, brass band, theatre and dance ensembles, and he talks of the idea of a brilliant circus coming to town for a week, all bells and whistles, before suddenly disappearing, to much despair. He then talks of another circus that the town helps to build, full of diverse programming, like accessible relaxed performances, that runs for the same time. Then everyone in the town comes to say goodbye to the performers on the last day, having sustained the skills and enthusiasm to continue similar good work themselves.

“We have to remember how music provokes reflections, stirs emotions, and makes us ask questions long-term,” Dawson adds. Later, I talk to him about how musical skills are not just about passing exams, but about giving essential value for a more harmonious life. “We hope to get young people internalising their musicality, so they don’t think about it,” Dawson says. “So the music just becomes a creative experience and a social experience – something that they just enjoy.”

The idea of what music collaboration could look like is also being expanded by large organisations like his in progressive ways. He talks about National Youth Arts Wales’ work with the National Youth Open Orchestra, incorporating young disabled and non-disabled musicians, and Taking Flight Theatre, who work with deaf and hard of hearing young people. He also thinks a lot about the accessibility of music technology in teenagers’ bedrooms, and how he plans to harness that creativity in real-world, real-time collaborations. “Having that real-world contact is so important, and it’s so different – and combining different kinds of performers is where things get really exciting. If we can bring our orchestra together with our dancers, or our actors together with electronic musicians, joining the new with the old – that’s when new things can happen.”

Dawson doesn’t avoid the question of falling numbers for GCSE and A-Level Music qualifications across schools and tertiary colleges in the last decade. Stretched education budgets also mean that teachers have less support to take time out for professional development – so focus, and money, is essential in these areas too.

“I find the drop in GCSE and A-Level uptake really saddening, but now is the time to impress on people how music can educate kids in so many ways, through our schools and other projects. If they want to work in music, we also need to tell them they don’t have to be a soloist or perform in a top orchestra – saying that’s what success looks like is a very old-fashioned view.” The most fulfilled busy musicians Dawson knows do a whole range of different things, he says – teaching, performing, charity work, taking up interesting commissions.

He also doesn’t think that everything we do in our careers should be for some economic purpose. “It’s good to do them just to be a fulfilled person.”

What’s striking when speaking to Dawson, and to so many other people committed to music-making in Wales, is that music’s importance beyond careers, beyond professional connections, feels like a solid, tangible thing in our country already. This is perhaps partly because of our heritage and identity as a musical nation, but also because its music’s importance to real-world friendships, partnerships and wellbeing is something we have experienced through choirs, bands and other groups – and we know in our hearts that these feelings are the key happier future.

“One of the things that’s great about this country is that people are creative and interesting and interested in each other,” Dawson says. “And the arts are the best way to bring people together. If you want to be a compassionate, fulfilled member of society, then that’s why you do music.”

COME WITH ME TO OTHER PLACES WHERE YOUNG PEOPLE IN MUSIC ARE SUPPORTED, PROMOTED AND FUNDED

As my months exploring Welsh music went on, I started to feel this piece could continue for so many more bars, more tracks, more movements. I discovered and fell in love with a brilliant new magazine, *Cwlt*, produced and beautifully designed by Welsh graphic designer Jon Mlynarski, full of pieces featuring young, upcoming musicians and exciting new clubs, alongside interviews with big stars like Gruff Rhys.

I found out there’s so much more to be said about Creative Wales – a huge player in this field – who help fund new artists and commercial music industry growth. They also support the PRS Music Foundation’s Power Up programme, an ambitious, long-term initiative which supports Black music creators and industry professionals and executives, as well as addressing anti-Black racism and racial disparities in the music sector, and are publishing a digital map of the Welsh music scene in the coming months, which will be of enormous help to new artists, promoters and music lovers.

Giving young people development opportunities when their careers have already begun is another area where Wales is blazing – which is where the work of Creative Wales has benefited two young female artists I speak to. Hana Lili spent her childhood singing at school, and tells me how growing up in Wales was so important to her: “because it makes performing onstage feel like something really normal!” After playing grassroots gigs from her mid-teens (“with just my synth, an iPad and keyboard!”) she got support from the Beacon Cymru’s Forte Project, airplay on Radio 1, then last summer supported Coldplay at Cardiff’s Principality Stadium – an exciting achievement for a bilingual artist. “That was nuts! It’s such a fantastic testament to them as a band that they have local artists support them wherever they are in the world – but the support I’d had already gave me confidence, too.”

Another support slot with chart-topping pop star Tom Grennan in Swansea's Singleton Park followed last summer, and money from the PPL Momentum Music Fund this year, run by PRS Foundation in partnership with Creative Wales, has been crucial to her work ever since. "It's been one of the most beneficial things for me as an artist because it's allowed me to go into a studio with my band and take the time as an artist to develop my sound. We have so many crucial support systems in Wales."

Equally passionate about Wales is Aderyn, winner of a Welsh Music Prize Triskel Award in 2022, who moved from London back home to a small village in the Bannau Brycheiniog just before the Covid-19 pandemic. Her story is a fascinating one for musicians who think they have to leave the country to build their careers, She'd been solely a live session drummer before she spent some of lockdown developing a solo project, putting a track online from her Sennybridge bedroom.

She didn't expect anything. "Living in London, I was used to shouting into the void and not getting anything back. And then in Wales, I put a track out, and everyone just goes, "Oh, we want to make you part of our scene! We're going to support you! It was a big surprise – and having the support of the Welsh music scene is what's kept me pursuing it. Ever since Aderyn's been building her solo career around other work – she still plays in several shows in London on shifts, but can now also spend time making the music she loves back at home. "Coming back to Wales gave me that breathing room to run, record and play gigs differently. In London, you feel like you're fighting for your life a little bit, but here I've had that space to build something new and exciting."

She's also working with exciting creatives right here: making a second EP soon in West Wales with Ceredigion-based producer Gethin Pearson, who has recorded with Charlie XCX and Orla Gartland, and the photographers and videographers she's collaborating with are also based in Wales. "I want to expand the project to be touring elsewhere, but I don't feel the need to travel outside the country for anything at this point. It's been the most amazing revelation. All the talent is already here."

COME WITH ME TO A PLACE WHERE MUSIC CAN KEEP REALLY LIVING – BUT ONLY IF WE GIVE IT THE SUPPORT IT NEEDS TO SURVIVE

We stand at a crucial moment for the question of arts funding in Britain. In the latest UK government budget, tax relief was extended for orchestras and theatres, but calls to cut VAT on the price of live music tickets were roundly ignored. John Rostron, co-founder of Welsh festival, Sŵn, and now the CEO of the Association of Independent Festivals, who is based in mid-Wales, made his displeasure clear: "Theatre has made the case for tax relief which is being extended indefinitely. We urge the Chancellor and the Treasury to now turn to festivals to offer a fraction of that support to ensure more events do not make 2024 their last."

The Night Time Industries Association, representing venues across the UK, made an even stronger statement: "The economic challenges faced by our sector are catastrophic, and following today's spring budget announcement, the lack of support will have a profound impact on this sector for years to come."

At the same time, the Labour Party has made a high-profile commitment to ensuring access to the arts, underlining how this would help to harness and bolster its economic potential if they come into power after the next General Election. Leader Keir Starmer –

once a flautist in a state-funded county youth orchestra – said his party would “create more opportunities for working-class kids and more secure jobs in the sector,” and also talked about the feeling that sits behind the economic picture. The arts are about, he said: “the excitement you feel...that sense of being drawn into something bigger than ourselves. Of being truly moved – by a piece of music, a painting, or a play. Of losing yourself, and finding something new in that space art creates. These encounters with art and culture change us forever.”

Such statements of passion and commitment struck one of Wales’ biggest music ambassadors, BBC 6 Music and BBC Radio Wales DJ Huw Stephens, in an interesting way. “Saying this kind of focus should happen across the UK makes me think that they’re talking about England. They should look to Wales - because it’s already happening here.”

Co-founder of the Sŵn Festival alongside John Rostron in 2007 (which is now organised and run by Cardiff’s Clwb Ifor Bach), and the Welsh Music Prize in 2011 to bring further attention and opportunities to Welsh artists, Stephens wants to underline how important grassroots venues are to the ecosystem: “They’re brilliant across the country, despite the constant threats to their existence.” He hopes that more managers will be encouraged to work in Wales, to give artists that next step of support and professional encouragement. (Sŵn has already been working with the Music Managers Forum to this end: I interviewed the Ebbw Vale born-and-bred manager Marcus Russell at an event for them last year, who managed Oasis, and now looks after Noel Gallagher, Catfish and the Bottlemen and others, as part of a day of industry events.)

Stephens has also been hosting BBC Gorwelion/Horizons sessions on his Monday night BBC Radio Wales show in recent months, a project that’s been running since 2014 in partnership with Arts Council Wales, to develop new independent contemporary talent (any artist can grab the attention of Welsh BBC DJs by uploading their music to the BBC Introducing uploader). He’s doing this at the same time as he’s moved to a peak-time afternoon slot on BBC 6 Music, from Tuesdays to Fridays, recording from BBC Wales’ new central Cardiff HQ.

By doing high-profile work in the UK while still working within Wales, he’s underlining the country as an important creative force to people who live outside it. Little things like this remind high-ranking executives that so much creativity exists beyond the Severn Bridge: not only in a capital city closer to London than Manchester and Sheffield but in towns and villages in which so much more innovation pulses and builds.

Simon Parton of BBC Gorwelion Horizons has an even more optimistic view of the future in which Welsh artists create things at home, but then bring people in beyond our borders. Still living in his hometown of Swansea, he loves how young people in Wales are building their own scenes, as they have with the successful Swansea Fringe Festival, driven by an aptitude for online marketing, promotion and creativity, and a push to do things in an organic, outward-looking way after the pandemic.

“People are thinking of where they’re making things, then looking outwards from their little bubble,” he says, “and they want to tell other people what they’re doing.” Young people are also using social media and video communication technology to network further afield, he’s discovered – channels they had to use creatively when stuck at home in the pandemic lockdowns. They now know how they can help them forge connections, quickly, Parton believes, in the wider world.

We discuss an analogy that older music fans might understand: it's a bit like taking the spirit of Manchester in the late 1970s, driven by Factory Records' Tony Wilson, who wouldn't leave his home city, and skyrocketing that DIY creativity and belief into the 21st century. In Wales, though, there are many more local Tony Wilsons around – lots of local, committed music-makers and promoters – that show how people don't have to travel to London to 'make it', we laugh. A few festivals in Wales are an important part of this ecosystem too, Simon adds, like the people behind the brilliant annual Focus Wales conference and festival in Wrexham, who "do lots of industry work for people by bringing the industry to them".

In my few months of exploring youth music development in Wales, I've met so many enthusiastic, creative, practical people, under and over the age of 25, who give me so much hope for the future. They make me think of my twenty years writing about music, with a renewed enthusiasm and profound respect for what's going on in the country where I live. They make me think, with excitement, of what could lie ahead for my nine-year-old, currently working out how to play notes on a trombone as he blows his way through classical, jazz, folk and film music in his local youth music service ensemble, who recently heard and fell in love with the music of Aleighcia Scott on Radio 1, only to be told she's Welsh, to his delight – as are so many other musicians who can bring his life joy.

As I think about him expressing himself, meeting new friends, and having so many worlds opened up to him, I think of what music gave me – and how much more forward-thinking Wales is today regarding different ideas of music-making than it was in my childhood. This is because so many people in Wales are working together, with open ears and open minds – sometimes together in chorus, at others working in counterpoint, or improvising wildly with different tools and ideas to make thrilling new sounds.

Wales deserves praise and attention for what it's been doing already and funding and support for what should come next. After all, music is giving the lifeblood of Wales a new purpose, distinction and energy – and behind these words of mine, written at volume, we need it to keep playing, loudly and proudly, forever on.

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