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## Ruth Price: creating a nation's pop scene

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### ABSTRACT

In Wales, during the 1960s, the seeds of a devolved nation were being sown. The Welsh Language Society was established in 1962, and Gwynfor Evans, first Member of Parliament for Plaid Cymru, was elected in 1966. Against this backdrop Ruth Price left her post as headmistress in 1961 to forge a career at the B.B.C. This article traces a career that led to her successful pop music series *Disc a Dawn* (*Disc and Talent*) (1966–73) in which she demonstrated an understanding of the vital role pop music had in addressing a youth audience. In doing so, she ensured the cultural capital of the Welsh language amongst young people and demonstrated the importance of light entertainment for public service broadcasting.



### KEYWORDS

Wales; Welsh language; youth; light entertainment; pop music; television; *Disc a Dawn*

### Introduction

When radio first came to Wales in 1923, provision was limited, and the output did not reflect the cultural and linguistic traditions of Wales. Long treated as a B.B.C. region, rather than a national service, it was not until the 1960s, that radio and television in Wales offered a wider array of programming in Welsh. This article addresses the ways in which the radio, and later television, producer Ruth Price (1924–2019) was at the forefront of developing a distinct strand of entertainment that spoke to the nation's youth. Utilising pop-music idioms and styles, she created the television show *Disc a Dawn* (1966–73) that successfully wove together the musical traditions, attitudes and teen culture in Wales. Through the use of light entertainment, her work ensured that Welsh-language programming resonated with and connected young people in Wales with their language and culture.

Throughout her career, Ruth Price sought to address the Welsh nation, an address that was historically at odds with the aims of the British Broadcasting Corporation. By tracing the history of B.B.C. broadcasting in Wales - from 1923, when a station was first opened in Cardiff - to the 1960s, when Price joined the B.B.C.'s ranks, a continuous thread of contention is revealed between the concept of the regional and the national.<sup>1</sup>

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## The beginnings of B.B.C. broadcasting in Wales

The British Broadcasting Company began broadcasting from Cardiff on 13 February 1923, but its programmes at the time did not reach much beyond the city itself and listeners in other eastern parts of Wales could receive signals from stations at Manchester and Birmingham.<sup>2</sup> The association *Cylch Dewi*, with the politician, critic and dramatist Saunders Lewis amongst its members, expressed their dissatisfaction with the early Cardiff provision and called for more broadcasts in the Welsh language, and a distinct identity for Welsh broadcasting.<sup>3</sup> This demand was also made in the *Welsh in Education and Life* report of 1927, 'Wireless is achieving the complete anglicisation of the intellectual life of the nation. We regard the present policy of the British Broadcasting Corporation as one of the most serious menaces to the life of the Welsh language'.<sup>4</sup> That same year, the B.B.C. had begun operating as a corporation, rather than as a company, and established two services: the National Programme and the Regional Programme under the Regional Scheme. As explained by Scannell and Cardiff, 'The design of the regional scheme, and the siting of the transmitters and stations, was determined by administrative, technical and economic considerations before any notion of what regionalism might actually mean in terms of people, places and cultural characteristics'.<sup>5</sup> Among the regions served by this arrangement was the West, a pairing which neither satisfied the needs of the English listener in the west of England nor the Welsh listener in south Wales. With increasing demands from across Wales, in 1936 the B.B.C. established a Welsh Region. However a decade later when a Welsh Advisory Committee was appointed, and engaged with the Beveridge Committee's discussions, its members' main request was that Wales be considered a 'national broadcasting unit, within the pattern of British broadcasting', and not provided for as 'a mere region of the B.B.C.'. <sup>6</sup> As Jamie Medhurst notes, the evidence from Wales, provided by Plaid Cymru and the cross party Welsh Parliamentary group, introduced 'a competing notion of the "national"'.<sup>7</sup>

Similar discussions dominated the establishment of a television service for Wales in the early 1950s, the corporation repeating its mistake of pairing south Wales with south west England, and the remaining parts of Wales provided with programmes from transmitters in England. Upon the official opening of the Wenvoe transmitter near Cardiff, Lady Megan Lloyd George conveyed, 'We should not rest until each separate nation [in the United Kingdom] has a television station of its own'.<sup>8</sup> Her vision was realised following the Pilkington Committee's 1962 report on broadcasting; its chairman, Sir Harry Pilkington, recognised Wales as a significant minority. However, the response of T.I. Ellis, *Cymru Fydd's* secretary, 'You say minority Sir; we say nation', demonstrated the prevailing tension between the regional and the national concepts within broadcasting in Wales.<sup>9</sup>

The Pilkington Committee's deliberations led to the establishment of B.B.C. Cymru Wales in 1964, the same year as a Labour Government established a Welsh Office, seen as the beginning of the devolution of political power to Wales. During this period, across the western world, young voices began to challenge the establishment and Wales' youth were emboldened to express their own desires. In 1962, Cymdeithas yr Iaith (the Welsh Language Society) was established, its call to action inspired by Saunders Lewis, and his landmark speech *Tynged yr Iaith* (Fate of the Language) broadcast by the B.B.C. in Wales.<sup>10</sup> The society members' first protest was held on Trefechan Bridge,

Aberystwyth on 2 February 1963, a physical expression of their frustration with the lack of Welsh language road-signs, and this campaign alongside the call for more Welsh language broadcasting became their focus during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>11</sup> In 1966, Gwynfor Evans of Plaid Cymru was elected as the Welsh nationalist party's first member of parliament, and the seeds of a devolved nation were sown.<sup>12</sup>

### Ruth Price: early career at the B.B.C. in Wales

It was during this defining period for Wales that Ruth Price joined the B.B.C., and in doing so, left her career in education as headmistress of the primary school, Ysgol Gynradd Gymraeg Bryniago in Pontarddulais. Price hailed from Mathri in Pembrokeshire and, having lost her mother at a young age, was raised by her grandparents.<sup>13</sup> She trained as a teacher at Swansea Training College between 1942 and 1944, and her first post as a young teacher was in Montgomeryshire. Price then moved to Cardiff, as a peripatetic Welsh second-language teacher. In 1947 Price returned home for six months to look after her grandmother, a duty traditionally bestowed on female members of the family, before resuming her career as a teacher in her native Pembrokeshire.<sup>14</sup> In 1955 she took up a post as headmistress within a developing Welsh medium education sector, but there was strong opposition locally. As Price expressed (in Welsh), 'all hell broke loose', and headlines such as 'Schoolboy's "Crime"—reading English' and 'Apartheid Accusation in Welsh Village' appeared in the press beyond Wales.<sup>15</sup> Her response, expressed many years later, reflected a considered opinion on a challenging situation. With the development of Welsh education still being in its infancy, she viewed the objections as an expression of uncertainty.<sup>16</sup>

It is interesting to ponder what drew Price to the broadcasting profession. Radio as a medium was not entirely new to her, having contributed to programmes from studios at Cardiff and Swansea, but when interviewed later in life she expressed her enjoyment of producing shows with children and her desire to produce for all of Wales' children.<sup>17</sup> During the furore at Pontarddulais, Price's strong character as portrayed in the press had caught the attention of B.B.C. staff in Wales and, in 1961, the Head of B.B.C. Bangor, Sam Jones, offered her a post as an Assistant on *Children's Hour* and its Welsh language equivalent *Awr y Plant*.<sup>18</sup> Provision for children was a key part of the B.B.C.'s remit from its beginnings; the first edition of the radio programme *Children's Hour* was broadcast from Birmingham in December 1922.<sup>19</sup> Its content aligned with the B.B.C.'s vision of public service broadcasting, and children were addressed with the same respect as adults, '... they were, after all *citizens in the making*'.<sup>20</sup>

Children were the first to be addressed by the production staff at B.B.C. Cardiff when broadcasts began from the city in 1923, providing an hour of stories.<sup>21</sup> As well as being seen as worthwhile, it was soon realised that there was an expectation for the programme to be in both English and Welsh as many children in Wales during this period were monoglot Welsh speakers.<sup>22</sup> Elwyn Evans, a Welsh speaker, was appointed as Children's Programming Organiser in B.B.C. Cardiff in 1935, and the Welsh title *Awr y Plant* (a direct translation of *Children's Hour*) appeared for the first time on 28 October 1935.<sup>23</sup> The number of Welsh language programmes for children gradually increased and by the 1950s the number of hours provided in both Welsh and English were equal.<sup>24</sup> One aspect that proved challenging for producers in Cardiff in those early days, was

finding Welsh-speaking children to take part in programmes. It was claimed that all Welsh-speaking Rhondda teenagers had appeared on *Awr y Plant*, which led to North Wales based newspapers such as *Y Cloriannydd* in 1938, to ‘attack the monopoly of the “shonis”’.<sup>25</sup> The challenge was acutely felt by Lorraine Davies, who left her post as a teacher in 1946 to join B.B.C. Cardiff as Children’s Hour Organiser.<sup>26</sup> She noted:

The planning of Welsh [language] programmes ... is a miserable hand-to-mouth business ... In Glamorgan, the problem of finding young [contributors] gets worse week by week. As far as Children’s Hour ... programmes are concerned, the sooner we move west the better.<sup>27</sup>

Lorraine Davies was to stay at B.B.C. Cardiff throughout her career but her sentiments, and those expressed in the press, led to children’s programmes being produced at Swansea and Bangor. An aspiring actress with the B.B.C. Wales repertory company, Evelyn Williams, was appointed as an Assistant on children’s programming at B.B.C. Bangor in 1951, most likely due to her previous career as a primary school teacher.<sup>28</sup> The city of Bangor, in north Wales, was within reach of the Welsh speaking heartlands, and this enabled Williams to take full advantage of Welsh speaking children on her doorstep, thus enriching children’s programming in Welsh on *Awr y Plant*. Williams was relocated to B.B.C. Cardiff in 1961 and was succeeded by Ruth Price.

Price soon became involved in well-established programmes with Meredydd Evans as presenter, alongside his wife Phyllis Kinney, and on the *Wil Cwac Cwac* series (translated as Will Quack Quack), based on Jennie Thomas’ stories in *Llyfr Mawr y Plant*.<sup>29</sup> Being involved in productions for the service within Wales and the B.B.C.’s service across the United Kingdom, and working in both Welsh and English, was a constant feature of the broadcasting experience for bilingual B.B.C. staff in Wales. As the producer Nan Davies noted in 1954:

Being a member of the Talks Department in a Region is very different from being a member of the Talks Department in London, where, with a large staff of about forty producers, a far greater measure of specialisation is possible. In the Regions, we have to be Jack – or Jills – of all Trades. And in Wales, if there is a Welsh equivalent of Jack of all Trades, we have also to be that as far as programmes in the Welsh language are concerned.<sup>30</sup>

Though Nan Davies’ experiences hint at production staff being over-stretched in Wales, it is worth noting they applied the same practices and understanding of the medium to the Welsh language provision, *Awr y Plant* as they did to *Children’s Hour*. Thus, young Welsh language listeners were catered for in their mother tongue with programmes of the same high standard as their English counterparts.

As well as following in Evelyn Williams’ traditional footsteps and the central *Children’s Hour* directive to provide fare for young listeners, Price began to target an older demographic.<sup>31</sup> In 1962 she launched a series under the title *Clywch, Clywch!* (1962–63, translated as Hear, Hear!), originally described as a ‘Welsh magazine for older children’, and later as ‘discussion’ and ‘light entertainment’.<sup>32</sup> This series provides a glimpse of a conscientious effort to meet the needs of older children and teenagers by turning to popular material and music in particular.<sup>33</sup> Centrally, the B.B.C. was fully aware of the appeal of pirate commercial stations to this demographic. For example, in an audience research report carried out in 1962, Radio Luxembourg’s provision for teenagers was clear,

... although Luxembourg's average audience was in total smaller than that of the Light Programme [BBC], in the age range 12–29 Luxembourg's was far larger (in the 15–19 age group Luxembourg's average audience was nearly six times as great as the Light Programme's).<sup>34</sup>

## Light entertainment and public service broadcasting in Wales

As Price relocated from B.B.C. Bangor to B.B.C. Cardiff in 1963, she continued to cater for youth audiences. Her radio series *Tipyn o Fynd* (1963–66, translated as Plenty of Get-up-and-go), was eventually moved to the early Saturday morning slot which, in due course, established itself as a regular feature in the Welsh language public service broadcasting schedule for this demographic.<sup>35</sup> Price was employed as a Production Assistant to work alongside Meredydd Evans, who had been appointed to head the newly established Entertainment Department, part of the B.B.C. Cymru Wales development.<sup>36</sup>

The establishment of such a department occurred three decades after the efforts of Eric Maschwitz and the Entertainment Department at the B.B.C. in London. However, as Sarah Hill outlines in her book, *'Blerwytirhwng?' The Place of Welsh Pop Music*, Welsh language listeners had not been deprived of light entertainment on the radio waves.<sup>37</sup> In the absence of the music hall and variety tradition, it developed instead from the indigenous tradition of folk singing, the eisteddfod, the traditional *noson lawen* (translated as a merry night) and from Anglo-American borrowings, but the prevailing non-Conformist ethos held a firm grip on the morality of the content and its presentation.<sup>38</sup> It is possible to trace the genre's evolution in Wales from the traditional light entertainment radio series *Noson Lawen* which originated from B.B.C. Bangor in 1946, to the television series *Hob y Deri Dando* (1964–68) and *Disc a Dawn* (1966–73) produced by the Cardiff based Entertainment Department. Meredydd Evans' name is synonymous with this development; his velvet voice had charmed the radio waves during the 1940s as part of the *Triawd y Coleg* (translated as The College Trio) harmony group on the *Noson Lawen* series, and he became known as 'The Bangor Bing'.<sup>39</sup> In 1963, as Head of the Light Entertainment Department, he set about assembling a group of artists and production staff to supply a wide range of programmes, Price amongst them. Much of the Anglo-American fare sang by *Triawd y Coleg* in the 1940s was set to Welsh lyrics by Evans himself. He expressed later in life how he firmly believed that accepting such influences was key to expressing the viability of a minority language and culture, a belief shared by Price, which dominated their approach to music and light entertainment at B.B.C. Cardiff.<sup>40</sup>

Price also believed in the value of light entertainment to public service broadcasting and looking back on her career in 2019 she noted (in Welsh), 'For me, if you haven't got light entertainment, and sport, you haven't got a channel. And if you get those two things right, you've got a channel ... people are missing a trick in this television business by not prioritising that'.<sup>41</sup> The first major television series she became involved with was *Hob y Deri Dando* which featured a range of soloists and groups, both contemporary and traditional. This demonstrated her desire to offer something for everyone, however echoes of the traditional and respectable nature of the radio series *Noson Lawen* remained.<sup>42</sup> In an episode broadcast on 10 February 1968, the rural and traditional contexts were reinforced in the opening link by the presenter Glanville Davies as he apologised for being late due to trouble with the milking; however, with the cows out grazing, the night was ready to start.<sup>43</sup> A prominent feature of the presentation

style was demonstrating his familiarity with the young members of the studio audience from Aelwyd yr Urdd Treforys (a youth club from Morriston, Swansea), Davies himself being a well-known member of the youth club, Aelwyd yr Urdd Amanw, Brynaman.<sup>44</sup> Fortunately, Price could depend upon various Urdd clubs from across Wales to travel to Cardiff to record, thus ensuring a wide appeal, fit for a national broadcaster.

*Hob y Deri Dando* enabled Price to hone her skills as a television producer within a studio setting with a participatory audience, and to master the craft of holding a television audience's interest within a light entertainment context. Her choice of artists, and her programme's running order, demonstrated her ability to manipulate the audience's emotions from exuberance to calm, the experience of each emotion enriched by the juxtaposition of each item. The series also provided good grounding for Price with regards to live production skills. Though *Hob y Deri Dando* was not broadcast live, it was filmed in one take, 'as-live' (as referred to within the industry). The main reason for this production decision was that tape was too expensive to stop a recording and edit.<sup>45</sup>

### **Disc a Dawn: fostering a Welsh language pop scene**

*Disc a Dawn* was launched with Price as producer on a Monday evening in August 1966, with Gareth Owen and Valmai Roberts presenting, and joined later that year by Endaf Emlyn and Elinor Owen. Gareth Owen was a graduate from Aberystwyth University and had sung with his guitar on various B.B.C. programmes. Elinor Owen was a teacher in Cardiff and a well-known harpist, she read a news item on *Disc a Dawn*. Valmai Roberts (née Jones), had trained at the College of Music and Drama in Cardiff and later embarked on a successful career as an actress. Endaf Emlyn began working for the B.B.C. as an announcer during the mid-1960s, but due to his musical talent was soon drawn into entertainment programmes, such as radio series *Pop Wales* which began in October 1967. He subsequently became an eminent musician as well as a notable film director.<sup>46</sup> The first series of *Disc a Dawn* ran until April 1967 but the second did not appear until March 1969 with Ronnie Williams as presenter, alongside Elinor Profit, a sixth form pupil.<sup>47</sup> Ronnie Williams was employed as a B.B.C. announcer and was ten years older than Profit, he was also a talented singer and entertainer, and *Disc a Dawn* was one of the Entertainment Department's productions he was involved with.

The magazine programme, with its mix of various items and music, came to fill a Saturday 6pm to 7pm slot, and Williams adopted a clean-cut respectable look on screen.<sup>48</sup> In its magazine approach, the slot—and the look—emulated the B.B.C.'s *Six Five Special* (1957–58) with presenter Pete Murray, a young Radio Luxembourg disc jockey, who was joined on screen by the series producer, Josephine (Jo) Douglas. Female presenters were an exception on such provision, such as Cynthia Pettigrew, a black model who co-presented *Discs a Go-go* (1961–68) on commercial television for a short period.<sup>49</sup> *Six Five Special* proved to be an important milestone on public service television. As the B.B.C. Handbook for 1959 stated, 'Primarily designed for a teen-aged audience, this programme has become a national institution equally enjoyed by the parents'.<sup>50</sup> It could be argued that the appeal stemmed from the broadcast slot along with the respectable shirt-and-tie appearance of the series' male presenters, and a similar admiration developed for *Disc a Dawn* during its two series with Ronnie Williams. Profit's presence on screen was short lived as she embarked on a law degree, but considering Price was a female producer who encouraged

young female artists, it was surprising that she did not choose another female presenter during *Disc a Dawn*'s remaining years on screen.

With its wave of pop programmes such as the B.B.C.'s *Six Five Special* and commercial television's *Discs a Go-go* (TWW, 1961–68), the television medium in the United Kingdom established itself as a commercial pop arena from which rock music tried to differentiate itself.<sup>51</sup> It is interesting to consider the meaning of the word pop in Welsh, which explains *Disc a Dawn*'s wide appeal, as Ned Thomas pointed out in 1968:

'Pop' is a word that offers only a very rough equivalent of the new song in Wales. At its worst, Welsh pop is imitative of rather old-fashioned melody-styles (to sell well it has to appeal right across the generations) with naïve and sentimental lyrics. At its best it is satirical or political song running very close to Welsh reality and comparable with the Russian satirical songs of Galich or Vysotsky rather than anything one finds in England. The master of this genre is Dafydd Iwan.<sup>52</sup>

The folk singer and language activist Dafydd Iwan appeared on television for the first time in 1965, on the news programme *Y Dydd* (1964–82; translated as Today), a significant event in the presentation of pop on television in the Welsh language.<sup>53</sup> This confirms Hill's perception that the development of Welsh-medium popular music, although following the same 'trajectory' as Anglo-American pop music, did so at a different chronological pace, 'It follows the pace of a culture in the process of defining itself, of developing a sense of self-confidence, of providing for itself that which the dominant culture fails to provide for it'.<sup>54</sup> The move from *Hob y Deri Dando* to *Disc a Dawn* can be read as an expression of a culture trying to define itself. This was facilitated by various developments such as the *Pinaclau Pop* musical festivals, the activities of the Urdd camps and the establishment of the first Welsh pop magazine *Asbri*.<sup>55</sup> The association between these and the broadcasts was a symbiotic relationship, illustrated by the Welsh publication *Y Cymro*'s Top Ten and the calendar of events promoted on *Disc a Dawn*. *Y Cymro* launched its Top Ten in December 1967 and, as the medium of radio had proved an essential part of the record industry during the early decades of broadcasting, so did the medium of television during the late 1950s and the early 1960s. Recording companies such as Recordiau Cambrian and Recordiau'r Dryw understood the new-found interest in popular Welsh songs and Ruth Price would be contacted after the weekend broadcast in order to sign artists, which in turn increased the commercial potential of Welsh language records. Furthermore, many letters arrived at the B.B.C. Entertainment Department office requesting that Price visit different areas of the country to see certain artists, and she was known to attend the noson lawen and concerts across Wales. Her attitude was also broad-minded, as the actor and singer Cefin Roberts expressed (in Welsh):

[She had this] broad interest in entertainment, from the eisteddfod to the club to someone singing on the street, she would have set the antennae at long range to look for talent. And that's what I think you wanted ... someone who saw further afield, and noticed talent.<sup>56</sup>

Those individuals brought by Price to the screen such as Mary Hopkin, Sue Roderick, Meic Stevens, Iris Williams and the Henesseys, testify to her determination to find a variety of artists from a wide-range of backgrounds. After placing them on air, her support continued throughout their careers giving them the confidence to continue in their chosen profession. Her nurturing can be expressed as a motherly approach, which also extended to the young people who worked on her programmes.<sup>57</sup> This

approach can be aligned with the concept of cultural capital, ‘... concerned with knowledge, skill, education and related advantages that can lead to a higher status in society, closely approximating the accretions of knowledge aspirations and spirituality which have been claimed to be central to Wales’ identity’.<sup>58</sup> Gender is key to such nurturing, and women may be considered as ‘vectors of cultural capital’ with mothers most prominent in such a central role.<sup>59</sup> Within minority cultures, the emphasis on the family is an integral part of national identity, with mothers ensuring the continuity of language and culture.<sup>60</sup> It could be argued that Price played a similar role within the B.B.C. in Wales securing the Welsh language as a valid, contemporary mode of communication.<sup>61</sup>

### British pop and the Welsh language pop scene

It must be stressed that the Welsh scene was not isolated from the British pop scene, as Price’s production process demonstrates. She kept a keen eye on the weekly British record sales chart, seeing it as key to attracting young people’s interest in her Welsh offering. In addition, the B.B.C. television programme *Juke Box Jury* (1959–67) was based on predicting a hit that was likely to reach the top of the charts, not necessarily what would become a good record. As Diane Railton has indicated, the concept of the hit was an important feature of the pop music of this period which appealed to teenagers, ‘It was the music of adolescent sexuality, of youthful energy and *only* that’.<sup>62</sup> Railton furthermore draws a comparison between pop and the carnivalesque, explaining that as the carnival is considered a short-lived event, similarly the young woman is expected to mature from her temporary interest in pop.<sup>63</sup> It is therefore a phenomenon associated with the feminine, appealing to the body rather than the mind,

... this music is perhaps the only form of popular music to have a predominantly female audience, the threat that it poses is the threat of the feminine, and of female encroachment into what is still predominantly a male, and masculine, world.<sup>64</sup>

Much of the talent that flowed through the *Disc a Dawn* studio was nurtured by the chapels and the eisteddfod culture, and as a result the feminist threat mentioned above was curbed by certain moral standards and ethics, lyrics were confined to pure love, and love for country. The harpist Robin James-Jones referred to the characteristics of rock in Wales, ‘[the Welsh] took everything they needed from [rock] but discarded its central emphasis on sexuality’. His words could also be applied to the nature of Welsh pop.<sup>65</sup>

Price’s interest in the British pop scene led to her arranging Welsh translations of English hit lyrics, heard on programmes such as *Juke Box Jury*, which would then appear on *Disc a Dawn* the following week. This practice did come under fire in the Welsh press, alongside viewers critical of the pronunciation of non-Welsh artists, but Price expressed her view later in life (in Welsh), ‘There is nothing wrong with translation. Once a song has been sung, someone has created a song, well I feel it belongs to the world and anyone has the right to sing it in whatever language’.<sup>66</sup> Given that she had forty-two programmes to produce a year, and considering the insatiable appetite of the television medium, her decision to translate songs can be appreciated. The translations were provided by Meredydd Evans and *Disc a Dawn* director Rhydderch Jones, and two others, namely Endaf Emlyn, and Hywel Gwynfryn, who were also kept busy by the ‘conveyer belt’ translation process as described by the latter.<sup>67</sup>

Price's vision of ensuring current content was thus facilitated, and groups such as Y Triban and The Hennessys were heard singing in Welsh. This meant Price was able to take advantage of the musical culture of non-Welsh singers, and viewers throughout Wales could view artists from their own areas, which strengthened interest across the country. It also led to viewers hearing the Welsh language within a contemporary context, and among the artists was Max Boyce.<sup>68</sup> He had begun singing in English in the clubs of south Wales, although he did speak Welsh. The series *Disc a Dawn* gave him the opportunity and confidence to step into the world of Welsh medium entertainment. He joined the circuit of noson lawen and concerts of the period, which led to a successful long-running career in both languages.<sup>69</sup>

In the earliest versions of the *Disc a Dawn* programme from 1969, a completely different flavour to *Hob y Deri Dando* is evident. The programme titles, with funky graphics and music, signalled a clear departure from the traditional folk idiom and rural connotations. However, upon hearing the first band, the viewer would have understood that Welsh pop music had not yet exonerated itself from its traditional roots, confirming Ned Thomas' perception of Welsh pop as being broad in appeal and thus tied to the past. In a programme broadcast in September 1969, the piano and guitar accompaniment led to the three singers of the Hogia'r Wyddfa band singing a traditional song, Y Llanc Ifanc o Lŷn.<sup>70</sup> The tension between the contemporary and the traditional was also evident in *Y Cymro* newspaper's Top Ten chart shared by Ronnie Williams in his excited radio-DJ-style over still pictures of the artists. Although Dafydd Iwan and his song about Prince Charles' investiture was at Number Two, at Number One was a recording of congregational singing from a Morriston chapel.

The investiture song, Croeso Chwedegrain, was included in the above programme, and in the absence of Dafydd Iwan, the visual content was provided by still cartoons interpreting different aspects of the song. A similar technique was used on the first magazine-based series of *Disc a Dawn*, to complement a regular item by Endaf Emlyn on current English language hits by bands such as The Kinks and The Lovin' Spoonful.<sup>71</sup> This was due to a shortage of Welsh pop records and considered a temporary first step in the process of sharing popular music with the audience, ultimately leading to the sharing of Welsh language music. It was also, as Hill pointed out, signifying '... a seriousness of purpose and a discerning trend in musical tastes in Wales'.<sup>72</sup> Such a decision, to include English language hits, could have attracted criticism but Emlyn doesn't recall any negative responses, however he does remember considerable discussion between Meredydd Evans, Ruth Price and the director Rhydderch Jones regarding the visual aspect of the series. (Figure 1)

This demonstrates an awareness of the particular requirements of a visual medium, which manifests itself in Evans' comments (noted in Welsh), 'I don't know why we Welsh assume that a natural talent for humour and song is sufficient. There is a strong element of art in television in general, more art than talent'.<sup>73</sup> Evans and Price had spent three weeks in London on a B.B.C. television training course, and the emphasis placed by them both on the quality of the television script prior to filming was witnessed and recognised by others.<sup>74</sup> Unlike several of their peers at the B.B.C. in Wales at the time, they were not fettered by thirty years of experience in radio production.



**Figure 1.** Band on *Disc a Dawn* studio floor, late 1960s / early 1970s, photo provided with permission by the B.B.C. Photo Archive.

### Pop on television: the male presenter's domain

The production team also understood what worked well on screen, and this is reflected in Ronnie Williams' informal presentation style on *Disc a Dawn*. In a programme broadcast in September 1969 with a studio audience, Williams was seen sitting on a high stool dressed in a matching patterned shirt and tie, with four young female members of the audience around him donning their *Disc a Dawn* stickers.<sup>75</sup> Their accents revealed they were from different parts of Wales, and the conversation between them and Williams was friendly with an element of innocent banter. This gives the impression of a man who is admired on screen; a portrait consistent with the presentation style of the early *Top of the Pops* (B.B.C., 1964–2006), and reinforces the concept of a pop programme as a light offering, its appeal limited to teenagers and young women. The choice of a male presenter was a means of appealing to the female viewer but can also be read as a means of controlling the feminist threat referred to earlier.

The format of one male presenter also remained a feature of the third series of *Disc a Dawn*. During its run Ronnie Williams was replaced by Huw Jones, a student at Oxford

University who, at 28 years old, was younger than Williams when he presented his first series.<sup>76</sup> By this time Meredydd Evans had paired Williams with all round entertainer Ryan Davies, resulting in a highly successful partnership and the establishment of the Ryan and Ronnie brand.<sup>77</sup> The change from Ronnie Williams to Huw Jones is similar to the comparison between the fatherly David Jacobs, presenter of *Juke Box Jury*, and Bob Harris, the fresh face and unique voiced presenter of *The Old Grey Whistle Test* (B.B.C., 1971–83), a series which marked a new era of appealing to teenagers. Although autocue technology was introduced to television studios in 1954, there was no such luxury at B.B.C. Cardiff. Thus, Jones had to learn all his presentation links, very much aware that producer Price demanded the highest standard in terms of linguistic accuracy, a priority that presumably arose from her time in the classroom.<sup>78</sup> The choice of Jones as presenter would have struck a chord with the young audience. Having begun singing with his guitar, he was a clear symbol of the very culture that the producers of *Disc a Dawn* sought to reflect live on screen every Saturday night. By this time the popularity of the contemporary folk idiom for communicating political messages had established itself within Welsh youth culture, and that idiom was signified by Jones and Dafydd Iwan, the latter seen singing regularly on TWW's *Y Dydd* news programme.<sup>79</sup> Both were regarded as promoters of the protest singing movement, a technique perfected in the Urdd camps. As Wallis and Malm explained, 'The style they represented was fast developing, as a new generation of youth with a Welsh schooling saw the potential for a music scene which had previously been reserved for audiences in rural areas where the Welsh language had survived intact'.<sup>80</sup>

### The national cause and the Welsh pop scene

By the end of the 1960s, Iwan was chairman of the Welsh Language Society and was key to the efforts to tie music with the national cause, 'Iwan was one of the people who succeeded in mobilising the Welsh popular music scene in a nationalist linguistic direction'.<sup>81</sup> Jones released his single *Dŵr* in 1969, expressing an entire nation's disappointment over the building of a reservoir that drowned the village of Capel Celyn, in the Tryweryn Valley, to supply water to Liverpool.<sup>82</sup> A year later he released his uplifting single *Paid Digaonni* (1970), to greet his friend Dafydd Iwan during his imprisonment.<sup>83</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that George Thomas accused *Disc a Dawn* of being a 'weekly half-hour plug for Plaid Cymru'.<sup>84</sup> However, as Jones pointed out (in Welsh),

the Cymdeithas yr Iaith campaigns were at their peak, road signs and then a television channel. I was a member of the Cymdeithas yr Iaith and Sain [record] company was being established at that time, so it was one vibrant, rich world and I was happy to be a part of it.<sup>85</sup>

The reference to one world is significant and bears witness to the comparison noted by Hill between 'African-American blues' in the United States and Welsh music in Wales, 'singing of their experience of marginality is what located them within a community'.<sup>86</sup>

The concept of a national Welsh community was maintained by *Disc a Dawn* in the promotion of new artists and records, the inclusion of the Top Ten and the events calendar which reflected the buzz of the light entertainment scene in Wales. With Huw Jones

as the new face of the series, the opening music was retained, but the titles were updated and—much like the transition from the *Juke Box Jury* to the *Old Grey Whistle Test*—there was a gradual shift from focusing on the hit, to performances by bands that were not necessarily interested in that kind of music.

Among the artists on the *Disc a Dawn* programme broadcast on 7 November 1970 were Y Diliau, Pamela Post (a female soloist from the Netherlands), Meic Stevens, Huw Jones himself, and the group Y Tebot Piws.<sup>87</sup> In Hill's opinion, as the Beatles represented the evolution of popular music, Y Tebot Piws signalled a change in Wales (Figure 2). Together with Y Dyniadon Ynfyd Hirfelyn Tesog, they represented a bridge between light entertainment and the rock music of the 1970s, between the amateur and the professional, and that in turn influenced the feel of the programme.<sup>88</sup> In the studio, Dewi Pws, the unruly lead singer of Y Tebot Piws, made all kinds of gestures to the camera whilst he sang, so keeping Price on her toes. Though she found the singer to be most amusing—providing a welcome injection of energy to the *Disc a Dawn* studio—the potential for mayhem did not appeal to everyone.<sup>89</sup> As Huw Jones testified, 'That was a shock to the national system but an exciting shock to young people. I was in favour of what Tebot were doing and proud of the uproar and the controversial side of it'.<sup>90</sup>

Despite the promise seen in the content of the series presented by Jones, the gulf was widening between traditional light entertainment and what young people desired, and as such it proved challenging to bridge the gap within one series. Letters of complaints were received when the long-haired group, Y Blew, appeared on the series. Yet Meredydd Evans, due to his own experience as a young singer, remained firm in his vision of supporting the gradual move from light pop music to music with meaning, as he explained (in Welsh):

There was a gradual change from the emphasis on words, good vocals and harmony to the rhythm, beat and bass. *Y Blew* represented the extreme in this regard in Welsh at the time and not everyone was ready to accept it. 'Not Welsh' was the complaint. I wonder? We had to adapt it as if it belonged to us. We had to follow the young people's instinct, and they were right. With time, as in the 40s, the imitation became inherent.<sup>91</sup>

As the 1970s progressed, *Disc a Dawn* welcomed the growth in disco and rock music signified by the replacement of Huw Jones with Mici Plwm. Plwm was familiar to the audience as DJ Plummy and his Disco Teithiol Mici Plwm (translated as Mici Plwm's Mobile Disco), in places such as Manchester as well as across Wales.<sup>92</sup> Due to the lack of suitable Welsh records to dance to, he had begun playing instrumental music and the approach was adopted by *Disc a Dawn*. By this time the series was produced by Hywel Williams, but the format set by Price remained, namely a variety of items which highlighted various musical styles introduced by a male presenter. Plwm was seen presenting the series for the first time in 1972. With his long hair and beard and record deck in front of him, he was a purposeful choice to reflect the current scene.

An aspect that became a regular feature during this period was inviting a live audience to the studio and encouraging them to dance along to the bands' music. However, as Plwm acknowledged, the musical nature of some of the groups that appeared on the programme posed a challenge to dancers; despite introducing an element of disco music, the acoustic items remained. The issue of satisfying the tastes of various audiences within one programme finally proved impossible, and *Disc a Dawn* was broadcast for the last time in 1973. By this time Meredydd Evans' ten-year period as head of the Entertainment Department was coming to an end. His leadership had been key to the success of



**Figure 2.** Y Tebot Piws on the *Disc a Dawn* set, c. 1970s, photo provided with permission by the B.B.C. Photo Archive.

B.B.C. Cymru Wales and his departure gave him the freedom to play an integral part in the campaign for a Welsh television channel.

## Conclusion

Price remained within the B.B.C. as a light entertainment producer. Throughout her long career, she demonstrated an understanding of what appealed to audiences. She was an

effective producer who knew how to package entertainment and provide it on television. She nurtured a generation of young artists and production talent and did so through quiet encouragement and a motherly approach without compromising on the highest standards. She discovered a range of female and male artists alike and although women presenters featured in the earlier series of *Disc a Dawn*, Price chose not to permanently place female presenters alongside her chosen male presenters, nor as sole presenters, rather she followed the format set by the commercial and public television networks within a similar genre. As such, the figure of the male presenter and his female admirers was maintained, implicit to which is the concept of pop music and its link to television as a female medium.

Price's core aim was comparable with the efforts of the young Welsh speaking female activists of the 1960s and 1970s, the national cause benefitting from their campaigning rather than the Women's Freedom Movement.<sup>93</sup> Her vision proved to be a successful one, namely to ensure that the Welsh language was a living and relevant language for a young nation, and as one long-haired young man commented (in Welsh) when interviewed about the pop series coming to an end, 'Well I think *Disc a Dawn* is the best thing that's happened to Welsh culture for fifty years'.<sup>94</sup> Price had succeeded in facilitating a cultural scene and a Welsh pop industry, and as Hill pointed out, 'it must be stressed that the production and consumption of Welsh popular music with its political and social ramifications was central to the positioning of Welsh as a language of youth, and therefore as a cultural artifact to be re-considered in subsequent generations'.<sup>95</sup>

In 2024, Wales stands as a devolved country with its own Senedd in Cardiff Bay.<sup>96</sup> Recently, Dafydd Iwan, as he approached his eightieth birthday, brought a bilingual nation together with his song *Yma o Hyd* (translated as Still Here), resonating alongside the Welsh football team's success.<sup>97</sup> Since the establishment of B.B.C. Cymru Wales in 1964, the Welsh people have become familiar with their own national mode of address, and for Welsh speakers this is further enhanced by a Welsh perspective on the world provided by B.B.C. Radio Cymru and the commercial channel, S4C. Such a position has been afforded by the efforts of past generations, with pioneering producers such as Ruth Price key to securing a national entity within broadcasting, with the Welsh language central to its development.

## Notes

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13. R. Alun Evans, Ruth Price’s Funeral Tribute, 2019.
14. BBC Cymru Wales Archive, BBC Radio Cymru, *Beti a’i Phobol*, February 21, 1985. Programme number: 133C008. A long running series that could be described as the Welsh language equivalent of *Desert Island Discs* (BBC Radio 4).
15. Ibid.; ‘Schoolboy’s “Crime” – reading English’, *Western Mail*, July 30, 1957; ‘Apartheid Accusation in Welsh Village’, *Northern Whig*, September 5, 1956. Similar headlines were printed in the *Birmingham Daily Post* and *Birmingham Daily Gazette* on the same day.
16. BBC Cymru Wales Archive, *Beti a’i Phobol*.
17. Ibid.
18. Evans, *Stand-by*, 232. It is more than likely Price was known to BBC staff in Wales, as she was a keen poetry recitation competitor at local and national *eisteddfod* events.
19. Andrew Oswell, ‘Early Children’s Broadcasting in Britain, 1922–1964: Programming for a Liberal Democracy’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 18, no. 3 (1998): 375, [doi.org/10.1080/01439689800260241](https://doi.org/10.1080/01439689800260241).
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32. BBC Programme Index, ‘*Clywch Clywch!*’, March 15, 1962, <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/1e624b94bfc59c7845fa231cc7b17e93> (accessed May 9, 2023); *Clywch Clywch!*, June 13, 1963 and July 18, 1963, <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/search/0/20?q=clywch+clywch#top> (accessed May 9, 2023).
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36. Evans, *Stand-by*, 232; BBC Cymru Wales Archive, *Teledu’r Cymry*, raw footage of Ruth Price’s interview, 2019. Programme number: WWNB171W. Since her time at Bangor, Price had become good friends with Evans and Kinney, when they relocated to Cardiff she rented the top floor in their three storey home.
37. Sarah Hill, ‘*Blerwytirhwng?*’ *The Place of Welsh Pop Music* (Aldershot, Hampshire, c.2007), 52.
38. *Ibid.*
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40. Hefin Wyn, *Be Bop a Lula’r Delyn Aur: Hanes Canu Poblogaidd Cymraeg* (Tal-y-bont: Y Lolfa, 2002), 47.
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42. *Ibid.* The title of the folk song, was first used in an English-language TV programme on BBC One on Christmas Day 1964, with Evans presenting and Price producing. From February 1968, the title was adopted by a Welsh language series, presented by Glan Davies and produced by Price.
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52. Ned Thomas, *The Welsh Extremist: Modern Welsh Politics, Literature and Society*, 3rd ed. (Tal-y-bont: Y Lolfa, 1991), 98.
53. Branwen Jones, 'Dafydd Iwan: The Tireless Welsh Nationalist Who Served Time in Prison And Gifted Wales its World Cup Anthem', *Wales Online*, November 20, 2022, <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/dafydd-iwan-tireless-welsh-nationalist-25523272> (accessed May 7, 2023); *Y Dydd* (1964–82); see Jamie Medhurst, *A History of Independent Television in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), 140.
54. Hill, *Blewytirhwng?*, 10.
55. Hefin Wyn, *Be Bop a Lula'r Delyn Aur: Hanes Canu Poblogaidd Cymraeg*, 94. The magazine *Asbri* (1969–78) was established in 1969 by publisher *Cyhoeddiadau Myrddin*.
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57. Endaf Emlyn (1944–), interview with author, January 2022; Hywel Gwynfryn (1942–), interview with author, March 2022; and Huw Jones (1948–), interview with author November 2021. All three referred to Price's approach in their interviews with the author. Singer Sue Roderick also commented on Price in the programme, *Dei Tomos: Cofio Ruth Price*, April 30, 2019, broadcast, BBC Cymru Wales Archive.
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59. Brown and Baker, *Mothers, Wives and Changing Lives*, 109.
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65. Robin James-Jones, quoted in Meic Llewellyn, 'Popular Music in the Welsh Language and the Affirmation of Youth Identities', *Popular Music* 19, no. 3 (2000): 321.
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75. BBC Cymru Wales Archive, *Disc a Dawn*, September 20, 1969. Programme number: PCL5019E.
76. Jones, interview with the author.
77. BBC: Wales History, Ryan Davies, Welsh entertainer, February 24, 2012, [https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/waleshistory/2012/02/ryan\\_davies\\_welsh\\_entertainer.html](https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/waleshistory/2012/02/ryan_davies_welsh_entertainer.html) (accessed May 9, 2023).

78. Jones, interview with the author.
79. Hill, *Blewytirhwng?*, 27. Hill notes further, “‘Folk’ music, in the international sense of the word (embodied by such figures as Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan et al.), was eventually embraced by the Welsh establishment; popular (and political) youth culture became mainstream’.
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92. Mici Plwm, interview with the author, April 2022.
93. Menna Elfyn, ‘Writing is a Bird in Hand’, in *Our Sister’s Land: The Changing Identities of Women in Wales*, ed. Jane Aaron, Teresa Rees, Sandra Betts and Moira Vincentelli (University of Wales Press, 1994), 282. This is also seen within other minority cultures, for example in Ireland, see: Charlotte Aull-Davies, ‘Women, nationalism and feminism’, *ibid.*, 253, and among native Americans in the United States of America, see: Brec’hed Piette, ‘Identity and Language: The Example of Welsh Women’, *Feminism and Psychology* 7, no. 1 (1997), 31. [doi.org/10.1177/0959353597071013](https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353597071013) (accessed May 9, 2023).
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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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