

Simon interviewing Coline on Fest-Noz

Simon: So, welcome back Coline. When we left off after the last interview where we were talking about, well you were talking about the bagpipes which was fascinating, of course, that touched on the whole thing of fest-noz. And you suggested that you would give us a history of the fest-noz. So, here we are to find out more about what fest-noz is and how it came to be.

Coline: Okay, hello. Thank you very much for having me again. So, the fest-noz or the festnoz depending on where you are in Brittany, is a staple of local Breton life as people listening to RKB would know and Spotlight on Brittany would know. What I just wanted to stress is that historically fest-noz used to be events celebrating the end of collective farming chores, such as. I mean, mainly harvest as the cereal or potato harvests, so these were private events that were open only to those who took part in those farming chores, and it would just bring together the farmers, the workers. Some of them were amateur musicians, even though obviously some were better than others, but they were not musicians. They were not musicians or singers by profession, so they would just do that on top of their jobs. So, it was a way to ease the tensions that might have arisen during the day, or during the couple of days, and it was also a way for, particularly for young men to demonstrate their agility and their strength, particularly bachelors who might be looking for a wife. Um, so sometimes you would have small dance competitions where interestingly men would be awarded tobacco or a pipe, and women would be awarded a handkerchief. So, I think it's a bit unfair.

Simon: Yeah, yeah.

Coline: But this is the way things, things worked. So, like small competitions to bring people together and to entice them to dance and give their best. Um, you also had apart from dancing and singing and playing music, you would have sometimes oral jousting, so oral competitions.

Simon: Okay.

Coline: So competitions of d'éloquence, so people would be speaking in a very practical way on a given topic.

Simon: Oh. Okay.

Coline: And there would be jousting.

Simon: Oh, like a slam, like a party slam or a hip hop slam.

Coline: Exactly. And this is also unfortunately that has died out in Brittany. That still exists in other countries. I am thinking about Lebanon and Syria, they have a similar practice called zagal, but hopefully it might come back.

Simon: Ah.

Coline: So, you had these oral joustings, you also had physical games where mainly men, again, would be demonstrating their strength. In a way, not so dissimilar to what we see in the Highland games.

Simon: Right.

Coline: Although we would see it in the jeux Breton, the Breton games nowadays. And, concerning music, the dancing would be accompanied by a cappella singing so the kan-ha-diskan, so call and response singing that is still here in fest noz these days and you also had traditional instruments usually two, only like two instruments during the call and response. Here, in central Brittany it was not traditional, it was not the biniou bombarde, it was not the bagpipes. Before that it was a clarinet called trejenn-gaol, so traditional Breton clarinets are tuned differently.

Simon: Oh.

Coline: And the bombales and so the double-reeded instruments such as the bombale and the bagpipe, the binou, came later on,

Simon: Right.

Coline: So that's what the fest noz were about historically.

Simon: So that's a private farm-based really, agriculturally-based, community-based event, yeah.

Coline: Absolutely. And what happened in like the 30s the traditional farming practices were based on solidarity that would be not relying on machines and tools but would be relying on people, just died out because new machinery arrived so along with the end of this working practice you also had the end of the traditional fest, fest-noz. And, er, which brings us to the 1950s when some people decided that it was such a pity that the culture that accompanied these traditional farming practices was dying, and so hence the revival of the fest-noz albeit under a different, different shape. And even though it was a collective dynamic, some people credit the man called Loeiz Repars with the recreation of the fest-noz as a public event, um, a public event that would not be taking place in farms anymore but the first official, or the first recorded fest-noz took place in Poullaouen in the mountain regions in 1954. It was organised by Loeiz Repars.



Simon: 1954.

Coline: And so, yes, so the first public fest-noz was organised in a village hall, it was a small singing competition I think along with er, and then quickly this new type of fest-noz developed with a paid entry. The money was often used to support a particular cause so sometimes it would be, it was a fundraiser.

Simon: Right.

Coline: So there was a very important role at the fest-noz to raise funds for a school, for a um you know a particular cultural society, later on for a political cause.

Simon: Right.

Coline: In the 1970s. And so this new type of fest-noz played a very important role in the 1970s revival cultural revival, particularly in cities. So we went from a rural practice to an urban practice so the fest-noz developed in major cities and in the Breton diaspora in the world, in Paris, in France. And it was a way for similar people to meet.

Simon: Yeah.

Coline: To come together, again, around a particular cause and you had new bands that were formed so, professional bands or just the idea of the band so not only two people doing the call and response either by singing or by playing music. And so you had a lot of these bands that were created in the early 1970s.

Simon: Right,

Coline: Such as Diaouled Ar Menez for instance in around Scrignac and Sonerien Du for instance. So both these bands have recently celebrated their 50th anniversary. And then you had a second wave in the late 1990s with again, new, a new, like a resurgence again.

Simon: Yeah.

Coline: Of the fest-noz that has endured and to today and with also new bands that were created at that time such as Plantec and Ar Re Yaouank. And what is interesting also is that traditionally when the revival of the fest-noz took place in the, from the 1950s onwards, on the posters because before obviously these were private events you wouldn't have posters.

Simon: Yeah.



Coline: But on the posters nowadays you know when you have like yeah, when you see the posters with the name and you say okay, I'm going to that fest-noz because that band is playing.

Simon: Yeah, yeah.

Coline: That is something that is very new.

Simon: Yeah.

Coline: That goes along also with the professionalisation of the fest-noz singers and the fest-noz musicians. But before that it was just, again, musicians were not paid, they would have their expenses covered, they would be offered, you know, a couple of drinks, and a bit of you know, tobacco or something, or something else but a lot of them were farmers and on the weekend they would go and sing.

Simon: Fascinating. Thank you very much once again.

Coline: Thank you.