

# THE FREEDOM OF LANGUAGE

by Paul Brett



Duffy

A few years ago, a young local girl asked my partner, Michele Breeze and I, to help her with her singing career. She was a teenager who had her eyes on being a Star in today's Music Industry. As we live in Welsh speaking North Wales, it's very rare that we get someone ask us about this who sings in the English Language. I have to say that there are many possible young voices in the making around here, but the vast majority of them seem only to be interested in singing in their native Welsh Language. No problem locally, but on a wider and International front, to break into the big time, you have to be prepared to sing in the English Language as well. Wales is officially a bi-lingual country, where both Welsh and English are spoken freely. More in the North though than in the South, where English is predominantly the first language spoken.

Throughout the years, many Welsh Language groups and Politicians have succeeded in cementing the Welsh Language into the doctrine of the Welsh Assembly Government. It is now safely protected as part of the education agenda in the schools in Wales. The Welsh as a whole, are very proud of their culture and all things Welsh. We have lived here for a few years and find the locals to be very down to earth, non posy and in the main, quite friendly to outsiders.

There are however, as always, the usual zealots dotted around that can make life quite uncomfortable for non Welsh speakers, currently about 80% of the population of Wales do not speak Welsh. The worst of these zealots, can even be English people who have moved to Wales and adopt to the extreme, all that they believe will make them acceptable as Welsh. Born again Christians, retired smokers, it's the same syndrome. As Michele and I have spent our lives in the Entertainment Industry in one form or another, we have never condoned any form of suppression, whether racially, linguistically or gender based. Creativity and Talent should never be tainted with such banal

constraints. To us, if someone wants to sing in Welsh, no problem, the same applies to any of the world's great or minority languages. So what's the point of my article ? A very valid and targeted one concerning young talent in Wales, like the young girl who asked us to help her. What's her name ? Aimee Duffy, better known to the world simply as DUFFY. At the time, Aimee was just finding her feet and identity. She was raw, basic talent, like so many others before her. She was a fluent Welsh speaker, but chose to sing in English, her choice . This was in 2001. We were running the Pwllheli Music and Arts Festival in the summer of 2002. We suggested to Duffy that she enter our talent competition along with quite a few other local singers. She did so and won her heat hands down. Aimee has a great focus to deliver a song, coupled with a very strong and soulful voice. It's the kind of voice that even the lads that have had a few too many beers will stop and listen to. We had eight finalists appearing in the Festival talent contest. Again, she was voted the best of those on show. She always had a belief and confidence in herself that belied her years and experience, but you need that to be successful. Without the drive and belief in yourself, you will struggle to make an impact.

Shortly after the Festival, in the Autumn of that year, we sponsored and ran a Pop Cymru show at our local Theatre, to give any local young bands and singers, the chance to perform in a serious theatre venue to a seated audience. Helping us put this show together was a legendary figure in Welsh Punk music, Rhys Mwyn, the bassist in Welsh Punk Band , Anhrefn. Rhys is now a top manager in Wales, involved in many projects working with and

for acts globally. He is a very dedicated and decent person and an easy guy to work with. We were funding the show and Rhys booked the local bands apart that is from Duffy, who we included in the programme. Rhys called me one day and said the Welsh Language Board were impressed with the idea and wanted to contribute the grand sum of £100 towards the event. No problem said I, the more the merrier if it helped the kids progress. Bearing in mind this board, like so many others in Wales, is funded by the taxpayer...namely us ! On the day of the show in the morning, I had a nervous and somewhat embarrassed call from Rhys to tell me that the Language Board had insisted that Duffy was taken off the show because she was singing in English. The other eight bands were singing entirely in Welsh, their choice. In my latter years and due to much experience, I took a deep breath, thought about it and told Rhys that it was not in our remit to dictate to young talent what they should perform, or in what language they should sing. They should sing in whatever language they wanted and he wholeheartedly agreed. I then spoke directly to the local guy from the Language board who had called Rhys and he passed the buck, saying it wasn't him but his boss in Cardiff who had insisted on Aimee being taken off the show. Surprisingly enough, there are two words in the English Language that mean exactly the same in the Welsh Language and I trust you people who are reading this article know which two I mean. So I promptly told the local guy to pass these words on to his boss in Cardiff and instead of taking Duffy off the bill, I took them off and saved taxpayer's money ! I will never accept interference from bigoted zealots of whatever nationality, dictating restrictions and policies on creative entertainers of any age, race or gender, never have, never will. We never told Duffy about this situation because I fear if we had at that stage in her life, it may have damaged her confidence for the future. As it transpired, Aimee has now had a recent number 1 single and album at the top of the UK charts. Good luck to her, she deserves everything that comes her way. From a small village on the Llyn Peninsula in Gwynedd to the big stages of the global theatres, both Michele and I sincerely wish her all the very best in her journey through life. Saving and promoting a language is admirable, but denying someone the right to speak theirs, is a criminal and morally unacceptable thing, especially when it's being funded by the UK taxpayer. Long live freedom of expression and the right of the individual to fulfil their own destinies, without interference from meagre minority jobsworths, in whatever medium or language they so desire.

