

Brysonville Schoolhouse Revisited

A Rural Open-Mic Responds to a Pandemic—An Interview with Bruce Barr and Alison Boyle

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Article abstract

In this edited interview, Glenn Patterson speaks with Bruce Barr and Alison Boyle of Quebec's Chateauguay Valley to discuss their initiative to transition Brysonville Schoolhouse Revisited, a monthly open mic, to an online livestream format using Zoom and Facebook Live. They describe their personal motivations for making this transition, how it impacted their daily lives and weekly schedules in the first months of the pandemic, and their experiences as non-experts working with these popular technologies. They also point out some of the principal barriers facing ageing and rural communities wishing to transition to online performance spaces and contemplate the prospects for the future of the event.

Brysonville Schoolhouse Revisited: A Rural Open-Mic Responds to a Pandemic—An Interview with Bruce Barr and Alison Boyle

Glenn Patterson

In October 2019, an announcement on Facebook caught my eye. A few community members in Québec's Chateauguay Valley were reviving the monthly Brysonville Schoolhouse music evenings. In 2012, a fire had brought an end to this decades-long tradition in the tiny south Québec hamlet of Brysonville, about an hour south of Montréal along the Chateauguay River. Seven years later, volunteers were launching *Brysonville Revisited*, a series of musical gatherings at MacDougall Hall in Ormstown, a small regional centre a short drive from the original site. In March 2020, however, the series moved online in response to the pandemic.

The Brysonville schoolhouse was built in the 1860s. The school officially closed in 1932 and in the decades that followed, the schoolhouse's vocation fell into the hands of a few local families—the Barrs, Hookers, Goodalls, Langs, Tannahills, and McKells—who began using it for small get-togethers, card parties, and eventually monthly musical evenings featuring local fiddlers during the summer and early fall. These activities were always entirely volunteer initiatives, from the musicians to the organizers. Voluntary donations went towards the food: snacks and a late-night "lunch" prepared by a few of the volunteers (Furcall).



Figure 1: The original Brysonville schoolhouse. May 2003.
Photo courtesy of Ruth Tannahill.

Bruce Barr and Ali (Alison) Boyle are two of the organizers of the new *Brysonville Revisited* series, which launched in September 2019. Bruce's extended family was extensively involved in the original Brysonville music nights. The family is renowned for their music, and includes

fiddlers, piano accompanists, and square dance callers who have provided entertainment in the area for generations. Ali grew up nearby in the Montréal suburb of Chateauguay and brought her mother—a lover of fiddle music—to a few of the original Brysonville evenings. She attended the first *Brysonville Revisited* event in September 2019 and answered the call for volunteers. The next month, she was baking cookies for the spread and helping with the monthly event's social media presence.

When I saw Ali's post on Facebook last year, I had just started a fifteen-month contract for the Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network to document and strengthen musical culture in Québec's English-speaking minority communities both rural and urban.¹ I wrote Ali to see if my project resources could help them in building momentum and visibility. In the first months of 2020, we were planning a series of beginner fiddle and piano workshops for local residents. On March 13, 2020, Québec's Premier François Legault called a province-wide State of Emergency to limit the spread of COVID-19. Within a week, all public gatherings had ceased.

The following is an edited interview with Bruce Barr and Alison Boyle in which we reflected on their improvised response to the pandemic as organizers of a nascent, grassroots, volunteer-run amateur music night. This interview took place on July 20, 2020 on Zoom.



Figure 2: Waltzing to John Wilson (fiddle) and Connie McClintock (piano). November 1, 2019. Photo by author.

Interview

Glenn Patterson: Within two weeks of the state of emergency called on March 13, you reached out to me for help setting up an online Brysonville. At that point, it wasn't clear how long COVID-19 would be affecting our lives. What motivated you to want to move online so quickly rather waiting it out a bit longer to see if things would return to normal?

Ali Boyle: I approached Bruce with the idea of doing it online. I had a different idea than what we did in the end. But I didn't want to lose the momentum of Brysonville Revisited and the community aspect of it. Brysonville to me equals community. I didn't want people to forget about it or miss out on it.

Bruce Barr: Ali's idea was to try to do a group get-together online and share it somehow. But I'd seen another livestream with each performer in series. And Zoom works that way. It only allows one microphone to work at a time so you can switch smoothly from one act to the next. The other motivation was that our community is elderly. And they are at home. And I just wanted to provide a service that brings back that sense of community to them. I felt that was important to do as a service to them.

GP: What were your impressions immediately following the first online event on April 3rd?

BB: I loved (fiddler) Anna Ludlow's response that night. She said she really wanted to thank us for giving her an opportunity to get dressed up for the first time in a couple of weeks. That first night, I loved it. I was just happy we pulled it off. We had a super lineup that first night. Glenn, you opened from Montréal. Then we had George Tierney (Prescott, ON); Graham Lindsey (Ottawa); Anna Ludlow (Ottawa); The Ever Lovin' Jug Band (Waterloo, ON); and Tatsu Oki (Halifax, NS).

AB: And then our local musicians were John and Connie Wilson (Brooklet, QC); Noah Tolhurst (Ormstown, QC); Sammi Brisebois (Ormstown, QC); Brenda Elder (Ormstown, QC); and Pierre Lachance (Saint-Anicet, QC).

GP: Within a day or so of the first online event you decided to do another Brysonville broadcast the week following. Talk about the decision to shift to a weekly schedule.

BB: That was me. I was just thinking about the people sitting at home all week without any social interaction. And I don't think it's too much to ask to put on a show. I was at home all week too. So why not spend it doing something to help other people? Early on, we found it was hard to keep viewers' attention on Facebook for a three-hour show as we had been doing at MacDougall Hall. So, after a few weeks, we moved to an hour-and-a-half format with half as many performers. That has made it more manageable for us, too.

GP: What were some of the initial challenges you encountered when first switching to an online format?

BB: The learning curve. Neither Ali nor I are hugely internet- or computer-savvy. Internet connectivity is also a huge issue in our area. Neil MacKay (Brysonville's house fiddler) doesn't have internet and is left out, along with many of our core volunteers who are elderly. Chris Crilly is another beautiful local fiddler we've struggled to bring on due to his connection. The same for Norm Rennie, a beautiful singer and wonderful local character.

AB: We still haven't overcome this challenge. I reached out to the high school here to see if they could help out, but all their computers are lent out to kids hoping they can continue their schoolwork from home.

BB: I've reached out to several local people with computer expertise. My nephew, Jesse Barr, in Montréal is currently the one setting up and hosting the link for our Zoom call to Facebook Live every Friday night.²

AB: As well, Zoom changes each week with updates, it seems. So then we have to be up on those. Friday night's show I couldn't get on for how long, Bruce? I was panicked. My soul was crying. It was something I clicked on and then I couldn't get on to the Zoom call.

GP: We struggled early on with sound quality. Zoom's default filters were cancelling out the sound of guitars while people sang and were making instruments sound bizarre. We eventually discovered how to disable these filters and turn on Zoom's "Original Sound" feature. But has sound continued to be a challenge?

BB: It's still a learning curve. We'll still have performers come on and forget to turn on the proper settings if we don't remind them.

AB: Or they sit too close to their computers and distort their mics.

BB: There's a lot of variety in quality of microphones being used. The built-in microphones are not great. They distort.

GP: How much time were you putting into these events every week? How is this fitting into your lives now?

AB: At the beginning, it took up a lot more of our time than it does now. But that was good. We were in a pandemic for the first time in our lives and the work really took your mind off things. You didn't have to worry about breathing on anyone. You were in your own house. It was really, really good. We got to see people on Zoom, like we're doing now. But it takes a lot less time now.

BB: For me, I spend Monday nights and Tuesday nights calling people and sending invitations. Wednesday and Thursday, my cousin George Tierney and I do soundchecks with musicians. We have a little debrief the next day after the show when things are fresh in our mind. We take Sunday off to give us time for ourselves.

GP: As the pandemic drags on and society is trying to find a new normal, with people slowly returning to work, are you contemplating any changes for Brysonville?

BB: We need to find some funding. Our only real expense so far has been the Zoom membership. But when we were looking at sound improvements, that means we need some kind of advice. Perhaps council, maybe some equipment. I'm thinking of a portable package we could take to those local performers with poor internet or equipment. Most of the people we bring on from outside of the Valley have good gear. But a lot of the folks in the Valley are still back in the 1990s. It would also be nice to have someone in the Valley who could host the show on Zoom and Facebook Live. Right now, we're depending on someone in Montréal or Ottawa for this. I don't know if it's feasible, but that's one thing I want to talk to professionals about: Do I need a satellite hookup or something to be able to have the kind of internet strength that you have in Montréal? But yes, going forward in the pandemic, the way I'm looking at it is: at what point do we want to bring our Brysonville community back together at MacDougall Hall? And seriously, as long as there is a threat to their lives, I want them to stay at home and be safe and healthy. And I will do this as long as I can, as long as there's a need.

AB: To do a gathering in person, say we have seventy people at a normal Brysonville—fifty of them are senior citizens.

BB: High risk.

AB: So, we don't want to even suggest starting to do that. Everyone would have to wear a mask. Right now, it just wouldn't be fun.

BB: My drive for doing this show is the same seventy people who used to come to the hall. That we sometimes get a thousand people watching online, it's a bonus. But it's not what I'm doing it for. I'm doing it for seventy people. There's still a need in that sense, I think. Because those are especially the people who can't go out and start circulating even though other people are.

GP: So, after sixteen weeks of Brysonville online, what are some of the impacts for the participants and audience?

AB: Sometimes we'll have nine people on Zoom from all over the country and this wouldn't have happened before. I know it's like the Jetsons. But it's pretty awesome that they get to be part of this. They always comment on this and thank us for the work we put in.

BB: That's the first thing that came to my mind as well: how the musicians are drawn to each other. It's a little frustrating that they can't play together simultaneously yet, but that technology is coming, I'm sure. It is what music is all about, harmonizing with someone else, combining. Everyone we hear from tells us they are enjoying the show.



Figure 3: Brysonville Revisited, St. Patrick's Day edition. March 6, 2020.
Ali Boyle (left), Bruce Barr (right)

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To find out more about *Brysonville Revisited* and access their live and archived online shows, visit [facebook.com/brysonville](https://www.facebook.com/brysonville).

A Different Tune: Musical Heritage in English-Speaking Quebec: <http://www.adifferenttune.blog>; [facebook.com/adifferenttune](https://www.facebook.com/adifferenttune)

The Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network: qahn.org

Notes

¹ A Different Tune: Musical Heritage in English-Speaking Quebec is a 15-month project sponsored by the Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network and funded by Canadian Heritage.

² Initially Graham Lindsey (Ottawa) and I were the ones hosting the Zoom call and supporting the link between Zoom and Facebook Live. We both have upload speeds of over 30 MBps. Bruce, Ali, and their friend George Tierney who live in rural communities (George in Prescott, Ontario) get upload speeds of between 0.5 and 1.0 MBps.

Works Cited

Furcall, Jean. "Living Memories, Down Valley Lane: Brysonville." *The Southwest Quebec Dialogue*, June 1989, p. 12.