

INTERVIEW

“GIM grabs you, it takes you into the experience that you’re ready to have”: An interview with Jim Borling

Jim Borling

Radford University, Radford, VA, USA

Anna Giménez Castells

GASS (Associated Group for Healthy Services), Catalonia-Spain

ABSTRACT

Jim Borling is a renowned practitioner and primary trainer of the Bonny method of Guided Imagery and Music (BMGIM). His career spans more than thirty years. From the Atlantis Institute for Consciousness and Music, he offers training in several countries such as Spain, where the interviewer currently attends his seminars. In this interview, he explains that GIM is something that changed his own life as well as the lives of many others. This is due to the fact that GIM approaches not only the psycho-social, psycho-emotional, and biographic aspects of clients’ therapeutic work, but also the spiritual dimension of people. He goes over the past, the present, and the future of BMGIM. This semi-structured interview is based on the transcription of a recorded online meeting. We tried to keep the tone informal, offering the vitality of our spoken conversation. Our aim here is to capture a way of understanding and experiencing this method which is increasingly recognised worldwide.

KEYWORDS

Bonny method of Guided Imagery and Music (BMGIM), music therapy, psychotherapy, spirituality, healing

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Jim Borling MM, MT-BC, FAMI, Professor Emeritus of Music and former Director of Music Therapy at Radford University in Radford, Virginia. As a faculty member of the Atlantis Institute for Consciousness and Music, Jim has trained professionals in the clinical use of the Bonny Method of GIM in South Korea, Spain, Japan, Germany, and Mexico. His clinical work focuses on Substance Use Disorders (addictions) and trauma recovery. Along with his wife Nannette, Jim is the co-founder of MusicVisions, LLC, where he maintains a clinical private practice in his hometown of Roanoke, Virginia. [jboring@radford.edu] **Anna G. Castells** MTAE, trainee BMGIM, musician, music teacher, amateur choir conductor. Her work as a music therapist is focused on mental health disorders and mental disabilities. [lannacrusa@gmail.com]

Anna G. Castells: First of all, what has Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) meant to you?

Jim Borling: I could talk a long time about this, but GIM has been a life changer for me, and I say that GIM has deeply impacted me in many, many ways. I never intended to do what I’m doing today. I never could have imagined that I would be doing what I’m doing today. But when I think of the changes in my life and the way certain things in my life needed to change, I don’t believe it’s too strong to say that in some ways, GIM saved my life.

In that, what I really mean, even though it's not a physical life I speak of, it was a kind of a spiritual, emotional life. So, it's one of the most important things in the history of all that I've done, particularly in the field of music therapy.

In the trainings, and particularly with this deep psychotherapeutic work, I talk about facing the dragon, a metaphor for people meeting those obstacles in life that require dramatic change.

It can be transformative for those who answer the call (Bush, 1995). It can also be the seed and the root of an existential crisis or something worse for those that don't answer the call. My specialisation clinically is with addictions and trauma and not everybody is able to face those dragons that are required when dealing with addictions. GIM is uniquely qualified to do that if the client is on board.

Anna: You have practiced GIM for over 30 years. How has the method developed over this time?

Jim: This is a good question and historically, of course, Helen Bonny never set out or intended to develop GIM. It came out of some of her clinical, musical, personal, spiritual and transcendent experiences (Grocke & Moe, 2015; Grocke & Wigram, 2002).

So, when she developed the Bonny Method several decades ago, it was taught, presented, and developed in the way that she presented it to us. However, as clinicians, we began to work in a deeper psychotherapeutic manner and, particularly with the Atlantis Institute for Consciousness and Music, really took a focus on clinical work, which is not necessarily separating out from what Helen did. But in addition to that spiritual, transformative work that Helen was so well known for, we began to see a real clinical foundation for the GIM method. Now in that, there are many things that have occurred: the development of new music programmes, the allegiance to certain theoretical underpinnings that Helen may not have necessarily talked about but were certainly birthed with her early work. So, how the GIM method developed over time is that it is now very applicable to clinical issues, as well as socio-cultural issues, and psycho-spiritual issues. It's hard to stop describing the applications for GIM.

I think one of the most exciting things that I'll end my answer with is this: is the development of new music programmes. Helen was a master, of course, at developing and putting together the music programmes that she did but as we gained these decades of experience, we now see the development of other programmes, new programmes or certain ways of looking at the music programmes that may be an off-shoot and quite different than the way that Helen initially envisioned this process unfolding.

Anna: You have taught courses in the United States, Spain, Korea, Germany and so forth. How is it possible that GIM fits with people of such different cultures?

Jim: This is a question that I often get as an international trainer. GIM can be different, in different cultures initially. And what I mean by that is we need to be culturally sensitive. For example, South Korea and Japan are culturally quite different from Spain and Mexico, and even the United States. So as a trainer, particularly from the United States, I have to be sensitive to what the cultural norms are for the group of people that I'm working with. And be sensitive to these cultural norms in the way that we teach, in the way that we guide, in the expectations that we hold for these trainees to experientially engage in the GIM experience.

However, what we notice over time is that we begin to deepen into the human experience, which is not limited just to particular cultural norms or boundaries. In other words, when we think of the growth and healing, spirituality and transcendence all residing deep within, we are tapping into a universal principle that many scholars talk about. It's not limited just to the Asian cultures or the European cultures or the Latin cultures or the American cultures at all. We begin to tap into that essence of the human experience which I have come to believe is universal. It has been a total gift to be in these different cultures to work with people like you in Spain and to see how this universal nature of humanity expresses itself. There's that natural innate human potential that begins to rise to the surface. So, in that sense, yes, very different cultures on the surface, even deep into ritual tradition, but fundamentally, we're dealing with the core human aspect of growth, transcendence, healing, and spirituality. It's the essence of being a human, and that's not limited by cultural norms or boundaries.

Anna: Helen Bonny had a mystical experience while playing the violin. This was perhaps an important developmental step for the method. Helen was principally a Christian, but it seems that she was opening to universal principles of spirituality, particularly as a result of this mystical experience. What do you think?

Jim: Yes, Helen had a mystical experience playing the violin. She was performing in a religious context and this was very familiar to her as it is for many musicians. But as she described, the music began to take her over and the music began to express in a way that she knew was not coming from her, a trained professional violinist. She felt at that moment that the music was something much greater than herself coming through. That was the door that opened her up to this sense of transcendent spirituality. Some of the considerations that Abraham Maslow offered in his "Toward a Psychology of Being" writings (1962) or Alan Watts (1951) when he speaks of going beyond the 'skin encapsulates ego' were then becoming a reality for Helen. In other words, she had experiences that were not natural to her, that were not part of her tradition, which was Christian. But she also was very open-minded and that was the beginning of her search for answers. It was the beginning of her effort to understand what this was, what happened, and what part music played in this experience. Is it just music in general? Is it this particular music or does music in a universal sense begin to express aspects of the human experience that are core, essential, and fundamentally healing? I think that was what was so meaningful to her. These universal principles of spirituality, healing, and transcendence that are so contrary to our limited sense of self, our limited sense of the human experience, and our limited sense of what it means to be fully realised as a human being have now become a primary focus for Helen. So, it was a beautiful beginning, this experience that she had with the violin, a beautiful beginning to what we know now in the 21st century as the Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music.

Anna: You have added new music programmes to the GIM library. Can you explain the process?

Jim: That's difficult. I'll share with you that just recently, I completed a new music programme. I was in the process of developing a new music programme and decided to use it for the first time with a client. And it was a very meaningful experience for the client. It was a process of letting go for her. It was a sense of surrender for her to something much greater than herself.

It takes me quite some time to develop a programme. It generally starts with me hearing a piece of music that touches me deeply. I will set it aside, waiting for another piece to touch me in a similar manner. So, I begin to sequence these pieces of music that initially invite a traveller or client into the experience. Then deepen the client into the experience to do the fundamental work that is relevant to their current growth process, whether it is uniquely clinical, emotional, spiritual, or biographical. As long as we, I'm not saying this well, but as long as we match the music with the needs of a client, and the client is open to the experience, this client will begin to respond in a particular way. Well, when I listen to music, the music begins to suggest to me that it will help the client in a particular way. So, again, that invitation aspect of any programme, followed by the working portion of the music, and then ultimately leading to an anchoring or an integration of the experience. So, developing music programmes generally follows that formula.

But one programme can be very different from the other, because one might be addressing a psychoemotional need of a client; another might be addressing a transcendent spiritual need; or another might be addressing a deep, strong emotional need, like anger or anxiety or frustration, or maybe something like grief or sadness. So, the formula for programme development can be similar across the board but the intent of the programme can vary quite a bit within the music library.

As I said, Helen developed several programmes early in her career and we all worked with those and they were, and still are, exceptional programmes. But as we began to evolve and see how GIM can meet certain clinical needs, psychoemotional needs, biological needs, we began to develop programmes around those core issues. And I will say this: it takes a long time, in my humble opinion, to be qualified to develop a GIM programme. I've seen new trainees immediately want to develop a new programme and I'm thinking, yeah, but you don't know the current and old programs yet. You need to learn the programmes that already exist and then, being patient, beautiful things begin to occur.

The most recent programme that I just started using yesterday took quite some time to develop. I was really unsure if it was right but using it yesterday, I found that it worked with a client whose clinical issue was appropriate and I realised right away that it was ready for use in a GIM setting. It's a good programme, but there was a lot of questioning in my mind and I've been doing this a long time.

I hope that makes some sense. Developing music programmes is not as easy as it looks.

Anna: Although you are a music therapist/music psychotherapist and professor emeritus, how do you view GIM in the context of a bona fide psychotherapy process?

Jim: This is a really good question. We refer to the Bonny Method of GIM as music-centred psychotherapy. Sometimes you'll hear someone say it's a music-centred transformational process, or that it's a music-centred holistic process, but it's really psychotherapy in the truest sense of the word. We're working with the deeper aspects of the human psyche, recognising that to define the human psyche is very difficult to do. But I know that, particularly with Atlantis Institute, we lean towards some of the Jungian ideas of consciousness, the conscious mind, the unconscious mind, the collective unconscious, archetypal process, and so on, self and shadow, all of that.

When we begin to work at that level of depth, we're really working at the psychotherapeutic level. We're not working at a level that is more coping-mechanism oriented or cognitive-behavioural oriented, all of which have value. But sometimes a client needs something deeper.

Anna: Can you describe the challenges you have being a music therapist who is trained in GIM where this type of experiential practice is not fully recognised or supported?

Jim: The music therapist doesn't always have the opportunity to use GIM in a way that can support a professional practice. The GIM community has licensed professional counsellors, licensed clinical psychologists. We have licensed social workers who all make use of GIM as a psychotherapeutic tool and can build a business based on their professional credentials. It is important here to note that these professionals cannot and should not refer to themselves as music therapists. Their GIM practice is offered in the context of their professionally credentialed work. It can be difficult for some music therapists who are not necessarily licensed, and I'm talking more specifically in the United States. But I think this is relatively true in other countries as well.

I hope what you're hearing in my answer is that GIM is a deep psychotherapeutic process that is life-changing and works with the structures of the psyche in a way that will impact all aspects of a client's life. The core structure of the psyche is impacted when facilitated by a qualified and experienced GIM guide.

Anna: How do you see the future of GIM?

Jim: Well, one of my mentors says with some regularity that GIM is exploding around the world. I think there's some truth to that. It's really international now. Europe is very strong. The Asian countries are very strong. Mexico is very strong. It's building in strength in South America now and Canada, of course.

So, in that sense, the future is good in that this is a method that's impactful and very effective for the work that people do. I caution against growth that happens too fast and anything that grows too quickly, however. We run the risk of losing some of the integrity of the method. You know, it's been interesting to have moved through the COVID era where we have gone, in part, to working online. We've developed hybrid models to implement GIM sessions and trainings online. But we need to be careful. Yes, there is value in the hybrid model, but caution should be our guide. Upholding the integrity of the model is essential. We don't want to sacrifice method for the sake of convenience.

And one of the things that I mean by that, that's really important to me, is the music. Are we sacrificing the quality of the music by working online? Are we sacrificing the presence of the therapist, the energetic presence of the therapist by working online? I'm not saying don't work online at all, but I'm saying that as we evolve, as we develop, particularly post-COVID, we need to keep a focus on the integrity of the method, on the quality. Those quality points of the music and the way that we present the music, also the fundamental principle of the therapeutic relationship between the guide and the traveller, so much of which is unspoken and experienced in an energetic exchange could be lost if we are not diligent in our commitment to the method.

So, as we grow as a modality, there will be new programmes developing as well. There will be GIM growing in different parts of the world. My hope is that we continue to explore the integrity and

how this growth is enhancing the Bonny Method and not in some subtle way taking away from the impact of the Bonny Method that we know to be accurate and true.

Anna: What are your thoughts about current research of psychedelics in the GIM process?

Jim: It's a good question. Well, we know that Helen's early work as a result of her transcendent experience with violin brought her into the research with psychedelics, with LSD-25. This was government-sanctioned research that was happening, looking at the impact of spirituality, or peak experience, and the high-dose LSD experiences on healing in a grand sense. OK, that's fantastic. And that was wonderful, wonderful work. It was consistent with some of the work that was happening around the globe at that time.

Of course, that research got shut down, and now there is a resurgence. There is a reemergence of psychedelic research; it looks a little different than what was happening in those early days. What I mean by that is it's not necessarily high-dose experiences that people are having but more of a measured use of things like psilocybin, MDMA, even LSD, and I may be missing a few here, but this research is very calculated.

What this question is asking is what about that union of music or GIM with this psychedelic research. I think there's a lot of potential there. My hope is that it goes forward, but in a very managed and ethical manner. For me, it is not until we arrive at, and are comfortable with, the managed and ethical practice of blending psychedelics with GIM that we should endorse the exploration of this practice. We need to, in a quantified and scientific manner, begin to collect data. We need to see what's going on, what's happening, what's the impact here, and be sure that when we do bring in the music, like in the early days, that it supports the contour of the psychedelic experience.

I want to be cautious, however, that we're not saying there is a potential for GIM and psychedelics to be a preferred method. What we're actually beginning to reinforce once again is that GIM and the way that we use music very intentionally can begin to speak to those deep layers of the human experience that were exposed through that early psychedelic research. Now we're beginning to replicate some of that, and the exposure of those deep transcendent experiences and the impact on healing is beginning to manifest. That's good. Let's see the data. Let's see how replicable those experiences are in a very measured way.

I think Lisa Summer is doing a wonderful job of stepping into the role of representing GIM in a measured way; how GIM and psychedelics can take the client where they need to go, be that enhanced spiritual development, transcendence, recovery from trauma, even addictions recovery as we understand addictions today. So, I think there's something there. I do want to take baby steps, but I'm actually very excited about it.

Anna: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Jim: Again, one of my mentors... let me mention that as a faculty member for the Atlantis Institute for Consciousness and Music I have been blessed to be mentored by Sierra Stearns and Carol Bush. These individuals are central to the changes in my life that I've experienced, and I feel deeply grateful to have had them as my teachers, as my mentors.

Is there anymore that I would like to add? In a way, and I think that Carol and Sierra would say this as well, GIM grabs you. It takes you into the experience that you're ready to have.

I never intended to do this GIM work at this level, and now GIM has taken me all around the world several times. I can't imagine that Carol and Sierra ever intended this journey to manifest the way it has, the way it beautifully has. So, GIM grabs us and takes us into the journey that we are ready to experience. It is not without our sense of readiness and full participation, but it grabs us!

There was a time early in my life and I'm talking about 40 years ago now, where I had some experience with GIM in Miami, Florida but it was not my time. There was a seed that was planted, however. But it wasn't until many years later that I went to a workshop offered by my mentors, Sierra and Carol, and that was the birth of my experience as I know it today.

So, for those of you who are sincerely interested in GIM, if you're really ready for the ride, it will take you. There must be a readiness but if you are, in fact, ready, it will change your life.

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Ελληνική περίληψη | Greek abstract

«Η ΚΝΑΜ σε αρπάζει, σε μεταφέρει στην εμπειρία που είσαι έτοιμος να έχεις»: Μια συνέντευξη με τον Jim Borling

Jim Borling | Anna Giménez Castells

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Ο Jim Borling είναι ένας φημισμένος επαγγελματίας και κύριος εκπαιδευτής της μεθόδου Bonny της Καθοδηγούμενης Νοερής Απεικόνισης και Μουσικής (ΚΝΑΜ). Η καριέρα του εκτείνεται σε περισσότερα από 30 χρόνια. Από το Atlantis Institute for Consciousness and Music, προσφέρει εκπαίδευση σε διάφορες χώρες όπως η Ισπανία, όπου η συνεντεύκτρια παρακολουθεί επί του παρόντος τα σεμινάρια του. Σε αυτή την συνέντευξη, εξηγεί ότι η ΚΝΑΜ είναι κάτι που άλλαξε τη δική του ζωή καθώς επίσης και τις ζωές πολλών άλλων. Αυτό οφείλεται στο γεγονός ότι η ΚΝΑΜ προσεγγίζει όχι μόνο τις ψυχοκοινωνικές, τις ψυχοσυναισθηματικές και τις βιογραφικές πτυχές του θεραπευτικού έργου των πελατών, αλλά την πνευματική διάσταση των ανθρώπων. Ο Borling μιλάει για το παρελθόν, το παρόν και το μέλλον της μεθόδου Bonny της ΚΝΑΜ. Αυτή η ημι-δομημένη συνέντευξη βασίζεται στην απομαγνητοφώνηση μιας ηχογραφημένης διαδικτυακής συνάντησης. Προσπαθήσαμε να κρατήσουμε τον τόνο ανεπίσημο προσφέροντας τη ζωντάνια της προφορικής μας συζήτησης. Ο στόχος μας είναι να αποτυπωθεί εδώ ένας τρόπος κατανόησης και βίωσης αυτής της μεθόδου η οποία αναγνωρίζεται ολοένα και περισσότερο παγκοσμίως.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ

μέθοδος Bonny της Καθοδηγούμενης Νοερής Απεικόνισης και Μουσικής (ΚΝΑΜ), μουσικοθεραπεία, ψυχοθεραπεία, πνευματικότητα, θεραπεία