A Song For Lighthouse Bill

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Nick and I chose as our Northword Storytagging response a poem about Bill Gault’s life serving with the Northern Lighthouse Board and the final days of service before automation. As one of the last serving lighthouse keepers, Bill served all round the Scottish and Mann coasts and had the significant but sad honour of turning off the last manned light at Fair Isle South on the 31st March 1998. Of all the stories in the database, this was the one that jumped out at us. It is an autobiography in miniature with so much detail and living memory, and Bill’s character shone through.

Long time pharolophiles, Nick and I are wedded to the sea on many fronts. My dad hailed from Tiree and his father sailed on tramp steamers in the Pacific and Far East. My mam came from a family of Clyde skippers (the ‘Skye Navy’) and others serving in the merchant marine. Nick is a navy brat, with his dad having served in the Royal Navy’s Fleet Air Arm. And I suspect my older cousin (Master Mariner) Ken MacLeod may even have been at that momentous switching-over ceremony, as he served for a while as the Commissioner of NLB.

The sea is with us daily, looking across the sea-loch of Loch Linnhe to Ben Nevis from Watercolour Music’s studios in Ardgour, just along the coast from the Corran light, legendary amongst keepers as the posting just a couple of hundred yards from the Ferry Inn! As a singer and musician, songs of islands, sea-faring and marine legend are a big part of my Gaelic song repertoire, and Nick has spent many years exploring the submarine sound world through hydrophonic recording, and the acoustic mapping of spaces and buildings via convolution reverb, which can place any sound in any setting by sonically charting the characteristics of a given space.

Nick and I had also worked on previous projects connected to the lights, including Ardnamurchan and Skerryvore, and were keen to work on a project that let us go further down the route of blending the human and natural worlds, and our backgrounds in traditional music, contemporary composition and sound design.

We planned to create a sound-work based around the Skerryvore lighthouse, one of Bill’s postings, as it was one that we were particularly familiar with, being 12 miles off the coast of Tiree. We wanted to recreate our first memorable trip to the skerry several years ago. Back then, we had been able to land on a perfect, calm day – no given on that rock light by any means – and spent a good while exploring.

There’s a big seal colony on the skerry, and I headed for the far side of the rocks to sing them one of my ‘seal songs’ from tradition, to see if they would respond. They did, in that ‘there’s one of those humans singing again’ kind of a way! But as I sat there I registered that the generator of the automated light hummed away in a drone that matched that of the bagpipes, with pitches at an octave and a fifth. But then the seals at the very far end of the skerry started to sing – an eerie but very melodic keening that sang in a pentatonic scale – and in pitch with the lighthouse ‘pipe’ drones. Not only was I hearing the almost-human voices that must surely have inspired the many selkie-mermaid legends, but I was hearing nature working in tune with the work of humankind. The experience has stayed with us ever since.

In August 2021, we made our return visit to the skerry, courtesy of Tiree Sea Tours, again unbelievably fortunate to be in rare perfect conditions and able to land. We only had a small window of opportunity to get everything done so we wasted no time in recording the ambient sounds of sea and genny drones, and recording the two seal songs that I wanted to sing again there. There were once again many seals on the rocks and in the sea, and as I started to sing, several of them onshore lined themselves up audience-style to listen attentively. The songs work!

We returned to Tiree (with a rare sighting of a basking shark in full breach) and spent the remainder of our field trip harvesting sounds around the coastline, including percussive hits from the iron-age cup marks in the geological erratic, the Ringing Stone at Balephetrish. We also paid a visit to the Skerryvore Signal Tower at Hynish, where the Hebridean Trust very kindly allowed us rare access to the very top of the tower and were told how news of a new baby used to be signalled by running either a wee dress or a pair of breeks up the flagpole.

When we returned to the studio to work with the raw material, our initial plans gradually changed, although they remain true to the original aspirations. We were sorry not to be able to use the male singer that we had hoped to work with (as he is currently working as a fisherman rather than a full-time musician, post-COVID), and I had been somewhat reticent to record the song myself. But we played with various approaches and finally found a place where I felt I could inhabit the song and Bill’s story.

Bill conjured up a real life in his song-poem, and it drew us back to Tony Parker’s book, ‘Lighthouse’, a stunning collection of interviews bringing the life of the lighthouse keepers and their wives to life through their own words, and our friend and colleague Fergus Stokes added the east coast balance to the work with his characterful voice with its roots in the port of Leith.

This is the kind of project we love to work on – a blend of real life, learning from others’ lived experience, drawing from the world immediately around us, and creating a new perspective on the subject. The fact that we get to mess around on the water is something of a bonus!

Local knowledge and history are precious things, a unique perspective so often overlooked, and we always regard it as a privilege to work with them. We had taken the decision not long before lockdown to move away from the traditional ‘on-the-road’ model of making a living from music, to concentrate on collaborative projects where we could work together in the studio at the interface between our skills and interests. Northword provided us with the perfect platform on which to develop this.

Also, having spent most of lockdown learning how to connect better with the outside world and work remotely with people, we had invested – and continue to invest – in the visual and connective sides of our business. A Song for Lighthouse Bill really let us push our visual skills, especially in drone work and editing, and has given us the confidence to explore further opportunities for projects where we have control of the overall creation and content. Thanks to all in the Northword Storytagging project for a fantastic opportunity, and the inspiration of watching the other artists respond to their stories in their own ways.