WILDERNESS TRACKS - EPISODE 1
ERLAND COOPER

SPEAKERS
Erland Cooper, Geoff Bird

Geoff Bird 00:09
Welcome to Wilderness Tracks recorded at the Timber Festival in the National Forest. In each edition a writer, artist or musician, tells me Geoff Bird about six songs that somehow connect them with nature. For today's podcast, we have one of the most talented young composers that works in Britain. Erland Cooper, whose work according to poet John Burnside, is rooted in natural sounds, but with a gift to transform what he has heard into a singular incomparable music. Erland, thank you for doing this. First of all, I'm very pleased that you have.

Erland Cooper 00:43
Thanks for having me on. I have not done this before. I'm used to maybe playing an instrument or something.

Geoff Bird 00:48
What - spoken to somebody?

Erland Cooper 00:50
I don't talk to people ever. I sit in a dark room in the studio, and then get to travel home and actually just looking at that, it makes me want to get out of the heat and go up to the north where its a wee bit cooler.

Geoff Bird 01:05
Not right now.

Erland Cooper 01:06
Not this second.

Geoff Bird 01:08

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Give us an hour. And then you can go. I'm curious about how you went about choosing the six tracks that we're going to hear today. What was the process? How difficult was it?

Erland Cooper 01:18
It was incredibly difficult, actually, I would say you added a fantastic element of additional pressure on email, when I was halfway through choosing. I'd chosen the four or five and I had to choose that sixth one. And you said, Oh, I imagine choosing the sixth is like shutting the door on every great song in the universe or something like that. Basically, no pressure.

Geoff Bird 01:50
It worked. I've got the list here. So it's fantastic. So you've just made me out to be quite cruel there. But it was all well intended I should say. The first track you've chosen takes us straight to Orkney, why don't you introduce it and talk a little about Peter Maxwell Davis.

Erland Cooper 02:08
I grew up in a small town called Stromness. And I think a lot of us will be familiar with Peter Maxwell Davies' work and his most simple, beautiful bit of genius in farewell to Stromness. And for me. It immediately evokes childhood memory, the ferry on Stromness coming in daily, and I miss it greatly. So it's a tiny wee fishing village called Hamnavoe, which means a sheltered bay, and it's not changed much really, the boats get a wee bit bigger, the people come rapidly every year in the summer, and then bugger off in the winter. And it's - actually when we shot that film, those series of films we went up in kind of October. And I got there and I saw some old school friends, which is wonderful. And we went to the pub and somebody said, what, what are you doing here this time of year, surely you should come and film Orkney when it's at its most beautiful? Where the skies are always red, and, and such and it's a wonderful time of the year. But it was great to go at that time of the year where it's wild. And you really, really get a sense of what a town and what an island is really like in the winter. And for me 'Farewell to Stromness' always reminds me of that first time as a boy, I left the island. And I hadn't really left until I was 17 - 18. And the first place I went. So bear in mind, I grew up on a tiny island surrounded by the sea, the first place I go is Gatwick to New York City. It blew my head. So then, you know, just just thinking about that melody reminds me of that journey.

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Actually just thinking about it now it gets me kind of - have a kind of emotional connection with it. But my dad was lucky enough to witness Peter's, possibly last performance of that song. And it was at a friend's funeral. And it's a song that he believes played a lot at funerals. And he said it was particularly poignant because Peter didn't actually perform it that well. I think for a few reasons, perhaps one of his best friends had passed on. But it was an incredibly special experience, one of which I would have loved to have witnessed. Irrespective of the event was being played.

Geoff Bird 05:02
We in the northwest where I'm from, tend to try and own him as a Salford lad, who went to Royal Northern College of Music and so on was part of the Manchester School but he chose to live in Orkney for 30 years so he was really yours, isn't he?

Erland Cooper 05:15
Well, I have a confession to make. My parents in their 20s decided that - they're English and they decided it would be really romantic to go to the Orkney Islands. In fact they went to Shetland first and have six children. And so I'm Orkney born and raised but my parents they sound like, mum sounds like the Queen. And she looks like Judi Dench.

Geoff Bird 05:43
That's a good combination.

Erland Cooper 05:44
A great combo. And so I quite love that Peter was embraced by obviously where he's from but absolutely embraced by the local community. And that's, to me as I get older, I realise that music's really about community - it's not about you, it's about how other people take your music or whatever music and how they share it. And I remember reading something Peter had said that it was his most popular song, but it was a song that a lot of folk didn't know who wrote. But I love it. It almost becomes a folk song. And Orkney is famous for his myth and mythology and folk and community. And I think it's just a lovely fit. And knowing how well he was embraced in that very small community fills me with joy. I mean, it was a protest song there wasn't it? In a sense, but it doesn't sound like it doesn't. And it was a car. It was written in protests, I believe. With regards to I think the council or Scottish

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Government had thought it would be a great idea to create a uranium mine on the Orkney Islands. And it was written in response to that. Gosh, it's memorable

Geoff Bird 07:19
He composed, I believe, while he was walking, so there was a phrase that I think he used or somebody used about him where music was landscape and landscape was music, he would literally look around him and that would process itself into notes. And I read somewhere that you said that every song you've ever written is a failed attempt to write something as good as this or something of that kin. Unnecessarily modest. I haven't heard all your other stuff. But let's have a listen to it. This is 'Farewell to Stromness', Peter Michael Davis. Wow. You definitely hear your music in that though. Yes. I think so. I think the continuity is just on it.

Erland Cooper 09:09
I stole it.

Geoff Bird 09:12
He did write a piece called 'Welcome to Orkney'. And I'm curious. I think it's interesting that you've chosen 'Farewell to Stromness' rather than 'Welcome to Orkney'. It's almost says something about how you feel about the place, now that you live in London. I guess that the difference between the two spaces and the landscape of that compared to the landscape of London plays heavily in your mental world. Is that fair to say?

Erland Cooper 09:40
It is. I don't look at Orkney or my childhood in rose tinted glasses. You got to remember that as a child growing up, you're exposed to all the same things everybody else is witnessing on TV and film. And you're on this little island surrounded by the sea. Somebody asked me, what's your favourite thing about Orkney? I said, Well, it's a remote group of islands surrounded by the sea cliffs. Effectively that. And then they said, what's also the worst thing about it and I said, Well, it's a small group of islands surrounded by the sea. So effectively the same thing because as a child, I could not wait to leave. And as an adult, I cannot wait to go home. And certain things bring me back there with a jolt. And when I'm in the city, you know, I'm not walking around the city kind of, in a sheltered way, I must admit, when I first got to New York, that I'm kind of saying hi to everybody. Oh, hello.

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You know, how you doing? And they're looking at you like you're, you're crazy, in a sense, you know, you are. I try and find some element of community in the city. And my studio is in a really bustling part of East London, which is really challenging for me on a Thursday night, Friday night, Saturday night. It's very hedonistic, it's very wild and loud. And if you've been in the studio, creating very, at times, quite peaceful music, and then you come out into that it's really challenging. But the best time for me when, at that studio is at around about 7 to 9am in the morning, particularly on a Saturday. And I've kind of developed a wee community of, you know, like, there's the laundrette man opening up. And then there's the coffee shop team opening up, and there's a little group of artists that have been out the night before, they're still awake, and they're just playing a playlist. And it's kind of my, my little Stromness, but in East London, it's my favourite time. And so I, you know, my growing up was perhaps quite sheltered. I think trying to create a sense of community in a city is a challenge but quite for my, perhaps mental health, I need to do that. It's a kind of -

Geoff Bird 12:14
a balm.

Erland Cooper 12:15
Yeah.

Geoff Bird 12:17
We've clearly worked out or identified the problem with this format, we could talk about one song for the full 45 minutes an hour, we'll have to shift on to get some of the rest in because there is some glorious stuff ahead. The second piece is -

Erland Cooper 12:35
The second piece is a piece by Ralph Vaughan Williams or perhaps is it 'Relph'?

Geoff Bird 12:41
The reason I asked you to introduce it is because I'm never sure and Elizabeth Alker is in the audience. And she's from Radio 3. All right. I didn't want to look stupid. Can you help us? Which one do you go with? See, oh, It's Ralph.

Erland Cooper 13:01

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And it's, it's possibly an odd one. It's quite a well known piece. Obviously, it's telesis Fantasia. But the reason I chose it was for a few reasons. My first band my guitarist, and I used to be in quite a loud, psychedelic rock band. And I didn't know this, but he had ripped off the track, but he had played it on guitar. And I was in awe of him. You've created this incredible thing. I mean, we could just play the introduction to this song, you know, he didn't tell me for four years, and I hadn't twigged. And nobody ever noticed. So he got away with that. He is a master though. So there's that that's one reason I chose the song. But the second for me was that - like his colleague, sorry, his name escapes me, but it will come to me the Cecil Sharp they would effectively go out into the landscape go out into the community and listen, actively listen, not just to the nature of birdsong. And I know he did do that. But listen to local folk melodies and songs and transpose them. And whilst we go out and we record on our phones, or whatever, and we capture that we take that away and we extrapolate ideas from it all. He would just go out and notate it, and then create these symphonies. And I always just loved that idea that a melody particularly in folk music, can be centuries old, and then be reinterpreted in some way. And he was also a lover of - I believe he encapsulated the idea of music being the communities once it's created, and something I'm only really latching on to at the moment.

Geoff Bird 15:16
It also suggests that your guitarist friend shouldn't feel too bad because it sounds like Ralph nicked it from some local who never got any royalties at all.

Erland Cooper 15:26
It's funny. That's exactly what Simon Tong said when I said you should have told me - Well, he pinched it from someone else in a field.

Geoff Bird 15:33
Should we have a listen? To me, I can definitely hear landscape in that. I saw the rolling hills or the sea - somethings rolling in there. And your music, as I said in the introduction seems to me absolutely suffused with the landscape, whether that's birdlife or just the physical space around you in your memory. And I'm curious to know how deliberately you as a composer, try to build that into your work. However consciously. Do you go out and think, I really would really like to reflect the sounds

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of Orkney, or wherever it might be in the actual notation, in the sounds that you create?

Erland Cooper 17:34
Really good question. But actually, for me, I didn't intend on releasing this record that you've invited me here because of effectively. I'd written it for myself, I was getting increasingly hot and anxious, working in the city going back and forth, and the London Underground. And, and so I'd write these melodies. As soon as I got into the studio, to do the work that I was there to do and I call it the laboratory, kind of a safe haven. And I would improvise the first melody or note or group of notes that would come to my head based on probably the journey I just had. And I started thinking about it more. And I realised that perhaps even just the drone of the underground set the key or even, you know, the work man setting up the scaffolding, the clanging and banging. I think I was transposing that, and almost like making something really ugly and aggressive. Like trying to turn it into something that by the end of the layer I'd created would make me feel better. And so I did it over a series of weeks, and then I would stick it on my phone and then on my next commute, I'd have three songs and I'd have four and then five and then 11 or 12. And I started to name them in the bird names in the local Orkadian dialect, again, just to bring me back home. And the local bird names are all quite curious. So the Gannet is the soul and goose the Curlew is the whap, the 'skooah' is the Bonxie. And so it was kind of a way to trick my brain. And I think the music that I'm creating is just a way to trick my brain into thinking about something else or you know, whether you're reading a story about Trump antagonising North Korea and you get a bit overwhelmed by that and then the chatter beneath it. I think if anything in a world of significantly immediate and intense dialogue, for me, nature is the one true reset. I don't know, it's like having a blank piece of paper again. And so certainly, the field I'm ploughing right now is purely like I'm trying to write a blank page every time and bring me back home without physically being on the boat. So up to the islands.

Geoff Bird 20:41
You say that the studio is a kind of laboratory. Brian Eno, that famous thing where he says that his studio is like, I think he says a microscope for sound. So that notion and but it's that scientific analogy, a lot of the music that you use is electronically created. It's created by incredible machines in your studio, which is fabulous from the photographs. And if I was to go out and attempt to create a natural soundtrack I

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think I might think I need some Northumbrian pipes and or something acoustic. I love the idea that you do it through electronic means, what's the process?

Erland Cooper 21:29
Not at all. This will probably sound really academic, but to me music - I love sound more than anything else I love sound and sound came first in every way. And to me music feels like effectively just patterns so sound put into a pattern creates music. And so with that in mind, I would take the voice of the birds singing so let's say -whistles-.

Geoff Bird 22:08
I don't know what that was. I was gonna say you're not gonna ask me what? A robin?

Erland Cooper 22:11
And do you know the term MIDI? So MIDI in computer language? And MIDI is effectively a way of synthesising sound or connecting with the computer. And so I would MIDI translate the birds. And I would then sort of have that original sound source as say that Robin, from a field recording. A robin would go into the computer, out of the computer into a synth, like a mini Moog from the 70s. And then Robin's playing the Moog, and I'm just sat back. And it's a lovely thing. You might get something which sounds ghastly, you get this pattern, which for four minutes is too much. But if there's two seconds, which could just be dum dum dum, and all of a sudden, turns into string line, and all of a sudden the string line gets a counter melody, a counter melody gets, you know, orchestrated, but its original source has come from the robin, not me. And that fascinates me and I think I've been doing it unintentionally, but now I'm doing it really intentionally. And sometimes it works really well. And sometimes it's an absolute disaster. But it doesn't matter because nobody's seeing my cutting room floor. As Eno would say that's his lab that's forever moving and you're bringing in various people objects, whatever. I like that idea. Going back to this feeling that the sound in pattern equates to music. Bird songs the ultimate music to me.

Geoff Bird 24:26
Absolutely fascinates me. Yesterday when we spoke, a composer Sara Lowes who I interviewed recently, and she had to come up with a piece of music based on the

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experiments that created graphene in the University of Manchester. It seems quite similar or at least related - humour me, which in order to do it, she didn't know quite what to do. So she took the hexagon which is the shape of the molecule of the graphene, and physically kind of drew it onto staves. Then started drawing notes around and tried to find patterns. And again, half the time it was hopeless and half the time, or maybe less than half, you know, suddenly something would work and you get a pattern and that became the tune. And that well that became the melody or that became the counterpoint. And the whole thing came together to find the music. That was wonderful.

Erland Cooper 25:18
Yeah, that's so great.

Geoff Bird 25:20
Speaking of wonderful music, I'm very excited about your next track.

Erland Cooper 25:24
Okay, next track is Jackson C Frank's Milk and Honey. Should we play it?

Geoff Bird 25:33
Let's play it, it's amazing.

Erland Cooper 26:13
I just noticed how incredibly melancholy all my choices are.

Geoff Bird 26:26
I was going to say did you not get the email saying you can choose some happy ones. But it's stunning, isn't it?

Erland Cooper 26:33
His voice is incredible. Do you know the story of Jackson C Frank?

Geoff Bird 26:38
I do. He's the archetypal kind of figure who comes along from America to London, influences everyone, makes one album, has a terrible breakdown, becomes

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homeless. And it's kind of forgotten about for years, and then kind of makes a bit of a comeback.

Erland Cooper 26:58
you know, he was the one that everybody thought, you know, Dylan and -

Geoff Bird 27:03
Nick Drake.

Erland Cooper 27:04
Everyone said, if there's anyone that's going to make it him. And he had written this wonderful songs, 'Blues run the game' and Sandy Denny performed his songs. I think they were a couple but it's a desperately sad story. I won't get into but effectively, yes, he completely disappeared off into obscurity. And he was found about 30 years later, in New York, living on the street. He'd been shot in the eye. He had one eye, one leg, I think, and people had actually thought he had passed on a long time ago. So anyway, this chap called Jim Abbott gave him a guitar again. And towards the end of his life, he started to play in the coffee houses in New York, much like he did 40 years prior. And when I first came to England proper, I ended up in the Ralph Vaughan Williams museum - library, sorry. And it was just a place I could study on my own because I've got no formal training and music in any way. My parents didn't - you know, I was encouraged to do mechanical engineering. And my brother's, all my siblings are all doctors, fighter pilots in intelligence and all sorts of stuff and better musicians than me I might add. And anyway, so I study in my own time, you know, I read, read a lot. And anyway, I was in, in this museum, and I actually found oddly enough, Jackson C Frank's album. And I was fascinated by folk music and the adaptation of folk music and taking folk music and turning on its head and, and I took one of Jackson C Frank's songs, and I covered it and created a band out of it called 'Erland and the Carnival', and we covered 'My Name is Carnival', which was one of his songs. And anyway, I contacted Jim Abbott. And I said, Oh, you know, I wasn't sure if Jackson had passed away at that point. And I said, do you think Jackson would mind if I covered this song? And he told me sadly, he's passed on. But, dear boy, he said, the one song no one ever covered was 'My Name is Carnival', and he would be absolutely delighted. So I was over the moon, that the man who had reintroduced him to the guitar and kind of gotten back off the street, gave me his blessing. So I was fascinated by fingerpicking. Not flamenco.

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And, Bert Jansch and a lot of Scottish, not just Nick Drake, but Bert Jansch was a big, big hero. He was a big hero.

Geoff Bird 30:03
But I was wondering why you picked it apart from it was just being beautiful. And in terms of the other songs, having tried to learn what seemed to be very simple guitar pieces, they're actually really quite tricky. There seems to be in a simplicity or an apparent simplicity running through the songs that you've chosen. That just builds up into this really powerful emotional hit. And I wondered whether I was on the right tracks with that. Is something about, with Peter Maxwell Davis and the guitar notes at the beginning of Milk and Honey, is that something you really respond to and try to replicate in your own music?

Erland Cooper 30:49
I had no formal training as I said, so for me I play complicated badly and I play simple okay enough. So, and there's a poem by George McKay Brown. Something like the essence of Orkney's magic is the deep marvellous rhythms of sea and land darkness and light, I'm so glad I remembered that. And the word essence - he was always trying to get the essence of something. And for me, that's what simplicity is. It's just you know, you're never going to write a song that everybody will go that's Orkney. But if you can get an essence of it and I think that my choices - the lyrics in this were obviously inspired by the changing seasons and I love the kind of imagery of spring dancing after winter, you know the death of winter, the birth of spring. But I think they all kind of get the essence of - I think Ralph Vaughan Williams is very pastoral, it's very grand. So it's more than an essence but I love just simple things maybe.

Geoff Bird 32:01
Works for me, right? Well before we do the experiment in sound, I just want to pick up on - having used lyrics quite heavily in the previous two bands you've pretty much entirely given up on lyrics in 'Solon Goose' is that right? Which is more important to you? Has it been liberating?

Erland Cooper 32:19
Well, we're about to create our own cacophony. Do you want to explain your fourth track is stretching the format, which is in its infancy - it's been massively liberating,

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there's so much weight and a lyric. And there's so much considered thought and choice when you choose lyrics that completely changed the music. And equally, the music can completely change the meaning of the lyric. I particularly like the juxtaposition of a really uplifting lyric, but on a very melancholy track. Or the other way around, you know, if ever I've done an upbeat song, the lyric is probably pretty, pretty dark, I imagine. And I like that. But I think if I go back to why I wrote the music, I remember I've come off the tube and I've gone in. The last thing I want to hear is my voice talking to me. Particularly when there's birds, and there's vibrations and tones coming from the city and the windows and the chatter - that was much more intriguing to me at this point in my life. And yeah, it was very conscious to kind of, as you say, Norton, he had 'wist', which means just hold your tongue. I think I must have realised, gosh, it's also melancholy, I've got to do something. So I did this in - you're all looking at me blankly. Gosh, I did this in a church the other day. And if you could grab your phones, that would be amazing. I want you to go to a wee link. And when you get to that link, I want you to hit play. I want to create a Curlew colony or Curlew camp inside this tent, and I did it in a church with gannets, and there was 200 folk and they all held up their phones and obviously the church has a kind of cacophonous sound. But anyway, if you go to erland cooper.com - It is so awkward saying my own name, slash Curlew. How do you spell Curlew sir?

Geoff Bird 34:37
C-U-R-L-E-W

Erland Cooper 34:39
cool.

Geoff Bird 34:40
What's the Orkney word for it? Don't say it's just curlew. It's, it's whap, isn't it? Whap.

Erland Cooper 34:45
That's so beautifully done. It's 'waarp' or whap. But anyway, you get to a webpage. It might take a while, but that's okay. And when you get there, just hit play. And it's a very gentle sound. Can you hold up your phone and turn your volume up. And the Curlew to me, just brings me back to Orkney with an absolute jolt. I'm very thankful you did that. So thank you very much. Just brilliant. My song choice, it's not quite as depressing. Thank you. When we did it in London, I then kind of conducted the

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audience to bring down the volume or fade down the volume, as we say in the studio. And I asked those few 100 folks, I said, when you think it's the end of the tune, can you feed it back up? And I was thinking, you know, at the start, maybe only 50% of the church had done it. And I was thinking, oh, it's gonna fall on its head. And by the end of the tune that they decided it was the end that they're involved - everybody had done. It was a wonderful feeling. And I felt like we created London's first live Gannett choir. So it's nice to have a wee Curlew ensemble at Timber in the tent. Thank you. Very good.

Geoff Bird 36:57
The next track is - it's an odd one, in that it's Johann Johansson and we were talking yesterday about seeing him. I saw him in Manchester last year, and you saw him in London. And since then he's died. You can't help but have that affect the way you hear the music, I think and so seeing this and listening to it it just pulls you up short.

Erland Cooper 37:27
It does, and just desperately sad. And when he passed away, only 43 or 44 or something and I think from just working so desperately hard. And he left an incredible legacy of music. But what he did, to me was he created his own world. And that's why I've chosen it, he's created his own landscape. He's created his own atmosphere, in this song in particular, and in all of his music. And that's why I chose this one, which is from one of his film soundtracks. And it's called 'Kangaroo'.

Geoff Bird 39:11
I mean, again, it's electronics, and it's kind of unearthly but it's still somehow a landscape, isn't it?

Erland Cooper 39:21
Well, he was creating an alien landscape. And it's wonderful that he decided to use the human voice, but in its own language and dialect and just the layers in it, and that's actually very uplifting piece of music to me. Ever more poignant hearing it now or looking at you, I just suddenly got a sense of that, that show at the Barbican, which directly inspired me to finish and release that record.

Geoff Bird 39:55
Was it that direct?

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Erland Cooper 39:58
100%.

Geoff Bird 39:59
And was that Because of that sense that, did you realise that you were doing something similar creating a world that was at that point, not for release, that was just for you? But that that's what you would do?

Erland Cooper 40:15
I was struck by how he had created that world in the Barbican, which holds I don't know how many folk. It could go on for as long as he wanted a song to go on. And it didn't inspire me to release it, it inspired me to play the record to somebody, this thing I'd been playing to myself, it inspired me to kind of play it. And it had a lasting impression on my publisher, and she persuaded me to put it out effectively.

Geoff Bird 40:55
When you gave it to that one person? Did you sit and watch them listen? Or was that too much?

Erland Cooper 41:02
We had gone to your Johann together. And I said, come over for a cup of tea the next day or the day after to talk about the world. And I had it on at the start, but not intentionally. Actually. I had it on and she just went - what's that? What's that you're playing? Because you could hear the sound of the Curlew, not the Curlew the Gannett chatting away, and I think that pricked her ears and then instead of talking, we stopped talking, and we turned it up, and she sat through the whole 40 minutes, and just said some really inspiring words to me. And, and actually, before I knew it, Elizabeth Alker played it on the radio, and again, that inspired me to kind of do a show and that's what I did so thank you for doing that. And you sandwiched it beautifully between Peter Maxwell Davies and Vivaldi I think and my parents haven't been, you know - I've released these kind of heavier, I work in left field music, I mean, alternative music. That's why this tent isn't full of 1000s of people. I mean, thank you for coming. And my dad, you know, part of this record is about the memory of walking the shore with my father and spotting birds, and learning these birds, learning their behaviours, their noises, their tones, their names, their, you

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know, local dialect. And I never really got any kind of, you know, bear in mind, my siblings are all incredibly competitive. You know, father and mother would say, well done on qualifying, you're now a brain surgeon, Well done, brother. But dad actually texted me after Elizabeth's show and said, excellent. And I know that sounds odd, you know, it's just excellent. But it was a lovely wee thing. It said well done. And, you know, aren't we all just kind of craving a little bit of - when you share something for the very first time to get a small accolade from your friends and family and sometimes your parents, it's just the most inspiring thing you need at that point. So thank you, Elizabeth. Appreciate that very, very much. I put you on the spot, but hey ho, I'm up here.

Geoff Bird 43:37
And you'll not be here tomorrow. Let me just check the time. Yes. Okay, we'll move on to the final piece. I'd never heard of this fella. And I'm delighted to become acquainted with him. Tom Anderson, who sounds like the most extraordinary fella, tell us a bit about him before the actual piece. Let's Let's finish with a piece because I think it's such a beautiful thing, especially once you know, the story behind it and a little about him.

Erland Cooper 44:08
Tom Anderson, a Shetland fiddler. But this isn't a fiddle tune in terms of a real, it's called 'Da Slockit Light'. And again, local dialect. The Shetland dialect is very similar to Orkney and it's all inspired by the kind of Norse words and an incredibly prolific fiddler whose music would dissipate down through Scotland and up through Norway. So his music can be heard very much around that area in particular. He wrote for hardanger violin, which is a very beautiful violin with these resonating ringing strings that sit underneath the top four, and they create these drones, which almost sounds like synths to me, synthesisers. But anyway 'Da Slockit Light" to me is about again, kind of going full circle back to Peter Maxwell Davies 'Farewell to Stromness'. It touches on a similar theme in the slockit is the light of the bothy, the bothy being the not the pub but almost the heart, the house, the village, you know, a community of say 10 bothies, and you all have the lights in the windows from the fires in the hearth and on a small island much like St Kilda or the Orkneys during whatever period particularly perhaps the 60s 70s, a lot of youngsters at 18, they would migrate away to whether it was jobs, prosperity or opportunity, perhaps coming back in elder life. So the slockit was the light of the bothy and I understand it

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was that light switching off when perhaps another family in this community took off. And I find that quite poignant and it touches on the theme of migration and birds moving and in Shetland - I read this in in the paper the other day, they did a census of the bird colonies in Shetland and Orkney and I grew up, you could go for a walk, and you could see loads of puffins and gannets. And these numbers are staggering. These are to me the lights going off. In 2000, there were 33,000 puffins in Shetland, there are now 570. In 1981, there were 55,000 kittiwakes, there's now 5000. In 2000, there were 9000 Arctic turns, there are now 110. And I kind of like this feeling, as the slockit light is the turning off. And there's loads of reasons why, you know, food supply ultimately, is the main reason, farming landscape and global warming. But just kind of like, I don't want my children's children to have to go to a national park, to experience nature that I saw in abundance. And so understanding that these numbers are plummeting, understanding why doing more science to study, I'm getting very political, apologies, but I'm fascinated by it. And this song actually reminds me of like the turning off of the lights. And that kind of movement away from the norm, how it affects what's there, and how it affects what's to come.

Geoff Bird 48:03
And political yes, but presumably, also, there's a level that is personal, deeply personal, that the idea of moving away and the light switching off by the very fact of you, upping sticks and moving to London and as you say, when you're there, you want to be there. When you're in Orkney, you want to be in London, and vice versa, presumably that that is a very profound pull.

Erland Cooper 48:27
You're called an expat when you leave, you know someone who's gone. And it's funny, I only just realised I've now lived away from Orkney longer than I grew up there. And you know, you get to that moment and you think, oh, what does that make me my Orcadian anymore, you know, but anyway, I'm so inspired by the encouragement of various people and I've decided to follow it up in with a series of three albums that all form parts of the same thing. So from George Mackay Brown's poem. The first one is about the sky light. Second one is going to be about the sea and the third one is going to be about land and community. So I'm feeling like maybe I just keep on heading back. So I'm going back in September with a group of folk, filmmakers, artists and we're going to record some synthesisers in the 5000 year old Neolithic Cairns because it's a good thing to do.

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Geoff Bird 49:39
So we've ended positively. I should say when I got to the point where I realised that I'd lived away from Preston for longer than I'd lived in Preston. I had a party - it was fantastic. But okay, let's finish with this beautiful piece of music. 'Da Slockit Light' by Tom Anderson. That's amazing, but I read that he petitioned the Council of the government up there to make it compulsory for every child in Shetland to learn the fiddle at school. We could do with more of his type.

Erland Cooper 51:09
And isn't it lovely that you know whilst the light goes out on our on a bothy or it can be re-lit and that's really what I'm encouraged by, you know, the more people that travel up that way, you know, don't stop at Inverness, keep going to Orkney, go to Shetlandand experience birdlife and Neolithic life. It's you know, I should work for the tourist boards.

Geoff Bird 51:35
Well you got 'Solon Goose', at the risk of sycophancy is a light going on in a bothy that's an amazing advert.

Erland Cooper 51:41
Sounds really nice. That's really positive.

Geoff Bird 51:44
I think we'll end it there. I'm quite touched by all this. I really sincerely would like you to offer a big round of applause to the first ever Wilderness Tracks guest, the fabulous Erland Cooper.

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