WILDERNESS TRACKS - EPISODE 5
LAURA BARTON

SPEAKERS
Laura Barton, 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. Today's guest, Laura Barton has been described as one of the world's best music writers. And in both her written and her radio work, including the series 'Notes from a Musical Island', she beautifully evokes and explores the relationship between landscape, and song. So we're gonna get to the music in a little while. First of all, though, I have to confess, I don't actually like a lot of music writing, because so often it's kind of rock family trees, description of music, you know, who played keyboards on that album. And it's about chord progressions. And it's very I spent this morning, actually, just before we came on stage, checking some facts on my phone, in case you asked me any of these kinds of questions, cos I won't know the answers. I'm not in the least bit interested. But what I - so the reason I love your writing in particular about music is it puts it in the world. And it's, it seems to me, at least to be about the relationship and the effect that music has on you and us in real life and in the environment. So if that's true, how conscious a choice has that been in your writing?

Laura Barton 01:25
Um, it's kind of how I would instinctively write about music, which I hope probably comes across, I think there was a point when I started - I started at The Guardian. And I didn't write about music for a really long time, because it's such a precious, beautiful thing to me that I thought, I don't know how to write about this in a way that conveys my feeling about it. Because this is sort of after the NME heyday, I guess. And there was only really one way to write about music, and some people did it sublimely. And I love those people, but it's not how I write. And then there was an editor at The Guardian, the music editor. He and I were good friends. And he started asking me to write a column that was not written in that sort of very angular, spiky NME style, but there was more reflective of the type of conversations he and I would have about music. So it grew out of that, really, it wasn't sort of a 'now I'm going to change how we talk about music'.

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Geoff Bird 02:25
Is that Michael Hann? Yes. And one of the assignments he sent you on, I can't remember quite what the song was. But it was a particular song, instead of just describing again, the kind of chord progressions and then you actually got in a car and drove around the place that it was set and wound the window down to smell the --

Laura Barton 02:44
Well it's Roadrunner by Jonathan Richman, and the Modern Lovers, and it's one of my favourite songs. It's one of his favourite songs, and we would talk about it a lot. And the anniversary of its releases coming up, and the sort of all these different versions of Roadrunner that exist, and they have various references to places in Massachusetts, and right from sort of towns to a stop and shop, grocery store. And, and it specifies a temperature at night. And so we worked out approximately when he might have been driving. And I went over to Massachusetts and spent several nights driving around in the middle of the night, with snow falling, going to all these different places is quite magical. Yeah.

Geoff Bird 03:29
If you, you know, if you were to go to one place to read something by Laura, if you can't wait for the book that's out next year called Sad Songs, then that's a very good place to start, I think. You also present a brilliant series called 'Notes on a Musical Island', Laura Barton's 'Notes on a Musical Island'. And that is all about the way that landscape can have an impact and effect on the way that musicians make music, and the place that they're from or that they live, can affect the way that music is made. But I wondered actually, whether or not you thought that where you live, or where you grew up, can have an effect on your ear? And the way that you respond - because you've moved from Lancashire to London to the seaside? And does it affect the way you respond to music? And if so, how? I think you must do, it's a bit like I always think the colour of green in the trees where you grew up is is your colour of green. So I think it must, there must be something about how you hear music, whether that's from the accents, whether it's from the weather, whether it's from whether you grew up in a terraced house, or you know, in a caravan. I mean, I think it's how sound hits you is really important. Even sort of the size of your family and the makeup of all of that, you know - how I listen to music now, it's a difficult question because it's not as straightforward for me in that it's my job. So I hear music and I also do A&R, so I listen to music in a slightly different way in that way too. And I would say also, because I spend so much

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time in the States and travelling, that feels like another home too. So I think I hear it in slightly different ways altogether. But how I listen to music living by the sea is probably is quite different to how I listened to listen to music in the city, because the city is so noisy. And because you are quite often on public transport, and you've got that delicate calibration between other people in yourself. And are you, are you sort of giving them a soundtrack? Or are you blocking them out? So yeah, I think - my house now it's, it's just sort of pretty silent. It's just me and lots of other people. So yeah, We will come to the first piece of music. Laura and I do work together. Occasionally, we do the Toast podcast, which is fantastic. Obviously. Available on all good streams. Yes. In one of the episodes this, this last series to heartily recommend. Laura did a really good impression of a wood pigeon. Would you care to do that for us? Now? I might do that as a final flourish at the end. I need to finish - I haven't had any coffee until now. So I maybe need to finish this before I can. Okay. I mean, it's maybe maybe - get more people in. I think it's a way of bringing people in. They'll hear it and callig wood pigeons. That's the danger. We were interviewing Helen Macdonald who wrote H is for Hawk and she obviously is great at impersonating birds. As you might imagine. Her greeb was amazing. I know.

Laura Barton 06:43
Yeah. If ever you meet her ask her to do a greeb.

Geoff Bird 06:47
But don't ask Laura to do wood pigeon show. First you have till the end of the show and then walk away before. Anyway, let's have the first piece of music. So this is Andrew Bird. I not to be confused with my brother Adrian Bird who is in the audience. Andrew is really good looking for one thing. Hey, never too old, Adrian. Tell us about the song. I don't know much about Andrew Bird. But he seems like a fascinating fella. I should say first of all, I was listening to these driving up yesterday and, and I realised that they're not entirely representative, the type of music I mean, there, it's all really male and white. And there's a lot of strings, which I don't know, I feel a little bit I ought to just put in a little caveat that I do listen to other kinds of music. But this song - Andrew bird is a musician from Chicago. I seem to have interviewed him about six times in my career. He is a multi instrumentalist, particularly good at the violin. And he seems probably because of his name, he seems to like birds quite a lot. So this track of it goes a bit further it has some birdsong in it, which is why, why I chose it, but it's from an album called Yawny at the Apocalypse, oh wait that's Yawny at the Apocalypse and it's from the album's called Armchair Apocrypha. Those are my facts that I learned to tell you.

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But he's, he often, he has a series called Echolations, which is where he stands in a landscape. Like the LA River, he'll stand which obviously, the LA River is not very high, he'll stand sort of up to his ankles in water and play and record it because he wants to hear how that interaction between sound and manmade structures and landscape will sound and he's done one in i think he's done one in the canyon somewhere. He's sort of a really sensitive, interesting, intricate kind of man. But I chose that song because I quite often listen to it when I writing. And the I think the first time I did that was when I lived in Portland for about two months in Oregon, and had a lovely house with a little porch and I used to get up early and write because it was so hot. And play that first thing and it was lovely to write and watch the day come up, you know and the birds rise and whatever. So yes, I think there are certain only certain songs I can write to, and that's one of them and also there certain songs which have a sort of almost painful beauty to them, they often involve strings. There's another one a bit later on in the selection. And this is that's one of them. I'm intrigued by the echo location particular - I heard the other day, this blew my mind as they say. They've discovered very recently, the cave paintings, the ancient cave paintings, they've discovered by going round with microphones, and so that the paintings are pretty much all done at the most acoustically resonant spots in the whole cave system. So they've deliberately chosen places where it sounds great. So that and then they found - they've looked around and found bits of stone that have been used as acoustic drums effectively. So they think that either worship was going on, and it and so once the beat of the drums comes in, you've got the rhythm and the bison running across are actually in movement, which is not a question. But the way that we use landscape for music and celebration and performances is fascinating. And we're doing it now. But you know, some, but even in our day to day lives, the way that we, where we listen to music, and how we listen to it, I think is really fascinating. We didn't have a bit with a birdsong on which is my fault. But that was one thing I was intrigued by. And I'm worried because I'm really surprised that more musicians and bands don't play and allow natural sound in. I know there's a studio in Sheffield, where they deliberately leave the window open. And Richard Hawley does it in his back garden, which is again in Sheffield. And some people deliberately do it. But it's quite a small number. And it's usually birdsong. But why do you think that is? Why are we so studio bound? I think we would probably get into a division right now where you've got this ultra polished pop sound. And then you've got other musicians sort of going the exact opposite way and getting more and more of that kind of stuff in. And some of them just call, you know, some of them will call it field recordings, but I think is just life coming in. And I imagine we might have a real return to that because, and certainly, I think the producers who are doing really interesting work

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at the minute are the ones who want a sort of rougher raw kind of sound, versus the ones who are very sheeny and manufactured. I think those things just come in, in waves in music in general. It doesn't just have to be acoustic, you know, acoustic folk music. We were listening, I was listening to Hannah Peel yesterday, and a couple of other acts in the Eyrie stage, the beautiful Eyrie stage over there, which I recommend if you haven't been and you had electronica, beautiful electronica, but you had the natural sounds and the acoustics generated by the woodlands, but the bird song and so on and, and it just added layers fitted perfectly with this quite sophisticated sound. So it doesn't need to be just a bloke with an acoustic guitar. No, not at all. And actually, there's a really interesting producer called Sophie who had an album out last year, but also produces bands like Let's Eat Grandma has done some stuff with Rihanna. And they are really interested in in texture of sound. And some of that's man sort of man-made textures. But I think that's a really interesting step. That we're just we're moving slightly away from that very sort of Vegas, the kind of shiny plastic the angle the vocoder sound into into something that has more of a roughness maybe. Excellent. Oh, one other thing that I thought. I'm really intrigued by what people listen to when they're working. Because I find it really difficult to listen to anything. Can you listen to anything with lyrics when you're writing? I've got I've got a little playlist of about, it's probably about four songs. And it does have some but only certain singers. So there's a Cat Power track on there - 'I found a reason'. There's a Springsteen one 'Stolen car', and there's a Smog one. And then it's stuff a bit like that Andrew Bird one, it has to be a certain pitch tone a little bit dusky. And then I'm okay and I have to know them well. The songs or the people? No, the songs. Well, we just had a lovely little segue, Smog. So track two, if you would Damien. That last line is one of my favourites. It's amazing. Okay. Bill Callahan. Tell us about it. I should say that that's the first of two songs about getting up early to go and see horses that I've included on this list for some inexplicable reason. Bill Callahan is one of my favourite artists. He's an American singer songwriter, has recorded as Smog, with brackets without brackets. After a while he started using his own name. He, I thought it was impossible to do this assignment that you gave me without including one of his songs because he writes a lot about horses and rivers in landscape and has this sort of strange majesty to the way that he writes and the way that he sings. He could say anything, pretty much and it would sound deeply profound. I once interviewed him in Austin, Texas, where he lives and I was a little bit late because it was game day. And so I was stuck in traffic. And I texted him and I was really nervous to say, to say I was going to be late. And he replied, saying, it's okay. And I kept this text because it felt like the most - I could hear it in his voice. I thought, it's the most profound text I've ever heard. You still have it?

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Laura Barton 16:53
God. Yeah. Sometimes I think about it, if things things aren't feeling, okay, I think it's okay. And he has this sort of, it's that sort of thing, like one of the great American novelists who are always male and sort of a bit swarthy, and a bit of a loner, which I'm sure is all nonsense, really. But there's something about his voice and his songwriting that conveys that to me,

Geoff Bird 17:19
Jim Harrison, Thomas mcguane, kind of - - that kind of thing. Yeah. I know how much you love him. You called him Your Beloved, you've said, My beloved Bill Callahan a few times to me, and and I'm curious whether - there have been a couple, maybe two or three voices that I've heard in my life, and it was kind of felt like love at first hear - was was that how you encountered Bill Callahan? Can you describe that first encounter when you heard it? And where were you and what was your body's reaction to it? So I had been to the Bowlie Festival, at Camber Sands, which was the sort of precursor to All Tomorrows Parties festival. And the internet existed, but it was sort of not really up and running yet. And, and at the festival, they handed out sort of little booklets of where you could order records online. And it was with a one line description of, of, of what the band sounded like. And I got back to my room at university. And, and I ordered three, I think it was three albums, two albums, at least, I ordered an EP called The Sky is Beginning to Bruise by Carl Smith. He also has a voice bit like that. And I ordered the Smog album Knock Knock. And I just played that album to death. You know, I just it became - that voice had - that album is extraordinary. But it has a track on it called River Guard, which would have been another contender for this. That voice just captivated me. I don't know if it's because my mum listened to a lot of Leonard Cohen maybe. But there's something. And actually I discussed this with Bill Callahan. We both kind of feel that there is a voice like that colour green, like the way you hear sound that just feels like home. And for me, it is actually a very dusky male voice. And then I just feel that that's what I want to listen to permanently. I got that same album at the same time, and listened to it a whole lot. And I find it really hard to listen to now because I have to be careful with some music. It's just such potent stuff. It is like, you know, blowing on a raw nerve. And, and your book next year is Sad Songs. And it's about the relationship between music and melancholy and sadness. And how how, you know, summarise that whole book in one minute, if you would, how did the two play out for you and why did you choose - why did you want to write that book, to turn it into a book? I've always really loved sad music and sad music has seen me through some

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very sad times. And I had a time a few years back, which was a very sad time for me. And so I went and I couldn't listen to music, I couldn't write. I couldn't watch anything, I couldn't read. And I couldn't listen to music. And that was really not being able to listen to music was the most disturbing thing to me. You know, I would listen to a song and it was as if the drums or curdling with the voice and everything seemed all over the place. And then I started to get little flashes of music or lyrics that would come into my head and I thought that was a sign maybe I was getting better or something. One of them was Paul Simon's Graceland. And it had been a really long time since I've been to Graceland. And I thought maybe I should go to Graceland. I didn't mean, I was slightly mad at this time. I just thought that's it. That's what you do. Yeah. And that's what I did was I went to the deep south, which I love in America. And I travelled through looking at how different musical genres look at sadness. So everything from the blues to shake notes thinking to country music, to rock and roll, soul and yeah, that's what it's about. Did you in the writing of the book, do your best to remove yourself from that, that exploration and your own sadness, or were you comfortable weaving it in? It's a memoir. So no, I'm, I'm in there, right. Yeah, I mean, you know, it looks at also, you know, the science of it. And some of which I find incredible. So there's sort of a particular three part descending chord sequence that appears in everything from John Darland, to you know, Bob Dylan, and it basically mimics boo hoo hoo, you know, it's that same sort of sound, but you you find it throughout music, that's sort of conveying sadness. And then there's sort of, you know, a look at other things like the Hungarian suicide song,i Gloomy Sunday, which is meant to be the saddest song in the world or look at what is the saddest key, you know, that kind of stuff. And what is the saddest key? Well, that's obviously disputed by a lot of people. The kind of men who write those music. Fantastic, the just looking at the time, we're gonna need to move on. But the this next song is also about getting up early to see horses, which is great. I've never personally got up early to see horses. Well, this is. Bizarrely and this is no word of a lie. And Esther is my witness. We went seven o'clock to drop off the instruments for a fantastic concert that's about to take place after immediately after this on the Eyrie stage, the Screeching Blue Jays. And this was before seven o'clock, and there's nobody around at all. And we dropped off the instruments on the stage and walk through the woods. And there's the Shire horses walking, it was just standing there wasn't it? Just, you know, I've noticed the big bloody shire horse.

Laura Barton 23:17
The on with the big feet,

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Geoff Bird 23:19
A huge horse. There was a big shire horse. He was over there earlier. And he's beautiful. But he was just staring us down. And it was weeks is the only time in my life. I've got up really early and seen a horse. And here we are talking about two songs. And it put me in mind and I mentioned to you of one of my favourite Ted Hughes poems, The Horses which we haven't really time to talk about - but it talks about the horses as these monoliths and an almost like an eternal presence. They're still fragments in a still world or something like that to paraphrase. And so maybe let's let's have a listen to the tune and come back to that. Another really lovely sad song. By a man, a white man. Maybe it's the assignment, maybe it's the nature of the assignment. We had the Willowherb Review on yesterday which is championing nature writers of colour and I was introducing him saying how you know the comment about nature writing being - the BBC being hideously white is true of nature writing - maybe there's something about asking, I don't know, for another day. And so why this one? Why did you look and go, here's another song about horses before dawn that I want to write about. So this is this is a band called The Mountain Goats who are another of my favourite bands. And basically The Mountain Goats are a guy called John Darnielle, who's also brilliant novelist. And he, he's quite prolific. And normally his albums have sort of concepts. He's just done one about goths, which has a song about Leeds, I mean, they're American, but it's kind of - he'll do ones about boxing or wrestling, rather. And there's one about a recurring theme of this sort of couple who are in therapy. But he did this album The Sunset Tree a few years back, and it was the first time he'd written about his own life. And it was after the death of a stepfather with him, he'd had a very difficult relationship. And it's one of my favourite albums in the world. And it's one of those albums that I always thrust upon people. It just has this delicacy. And he's got this sort of real keen eye for how people work and how they, what motivates them. And also, for nature, that some, you know, there's that line in that song about the pale green things, these sort of shoots of hope coming up through the cracks in the asphalt. He's just an astonishing writer to me. And the I mean, it's fantastically concise storytelling as well, it seems to me that story is wrapped up so beautifully. It is like a poem, in that sense, a very effective poem. Are you a fan of storytelling in music, a lot of Phill Jupitus his choices yesterday, were storytellers in song just, do you for imagery over an effect over narrative. Interesting, I'm Yes, I mean, I do like storytelling and music, but I don't like every single aspect of that story. To be spelled out, and that's how I feel about actual storytelling. I prefer a sort of slightly more, better phrase, a slightly more poetic imagistic take on that. And I think that's exactly what J ohn Darnielle does, you know, as he said, it does sound like a poem, a lot of his songs sound that way. And those are

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my favourites in his collection. Yeah. He talks about environmental rights about environment a lot. And I mentioned that you are the it seems to me, whatever you write, not whatever you write about. So often you write about landscape, or almost forces its way through, because it's so it seems a present in your consciousness, in terms of not necessarily the physical presence of a tree, but the colour, and the scent, all the senses seem to be very present in your work. How important is that to you? not in your work, but in your life? And that relationship was a central experience and relationship with nature. Massive, that's the probably the biggest, that's probably the most important things in my life, really. And when I was talking about that period, before I started writing the Sad Songs book, I had none of that in my life. I couldn't taste things, feel things and and that left me feeling I would like, say distraught, but you can't even feel distraught. But having pleasure through sort of sense. And through, you know, the texture and taste of a peach or the, you know, the sound of a wood pigeon, is just so, to be able to stop and enjoy that is or just even to notice it is one of the most important things of being alive to me. So yeah. And they are the points at which joy is approachable and achievable.

Laura Barton 29:03
Exactly, yes. Yes, yes.

Geoff Bird 29:05
And so when you see or hear an artist or a writer convey that, presumably, that's when you latch on to them and don't let go. Completely. And it doesn't even have to be that they're trying to convey that. It can be that the way that they approach a single word or a syllable even there's a - there's a Nick Cave song called 'People ain't no good'. And I love Nick Cave. But there's a line about the pink-eyed pigeons. And every time I hear that my heart just swells is like this sort of really intense sensory experience to me. Yeah, so yes, any of them. My entire opinion if an artist can turn by their use of a single word? The album I had with Knock knock. Those are the two at the time and Sheffield - can't remember, Abbeydale road it was, listen to those back to back. God anyway, The next one - I can't I think might be - I think he's John Betjeman. Could we have track number four? So that's not just the marvellous old bugger that is John Betjeman, with Jim Parker, this means a lot to you again, doesn't it from your childhood, I think. I mean, first of all, white man strings. Not played by John Betjeman. No. So I'm in the 70s, John Betjaman Poet Laureate, recorded with the producer, Jim Parker, and just set some of his poetry to all kinds of music and that's a very sort of graceful one. But there's reggae on there. You know, there's all kinds of slightly peculiar things it was reviewed in the

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NME. It was really quite experimental drones and drones, brass, brass. There's lots of brass. It sounds northern to me. But that's because there's one particular track where he does a slightly cod northern voice. The music more than maybe. Yeah. Sounds to me like something like you're up t'North. I've forgotten which one it is. Anyway, you can find it but um, so there's Banana Blush is one of the albums and 'Late flowering love' the other, but that's some Banana Blush. And my mum, these are the earliest music I remember hearing, these albums. My mum used to play them all the time. So I kind of have always thought that that's what planted in my brain, the idea of sort of words and music together. Wow, how far do you think those musical experiences formed you? Those early ones. They must be huge. I mean, I grew up in a, in a house full of - we didn't didn't play instruments, but it playing music all the time. So yeah, massively. And I still have an incredible musical bond with both my parents. We still send each other music all the time. We share playlists, you know, Spotify playlists, they still go to gigs. I remember once I got them on the guest list for a Bon Iver show in Manchester. And they sent me a picture of them just hanging out backstage like it was the kind of normal thing to do. And like, it's not. That's a huge link between us. And I think that a lot of my musical bond is with my dad, probably. But that's a really strong bond with my mom. And this is based on a real incident. He was convalescing, wasn't he and he saw somebody drift by but rather than just concentrate on that, at the end, he brings in an older woman who was watching and it all becomes very poignant and difficult in the way that John Betjeman could be brilliantly difficult because it seems so lovely. And then all of a sudden, he kidney punches you. Yeah, I think a lot of people think that Betjeman is just a sort of slightly jovial man who loves churches and that's sort of it but um, but I love the way he turns - there's always a sourness somewhere, a sadness and a sourness in his poetry, and I love the way that he writes about women which again, some people think is a little bit lechey but I I kind of love those female characters that he you know, you mentioned Clemency, the generals daughter and Mrs. Faircloth sipping tea and they were sort of like - they were figures in my head like Anna of Green Gables or whatever became figures in my head growing up. What would he make of today with the climate? What do you think Betjeman - would you be able to maintain that grip, I mean, some Conservative MPs do it very nicely, but you know that that fairly bluff exterior?

Laura Barton 35:11
I think, no, not as it stands, because, you know, he's always talking about women speakers and them playing tennis or whatever.

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Geoff Bird 35:27
But I think but I think he's an incredibly inquisitive man or was and I would like to think he was up to speed with the desires of a time and of women themselves. So I think maybe he'd be, I'm gonna grant him a little reprieve, maybe he would be okay. I love him. So, yes. You mentioned Bon Iver, you wouldn't say this, but you had a significant hand in his shoot to fame, shoot to fame, and his rise to fame. That's what I'm going with. But what I'm interested about is that you - his breakthrough album, he wrote in a cabin in the woods -

Laura Barton 36:11
- in Wisconsin, yes northern Wisconsin.

Geoff Bird 36:13
And you wrote a piece, a brilliant piece where you visited to the place, the hut his father's hunting lodge wasn't it or hut. The first piece I wrote about it. So I wrote sort of the first piece about Bon Iver, which is after which he got signed. And the first piece I wrote, without ever having been there, I'd been near there just one for weird other reasons. So that was sort of in my head. And I, through the power of his first album, and also through my vague knowledge of the landscape, captured that place, I think quite well, well enough that his father, in fact, emailed me and said, \You must have spent a lot of time in northern Wisconsin\. And Bon Iver's dad and I are now long standing friends, and I've even been on holiday together, and it's slightly odd fashion, but I have since been to the hunting lodge. Yes, yes. I know, you went, I think into the long trail into the Appalachian hills to hear a choir I think singing. Maybe that's connected, maybe it's not, but I'm just wondering, how much having visiting a place enhances your experience of listening to the music itself, after you've been there? Do you hear it in an entirely different way? And in a more, in a richer way? Or does that belittle all those of us who aren't able to go and visit his dad's lodge because we go on holiday with him? I think you shouldn't underestimate the power of the imagination to create something special and that's important to you. You can listen to any - you can listen to Graceland, and then you go to Graceland, and it's just you know, a lot of tourists traipsing through listening to their headphone tour guide. It doesn't have that magical quality. And sometimes it can be a bit like you shouldn't meet your heroes. But I think in the aftermath of going to a place you can then create another narrative that bestows something special on it. I think it was special to go to the hunting lodge. It's not quite as you imagine. But it was special just in my friendship with Gil and with with Justin/Bon Iver and, and with that record, it felt like a sort of completion of a cycle

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somehow, Like Thoreau's Walden Pond is famously not as it's painted. It's the little pond. I had a question, which was much better than that Walden comment, and it's, it's gone now. So maybe we ought to move on. It's gone - on to the next track. Sublime, I think. Tell us what it is. That is Alan Lee, who is an an Australian jazz musician, bandleader. And the singer is a woman called Jeanie Lewis. And it's a take on a French composers song which is basically a shepherd song. So I thought it qualified but it's one of the songs that I listened to when I'm writing. And it's one of those songs that I was saying about that make me almost want to burst. There's almost like it's sort of right at the meniscus of yourself and the outside world, those kinds of songs. So I would also put in Mica Levy's 'Love' from the Under the Skin soundtrack. And O'mio Babbino Caro, which most of us know is the bit where they kiss in A Room with a View? Those kinds of songs, even if I don't know the language. Which is actually exactly what I was, what my question was about earlier. The Celtic concept that Robert McFarlane, champions have thin spaces in the landscape where it's possible to have, regardless of whether you're religious or not, it's possible to have a closer encounter with the numinous, something other, than it might be in any other location. So and it might be that we bring that with us to that spot, whether it's a very Grand Canyon or a small sapling. But the there are certain spaces that are thin spaces that you can almost touch through. And I wonder if for you, you've answered the question, but how then does music create a soft space for you? How does that work? I mean, the easy way to get there is to put strings on it. And be a white male. But um, strings kind of do it. I guess I find that, it is a thing with writing if I need to get into a certain head set. Headspace. Like when I was writing the Sad Songs book in particular, I would do that through music and earn a few listens to that writing playlist and songs like that. And I could get there. Does that answer your question? There is a trick to it. Once you learn the trick, because it almost stopped working because you're kind of looking over your shoulder at it going 'I'm conscious of what I'm doing', rather than just encountering somewhere that you might turn around to bend in on a road and see a certain canyon. There's a road to Aberystwyth, and you suddenly turn into this incredible vista. And I used to have to do with that journey a lot. And I'd be prepared for it. And I'd be waiting for my numinous moment. And here it come and then eventually it was, yeah, I was, I was actually waiting for it, it didn't work. I think the thing, the trick is to notice variation. And notice that openness to that variation, whether that's to a song, and the way that you listened to it that day, or to a landscape is the way to still feel that numinous wonder feeling. I drive a lot to Folkstone from where I live. And the landscape right now is almost at its most beautiful, it looks like a Laura Ashley from the 80s. But I also know that at other points of the year, it will look just as beautiful, but in a different way. And even week to

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week at the minute, you know, one, one field of rapeseed is given away to, you know, potatoes or whatever is the next wondrous thing that you see. And, and songs like landscape always have a different, they will sound different in a different light, I guess or however your feeling that day. Is Folkestone on where the tip is because you drive to the tip alot. I love the tip. It is on the way the tip is on the way No, but Folkestone is where yoga is. We talk about nature, and it can be very easy to get all very bucolic about it. And I wonder whether you like a bit of grit in that, would you? Would you like the tip to be there? So there are a few gulls fighting to stop it getting it all a little bit twee.

Laura Barton 43:43
Oh yeah, people assume quite often that I just love really twee fae fiddle-dee-dee music and it makes me quite cross. I would swear it to him that they were probably young people in the tent.

Geoff Bird 43:58
You mentioned before we go to our final turn to our last track - wow, how did that happen? You lost music then for a while, effectively? How scared are you having lost at once, that you might lose it again? Don't feel scared because I've managed to build myself back up. And I think actually it was a sign that I needed to take apart my life entirely and rebuild it and become a person that I liked. And there's a really interesting piece in The Guardian, I think yesterday about narrative and how it's really important that sometimes we have periods of our life where we don't have a narrative A script. A script which because - often that script is given to us by somebody else, by our parents, by whoever. And I was fortunate enough in a weird way even though it was the darkest time of my life to be able to put away somebody else's script and and not replace it with another script but just to sort of freefall and and it made me into much better person and a better writer. And yeah. But I've been able to know how to take care of myself if something like that happened again. So by now with the help of yoga and the tip.

Laura Barton 45:16
Yoga, the tip, therapy and white male singers with strings.

Geoff Bird 45:23
Before our final piece, it would be awful to finish with this piece and then ask you to do the wood pigeon. Because it is so beautiful. You have to get the wood pigeon, please,

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can we do the - I'm gonna be almost as bad as on that podcast. Okay, So this is being recorded as well, by the way, can everyone gather around?

Laura Barton 45:40
He's already put this out into the world once and I now he's gonna do it again. It's terrible. Okay, it's like 'Cuckoo. Cuckoo.'

Geoff Bird 45:55
Right? completely different.

Laura Barton 45:56
It's more kind of ullulation. I can't do it, I can't do it without saying cuckoo. No, I can't do it.

Geoff Bird 46:05
One more we can say Cuckoo. I think we should get on the next track. This is a track that you introduced me to when we were making a series about confidence. Which was brilliant. I'm gonna say it there - we were brilliant. I've used it three times now in various radio things. I love it so much. Say a little about it. Because I think we should maybe close with it actually, because it's so extraordinary, I think. Tell us about her and about its place in your life.

Laura Barton 46:50
This is Gaelynn Lea. 'Breathe, you are alive'. And it doesn't strictly fall into the nature category. Other than I just thought every single thing is living and breathing. So I was at Green Man festival a few years ago. And I was walking across a sort of walk past one of the stages. And she was playing this song. And she is an American artist again. She has a sort of a bone disorder so that she - she doesn't have her sort of properly formed limbs or height. And so she's tiny. And she's in a wheelchair. And she's had to learn how to play a violin in a totally different way.

Geoff Bird 47:37
She describes it as using the boat like a baseball bat.

Laura Barton 47:41
Yeah. But I just think she's extraordinary. She could almost sing anything. And I'd be like, that's the most moving thing in the world. A few years back, she won NPR Tiny

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Desk, concert competition. And she's just an interesting, she's an incredibly powerful songwriter and performer. This song is - it's simply about - it's basically an exercise in mindfulness. It is what I wake up to every morning. It's my alarm clock, just to sort of have three minutes of remembering that you are alive. And in that moment, and it's very important thing.

Excerpt from Gaelynn Lea 48:21
"We make ourselves up, put ourselves out there as works of art is entertaining shows for the world to see, to judge to notice. Well, you are a work of art, but it's not how you think, it's in your eyes when you smile, when you laugh. When you're angry when you cry, you can't hide it. It leaks out and flashes across your face. Your soul bursts through in moments of true tenderness when the empathy just kind of swells up from nowhere. From very deep. You are in there. Divine. Why are we so afraid of it? Why do we try to bury it alive in schedules and important deadlines and hurrying. We have let too much in. Crowded ourselves out. Forgotten our purpose, forgotten to show up. Pause. Sit with yourself. Sit with a neighbour. Sit with me. And notice when you are quiet, how the divine whispers. Notice all things. Just be in the present, for a moment. Remember to breathe love, for you are alive."

Geoff Bird 49:59
When you chose us I was thinking, oh my god, it always makes me cry. I'm gonna cry on stage, and I very nearly did. Please, ladies and gentlemen, could you give a round of applause, Laura Barton.

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