WILDERNESS TRACKS
MAX PORTER

RESOURCES
Here are some resources linked to projects and topics discussed during this episode.

Tracklist for this episode:
See all the tracks mentioned in this episode here.
https://timberfestival.org.uk/the-wilderness-tracks/
Books referenced in this episode:
Explore the novels written by Max Porter and mentioned in this episode of Wilderness Tracks here:
https://www.faber.co.uk/tutors/max-porter/

SPEAKERS
Max Porter, Geoff Bird

TRANSCRIPT

Geoff Bird (0:08)
Welcome to Wilderness Tracks, part of the Timber Festival in which artists, scientists, writers and thinkers tell me about six pieces of music that connect them to nature. In this episode, I'm meeting Max Porter, would be Bontempi virtuoso, and the author of two extraordinary books Lanny and Grief is the Thing With Feathers. We're meeting off in a favourite spot of his, a woodland close to his home in Bath.

Max Porter (0:36)
...in the morning to wake up with is as close as I get to paradise.

Rory Clifford (0:40)
Look at it, it's idyllic isn't it? Where are we exactly?

Max Porter (0:45)
Smallcombe Valley. So we're 10 minutes from the centre of Bath. You'd never guess it, would you?

Geoff Bird (0:50)
No, not at all. So incredible here.

Max Porter (0:53)
So this is an old...

Geoff Bird (0:54)
Oh it's the Commonwealth war graves.

Max Porter (0:55)
Yeah there's a lot of war graves. But this is the old St. Mary the virgin church. My kids love coming to the graveyard and telling each other the stories that you can get from the graves. There's one really heartbreaking one which is a grave for two twins. One died a couple of days after the other one.

Geoff Bird (1:12)
Kind of stuff you want to show your kids, isn't it?

Max Porter (1:19)
It's a proper myth tree that isn't it? You know, someone who was a witch buried in there or something, isn't there?

Geoff Bird (1:25)
There's a line in Lanny, your latest book where it says, and Lanny is a character, I should say. He says 'we're in the woods. Given the choice, Lanny would always be in the woods', or words to that effect. Would you always be in the woods given the choice?

Max Porter (1:41)
Yeah. Yes, it's my default place of worship. Look at that one. It was a beautiful gravestone, here with Ivy carved on it. It's wonderful isn't it?

Geoff Bird (1:51)
And if you were gonna get to choose your place of rest, you could kind of settle among these trees. You'd go for that, wouldn't you?

Max Porter (1:58)
Well, my ideal place of rest would be between the woods in the water. To borrow a phrase, and I think that that, you know, the sound of running water in the woods is my absolute happy place. There's a few places I go swimming in the river, in the woods a place in Dartmoor, and a place near here and that thing of being...having trees over you, being in it, in almost almost like being in a holloway, but floating on your back in the river is as close as I get to heaven. Heaven on Earth.

Geoff Bird (2:32)
You say it's your place of worship is closest to heaven. You...

Max Porter (2:37)
You're borrowing religious language....

Geoff Bird (2:39)
I know.

Max Porter (2:40)
It feels that way, for me.

Geoff Bird (2:41)
I know from meeting you before that you're increasingly inclined might be the right word. To feel that there's something spiritual, animistic going on.

Max Porter (2:54)
I am an animist. Yeah. And I believe it to be both? Well, I believe it to be an incredibly unique combination of a rational set of beliefs, scientific beliefs, and potentially spiritual. Yeah, it's the oldest faith on Earth, the relationship between human beings and the living world, it's what everything grows out of, and I, you know, don't want to speak ill of other religions. But they all seem so nonsensical, compared to the fact that these extraordinary things give us the air we breathe. just reading a brilliant book, which we'll maybe talk about by someone called Diana Beresford-Kroger, have you ever heard of her?

Geoff Bird (3:32)
I've heard of her but I....

Max Porter (3:33)
She's written a few books about trees. She's a botanist and extraordinary woman, but it's about her childhood in Ireland, and the marrying of the Celtic spiritual animist tradition, the sort of Celtic metaphysic with modern cutting edge science, and obviously, the two are increasingly meeting up. But she says something about, you know, our debt, our debt to the trees is something we can never repay. And that simply, you know, it's as simple as you cut down a tree you are complicit in or beginning a process of suicide. And that's just an extraordinary clear way of looking at it. And one that's become both, you know, the ancient wisdom, but it's also very urgent now. Look at this beautiful thing, these are the twins, I was telling you about.

Geoff Bird (4:20)
1903.

Max Porter (4:24)
But the cut...the juxtaposition between that, and some of the war graves, there's one where two brothers returned from...don't return from the war in less than a year apart.

Geoff Bird (4:35)
Talking about the brothers not coming back from war puts me in mind of your first piece of music.

Max Porter (4:40)
My first piece is by Gerald Finzi. Is it? Is that what it is? I don't remember the order. It's from the clarinet concerto by Gerald Finzi.

Geoff Bird (4:48)
And he lost three brothers as well, I believe.

Max Porter (4:50)
Really?

Geoff Bird (4:51)
Yeah. I don't know if they were, if that was in the war, but it was the right...was the same period of the First World War.

Max Porter (4:57)
Yeah, well, yeah, because he was writing his big work in the gap between the wars and during the Second World War. I didn't realise how young Gerald Finzi was when he died. Actually. He was in his 50s. I chose this one because it's, um, well, I should just stay in a sombre mood. My mum gave me a piece of paper about 15 years ago now, 20 years ago. You know, in kind of, in case anything happens to me piece of paper. Maybe she was going overseas, I can't remember. But on the piece of paper is her funeral playlist.

Geoff Bird (5:27)
Wow.

Max Porter (5:27)
And this one's on it. And we used to listen to this piece of music together in that kind of time when I'd finished school and I was sort of around, possibly a bit low... dunno, I was maybe not living very well. And we hung out...

Geoff Bird (5:45)
And what age was this?

Max Porter (5:46)
I guess, 18 before I went to uni, me and my mum hung out a lot, smoked Marlboro reds together.

And I played the clarinet when I was a kid. And so we got into this piece together. And it was bound up with the mourning for a very, very amazing person I knew called Ravena Dalimea, Ravena Nicholson, who died of cancer. She was my clarinet teacher. And really one of those, you know, you meet a handful of people in your lifetime that have that creative energy to the point of mystical power, do you know what I mean? Really phenomenally potent. Musical force for good, I loved her. And so that was Rabena. And she had died of cancer. And I had put the clarinet down, it was bound up with my feelings about her. And I had been slightly tempted to leave the nice world of clarinet and get into the world of....

Geoff Bird (6:41)
Electric guitar?

Max Porter (6:42)
Well no... the sax and jazz. And it was when I was discovering hip hop and some of the music we'll go on to discuss and I thought, well, I need to join the jazz band and they won't have a clarinet.

Geoff Bird (6:49)
Like, in Dead Poets Society he gives up the clarinet for the saxophone because it's more sonorous.

Max Porter (6:53)
Yeah, I mean, I didn't...I wouldn't have had such an eloquent excuse, it just felt, felt like I wasn't getting any cool gigs on the clarinet. But yeah, the day that I found out that Ravena died I was, I'd kind of given into the constant 'you must practice your clarinet we, you know what we'll stop driving' and I was standing playing Mozart's clarinet concerto when my mom knocked on the door and said that Ravena had died. So it seems sort of symbolic and right to just put the clarinet down. But yeah, so when I listened to the great works of music with the clarinet in it, be it Bonnie Prince Billy, or The National or anything. It reminds me of that time, and Finzi particularly because it was, I guess, a time when I was reckoning with discovering, you know, when you're an age, and I'm getting into different types of music, but I was always so into sad music, and Finzi is a great one for the sort of elegy, you know, for the mournful mode. Particularly as I suppose my sort of political self was emerging around that time finding out aspects of English, British history that were very upsetting, and wondering how one reconciles that shame or outrage with the love of landscape and the love of British, some British history and British art particularly.

Geoff Bird (8:06)
And he was very, he himself was very engaged with the idea of Englishness, wasn't he?

Max Porter (8:11)
Yeah. And the pastoral. Well, I mean, you know, you listen to it. It's like, it's one of those pieces it has, like the Lack Ascending, it has an extraordinary distillation somehow of English, of English rural life.

Yeah this is my....oh we missed my, missed the Ash tree. But there it is. This little cluster of what must be,I dunno, 200 year old ashes? Calling out to me is the definition of an ash in its formation. And they're alive and well. Which isn't the case with all the woods around here. But yeah, this, I love the height of those crowns they are unbelievable.

Geoff Bird (9:12)
Beholden to no one, are they?

Max Porter (9:14)
Well, ash is such a strangly rudeboy isn't he just?

Geoff Bird (9:16)
Yeah.

Max Porter (9:17)
Up, up he goes wherever he fancies and I love that there's a kind of clumsy, gangly... I'm obsessed with ash trees at the moment. I've been documenting ash trees for the last year and writing about them and I'm doing a project with my musical collaborators I worked with Lanny on doing a song cycle for the ash. But even going out my kids, my kids are saying 'that would be our memory of you when we're old, dad. that you have to stop and take pictures of ash trees'. But I think that documenting anything for a year is a really interesting thing to do.

Geoff Bird (9:46)
Look at that! You are kidding! Wow!

Max Porter (9:54)
Well, I'm not, I'm not an expert, but is it a sparrowhawk?

Geoff Bird (9:59)
I think it is.

Max Porter (10:00)
I think it's a Sparrowhawk.

Geoff Bird (10:02)
It's landed on one of the ash trees that we're just talking about, to prove a point.

Max Porter (10:05)
What an elegant enter stage left.

Geoff Bird (10:10)
Wow, yeah, it's a hawk just flying up. Just once in a life to achieve such grace as that.

Max Porter (10:21)
That's actually my mate Steve in a costume. I paid him five quid to do that.

If we could run that again, please Steve. That was magical. Also what if you were if you were a big bird like that? What a perfect little roost that is.

Geoff Bird (10:41)
Yeah, yeah.

Max Porter (10:41)

You've got a nice view over the forest floor. You've got the protection in the canopy above you so no one can muck around with you.

Love it. Well, that was magical, Geoff we shared a real moment there.

Geoff Bird (10:50)
Didn't we? Do you, do you think the ash are aware? I think I read last week that you, your favourite tree's the beech, and i'm whispering here...

Max Porter (10:58)
Yeah, no, that's okay. They don't mind that. I don't think you get any kind of...well we romanticise the relationship between trees and the idea of this forest community but actually, they're all warring like mad, aren't they? And sharing.... I like to think that, you know, we assume they're sharing nutrient information and stuff through the, to the wood wide web through the fungal message.

Actually, I like this think it's really banal, you know, like that, you know, like 'Morning Gavin. Looks like rain. What you doin' today?'

But I think the ash, of all trees, would be relatively unfussed by any kind of allegiance politics, like I, they'd be like, fine, you're a beech man. And they'd understand that because of where I grew up. It was all beech woods where I grew up. But my obsession with the ashes has to do with the dying and the idea of collective mourning and paying attention to what is dying and how we might support species but also this sort of anti romantic impulse, like, you know, the great Oliver Rackham.

Yeah.

The tree dude, you know, he's...trees come and go. And they don't, we don't, we don't need to put human ideas of sentimentality onto these species. Some survive, some don't. New ones come in, what we consider native species aren't. The ash is a refugee tree.

Geoff Bird (12:11)
So do you think we can get too easily drawn into a sentimental view of the wild wood and the green wood?

Max Porter (12:19)
I think we can. I'm guilty of it myself. But one has to, one has to, same with nostalgia one has to be analytical about what aspects of it are pernicious what aspects of it are a form of propaganda or a form of denial and sometimes quite dangerous, you know, we have this relationship with sort of blood and soil ideas of national pride here that sometimes become very toxic, almost fascistic in their, in their sort of, the idea of...

Geoff Bird (12:47)

Purity.

Max Porter (12:47)
...of purity and a kind of pre integrated society. So yeah, I think one has to be, one has to try and marry the emotional response one has to trees and for some people, it's palpable, it's very strong and there are now scientific tests that explain why some people have these...because trees are really, are acting upon us as we act upon them. But whilst also being quite matter of fact, in one's science reading and same with birds, you know, the, you know, like, if you read this book, by Richard Smythe, do you say Smythe or do you say Smith?

Geoff Bird (13:20)
I'd say Smythe, I go for Smythe.

Max Porter (13:22)
Well it's got a Y in it. So I'm assuming it's Smythe. It's called 'An Indifference of Birds'. It's about the relationship between birds and humans, or not. And often the idea that we think, we've killed all the birds. And he's basically the point of the book is they're gonna, they're just getting on with it. If there's food dropped on the floor, they'll pick it up, if there's a nice place to roost in a city environment, they'll go there and they'll roost there. And if we, you know, our civilization crumbles and falls, they might crumble and fall with it, or they might spring off into, back into where they come from...

Geoff Bird (13:46)
And none of it's done for our benefit.

Max Porter (13:48)
That's the same thing we were just joking about with the trees because the birdsong is so loud at the moment. And this lockdown spring, we're all noticing the birds for the first time. And they are in fact louder apparently, because they're having to work harder to battle out other noise further away from other birds. So that like, we think it's we think it's we can hear them better. Actually, they can hear each other, they can hear each other better. But also they're probably saying to each other, 'Oi!', you know...'get off my worms, we talked about this!'

Geoff Bird (14:20)
Coming back to the clarinet. Was that the point then where in this awful biographical moment, then you started to draw connections, subconsciously, even between landscape and music and personal experience?

Max Porter (14:37)
I think there's, those things are organically woven together anyway. But I probably at that time became a more solitary person. I'm not hugely sociable, I don't think. I suppose. I mean, people keep sending me pictures of me having a fun time in the pub at that age. And I'm like, what? Did I ever have a fun time in a club? at the pub? I don't think I did. But I evidently did. But no, also it was about that time, I started to indulge a slightly more melancholic aspect of my personality

which seemed to belong in the woods on my own in a river floating on my back in a river or something. And that is when one has profound encounters with music and literature, you know, solitary, in that solitary mode.

Geoff Bird (15:20)
Did you, would you take the music with you? Would you take it and sit next to the river with the headphones and put the clarinet concerto on?

Max Porter (15:28)
No, I only ever, only ever got a pair of headphones a few years ago. No, I would do my listening to music at home. I was a CD buyer.

Geoff Bird (15:36)
Yeah.

Max Porter (15:38)
No, I never took music with me. Partly because Richard King's interesting about this in his book about...well it's about lots of different things, isn't it? But about the Lark Ascending, I really want to hear if I'm out and about the I would be sad to have someone's voice, no offence to people that listen to great, beautifully produced podcasts while they're walking around. But I'd be sad if I missed. Like, for example, I love the Jays, one of my favourite birds, and the way that you hear a Jay first and then, then find him, you know, like watching a Jay, I love that kind of thing. And that's one of the reasons I'm out and about in the first place. And also now, you know, I had kids very young. And so I can't deny, you know, we talked about this previously, the role of domesticity in my experience of art and music and ideas is now filtered through the noise of three young people, you know, I spend my whole time saying 'shut up! be quiet, there's a Jay'. Or 'go away i'm taking a picture of this ash tree' or boys 'come on look at this, you won't believe this'. You know, if my son had been here, my eldest son would have told us before that bird had even landed, what type of bird it was, how old it was. And I, that's the noise I like in the woods. And do my listening later. Also, I like I've discovered about myself, I enjoy and I get a lot from a sort of depth, like a depth of yearning like Sunday night blues missing one's grandmother, or you know, Father's Day thinking about one's dead dad or whatever, or sitting in, you know, in the evening, listening to Finzi for the first time thinking about how much I love my mum or how much I want to get down to the river. That strength of yearning that it creates in one shouldn't immediately be satisfied. There's something very good about the wait before you can next satisfy that. To be walking in the hills of one's imagination is sometimes almost as important as going out and doing it if you know what I mean. I've always enjoyed that. That way, like right now, I'm thinking about the sea and yearning for the sea and particularly for Wales, wanting to go where I go every year in Wales and be in the water again, thinking about Wales and my Welsh ancestry and my children and all this stuff. The yearning for it during lockdown has become so potent. It's almost drug like, now. It's almost dizzying.

Geoff Bird (17:46)
Yeah.

Max Porter (17:46)
And that's a good thing, I think. It teaches me patience. And it teaches me to be careful in my thinking about what the yearnings are, whether they're rational, at what point they - as we were talking about with trees - at what point the kind of biological yearning and more irrational emotive things might overlap, be connected to one another. That seems like good and interesting thinking to do. I want well, in a minute, you're going to hear the sound of running water in a really beautiful way.

Geoff Bird (18:14)
Squirrel! I can identify that.

Max Porter (18:16)
Lovely, lovely little Hazel runway he's got there.

Geoff Bird (18:19)
Right, a second piece of music.

Yeah. Which....

Max Porter (18:22)
That is extraordinary,

Geoff Bird (18:24)
It is extraordinary....

I think they're Buzzards, because they're much smaller, aren't they?

But it's the tail on a buzzard.

Max Porter (18:32)
Logical cluelessness from us here. But now there's four of them winging around, they must be kids.

Geoff Bird (18:37)
I kind of feel like there's a certain strain in male nature writing where it's just a bit too much we're leaning towards and being able to name everything. Not just name it but Latin-ate it.

Max Porter (18:48)
Yeah.

Geoff Bird (18:49)
And the rest of us, I think, yeah, for sure. It's a beech. Pretty sure that’s a, that's a Pheasant.

Max Porter (18:56)
Either way, I love it. Yeah, yeah.

Yeah, there is, also there's a, there's a kind of schoolboy bullying mentality to sort of exclusionary tactics aren't there? of people that don't belong in the club. Well, do you know what I would if I didn't know much about the writer, Tim Dee. And I might have assumed he was one of these guys. And maybe he is, because he has an extraordinary knowledge of the bird world. But I'm reading his new book Greenery at the moment and it is astonishingly good. And there's some knowledge being bandied around which is fine because he's gone around the world looking at birds his whole life, but just the prose is it's like symphonically good writing. Talk about the relationship between music and language when you're writing about the natural world. It's got actual lift, actually soars on the page. Really remarkable book.

Geoff Bird (19:43)
I know Tim Dee, he is also the radio. He's one of the greatest radio producers this land has produced in the last few decades.

Max Porter (19:52)
Yeah, well, I mean the attention to sound and behaviour and, like, the ability to describe page after page, the behaviour of birds and the relationship between human beings and birds and birds and place in fresh and startlingly insightful ways. They're very few people in the language, you're talking about your Ted Hughes of the world really, Kathleen Jamie people like this that can do it. Anyway. Can you hear this little trickling? We're coming up to the stream now.

Geoff Bird (20:25)
Anyway, second piece of music is June Tabor.

Max Porter (20:29)
Yeah, this is an uncomplicated choice for me, I just...the quality of her voice, the strength of her voice, over 30, 40 years of output, it has a kind of medicinal effect on me.

Geoff Bird (20:45)
And, and the one you've chosen is from her earlier years, when she was typically unacompanied. Yeah, much more likely to be accompanied more recently.

Max Porter (20:56)
Yeah. And that beautiful record, her last record, which is with the Oyster Band or whatever they're called, and the one before with the saxophonist, which is very beautiful. And in terms of a kind of dancing rapport between the saxophone and human voices, really special record. But yeah, I go back to unaccompanied, wherever possible. And it's an amazing song. And it's just incredibly moving the human voice unaccompanied like that. And I've been working with a singer in Kentucky this year, and she's pointed me in the direction of some incredible Georgian voice choirs, and Hungarian singing and stuff. And I'm quite into early church music and listening to talis and things like that. Yeah, Gregorian works. So I think that the reason she's on

this playlist is to represent, to me, the almost beyond language, power of a human voice, in an old stone building or indeed out in the woods or unmediated, by, you know, other forms of cultural production. I think it's just humbling, isn't it to hear a voice like that, and to hear a song like that, that, you know, in other versions, to hear it being translated by an artist of that, like, pure natural power and grace.

But again, you know, I could have put a Shirley Collins version on, I could have any number of versions of that song on, could have put Fairport on but I just wanted to have June because I get goosebumps really?

We're in this little convergence here. This little wooded glade, you could describe it, couldn't you?

Geoff Bird (23:02)
If you were a writer at the top of your game...

Max Porter (23:04)
One would have words for it. Yeah.

Geoff Bird (23:06)
Yeah.

Max Porter (23:07)
Well on the tree here it says DOM. Maybe Cummings came here on one of his little lockdown jaunts. But this is kind of almost preposterously idyllic.

Rory Clifford (23:17)
It's almost daft, isn't it?

Max Porter (23:18)
Yeah. Yeah. We're in a little wooded Glade. There's a fallen down lime tree here, which they have wisely and correctly let grow over the years. So it sprouted out and all...

Geoff Bird (23:29)
Different trunks out of it.

Max Porter (23:30)
This is like the green church. I mean, it's...

Geoff Bird (23:32)
Yeah, yes.

Max Porter (23:33)

Architectural. And then we've got these three streams coming down out of the woods, beech trees, birch trees, hawthorne. It's a really beautiful spot, isn't it? And all the stench of wild garlic gone over. Yeah, it's not quite.

Geoff Bird (23:49)
It's not quite there. But again, a bit of a kind of corrective to too much romanticism.

Max Porter (23:55)
That's very Dead Papa Toothwort, that.

Geoff Bird (23:57)
Yes, who is a character in Lanny, who will come back to shortly. I was really excited when you chose an unaccompanied voice. Because it was in just a setting like this, that kind of my relationship with music was transformed pretty much overnight, when, about 10 years ago, we started putting on festivals, and there was just a campfire. And it's not, it couldn't be more cliched as that and there was a singer and just sang at one o'clock in the morning with hardly anyone around the campfire, dying embers. It was so corny, but immediately, everything opened up.

Max Porter (24:36)
The reason it sounds corny is because you know that that has been the case for as long as human beings have sat around campfires, it's like, it's like, you know the profound experience I had of seeing Alice Oswald read, recite her Memorial, no notes, no mic, nothing just a human being tapping on the floor and delivering. Pure. to a sound. pure story and for a singer when you hear that. I mean I saw The Unthanks singing last year,

Geoff Bird (25:01)
Yeah.

Max Porter (25:02)
Acapella.

Geoff Bird (25:02)
Yeah.

Max Porter (25:03)
And I felt like my stomach had fallen through the chair underneath me. It was, it was a physical blow to the, to the whole of my system, my sensory system, it was astonishingly powerful. And we can achieve that. Yeah. Anytime, any time of day, and I find that very, very, very humbling and exciting.

Geoff Bird (25:25)
I don't think I could achieve what The Unthanks....if the pair of us try....

Max Porter (25:27)
Well you say that, right. But I was recently doing a festival somewhere and we were in the woods late at night, it was a thing raising money for refugees, I think. I think I read an indigenous American folk tale. And then everyone sort of said, well, that's kind of all we've got, you know, but feel free to stick around. And in a very unlike me, don't sing, can't sing particularly well. I sang a round. I got them all singing a round of Rose, Rose, Rose Red, which everybody knows and if you don't it's only four lines, and it comes around again so join in whenever you want. And that was the spirit of it. Join in whenever you want. And it was maybe 25, 30 people in a relatively immature wood like the, you know, shallow wood. And it was... you'd have to be the most cynical person on planet earth to not say that you had you been in some kind of communion then with something that was much, much larger than any individual can ever be. And gifted everybody equally. You know, no one owned the moment, it was really very beautiful.

Geoff Bird (26:21)
So it comes back to that unaccompanied voice June Tabor, i'm pleased that she's made all the records she has with the band. In fact, if for no other reason. Have you seen the front cover of the album, A Cut Above with Martin Simpson.

Max Porter (26:35)
Is she wearing a pair of high boots and they're on the bridge?

Geoff Bird (26:40)
Mainly because it looks like Martin Simpson tried to take her on.

Max Porter (26:43)
Yeah.

Geoff Bird (26:44)
Because his boots are up past his knees. Fantastic, couldn't be more 1970's.

Max Porter (26:49)
Yeah, you sort of think like, there's my performance. And we're going to go to a hall. And based on the way they look, I'm gonna guess it's going to be somewhere in between, like....And you know, like, John Stewart, Johnny Cash type country, and then out would come Tam Lin or something just absolutely uncluttered. Through the ages 1000 year old song/

Geoff Bird (27:14)
You'd put your pint down for that one.

Max Porter (27:15)
You'd put your pint down, yeah. I'm gonna just wash my hands in this.

Geoff Bird (27:20)
Okay.

Max Porter (27:20)
But should we wander up a bit?

Geoff Bird (27:22)
Yeah.

Max Porter (27:22)
Yeah, I mean, this is very managed woodland. There's nothing. There's nothing wilderness about this really. I mean, this is I think, as I said, I think this is owned by a National Trust. And it's one of these sort of semi regulated play areas where people come and do den building classes and stuff like that.

Geoff Bird (27:52)
But there is, as you said earlier, that kind of, it's very, it's very alluring. That notion, you want to get back to the oldest tree you possibly can the least touched landscape you can possibly find. But there's something underneath that that is deeply troubling. Yeah, well,

Max Porter (28:07)
Yeah. Well, I do want to undo... this is one of the things I've slightly struggled with. With the kind of... a lot of the nature writing that is sort of, well it's quite masculine in flavour and it's to do with sort of man with his top off digging-type imagery. But what it does, I think is it attempts to... it's escapist, it's a fantasy of escapism from the modern globalised world, which is all well and good. And I sympathise with that and have impulses in common with that. But what about the people that can't escape? What about the people who are, who make the clothes that you wear or make the spade that you're leaning on in your publicity shot showing how at one with the earth you are? It's exploitative to not at all times be aware of that and because you can't turn that time and one has to work, one can work back time or one can re wild or re educate etc. But that's a huge collective undertaking and buggering off to dig your own potatoes in rural wherever, which is actually half a mile down from Tesco is an illusion and quite a, quite a dangerous one, I think. Because I think it's complicit in all sorts of cruelties of you know, systemic cruelties that now exist in the world.

Geoff Bird (29:15)
Could it also be said more positively to offer an alternative vision and embody an alternative vision that people can, so that people can actually see that there is something other than the prison they're trapped in?

Max Porter (29:28)
Yeah, I'm talking about a few fringe figures who I think take it a little bit too far. Genuinely. It's an incredible moment. And we have an extraordinary opportunity now to re educate people and reintroduce human beings into the systems that created us. And, and broadly, those efforts are amazing and if not now when? What an unbelievable opportunity we have now. And that's what lockdown has been so interesting about isn't it? It's like the relationship between humans and

cities between humans and transport networks, the whole infrastructure of our lives has changed and why not take that as an opportunity? He says, you know, nipping down to Primark at the first opportunity he gets to buy 100 cheap hoodies.

Geoff Bird (30:16)
Next song is, you're gonna have to educate me on this. It's drum and bass.

Max Porter (30:21)
Oh, it's Source Direct.

Geoff Bird (30:22)
Yes. So this is not an area of anything, you know, I'd easier spot the Peregrine Falcon, then...

Max Porter (30:28)
Oh, really?

Geoff Bird (30:28)
A drum and bass band. You know, I'm listening to more of it...

Max Porter (30:32)
See, you given yourself away there.

Geoff Bird (30:34)
Yeah, exactly.

Max Porter (30:49)
Well, this is just a glimpse of my teenage years. This is the junglists, you know, straight from the junglist heartlands of home counties, England. You know, sitting in my friend's cars listening to mixtapes being too young to go to raves, being too young to be in London at that extraordinary moment when drum and bass and jungle came out of the house movement and the sound system culture and loving reggae, passionately loving reggae, and jazz and hip hop. And just suddenly this sound emerging in the 90s, which was our sound. And I've chosen A Made Up Sound by Source Direct just because it seems to encapsulate that minute as part of quite distinct aspects of things, the metal head sound, but the thing about the Source Direct, it still sounds unbelievably fresh. And That was what we loved about it, was it was a sound that had come out of British dance music culture, borrowing, you know, generously admittedly from all types of different musical traditions, but relying on an unbelievable technical proficiency to make new sounds, new baselines, new beats, and it sounds to me like England. It sounds like London in the 90s and Bristol, and very exciting, and I loved the bass and I loved being in front of sound systems at that time in my life. And as close as I got to being part of the rave culture, which is a very important part of this country's history, but more solitary for me, I like being in a friend's car, you know, bit stoned listening to these, these tunes and being just blown away by what they're achieving. It seemed to be galloping. And there was a moment when it galloped ahead and, and

there was no sound like it on Earth. I remember my American cousins who lived in Washington, DC came over. And they were like, play us this music that we've heard.

Geoff Bird (32:35)
Yeah.

Max Porter (32:35)
My brother was a music producer, is still a music producer who's gone in a different direction. But at that time, we were, it felt like we have this unbelievably exciting secret that the rest of the world didn't know about yet.

Geoff Bird (32:46)
It's interesting. You mentioned jazz, and I saw I had Coleman Hawkins on the other day, and then I listened immediately afterwards to this track. Yeah. And it kind of made a whole lot of sense.

Max Porter (32:56)
Oh, yeah. Mingus...

Geoff Bird (32:57)
Yeah.

Max Porter (32:58)
Coltrane, Alice Coltrane, right up into the sort of Bill Laswell into the reggae world where jazz and reggae crossover and dub and you get Scientist and Perry and Tubby, and then suddenly, out of it comes this razor sharp digital dance music and stepping as well. You didn't have to dance, you could just stand in the club in the dark with your hood up stepping all night long in a way that suited my slightly depressed 18 year old way of life. It was so exciting. And the reason I connect it to the wilderness, partly these are the wilderness years for me, and partly the sense of solitude that one achieves in a place like this is what one achieves one puts one's headphones on, on the night bus. You know, I remember moving to London as a student and doing that journey across London late at night on a 35 bus, right from Shoreditch all the way across the Cold Harbour Lane in Brixton where I lived and it wouldn't take that long at night 'cause there's no traffic but putting one's headphones on then. And listening to this music that was so tight. And the sort of Sonic landscape of it was so engaging and out of that comes Burial and dubstep and all the interesting things that have happened in music over the last year but there was never a more joyful moment to me than standing feeling that jungle was our sound and the break particularly the aim of breaking everything and, and the Bristol sound and everything was something we could be really proud of, and especially as I said about the politics because you can never separate politics from work of art. But that was a time to me a kind of golden age of collaborative multiracial Britain.

Geoff Bird (34:28)

And the stuff got cheaper and made it possible. It's always the way isn't it? when things get cheaper...

Max Porter (34:32)
People making this stuff in their bedrooms. Yeah.

Geoff Bird (34:34)
So was there a big sense of kinship that when you were sitting on the bus? Did you kind of nod across to somebody else who looked like they might be listening to the same?

Max Porter (34:41)
No, I never really had that it was more solitary. And I always saw that more in the indie community. I never felt part of a gang and also because I'm a younger brother, I always felt like they were the cool guys. Yeah, and they were of the age when they were going up to the you know, the blue note and hearing those early sessions and going up to like world dance in Milton Keynes and I was 13. Thinking, 'oh, I'd love to go to a rave'.

But I'd have to wait. My brother would lend me the tapes. The classic younger brother. Well, I mean, I remember when I did get to London, and I'd be like, I'm going to go to Mr. Bongo on Poland Street. And I'm gonna go in and like Gilles Peterson is going to be stood there and I'm going to buy some really rare Brazilian samba records. I got massively into samba at one point, and then he's gonna say 'hey, man, great choice. Do you want to come and do my radio show with me?' And I was like London, like the streets are paved with gold type thing. And then of course, you get in the record shop, you feel like a fool. You ask for the wrong thing. It's more expensive than you can afford. You leave feeling a bit humiliated, a bit sad. That was my experience.

Geoff Bird (35:36)
Yeah.

Max Porter (35:36)
Same as the woods. You know that whole...like you were saying about the imposter syndrome of not knowing the correct name for that species of maple tree? Or not knowing the difference between a cherry and a whatever, that that sense of 'Oh, I didn't know it was about right or wrong answers'.

Geoff Bird (35:49)
Yeah.

Max Porter (35:49)
And shedding that as one grows older and thinking 'no I am here, human being, standing in the woods, shed of all that language and that performance and that politics' that's, it takes time. And you've got to go through the awkwardness, haven't you in any field of life, you need to find the freedom.

Geoff Bird (36:03)
And then find yourself being an absolute hypocrite. So I'm kind of pointing at the really obvious trees, and saying to my kids. That's, that's a Oak. Grabbing a leaf. 'Keep this this is an Oak, you'll remember this forever!' And of course, yeah.

Max Porter (36:18)
I think I'm probably a bit far in the opposite direction of telling my kids all the time that I know nothing.

Geoff Bird (36:22)
Yes.

Max Porter (36:23)
So now they just don't respect me at all.

I think there's a story about my brother getting played on John Peel's show.

And having no, you know, getting a phone call or whatever, and just going, 'okay!' Not 'Amazing, so John, we send our warmest regards. We've got loads more stuff. If he wants to listen to it. We're developing a new sound. It's called the industrial...' Just 'Okay! thank you very much'

Geoff Bird (36:43)
So speaking of heroes, you happen to have chosen a song by my favourite band of the last 10 years, maybe ever, Lankum.

Max Porter (36:51)
Really? Maybe ever?

Geoff Bird (36:52)
Maybe ever! And you're not even allowed to say that to yourself. But I was driving down today thinking, I think maybe they are. Or at least, and I heard him for the first time, first couple of times. I then saw them live for the first time. I've not been that. not excited, but kind of immediately touched deep down by a sound. Yeah. I've not felt that since I was a teenager. Yeah, and it just made me spin right round. And you've chosen....

Max Porter (37:19)
Right round, baby.

Geoff Bird (37:20)
Right round. That was the last time.

Max Porter (37:23)

Well, yeah, I mean, I agree with everything you're saying. It's almost like, it's almost like a kind of delivery from the holy place we didn't dare hope would exist. Of the kind of Celtic folk tradition meets.... Type, drone, kraut, heavy..I mean. Yeah, it's extraordinary. And they do, it was such a lightness of touch and such...

Geoff Bird (37:44)
Comedy as well. Yeah, very funny.

Max Porter (37:46)
Yeah.

And they're just badass aren't they? they're just cool. They're a band to believe in and the artwork is so good. Everything about them is so good. I always fall in love with them actually.

What I wanted to put on was a song called Pothole in the Sky by Elise O'Neill,

Geoff Bird (39:06)
I was about to mention her actually.

Max Porter (39:09)
Talking of hero worship. If I'm thinking about... 'cause I'm not a great gig, I can't tell you encyclopaedic-ly how many gigs I've been to and actually I've got bad knees and I like to sit down. So I'm not a great gig goer. But probably the greatest gig I've ever seen is Ali Farka Toure.

Geoff Bird (39:22)
Yeah.

Max Porter (39:22)
And after that, I went to the End of the Road Festival last year.

Geoff Bird (39:26)
Yeah.

Max Porter (39:27)
I was keen to see Lisa O'Neill because I absolutely love her records.

Geoff Bird (39:31)
Yeah.

Max Porter (39:32)
And I was a bit tired and emotional. Maybe I'd been in a discussion with someone about Brexit. Yeah, and I got myself all upset. And I thought I wanted to go and see Lisa O'Neill in a really good mood. And I went in and she played a song and it was extraordinary and in between, her

in between chat, which is wicked anyway, she's a master of the art. Have you seen her do a YouTube gig at the National Concert Centre in Dublin or whatever it's called.

Geoff Bird (39:56)
Is that available?

Max Porter (39:56)
Yeah, she does it to an empty room and she talks about the various ghosts that might be in the room and plays for them. It opens with her saying 'now sit yourself down Hilda, I'm going to play a song by a man called Tom Waits, who you won't know. He's still alive and you're dead' it's absolutely brilliant. But she then said this thing about, I don't think she even used to B word, but she said 'you know, I want you all to know that whatever happens' because we we're around about that July date when we notionally left and she said, 'I will come back here and I will play for you again. We will meet again'. And then she started singing that song about shooting Mussolini or chopping his ear off...

Geoff Bird (40:32)
Shooting his nose, or...

Max Porter (40:33)
Yeah, I shot Mussolini. And I crumpled, yeah, I fell to the floor and wept. And I came out an hour later, after she just finished her set and my wife's like, jeez what's happened to you? Because I was blotchy and red and I had tears streaming down my face, and I was shaky. And I said, I think I've just seen one of the great performances I'll ever see. And Lisa O'Neill knocks off gigs like that every night of the week. She just has it. But anyway, so my link to Lankum is that I ummed and ahh-ed about which to put on.

Yeah, yeah.

And then I was in a pretty dark place recently, I played that tune What Would We Do When We Have No Money. And I got that feeling again, yeah, buzzing up from the middle of oneself, tuning into a sound and the sentiment that is both utterly contemporary and like millennia old, and I'm pretty anti English at the moment. So I lap up a bit of Lankums intolerance of the English as well. And I just...

Geoff Bird (41:28)
Lisa O'Neill was the last gig I saw before lockdown, actually. I had exactly that experience. I saw it in Manchester and it was amazing. Then I went back and watched her and Radie Peat from Lankum on YouTube. You know, This Ain't No Disco. I think it's called. It's a film, series of films, from Ireland. Brilliant. But Radie Peat and Lisa O'Neill sing a song called Factory Girls. It's like the most beautiful sandpaper voices rubbing up against each other. And back to the unaccompanied thing Lisa and Louise rarely accompanied or rather she has a very light accompaniment but in this case....

Max Porter (42:05)
She treats a banjo like it's an unpretentious domestic implement to be used...

Geoff Bird (42:11)
Yes. Yeah.

Max Porter (42:11)
To be used in whatever way you see fit.

Geoff Bird (42:13)
Yeah, absolutely.

Max Porter (42:13)
So unpretentious.

Geoff Bird (42:14)
Yeah, brilliant. No fiddling. No diddling around. Yeah, these two chords.

Max Porter (42:18)
This is my collaborator in this undertaking, which is to sing you people a good song now. Yeah, God. Yeah.

Geoff Bird (42:24)
So how does that...

Max Porter (42:27)
That's what I mean about these voices.

I mean, I suppose I've made that clear by putting June on as well and talking about this work I've been doing with Joan Shelley and, and, you know, to a different extent, I suppose some of the African blues music I listen to. The pure, unfussy not taking itself too seriously, but understanding that it is a sacred undertaking, the delivery of songs into the community, as long as, it's this looking the audience in the eye thing that I find so powerfully refreshing in a time of systemic bullshit, like everybody lying to each other in complex ways, both by performing an identity online or with the politic whatever it is, the ways in which untruth has become a kind of defining characteristic of the age. We don't know what we're eating. We don't know where it comes from. We don't know who these people are. We don't know why they're lying to us. We don't know how we're all dying. We don't even don't even see the things we're dying from anymore. And out comes someone that sings you a song. Yeah, very much the same as hugging a tree. Sorry to make the link so explicit, but it is to me, it's a self same thing. Recognition of the human body in space and time. Yeah, pure song. I mean, I, yeah, I love, I love that Lankum song. I'm pleased you, when you accepted the playlist and said that was, I was like good, because then we can, that can be the, that can be the heart of the discussion is

how you get to this, this potentially ecstatic moment which is loaded with tragic histories and exploitation and pain, but is also our release from all that.

Geoff Bird (43:52)
This is not typical for me. I was so excited that it was on the last but one album, and I flew across to Dublin to see it. They did it at the National Music Centre. I think it's called.

Max Porter (44:02)
Yeah.

Geoff Bird (44:02)
It's a beautiful Grand Hall. And the first song they did was What Will We Do When We Have No Money and I was just in pieces. And then again...

Max Porter (44:10)
What can you do with just one note? Yeah, and I could listen to that note all day and wait for her to come in.

Geoff Bird (44:15)
Yeah. And then afterwards, because I've tried to get radio programmes made about them, Radie Peat walked past and I kind of mumbled something. 'Come all the way from the northwest...'. And then went back to the airport and had a flight at five o'clock in the morning or something. I just sat on these crappy chairs thinking, how old am I to be doing this, this is so...

Max Porter (44:36)
Like Beatlemania.

Geoff Bird (44:37)
It was ridiculous. But another, another time I was making a Radio 4 programme and I had an interview in the programme. I just wanted to give it a bit of belly. So I put on the drone, not from that song but from Turkish Reveille. And my editor rang me up and said, Geoff, you've got to get rid of that there's a bit of the interview. I said, 'what are you on about?' She said 'there's a terrible electronic distortion on the line. Whoever you interviewed, there's a problem'. I said 'no, that's, that's a drone from my favourite band'. She went 'I don't care, it's got to come out'.

Max Porter (45:10)
It's like when my grandmother first listened to my brothers early, powerfully industrial noise records, 'I can't listen to them, they've broken my CD player'. He was like, 'oh you don't know how proud that makes me'.

I just bought this Bontempi keyboard, an old air powered Bontempi organ, because all my Melodicas are Bontempi. And so I'm loyal to the brand, my toy keyboards, and you plug it in it goes [makes noise]. So it's already operating at quite a...

Geoff Bird (45:39)
Lankum level.

Max Porter (45:39)
Intense Lankum level. And then when you play it, the note breathes so it goes like [makes noise]. And it's not quite in tune and then my brother's got one as well. He buys them for like 19 pounds on eBay. So you get them both going together. They're discordant, dissonant, whatever the correct musical term is, and then start singing over one of them.

Geoff Bird (45:58)
But, tying it back to nature and back to your books. So in Lanny, you've got a reasonably traditional narrative of the boy in the village in the family, and he goes missing. But that is to say what a fraction of it thinking, this is this may be a leap and do slap me in the face for the crassness of this. But listening to the drone....

Max Porter (46:20)
What's the socially distant options for slapping interviewers in the face?

Geoff Bird (46:24)
A raised eyebrow? A pursed look, yeah.

But the way that you did that, you describe nature in that book. Sounds to me very much like this kind of thrum, a deep resonant thrum that underlies all the detail of the narrative and all these little details that you throw in through the voices of the villagers. And it seemed to me listening, as I was listening to Lankum, but also your brother's stuff on the way down that we'll come to in a minute. It felt kind of similar that there's a wash beneath your writing that plays a similar kind of role as the drone does in the Lankum songs.

Max Porter (47:02)
I'd love that to be true, I mean, you, that, you've probably paid me the highest compliment I've ever received. Because you cannot write about that. Using conventional or worse hackneyed descriptive metaphors for the natural world, you have to write something that speaks of it and conveys that to the reader without being named. And that, that's, trial and error. I think the same with music, sometimes it works the same with art, and then I start with drawing. And to me the principles are relatively similar can something emerge that speaks to and of the organic truth of the matter, while also having a beauty that is not relying on any gimmicks or techniques or or proficiency on my part. I'm not a good draughtsman, but I can find an image that has it. And particularly when it's about the natural world, what I've hoped is that the book, through the way Lanny is particularly but through the things that turn him and Pete on in the wild, things like tree roots that look like skeletons or the idea of a wor- of a worshipful encounter with an old tree that teaches you a lot because it's been around much longer than any human ever could be. Therefore is, is a superpower you are encountering something supreme, a supreme being, to try and convey that not write about it. To me it is like hammering, this is why I cheat in Lanny, because I use an epigraph from the poet Lynette Roberts, called Green Madrigal "Peace, my

stranger, is a tree". And the line, kind of pertinent line for Lanny is 'carrying through all our discomforts as I would yours, the peace my stranger is a tree'. And one of the reasons I used it, there's loads of reasons I used it, I've got it tattooed on my arm. It's a poem we had at our wedding, all these reasons Welsh, feminist mystic, etc. One of the reasons I used it is because I think of it like a tuning fork for the green fuse for this green, modernist, but anciently looking sensibility, like green romanticism basically that is not fairy tale, but fairy tales borrowed from it, it's not botany or, or modern silviculture or anything like that. But those things can brush up close to it. And to describe it as a drone is perfect because everything relates to it. So the sounds, even when it's petty gossip, should be in tune or related to it should achieve a kind of counterpoint with it. So if you're listening to one you're unavoidably listening to the other. And I mean, that's perfect. That is exactly what we're saying about the domestic chitchat of birds. Oh, yes. It's not taking itself too seriously. Because it announces from the very off that it's the most serious thing in the world. Like it's deeply devout, I hope but also abstract, playful, banal. All the things that make up life.

Geoff Bird (49:43)
Potty mouth.

Max Porter (49:44)
Yeah potty mouthed and not necessarily pious but certainly reverential. Like, I can't bear that, that, the type of nature writing that is anti urban, or even anti human. The point is that the living organism is complex and requires extremely complex efforts to tune in and understand it. Yeah. But if you're saying that there's a kind of sub noise, cattles walking in the background, someone being slaughtered in woods, then that's good. That's good. And I would hope I'm just writing that....[bird squawks] Yes, mate. Afternoon!

I'm just writing a thing about painting, about Francis Bacon. And I'm trying to create the same thing there for paint, to write, to write not about painting using techniques of visual analysis, and to somehow write of it, as it, you know, and that's the same thing I'm trying to write as the living world in Lanny, because that's how he feels it the child feels it intuits it. And it's pre or post verbal.

Geoff Bird (50:43)
No, but that's the thing is time as well as just detail. You talked about the drone in the Lankum song, takes you right back to Neolithic, or whatever you want to call it.

Max Porter (50:53)
And it is felt inside the body, which is a crucial thing for me. I'm quite a bodily concerned writer, like, that is to be felt in, in the lungs.

Geoff Bird (51:01)
Yes.

Max Porter (51:02)

And up through vibration. So almost, I love the fact that crows come down there and it's just patrolling this area like there were two intruders.

Geoff Bird (51:10)
It's there going 'well, when are they going to start talking about...

They're talking about bloody Lanny, you know. He's the star of this show.

Max Porter (51:17)
You're an egomaniac, go away!

I was again until actually the...[unintelligible]...is that my famous crow friend, Cillian, who was in the play.

Yeah, yeah.

Is a huge fan and went to see them supporting or went to see her supporting. I think it was just her on her own. Okay. Supporting Beak in Dublin and had a profound encounter.

Yeah. Nice. staggering, but yes.

How many times, see I've never seen them live how many times have you?

Geoff Bird (51:43)
I've seen them six times.

Max Porter (51:46)
But it hasn't put you off. I mean, I've seen a few people live recently and it's put me right off the bands.

Geoff Bird (51:49)
Oh, not at all quite the opposite. And so I kind of travel with them. No, I don't travel with them.

Max Porter (51:55)
Lankum, security alert.

Geoff Bird (51:58)
I saw them in Manchester in Bury first, then we drove up to Glasgow to see them then I went over to Dublin and me and my Mrs. went to Brussels for the night and we went to see them and then Fire in the Mountain.

Max Porter (52:09)
It's good to have that, to feel that way about people. And my friend, my friend Roz is the same about Tori Amos.

Geoff Bird (52:18)
Tori? Oh yeah, yeah.

Max Porter (52:19)
She's obsessed with Tori Amos she does like you with Lankum she goes and sees her everywhere she can.

Geoff Bird (52:24)
Okay.

Max Porter (52:24)
To the point, I think, where Tori Amos had once stopped the gig and gone. 'Hey, you guys' you know. The screaming fans isn't cool. I guess you don't get that kind of thing. A Lankum gig really? You're probably the most extreme they've got, yeah. Throwing your boxer shorts up on stage.

Geoff Bird (52:41)
Only the once.

Max Porter (52:43)
Well, the other record of that song that has really been, I suppose I'd call it my best friend in lockdown. I have listened to it hundreds of times, and I'm gonna be horrendously English and not quite know how to pronounce the name but Bridge, Brigde, Bridie?

Geoff Bird (52:59)
I know who you mean.

Max Porter (53:00)
Brìghde Chaimbeul, The Reeling.

Geoff Bird (53:02)
With the, with drums again.

Max Porter (53:03)
Yeah. I mean, if you told me that my album of the decade would be, would be a bagpipe album. It's a sound I run from. But I am obsessed with that record.

Geoff Bird (53:14)
What's the difference? Because I go to Edinburgh and I see the bagpipes come out...

Max Porter (53:18)
It's different, it's not a bagpipe, it's a different type of pipe. It's a softer pipe isn't it, because it doesn't have to go soul grating. More so she's such a nimble player. But she's also got such an

unbelievable like, I mean, here we are standing watching these two streams converge. That's what it's like listening to her, isn't it? She has...

Geoff Bird (53:34)
Yeah, yeah.

Max Porter (53:35)
She has multiple things going on. And she has such a beautiful flowing. Oh, I mean, that the whole, the music breathes and in a way that I go to a lot of different kinds of ambient music. You know, I might, for example, listen to like, ambient classical music or avant garde music. But I've, I've yearned in my life to find something that actually sighs and rolls and trickles like that. Like if I could achieve that in my prose, then we'd really be talking about this, this green fuse. But anyway, that was changed we're chopping around subjects aren't we, but the Bacon thing attempt to do that with pain, yes, is an attempt to kind of have a baseline, a sort of baseline structural conceit or premise that the author feels, that the reader feels like okay, yeah, we may be in the paintings or we sort of it's a kind of psychic psychosexual Fantasia of baconian themes, and I want them secure enough on that ground. So that when I then make marks on, as it were, my imaginary canvas with sex work or sexual material or historical references or whatever, then you are complicit in the in the making of that mark with, as it were, the painter who doesn't exist, you know, I mean, so....

Geoff Bird (54:43)
And that's the same thing. It's perpetually there.

Max Porter (54:45)
Yeah. And it's like a drone, and it's like the trickling in this water. And if you and me can hear the water and then start to hear the relationship between the birdsong or the wind, in relation to the water as the same thing, then prose suddenly becomes wildly exciting to me in a way that makes me think I've chosen the right job for a living. Because I got into it because I couldn't find that, that tension between making music, making art and writing was always unresolved. I couldn't choose when none of them felt like, I couldn't express myself in any of them. So I ended up going for a type of writing that borrows more from music and art than it does from the history the novel really, because it's not...

Geoff Bird (55:23)
It's not resolved by any means is it? When you, just to open either of the books doesn't feel like it's nicely tied it away.

Max Porter (55:29)
I hope not, hope there's energy in it, coming off it after you finish reading it as well. My sincere hope is that people close the books and get thinking about them or responding to them in their own engagement. It doesn't work for everyone. Some people find them absolutely horrendous. You know, that's okay. Some people don't like Lankum. But yeah, so we've covered that haven't we? You are the biggest fan.

Geoff Bird (55:58)
No, I'm not. And I see people who are like that, and I see them I recog- you know, I see. It's like, you know when, if you like a tipple, for example, as I do, but you're kind of reassured by when you look down the bar and you see somebody who really likes a tipple. Yeah. And you think no, I'm not that bad. And I got to Lankum gigs, and I look around and I think, okay, I'm not, I'm not done. I can retain some degree of constraint.

Max Porter (56:19)
I've got a superfan.

Geoff Bird (56:20)
You've got a superfan?

Max Porter (56:21)
Who was boasting of being my greatest superfan and she's got a bird from Grief is the Thing with Feathers on her arm. Several people have people come to readings and said 'hope you don't think this is weird'. And then there is. And I said that I think it's incredibly flattering and cool. The only reason I think it's slightly weird is it looks like a partridge. Of some kind, it looks like a slightly overweight fluffy fowl.

Geoff Bird (56:44)
So it's not a very good....

Max Porter (56:46)
Given the potential for crow tattoos, don't choose mine! [he laughs]

Geoff Bird (56:50)
If Leonard Baskin was still around and took up the gun. Then...

Max Porter (56:53)
A full body Baskin

Geoff Bird (56:55)
A full body Baskin, how much would you pay for a full body Baskin?

Max Porter (56:59)
What a thought. Him and Ted could have set up shop couldn't they? Doing it together.

Geoff Bird (57:04)
Out of the back.

Max Porter (57:10)
Let's not get into Ted Hughes impressions. I've been kicked off podcasts for that before.

Geoff Bird (57:15)
I'd have the home advantage here although I'm Lancashire rather than Yorkshire but he did, he came down here, didn't he?

Max Porter (57:20)
Yeah. So we're about halfway between Hughes country and Hughes country.

Geoff Bird (57:27)
It's so different.

Max Porter (57:27)
It's a hell of a drive though, when he was first doing that drive backup to see his folks.

Geoff Bird (57:31)
In a Morris Miner.

Max Porter (57:31)
North Taunton to the Calder Valley. No wonder he had to shag hundreds of women and ruin everyone's life. Bastard. Hashtag no excuses, Ted.

Geoff Bird (57:47)
What is the next song? Fifth song.

Max Porter (57:49)
Hugh Mundell.

'Don't think for a while' I just love how, I love the way he sings. So straightforward. So honest. And he's probably one of my favourite reggae singers. And I've got a lot of love for that period of reggae that sound classic production, roots production.

Geoff Bird (58:09)
Well, what period are we talking?

Max Porter (58:11)
Early 70s, mid 70s I think. Golden Age, golden age of reggae politically fired up, an incredibly, you know, activist music of the black diaspora trying to get people to think about the roots of human civilization. And you know, the pride of the Rastafarian people just brilliant, incredible, incredible music. The best tunes, you know, I'm a, I'm a if you made me pick Marley or Dylan, I'm a Marley man. You know, in the battle of the Bob's there's something so self referential and grinding about the, some of the work of the North American like folk tree but there's something so proud and exciting and joyful and just the sheer tunes-manship of those records like Burning Spear and John Holt and Dennis Brown, I just love it. I love that, I love, reggae is my go to. I get

so much joy from reggae music. And I thought the reason I think I chose the Hugh Mandell is such sweet sentiment. And like if I came out here now.

Geoff Bird (59:34)
Yeah.

Max Porter (59:34)
And no one was around. I did have my headphones, I would listen to that tune and I would, it would be maybe the 1,000th time I heard it. And I would hear my wife singing along to it cuz she loves that tune as well. And I would feel a lift, an uplift, akin to looking up in a Beech wood in spring and seeing the green canopy, a human uplift.

Geoff Bird (59:51)
So is, is it connected for you?

Max Porter (59:53)
Yeah.

Geoff Bird (59:54)
That's your go to comparison. The immediate jolt that you can get from a piece of music and jolt you can get from looking at a glorious Beechwood in full.

Max Porter (1:00:03)
Clarification. I think reminding, reminding refreshment, the sense in a world beset by injustice and pain, that there is these joy, there is this fantastic joy that we are capable of joy and especially, like, quite relaxed. There's something kind of rolling and gentle. And, you know, he looks at the washing on his line, he thinks about his mum, and he thinks about his sister and he loves them. It's just a gorgeous, gorgeous tune. I mean, it might be my funeral song actually.

Geoff Bird (1:00:30)
It came in fifth place, just chronologically in the list. And it immediately kind of lightens up the songs around it. Somehow, I mean, obviously, it's cheek by jowl, or it's between two very droney songs in the best sense of the word.

Max Porter (1:00:46)
Yes.

Geoff Bird (1:00:47)
But as soon as you hear the first few bars.

Max Porter (1:00:49)
Yeah, the lift is like light coming over this wood. But the thing is, right that, that's okay. The point is that we are, the activism and the calling out injustice and pain and when we see it indeed the oppression of black people in this country. You know, we're in this incredible moment where

we're asking, rightfully asking ourselves, these questions about oppression and injustice here and the ways in which we are institutionally or casually racist that can exist and has existed in the musical world with, with joy and pride and collaboration and friendship and extraordinarily nimble appropriation across different cultural, perceived cultural borders, where you borrow one thing and recycle another. And nowhere is that more evident than in, in this, in this music? And so yeah, it does and looks particularly the BPN, like there's a chemical response in the same way as they've now proven that human beings have a special feeling for trees. It's because the tree's communicating with them as we were discussing earlier. Reggae, Reggae, is doing the Lord's work. I mean, it is. It is the great, is the great pop music of the 20th century, I think, arguably, and also just that, that classic era of real, I guess, it's sort of the Lee Perry productions in Studio One productions, and i'm no, reggae nerd, but that to me is almost as good as new popular music ever got. I love it.

Geoff Bird (1:02:06)
That's a, that's a claim.

Max Porter (1:02:07)
Yeah. Who's gonna argue with me The Vengaboys?

Geoff Bird (1:02:13)
That crow might have a word.

Max Porter (1:02:16)
Africa must be free by 1983. What an extraordinary thing that that's now 33 years old, that record and that sentiment and where do we see those political sentiments existing now in the music? And when you think about, I mean, I've just had a really pleasing personal thing, which was I was asked to give an award to someone that we felt had made a major political contribution through their writing. And I, I don't know when this is going out, so I better not say it as a spoiler, but it's a, it's a figure from the British reggae, and spoken word and poetry community who is phenomenally iconic and important. Personally, it was just, I didn't even hesitate, it was like 'that person. Got to give it to that person. Got to give it to that person now'.

Geoff Bird (1:02:55)
How is Linton Kwesi Johnson? Is it?

Max Porter (1:02:58)
Yeah, of course. Yeah, of course. He's the Godfather. And never, never has been more of a bitch than it's being now in the global world and never is it more blind to the ways in which it has been a bitch in the past, its colonial history is being whitewashed. Becomes a ridiculous conversation about whether we should have statues of slavers in cities, of course we shouldn't. But um, but I think the roots where we, you know, the sort of Stormzy headlining Glastonbury or Dave, you know, talking about police brutality at the BRIT Awards, or whatever it is, this is not, thank God. And you think this is part of a long tradition of, of black artists in this country using

pop music to speak about these issues, and it's the richest heritage we have, we should be so proud of it. We should be amplifying those voices wherever possible.

Geoff Bird (1:03:39)
And yet...

Max Porter (1:03:40)
But 33 years ago, Hugh Mandell.

Geoff Bird (1:03:42)
And just the lyricism that the deftness with language, the dance with language, there's an encapsulation of joy of love and life.

Max Porter (1:03:52)
Yeah, it's where, it's where, it's where the absolute apotheosis of that, I think, is in this music. I was talking to my kids the other day about pacifism. When I played them War by Marley, you know, the Selassie lyrics. And we're talking to them about that gesture and what that means and asking them questions about where they thought that was happening today. And you know, my son was saying, well, people you know, Stormzy says stuff like that, doesn't he? I was thinking God it's so important for the culture. To have these, have these voices amplified now. And not just put it in whatever musical or cultural or political ghetto it's deemed to be in in terms of the mainstream. That's one of the frightening things about conservative Britain is it's become culturally very conservative. And we need, we need anger. We need eccentricity. We need pretentiousness or so called pretentiousness to have, to move forward, to have an avant garde to make work that's difficult and interesting.

Geoff Bird (1:04:45)
You know, here in this very mixed English forest,

Max Porter (1:04:49)
Yeah.

Geoff Bird (1:04:49)
Woodland, whatever you want to call it, you know, talking about this music listening to this reggae music. It is full of sunshine, isn't it? And is, do you think music from that is very rooted in particular areas that with very different geographical, climatic settings? You can, you can feel that through the tunes.

Max Porter (1:05:06)
Yeah. And that's why, that's why ones only put, to me the only credible response to the migration of ideas and sounds and people around this world is one of profound gratitude. That means that I can sit as a slightly depressed 16 year old boy just outside in a tiny village outside High Wycombe with the rain pouring down on the concrete doing my math homework, listening to the sounds of Mali, or Chad, or Jamaica, or you know, or like weird Czech folk or like crazy Brazilian

jungle like, what an unbelievable time to be alive. And it felt that way in music more than anything else. Later, I found it in literature as well. When I first walked into a bookshop that was arranged by country, Binged on Chinese short stories, binged on African novels, binged on the great Spanish novels, Russian novels, you know, what joy? So, yeah, I think, yeah, yes, I think there's something unmistakably of Jamaica about reggae and it travels, and I love the fact that it then gets woven into other cultures so that we're not, you know, to me, I listened to, you know, Dr. Alimantado, or whatever. And, and I think, wow, yes, that is, that is a sound that will always speak of Notting Hill. Yeah. For Notting Hill was what Notting Hill is now. Like that's, like a time capsule of....in the culture industry. It's cliche to speak of like melting pots and exchange, you know, exchange fertile breeding ground for ideas and everything. But was it ever more perfectly expressed in, in the coming together of people with different musical heritage is making something new. And that, for me, is like, that's the two areas in which I am unashamedly proud of this country is in those two things is in the migratory benefits of music and art and what we achieved when we when we, opened our doors to people from other countries to make work with us. And the fact that you hear in music, like the Source Direct thing the fact you hear that you can hear sound system culture, and you can hear jazz and you can also hear English, like English, minimal, like you can hear John Renbourn, and stuff and some of that music. And that's just the height of our achievement as a civilization I think. And especially because it undoes so much of the more hate filled stuff that exists in the political world. So if you want to find where collaboration was happening, where people were unpicking difficult things and making good things. It was in music.

Geoff Bird (1:07:24)
And although you kinda left music behind, making music behind. Your brothers carried it on, and your brother's your sixth choice.

Max Porter (1:07:32)
Well I don't talk about, I'm not one to particularly talk about my family and what they're up to. On the record. But this seemed like the time.

Geoff Bird (1:07:40)
Roly Porter.

Max Porter (1:07:41)
Yeah, he's called Roly and he's two years older than me. And we were very close. And, and we share a lot, but he you know, we share a lot of a lot of our passions so we would, we would both, we love the woods. We love Snowden. We love making music. We love swimming in rivers, we're buddies, you know, we always have been, it's good. And when you lose a parent you are, you're thrown together in a way. So we were mates early on in a good way, we look and we look out for each other. I think, and we live together now, we're close. Our families are very close. He went on Twitter once saying, could it be true? That Grief is the Thing with Feathers author Max Porter is brother of industrial dubstep icon. And it's true. That's him. So he first of all, made this kind of, yeah, industrial, that word, I think Vexed they were called and they were on kind of Loefah, Terra, Danger side of dubstep early on. Aggressively, aggressive noise. Very

much indebted to the darker side of the English, jungle and drum and bass sound. Also borrowing from German techno, European techno and drone music, and in my brother's case, Beethoven, Roman, he loves his big, big, noisy orchestral music. And then he gave up Vexed and Roly trained to be a carpenter and took some time out from it all. He wasn't mad about the whole touring and noise and stress of it all. And then came back as himself Roly Porter with a couple of records, and they're very beautiful, very beautiful ambient, sometimes noise music but very indebted to sort of sci-fi and the reading he does, which tends to be quite astral. You know, Roly's one for reading books about the cosmos. And he's now recently got into sort of ancient wisdom. He's a wise guy, very humble, nice, one of the kindest men I know. And the new, the new work, Kistvaen is a collaboration with Mary Anne Roberts from Bragod, medievalist, and she sings. I think a relatively archaeologically accurate Neolithic burial. Right, the kind of wailing / chant song that would have accompanied the burying of bodies up in the Kistvaen tombs on Dartmoor and him and his collaborator Marcel spent time on Dartmoor filming the woods, filming people, naked volunteers in the woods. Creating this unbelievable sound library which Roly's turned into this record. And there's, there's, I've experienced powerful things in my time, but my brothers gigs, I've seen people, you know, weeping. Because the sheer noise. And you know this if you've been to, anyone that goes to live music and particularly stood in front of Aba Shanti, or any of the huge reggae sound systems, the noise in one's internal organs, the actual taking over of one's body by sound is an incredible thing to experience, especially when it's a wall of pure sound. And then if you combine that with incredibly beautiful music, and screeching noise, and like thunderstorm style, audio assault, it's incredibly moving and powerful stuff.

So yeah, I just thought it would be a nice thing, because me and my brother go to the woods together, and we love the woods, and we understand how important it is to one another, to, to worship in nature and to what, and to try and not be the kind of men that... try not to be arseholes, really. It's no more complicated than that. And those lessons to be learned in the woods. Try not to be an invasive or an unpleasant species, try not to litter, try and leave no trace, try wherever possible to strive to make beauty and apologise when you've offended people and so on and so forth. You know, I think we are, we see eye to eye philosophically and when I heard this new record, you'd just emailed me saying would I do a playlist, and I was gonna put a piece of his music on anyway, because I wanted to pay homage to the closeness of our relationship. And our creative, we've never worked together, we're going to do a commission for Durham Cathedral in a couple of years time. But we've never actually worked together. But I'd say he's been my constant collaborator, in ways that run deeper than the work itself.

Geoff Bird (1:12:01)
I was gonna ask exactly that, just as the trees around us now we know are communicating underneath through the roots and the fungi. Do you kind of have, do you meet through your different cultural offerings? Do your, does his music and your writing? Are they the roots and the fungi that somehow join you together in ways that you don't necessarily need to speak about?

Max Porter (1:12:22)
100% in non, non literal ways. In felt, intuited, quite nuanced ways that would be invisible to anyone but the two of us, I think they are part and parcel of the same creative process related to

ourselves as, as people now on this planet, but also as, as I don't speak for him. But for me, I think also always forever, a six year old and an eight year old, looking at each other and thinking, now, what are we going to make? What do we make of that? What do you make of being boys in a world without dad? And that kind of thing? You know, there's sort of founding principles in the person's personality is always in the same way, as the cliche goes, that you're waste - your first novel is the one you're working on for the longest because it's the one that you pour everything into? We are, to some extent, always examining that love and that pain and it's a good subject. It's an interesting subject, so you can map it onto anything, and map onto the natural world, you can map it onto, you know, people burying bodies and Dartmoor 3000 years ago, or, or a kid going missing in a made up village. And you know, we're asking each other the same questions and I so I feel like on a deep creative kinship with him, and also fun, you know, like, he'll buy me a funny keyboard he'll make me put on his, he's written a soundtrack for a VR game. And I'm like an old man you put me in a [headset] and I get terribly confused and walk into the door and start crying. Like, I'm not, I'm not happy in that world. And he tries to teach me about that world and we frustrate and annoy and entertain each other in a way that feels long term, like a collaboration.

Geoff Bird (1:13:54)
I can't think of a better way to end it. So let's leave it there. Max, thank you very much.

Max Porter (1:13:59)
Thanks.

Geoff Bird (1:14:06)
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