

there. At 14 I learned to use a loop and to beatbox, which I like to use in subtle ways, the way Bobby McFerrin uses body percussion."

Later, Sheldrake would attend one of McFerrin's vocal improvisation workshops in New York. But back in his teens he began collecting and playing instruments from elsewhere: a *duduk*, the *morin huur* (Mongolian horsehead fiddle), banjos and fiddles. "I got into folk music through listening to Pete Seeger's recordings of Appalachian tunes, which was English, Irish and Scottish folk that had gone across the Atlantic. I loved the raw, rugged originality, before it came back to England and was turned into written down Victorian parlour music."

Influenced by his father's writings on the philosophy of science, specifically morphic resonance (defined by Sheldrake senior as *'the idea of mysterious telepathy-type interconnections between organisms and of collective memories within species'*), Cosmo Sheldrake explored subjects including phenomenology, the psychological study of subjective experience ("I did some writing on phantom limbs,") while studying anthropology at the University of Sussex. His long-standing interest in ethnomusicology focused the ways in which oral folk traditions interact with awareness of environment.

He learned of Native American elders taught to sing by reading the tree lines ("Imagine looking at a forest in the distance and using the outside edge as a musical stave, going up, down, straight, up..."), of indigenous Canadians whose lullabies mirrored their immediate topography, and a zillion other examples of place



Flora Wallace

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and ecology and melody and music interacting. Into all this he dropped his love for writers of smart-thinking nonsense, Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear and William Blake among them.

"I've always loved their type of irreverence, which is an exploration of meaning and more profound than people may think. Initially, I set poems I liked to music; [2015 single] 'The Fly' used the words of a poem by Blake. Then I began writing lyrics that juxtaposed certainty with the fantastic, like

with 'The Moss' (*'Legend has it when the rain comes down/all the worms come up to breathe/But have you heard the story of the rabbit in the moon/Or the cow that hopped the planets while straddling a spoon...'*). It's little wonder, really, that the cover photo on Sheldrake's website shows him balancing a model wooden ship on his head.

Increasingly, he's been exploring technology. A Nature Unwrapped gig at Kings Place last year saw him improvising using the disappearing soundworlds of birds and the changing sonic landscapes of coral reef fish – oh, and exploring polyphony by creating music for a multichannel sound system composed of the audience's mobile phones, using custom-built software.

"I mean, I love playing instruments," says Sheldrake, who between performing solo composes for film and theatre and collaborates with Sam Lee and the Nest Collective, and bands including alt-indie darlings Gentle Mystics; he has also run a community choir. "But there's



something about sitting down at a computer and pulling in elements to create these rich tapestries that I find more fun, more of a complete expression. I can get what's in my head out." And Sheldrake – eco-warrior, wunderkind, sprite – has a lot going on in his head. Much of this is about trying to capture a sense of place in music: with his mentor, American soundscape ecologist Bernie Krause (with whom he collaborated on *The Great Animal Orchestra* exhibition at Fondation Cartier in Paris, and appeared in a sort of TEDx talk on the Society of Sound stage at WOMAD), he has explored the aforementioned coral reef eco-acoustic systems, as well as human music's origins in bird and animal sounds.

"You very much hear this in the polyphonic traditions of pygmy people, who allow music to exist in its true ecological context as part of the greater acoustic community," he says. "In a healthy ecosystem, birds and animals will leave each other space to sing, both rhythmically and frequency-wise.

It's fascinating how all animals have evolved acoustic niches to achieve this. But pollution or systematic logging, say, can destabilise the whole relationship. Birds and animals will start singing over the top of each other."

That is, if they're not disappearing. Back, then, to *Wake Up Calls*, for which Sheldrake licenced Krause's recording of the calling of a cuckoo, captured as the bird sat singing above the Aldeburgh, Suffolk, grave of 20th century music icon Benjamin Britten – composer of the lilting, lovely 'Cuckoo Song'. The latter is the only tune to feature a sample of an actual instrument (a marimba), and the only time that Sheldrake actually sings.

Which, given that the album is but another instalment in a rich tradition of music influenced by birdsong, is only fitting: here, the birds are the stars. ♦



♦ **ALBUM** Cosmo Sheldrake's album *Wake Up Calls* is out now and was reviewed in #162

