

A man with curly brown hair and dark sunglasses is shown in profile, looking out over a body of water. He is wearing a white short-sleeved shirt with a black geometric pattern of circles and squares. He is sitting on a boat, with a white railing visible above him. A guitar is partially visible in the lower right corner. The background is a bright, hazy sky and water.

COSMO SHELDRAKE

# *Birdhouse In Your Soul*

**Jane Cornwell** speaks to eco-minded composer, producer and multi-instrumentalist Cosmo Sheldrake, whose interest in endangered species and enigmatic writers inspires works such as his new sophomore set, *Wake Up Calls*



The poet William Wordsworth described the call of the nightjar as being like *'the spirit of a toil-worn slave/ Lashed out of life, not quiet in the grave.'* Last year Cosmo Sheldrake – a composer, producer and multi-instrumentalist – reworked the spooky chirrs of this rare nocturnal bird into a delicate musical soundscape, in collaboration with global environmental movement Extinction Rebellion.

'Nightjar' is now the opening track on *Wake Up Calls*, Sheldrake's sophomore album. The album is a 13-track collection of recordings of endangered British birds: nightjars, nightingales, dunnocks, marsh warblers, bitterns and owls. It's a glorious affair – a deft blend of organic and synthetic, sequenced to conjure the around-the-clock aural life of birds in the UK. Some recordings were created as alternative alarm-clock music for friends. Others were driven by a mounting sense of urgency – with the exception of a robin and a blackbird, all the creatures on the project are on the RSPB's red and amber lists of endangered British birds.

*Wake Up Calls* does what it says on the tin, using the remarkable sonic beauty of these threatened species to bombard the listener into awareness and hopefully, into taking action. Each track, aside from 'Cuckoo Song' (more of which later), is entirely comprised of bird song, either delivered as heard or skilfully manipulated through the digital audio workstation and software app, Logic Pro.

"My main technique," says the gently-spoken Sheldrake, 30, speaking to me from the wilds of Devon where he's been riding out the pandemic, "has been to take a stretch of birdsong that I might have recorded using a soundstage, then go through it finding certain tones, rhythms or expressions. I'll then rearrange them, stretching, looping, speeding up or leaving space, using the keyboard as a sort of prepared piano. The outcome is always unexpected."

And beautiful. Seduced in part by YouTube videos that see Sheldrake performing knee-deep in bluebells, or as the sun rises through ancient oak trees, his vast fan base has rallied around his ability to create a refreshing sound-world from a combination of smarts and whimsy. Having come to attention with his 2014 single, 'The Moss', he released an EP in 2015, *Pelicans We*, then his 2018 debut album *The Much Much How and I* (which used sampling to examine our relationship with the environment), all on his own label Tardigrade.

*'If Cosmo started floating and said "I'm a god btw," we wouldn't even be surprised,'* came an online comment. *'If I was in a forest and walked into Cosmo performing to nobody in particular I would not question it at all,'* came another.

Which happened to be the case for this writer when, in April 2019 at Fingringhoe Wick, the sprawling Essex nature reserve where Sheldrake's friend, Mercury-nominated folk singer (and erstwhile *Songlines* cover star) Sam Lee was hosting his Singing with Nightingales events, the lauded springtime project that sees folk musicians duetting with this most dulcet of nocturnal songbirds. Round midnight we'd walked silently through dark woodlands into a clearing where, under a small gazebo, a wild-haired young man was standing behind an open laptop, his sounds wafting star-wards, his cheekbones illuminated.

"Sam's parents used to know my parents," says Sheldrake, the son of biologist and parapsychologist Rupert Sheldrake and the shaman/sound healer Jill Purce; Cosmo's elder brother is biologist/mycologist Merlin Sheldrake. "Sam remembers being about 12 and having a profound experience on walking into our house next to Hampstead Heath. Our house is filled with shells, fossils and spirals; my mum wrote a book [1980's *The Mystic Spiral*] about sacred geometry."

"We'd lost touch until ten years ago, when by chance we reconnected on a street in Dalston [East London]," he continues. "My brother and I were busking, playing an Irish tune on the bones. Sam was cycling past, recognised the tune as [well-known ballad] 'The Little Beggar Man', and was over in a blur. We were just getting into folk music, so I started working with Sam in various capacities."

The magically monikered Cosmo and Merlin grew up playing piano, overtone singing (as taught by their mother), spotting birds and learning the names of plants on the heath, which doubled as their extended garden. Each year they holidayed in Canada at a youth camp (PYE Global) with a remit to unleash the creative potential of young people: "So many inspiring educators, artists and musicians worked ▶

