

“Our  
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PUTAD, TAIWAN







**Jane Cornwell** speaks with Tim Cole and BaoBao Chen, the producers of the Indo-Pacific collective Small Island Big Song, about their second project, which focuses on our troublesome relationship with nature

ILLUSTRATIONS **JENN DA COSTA**

With a long blast on a conch – the seashell containing the ocean – the ceremony begins: a paean to the Earth, to our own precious island. Taking part in the ritual are over a dozen artists from the Indo-Pacific region, their roots strong, their message urgent, their music both powerful and moving. Alongside them and represented by found sounds (bird song, rustling palm fronds, the happy noise of children splashing in the shallows) is Nature herself, a key player in all 14 tracks of *Our Island*, a concept album conceived by producers Tim Cole and BaoBao Chen and buoyed by collaborators from island nations from across the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Tracks roll into each other, undulating like waves, containing stories of culture and environment. Each champions a unique ancestral heritage while musing on the same leading question: ‘What does the Earth, our island, mean to you?’ The artists’ spoken-word answers bridge the songs.

“Our island is like a warm mother,” states Putad, a singer, surfer and erstwhile grunge rocker from the Amis nation people of Taiwan. “Our island knows the ocean is not the same as before. Our island feels nature is disappearing.”

“Our island is the whole world sharing a piece of paradise,” declaims Emlyn, a Mauritian vocalist, dancer and environmental campaigner at the vanguard of a movement of Indian Ocean performers reclaiming their unique rhythms and cultural mix. “Our island is losing too much nature for concrete.”

*Our Island* is the much-anticipated follow-up to *Small Island Big Song*, the 2018 album and

multi-platform project conceived by Melbourne-born producer and filmmaker Tim Cole and Taiwanese producer BaoBao Chen. The winner of the *Songlines Music Award* 2019 in the Asia & Pacific category, *Small Island Big Song* featured artists from 16 nations linked by a Polynesian seafaring heritage and a shared concern for the steady loss of nature and culture in the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. That work was the result of the three years Cole and Chen spent visiting artists on their islands, filming and audio recording as they went.

“Culture defines our relationship to the natural and social environment, and vice-versa,” says Cole, sitting beside Chen outside their A-frame house in the mountains of central Taiwan. “We met people on their islands and recorded a song in their language. Then we took that song to another island and overdubbed more vocals and instruments and so on. The idea was to capture and unify the essence of all these places,

and through reunifying heritage, creating a statement about humankind’s relationship to the earth and the oceans. We met incredible musicians who became friends, and planned to record a conventional album together in a studio, where we’d jam and play music and laugh and cry over the issues.” He pauses and smiles. “We found the core musicians, most of whom happened to be women, and we had the session booked in Australia. But then came this virus, which had other ideas. So we couldn’t actually meet in person.”

*Our Island* is a collaborative project, nevertheless. Weekly Zoom meetings fostered relationships between the group’s members, including spoken-word artist and climate warrior Selina Leem of the Marshall Islands; singer and educator Sauljaljui of the Paiwan nation of Taiwan; singer Vaiteani and multi-instrumentalist Luc Totterwitz of popular Tahitian duo Vaiteani; master percussionist, log drummer and hip-hop-informed label boss Airileke Ingram from Australia and Papua New Guinea; and Madagascar’s Sammy ‘Tarika’ Andriamalalaharijaona on the *valiha*, a tubular harp made from bamboo. “We were all isolated on our respective islands but the internet brought us together,” says Chen. “Tim and I suggested that musical ideas should begin with people drawing from their own culture first, using instruments that have a direct relationship to themselves and their homelands.” ▶

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