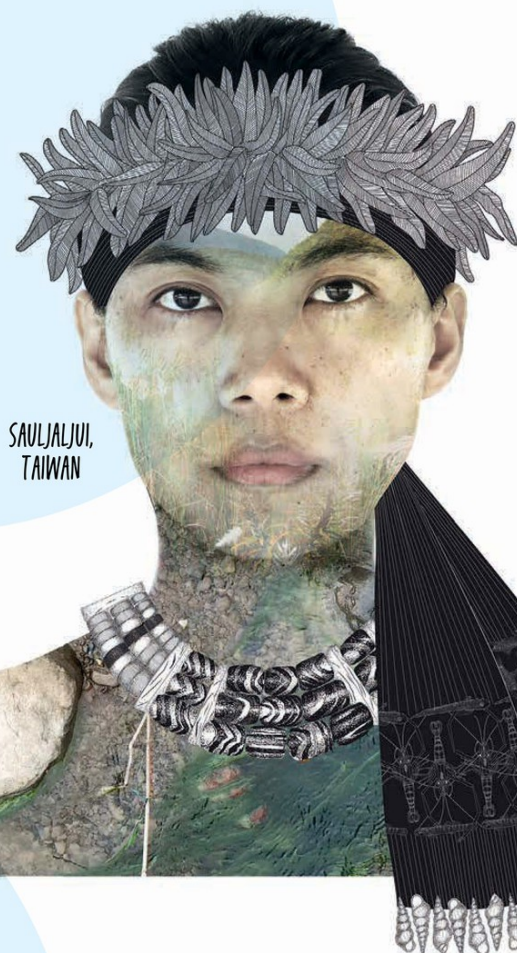




“In Tahiti we call
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and to your soul”

VAITEANI, TAHITI

SAULJALJUI,
TAIWAN

(founder and artistic director of the Melanesia-infused Wantok Music Foundation) and guitarist John Philips, and whose free-form ambient soundscapes took in natural acoustic and atmospheric dynamics – and involved Papua New Guinean musicians including George Telek. “This journey began with the two months I spent in Papua New Guinea with Not Drowning, Waving, which shifted my Western mindset around music. The cultural lineage opened other perspectives and dimensions, as did my later work with Indigenous Australian artists such as Archie Roach and Bart Willoughby, and especially with First Nations communities in central Australia. I learned about boundaries and protocols.”

It was to Cole that the *Our Island* artists sent their individual recordings. Cole then compiled and edited and sent the recordings back with suggestions for extra instruments, or with further ideas that dovetailed with those of the artist. “Because BaoBao and I had been able to visit the artists pre-pandemic, and record with them on a beach, next to a river or in a rainforest, every song has a dedicated natural sound that I am mixing in as loud as the vocals. It’s an album where nature is really making a statement.”

The tune ‘Ta’u Tama’ (Our Child), featuring Vaiteani, is dedicated to the couple’s baby son and expresses concerns

about coral bleaching and the legacy left for future generations. The song started as stripped down guitar and vocals and then evolved into a multi-textured ensemble piece. Putad added a chant she improvised on the beach where her grandfather taught her to swim (*‘I hope in the future my son, my daughter, my grandson and granddaughter still have the same beach, never change’*); Sauljaljui beat time with mortar and pestle; Yoko Tuki of Rapa Nui (Easter Island) contributed ukulele; Airileke played the Samoan *pate* (a struck hand drum fashioned from a hollow log); and natural and village soundscapes were recorded in Kavieng in Papua New Guinea’s New Ireland province.

“In Tahiti we call our traditional choral songs *himenes*,” says Vaiteani. “I always thought they sounded super weird when I was a child, but now I recognise their beauty. These voices really speak to your *‘a’au* [gut] and to your soul. This is what we tried to do with ‘Ta’u Tama.’”

“If this is the story for our islands, this is the story for the whole world,” declaims Leem towards the end of the song, a soundbite of her address, aged 18, at the 2015 Paris Climate Conference – an excerpt of which also features in the visuals. In October Leem was one of several Pacific Young Climate Leaders calling for urgent action ahead of COP26.

The mighty ‘Putasanga’ (Nature) featuring Putad is a tune that begins with a spoken-word piece by four generations of women from the matriarchal

Amis nation, each one a member of Putad’s family. A dreamlike video directed by Hung Shih-ting and shot entirely in Taitung on Taiwan’s south-east Pacific coast re-enacts the feeling of being swept away by a tidal rip, mirroring Putad’s near-death experience while surfing in the ocean a decade ago. “I almost died

because I didn’t respect the ocean,” she told Cole and Chen. “I didn’t watch the way the current was going so I could find the channel and paddle out. The ocean just threw me into the waves. This song is about the power of nature and the love for the mother, for family.”

Our Island will be released on digital platforms as individual tracks and as a complete Side 1 and Side 2 continual listening experience. There’s also a physical edition packaged inside tapa cloth, including a recyclable 52-page booklet and make-your-own ‘Our Island’ globe. And then there’s the tour – the US first, then Europe, (hopefully) the UK and, still to be confirmed, Australia. “We will begin each concert with the blowing of the conch [which is played by Māori songman Horomona Horo on the album]. Then artists will enter from different corners of the stage, introduced on screen while singing out a refrain that represents their identity and island before joining in a chant led by Sauljaljui and backed by a powerful battery of drums from the Indian Ocean and the Pacific,” says Cole. “It builds and builds from the simplest beginning into something epic.”

Chen nods, “like the waves of the ocean.” ♦

+ **ALBUM** *Small Island Big Song’s* album, *Our Island*, will be reviewed in the next issue, March 2022 (#175)

+ **VIDEO** Watch the atmospheric video to *Our Island’s* first single, ‘Listwar Zanset’, at bit.ly/ListwarZanset

+ **ONLINE** www.smallislandbigsong.com

WIN

We have three copies of *Our Island* to give away. To enter, answer: Which *Songlines* award did the first *Small Island Big Song* album win?

See p21 for competition rules and deadline