

music

this week's essential reading

{ 'Al Jourgensen bids adieu to Ministry, not to speaking his mind' by Kenny Herzog, Spin

Ministry frontman Al Jourgensen: 'I am not the industrial godfather, king, whatever. I don't relish that title. I don't like it. I think it's limiting. I do country, I do blues. I don't just go straight'

The sound of history

Chris Watson has made an intriguingly alien-sounding album with a series of purposefully earthbound sounds. The sources of the sounds couldn't be more plain: wind and water, bugs and birds, scatterings of animate and inanimate subjects and objects all around. They're so plain, in fact, that they permit the album's peculiar premise: to summon the state of the world as it would have sounded more than 1,300 years ago.

There's little archaeological evidence to suggest the existence of microphones in the north of England in the 7th century, but other than that, nothing at work sound-wise on Watson's new album *In St Cuthbert's Time* would have been out of place way back when. Great efforts were made to be faithful to the place under consideration, namely the English isle of Lindisfarne, owing to its significance as the home of a monastery where a manuscript was made by monks in tribute to St Cuthbert, a medieval Christian saint whose memory has been ferried through time.

The illuminated manuscript, known as the Lindisfarne Gospels, was especially grand and ornate, and whatever its religious worth, it remains a strikingly beautiful relic from a time when the act of making even a simple book meant months of toil and painstaking work by hand. Pages were made of vellum, a form of parchment produced from the skin of calves, and inks and materials for binding weren't exactly waiting around to be purchased at the corner shop.

The elements, too, wreaked havoc on work sometimes done in less than cosy shelter. In the liner notes to *In St Cuthbert's Time*, a quotation reads: "The conditions of the past winter have oppressed the island of our race very horribly with cold and ice and long and widespread storms of wind and rain, so that the hand of the scribe was hindered from producing a great number of books."

The natural world, then, was a principal player in pretty much everything that could have possibly transpired at the time, and the natural world is what makes up the bulk of the sound world brought into focus by the recordings captured by Watson with nothing more than some microphone equipment and



Chris Watson, a founding member of the 1970s British post-punk band Cabaret Voltaire, recorded the sounds of England's Lindisfarne Island for his album *In St Cuthbert's Time*. Daryl Benson / Getty Images

a pair of curious ears. Watson first developed his ears in a notably different realm: as a founding member of the spectacularly strange 1970s post-punk band Cabaret Voltaire. (Early use of electronic rhythms and sounds figured into such Cabaret Voltaire classics as *Do the Mussolini* (*Headkick*) and *Nag Nag Nag*.) More recent years, however, have been devoted to the practice of field-recording, or making recordings out in the field, in places all over the globe. A past album of his, *Weather Report*, features the high-fidelity sounds of cracking and creaking from a gigantic glacier in Iceland; another, *El Tren*

Fantasma, tells the sonic story of a cross-country journey on a Mexican train. For *In St Cuthbert's Time*, he recorded the isle of Lindisfarne as it would have sounded during the era of that idiosyncratic saint, who in his spiritually searching solitude was thought to have developed special bonds with the wildlife in his surroundings. ("Birds and beasts came at his call," the story goes.)

The album, then, is just that: recordings of ambient existence outside on the island, edited into four long tracks by the seasons and otherwise presented unadorned. It's a magnificent aesthetic achievement

and also, by a different measure, not even remotely an aesthetic achievement at all.

A whoosh of wind ushers in the first track, *Winter*, before honking geese and birds of unidentifiable sorts start to chime in. Their sounds rise and fall, grow loud and soft and then change expressive course. In the second track, *Lencten* (translation: spring), different varieties of birds cycle through flurries of incredible sounds in an array of strange frequencies. It's difficult to listen to the grace and elegance and seemingly sensible complexity on display and not think, even if one would want to,

that the sounds are part of anything less than an intricate conversation.

At one point in the track, a bell sounds – the kind of small, ringing handbell that would have been used by monks in St Cuthbert's time for signals of different sorts. It's not an animal sound or a part of nature, it seems – or is it? Why would human activity count as anything other than animalistic, or natural? How could it be anything less than part of the world?

Watson's work with sound brings such queries into question, in a general aesthetic sense and, in particular, in a specific artistic sense that

proffers the art of listening as an art form of its own. Listening can be more than a passive action. It can be about more than merely taking stock of what you hear.

In his focus on nuances of the sort, Watson shares certain habits and proclivities with the realm of "sound art", a growing and diversifying field that takes certain cues from the world of music but extrapolates and expands on those cues too. There's no tidy definition of sound art as an entirely distinct enterprise. (What do we mean when we speak of "music", "sound", "noise"? Things get complicated quickly.) But any good working

definition of sound art suggests its true worth as a signal of a subtle difference of inflection. It's a matter of prioritising the act of thinking about listening even while listening qualifies as an act in and of itself.

Sound art has been around for a few decades at least – in certain ways, it goes back to the beginning of time; in other ways, it often gets traced back to the 1960s or so – but it has been on the rise of late. In New York, the Museum of Modern Art just opened its first full exhibition devoted to the practice, with a momentous sense of significance attached to it. In the catalogue for the show, *Sound-*

ings: A Contemporary Score, the writer Anne Hilde Neset muses on the lack of a concise definition for the form, writing: "This much is known: sound art embraces science, music, noise, political activism, ecology, anthropology, memory, literature, and more."

She considers its elusiveness a sign of fertility too, since a practice not yet confined can be open in more ways than can be counted. In the exhibition itself, a range of work takes different approaches to different objectives. At the beginning, the artist Sergei Tcherepnin animates an inanimate object with transducer devices attached to a vintage New York City subway bench; the "sound" that courses through it manifests most fully as a physical presence in the bodies of show-goers who interact with the piece while sitting down.

Another piece by Florian Hecker plays with psychoacoustic properties in an electronic composition that makes use of research into sorts of aural illusions (like an optical illusion but particular to the many peculiarities of the ear). The Norwegian artist Jana Winderen made an installation of intrepid recordings of bats and fish, among other things. The German Carsten Nicolai fabricated a large sculpture in which sound waves take the form of waves in water. The deaf artist Christine Sun Kim made drawings related to sign language and other systems for depicting sound.

The setting of the exhibition makes clear that sound is best addressed not as a single sort of entity – as a material merely for use in music, say – but rather as a subject for a constellation of different experiences. A listener can take in such work in a number of different directed or suggestive ways. The same goes for the work of Chris Watson, whose recordings for *In St Cuthbert's Time*, of course, were sourced from quite a different time – our own.

If sound can allow us to commune so expressly with a sense of the world as it existed so long ago, well, then, let's listen.

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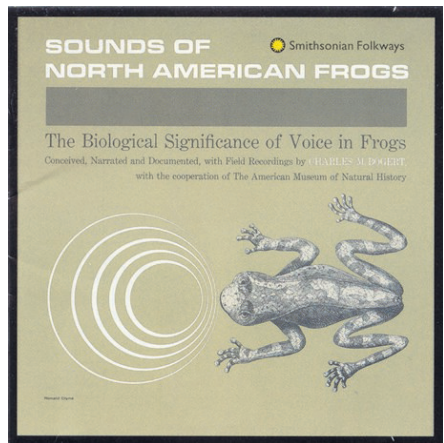
playlist

Albums by sound artists, including croaking frogs and buzzing electromagnetic fields

Sounds of North American Frogs

Various Artists

This 1957 curio from the storied American record label Folkways is a field-recording classic, with extra educational narration to put the weird, wondrous frog sounds into context.



Magnetic Flights

Christina Kubisch

The German sound artist Christina Kubisch, active since the 1970s, made this beguiling sound art work by capturing recordings of otherwise inaudible electromagnetic fields in airports all around the world.

The Creative Act

Marcel Duchamp

In 1913, the proto-conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp hatched a prescient idea when he composed a musical piece using chance operations, presaging John Cage and so much sound art that came in his wake.



Listening to Donald Judd

Stephen Vitiello

This work of album-length sound art features sounds collected in Marfa, Texas, the small desert town that played home to an otherworldly art fantasia established by the minimalist sculptor Donald Judd.