

A Necklace of Stars: circle of lullabies

*Philip Davenport (PD) Diary extract, 10 Nov 2020.
Jenny: "I'm really grateful. It's taken me away from myself. When I write I'm away from this pain and I can be anybody."*

A **Necklace of Stars** was a multi-arts collaboration with housebound, isolated older people at home during Covid. One of the project's aims was to create a soundtrack of lullabies and poems, to accompany a quilt of embroidered stars made collaboratively with artist Lois Blackburn. So, during lockdown I (Matt Hill) and poet Philip Davenport worked hundreds of hours down a phone line to create a song cycle.



Lullabies are an ancient form of song, written to be sung at those in-between moments when light turns to darkness. It seemed apt that we explored them during an in-between time, such as a pandemic. For the duration of this project, I was facing a double isolation. My partner was on the shielding list and I chose to isolate with her. I was also succumbing to a medical condition myself, that was affecting my hearing and balance, slowly withdrawing me from the outside world. These phone calls, and through them the songs themselves, became a point of connection, bringing me back to the world outside.

What follows is an account of this strange time of disconnect and intense closeness. This account includes extracts from Philip Davenport's diary of the phone conversations made during the Necklace of Stars project in 2020.

When a conversation becomes a song

One such point of personal connection was a part-spoken song called **Natterjacks**. It stemmed from a natter, with participant Anne about Harlech beach in North Wales. She had lived there many years ago and I had been there myself. As she began to tell me about a moonlit walk on the beach I immediately hit the record button, not wanting to miss a moment of her tale.

Anne described seeing thousands of tiny Natterjack toads illuminated in the sand dunes. Here was a story about how the landscape had transformed under moonlight to become a magical place. Perfect for a lullaby. I knew that I wanted to keep her descriptive prose, and so the song features extracts from that very phone conversation, alongside the more considered lyrics she wrote.

The creation of this song was a special moment for me. The tone of Anne's voice, her Welsh lilt, her beautiful evocative words took me straight to Harlech beach. For a moment I wasn't cooped up in my Derbyshire attic studio, I was on the wide expanse of sands at Harlech. A moment of freedom in a time of lockdown.

The creative process

PD Diary extract, 26 May 2020. A joyous conversation with Trish about the sweet shops of her youth. She was full of delight when she described a particular experience: "My dad used to work at the pit and on Friday he pick up flying saucers from the sweet shop and bring them home for us. So that is a really special treat, a special sweet." This conversation has led to her writing part of the group song lyric The Universe is Sweet, celebrating the constellations as a huge sweet shop.

When it came to the songwriting process, people often ask which comes first the music or the words? On this project we used several different ways of creating songs. Sometimes I wrote instrumental music to underpin the recital of poetry, sometimes I took poems as lyrics and added music, sometimes we wrote lyrics inspired by our conversations, some ideas came from word games.

Writing a song from a pre-existing and finished poem is quite a tricky process. I've worked with Phil on several projects and I know he and the participants work hard to create the perfect poem. But sometimes I need to twist and bend the words to fit them to the melodies. However, I always try to tread sensitively and be true to their words.

Today it's less common for songwriters to write in this way, working from a pre-written set of lyrics. However, the separation of lyricist and composer was commonplace back in the early-mid 20th century with writers such as George and Ira Gershwin or Richard Rodgers writing music with lyrics from Oscar Hammerstein or Lorenz Hart.

I had already written a melody for the song [Look for the door](#) and I knew the exact number of syllables it would need. So I gave Lorna, a very capable poet and singer, the challenge of writing about her night time routines, but to a strict syllable limit, similar to the Haiku format. Another of the participants, Linda is a skilled singer. She had already written melodies to fit her words. All I had to do was add chords and help structure the songs. You can hear Linda take the lead vocal on [Night is a Forest](#) and [Madame Moon](#).

The sonic palette

PD Diary extract 7 July 2020. Neil: "The universe does talk to us, but do we listen to the universe? There is an aura off the starlight, it's very powerful. It draws us to it, gives us peace and makes us feel our place. Now I've got the time I'm coming back to those questions. Instead of taking life for granted, I'm exploring it. Opening my eyes to the starlight."

In creating the song cycle, I gave a lot of time and thought to my musical palette. Like a painter will pick certain tones, hues and colours that suit their picture, I thought about what sounds this project needed. Aggressive rock or hip-hop would not be right for a lullabies project. Traditionally lullabies are in major keys with time

signatures in waltz time. These songs needed to be sweet, simple and melodic. Instrumentation was primarily gently plucked acoustic guitars and twinkly pianos.

I also thought about our cohort of collaborators – the people on the end of the phone who were helping us create the work. They were mostly from a generation who remembered childhoods in the post-war era. So I wanted to reflect something of the 1940s, 50s and 60s in these songs. **Blueberry Woods** uses the sorts of chords you might find in the Great American Songbook and I brought in James Youngjohns, a skilled guitarist who could add those jazz touches that evoke that era. Elsewhere on this album you will hear echoes of doo-wop and fifties ballads. But these are not pastiches, just colours used to tint the work.

Phil Davenport brought lots of production ideas too and recorded some backing vocals and electronics. Phil suggested adding crackles, suggestive of nights spent under bed covers with a transistor radio or playing vinyl 78s on an old Dansette. The moon looms large in songs such as **Circling the World / Sailing the Sky**, so Phil constructed some retro-futuristic bleeps and noises that evoke the space race and take us back to a time of Telstar and Sputnik. Hovering around us now were Covid media broadcasts and the real-but-intangible aura of fear.

PD diary extract 13 Oct 2020. J was very nervy today. I could almost see her quivering physically, as I listened to her shaking voice...

Voices from isolation

PD diary extract 13 Oct 2020. Given the darkness of X's mood and her nervousness about what happens next in her life, I kept our creative activities to the simplest and most reassuring things I could think of. We returned to the lullabies and songs of childhood, which she sang with a wistful, tremulous voice. I joined in to make her feel less alone. We sang Over The Rainbow together and she cried the line: "Why oh why can't I?" Then in a lovely and very poignant ending to the conversation, she mentioned that her husband used to sing to her when they first met.

My own voice sings many of these songs but for me the album comes to life when we hear the voices of the participants – recorded down the phone. There are considerable technical challenges in this approach, not least of which is making sure we are all singing in the same key! The recorded voices can sound tinny, disembodied and disconnected. But somehow that felt perfect for a project born from a time of disconnection and isolation.

For some of the songs, we used people reading their poems to add different textures and voices. Both Phil and I know that some people are not comfortable performers, whether that is reading a poem or singing a song. We spent time building trust and employing some gentle coaxing. The resulting voices make this album a true ensemble cast performance – all of us together, separated geographically but assembled here electronically.

Navigation by the stars

Diary extract 9 June 2020. M: "I'm scared we've got obsessed with seeing only the positive side of COVID-19, the NHS heroes, but there are other facets too. There are dark political forces at work, trying to bring the selfishness and the capitalism into our lives even more than before. These are the things that worry me, where all this leads us."

There was a lot of fear in the air during those Covid times. In fact, we were scared of the air itself and its deadly passenger the virus.

For some older people who were already isolated, being further shut away was a disaster. There were many times the voice on the other end of my phone talked about never coming out of this, just disappearing into the dark. Many were people who only had a bit of time left, they were at the end of their lives. There would be no restarting the world for them, no delayed university place, or the job held over for them.

Well, I couldn't offer easy answers or a cure; I could suggest that we do something else instead. Make something with words. Writing could be at the very least a distraction, at best a place of peace to reflect. Inner space is in some ways the biggest space of all — and poems and songs are designed to explore it.

PD Diary extract, 17 Nov 2020. Lorna is exploring ideas of illusion and truth in her writing... What is the relationship between our dreaming and the way that we see our lives? In this peculiar nightmare of a pandemic, it seems very logical that somebody would try to understand what a nightmare actually is. And to escape into dreams.

Sometimes we talked directly about fear, tried to give a shape to it so that it didn't seem too enormous. But we also made poems and lyrics about the lightness, about the stars. And that's how we steered our way through.

If anyone is the narrator of this set of songs, Sylvia is. Her wonderful goodwill to all and her strength of character are in every word she utters here. She is the counter to the dark shadows waiting in the corners of Covid, the shadows that we are still trying to come to terms with. Sylvia is the voice of life, she speaks for the babies and lulling the world safely with a lullaby; she's also the Great British team player, simultaneously kindly and strong.

PD Diary extract, 17 Nov 2020. Sylvia: "When I was a child I went through a war. It's important you don't take it personally, you've got to take a wider view. If you only reach out to one person a day, you've achieved something. You have to be positive about things and then wake up and be ready for the next. The majority of it is that with all we are all dependent on each other, irrespective of colour, creed, or status. It's a difficult time right now, once again like the war, but we're all in this boat and we've got to paddle that boat along and aim for a better shore."

Journey into night

PD Diary extract, 1 Sept 2020. Tony: "You are facing forward all the time at the start of your life. It's only when you get older that you go to the back of the boat and look

at the wash. This writing project I'm doing now has been the saving grace of the pandemic, the chance to take away the worries at least for awhile."

When we put the CD album together the poems about fear were set to one side. Our first job was to get everyone through safely, not pull them into the vortex. The presence of the terror abroad at that time is muted here. But when I listen closely I hear hints of it — "it's time for girls and boys in isolation to go to sleep" — and I also hear the bravery, humour and the common delight in making these songs.

I'd love you to sit down and really listen to this record, hear all those voices coming together through adversity. Using this very disconnected process we bring connection and transport the listener to an in-between place, next door to the border of dreaming.

PD Diary extract, 27 July 2020. Neil: "It's like a mind itself, the stars at night flickering. Most of our mind is the flickering of signals. Mother nature draws us to her... Put yourself back to childhood, back to flying with the ladybirds in your imagination..."

Written by Matt Hill / quoting the diary of Philip Davenport

Songwriter Matt Hill and poet Philip Davenport have made several song cycles together, each one a glimpse into discreet, hidden lives told through words, melody and the sound of the human voice. **A BOOK OF OURS** and **WHISPER TO ME ALONE** were both made with the homeless community in Greater Manchester. Most recently **REFUGE FROM THE RAVENS** is a re-telling of Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads as a "songscape", book and film made in collaboration with people affected by homelessness in NW England, which was exhibited at the Houses of Parliament in May 2023 (a Zwiebelfish project).

This essay includes extracts from Philip Davenport's diary of the phone conversations made during the Necklace of Stars project in 2020 in which he documented the calls and wrote down quotes from participants.

A Necklace of Stars was an Arts Derbyshire project, funded by Arts Council England. It was a collaboration between Arts Derbyshire, Derbyshire County Council Public Health and Libraries, and artists Lois Blackburn, Philip Davenport and Matt Hill



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**