

SAM LEE

Biography 2023/4

“I wanted to sing a vision of what a conversation between us and the land could be, to restore and inspire a practice of songful immersion in nature that brings with it healing, something we need now more than ever.”

Sam Lee, November 2023

March 2024 sees the release of Sam Lee's fourth studio album.

'songdreaming' represents the latest stage in a journey that began with Sam's discovery of the canon of British folk, took in extensive study and training from its masters, delivered a succession of albums that built on that base to create a new language for old tales and, now, finds its protagonist at a critical moment in his artistic journey. Having firmly established himself as a voice for old songs played in new ways, with 'songdreaming', Lee is developing the work of previous release, 'Old Wow', in going beyond genre and convention, delivering a record that escapes easy categorisation and demands to be treated on its own merits.

When we meet in his native North London, Sam Lee arrives directly from a nature protest outside DEFRA. As a Sam Lee thing to do it couldn't be more on brand.

The folk custodian of the native song of the British Isles, leading voice in the environmental movement, and creator of the hugely successful and popular Singing with Nightingales, Lee has become, over the course of four albums, a touchstone for the idea of the chronicler and artistic spokesperson of the natural world. It is a crown he wears lightly, Lee's commitment to both the indigenous song culture of the British Isles and its nature is heartfelt and deep rooted. Sam lives it how he speaks it but to characterise his work and his art under such important yet narrow terms rather misses the point.

Working once again with producer Bernard Butler and long-term collaborator James Keay 'songdreaming' is wide in scope and ambition. Adding electric guitar to the more regular staples of double bass, violin, and percussion that have always been the base of Sam's music and embellished with a truly global sweep of options from the French Horn and small pipes to the Nyckelharpa (a Swedish keyed fiddle) and the Qanun (an Arabic String instrument), 'songdreaming' is an album that is sonically far removed from the traditional ideas of Sam as a purely British folk performer.

Within that expansive vision for the album lies a rich and extensive musical impulse unbound by conventions or expectations of what a Sam Lee album should be. It is a record as informed by his deep interest in the sacred music of European and global mystic traditions, and the duality of his late Scottish Traveller teacher, a revered keeper of the lore and mystical wielder of the dark arts, as by his extreme knowledge of the British folk canon. It undoubtedly also owes a little to his home life, residing in the caretaker's flat of reputedly London's largest parish church, frequently populated by African Baptist denominations with their unique and heavily musical versions of the Christian faith.

Granted, the British Isles and their song remain at the heart of Sam's impulse, but his vision of that history and its impact are global in both scope and scale as he explains:

“The album is about imagining into or retrieving what was once felt before the segregating of us from the land first started, the enclosures, the Norman conquest, the Romans, those successive eras of trauma and subjugation that occurred in this country and then the knock-on to slavery and empire, exporting that brutality, It looks beyond that loss and attempts to reclaim that sense of sovereignty and permissiveness that I feel we need to protect the little natural richness we have left.”

Which is not necessarily the obvious starting point for what is, in essence, a populist album, yet the duty towards enrichment and a resistance to dumbing down lies at the heart of Sam Lee's artistic impulse. Crucially, that vision is inclusive, and far removed from any concepts of nationalism. 'songdreaming' is literally a British album, in that its songs are drawn from the British Isles, but also an international album, narrativising the interconnected climate crisis globally as ultimately resulting from our withdrawal from being a nature-centric species mostly from the deep scars of past industrialisation, colonisation, and colonialism. For Sam Lee, belonging is both literally and musically inclusive,

highlighted by the recorded debut of Trans Voices, the transgender choir whose massed voices drive 'Meeting Is A Pleasant Place' and 'Leaves of Life'.

For Sam, these reimagined and reworked songs are more than a history, they are a living, vibrant, vital connection to our very being. In translating these songs to a modern context, he is making a commitment to relevance. So, whilst the likes of 'Sweet Girl McRee' will be familiar to long-term Lee listeners as beautifully executed pieces of balladry, the drone space of 'Aye Walking Oh', or the rage that propels album opener 'Bushes and Briars' and the wall of dissonance that brings the track to a close, are far from your traditional folk song and, in the case of that opening track, a deliberate marker for the album that follows:

"There's rage in there. The opening song brings in that feeling of injustice, anxiousness and grief I feel when I'm present to nature in her times of abuse and neglect. Across the album, I've tried to create a mosaic of the emotions felt in my time outdoors, that artistically emerge in reflective moments when I'm permitted to recount and articulate the complexity of all I witness and thus feel responsible for, where nature astounds and invokes awe, but also when you're like 'what the fuck is this pile of shit in front of me and how have we got to a place where people can legitimately do this to the land.' How does one write all these relationships? I find that folksongs make great collaborators in this endeavour, they've seen it all before."

Which is a Sam Lee that is less recognised to date. 'songdreaming' undoubtedly details the awe, the beauty, and the belonging that being in nature means for Sam, a glimpse of the child who spent his spare hours exploring the spaces of Hampstead Heath and looked forward to summer camps in the wilderness, but also highlights the passionate anger of the narrator of loss and the complex emotions that such a role creates.

Yet this work, reimagining and reframing old stories for new audiences is crucial for, as Sam notes, when the songs fade into the forgotten, so the resilience that they contain also fades in ways we see reflected in the perilous ecological and social state in which we find ourselves.

"When our nation experienced the oral tradition of folk song rapidly die out around the middle of the last century, that is when biodiversity also collapsed in this country. Language, cultural diversity and biodiversity are intrinsically linked, and this is speaking globally not just in Britain. If you look at the indigenous Amazonian cultures and their homeland, they correspond to exactly where the biologically diverse hot spots are. Humans make the best stewards of nature, we are gardeners. Those people who are and were singing the old songs here at home were also looking after the land. As we stopped singing with the land, the land stopped singing back."

Nonetheless, Sam's vision and his creation remain positive. 'songdreaming' is, above all, a romantic and positive work. At its core is a hope and belief that this music can connect, inform, and inspire a mainstream audience. In its contemporary expression, it is as much in the tradition of Nick Drake as it is in traditional folk, as close in its pure belief in the power of music to artists as seemingly opposite as Public Enemy as it is to the nameless balladeers that began its traditions. It is sonically ambitious and unafraid to experiment, a radical vision of an ancient tradition that can, and will, restore its power through renewal.

'songdreaming' brings Lee's music to the natural place signposted by his previous albums, a contemplation of the power of the artist and their music and the connection between that art and the natural world, unbounded by convention or tradition, a music unique in its creation and exposition, the realisation of the possible world that Sam Lee sees:

"Who doesn't sit at the bedside of a loved one who is sick or dying and say how much they love them? What I am writing is an uninhibited love letter to an ailing land."

'songdreaming' is released by Cooking Vinyl on 15th March 2024.

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