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Is It Painful to Think?

Hand's End

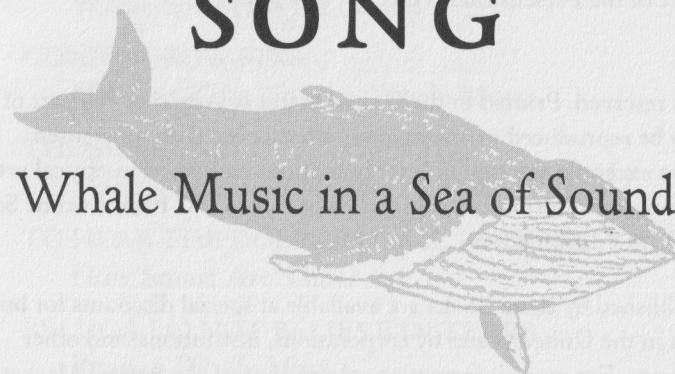
Sudden Music

Blue Cliff Record

Always the Mountains

Why Birds Sing

THOUSAND MILE SONG



Whale Music in a Sea of Sound

DAVID ROTHENBERG



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New York

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people who heard it, there might never have arisen a movement to save the whales, transforming their image from oil and blubber to gentle serenaders of the sea—turning the majority of the world's people against whaling, probably forever.

After thirty years of conservation efforts by McVay and thousands of fellow activists, whale music can still be heard. Back on Tortola, Paul Knapp goes out every day to make sure. "It's good for me to go out every couple hours to hear what's happening out there. Things do change, and you have to keep up with it, things are happening, and if you are not aware of it you're not going to be able to capture it on tape." Good thing there are witnesses on the water taking in all the changes—someone has to notice such things to remind us what is truly worth saving.

chapter two

GONNA GROW FINS

Humans Take Up with Whale Music

ON JANUARY 3, 1971, *NEW YORK TIMES* CRITIC HAROLD SCHONBERG summed up the previous year's highlights. In music, 1970 was surely the year of the whale. Luminaries from classical, pop, and folk music were so turned on by this amazing sound that they began to integrate it into their own work up here in the human world, safe on dry land. Judy Collins had a hit song with "Farewell to Tarwathie," and Pete Seeger wrote a rousing tune in a minor key, "The Song of the World's Last Whale." The first classical work to make use of whale sounds was Alan Hovhaness's "And God Created Great Whales."

After Roger Payne gave his tapes to Scott McVay for scientific analysis, he also thought a qualified composer should have access to them. New York Philharmonic conductor André Kostelanetz suggested Alan Hovhaness, a populist composer whose works blend his Armenian heritage with a cinematic response to the rhythms and moods of nature. The composer started work on "And God Created Great Whales" before the record *Songs of the Humpback Whale* came out, and his piece premiered on June 13, 1970, around the time the disk was first released.

Kostelanetz probably chose Hovhaness because of the booming, Orientalist quality of his music, with its heavily orchestrated modal melodies. Hovhaness never went in for the experimental, atonal excesses of modern music, so it was a safe bet he would produce something audiences would warm to. Yet the introduction of whales led the composer to write his strangest, freest, and most famous work.

Hovhaness claimed he was writing a music of the dawn of time, long before humanity appeared on Earth. Usually his music makes use of grandiose, unison melodies with a solemn Middle Eastern feel. But when he had to incorporate material as unearthly as whale songs, he made his orchestra do unconventional things: improvise around the soloing whale, screech up and down the strings, offer a trombone *blatt* or a bass fiddle *thunk*. He bent his method to work more the way nature works, following rules only loosely, with results that sometimes surprise. After the whale section stops, the music returns to his usual orchestral exotica.

Hovhaness played his idea to Kostelanetz, who was not impressed. "That idea is too Oriental," said the conductor. "The whales don't sing Oriental music."

"But they do," Hovhaness defended himself. "That's the whole thing, they really do!" He took a five-note theme from one of his early operas, and Kostelanetz was fine with that.

Time magazine found "the eerie whale songs" to be a "natural complement to the mystical music of Hovhaness." Their critic wasn't sure if the thundering final applause was for the whales or for the composer, who "beamed like an ecologist, announcing that we've got to preserve everything we can on this planet. It's God's own little spaceship. Everything counts." The *New York Times* critic Donal Henahan wasn't quite sure the different species' voices met on an even keel. "His whales spoke profoundly, but [the orchestra] stayed on the surface. . . . Faced with such an irresistible soloist, Mr. Hovhaness must have suspected he would be harpooned." Henahan was not impressed by the "commonplace black-key melody, conjuring up the sea by unmeasured bowing and overlapping patterns, setting

brass and percussion to echo the real thing." Too obvious, too close. It was music imitating nature without thinking enough about how.

In the mid-1980s Hovhaness added some choral parts to the piece, and a grander version was performed for three killer whales at the Vancouver Aquarium, who jumped and leaped along with the human performers. The whole thing was documented in Barbara Willis Sweete's film *Whalesong*.

Toward the end of his life Hovhaness used to say "And God Created Great Whales" was the one piece he regretted having written. I suspect that's because he realized the composed parts of his music were no match for the power of the whale's voice and that the ensembles he worked with were not sufficiently prepared to improvise the way they ought to. Yet it remains his most performed work, perhaps the first example of officially sanctioned interspecies music. Those few musicians who dare to cross species lines will at least be remembered for their willingness to try.

Shortly after *Songs of the Humpback Whale* came out, Scott McVay was to give a lecture at New York's austere, oak-paneled Explorers Club, a gathering place for adventurers for more than a century. Word got out that Judy Collins, one of the most popular singers of the day, was interested in attending. Only problem was, at that time the club did not allow women through its doors. McVay thought such a rule entirely ridiculous and suggested he do two talks, one for men and another for women. With that idea, the club relented, and Ms. Collins, known for her pure and quivering voice, got to hear the song of the humpback whale for the first time.

Immediately she was inspired to work the whale song into the album she was recording, which would be entitled *Whales and Nightingales* when it came out in November 1970. The most stirring song on the record is a solo performance of Judy singing a Scottish whaling shanty, "Farewell to Tarwathie," accompanied only by a particularly hypnotic track from *Songs of the Humpback Whale*. The whale part has a little delay added to it, so a slight echoing rhythm

appears at the beginning, giving the tune a very subtle electronic beat. Judy sings crisply and mournfully of the loneliness of the whale hunt off frozen Arctic coasts:

Farewell to Tarwathie
 Adieu Mormond Hill
 And the dear land of Crimmond
 I bid you farewell
 I'm bound off for Greenland
 And ready to sail
 In hopes to find riches
 In hunting the whale. . . .

The cold coast of Greenland
 Is barren and bare
 No seed time nor harvest
 Is ever known there
 And the birds here sing sweetly
 In mountain and dale
 But there's no bird in Greenland
 To sing to the whale

This fine killing song wafts over the whale's own lament. Toward the end of the piece Judy modulates up a step, and the whale backup sounds just as much in tune, revealing how this animal music comes from a whole different harmonic world. As the sad tune fades away, Judy and the whale disappear into a wash of reverb, rewarding the listener with the thoughtful echo of deep oceans, where whale and human songs wash together over distant leagues.

Without any explicit preachiness, this song is the purest and most moving of any of the first examples of human/whale music. It certainly touched a chord with the public, for the album went gold a few months after its release, selling more than half a million copies by the

spring of 1971, making it the most successful human/cetacean collaboration in the popularity contest that is the music business.

As the number of whale-inspired songs increased, the numbers of real whales dwindled in the ocean depths as we humans kept killing them. I don't want you to be particularly impressed by all the money made off of whale songs in those days, but the point is that these songs were on the airwaves, and whale music was filtering into human consciousness on many levels. Brought to human ears through the latest technology, they were ancient and contemporary all at once.

Right at the moment when we believed in hope, peace, and revolution, the song of the humpback whale appeared in our midst. We wanted causes to believe in, and the whales needed our help, and were making all these sounds for who knows what reason. Why not hear it as a cry for aid, a chance to reach out, a push for humanity to find a better way to fit into the world?

Of course those whales are singing for each other, not for us. If we listen to them closely and take them seriously, we honor our place in the bigger scheme of things. As we strain to appreciate sounds that are larger than we are, perhaps we move a little closer to the greatness of the natural world—the most important thing we can bear witness to, as the thinkers, questioners, and chroniclers of nature. To truly be human we must listen well.

Not everyone liked what they heard. Some early reviews of *Songs of the Humpback Whale* recognized that these underwater melodies might have something in common with the experimental human music of the day. Paul Kresh in *Stereo Review* wrote that “the humpback whale sounds more like a mewling cat than a nightingale, with echoey electronic overtones that should prove no threat to Morton Subotnick or György Ligeti, although they may be of some help to the whale in locating his friends, if he has any.”

I called up Subotnick, thirty-seven years after that review was written, and asked him about this. “Wow,” he was surprised. “That’s certainly an insult to the whales.”

Back in the day, he didn't think the whales sounded anything like the electronic music of the late sixties, such as his own pioneering work "Silver Apples of the Moon," the first classical commission for synthesizer. He does remember what it was like to first hear the deep, profound music of another species: "It wasn't primal, it wasn't animal-like. It was beyond any musical instrument we could then imagine."

The whales sounded nothing like a sine tone or white noise (the basic building blocks of early electronic music) yet the newly found animal sounds reminded young composers and performers that there were unknown worlds of music still to explore. "We were desperate to define a new music for ourselves, and we were thrilled to discover such beautiful sounds were out there that had never even been considered before." Still, like most human composers, Subotnick was content to let whale song occupy some sacred place beyond: "It was an Ur-music, almost a religious experience."

Hovhaness was the first classical composer to have access to the prized Bermuda whale tapes, but George Crumb was sent the recordings only a few months later. Like most composers, Crumb may not be a household name, but his music is incredibly powerful, subtle, and unique, full of unusual sounds and deep silences made by unconventional techniques like singing into a flute or preparing a piano with paper clips and string to give it a brand new sound. This is music that reveals a genuine astonishment in the sheer beauty of sounds, nowhere as evident as in his delicate and subtle piece, "Vox Balaenae"—or "Voice of the Whale."

Crumb looks and sounds like the guy who's run your local hardware store for fifty years. He is not impressed by the ways some of his predecessors have integrated natural sound into their music: "Some of the real birds make Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony birds look like *pikers*. He had no sense of the sounds of nature. Now eighty years later with Debussy, things started to change. . . . Not now, Yoda, *quiet!*" says the great master to his dog, a nervous terrier.

We're speaking at his plain ranch house in the suburbs of Philadelphia. I ask Crumb, now seventy-six years old, if he thinks

contemporary composers are closer to making good use of nature's sounds than their forebears. "Oh, certainly in the twentieth century, in Ives and Bartók I begin to hear nature in their music, don't you? Perhaps it's the influence of Asian music, one stroke on a Chinese gong and suddenly the winds are rushing in to your piece. I don't think you need to actually imitate the sounds of nature in your piece to get that." He sounds like a composer revealing his tricks or the hardware-store man explaining how to fix a drafty window. It's amazing that such a regular guy can write such remarkable music. Perhaps true sensitivity to sound is a quite ordinary quality that most of us have not tapped into.

"La Mer' doesn't sound like an ocean, Debussy could just as easily have called it 'La Terre.' Nature is music but it becomes refracted in a curious way through the persona of the composer. I read once that Bartók had an incredibly acute ability to hear insect sounds. It shows up in his music, and it's so effective. Don't you think that happens, that we don't need to hear the actual sound? The *evocation* of nature is what matters."

Crumb didn't think up the idea of writing a whale piece himself. In 1970 a reel-to-reel copy of the humpback songs was already making the rounds among various musicians, and they were all amazed by it. The New York Camerata chamber ensemble commissioned Crumb to write a piece inspired by whale song, but Crumb didn't want to use the humpback recording in the piece itself. As a composer he doesn't believe in using prerecorded sound, because anything planned in advance takes away from the live musical experience.

"Each moment in great music is authentic, there's no accounting for it, something is there," muses Crumb. "If you use a recording you have no sense of bravura, there's no chance of falling flat on your face. It's what I call 'danger music,' fragile sounds that can collapse at any moment. The audience knows this is going on and they're relieved when a performer gets past a treacherous passage."

Crumb's music is famous for unusual techniques and theatrical moments, like a flutist playing a phrase over the piano's strings while the

pianist holds the pedal down to create an instant sitar-like drone echo. He was the first to have classical players amplify their instruments so that very subtle gestures could be heard, like the tap on a clarinet key or the barest touch of a bow on a cello string.

So if he shunned the use of recordings, could he find a true use for the whale?

"The range was the first thing that impressed me," says Crumb, "from the pedal tones of the organ to sounds that go way beyond the limit of human hearing. A sense of musical phrase, an incredible composition that was going on, majestic, huge phrases. I loved the movement from the lowest to the highest sounds, the percussive elements, sounds like a thousand tubas playing at the same time."

Crumb didn't write a magisterial piece for a huge brass ensemble, that was more Hovhanness's line. Crumb instead used three of the four instruments of the Camerata: flute, cello, and piano, all amplified, demanding enhanced techniques from the performers. The flutist had to sing into her flute as she played, making some buzzing tones that mimicked the whale's sound. The cellist had to play high overtones beneath the bridge. The pianist had to "prepare" his instrument by sticking all kinds of screws and tape on the strings.

The whole conception of the piece bespeaks of evolution and of the sea, passing through a series of movements borrowed from the march of geologic time: Archeozoic (announced in the score as "timeless, inchoate"), Proterozoic, Paleozoic, Mesozoic, and Cenozoic (where humanity emerges, "dramatic, with a feeling of destiny"). And did I mention? All the performers have to wear black, half-masks over their faces. They are only removed for the final movement, the Sea Nocturne.

Sitting in the corner of the room the terrier paws at the door, yapping. "Yoda, be quiet!" snaps the master musician, and he returns to remember what his piece is like. "The sounds are epic, huge. Lions may roar but this is a much more vast conception with many more components than the howls of wolves or bears," says Crumb. He also made specific use of the idea that whale songs reverberate across the world,

ARCHEOZOIC [VAR.1] Timeless, inchoate

FIG. 1. A FRAGMENT FROM GEORGE CRUMB'S SCORE TO "VOX BALAENAE."

"My piece sounds at times like it's under water, it's got something submarine. I mean little things, extra things like the seagull sound which I borrowed from Bert Turetsky. He invented that on the double bass and it works just as well on the cello, like fingering a false harmonic. It phases in and out, no one knows exactly how it works." Figure 1 shows a fragment of the score where the electrified cello is playing that very whale-like sound.

"Vox Balaenae" is clearly an homage to Olivier Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of Time," which may be the most important classical piece inspired by bird songs. Messiaen was certainly more wrapped up in the sound world of birds than Crumb ever intended to be with whales—he was never out on the sea transcribing the songs as they welled up from the deep, the way Messiaen did in the wilderness with birds. But Crumb also wrote a piece for a very small ensemble with a genuinely epic reach, mirroring the whole evolution of life on Earth. He thought about the grandness and extent of the whale's music, and

he did not copy it or easily insert it into his own work. Instead he evoked it, not only with buzzy timbres and irregular forms, but by inhabiting the submerged magic.

Every effect and strange sound proceeds sequentially, so we can really hear the weirdness of it, much like the relenting solo explorations of a singing humpback whale, who introduces one astonishing phrase after another. We listeners drink in the sound. Crumb's succession of beauteous effects is serene and delicate, in that sense nothing like a 150-decibel whale. He sighs and takes another sip of tea. "Some people tell me my music is too *quiet* for today's world," he tells me. "It just gets lost in the noise."

It is a stirring, unusual, but ultimately accessible piece, with powerful tonalities luring you in to an alien world. Donal Henahan reviewed the second performance of the piece in the *New York Times* in 1973, impressed by the "fragile harmonics" and fuzzy piano preparations. He praised the delicate poetry of the sounds but cautioned that "sheer surface beauty of this kind is always suspect in intellectual circles. 'Vox Balaenae' may not turn out to be a major work. But don't bet on that." His second hunch was right on. It is Crumb's most-performed work, and it too has been performed for whales a few times. Their critiques have not been noted.

Crumb considers his music to come from a solid twentieth-century history of emotional energy. "Four composers were extremely influential on me, Béla Bartók, Debussy, Charles Ives, and Gustav Mahler, and they all were heavily affected by nature, they were pluralists in their outlook, so nature had a place. They weren't insulated from what life is and what the world is all about. Not like those middle-of-the-century purist abstract guys." Much of twentieth-century classical music lost this raw power. "It became university music, it had no potency, it became inert. It's music without sex, emasculated."

Since Crumb taught for years at the University of Pennsylvania, I wondered if anyone pressured him in that more standard, academic direction. (I remember they tried to pressure me, as late as the 1980s.) "No, even though much of the academic world was buried in gray

music, we could ignore it. But today there's been a complete change, composers are hearing *sounds* again."

Crumb has shown us how the specific inspiration of one fragment of nature can completely change the way we listen. As computers make the manipulation of sound for its own sake ever more facile, people start to pay more attention to the immense musical power of raw, natural sounds. Today's music students study the perfectly realized splendor of "Vox Balaenae" as an example of how traditional instruments can be stretched to the brink of possibility.

These underwater ballads appeared to human ears from nowhere, and musicians from all walks of life almost felt obligated to respond to them. Back in the early seventies, it is astonishing that so many leading music groups wanted to weigh in on the whale situation. I couldn't find a recording of Pete Seeger's reputed "World's Last Whale," but there are plenty of others. Country Joe (and the Fish) sang "Save the Whales!" David Crosby and Graham Nash, with James Taylor as backup, recorded an unusually complex arrangement in "To the Last Whale: Critical Mass" with wordless choral echoing, a tiny bit of actual whale song, and a plaintive lament for the great beast: "Maybe we'll go / Maybe we'll disappear / It's not that we don't know / It's just that we don't want to care." The faintest glimmer of whale song appears at the end, and we know we have to change the world. The band Yes did "Don't Kill the Whale." Even the Partridge Family devoted an entire episode to using their music to save the whales so we could save ourselves. Almost all of these songs offered the same basic message, but everyone felt the need to make it their own.

Captain Beefheart went a little farther. "I'm an animal," said this punk-like figure whose Magic Band sometimes veered in the direction of avant-garde jazz. "I think I sound more like a whale than I do John Coltrane." A more bluesy, raggedy version of Frank Zappa, Beefheart was suspicious of presenting whale songs themselves as music because he respected the animals too much.

"Whew . . . a thirteen and a half pound brain! I wouldn't record the whales though. I just want to help them, man. I mean, can you see a

whale as a rock star? You know there is a family of whales, *heh heh*, in Trinidad Bay near where I live and when we play the music, the album, late at night when it's quiet they show up, they come and they dance!" When critics complained that his band sounded all out of sync like some garage free-for-all, Beefheart just smiled and said we just start and stop when we want to, like those whales. Their music "is past trigonometry, calculus, past polygraphs, and beyond that. They're smart, and it's frightening that we're killing them."

He handed out pamphlets for whale conservation groups like Project Jonah at his concerts during the seventies. He sensed something whale-tastic in the way he made music, raw craziness with a deep respect for the whole animal world. "Gonna grow fins," Beefheart wailed, "take up with a mermaid, and leave you land lubbin' women alone." No other pop figure is so suspicious of the human world—he's spent the last few decades painting alone in the desert, having left music behind long ago.

Over the years the songs inspired by whales appear less frequently but are perhaps deeper. One of the best is by Lou Reed, who turns "The Last Great American Whale" into a hero for our time: "He measured a half mile from tip to tail / Silver and black with powerful fins / They say he could split a mountain in two / That's how we got the Grand Canyon." Tougher than most songs of its kind, the lyrics admonish us for not having the strength to be concerned: "Well Americans don't care for much of anything / Land and water the least / And animal life is low on the totem pole / With human life not worth more than infected yeast. . . . They say things are done for the majority / Don't believe half of what you see and none of what you hear / It's like what my painter friend Donald said to me / Stick a fork in their ass and turn 'em over, they're done." Only the tiniest glimmer of a whale song appears at the end of the track. When Reed wrote about his early days in the Velvet Underground, he could have been talking about whales: "We heard our screams turn into songs, and back into screams again."

Laurie Anderson did a theater piece called "Songs and Stories from Moby Dick" in 1999, which became an album called *Life on a String* the following year. Again, you hear only a slight imitation of the whale, with evocative, searching texts. In one piece, "One White Whale," she wonders if the song will lead us to our goal: "How to find you, maybe by your singing / A weird trail of notes in the water / One white whale in all these oceans / Slipping through the nets of silence." We know so little yet pretend to know so much. The search is endless, and even when we find him in another tune, "Pieces and Parts," we still can't figure him out: "It's easier to sail around the world in a coffee cup / Than to see a whale when he comes rising up / We see him only in parts / A fountain, fins, a speck on the horizon / Giant teeth, an open mouth / Look out, look out, look out, look out."

Every musical portrayal of whales seems to combine longing and sadness. We want to reach them but we cannot. The sum total of human effects on the planet may have made the timing too late. Ecological longing continued to inspire more music. Other classical composers got on the cetacean bandwagon after a few years. John Cage, pioneer composer and musical philosopher, who for years urged us to enjoy sound for itself and to let art imitate nature by manner of operation, wrote his "Litany for the Whale" in 1980. This composition is a nearly half-hour piece for two male voices, each singing the letters of the word "whale," like "*woo ha el eh*," each to the other, never overlapping, like the actual solo humpbacks never interrupting each other across ocean miles. The whole work gives a meditative sense of wide spaces and great distances.

Toru Takemitsu, perhaps Cage's Japanese counterpart, met Scott McVay in 1970, but it took him eleven years to offer up a whale piece, specifically commissioned by Greenpeace in 1981. Takemitsu was also inspired by Melville's *Moby Dick*, impressed that, for once, a whale triumphed over its hunters in the end. Yet his favorite reference in the novel concerned the musical power of the sea itself: "Let the most absent-minded of men be plunged in his deepest reveries,

and he will infallibly lead you to water. . . . Yes, as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever."

"Toward the Sea: Moby Dick" is a swishing, wave-like tone poem echoing Debussy's "La Mer." Takemitsu adds some of the unusual flutter-tongue flute sounds that Crumb so eloquently brought to whalify his own piece. Still, Takemitsu's work sounds more conventional, more derivative of these earlier masters. But the significance is that he, the acknowledged master of classical music in Japan, cooperated with Greenpeace to save the whales instead of continuing to offer humpback sushi on the menus of the nation.

You would think that jazz musicians would be among the first to welcome the strange culture of the moaning whale, yet it wasn't until 1979 that a jazz player explicitly emulated whale sound in his own playing. With just the right amount of undersea reverb, bassist Charlie Haden begins "Song for the Whales" with an improvised melee of descending bowed notes. He is known for the deep sensitivity of his tone and attack. His band Old and New Dreams was composed of four of Ornette Coleman's most distinguished sidemen. They continued Ornette's style of playing free jazz with an undeniable sense of groove and swing.

Don Cherry interjects with dolphin-like pocket trumpet *upbleeps*, and eventually the two remaining members of the band, drummer Ed Blackwell and tenor player Dewey Redman, come in with a sped-up dirge with a fast running drum line beneath. Whales come back up on land once more, and this time they dance. The structure of the piece is unlike anything else the band ever did, once again showing that when musicians take up with humpback song, their music changes and there's no going back.

The one jazz musician who has most allied his work with the sounds of nature is Paul Winter, a man who has used wolves, whales, and birds throughout his work. Winter was discovered as an up-and-coming young saxophonist while still in college in the early 1960s. The U.S. State Department sent his band on several international tours where he got acquainted with Brazilian music, which he soon

integrated into his sound. In 1962 Jackie Kennedy invited the Paul Winter Sextet to be the first jazz group to officially perform at the White House.

In 1968 a friend of Paul's said he ought to put on headphones and check out these whales, saying it was way better than an acid trip. "Their voice was sort of a cross between an elephant trumpeting and Miles Davis. They had this bluesy quality that was so poignant. This made me realize that there is perhaps a universal yearning that is shared by all species, this calling, crying quality, in their singing." Winter may have been the first to think of whales as subterranean jazz musicians.

He was inspired to attend a lecture by Roger Payne, and from that moment he was hooked. Few speakers on whales are as gripping as Payne, who has brought thousands to tears with the songs and stories of the humpback whale. Through his research and activism he has done more to spread the beauty and dignity of whales and their sounds than anyone else.

Winter was astounded by Payne's diagrams of the deep structure of the humpback song that resounds for up to thirty minutes before it repeats. He immediately felt an extraordinary intelligence behind the songs of these animals that were being killed for lipstick and dog food. Paul asked Roger what he, as a musician, could do to help. Payne said "Make sure nature has a place in your music."

By the mid-sixties Winter had moved to the countryside of Connecticut, not far from where Dave Brubeck, Gerry Mulligan, and Winter's first producer John Hammond lived. Taking to the woods is a challenge for a rising jazz musician. Jazz is famous as an urban music—the jarring juxtaposition of city sounds suggesting new sudden moves, improvisations out of the melee of people meeting, culture blending. Living amid so much water, wind, and trees, Winter began to wonder how a sense of place could meld with his sound.

The first nature piece he did was based on the beautiful Eliot Porter photo book *In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World*. The vivid, pure photography juxtaposed with pithy quotes from Thoreau

set the tone for a whole line of Sierra Club Books that showed how beauty, not only worry and fear, could coax the public into the environmental movement. Winter's piece of the same title used a litany of voices of endangered species, with their names recited one after another: "Black-footed ferret, whooping crane, Alabama cavefish. . . ."

After one such performance, someone in the crowd came up and gave Winter some advice: "You're never going to accomplish anything by making people feel guilty. You need to celebrate the creatures instead." He had to learn to create the musical equivalent of a Sierra Club book. It took Winter nearly a decade to figure out how to do that.

In the early seventies Winter found himself influenced by another Connecticut musician, the iconoclastic composer Charles Ives, who had lived just up the road in Redding, fifty years earlier. An early champion of a raw, primal kind of Whitmanesque Americanism in classical music, Ives set up different marching bands clambering up and down hillsides, playing cacophonously together in and out of time. One might call him the Captain Beefheart of his day.

Winter tried in his own way to make a music rooted in his home landscape. He began to organize music villages where all kinds of people would get together and play, breathing in the clean country air. Following Ives, he saw a possibility of blending classical, folk, and jazz music. He worked with Peter, Paul and Mary as well as Pete Seeger. He gathered together some of the best and least conventional improvising musicians, guys like guitarist Ralph Towner and oboist Paul McCandless, who applied a personal, jazz-type sound to classical instruments. Winter called his band the Consort, evoking a purer world of medieval troubadours.

Their record *Icarus* was produced by legendary Beatles producer George Martin in 1972. Mixing Bach, drums, ancient ballads, and wild soloing, it presents a genuinely optimistic, new sound. Martin has famously called it the finest record he ever made. The title song was even launched into outer space on one of those Pioneer missions that left our solar system. (Also included, at the behest of Carl Sagan, were songs of the humpback whales themselves, just in case the probe

is found by an alien intelligence that might understand them better than we do.)

Icarus is a beautiful record, and it was critically well received, but it did not become a hit and did not bend the jazz world in Winter's nature-oriented direction. He went back to the drawing board. "The failure of that album to connect with the culture led me to withdraw and want to write my own music."

The Consort started to play ecology movement benefit concerts, and Winter began to meet more activists and biologists. He went out with David Mech to listen to wolves, and discovered that his especially soft and pure saxophone tone seemed to blend perfectly with their howls in the night. He first saw gray whales from the Greenpeace boat *Phylis Cormack*, off Vancouver Island. "I had never before seen a whale, I had only the sounds and this vague notion of what they are. What struck me so deeply was this slow-motion grace, their surfacing, this powerful spout, and then they would dive. Suddenly I understood a whole different aspect, not just this thunderous power."

The next day he took a cheap saxophone out on a Zodiac raft and tried to play for the big, mostly silent grays. Although there are famous pictures of Winter playing his sax out on the water with whales, he's never been sure they could hear or respond.

In the seventies, Winter went down to Baja California three years in a row, where the gray whales in their winter calving lagoons have since gotten more and more interested in human whale watchers. Someone was trying to make a film of people and whales getting closer together. "There was a yoga dancer on the beach, and I was playing my soprano, and both of us were completely naked, and they had a big plastic inflatable whale on the beach and some real whales in the water watching us. This film was never completed; I often wonder what happened to the footage. And I wonder what the whales thought of it all."

(Now it so happens that a few months after visiting Paul I met this very same dancer on a beach on Maui, about thirty years after the fact. "Naked?" she laughed. "I would never do those dances naked.

They're sacred. Of course, there was a lot of general nakedness going on down in Baja, Paul's memory may be confused.")

Probably because of tales like that, and because of the softness of his speech and his saxophone sound, Winter is often thought of as a father of New Age music, a category in which he has won many Grammy Awards. To those who support it, the New Age genre refers to that kind of sound that connects the listener to higher spiritual states, into a kind of pan-religious bliss of a hopeful future. To those who don't like it, it's trumped-up muzak or milquetoast instrumental folk. Winter, though, has always been a jazz musician, one who has tried to push the boundaries of that genre to encompass the tunes and inspiration of many species through new clues for improvisation.

Since his performance in the White House forty-odd years ago, Winter has continued to be a musical activist, creating beautiful and provocative soundtracks to numerous important environmental and political campaigns. His 1976 album *Common Ground* is the first to incorporate the melodies of the creatures themselves, specifically the trio of whale, wolf, and eagle, where the specific tones of each creature's tunes form the basis of the music in a direct and easily accessible way. Paul McCandless improvises with an eagle's cry in the loosest piece on the record. The wolf howls over a minor, tragic harmony in "Wolf Eyes," and the whale piece is called "Ocean Dream."

The piece opens with the hissy waves of the original recording from Payne's *Songs of the Humpback Whale*. Organ and guitar enter, with a downswept sigh. Winter sings a melody that heads up a tritone, the inverse of the whale's own interval: "Ocean child, come now home, holy wonder, holy one." The whale song comes back, weaving in and out of the human melody as the cello picks up the anthem as more squeaky whale songs emerge. The whale recedes into the distance, the saxophone drifts back. A wash of descending weird washes. They sound electronic, but they're actually humpback wails.

Hearing that record at age sixteen changed my life. When I first heard Paul Winter, I was amazed that music and ecology could be honestly combined. I imagined that better listening might really lead

us all closer to nature. I even named my high school band Ecology. Winter showed a way that musicians could contribute to environmentalism not just through propaganda, but by teaching people how much music could be found in nature itself.

"That was the first time I ever tried to sing," says Winter. "And almost the last. It was fun, but I never felt like it was my essence. Lyrics to me are limiting. You can't take people into the realm of magic and mystery when words are in the way. That's just the prejudice of a lifelong instrumentalist. I'd much rather aim for something that's universal, not limited to one language." Winter's singing voice is soft and alluring, a fine complement to his horn playing, a classical sound that few other jazz players use as effectively. Certainly influenced by the Paul Desmond tone that was so much a part of Dave Brubeck's sixties quartet, it is not a sound that has spawned many imitators today. Perhaps, like George Crumb's music, it is too quiet for the noise of the modern world.

I ask Winter what he thought of the works of Hovhanness and Crumb, both written at the dawn of human interest in whale music. "That's head music. I have always been interested in *heart* music." Makes me smile, because that's just what Crumb said about his nemeses, the chilly composers of atonal serial music like Schoenberg and Berg, so beloved by the academy. Perhaps for musicians, whatever we embrace comes from the indescribable heart, while whatever leaves us cold is the work of a mind more willing to calculate than to feel. But Winter is more practical in his rage. He wonders more about the fact that most musicians didn't give whale song a moment's thought:

"What about all the people who *didn't* get inspired by the whales? There should have been *thousands* of compositions." This should not be considered a mere historical fad, a relic of the 1970s. "Our only hope at salvation is to recollect with the wild world around us and to rejoin the family of life. Not just for aesthetic reasons or to preserve them, but because they are our elders, and we need to learn from their wisdom and their example of how to live in the world without defiling our own home."

If Winter sounds a little pious here, you may find it no surprise that for nearly three decades he has been “artist in resonance” at the biggest cathedral in the world, St. John the Divine in New York City, where his summer and winter solstice concerts draw thousands of listeners over many nights. There is nothing quite like hearing the jazz of nature echoing in this giant church. Those who call Winter a New Age musician miss the point, that he is trying to reach beyond humanity to the hope of reconnecting our marauding kind with the gentle voices of the eternal, natural world. He is actually seeking something sacred.

Not thinking of himself as a singer, Winter rarely performs “Ocean Dream” today. His next record, *Callings*, in 1980, was the first on his newly founded Living Music label. Winter wanted total control of the recording process on this, a concept album featuring a sea lion pup named “Silkie” on a fantastic journey from Baja California all the way to Magdalen Island off of Prince Edward Island, where harp seals are slaughtered for their fur. This time Winter went back to Payne’s original recordings and heard something that sounded like a lullaby: “I had this fantasy, that this song, from one of the largest mammals in the sea, was crying out for the fate of these small, helpless creatures. . . . It was an act of reverence to put these humble human harmonies beneath this whale melody.”

This soft, gentle song, with the rather weighty title “Lullaby from the Great Mother Whale for the Baby Seal Pups,” is a moving melody even if you might find the tale behind it a bit heavy. This is the most frequently performed piece of Winter’s whale music: a simple ocean melody turned into a chorale, with clear, honest harmonies.

In fact, it is based on the same fragment of whale song that Judy Collins used in “Farewell to Tarwathie.” The humpback fragment comes from *Songs of the Humpback Whale*, and this particular song was recorded in Bermuda in the spring of 1967. Collins used it in 1970, Winter in 1979. The whales change their song as a population from year to year, so forty years later none of them are singing the same songs anymore. None except for the Paul Winter Consort, that

is. You don’t hear much whale song in classical, jazz, or pop music today. Perhaps we’re all so used to it that it’s become a cliché. Did these many efforts help at all to save the whales?

For Katy Payne, who did so much of the most sensitive work really listening to and trying to decipher the song, the most important thing was how this whale music made us reconsider all of nature: “There was a burst of realization that the world could change its relation to wildlife. The reaction people had to hearing these sounds made whaling obsolete!” Whaling had been the only reason people knew anything about whales. As people heard the songs the desire to kill whales soon lifted away.

Not that it was so easy to convince the governments of the world that this was a good idea. It was public concern that forced our leaders to suggest that whaling must be stopped. In June 1971, the U.S. Senate unanimously passed a resolution demanding a ten-year halt to commercial whaling. At the time the government’s highest-ranking whale scientist, director of the Smithsonian’s Marine Mammal Council, was Carleton Ray of Johns Hopkins. This is what he had to say: “I don’t find it very relevant to hear that whales produce music. Cock-a-doodle-do produces music too. Whales are smarter than chickens, but it is not relevant to say that whales have a complex social life. So do all animals, including the cows that we eat.” Ray was also famous for arguing that clubbing seals to death was a quick and humane way to kill them.

Despite his academic pedigree, public opinion turned against Ray. Whale songs were all over the airwaves in the early seventies, and Congress succeeded in passing the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, placing the United States at the forefront of global environmental protection. It is still one of the world’s most exemplary articles of law concerning whales, sending a clear message that cetaceans are to be studied and respected, not used. Section 101(a): “There shall be a moratorium on the taking and importation of marine mammals and marine mammal products . . . no permit may be issued for the *taking*

of any marine mammal and no marine mammal product may be imported into the United States.”

Whales got a great boon of protection with this law, and the fifteen years of public outcry and music inspired by the plight of the whale helped to push global sentiment in their favor. Greenpeace became famous for its Gandhian techniques of putting their rafts right between harpoon and whale. The elegant book *Mind in the Waters* was published by the Sierra Club, an anthology of whale tales, drawings, and scientific reports, which drew further support for these wonderful, little-known animals.

By 1986 the International Whaling Commission had to respond to the overwhelming support of the world's people, and their governments, for a moratorium on commercial whaling. Though Japanese, Norwegians, and Russians continue to hunt whales and defy the ban, world public sentiment is against them and protests continue. Whale populations have been recovering steadily since the ban, and these countries sometimes argue there are more than enough whales out there to kill—no one will notice and whale watching can still thrive. But most of the world's people now consider whaling to be an obsolete and barbaric practice. If they want to openly continue to kill whales, it's up to those countries to prove otherwise.

“There was one moment in the seventies in which I most admired Roger,” smiles Katy Payne about her ex-husband. “At a meeting in Bergen, Norway, with hundreds of people there deeply invested in the whaling industry, he simply told them that whale watching was starting to make more money than whale killing. When people began to realize that this is the case, I realized, the world is changing. And it was the song that did it.

“But people forget quite soon; there's this love for novelty which probably drives the changing whale songs, which also drives people's interest. We find fashion a really important part of human culture. Our culture got really fond of humpback whale songs, and then they forgot about them.”

Until now. It's time to bring whale song back into the human world again. The long, epic rhymes of humpbacks. The *tap-tap*-tapping of sperm whale click trains. The cacophonous free jazz of belugas and the kinship whistles of orcas. The thousand mile thrums and beats of blue and fin whales, crossing whole oceans in less than an hour.

What about that Pete Seeger song? There is no recording of it, but a quick Internet search did conjure up the lyrics:

It was down off Bermuda
Early last spring,
Near an underwater mountain
Where the humpbacks sing,
I lowered a microphone
A quarter mile down,
Switched on the recorder
And let the tape spin around.

I didn't just hear grunting,
I didn't just hear squeaks,
I didn't just hear bellows,
I didn't just hear shrieks.
It was the musical singing
And the passionate wail
That came from the heart
Of the world's last whale.

This song seemed quite different from the others of its time. It's all about how the song is recorded, and how the music happens. At the end, it does return to a morality tale:

So here's a little test
To see how you feel,
Here's a little test
For this Age of the Automobile.

If we can save
Our singers in the sea,
Perhaps there's a chance
To save you and me.

I heard the song
Of the world's last whale
As I rocked in the moonlight
And reefed the sail,
It'll happen to you
Also without fail,
If it happens to me
Sang the world's last whale.

Seeger got all the details right: the microphone deep under the sea, the rocking, rhythmical beat of the boat swaying back and forth, and the whale poetry resounding and repeating underneath. Never recorded? I was shocked. Pete Seeger lives just up the road from me, so I wondered if I might rectify that situation. Let's record it today.

We had recently performed on the same bill in Toronto, so I gave him a call. "You remember that song about the world's last whale?"

"What song?" The scratchy voice on the other end of the line sounded suspicious.

"Goes like this: 'I heard the song, of the world's last whale. . . .'"

"Ah yes, you know my mind doesn't remember it, but I believe in muscle memory. My body's still got that tune."

"You want to sing it?"

"I'm eighty-seven years old—too old to sing. But *you*, you should come on down to the Hudson riverfront and play some of those whale songs of yours while the swimmers cross the river from the other side. They're going to love it."

"I'll do that if you sing the song."

"What song?"

"The World's Last Whale."

"Oh, we'll see about that."

The next weekend I ambled down to the waterfront festival in the nearby town of Beacon. Pete started the Great Newburgh-to-Beacon Hudson River Swim four years ago to remind us that this river has gotten clean enough to jump in. He wanted to celebrate some environmental good news and raise money to build a lined swimming pool in the river to make it safe enough for all.

I had done my homework, and found out that in 1988 a humpback whale had actually swum up the Hudson River. Why not play some of its songs to inspire swimmers just finishing their mile-long crossing? I asked a question of the crowd, "How many of you know what a whale sounds like?" The parents and grandparents smiled.

I pressed "play" on my computer, and the swoops and bowed bass notes resounded from the speakers on stage. I accompanied on clarinet, trying to play sounds that would blend. It was a bit of a change from the usual river festival folk tunes, but the swimmers and their families didn't seem to mind.

A tall, rail-thin man with a beard pushed his way to the stage with a banjo and a big pile of papers. "You know, I had totally forgotten about this song until this young man brought it back to my attention," Pete nodded in my direction. "Here are some copies of the words, and I wrote out the music, too. These whales still need our protection. Anyone who wants to keep this song alive, here, take a copy."

Can Pete Seeger still sing after sixty years on the road? More than once I've heard him go on unaccompanied for an hour at a time. On the tribute album to Seeger's work, I find that Bruce Springsteen, with his worn, gravelly delivery, sounds a lot older than Pete.

This lilting, grooving tune in a doleful key reveals exactly what the song of the humpback whale meant for us when it first became known: in the 1960s, miraculous underwater recordings revealed there is music under the sea, and we learned of one more rare thing of nature that was fading away. If we don't work hard to save this song that is so radiant yet also fragile, we're going to disappear just like the whales. It's a simple moral from a beautiful sound.