Ancient Ritual Inspires New Work By Scots Songwriter Robin Beatty

Tuesday 22 April, 2014

A unique centuries-old Hebridean ritual, harvesting Gannet chicks, has inspired a songwriter and a song which will be showcased by The Old Dance School in Aberdeen 's Lemon Tree on Tuesday, May 6.

Once a year, 10 chosen men make a treacherous journey out to the remote island of Sula Sgier to take part in the ancient rite - the harvesting of the chicks or 'gugas' - and return to the small community of Ness on the Butt of Lewis, where they are a celebrated delicacy.

This controversial tradition is still allowed to continue today under a special license from Scottish Heritage Trust.

In 1991 a Derbyshire photographer was the first ever 'outsider' to accompany the 10 Lewis men on the hunt, and two decades after that grueling expedition to Lewis, his son, acclaimed guitarist and songwriter Robin Beatty (28), has written song a honouring the tradition he witnessed as a five-year-old boy.

He and his band The Old Dance School will perform the song in a series of concerts across Scotland - in Alnwick (April 30), Portree (May 1), Stornoway (may 2), Glasgow (May 3), Dundee (May 4), Aberdeen (May 6), Findhorn (May 7), Montrose (May 8), Edinburgh (May 9), and the Moniaive Folk Festival (May10).

The musician says he is "excited, and even a little nervous" to be returning to the island that informed his love of Celtic music and the band's elegant contemporary folk sound draws strongly from this early inspiration.

Over a fortnight, Robin's photographer father John Beatty documented the catching, plucking and salting of 2000 sea birds on Sula Sgeir and while he worked, his young family was immersed in the community of Ness in northern Lewis.

Says Robin: "We'd spent few weeks trundling around in the van while Dad worked on Sula Sgeir with the men of Ness . . . I was only young but I still remember the sounds and colours of music sessions going on in the local pubs.

"It was tremendously exciting. I loved wandering across the expansive peat bogs and windswept beaches with my little sister."

His father remained friends with the men he photographed taking part in the 'guga' harvest and wrote a book about his experiences. Occasionally through Robin's childhood, the family were sent a guga for Christmas by the friends they'd made on the island.

"We kept it in a bucket of salt water in the cellar," the musician says. "It was very fatty and salty - we always said we were getting a taste of the sea."

The song about the gannet hunt, Sula Sgeir, is the centrepiece of the third album by the seven-piece folk outfit The Old Dance School, entitled Chasing the Light.

It was recorded in Glasgow by celebrated producer Calum Malcolm and was lauded as folk album of the year by The Scotsman, and BBC Radio Scotland 's Album of the Week.

"For years, I always wanted to write a song retelling the extraordinary tradition of the guga harvest," Robin says. "But when I started, I realised it was reflected against an even more controversial backdrop."

The song juxtaposes the ancient sea bird hunt with the large scale wind farm scheme proposed for the island in 2006.

He says: "I was following the story of the campaigns and legal battles that went on for a decade with the windfarm proposal, which would have been the biggest in Europe had it gone through, and thinking about how it would affect the small community we had spent time in."

In the form of a moving conversation between a father and son, his song pits the arguments for and

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against windfarms as well as the guga harvest.

The Old Dance School have performed Sula Sgeir and at festivals across Europe, but this will be the first time Robin returns to Lewis to perform as part of their first Scottish tour.

"I'm really excited to present it to the islanders, it means a lot to me," Robin said. "I know that for many, it will be a heartfelt issue. And it would be amazing to meet some of the men who took my dad out with them all those years ago."

Tickets for The Old Dance School gig are available online at www.aberdeenperformingarts.com, by phone at 01224 641122 and at Aberdeen Box Office at the Music Hall and His Majesty's Theatre.

(ENDS)

Note to editors:

Please find attached a photograph of Robin Beatty aged five on Lewis, free to use.

Issued on Monday, April 21, 2014

The Old Dance School

Duelling fiddles, soaring brass crescendos, and irresistible grooves, The Old Dance School's genre-defying live show charts their remarkable journey from ballet school basement jam sessions and cowshed rehearsals, to remote lighthouses, to headline appearances at international festivals.

Championed by BBC Radio 2's Bob Harris, expect extraordinary virtuosity and vitality that has received plaudits throughout the UK , including Songlines Top of the World, and The Scotsman's Album of the Year.

Band Images:
https://www.dropbox.com/s/zxvjirfnsx9kv30/NT6D5760.jpg
https://www.dropbox.com/s/lgrjs7yg5fcrlec/Cover-Image.jpg

More info here,
http://www.theolddanceschool.com/about.html

YOUTUBE
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLewQdYcSNqQgCvhd6QFf5vSkYX6cWU4hO

SOUNDCLOUD
http://www.soundcloud.com/transitionrecords

WEBSITE
http://www.theolddanceschool.com

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