

sylvi macCormac Pt. 1 | Discover Stories Episode 83

Announcement 0:09

The Strong Sessions are back. The Vancouver Adapted music society's flagship event celebrates musicians with disabilities, featuring performances from four talented artists and bands from our community, join us on August 25 at the Roundhouse Community Centre, from 5pm to 8pm tickets are by donation. For more information, visit the Vancouver Adapted Music Society on Facebook, @vamsociety on Instagram, or on our website, www.vams.org, we hope to see you there.

Tanya Griffiths 0:40

Hello and thank you for tuning in to discover stories on Re-Imagine Radio. My name is Tanya, your host, and a student intern with VAMS while completing my social justice practicum. Today, I have the absolute privilege of talking with sylvi macCormac. sylvi began composing WHEELS Soundscapes: Voices of People with Dis Abilities at SFU & VAMS in 1997; received International Honourable Mention Electroacoustique in Bourges, France for Waves of Kokoro, including Text, Soundscape and Voices of Barbara Bourget and Jay Hirabayashi of KOKORO Dance 1999; Patience & Absurdity Documentary, about Mum with Dementia and Daughter with MS, screened in London during 2012 Paralympics (14:33, Director 'Paula Cole); acted in the 2018 Canadian Feature Film Bella Ciao! (Director Carolyn Combs) and "walk-on" role in the CBC series 'Charmed' 2021; Co-Produced with Bryden Veinot at VAMS, BROTHER BEAR & BENT BOXES: RUSSELL WALLACE, An Echo Acoustic Portrait of QEKIYEKSUT 2023. Hi, sylvi, how are you?

sylvi macCormac 2:08

Hi, I'm rollin. How are you?

Tanya Griffiths 2:10

I'm doing very well. I feel, I feel like it's been a pretty cathartic week for me.

sylvi macCormac 2:18

Wow. Why?

Tanya Griffiths 2:24

Well, essentially, I think I felt a lot of feelings that have been ruminating in my body, so it was cathartic in that I sort of let it out and let it go. So emotional, emotional. In other words.

sylvi macCormac 2:48

That's good. It's good to lift yourself up.

Tanya Griffiths 2:52

Oh yes, yeah, absolutely, to let go of the heaviness. Yeah, yeah. To start off our conversation today, a question that I'm borrowing from one of my favorite podcasters, Krista Tippett, who hosts On Being is, how would you trace the origins of your passions and way of seeing and being that form and fuel you in the soil of your childhood?

sylvi macCormac 3:23

Well, how do you really think about that? I think being born here, Coast Salish Territory, Vancouver, Canada, hearing the music of the First Nations People of my life, and then really loving folk rock, you were saying that you're doing a social justice bachelor and folklore really has that relationship with well being of the individuals and the community. And so that was my first love was folk rock. I loved the music of Joni Mitchell, Bruce Cockburn, and I volunteered at the folk bank of the folk music festival for many years. So I was really influenced by music from all over the world. And I grew up with a single mother, and we became very involved in the Greek community. So I had that real love of Greek music and beauty of the the playing the guitar, and it just mom says that I had a very sensitive ear, and I think that to and really mimic. I'm a mimic. I can really mimic sounds and voices, and so it's a combination, I guess, of i. Where I grew up and how I grew up that led me to, well, be the person I am.

Tanya Griffiths 5:08

Yeah, yeah. I think the way you described how being exposed to all these musicalities and having that sensitive ear, I think really led you to lean into that gift. It sounds like I know for me, I have a sensitive nose. So for me, I can smell certain spices, and my mother trained me from a very young age to smell the difference of grass, of leaves of trees. But yeah, I can imagine how for you, it's, it's your ear.

sylvi macCormac 5:48

Yes, and then, you know, with playing the folk rock, that was my first love. And the second love was the soundscape. And then it was like, wow, my ears really opened up, because then it was about what they used to call acoustic ecology. Now they call it echo acoustics,

and it's an awareness of sound around us, what's healthy, what's unhealthy, what's too loud, what's too soft, whether it's noise, you know, and how that affects us, how that affects the animals. And it's a wonderful field, a global field, so yeah, whereas folk rock just felt like I was went, went, going on the guitar, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, and bashing my head against the music business wall, when I started to study the soundscape. It was wonderful. It was like build recording, and taking those few sounds into the studio, creating with them, like sound was color, you know, and moving them around, collage. And it was quite a lovely field, yeah, I love it. I very much fell in love with that.

Tanya Griffiths 7:07

Yeah, yeah. I love how you describe that, how it sounds like, the magic of soundscape really like, led to an appreciation for Yeah, just like for things as they are, you know, of being in the field and of recording the sounds as as they are.

sylvi macCormac 7:34

Getting your hands dirty, you know?

Tanya Griffiths 7:38

Yeah, absolutely.

sylvi macCormac 7:40

Yeah. I, when I did a presentation, it was field of sound is, is a dirty word, because you have to get your hands dirty out, go out there with the microphone and be very sensitive to sounds around you.

Tanya Griffiths 8:00

Yeah, yeah. And that actually leads me to another question about how you have a deeper awareness and appreciation of the lands you live on, having moved from Ireland to Coast Salish territories at a young age, and how did your journey of honoring the land and the Indigenous Peoples who belong to it begin and also evolve.

sylvi macCormac 8:24

My mother and father came to Ireland in '56 and I was born here in Coast Salish territory, Vancouver, Canada. And I always had the awareness that we were surrounded by the First Nations People. But in '95 when I met John Clark, and he was a mountain climber, that I was introduced to the its own witness project, which was a project to bring awareness of a very sensitive territory which was called the Isle au Haut, and is now place of transformation in the Scottish language. And we were able to, by our efforts, to preserve

that area so and in that, in that project, there was a lot of First Nation teaching and public information. It was all shared and camping trips up in the in the Northern Squamish territory. And that really is what brought my awareness more,

Tanya Griffiths 9:46

yeah, just this advocacy around you, and this, this movement towards really reclaiming the land.

sylvi macCormac 9:58

Yes, and then that was when I did a composition called Witness Round Journey, named that I have people talking sounds of the rivers and the birds, and I have the sound of the big it was a big truck came down the hill, and it was just so high pitched and screaming, and you could hear the children running, and it just really affected me. So I included that within the peace, the beauty and the absurd, scary part. And hopefully, you know, my contribution helped a little bit there.

Tanya Griffiths 10:40

Yeah, yeah, yeah, just that juxtaposition of of the way things were which many times like coexist, and it's, and that's one thing too, that Indigenous culture and many other cultures, especially, yeah, like drawing from where I'm from, from the Philippines, that there is no one narrative, there is no one truth. There is multiple.

sylvi macCormac 11:13

Yes, the colonialization of the Philippines and Ireland. Ireland was colonized by England for 800 years. Philippines was colonized by the Spanish and so many by the way, salamat po.

Tanya Griffiths 11:31

Yeah, walang ano man.

sylvi macCormac 11:32

Thank you. Magandang araw. Nice to meet you, ate.

Tanya Griffiths 11:42

Oh, I feel like here you're the ate here. For those who are tuning in ate means older, older sister, magandang araw is good morning, magandang hapon is good afternoon, and salamat is thank you. And I love that you know, some of the words from my language, it always it just like makes my heart flutter to hear that. I'm just so curious. Where did you learn that from?

sylvi macCormac 12:20

From my care, people who the community health workers, many who have been nurses in the Philippines came to Canada and and became the community health workers here. So over 20 years, I've learned phrases here there. I'll tell you another one, and I finally learned the grammar of it. Ako ay nakakatawang unggoy sa Ireland.

Tanya Griffiths 12:48

Say that again?

sylvi macCormac 12:50

Ako ay nakakatawang unggoy sa Ireland

Tanya Griffiths 12:55

Are you saying that you are you're from Ireland?

sylvi macCormac 12:58

I am a funny monkey. So Ireland, there's the monkeys in Ireland.

Tanya Griffiths 13:17

I get it. I get it. Oh, yeah, yeah, that's the thing with this. With Tagalog, is the there, there's very special like, emphasis on certain syllables. So it's, yeah.

sylvi macCormac 13:30

How would you say it?

Tanya Griffiths 13:34

Ako ay nakakatawang. It's very fast. Unggoy. Yeah. I love that. Oh, I love the silliness around that, too, and just the free spirit I can, kind of, I can't imagine it. It's a sight. It's a sight to see a funny monkey in Ireland.

sylvi macCormac 14:09

You don't, yeah, that's why I love the elephant on your wall there. My mom, when she was a little girl, she rode a monkey in the Dublin Zoo. But she always felt sad for that monkey, that sorry elephant, because she knew that it was hurt, you know. And as she got older, was harder to carry the children. And her name was Sarah, the elephant, and we always

had an elephant in our house, you know. And if you face it inwards the trunk, it brings you good luck. Yeah, my mom always talked about Sarah.

Tanya Griffiths 14:49

Oh, yeah. No. I really feel that too. And I feel as though like elephants to me, I have, I have this affinity to elephants. Um, because they are such nurturing and protective and loving animals, and yet they have such thick, resilient skin. And I, yeah, I'm, I'm, I always just, I'm amazed by them and their love for each other. Yeah, yeah, shall I go to the next question? When were you first diagnosed with multiple sclerosis? Can you share what it was like receiving the diagnosis and how that unfolded.

sylvi macCormac 15:43

I was diagnosed when I was 21 and it affected me sort of every year, I would get sick, I would get better, I would get sick, then I would get better until, until it became, more aggressive. I was picture framer, that was my trade. Then I wasn't able to do that, so I moved knowing that I was losing the ability, then I went to study at SFU, and that was where I discovered the soundscape you're studying with fairy traps and finding the world soundscape project R. Murray Schafer and Hildegard Westerkamp's work. And the wonderful field that they're calling eco acoustics is, you know, acoustic ecology. And it just opened my my mind so much to it MS affected me in that I couldn't do the picture framing anymore and couldn't do the playing guitar or traveling, but it opened the door to the soundscape composition, which then was a more fulfilling field, in a way, and a more global field. My work then went around the world, whereas here I was in Vancouver, um, just one of many artists. You know, I'm still one of many artists, but I love the field. It just, it's very special. Yeah, you know, you can make birds are already singing, but you can combine them with piano and spin them around the room and water and affordable trucks and just really communicate, maybe your family's story or and I love doing portraits. That's why I started the real soundscape project. I had been at SFU, and I was introduced to this project called the radio ballads that was Peggy Seeger, and she was the daughter of Pete Seeger. So Peggy Seeger and Ewan McColl, with producer Charles Parker, began a series of interviewing people in the community, one of which was our individuals with polio, and so that was one of the first pieces with composition of people with disabilities. And so I was inspired to do the start the real sounds good doing that. And that's one of my favorite fields, composition types. And then it's funny, because Brother Bear, Russell Wallace has a disability called cataplexy, which is similar to epilepsy. When you're overwhelmed with feelings or stress, you faint or you fall. And so, and that piece has now gone to Scotland, to

the Netherlands, to California, twice, to radio in Alberta, and it's making its rounds around the world right now. So it's quite wonderful.

Tanya Griffiths 19:22

Yeah, yeah. That is, that is, and I have listened a bit to it. And I love, I love the storytelling. I love the overlapping, and just how, like, just this beautiful amalgamation of of things that just fit right. Like, yeah, yeah. Oh, I really enjoyed it.

sylvi macCormac 19:44

Oh, thank you so much. That means so much to me. It was a real joy to do and such an honor to work with Russell's music. He's a composer of music over 40 years, from traditional, to pop, to hip hop, to classical and then to work with his music, which included his mother's voice, also, as they were in a band called Tzo'kam, which means chickadee. And so then to have his mother's voice, that's the women, the older woman's voice you hear in the beginning. It was just so meaningful. You know, you asked me, which is my favorite, all of them, but that one, my latest one, feels like almost the completeness of what my purpose is here. And, you know, I couldn't now. I can't edit anymore physically. I can't use the mouse to cut net it. And so I went to ask a few to VAMS, and I spoke with Bryden, and Bryden's knowledge and his ability to edit, oh, my God, would have, would have taken me so long to do, because he's beyond me in knowledge and ability, and working with him was a dream come true for a composer, a lot of composers in the early parts would work with technologists who would know all the ins and out of the and they give them directions. And I can do that with Brighton. Just enjoy working together. We're working on some cassette tapes that I had from 1982 and we're now working on an album of folk rock songs from '82 and '94 Wow. So this, this year, I'll come up with the wheels compilation, which will be about 10 or 12 compositions, and then also, might call it evergreen, which would be the folk rock album. So it's kind of, I've got two sides, two hands, you know, one does the folk rock, one does the electroacoustic soundscape composition.

Tanya Griffiths 22:17

yeah, yeah. Yeah, I'm not going to lie. I think the last time I saw Bryden, he gave me a very exclusive sneak peek to what he was working on with the with the old cassette tapes. And I thought it was so cool. I was just like, woah, like I didn't even think this could be possible, but it's now that, because I know that we were talking about this, this elephant behind me, and I was, I was talking about how it's like a mosaic, mosaic, mosaic, and that's sort of how I see, like the work that you do because it this is also, I would say, This is my introduction to to soundscape, composition and electroacoustic. And I think it's, it's so rad. I haven't used

that word a lot, but I think it's rad, and I think it's, it's cool. And I when you, when you mentioned earlier how this last, this last project you worked on with, with Russell Wallace, I think, and how that gave you a sense of completeness to your purpose here on Earth. I that really moved me. I had goosebumps, because, as somebody who's also creatively inclined, I I think that the art that we get to produce is this, this beautiful extension of ourselves and and a way for us to leave a legacy and to and to continue being part of community long after our bodies have served their purpose.

sylvi macCormac 24:14

Yes, I think so. And I'm sure you could imagine and ask you, could you imagine creating a piece with elephants, the sounds of elephants singing back and forth to each other, and the sounds of their environment, and then maybe people talking about them and honestly what they do.

Tanya Griffiths 24:35

So, I I am very open to it, and I'm always open to creative ideas. And also the reason why I say I'm very open to it is because one of my partner's aspirations is to go back to to his lands, back to essentially, Africa. And I and I totally see I wouldn't. I would not. To shut myself from the opportunity and and that's the thing too, is that life has a magical way of of bringing us to places that also need us.

sylvi macCormac 25:12

Yes, yeah, yeah. You can get yourself a little H4N Zoom you know, take that. It's very small recording, and take it with you. It's build recorder, and it transfers digitally into the computer. You may know about it already, right?

Tanya Griffiths 25:30

I do, yeah, there you go. I took a, I took a podcasting class in my in my undergrad. I did my undergrad in Hispanic studies and creative writing. And so my podcast professor, she was really cool. She we also did this activity once where we just went out into the campus at UBC, and we, all we had to do was just record sounds that that we were drawn to. And I thought that was very cool.

sylvi macCormac 26:02

Lovely.

Announcement 26:05

This podcast is brought to you by the Vancouver Adapted Music Society. Since 1988, VAMS has been supporting and promoting musicians with disabilities in Metro Vancouver through various programs including music lessons, recording projects and live performance opportunities. To learn more about us, visit our website at www.vams.org, [@vamsociety](https://www.instagram.com/vamsociety) on Instagram, the Vancouver Adapted Music Society on Facebook, or email us at info@vams.org. Thanks for listening.