

With her first album in almost 20 years soundscape artist **Hildegard Westerkamp** performs acts of narrative alchemy. By **Jo Hutton**

Hildegard Westerkamp

Breaking News

Earsay CD/DL

Hildegard Westerkamp began recording and composing in the early 1970s as a researcher with R Murray Schafer on his World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University, Canada. The research was published as Schafer's *The Tuning Of The World* (1977), a seminal work in the field of soundscape composition. Westerkamp worked at Vancouver Co-operative Radio, which provided a platform for the early soundscapists to broadcast their recordings in her programme *Soundwalking* (1978–79). Her music fits the genre of soundscape composition, but as Westerkamp writes, that is something hard to define. Much more than just composing with ecological field recordings, it comments on the acoustic health of our environment. It partners – but is distinct from – the science of acoustic ecology. Created by composers and musicians rather than scientists, music is at its heart. It expresses a sense of place where the composer has spent considerable time and includes an aesthetic abstraction of the recorded sounds. Westerkamp has been transforming environmental sounds into music for some 50 years, such as the tiny sounds of barnacles on *Kits Beach* (1989) and the silence of industrial ghost towns around British Columbia for *At The Edge Of Wilderness* (2000).

Breaking News is Westerkamp's first new release in almost 20 years. She describes it as a retrospective of her work in which she challenges the gloomy style of broadcasting news bulletins and promotes the telling of hard-hitting news stories in more positive ways. The album features sounds of children and includes a dramatic event, the birth of her first grandchild, soon after 9/11. It comprises five tracks of storyfied music – news related as a collage of narrative excerpts, musical phrases and electronic effects with slices of poetry, children's stories, recordings of the ocean, singing, birdsong and carefully crafted electronic manipulations. Westerkamp focuses on giving voice to the fragile, neglected and rarely heard, seeking life-affirming energy in the politics of disaster.

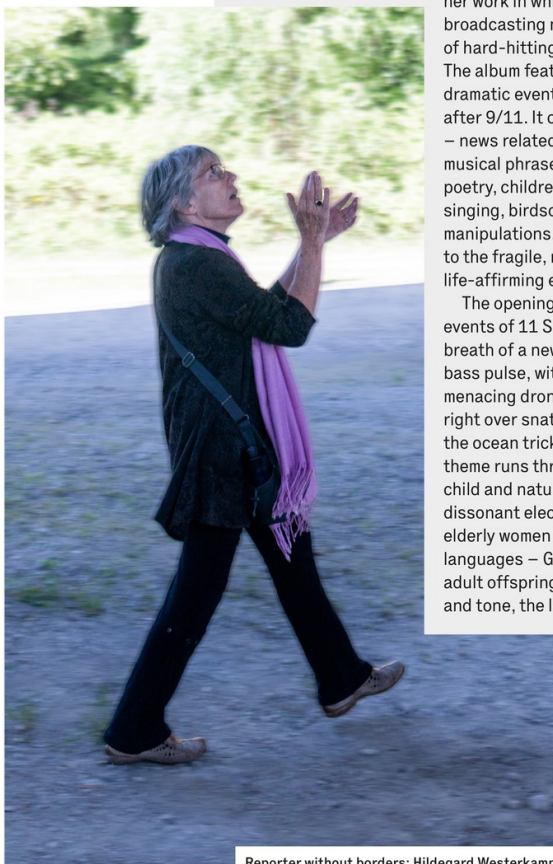
The opening three minute title track, based on the events of 11 September 2001, features the cries and breath of a newborn baby, over a hum of the earth bass pulse, with metallic swoops and an incongruously menacing drone that swings rhythmically left and right over snatches of traditional folk singing as the ocean trickles in and out of earshot. This sonic theme runs throughout the album, contrasting sweet child and nature sounds with threatening drones and dissonant electronic pulses. In "MotherVoice Talk" elderly women relate their life stories in different languages – German, English, Japanese – as their adult offspring express, through abstracted sound and tone, the love, frustration and anxiety that the

mother/child relationship evokes. Westerkamp uses simple electronic treatments to convey space, such as the words "several years went by" drifting into the distance in a wash of extending reverberation, backed with the ocean and squawking gulls. The real-time manipulation of a resonance filter creates gentle jangling bell-like ripples, with the same attention to tiny sounds in all Westerkamp's work. "Moments Of Laughter" explores the cyclical mutually imitative interaction of mother/baby sounds, becoming at times more like an educational programme about the development of speech, and it takes a feat of reduced or deep listening techniques to remain focused on the musical aesthetic of the sounds presented.

"Once Upon A Time" incorporates a children's tale, "The Girl, The Witch And The Magic Bird", and shows how a story can become music when freed from the rules of storytelling. Narrated by several child voices in short repeating phrases, synthesized, interjecting, overlapping, echoing left and right, it transports the listener on a journey into sonic fantasy. Westerkamp has written much over the years about the sound journey and where it can take you if your imagination will allow it. This particular enchanting adventure is summarised in her simple conclusion, "everyone had forgotten about their fashionable headphones and the witch's music".

The final track "École Polytechnique" is a powerful reflection on the breaking news of the shocking anti-feminist Montreal college shooting of women in 1989. Uplifting sounds of nature, water, birdsong, sustained choral soprano, merge into dark, threatening textures from orchestral instruments. Joyful bell peels morph into urgent clanging, reminiscent of Schafer and Westerkamp's research into the contrasting cultural meanings of bell tolling sounds around the world. Cycled drones and gasps with irregular tempo changes develop into a collage of global news bulletin excerpts, a montage of manipulated siren sounds and an emotive assembly of young voices reciting prayers. This track encapsulates Westerkamp's intention to focus on ways to find positive energy in tragic circumstances.

The transformation of Westerkamp's sounds into music always returns to a spoken narrative on the nature of sound and its relationship to place. She explains the essence of soundscape composition as "the artistic, sonic transmission of meanings about place, time, environment and listening perception". *Breaking News* invites the listener to surrender to a journey to the place and time of the recording, transitioning into an abstraction of the original sounds, guided by her studio practice with looping, filtering, equalising, resonating, reverberating. It brings all the technique, sound research and creative thinking of a career spanning half a century into the present moment where for Westerkamp, headphones are still for listening, not fashion. □



Jaro Berbuesse

Reporter without borders: Hildegard Westerkamp

Reviews

- 43 **Reviews Index**
- 44 **Soundcheck**
New vinyl, CDs, downloads and streams, plus reissues and specialist columns, including:
- 45 **Hildegard Westerkamp**
Mother courage. By Jo Hutton
- 49 **Julie Tippetts & Martin Archer**
Use your illusion. By Andy Hamilton
- 55 **Ron Trent + Louie Vega**
House of the future. By Joe Muggs
- 66 **Jerry Hunt**
Irida facts. By Ken Hollings
- 70 **Print Run**
New music books, including:
- 71 **FMP**
Half a century of transatlantic jazz innovation from the historic German label. By Gabriel Bristow
- 73 **On Screen**
New films and DVDs
- 74 **On Location**
Recent live events and streams, including:
- 74 **Sonic Protest**
International rebellion occupies Paris. By Rob Turner
- 82 **On Site**
Recent art shows

- 4 **Masthead**
- 6 **Letters**
- 42 **Charts**
The Office Ambience and other playlists
- 90 **Out There**
Festivals and gig listings
- 96 **Subscribe**
Print, digital, downloads and CDs

Features

- 8 **Unlimited Editions**
Radio Art Zone
- 8 **Unofficial Channels**
Riddimguide
- 10 **Black Glass Ensemble**
Environmental chamber group follow the data. By Phil England
- 12 **Deborah Walker & Silvia Tarozzi**
Finest worksongs for the Italian cello and viola duo. By Peter Margasak
- 14 **Julmud**
The Palestinian producer and rapper collages industrial sounds from across the Middle East. By Miloš Hroch
- 16 **Floris Vanhoof**
Transforming sound and vision is fair game for the Belgian artist and instrument builder. By Claire Biddles
- Global Ear**
- 18 **Moscow**
The invasion of Ukraine has pushed the Russian counterculture into retreat. By Arthur Kuzmin
- 69 **The Inner Sleeve**
billy woods on Bigg Jus's *Black Mamba Serums v2.0*
- 98 **Epiphanies**
Gary Lucas is enchanted by Third Ear Band's trancelike medievalism

Invisible Jukebox

- 20 **Ava Mendoza**
Will *The Wire*'s mystery record selection shred the nerves of the virtuoso guitarist? Tested by George Grella



The Dream Syndicate

- 24 **The Dream Syndicate**
Since their 2012 reunion, the US psych trailblazers have let their freak flag fly across a run of trippy releases including new album *Ultraviolet Battle Hymns & True Confessions*. By Joseph Stannard



The Primer

- 28 **Pauline Oliveros**
A Deep Listening dive into the recordings (and cisterns) of the composer and accordionist who pioneered radical new ways of listening and living. By Louise Gray
- 35 **lone**
The writer, playwright and director, and creative/life partner of Pauline Oliveros, continues their work to connect communities and listeners. By Vanessa Ague



Phew

- 36 **Phew**
The Japanese punk survivor and intrepid vocalist/composer continues to build an impressive catalogue of collaborations, solo projects and band work in a career now spanning over 40 years. By Emily Pothast



Japanese punk primer

- 41 **Japanese punk primer**
A round-up of notable outliers of Japanese punk and post-punk. By Alan Cummings