

Rewilding

As Sam Lee brings his Norwegian-British sound-jam Vindauga to this year's *Songlines Encounters Festival* and pushes folk onto the big screen in Guy Ritchie's new film, **Nathaniel Handy** steps into the headspace of folk music's polymath

Sam Lee is a song collector. More than that, he favours full-immersion baptism in the Gypsy and Traveller folk singing communities from which he has gleaned an oral repository. Yet he is not only a conservator of song, but also a conservationist more broadly. "Before folk music, I worked in nature studies doing a lot of wilderness training. It's my first passion," he tells me. And should the son and heir of Madonna and Guy Ritchie one day become a famous survival expert, we may well have Sam Lee to thank for it.

He brought his bushcraft to the Ritchie household in Wiltshire when he was invited to discuss a new film project with the director. "Guy likes folk music," reveals Lee. "He was making a film set in the first century and he wanted folk music. He wanted that sense of authenticity." The film in question is the blockbuster *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword*, a sprawling epic of English braveheartedness set for release on May 19.

"I went down to his house in Wiltshire and he took me on a tour round the grounds," Lee remembers. "I taught him and his son a few things about the outdoors and he was like, 'Geezer, how come there's this Jewish kid who knows all about folk music and the outdoors?' He just couldn't get his head around it. But he said, 'Right, we'll get you in the film!'"

Lee visited the Warner Bros Studios in Leavesden where he saw the sheer scale of a film that was also shot on location in Snowdonia, the Forest of Dean, Windsor Great Park and the Isle of Skye's distinctive Quiraing region. "It's enormous," says Lee. "Castles. Cave systems. What they've built is phenomenal."

It's not the usual setting for English folk music, which is what makes Ritchie's punt so brave. "He just put me in a studio with some scenes and said, 'Sing,'" Lee explains. "I actually went for Scottish Traveller ballads, because they're my favourites, but also because they have that sense of drama. A little bit of the song 'The Wild, Wild Berry' came to me." It was to become the soundtrack to a trailer that has gone viral. "They said they'd never had a reaction to a song on a trailer like it," says Lee. "I was immediately bombarded by people asking, 'Dude, what sort of music is this? Where can I find it?' It's unbelievable what's happened to it."

These are certainly strange environs for folk music. The trailer reveals classic Hollywood treatment, with a fantastical monster and CGI galore. It is English myth remade for the action movie age. Such big screen treatment of British folk song might make some uneasy, but Lee believes it's high time it got the exposure. "The art of cinema is about trying to create an experience," he says. "Folk music is a brilliant way to transport a viewer, which is why you get bagpipes all the time; they're a great way of getting a sense of drama, ancientness and ensuing battle. It's amazing that British folk hasn't been utilised more in the way that American folk music has been in so much American cinema."

Lee's sense of openness, exploration and enquiry is at odds with a more preservationist view of tradition, yet is perhaps closer to the spirit of folk music. "The final piece of 'Wild Berry' has lines that have been extended or rewritten for the film," explains Lee. "It's very textural. There's no narrative to it in the way of the original." Does he worry about such things? ▶

Alex Harvey-Brown





Sam Lee and Lisa Knapp pictured in East Sussex last May on a Singing with Nightingales evening

“There’s always going to be people out there who say, ‘You changed the lyrics.’ My job as an interpreter is to show through the music that I can do what I like, as long as it’s respectful. I’m never going to please everybody.”

The fluidity of his approach is what caught the attention of BBC’s *Late Junction* presenter Fiona Talkington in 2015, when she was setting up a project connecting musicians from Norway and the UK in collaboration with Riksscenen in Oslo – the Norwegian national centre for traditional folk music and dance. “The Norwegian approach to traditional music is progressive in its ability to take the traditional essence and completely go to other places with it,” says Lee. “I’m always really impressed with how ambidextrous the musicians are, how playful they can be with this idea of what’s ancient and what’s modern.”

This first workshop in Oslo saw Lee working with a Norwegian Hardanger fiddler, an Iranian *santoor* player and a jazz percussionist. It was illustrative of the breadth of the minds involved. However, when the opportunity to play a gig at Celtic Connections in 2016 in Glasgow came up, the original line-up were not all available. So it was that a new team was brought together. It included Lee, Norwegian vocalist Unni Løvlid, Hardanger fiddler Erlend Apneseth, Scots-Finnish duo Sarah-Jane Summers on fiddle and Juhani Silvola on guitar and harmonium player Andreas Utne (see box overleaf).

When the musicians were told the organisers were ready to go to press with the initial project title of Folk Conexions, they recoiled. “We were like, no fucking way! That’s awful. Great for the funding application, but we needed a name,” Lee remembers. “Unni came up with Vindauga. It means window and it resonated. It’s a very unstructured, very impressionistic project. It initially began as a jazz project and that stylistic openness is reflected in the name.”

Lee’s love of Nordic folk music has developed over many years – something for which he thanks both Talkington and fellow BBC presenter Verity Sharp who brought him to play in Norway and put him into contact with some of the country’s best Hardanger fiddle players. “It’s probably the instrument that makes me weep the quickest,” Lee confesses. “There’s something in the intonation and the tunings and scales that they use that has the quality of ancientness. I don’t get that sensation from hearing any other music from any other world. The Hardanger just transports.”

The ability of master musicians to lose themselves

in the music is a quality that captures Lee’s imagination. He sees it in the young fiddler Apneseth, whose performance style he terms “utterly Zen.” It is a place he clearly tries to reach himself. In doing so, he’s not afraid to straddle borders between genres, allowing his creativity to roam. “I’ve just finished recording an album with London-based jazz ensemble, Club Inégales,” he enthuses, “and there I really am improvising in jazz folkiness. I don’t know what I’m going to sing. I just have to channel a lyric and start to meditate upon that. I love letting go of the thread, just falling with it and seeing what doesn’t break on impact.”

The Vindauga show for *Songlines Encounters Festival* is likely a one-off. It will also be largely improvised. It not only means that what audiences hear at the festival will be a unique experience, it also illustrates the mental state of fevered creativity that Lee inhabits. He is a man on a mission to connect as many threads as possible, pausing on one rich flowering before moving to the next. Yet for all the bright lights, his real focus is more intimate. It is on connections between individuals, connections that build community.

“I’d much rather be taking folk music back to the land than the big screen,” Lee explains. “It’s more important. Folk music is brilliant for giving a sense of community. I’m trying to fertilise the places, particularly in London, where there’s a denaturing and a leaching of the soil as corporate development takes over more venues to the detriment of organic community-based music.”

Lee has done this not only through his own music, but also through his work as a founder of The Nest Collective – the organisation behind The Campfire Club and Unamplified events. “The Campfire Club is such a simple idea – just taking an ancient thing we’ve always done and doing it in the city – music around a campfire,” Lee says. “And getting rid of amplification – God, it’s so wonderful! To play music in such a way that people have to commit to listening. And by committing to listen they are so rewarded.” That sense of the interactive experience, the audience member as participant, is also central to Lee’s Singing with Nightingales events, something ▶



Tom Piskew-Miller

that feels like it encapsulates all that this young folk singer is trying to achieve. "Singing with Nightingales is more than just a trip to the woods and sitting around the fire and having a chat and a little song," says Lee. "It's a carefully crafted ceremony. I show people how to start using their sensory awareness outdoors, how to observe and listen. It's a lost skill. It's endemic in all indigenous communities, but Western folk just stumble through nature, knocking everything apart, scaring everything away before we have a chance to properly experience it."

Singing with Nightingales is exactly that. There are only 6,500 breeding pairs who come to the UK and they are on the red list of endangered species due to habitat loss. Yet Lee takes participants into the nighttime woodland to, as he terms it, "get right under the skirt" of the nightingale. "When you sing, it interacts with you. When you play, it returns the tune," Lee says. "People suddenly start to have a sense of connection with nature."

Lee talks about the "marrying of my love of folk song and the identity music has to the land" and this is the central theme of his craft. Time and again, he conjures up the imagery of the natural world to describe the effects of folk music, or lack thereof: leaching of the soil, fertilising, textures and tinctures. This preoccupation with the organic matter of life infiltrates so many of his observations, including his excitement about the Unamplified event occurring at London's Royal Academy

in June. "It's wonderful taking folk music slap bang into Piccadilly," he says. "The Unamplified concept is growing and I really want to see it – like a dry rot – put into these amazing buildings. It's musical dry rot, or woodworm perhaps, put into every room and doorway and staircase." It's an arresting image: the unstoppable fungal spread of folk music into our mainstream movies, our music venues, our parks, our woodlands, our art galleries and even our very homes.

"I'm using the same principles as conservationists of rewilding certain areas of land into being musical places," says Lee. "My ambition is that normal people will start to incorporate it into their daily practices. The platforms I've developed suddenly start to work as places that are bigger than just listening to music. They're about cohesion." It may come as no surprise that Lee is already hard at work on his next project: a third studio album. Equally unsurprisingly, it is, as you've probably gathered, inspired by nature. ♦

"I show people how to start using their sensory awareness outdoors"

- + **DATES** Sam Lee will be at *Songlines Encounters Festival at King's Place on June 3*, see below and p17 for details
- + **PODCAST** Listen to Sam Lee talk about *Vindauga* on the *Kings Place* podcast, www.soundcloud.com/kings-place
- + **MORE** Sam Lee's *Singing with Nightingales* project runs until *May 28*, www.singingwithnightingales.com. *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* is at cinemas from *May 19*

VINDAUGA

Following his recent excursions around the English countryside singing with nightingales, Sam Lee will be at Kings Place in June where he'll be performing in *Vindauga/Wind Eye*, an exciting new collaborative project featuring the following artists:



UNNI LØVLID

One of Norway's most highly acclaimed and respected traditional singers, Unni Løvlid plays a key role within the *Vindauga* project, together with fellow vocalist Sam Lee. Løvlid's latest solo album was *Lux* (reviewed in #104), and it is a collection of religious folk songs and lullabies. In the review, Fiona

Talkington describes her voice as: 'pure yet powerful, extremely versatile and engaging.' Her interest in folk singing originates from her mother who was a traditional singer and song collector from Nordfjord. Alongside her professional singing career, Løvlid also lectures at the Norwegian Academy of Music.



ERLEND APNESETH

The award-winning Hardanger fiddle player is still only in his 20s, but his virtuosic playing has been widely praised, nationally and internationally. His solo debut album *Blikkspor* was released in 2013 (reviewed in #104), and *Det Andre Rommet* (reviewed in #119) saw Apneseth joined on guitar and

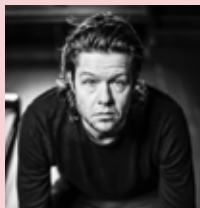
percussion, conjuring up a radically different sound. Apneseth's latest work, *Nattsongar*, was specially commissioned by the Førde Traditional & World Music Festival in 2016.



SARAH-JANE SUMMERS & JUHANI SILVOLA

'One of the finest folk duos around' is how the pair were described in the review of their latest release

Widdershins – a Top of the World selection in #124. The combination of traditional Scottish fiddle music from Summers' Highlands home, together with the Scandinavian influences of Silvola's background complement each other perfectly and their improvisatory approach to music making provides a crucial backbone to the *Vindauga* collective.



ANDREAS UTNEM

The Norwegian composer, pianist and harmonium player is equally at home within folk and jazz circles. A member of the Gjermund Larsen Trio, Utnem released a solo piano album, *Night Hymns* on KKV earlier this year. In 2010 he collaborated with the saxophonist Trygve Seim, releasing *Purcor* (ECM). Besides his work within the jazz and folk worlds, Utnem also works as a cantor and has composed musical liturgy for church.

Ingvil Skeie Jones, Andreas Eikeseth Nyjerd, Erlend Berge