

# Spellbound

**Nathaniel Handy** is captivated by the musical spells conjured up by a collective of artists in response to *The Lost Words* book

PHOTOS **ELLY LUCAS** ILLUSTRATIONS **JACKIE MORRIS**

“These are the tears of Robert Macfarlane,” announces the artist Jackie Morris, holding aloft a small glass bottle containing a clear liquid. The Hay Festival audience roars. Whether the naturalist and bestselling author Macfarlane did shed tears alongside blood and sweat as he created the poems that would form *The Lost Words*, he could surely never have dreamed that it would come to this?

Macfarlane is the poster boy for the current surge of interest in books on natural history. From *The Old Ways* to *Landmarks* to his highly anticipated latest book, *Underland*, he has been met with almost universal acclaim. Yet this was something different, perhaps even left field: a set of poems inspired by the fact that the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* had decided to do away with certain nature words in favour of more tech-focused ones.

He recognised a dying language of our landscape and enlisted painter Jackie Morris from

her Pembrokeshire home to bring his poems to life on the page. It might have been a quirky little side-project – a niche poetry and fine-art curio. What it did instead was become their greatest success to date. It was more than simply a book, more than a page-turner; it has become a social movement.

Soon, campaigns had sprung up across the UK to get the book into classrooms and care homes. Ordinary people with no connection to the publication were turning activist. Something was happening. When Caroline Slough of Folk by the Oak festival heard Macfarlane and Morris speak about the book at Hay Festival’s Winter Weekend in 2017, she also heard London-based musician Kerry Andrew sing her interpretation of Macfarlane’s spell poem to the wren. An idea was born.

Slough proposed that Macfarlane and Morris bring together a group of musicians to create a musical response to *The Lost Words*. The success of *Spell Songs* – the resulting project – is in the musicians they chose. For several of the artists, it was as if this project came to them like some long-lost musical twin.

Scottish folk singer Karine Polwart was hot off the back of her sensational *Wind Resistance* project and the album *Laws of Motion*, and her intimate, spoken-word delivery was made for Macfarlane’s poetry. Julie Fowlis is a singer and broadcaster who is a standard-bearer for the resurgent Scottish Gaelic language.

Around these two coalesced a formidable band of creative talent, one that at first glance appears



Above and below:  
The Spell Songs ensemble  
at the QEH concert  
in February



## WIN

We have a copy of the CD/book *The Lost Words: Spell Songs* to give away. To enter, answer: Which festival commissioned the project? See p23 for competition rules and deadline

almost as a Scottish folk supergroup. Polwart and Fowlis were joined by Highland harpist and Gaelic singer Rachel Newton and Orkney-born singer-songwriter and guitarist Kris Drever of Lau fame.

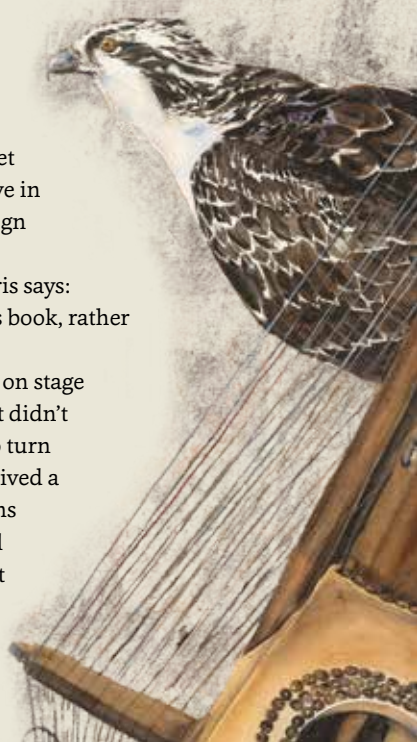
The musical range was enlarged by cellist Beth Porter, multi-instrumentalist Jim Molyneux and Kerry Andrew – who had first tapped the rich vein of Macfarlane’s poetry back in 2017. The icing on the cake was delivered courtesy of Senegalese *kora* player, Seckou Keita.

Talking before the Hay Festival show, Morris recalls the Welsh word *hiraeth*. It means something like ‘a feeling and longing for home’ – like a Welsh blend of Danish *hygge* and Portuguese *saudades*. And so, as Morris holds aloft the vial of Macfarlane’s tears to the sell-out crowd, it does feel a little like *Spell Songs* is coming home, feeling its *hiraeth*. The night feels a little charged.

Macfarlane’s original vision for *The Lost Words* was a book of spells. These were works of magic. There was theatre in the delivery. Open the book, which feels large and weighty like it should sit upon a pulpit, and the rhythms and rhymes are clearly yearning to be spoken, to be set free.

It’s all about capturing words for the next generation, and what do we do with young people and a book? We read it aloud to them. Of course, as Macfarlane well knows, the secret thrill of being read a story is alive in all age groups. Adults merely feign disinterest. Just look at the sales figures for audio books. As Morris says: “*The Lost Words* isn’t a children’s book, rather a book for people.”

Bringing *The Lost Words* alive on stage was a natural evolution, but that didn’t necessarily mean it was going to turn out as it has. We could have received a fairly purist treatment: the poems beautifully presented to musical accompaniment by the very best English-language singers. ▶





Clockwise from left: Jackie Morris conjuring up an otter live onstage; the QEH stage set-up; the Spell Songs ensemble; Kris Drever duets with Seckou Keita



Instead, by planting this project not only in the very soil of Wales, but also in the hands of the finest Gaelic singers of their generation, something other was going to occur. When it comes to lost language, Gaelic can put English in the corner. In the mid-20th century, the language was shunned in its very heartland. Parents stopped teaching children. Teachers admonished pupils caught speaking it in school. “For my grandparents, Gaelic was their first language,” says Rachel Newton. “But then they didn’t speak Gaelic to their kids. Even today, there’s quite an anti-Gaelic sentiment among certain people, tied up with politics. But Gaelic usage has hugely developed.”

A half-century on, Scotland is changing. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig on the Isle of Skye is a Gaelic-language university. BBC Alba broadcasts in Gaelic. But it’s the organic life of a language that truly matters, as Fowlis explains: “Unless the language is passed on to children, unless the language is living and existing as a language of the home, family, community and recreation – and not just in schools and offices – then it will slowly die away,” she says. “It will still exist, but its beating heart will be gone. This may sound dramatic, but it’s true.”

A new generation is now speaking Gaelic, and in turn, evolving it. It’s something touched upon by Keita in writing about ‘Papa Kéba’ – his Mandinka-Gaelic duet (surely a world first?) with Fowlis. “A lot of words have changed direction with the new generation,” says Keita. “Old words get buried, or

local words get replaced by new colonial or even global terms. You need to dig to find the old words.”

*The Lost Words* is now growing beyond the English language. “We’ve got a Welsh translation now and we’re really hoping for a Gaelic one,” says Morris. “There’s a German and a French translation, both of which keep the acrostic and the meaning.”

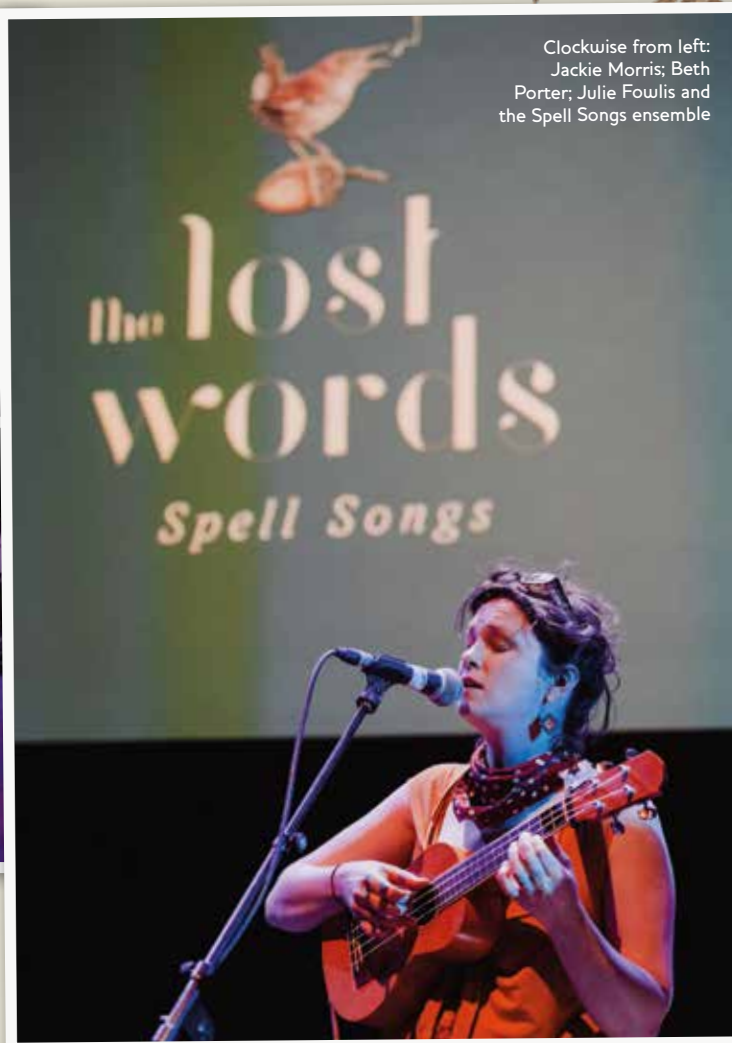
And just as you begin to wonder if the boys at the back are merely making up the numbers, you’re proved decisively wrong. Drever on guitar and bass and Molyneux on drums and piano are the musical bedrock on which the spells are woven.

Over them thread ripples of gold from the fingers of kora maestro Keita. And when his voice rises above the rhythmic backing of the women on ‘Heron’, it’s clear that in transporting *The Lost Words* not only to the Scottish Isles but also to West Africa, something truly global has been born.

Before the Hay Festival performance, I ask Morris whether *Spell Songs* is part of the wider eco-activism story of the moment. “It’s the only story,” she says, adding that she feels tonight’s show should be dedicated to Greta Thunberg, the young Swedish climate-change activist. “In the same way as she says ‘you’ve stolen my future,’ I feel like we’re stealing her childhood. ▶







Clockwise from left:  
Jackie Morris; Beth  
Porter; Julie Fowles and  
the Spell Songs ensemble

She shouldn't be the one that's up there. She needs to be reading books and running wild."

The centrality of the next generation – and future generations as yet unborn – is humming beneath this entire project like a low drone. It's the bass note, the undertone, the depth from which flights of ecstasy rise.

When Keita raises his voice to heaven, or when Molyneux implores, *'Right now I need you, for my sadness has come again,'* on 'Little Astronaut', about the precipitately declining larks of his local Blackstone Edge in Lancashire, we're hearing the explosion of energy that is life. We're hearing the joy every animal feels at its own existence.

Long before monotheism, human beings acknowledged the majesty and mystery of the living world. In the voices on *Spell Songs* – and in the transformative, mesmerising live art of Morris on stage, like a Tony Hart for the modern age – it feels like such shamanic ritual is coming back to us full circle.



The live show has more than a little of the communing of religious ritual, and so it's fitting that it ends with a blessing song. Polwart introduces it not with a dedication to Thunberg, but to all the young people out there. Then two mothers – Polwart and Fowles – lead the band in their call to the little ones to *'walk through the world with care, my love, and sing the things you see.'*

Forget stump orators, riots or demos. This is a Gandhi-like resistance. In their subtleties, far more than their shouts, they are deafening. The standing ovation is a collective outpouring. The audience leave awash with tears – young and old, alike.

Whoever bottles this stuff, they really are onto something. Are the Spell Songs band tempted? "We had more material than we could fit on an album," confesses Newton. In which case, watch this space. The revolution by birdsong has landed. ♦

**+ ALBUM** *The Lost Words: Spell Songs* is a Top of the World review on p79 and a track is featured on the covermount CD

**+ DATE** The Spell Songs ensemble form part of *The Lost Words BBC Prom* on August 25. See the Gig Guide for more details

