

Various Small Flames



Derek Piotr – Barbry Allen

[Liam Doyle](#) 7th December 2020

The music of New England-based folklorist, performer and composer [Derek Piotr](#) is nothing if not adventurous. Originally containing no instruments at all, confined to strict constraints of voice and samples, Piotr's solo work has grown and evolved into a multitude of forms, traversing genres as diverse as glitch and drone to avant garde pop.

But while Derek Piotr can be defined by his experimental and exploratory nature, his music has never undergone as dramatic a shift as signaled by new single 'Invisible Map'. The first glimpse of forthcoming album, *Making and Then Unmaking*, the single presents a previously unknown side to Piotr's music. This is music in the long and storied tradition of country and folk. It has pedal steel and fiddle, three acoustic guitar players.

This might seem a long way from Piotr's previous work, but there is a sense that this record has been a long time coming. Indeed, the signs were there for attentive readers when we last spoke to Piotr [back in 2018](#), when he admitted "I listen more and more to acoustic music, and always sort of have. So it's about taking my natural tendencies towards music making and braiding them into the kind of music I myself would want to hear."

Today we have the pleasure of unveiling the single's B-side, a rendition of traditional Scottish ballad 'Barbry Allen', performed with Reuben Walton and recorded Alan Lomax-style on a Zoom h4n field recorder. Piotr's version of the song borrows from a North Carolinian version as sung by Mrs. G. L. Bostic, his and Walton's voices unadorned by instrumentation in an uncanny reconvergence with his earliest principles, and suffused with the spirit of Appalachia's old-time mountain music.

Press play below to listen to 'Barbry Allen', and then read on to hear more from Derek Piotr about the song, this latest change in direction and his long-held passion for folk music.

The new songs are a pretty big departure from your previous releases. What inspired this change? And is it something you've wanted to do for a long time?

This has indeed been something I've been thinking about for years. In 2016 I released a slight, bandcamp only compilation of odds and ends I'd been sitting on for a while, called [things](#), which featured a [solo Viol version](#) of one of the songs from *Bahar*. This was my favourite music I had made up until that point: laid totally bare acoustic, with nothing added. *Bahar* was also a little bit me giving myself the third degree: are you a sound artist, or a capital M Musician? So then of course I wrote a whole album for woodwinds to put a capital M on myself. In a real way though, I wanted to confront this idea head-on and not use any electronic elements. The only electronic element on this album is clavinet, which barely counts. Everything is acoustic. I have basically said goodbye to working on electronic music for myself now, except for some few commissions here and there. It no longer interests me, or feels right to make. I want to be a cowboy now.

Your press release describes a "long-held passion for folk music," and I'm interested in where and how this began. Who are your favourite folk musicians and how have they influenced your music and/or life?

Mostly I had listened to ethnomusicology records and field recordings from Southeast Asia. I did [a couple of projects](#) for Frequency Asia a long time ago. But I have always loved Joni Mitchell, Jean Ritchie, and Shirley Collins. Shirley and I have been email buddies for 10 years. My favourite folksinger of the moment is [Lena Bare Turbyfill](#), I [wrote extensively about my research](#) around her, and visited her family this summer. I field recorded her last living daughter on that trip. So, more and more, I've gotten away from Asian or North African music and into Appalachian music. But folk music, to me, is the same no matter where you go. Very pure and honest, full of fantasy and symbolism, and totally raw. I had a long standing taboo against guitar music in my work, because I was more inclined toward the chamber or electronic side of things, the Thai branch, or the Morton Feldman branch...but it's silly because I listen to so much banjo and guitar music! So it is all over the new record. Of course, old habits die hard, so alongside those bones, I also have bagpipes, clavichord, harp, reed organ...I am incorrigible!

What made you choose to record Barbry Allen, a song with such a rich history?

I had heard a really nice version sung by Mrs. G. L. Bostic taken from the UNC Southern Folklife Collection, and the melody was totally different from any other 'Barbry Allen', some of the melodies you've heard a hundred times, but one was a fun allegro and a bit of an outlaw version, I thought.

The thing that grabs me most about the song is how “old” it sounds, like it could have come from any time in the past century or so. Was this intentional? You recorded the song with Reuben Walton – how did this collaboration come about? And how did the recording process work?

Another friend has said that to me! To him, it sounds like two old ladies singing. This was not 100% intentional, but I have been singing almost exclusively into an h4n field recorder all year. I am really trying for Lomax or Halpert style documentarian dry musicality, and that stylistic choice is all over the record...Reuben and I have known each other for 15 years so the trust is built-in at this point and I can throw any project at him and he'll acrobat with it...he learned this song on basically no notice and I put my recorder down on the kitchen table and sang it with him in one take and then he drove home to Cape Cod immediately after. It was a totally spontaneous thing, which I suspect is why it sounds so “old”, it truly was a field recorded fleeting moment!

More generally, how are you finding making music during this tumultuous year we've all been experiencing? Is it a strange experience? And what role (if any) do you think art/music play in uncertain times like these?

This is my first year in 10 years not releasing a solo album; that should say plenty about the state we're in. Expect my cowboy album, *Making and Then Unmaking* in the Spring.

Cover photography by Alex Weber