

# Mogwai star's homage to the Isle of Lewis

Collaboration's new album spawned by lockdown

BY SIMON COATES

**L**OCKDOWN Twitter was an odd place. Railing against Covid isolation, users ranted, accused, confessed, and worse. Others made promises, broached ideas, and instigated new alliances – Mogwai's Stuart Braithwaite included.

In early 2021, he struck up a Twitter chat with his wife, Glasgow's electronic Goth-pop queen Elisabeth Elektra, and Devon-based alt-rock guitarist and songwriter Matthew Rochford about isolation and the wonders of the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides.

Rather than grumbling about the isolation imposed by the pandemic, why shouldn't they embrace it, perhaps as an opportunity rather than an imposition? What about making an album there? The idea grew wings.

Others were invited to contribute: ethereal singer Evi Vine; Prosthetic Head (aka post-rock cellist Ben Roberts), and members of Southampton's Burning House and Matthew Rochford's day-job band Abrasive Trees signalled interest.

Zoom calls followed and in early 2021, seven musicians (the majority of whom had never met in real life), caught the Ullapool ferry to Stornoway, and travelled the last few miles to Black Bay Studio, a former crab processing factory on Lewis's western edge that celebrates its position as the UK's most-remote recording facility.

Maximum isolation achieved, for the next four days the assembled team improvised, exclaimed, and exchanged. The outcome is the Silver Moth band and their Black Bay album, a glimmering testament to the strength of collaboration, and proof that difficult times can inspire powerful responses.

Braithwaite has form when it comes to putting together supergroups. In 2015 he assembled Minor Victories, an enterprise that included Slowdive singer Rachel Goswell and Editors guitarist Justin Lockey. Minor Victories sounded very much as you would expect from a collective made up of contributors



**Stuart Braithwaite of Mogwai started the isolation-embracing project in early 2021**

with their own, distinct styles. So, while both projects are imbued with Mogwai's loud-quiet-then-louder-again tropes, Silver Moth's Black Bay is gentler and less bombastic than Minor Victories' output. Where Minor Victories maximalises, Silver Moth strips back, building tracks organically around a kernel of drums, keyboards and guitar.

Thus Black Bay is an elemental album – a reflection of the island surroundings that spawned it. As Rochford notes in a journal he kept during the recording process: "Lewis is such a special place to have done this. A landscape that shapeshifts with the ever-changing light, the weather pouring in from the Atlantic, stories of Kelpies, soaring sea eagles, whalebone arches,

Luskentyre, the sweetness of peat smoke, the poems from my father, the lochs that move from black to gold to pink as the sun moves across these expansive skies.'

Black Bay opens with the fireworks and wonderment of Henry, sketching out what Bjork's organic Biophilia album might have sounded like had she rocked out. Roberts' cello imitates whale song as plangent guitars and piano keys swoop and rise around Vine's fragile, whispering vocals.

A tribute from Elisabeth Elektra to her late friend Alanna, The Eternal is a fitting paean to old and new companionships. Replete with splashy cymbals and celestial harmonies, the track opens its arms wide to embrace Elektra's mourning.

It's worth wondering if Braithwaite had Paul Giovanni and the band Magnet in mind when the idea of a Silver Moth album was conceived.

There are certainly clear parallels between Giovanni's soundtrack to the 1973 folk horror classic The Wicker Man and Braithwaite's Black Bay initiative. Both illuminate stories of pilgrimage to the Scottish wilds (Edward Woodward's character travels from London to the fictional Hebridean island of Summerisle in the film) and both resultant scores resonate with a kind of Celtic paganism. Plus, like Braithwaite, Giovanni assembled a group of musicians (naming



them Magnet) specifically for The Wicker Man project. Silver Moth's Mother Tongue track bears a passing resemblance to Giovanni's Willow's Song, with Elektra and Vine swapping the film song's seductive themes for a celebration of the fight for women's rights.

**T**HE Celtic thread continues on Gaelic Psalms, Rochford's reading of a poem from his late father, the Aberdeen-based poet Gerard Rochford. Gaelic Psalm first appeared in Gerard Rochford's 2017 anthology Cairn: Poems For The Isle Of Lewis and speaks of the place's gifts of rugged landscape and a never-ending sky.

If four days don't sound anywhere near long enough to make a satisfyingly rounded album, credit must go to Black

Bay studio owner and producer Pete Fletcher for weaving the Braithwaite and company's recording sessions together.

Fletcher augments the set with a depth that goes beyond the septet's freeform ideas, adding lustrous, textural washes and found sounds (lapping water, static crackles) that imbue a feeling of being both far away and very close. It's his touch that brings Gaelic Psalm to life.

Clocking in at just over 15 minutes in length, Hello Doom is either a description of what it feels like to drown or an opiate. Or both. Either way, delicate trails of feedback and insistent drones shimmer over a simple guitar figure as Elektra sings of how the "waves pull me in".

Like Millais's painting of Ophelia, it's very beautiful in a kind of melodramatic, wistful way. Taking its name from the Inuit goddess of

**Inspired by the wonders of the Isle of Lewis, Silk Moth's Black Bay is an album of hope for the black waters of night and new dawns of day**

marine life, Sedna – the album's closer – is all glacial synths and layered, shuddering guitar shapes underpinning Elektra's siren song to the ocean depths.

At a time when discussions about the toxicity of social media platforms grow louder, it's reassuring to know people can still gather online and use the benefits of virtual friendships to break new grounds of creativity.

As with James Graham and Aidan Moffat's Gentle Sinners venture that was conjured up during Covid and resulted in last year's These Actions Cannot Be Undone set, Braithwaite et al find light in the darkness to create an album of mature, keening hope for the night's black waters and the day's new dawns.

*Black Bay is released on CD and double vinyl LP on Friday via the Bella Union label.*

## Story of forgotten world champion runner uncovered



**William Cummings (left) filled stadiums with thousands of fans and beat England's best athlete, Walter George** Image: Paisley Museum

BY JAMES WALKER

**T**HE team behind the £45 million refurbishment of Paisley Museum have unearthed the story behind a Paisley distance runner who was the Mo Farah of his time.

William Cummings was born in 1858 to a family of shoemakers. He would go on to become a world champion distance runner, filling stadiums with thousands of excited fans and beating England's best athlete at the same time.

Archie Henderson, social history researcher at OneRen, which is leading the curatorial delivery of the refurbishment of the museum, was cataloguing objects when he made the discovery.

He said: "We were keeping an eye out for anything interesting and I opened a box and there it was. Initially, I thought it was a boxing belt, but I quickly noticed that it had depictions of runners and an inscription for the 10-mile world champion."

After a little digging, Henderson discovered that Cummings was pitted against the leading amateur of the day, an Englishman called Walter George.

George turned professional to take part in a series of head-to-heads over a three-race challenge – over one-mile, four-mile and 10-mile distances. The 10-mile race in London was the decider.

One of the stadiums had at least 25,000 people inside – although once it reached capacity, crowds tore down barriers to gain entry.

Henderson added: "It really captured the imagination of the public at the time. There were

thousands of people coming just to see these two race around a track. Cummings won the decider, which saw him crowned as the champion."

The belt in Paisley's collections was won by Cummings three times, consecutively, from 1880-1882. He had a long and successful career and was recognised as the best distance runner of his age.

Henderson has turned to another local star, Callum Hawkins. The Elderslie distance runner is the Scottish marathon record holder and represented Team GB at the Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games and World Championships.

The researcher said: "Paisley and Renfrewshire has a legacy of producing elite athletes and we want to reflect that in our new display."

Hawkins recently visited the Secret Collection to donate his New Balance running shoes and Team GB vest from competing in the World Athletics Championships in Doha in 2019.

He also donated a European Championships Cross Country bronze medal that he won in 2016, where he helped Team GB to win a gold medal.

Hawkins said: "It's an honour to be part of the museum. I remember going as a kid and it's amazing to think I'm going to be part of it when it reopens."

"This area has produced some amazing athletes over the years, from Kilbarchan Amateur Athletics Club providing great coaching, to the brilliant local facilities, it means that Renfrewshire has a great track record in supporting elite athletes. I can't wait to see it up and running again next year."

## Former SRUC student set for world-first Amazon challenge

BY JANE MCLEOD

A FORMER Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) student is embarking on the first navigation of the Amazon River from its highest source at the summit of Volcano Chimborazo in Ecuador to the river's mouth at Belem in Brazil.

John Bathgate, who studied Countryside and Environmental Management and Ecology Surveying at SRUC while serving as a Royal Marine, will embark on the Summit to Sea 2023 Expedition on April 28

with his brother Ben and a group of friends. The challenge was originally devised by the brothers' father, and will take seven months and cover more than 5000km through snow, ice, rocks and jungle.

The group will conduct water sampling and abiotic surveys in the Ecuadorian Andes and the Amazon Basin – areas under threat from deforestation due to agriculture, oil extraction, mining and the expansion of cities – while raising funds for the charities Rainforest Concern, Royal Marines Charity and RV.ONE.

John, 34, from Edinburgh, said: "My father planted a seed and cultivated it in the form of old maps, dusty books, scribbled expedition diaries and mysterious stories."

"The Amazon Basin is the most biologically diverse place on the planet, but we are clearing it at a rate of around 15 square miles a day. To put that into perspective, an area half the size of Scotland is disappearing annually."

"Will the 'sea of green' that my father described in 1968 when he paddled the Amazon be there in



Will the sea of green of 1968 be there in 2023?

2023? We are embarking on our journey in the name of adventure, but we also want to connect with and learn from indigenous people along the way.

"I think the West could learn a lot from the sustainable practices used by these people who have lived in harmony with the forest for centuries. We hope to pass this knowledge on once we return to Scotland, aiming to eventually change our culture to prioritise the natural environment that supports us."



**John Bathgate (left), from Edinburgh, is heading a 5000km Amazon expedition**