

LOREENA McKENNITT lost souls

Question, Answer and Song By Song Notes

1. This is your first recording of original material in over 10 years. Why now and why the wait?

The short answer is, life happens. I guess the long answer is that since I released *An Ancient Muse* in 2007 I've been extremely busy. We toured right after that recording, then in 2009 I devoted time to my family, including caring for my mother during the last two years of her life. Then we were back on the road touring again. In between, we were releasing compilations, commemorative recordings and other specialized projects, up until the time we started recording *lost souls* in May 2017. Because I also run my own independent record label and management office, I spend a great deal of time working under those hats, rather than wearing the creative artist hat. Creations, I can assure you, take even more time!

2. In past studio recordings you've drawn inspiration from the history of the Celts. Is this recording the next chapter in that process?

No, this isn't the next chapter in the history of the Celts. This is really a collection of different kinds of songs I have been working on over the years. I think many artists have a number of creative projects on the go at one time.

3. The album title is *lost souls*. Where did this come from, and what does it mean?

This title originated from the song "Lost Souls," which is a reflection on the state of our planet's species at this point in time.

I also wanted to explore different aspects and angles of being a 'lost soul,' while reminding myself that like the great hymn "Amazing Grace," we can be lost, but we can also be found. This new recording is an exploration of all that. Since some of the

songs date back to the 1980s, I suppose in a way they have been “lost souls” which have now found a home.

4. Where did you record *lost souls*?

In the spring of 2017 we started working at a wonderful studio in Hamilton, Canada called Catherine North Studios, which was once a church.

In August 2017, we headed to Real World Studios in England, which is where I’ve recorded off and on since 1993. Real World is the residential studio Peter Gabriel set up in a beautiful renovated mill in the Wiltshire countryside. I have to confess, it has become a kind of second home to me now.

5. You’ve recorded at Peter Gabriel’s studios several times over the years. What is it about this particular studio that keeps bringing you back?

To me, it’s a creative sanctuary and I’ve come to recognize that my creativity is hugely impacted by being in close proximity to the natural world. Because it’s a residential studio, it also allows us the spontaneity and flexibility to work at all hours of the day with great ease. It can also comfortably accommodate a large number of musicians all at once. At times it can feel a bit like a summer music camp. Or musical hamlet.

In the three weeks or so that we were encamped at Real World, we had a wonderful feast of musicians join us. Many were old friends who we hadn’t seen since recording *Nights from the Alhambra* in 2006. It was such a great feeling to see them again and be immersed in their incredible musicianship.

Some of my favourite moments were being able to listen to each of them play their own material at the end of the day when we’d be packing up. I can’t help but marvel at how uniquely exquisite the language of music can be.

6. There are some musicians on this recording with whom you have worked for a number of years. Could you talk about them and explain their importance to you.

I’ve played with Brian Hughes, Caroline Lavelle, and Hugh Marsh for many years. I find it extremely comforting and beneficial to play with folks I’ve worked with before. They come to know you and can quickly relate to my creative ideas and approach. It’s like a dance. We play off one another in a way that has almost become second nature now.

7. Your recordings and DVDs have become highly regarded in the audiophile world. Can you speak to why this is?

I am sure my classical training has influenced my quest to have sonically strong recordings. One can appreciate the detail and personality of instruments and the voice when great care is taken to the fidelity.

Over the years we have made many choices to protect and enhance the listener's experience. One of the first choices is the engineers who have the same respect and appreciation for fidelity and then the expertise to make it happen.

Other choices involve the mixing board, cables, microphones, how things are mixed and where they are mastered, and how and where they are ultimately conveyed for the listener, such as on 180gram vinyl, which is one of the formats on which *lost souls* is delivered.

From a creative standpoint, having the right engineers can make an enormous difference in both the recording and the mixing process. Your temperaments and approach to work needs to be compatible and well aligned. We also work in a way that is quite spontaneous and non-linear, in that I'm usually working out the arrangements when we're already in the recording studio. So, we have to be ready to move from a drafting exercise to something we intend to keep.

With all that in mind, we worked with Yossi Shaked at Catherine North Studios and with Stuart Bruce and at Real World. Jeff Wolpert recorded the Canadian Forces Central Band in their rehearsal space in Ottawa, and then the Stratford Concert Choir at Knox Presbyterian Church in Stratford where I live.

8. Over the years your arrangements have involved what some people would describe as eclectic instruments and blends. How do you gravitate to those instruments and why?

Yes, in addition to the more conventional instruments such as violin, cello, guitar etc., I relish being able to work with a wide array of musicians who play instruments such as the nickleharpa, kemenche, kanoun, oud, hurdy gurdy, or uilean pipes, and experimenting in blending them together. This has largely been inspired by my attempts to paint a picture for the listener of a place or a time. These instruments, and the idiom in which they are played, can be quite effective in evoking that kind of imagery.

9. What is your creative process when it comes to making a recording?

There is no set process, although I have identified over time the conditions or circumstances in which I'm most likely to be creative. It often has to do with the combination of travelling on my own, reading books and researching something. Also, being close to a natural setting.

Sometime lyrics or phrases come first. Sometimes it's the melodies. I usually develop an image in my mind, which becomes somewhat fixed, and it serves as a guide in the recording process where there can be an unbelievable number of choices.

10. What formats for this new album will be available?

We'll be releasing this recording on 180 gram vinyl and CD, as well as downloads. It will also be available on all music services, which I have come to learn means a spectrum of streaming services.

11. Will you be touring on this recording?

We hope and intend to tour these songs internationally over the next couple of years of 2018-2020.

12. You are often referred to as one of the earliest and longest operating "independent artists." How did you begin and how did you get to this place of selling more than 14 million records 30 years later?

In many ways, it's a great story... I'll try to give you the short version. I actually dreamed about being a veterinarian when I was a child and never considered music as a career. I often say that music chose me, rather than, me, it. Once I began acquainting myself with the traditional Irish and Celtic music, I knew I wanted to be involved in this music in a long-term way.

In the early 1980s, I acquired a harp and taught myself how to play. In 1985 I felt I had learned or created enough songs to make a recording, which I did in one week in a studio in a barn in southern Ontario. I ran off 30 cassettes and gave half of them away and then sold the rest by busking at the St Lawrence Market in Toronto on Saturday mornings.

By busking on a regular basis, I soon made enough money to produce my next recording. Also at this time, started producing my own concerts in libraries, church halls etc across Canada while selling my cassettes and then CDs at my concerts. When I toured, I would also set up accounts with local stores for people to buy my recordings once I had left town.

In the course of time, I built up a considerable range of accounts and ran my little business from my kitchen table top. This process grew until I signed a licensing deal with Warner Music Canada in 1991 at which time my music, through their matrix agreements, became available around the world.

I would love to say that I knew what I was doing, but really, I was following my instincts, which sometimes involves knowing what you don't want.

13. You will have seen and operated in a very interesting time in the music business. How have things changed since you set out in those early days of the 1980's?

Anyone who has been in the music business during this time will attest that the industry has, on the most part, collapsed in comparison to what it once was. When I started out, there was a robust eco-system of all manner of players such as studios, graphic designers, manufacturers, and especially retailers.

A great deal of my success was built on the support of many retailers, often smaller ones, run by people who loved music and loved the experience of turning their customers onto new music. It was a real "people" business.

Now, it is primarily an anonymous digital business either through download, streaming or ordering from Amazon as most stores could not compete with them. Personally, I find this sad. The music industry was the first industry to experience the unintended consequences of the Silicon Valley, which have gone into many other industries, professions and aspects of our lives such as child development and education.

Once music could be digitised, first through CDs and then into MP3 files, the music industry was side-swiped by piracy and then illegal downloading. Not unlike now, it took people a long while to comprehend what was happening, or to figure out how best to respond and then for regulators to catch up.

Sadly, it wasn't soon enough, as a whole generation got used to acquiring music for "free." Attempts at new business models were spawned out of this. But, even now, many streaming sites have yet to make a profit or prove a new viable business model.

Although what they offer might be good for them and the consumer, it is often devastating for the creative class, who are largely artists and more than just the “record companies”. In the meantime, what they pay artists cannot be considered a living wage. One well-known streaming company pays artists less than 10 cents per thousand plays or less.

I think the average person would be thoroughly shocked at what artists get paid per song. It is largely why many artists have seen their careers slip away or they are forced to tour relentlessly where money might still be made. Touring is fine once and again, but it is, in my view, not a healthy lifestyle and certainly not conducive to healthy relationships and families.

For me, I will be OK and I am lucky that I started when I did and that my career reached the height it did around 1998. I have escaped the worst of it, also because I run my own label. What I do know is, I could never have established my career to the same height were I to start today.

14. What can you tell us about the songs?

SPANISH GUITARS AND NIGHT PLAZAS

The imagery of *Spanish Guitars and Night Plazas* has its origins in my earliest travels to Spain somewhere in the early 1980s. In particular, I remember walking out on the streets in Granada, visiting the Alhambra, taking in the sensual aesthetic of jasmine, the courtyards and plazas and the particular heritage of Moorish and Spanish influences. I remember going to a club of flamenco guitar playing and dancing, then eating and heading home very late while life was still vibrant in the streets.

A HUNDRED WISHES

I think many artists would attest to the fact that creativity can come at unexpected times and that one doesn't always have to search for it. The creation of *A Hundred Wishes* was much like that. In 1991, when I was working on my recording *The Visit*, I remember simply coming up with the phrase “if I had a hundred wishes” and just started to play around with what that idea might become.

Although I liked the idea, I also knew it didn't fit into the more Celtic focus I was trying to aim for on that recording. It's only now that this song is finding a home. It's a kind of 'lost soul' in its own right.

AGES PAST, AGES HENCE

Ages Past, Ages Hence had its origins in the 1980s when it was called *Pagan Trees*.

When I think of the inspiration for this piece, and particularly the time in which it was created, I realise I was tapping into a growing awareness of what we as a species were doing to the environment, and in particular with respect to the decimation of forests.

I remember one interviewer asking me what was it about my relationship to trees, because so many of my songs made reference to them. The only explanation I could think of at the time was to say, half jokingly, it must be because of my Celtic roots! I remember as a child constantly playing in and around trees and often felt they had a presence I couldn't deny. Now, after having read *The Hidden Lives of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben, I have developed an even deeper appreciation of their role in our survival.

In a way, I guess I've come to regard them as witnesses to our human folly. This is partly what inspired this song.

THE BALLAD OF THE FOX HUNTER, lyric by W.B. Yeats

I've drawn on poetry so that I might provide another voice in lyric writing, and another perspective other than my own. One of them has been W.B. Yeats, the Irish poet.

In *The Ballad of the Fox Hunter*, Yeats imagines and focuses on the special connection humans can have with another species. In this case it was a king's hound, with whom he would have gone hunting in his day.

As someone who has had animal companions throughout my life and at one time aspired to be a veterinarian, I can certainly attest to the special connection one can have with other creatures and how intuitive they can be.

MANX AYRE

This is a simple Manx melody I remember playing when I was busking in the mid-1980s. It lends itself to the harp quite nicely. We had great fun bringing in some of the other instruments, like the hurdy gurdy and nickleharpa, along with the violin and cello.

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI, lyric by John Keats

Another poem I set to music on this recording was *La Belle Dan Sans Merci*, by John Keats. Someone once said it's like a fairy tale gone awry. For my part, some of the imagery I saw was of an old soldier on a decimated, battle-worn landscape. In his trauma and final hours, he hallucinates and sees his beloved, perhaps wondering what it was all for in this place where "no birds sing".

SUN, MOON AND STARS

My travels in pursuit of the Celts have taken me all over Europe and as far east as China and Turkey. Through these travels I've learned so many things about other cultures, in particular how they've morphed and merged into each other.

Or, how people have connected to the natural world to help them keep track of time or navigate their way. I think of the song-lines of the indigenous people of Australia, or the advanced astronomy which came to the Western world through the Arabic culture.

Sun, Moon and Stars is partially inspired by a Moldavian folk melody and is a tribute to this ancient knowledge.

BREAKING OF THE SWORD

In 2017, I was invited to participate in a performance to commemorate the Battle of Vimy Ridge, a First World War event where many Canadians perished. In reflecting on this battle, I came to appreciate that a mother's loss or a family's loss of a loved one is still deeply felt whether or not they're on the winning or losing side, right or wrong side.

Since coming into my role as an Honorary Colonel in the Royal Canadian Air Force, I have come to appreciate that there are two more kinds of families who experience this loss: there's the military family and a soldier's comrades, with whom they've built a special bond, and there are the communities in which these individuals grew up, lived and worked. *Breaking of the Sword* is a reflection of all these things.

When we recorded this piece, I was grateful to be able to call upon the Central Band of the Canadian Armed Forces and the Stratford Concert Choir to help represent those interests.

LOST SOULS

A few years ago, I read a book by Ronald Wright, called *A Short History of Progress*. In it, he examines the fall of civilizations before us, as one would examine the black boxes of downed aircraft. He coins the term "progress traps" as being the fundamental error of our ways.

In the case of Easter Island, it was the complete denuding of the landscape of trees, which brought down its society, something they didn't realize until it was too late. He points out that prior to the industrial revolution in the 18th century, we were more preoccupied with *moral progress*, but since then, it's been *technological progress*. He also refers to the progress of nuclear armaments, speculating that by the time we reached this point perhaps we had made a bit too much 'progress'.

Personally, I see the evolution of connection technologies during the past two decades in a similar way and the impact it's having on human development – and more alarmingly on child development.

So passionate do I feel about this, I established a modest initiative, called The Stolen Child Project. It's designed to support the many experts who speak to this concern, including renowned physicist Stephen Hawking.

Ruminating on this was certainly a departure point in creating the piece "Lost Souls".
