

ISSUE

COLE STERNBERG

Interview and Images by Joe McKee

In October of 2015 I had the pleasure of boarding the Ultra Letizia cargo vessel in Hiroshima for its maiden voyage. Alongside visual artist Cole Sternberg as well as a cinematographer, a journalist and 30 merchant marine crew members (mainly of Filipino and Eastern European backgrounds) we drifted across the North Pacific Ocean and down the Columbia River to Vancouver, Washington, our final destination. My task was to compose music made entirely from the sounds of the journey, while Cole would create visual works informed by the environment and voyage. All of this madness was captured on film, soon to be stitched together to form some kind of narrative about the whole process.

Watching Cole's work gradually unfurl was a marvel to me. He painted out in the open air on the main deck, canvases strung up to various metal beams, looking like flags of Atlantis being battered by the wind. He dipped each piece into the Pacific ocean by rope and anchor, dragging them alongside the mammoth vessel as if they were giant squid, the near freezing salt water stressing and decaying their faces and ageing their appearance. The 18 paintings that were birthed from that process are almost biblical in nature, each shroud encapsulating the movement and harshness of the open ocean.

Meanwhile, I was collecting the various grunts and groans of the ship: the pistons in the heart of the engine room pumping out polyrhythms, the Pacific wind blowing through scaffolding pipes outside the captain's bridge (making sounds not unlike a bamboo flute) and recording the peace songs of Japanese school children in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. All of these sounds (and hundreds more) I'm now arranging and manipulating into various compositions to be included in the aforementioned documentary film.

The journey took a few weeks, during which time we had no phone signal or internet connection to communicate with the outside world. In fact, we didn't see another ship for the majority of the journey. Did I mention that we were being tossed around at 30 degree angles by the brutal swells and gale force winds? It was like living with a poltergeist, watching cutlery flying across the dining room. Our shared experience, I can safely say, covered the full spectrum of emotions. It was mundane yet undeniably profound and despite our isolation, I felt an immense connectivity to something greater than us all. Something universal.

However, the inevitability of being back on land means that we've been sucked back into the whirlpool of endless distractions and the hyperactive pace of city life, so I thought it apt that we conduct this interview via text message rather than in person. Besides, I'm sure Cole is sick of seeing my ugly mug after sharing such confined space for a month.

Joe McKee: So Cole, tell me, how did this trip come to fruition?

Cole Sternberg: This was a project that was in my mind for years. I wanted to deal with the micro existence of life aboard a shipping vessel within the macro context of the vastness of the Pacific Ocean and explore what that meant to me and my practice. It came to fruition when a group of supporters of the arts provided the access and funding to turn the dream into a reality. How did you end up on a shipping vessel staring at the horizon?

JM: Well, I probably wouldn't have ever ended up on a cargo vessel making music from the sounds of the ship if you hadn't asked me. I was immediately excited about the opportunity for a number of reasons. The isolation and disconnection was probably the most appealing aspect of this project. I wanted to bask in the solitude a little and see how my thoughts could gestate without distraction. Inevitably, the horizon became my closest friend and worst enemy—all encompassing and omnipresent at all times.

Environment seems to be a strong concern in your work, so how did this new and seemingly alien seascape affect your practice?

“IT FELT LIKE AN EXPLORATION OF INNER SPACE
VIA OUTER SPACE OUT THERE ON THE HIGH SEAS.”

— JOE MCKEE

CS: I didn't expect it, but the environment strangely mirrored my conceptual desires of the journey. There was the massive, glorious, freeing environment of creating on the deck, exposed to the elements, with the best view of the horizon on the planet versus the constrained, maddening dizziness of a tiny interior studio, lacking windows, crunched, trying to work it all out while still breathing.

What's the first sound you recall that made you smile on the journey and how did that sound come about?

JM: Well, as you know, the first day onboard the vessel I was running around like a kid with ADHD in a candy store. Whacking things and scraping the metallic skin of the ship, trying to extract as wide a variety of sounds as possible. I think within the first ten minutes of doing this, I discovered that the ship was littered with a number of bollards that, when struck, sound like Indonesian gamelan. All of the bollards were microtones and semitones apart, so I had an entire percussive musical scale right there at my disposal. It was a relief to find them so soon because they became a foundation for me to build the rest of the music upon.

It felt like an exploration of inner space via outer space out there on the high seas. Gravity and time behave very strangely. Did you find that this skewed perspective helped you to see your work in a new light? Or was it more about battling to retain some sense of normalcy on board the ship to get work done?

CS: Well, the outer-space reference itself is an interesting and appropriate one—you really feel like your existence has become completely separated from the rest of humankind, as it would in space. You also have a strange physical reaction to the continuous movement of the sea and ship, similar in some way to the anti-gravity of space... But, in terms of dealing with time and the normalcy of life, I think the ship (as is likely in space) simply helped me be vastly more focused and effective with the day. I didn't search for the normalcy of home much because I was too engaged from the early morning until bed on the projects at hand. These projects became so exciting and engaging for me that the isolation just pushed them forward at a rapid pace.

For the readers, I think it would be interesting if you gave a rundown of a typical day for you on the ship. What were you up to?

JM: Well, whether we were caught in a storm or not determined how long or short the day was out there. On the mornings that I had very little sleep, I would head down to have an early breakfast at around five a.m. before heading up to the bridge to watch a sunrise of biblical proportions. Those were my favorite mornings. In fact, that reconnection with nature—despite how vast and lonely the open ocean can be—was still the most profound aspect of the trip for me. Feeling connected to the earth and the universe in such a overwhelming way was a nice beginning to each day. The days tended to be divided by meal breaks, which happened at set times. And in between those meals I would busy myself with exploring the sounds of the ship, collecting sound for the documentary or composing and arranging those sounds into music for said documentary. It required a certain amount of initiative and self motivation to create tasks throughout the trip, though there wasn't much else to do, to be honest. So there was really no choice but to work, work, work... Otherwise, it was easy to slip into despair, staring out into the black, seductive ocean.

I'm curious as to how you've slipped back into life on land. Have the experiences stayed with you and reverberated in your everyday existence or does it feel like a bit of a dream, and now you've snapped back to waking life?

CS: Land? What are you talking about? I'm still on the ship! Kidding aside, I do feel a bit out of my routine on land. The immediate busyness of the land engulfed me and I feel as though processing the journey, deciding what is real and unreal on sea versus on land and so forth are questions that will take some time to answer. Currently, even looking at the photos from the trip is difficult. It is like I'm looking at someone else's adventure.

Did you learn anything from those early karaoke experiments on the ship? [The ship had a room almost solely devoted to karaoke.]

JM: I did! I learned a great deal. Or rather, I think it confirmed a few things that I already assumed about music—its ability to bridge divides in culture and language. A lot of the friendships we made were thanks to those karaoke sessions. The crew members were mainly working class Filipino guys and English was their second or third language. I discovered a couple of shining stars amongst them. One guy, Ray, had a smooth, slick pop voice and Chito, the mess man, had this fragile, tender voice. I ended up writing a song for him, a sort of lullaby for our babies back at our respective homes, which he translated into Tagalog, his native tongue. This was one of the highlights of the trip for me. I also used Ray's voice, but more as an instrument. I've have been manipulating the notes he sang and cutting and pasting them into new shapes and melodies.

Tell me about the friendships and experiences that really defined the trip for you?

CS: Oh man, I missed out a bit on new friends. Everyone in our crew seemed to have a specific close buddy on the ship's crew except for me! I think (or hope) this is partially due to my multi-faceted role, but who knows. I was, however, very struck by the general kindness and emotion shown throughout the ship. Everyone seemed engaged in our processes and willing to welcome us into their sea family. They've brought me to tears many times hearing and recalling their personal stories.

How did it feel exploring the cargo holds from an audio perspective and emotional one? And perhaps, explain the dynamics of the hold a bit.

JM: That was a particularly awe-inspiring experience in a completely different way than those stunning sunrises. That's the other thing about being out there at sea on these giant vessels—all sense of scale is lost due to the magnitude of your environment and surroundings. The ship itself is unfathomably huge. The cargo holds are basically these giant steel pits for transporting minerals. There are four of them spread along the vessel and they're each like an abyss. They act like giant reverb chambers, so from a sound perspective it's like walking into a sonic cathedral. Every creak and moan of the ship is amplified and echoed. I found a bunch of pipes and hoses and brought them down the manhole into one of the holds and proceeded to blow into them and play them like a wonky, busted up horn section.

What becomes of all of this work and all of this footage and all of this sound. We have an ocean of documentation to wade through. What's next?

CS: That is the exciting part of finding our land legs. I'm looking at 80 hours of documentary footage, 18 paintings and over 2500 photos, and collaging all of it into rational frameworks. It will likely take years to do justice to the trip in all creative formats. Would you go back on the ship?

JM: I would almost certainly go back on the ship for short periods of time, depending on the destination and route. Again, the isolation is such a valuable thing for the creative process. That kind of concentrated isolation is nearly impossible to have in my land life. How about you?

CS: I would certainly go back. The adventure is different the second time around, but knowing what we know now, I think our creative approaches could be sharpened and our exposure to more isolation, more dramatic sunrises and more salt in our nostrils could only be a positive thing.

JM: And finally, how do you feel about the paintings that you created aboard the Ultra Letizia?

CS: I'm in love with them.