We Have An Anchor

Jem Cohen
Presented in association with Wordless Music

BAM Harvey Theater
Sep 26—28 at 7:30pm
Approximate running time: 90 minutes; no intermission

Guy Picciotto guitar
Jim White drums
T. Griffin guitar, electronics, organ
Jessica Moss violin
Efrim Manuel Menuck guitar
Sophie Trudeau violin
Mira Billotte guest vocalist
Don Wilkie co-producer
Gravity Hill co-producer
Kathleen Forde creative producer

Commissioned by EMPAC / Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY.
Over the past decade or so, I traveled to Nova Scotia, especially Cape Breton, and collected fragments of film, sound, and in due course, digital images. I often build work from a loose archive, gathering without even knowing if there is a project at hand or what shape it might someday take. *We Have An Anchor* eventually took an odd form that could be described as an experiential documentary with live score. With much of the footage shot in 16mm and Super 8, it is also an elegy for the disappearing medium of film, albeit one which simultaneously celebrates digital technology, without which the show wouldn’t be possible. Document/documentary, coupled with soundtrack/sonic journey, it is neither a film nor a concert, but a “meeting in the air” between the two.

As a filmmaker who has explored and deplored the disappearance of regional character (so often driven by corporate homogenization) I found Cape Breton a revelation. It brought me back to the Scotland and Wales I’d visited as a child and is as beautiful as any place I’ve seen since. It’s also elusive and troubled, full of paradoxes yet somehow deeply itself. As in my other place portraits (i.e. *Buried in Light*, *Amber City*, *Lost Book Found*) what I have to offer is a collage that moves, a chain of observations, an inquiry but no answers. There’s nothing definitive about it; I’m trying to get at how a place feels, and what I documented has much to do with what I stumbled onto by chance and poor navigation. I fell in love with Cape Breton, but I could never make it mine, and the place of an outsider there remains a thorny one. (Who does the place belong to? It’s deeply attached to its Scottish/Irish/Acadian traditions and Gaelic and French are still spoken in some areas—but these are not the traditions of the native Mi’kmaq, and much has also been generated by the back-to-the-land wanderers and renegades who arrived in the late 1960s and early 70s). To be honest, in my own mind the place will always “belong” to artists June Leaf and Robert Frank, who landed in 1969—70 and have spent much of their time there since. Their deep but unsentimental embrace of the place is particular and profound. Among the scraps I gathered for this project are their short portrayals, prefaced by one of their friend to the south of the island, John Marshall, whose store is a special repository and crossroads.

The texts I’ve included are the project’s sub-strata, ladders to things others thought and felt. Contemporary poet Don Domanski resides in Halifax and the natural/supernatural terrain of Nova Scotia is his beat. Elizabeth Bishop lived in Nova Scotia as a child and never shook it from her bones. She took its measure with a precision, grace, and toughness that still takes my breath away. I am indebted to her work, as I am to all whose words, presence, and contributions are stirred into the pot.

The sonic environment of *Anchor* was developed in close collaboration with the player-composers, who worked both in clusters (sometimes from vague seeds and ideas I offered) and en masse, reacting directly to the image. It’s not an improvised score, though I would hope it leaves musicians room to move. I wanted them to make weather out of sound. Preparations included holding up with a core group in the middle of winter in a house in Wreck Cove. Given that a very particular music played by very devoted locals is Cape Breton’s primary cultural attraction, we decided early on to use that music only as an occasional point of departure. (If asked why we didn’t work more with traditional music, I’d be tempted to answer, “We did: punk, blues, and rock.” The show has also invited different guest

Book Found

Jem Cohen
vocalists to participate, and for this version, we incorporate some of Mira Billotte’s own composition and takes on old tunes). Still, regional echoes did find their way in, not only via bits of fiddle tunes and old-world hymns, but through odder currents, like the beat of the bodhran-type drum, which traces back not only to Ireland, but more mysteriously to Africa and Asia and is still found in the Middle East. These connections make a mockery of simplistic assumptions about tradition, geography and, for that matter, time. Which brings me to one of Anchor’s key precepts: other places are not just other geographies, they are other experiences of time.

By harnessing moving pictures and sounds, in forms both crude and advanced, what I really hoped we could do was to pull apart, rebuild, and celebrate time. It’s especially nice to attempt that in the Harvey Theater, where time has been kindly allowed to leave its mark.

Anchor was originally commissioned by Kathleen Forde, then at EMPAC – Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. She has kindly rejoined the project as its current creative producer.

For this New York premiere, we are indebted to Ronen Givony, whose Wordless Music concerts have been especially dedicated to bridging unnecessary separations between “classical” and contemporary music.

Don Wilkie, co-founder of Montreal’s Constellation Records, co-produced the winter sojourn to Wreck Cove. He is from Cape Breton and appears in the film.
JEM COHEN
Jem Cohen has made over 60 films, including CHAIN, Benjamin Smoke, Empires of Tin, Instrument, and his most recent feature, Museum Hours. His works are in the collections of MoMA, the Whitney Museum of American Art, DC’s National Gallery of Art, and the Jewish Museum, and have been broadcast by PBS, ZDF/Arte, and the Sundance Channel. He has received grants from foundations including Guggenheim, Rockefeller, Alpert, the NEA, and Creative Capital.

T. GRIFFIN (guitar, electronics, organ)
T. Griffin plays in the Quavers. He is also a composer for film and has created soundtracks for projects including A Walk Into the Sea, Children of Invention, Return, and La Camioneta, as well as many of Cohen’s films.

EFRIM MANUEL MENUCK (guitar)
Menuck co-founded Godspeed You! Black Emperor and Thee Silver Mount Zion Memorial Orchestra. His solo album, Plays “High Gospel,” was released in 2011 on Constellation Records.

JESSICA MOSS (violin)
Moss plays in Silver Mount Zion. Previous bands include Black Ox Orkestar.

Photos: Jem Cohen by Megan Cump; T. Griffin, Efrim Manuel Menuck, Jessica Moss courtesy Empac.
GUY PICCIOTTO (guitar)
Guitarist Guy Picciotto’s bands include Fugazi and Rites of Spring. He played and recorded with Vic Chesnutt, produced records for bands including the Gossip, Quix*o*tic, and Blonde Redhead, and worked with Jem Cohen on *Instrument*, *CHAIN*, and *Museum Hours*.

SOPHIE TRUDEAU (violin)
Trudeau plays in Godspeed and Silver Mount Zion. Other projects include The Mile End Ladies String Auxiliary, Diebold, and Mutter.

JIM WHITE (drummer) is from Melbourne. He plays in Dirty Three and has worked with bands and musicians including Cat Power, White Magic, PJ Harvey, and Smog.

MIRA BILLOTTE (guest vocals, percussion, drones)
Billotte performs with accompaniment and solo as White Magic. She was previously in Quix*o*tic, and has released numerous recordings on Drag City. She played one of the leads in Cohen's film, *CHAIN*.
TECH/ARTS COLLABORATORS

Colorist Damien Van Der Cruyssen (at the Mill) worked closely with me in bringing the 16mm film elements to life.

Master projectionist James King created the DCP from which the main image is projected.

Projection mapping by Dawn of Man. (Max Nova and JR Skola worked with me in developing projections specifically for the Harvey and provided live projection services).

Ryan Jenkins from EMPAC was a trusted right-hand man.

Tim Herzog, additional music tech and documentation.

Metropolis Post, NYC (Jack Rizzo, Jason Crump) transferred the Super 8 material.

Still photograph of wrecked house, 2013, courtesy of Rebecca Silver Slayter

Research intern Emily Allen
Intern Isaac Burgess von Hallberg
Projection consultation and assistance Griffith Iffith
EXCERPTED POEMS

Elizabeth Bishop
“Cape Breton” and “At the Fishhouses”

Don Domanski
“Before the Plague and the Breaking of Fingers,”
“Fata Morgana,” and “Looking for a Destination”

OTHER EXCERPTED TEXTS:

Special appreciation to Ronald Caplan’s *Cape Breton’s Magazine* and the compilation *Magnificent Obsessions: They Wrote About Cape Breton*, Breton Books, 2010, which includes: “A Talk on the Rocks! Cape Breton’s Geology” Raeside, Ronald, 1993; and “A Cape Breton Tea Ceremony” Cox, Lori, 1997


*Signor Marconi’s Magic Box*, Weightman, Gavin, First Capo Press, 2003

*Marconi: The Man and his Wireless*, Dunlap, Orvin E., Jr., The Macmillan Co., 1937

THANKS

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