

# Hannah Peel & Will Burns

## Chalk Hill Blue

**Start time:** 7.30pm

**Approximate set times:**

7.30pm On Vanishing Land

8.15pm interval

8.35pm Hannah Peel & Will Burns

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

**Stephanie Phillips talks to Hannah Peel and Will Burns about the changing landscapes and sense of belonging at the heart of their collaboration**

Only twelve hours in total were needed for composer Hannah Peel and poet Will Burns to solidify their experimental combination of moody electronic sonic landscapes and unrelentingly honest poetry. A lofty feat made even more impressive since the pair barely knew each other before deciding to embark on the adventurous project. After hearing Burns's poems read by actor Christopher Eccleston at an event she was attending, Peel sought out the poet. After a meetup over coffee they decided to head into the studio together, Burns accompanied by a hefty book of poetry, Peel with an inquisitive ear and an array of synthesisers. Working together with producer Erland Cooper, the sessions birthed into the world *Chalk Hill Blue*, an expansive album which explores the dysfunction and discord at the heart of English landscapes and our homes.

The collaboration refrains from holding up either the instrumentals or spoken word as the star of the show. Rather, because the two forces were created at the same time, they intermingle with one another, often mimicking each other's energy. For Peel, the way they worked together was a key factor in creating their sound: 'It just worked really fast because we didn't meddle in each other's art, so it was very much like 'bring to the room', and that idea of collaboration, and something that's bigger than the sum of your parts, something that you can't touch or fathom, was just in the air somehow.'

*Chalk Hill Blue*, a reference to an endangered species of butterfly near Burns's Buckinghamshire home, refrains from painting an idyllic image of nature, preferring to linger on the chaos and hostility present in the natural world and in our everyday lives. This can be heard in the throbbing mass of stalking synthesisers, pulsating beats, and chirruping woodwind sections, which correspond to Burns's blunt tone and matter of fact prose. Every instrument has its place, even Burns's voice, which delicately disappears and reappears when needed. 'It's quite interesting as the person who's contributing the lyrics, all the poems made the most sense to me when I had a long instrumental section in it,' explains Burns. 'I think that's testament to how the alchemy works, because there needs to be space away from the human voice. There needed to be a genuine musical kind of counterpoint to all the language that you've had before and after that.'

Since the album release in March, the duo have been touring around the UK and will play their final date at Milton Court. Their stage show will feature live woodwind for the first time and pioneering field recordist Chris Watson, who will transport the audience to the great outdoors by incorporating captured sounds of skylarks, wind through the grass, and other fauna and flora. The creation of the record relied on improvisation, a practice which will also feature on stage. Burns explains: 'It's like we're remaking [the album] every night. The music is being remade, the poems are being re-spoken. There's...,' Peel breaks in and finishes his thought, 'They live in the air'.

Opening the evening will be a playback of Mark Fisher and Justin Barton's *On Vanishing Land*, an audio essay which evokes the Suffolk coastline. Co-creator of the piece, Justin Barton, will deliver a short introduction before the audience is plunged into darkness. Barton believes this will aid how the audience listen to the essay: 'On Vanishing Land' being played in a relatively dark space should help, but my feeling is that the piece will eventually sweep people away if they focus on music and words together, so that, whether or not the darkened auditorium helps, and whether or not they close their eyes, they will find themselves in front of a doorway that leads to another space — to the images of the work.'

Both *On Vanishing Land* and *Chalk Hill Blue* consider the changing environments we inhabit and the impact change can have on society. For Burns, *Chalk Hill Blue* reflects on 'the idea that home, which is somewhere that you feel a sense of belonging with, but also you might feel a sense of longing for, because even though you're still located there, it's actually disappearing and changing before your eyes.' It is a sentiment Peel also agrees with. One that she knew would ensure their record stood out and did not play as whimsical. 'I don't want to just record this background [music]. I want it to say something,' explains Peel.

Though the pair have no plans currently to go back into the studio, they have both left the door open to return to the project when their busy individual schedules die down, perhaps to explore new concepts together. Though the future remains open, both Peel and Burns are revelling in the creative success they experienced with *Chalk Hill Blue*. It takes

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Peel back to their very first meeting, which easily could have gone the other way, as Peel reflects: 'You never know where anything is going to lead. That's the thing with creativity, you can't just be a closed door because you've no idea where it's going to take you,' she turn to Burns as he nods along, 'If you'd just been like 'nah I'm not into that' we wouldn't have done any of this, this year.'

## Performers

**Hannah Peel** electronics

**Will Burns** poetry

**John Andrews** introduction essay

**Chris Watson** field recordings, spacial sound

**Guy Passey** oboe, clarinets

**Oliver Pashley** clarinets

**Nick Moss** clarinets

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