

Are you a Ghost-hunter? An Audio Trail of The Old Church

FIELD RECORDING OF TEENAGERS: Excuse me are you ghost-hunting? I knew it, she's ghost-hunting. I love ghosts, I love ghosts!! Oi, Let me know when you find any. Aiiiiii.

ABSTRACT BENNA: ***Are you a ghost-hunter? An Audio Trail of The Old Church.***

Got your headphones ready? Are you listening? There's a mysterious archway with a lantern, at the entrance to The Old Church. We're meeting someone - the poet, Jean Sprackland.

JEAN SPRACKLAND: Returning to The Old Churchyard is like listening to a favourite piece of music, and hearing it a little differently each time

JEAN: I'm standing beside the archway with the lantern at the entrance to The Old Church. I'm looking up at the curly ironwork and I'm walking through the arch.

BENNA: Ready? Let's walk until we reach the heavy wooden door. It's Hella old - the stone above the door says 1563.

JEAN: St Mary's is the only surviving Elizabethan church in London.

BENNA: The church is now a venue for the litest parties, arts and events... Let's put our ear to the door, because Sam Lee is singing inside.

SAM LEE [*sings*]: 'I see the starlight. I'm walking through the starlight. Lay this body down. Oh graveyard, oh graveyard. I'm walking through the graveyard. Lay this body down. I lie in the grave. I'm lying in the graveyard. Lay this body down. Lay this body down. Lay this body down. Lay this body down. Lay this body down. I go to judgement on the evening of the day. Lay this body down...'

SAM: It's aspiritual from a freed slave... sung by an oarsman, who was carrying people across the water. He sang this song that is about passing over to the other side, as though he was the oarsman on the Acheron, taking the dead souls to the underworld..... as though it was the river Akron, taking the dead souls to the underworld...And that chimes in with a story of this place when it was also at a point of decay back in the 19th century.

JEAN: ...In the 19th century, there was water underneath the floor of the church where we're standing now, and coffins were floating on the deep floodwater like lost boats.

SAM: as though they themselves were also being taken to the other side.

JEAN: ...Oh graveyard, oh graveyard. Lay this body down.

SAM: Lay this body down (humming)

SAM: It's incredible that we think we're in a very solid, stable place, but actually everything's moving here and shifting and trying to be taken down. The Earth is trying to consume and swallow everything.

BENNA: Let's turn our backs on the door. We're following the wooden path that forks off to the right, keeping the church building on our right hand side. Stop walking before you reach the open-air theatre at the back of the church.

JEAN: I think of this place as a kind of time machine. We're in the middle of a very busy part of North London, but here we are in a village churchyard. That's what it is, and the tombs and memorials around us are often family tombs with generations of that same family buried there. So, there's a real sense of continuity and a kind of stability, of belonging here, just as you would get in a small village...

A misty looking village ...as Edgar Allen Poe said.

BENNA [*right ear*]: Edgar Allan Poe came to this church every Sunday, back in the day. He always remembered the sound of the bells.

BENNA [*reads softly, more formally, from the story 'William Wilson', left ear*]: "The deep hollow note of the church bell breaking, each hour, the stillness of the day."

BENNA [*right ear*]: You'll see a faint path that runs past a marble cross. Let's follow Edgar Allen Poe along that ghostly path, into the very back of the churchyard...Stop when you reach the oak tree stretching its branches over the tombs.

Edgar Allen Poe, he wrote a famous story about a young rascal who meets his double here.

BENNA [*reads softly more formally, left ear*]: "An imitation of myself, noticed by myself alone."

BENNA [*modern, right ear*]: The name of the double - William Wilson - was lifted from one of the old tombs. Wilson looks like my man, moves like him, talks like him.

BENNA: [*reads softly more formally, left ear*]: "His voice - it became the very echo of my own."

BENNA [*modern, right ear*]: In the story my man gets a taste for gambling and hustlin' and con-man business. Every time he's about to finesse someone, Wilson appears as the voice of truth and warning. Freeze when you hear a whisper in the oak tree.

SFX: FOOTSTEPS STOP

BENNA: [*whispers softly*] "William Wilson"

BENNA [*reads softly & formally, left ear*]: "What say you conscience grim - that spectre in my path."

BENNA [*modern, right*]: Vexed by his haunting double, my man draws a sword and he challenges Wilson to a deadly duel. The double takes his last breath beneath the evergreen oak tree-

BENNA: *[reads softly & formally, left ear]:* "In me didst thou exist — and, in my death, how truly thou has murdered thyself."

BENNA *[modern, right]:* Let's keep walking past the oak tree. The church is on our right hand side.

SAM *[Sings underneath Benna]:* And son don't talk so venturesome, / for England is the heart of oak./ It's England, Ireland, and Scotland,/ and their unity shall ne'er be broke.

SAM *[Sings underneath Jean]:* And when he came near old Moscow town,/ he was over covered by the grievous snow. / And Moscow was a-blazing. / He was taken by his bonny bunch of roses-o.

JEAN: We're coming around to the north-eastern corner of the church. Just before you reach the gate, there's a large box tomb with pillars on each corner. It's just to the left of the path and it's very overgrown. You might just be able to make out a wonderful inscription...

JEAN SPRACKLAND & BENNA: Stranger who'er thou art, that visiteth these silent mansions of the dead, here pause...

BENNA: Do you want to see a ghost? Alright. Give me a second. Do you see it? Standing there. Right next to you? You feel it though? Me too.

FIELD RECORDING OF TEENAGERS: What was that? oooh.... paranormal activity. Danny chill!

JEAN: Now we're going out through that little crooked gate...and turning right onto the main footpath that divides the churchyard in two. Turning right onto the path, walking a few steps, and there's another gate on the left. And we go through the gate into what I think of as the wilder part of the churchyard.

JEAN: And if we walk across the grass here into the wilder half of the church, we find a wonderful headstone with a skull at either side, sunken into the ground.

SAM *[Sings underneath Jean]:* A young man sat at his mother's knee. / And he took his mother by the hand/ Saying, Mother, I'll rise in the morning / and I'll soon be able to command.

JEAN: Looks a little bit like a bed head with a skull at either side, and these skulls are very smooth and weathered, and you feel as if you could just reach out and stroke them. Some of the tombs here are very broken and damaged, just by the passage of time. And you can see dark spaces underneath where foxes come and go.

BENNA: Night fall is the signal for the wildlife to arise. The sound of foxes and birds reminds us that we're all just guests in their home. Charles Foster, the vet, comes out to hunt with the night creatures.

CHARLES FOSTER: I thought if I can enter the body of a fox, perhaps I can understand what's going on in the minds of my children and my friends.

CHARLES : When a fox emerged from its den under the tombstone at night, it would open its eyes and there would be a massive, crashing flood of light. It might seem like darkness to us, it wouldn't seem like darkness to the fox. It would feel the pebbles of the churchyard underneath its very sensitive feet. It

would hear the grind of the lorries and the cars on the road outside, and it would ignore them, as it had learned to do, so that it could focus on the squeaks and the rustles of the voles...

SFX: sniffs

JEAN: So, we're heading back now to the path underneath an enormous holly tree, and we're turning left onto the path and going past a lamppost.
and we can see on the left here the rectangular tomb of Elizabeth Picket with the holly tree leaning its branches down on the top.

JEAN *[reads inscription]*: "Elizabeth Pickett, died 11th December 1781, aged 23 years, in consequence of her clothes taking fire the preceding evening"

Sometimes it's so still and quiet here that you feel as though you're not quite in the present day anymore, and I imagine Elizabeth Pickett at the age of 23, standing by the fire, maybe reading a letter or maybe just thinking her own thoughts. And it's as if a door has swung open on the past and I can see her there. Just for a moment, time is kind of suspended. And then a car goes past, and that door slams shut, and I'm back in the present.

JEAN: So, we're leaving Elizabeth Pickett now and continuing along the path towards Church Street...*[fade out Jean under Benna]*

BENNA: Take a few more steps towards the road, there's another big holly tree here, and underneath, we see man like James Stephen.

JEAN *[fade up]*: the tomb of James Stephen, who was an abolitionist. He was also the brother-in-law of William Wilberforce...

STOKE NEWINGTON SCHOOL FIELD RECORDINGS: James Stephen was the mastermind behind the abolition of the slave trade act of 1807... James Stephen used his privilege to amplify black voices... James Stephen was complex, he was divided, he almost had 2 sides to him, his childhood and then his lived experience which changed him

BENNA: As a young man, he was a player, no doubt, he had to flee to Barbados to avoid the scandal. The things he saw in the Caribbean changed him, though, forever. As soon as his ship arrived in Barbados, he went to see the courthouses in action. He saw enslaved men being condemned on poor evidence, and then burned alive. The experience was enough motivation for him join the abolitionist movement. Anyway, James Stephen was real about taking his inspiration from black activists. He supported the first Black republic in Haiti, against Napoleon, who wanted to enslave the Haitians. He even persuaded parliament to stop slave trading with the French. That set pace for the abolition of the foreign slave trade the next year.

SAM LEE *[sings]*: Been a long time travelling here below / Been a long time travelling / Here on my own / Been a long time travelling here below / Going to lay this body down.

JEAN: Stoke Newington was full of people with dissenting political views and we're going to see another of those people now.

Let's continue now along the path towards the road, but take a right turn by a sign that says, Cycling prohibited...And walking back past the front of the church...Past the wooden doors. And left onto the stone path that leads to the iron arch with the lantern where we came in is the tomb of Anna Barbauld. ...Anna Laetitia Barbauld, poet, a campaigner and a great believer in liberty and human rights.

BENNA: Anna is hiding just behind the wooden sign with the gold lettering....Why not take a closer look? Mind where you step though.

JEAN: It's a very plain brick box, little bit like a plain house, with this heavy stone ledger on the top, and there's this odd feature to it, this perfectly circular depression in the stone....But the odd thing is that it's not central. It's off-centre, and I think, Anna Barbauld herself was a bit off-centre, and her work was a bit like that too. I really like a poem of hers called Washing Day, and I like the humour in these lines.

JEAN: "Saints have been calm whilst stretched upon the rack, and Montezuma smiled on burning coals, but never yet did housewife notable, greet with a smile a rainy washing day. "

JEAN: I like that she was such a great observer of how things are, and in this poem, of how women's lives were, and in a different way, perhaps are.

JEAN: In reflecting on the end of her life, Anna Barbauld wrote these lines. [second reading of the line] "Say not goodnight,

NANA FANI-KAYODE: Say not goodnight

JEAN but in some brighter clime,

NANA FANI-KAYODE: but in some brighter clime,

JEAN: bid me good morning.

NANA [*simultaneously with Jean*]: Good morning.

TANIA AUBEELACK: I think she's saying do not give up, keep going, but make sure to remember those who came before us.

BENNA: Dead people never stop talking and sometimes the living hear them.

SAM: So we're kind of listening in, eavesdropping into the land around

FIELD RECORDING OF TEENAGERS: Have you found any yet? Have you found any ghosts? Have you found any ghosts? Yeah, old Victorian tings, innit. Victorian tings - looking like his dad. There's definitely ghosts here. I believe in all that stuff you know...

MUSIC: SAM LEE instrumental version of Lay this Body Down

BENNA: The Old Church is a community arts venue with music, performance, art, workshops and more on offer. Check out www.theoldchurch.org.uk to see the programme. I hope you lot enjoyed the tour, make sure you come back.

Tell a friend to tell a friend.

Credits

'Are you a ghosthunter?' is an On the Record production for The Old Church. It was produced and recorded by Laura Mitchison with sound design by Gareth Fry, and illustration by Joanna Layla.

You heard me, Abstract Benna, I'm a spoken word artist. You also heard the voices of Jean Sprackland, poet, Sam Lee, folk singer, Nana Fani-Kayode, radio producer, Tania Aubeelack, activist...Charles Foster (who told us what it is like to be a fox)... and...Stoke Newington School students...Big shout out to all the youngsters!

SAM LEE [*sings*]:

My soul and your soul/ Will meet on that day/ I see moonlight/ Walking to the moonlight /Lay this body down.

MUSIC

Featuring the following songs by Sam Lee:

-*Bonnie Bunch of Roses* [*a capella*]

-*Lay This Body Down* [*a capella*]

-*Lay This Body Down* [*studio recording*, licensed courtesy of Cooking Vinyl Limited]. Performed by Sam Lee and produced by Bernard Butler.

'*Bonnie Bunch of Roses*' is a Napoleonic ballad originating with a Romany singer called Freda Black.

'*Lay this Body Down*' is a spiritual originating with a formerly enslaved oarsman from the South Carolina Islands.

Bonus track

BENNA: Bonus track. Take one last look around you and imagine the spirit of St Mary's Old Church.

JEAN SPRACKLAND: I think she'd be an old lady in a jumble of patchwork clothes, but a really lively mind and an interesting story to tell.

EVA & ANYA: I think she would also be an old lady shaped and formed by different points in her life....

EVA & ANYA: Perhaps, in relation to the foxes that live in the church...they would live on the old lady's lap...and go unnoticed at first, but when you look a bit closer, there's a little fox sleeping in her lap.

TANIA: The spirit of St Mary's Old Church?

DILLY BAKER – RECTOR OF ST MARY'S: Quirky, connected, inspiring.

NANA FANI-KAYODE: She's always exploring, constantly imagining new places where people are equal, where things can change.

MARGARET: I feel like she'll be proud because, like with the hashtag "Me to" movement, more women are coming out and speaking about their experiences.

EVA & ANYA: Say not goodnight, but in some brighter clime, bid me good-morning.