

Call to Join the Westben Sustainability Team

3 Seeds: Music, Community, Nature. By Ben Finley



I often think about two unforgettable events in my life. The first was in 2000. I was 10 years old. This was the year that the Westben Barn was raised. I remember sitting on a mound of dirt with my younger sister, Eve. We gleefully took turns sliding down the raised earth, hard hats bobbing on our noggins. Around us, we heard voices planning, laughing, building, dreaming. We alternated between sliding and perching in awe as a timber frame barn seemingly appeared out of nowhere; a cornfield gave way to a musical sanctuary. Sliding barn doors welcomed the music of the birds, breeze, curving County Road 30 and all kinds of music makers and enthusiasts.



Now I'm 32. When I think of Westben, three joyful things have rooted in me from this place: music, community, and nature. When thinking about connecting with nature, I find it difficult not to grapple with the present and coming effects of climate change. I think of at-risk bird species who nest precariously on the farm. I think of how reports like the IPCC (2022) and Canada's Changing Climate Report (2019) show how Canada's temperature is warming twice as fast as the global average. Two years ago, the Nature Conservancy of Canada, with the help of local school children, opened a trail on the Mary West Nature Reserve across the road from Westben. This spurred Westben into wondering how we might not only connect people with the sounds of the grounds here, but also understand our collective roles in caring for this area.

This is where you come in! We are heartily seeking volunteers with a passion for caring for the long-term health of the environment, community and arts to be a part of Westben's Sustainability Team! All ages and backgrounds are warmly welcome. If you are interested on

any level, I would love to hear from you. Please feel free to email me at ben@westben.ca

Some areas for involvement may include things like: participating in monthly meetings to co-create, review and update Westben's Sustainability Action Plan; help with the festival's waste, water, energy, food, environmental education and accessibility experiences; connect us with community organizations and community members working across this area. We invite you to be a part of a vibrant hub of fellow team members as we exchange resources to increase our collective understanding of holistic and intersectional sustainability.

Oh, and the other big event was when I played my first electric bass at age 14. With that string pluck, my world went instantly still and peaceful; worries drifted away. The low tones created an immediate way to connect to my environment, find peace, communicate with others, rejuvenate. What connects you to wherever you are?

Ben Finley is currently pursuing doctoral studies at the University of Guelph in a program called Critical Studies in Improvisation where, in addition to trying to pursue a career in playing and composing with the bass, he seeks to build relationships and partnerships around community-engaged sustainability initiatives.



Westben's Sustainability Team Underway

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tion biology, environmental communications, social work, various art practices, information technology, life assessment cycle, and environmental philosophy.

Our first team meeting began by getting to know each other and what brought us there. Some overlapping interests included building community connections and transforming planetary anxieties into local actions. From these discussions, we outlined 10 short-term sustainability goals to get rolling this summer. These goals include things like creating a Sustainability Action Plan; using the newly released and free Canada Creative Green Tools (www.cgtoolscanada.org) to track areas like energy use, food, water, waste, travel, governance, creative programming; developing our accessibility experiences and services; creating pollinator habitats and bird havens; composting; finding sustainable potable water solutions; exploring arts-based environmental education; educating ourselves about local histories; and respectfully learning from/with Indigenous knowledge holders and traditional guardians of this land. We are encouraged by the work of the Mariposa Folk Festival and Hillside Festival in Ontario, which have been engaged

in documented sustainability work for decades, as well as the DGTL festival in Amsterdam (www.dgtldoughnut.com) that bases their festival operations on Donut Economics (meeting the needs of all within the means of the earth). That's just to mention a few! Do other festivals like this come to your mind?

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Thanks for listening, and stay tuned for next month!

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Grackle, Bark & Meow – The Westben Sustainability Team Go Birding!

Ben Finley, Sustainability Coordinator at Westben

The Westben season has begun! It's so exciting to return to live music with others. I hope to see you on Willow Hill or at the Barn this July. What a lush season! And what a chorus of birds all around us.

Early this June, Leslie Abram, a board member of the Northumberland Land Trust, led some members of Westben's Sustainability Team on a thrilling morning bird walk. We hoped to get to know a little bit more about our winged neighbours and check in on their habitat. We started by the tractor, wandered up and down the path to the parking lot, and swarmed around the Barn's eavestroughs, the pond, fields, the trees, and hill crevices. Can you hear some of the following in your mind? Canada Goose (I bet you got that one). Mourning Dove. Blue Jay. Song Sparrow. Eastern Meadowlark. Indigo Bunting. How about the Gray Catbird? (What a copycat). While teaching, sharing and carrying on a conversation, Leslie (somehow) was able to pick up very particular numbers of each bird (by memory!). She later shared with us the report she made on the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. I'm still stunned by this listening virtuosity!

Spending this morning listening to the birds with others got me thinking about the parallels of the kind of listening that happens in a music ensemble, band, choir, etc. In such a group, there is a lot of cross-listening going on. We can listen to our own part, tune into our fellow musicians, react to feedback from the space, and align certain musical moments together. Musicians have been fascinated with birdsongs for probably... ever, but what similarities exist between human and bird listening and song-making?

In a paper called "Hearken to the Hermit-Thrush": A Case Study in Interdisciplinary Listening," Emily L. Doolittle identifies nine potential overlaps between non-human animal song and human music (you can download it on the Frontiers in Psychology website): 1) Vocal learning – Like humans, songbirds, parrots, hummingbirds, whales, dolphins, bats, seals, and elephants, learn their songs from other members of their species. 2) Culture – Like humans, songbirds may sing different 'dialects' of their songs based on where they grew up. 3) Pattern creation – Like humans, songbirds repeat certain phrases with all kinds of variations. 4) Structure/Form – Just like we might sing in a chorus/verse structure, certain species sing in recognizable forms or improvise based on a set of motifs (e.g. the Sedge Warblers). 5) Individual varia-

tion within a given style – Just like each individual human plays a tune slightly different, so do members of vocally-learning non-human species! 6) Functional identity with non-functional stylistic change – Humpback Whale song continually changes over time, but the breeding season stays constant. Doolittle says this is akin to orchestral music changing over the past 200 years, but the concert hall setting remains largely the same. 7) Play with pattern and surprise generally speaking, like human songs, it is hypothesized that animals songs need a certain amount of surprise in breaking a pattern to keep the listener engaged 8) Connection with physical and/or emotional state: non-human vocalizations also vary according to context (calm, aggressive, soothing) 9) Singing for intrinsic reward: "recent research on the singing behaviour and hormones in starlings supports the idea that some non-human species, too may sing in part for 'intrinsic reward'" (p4).

With all the birds to learn, it can be overwhelming. But Leslie showed us how soothing it is to start by enjoying the process. (I think that's a great approach to learning music too). As we all begin to come back in person, with the birds, how might acknowledging our listening and singing similarities create a shared empathy? Resources: check out the Merlin app to identify birds by sound. Consider contributing to the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas to help with bird conservation. If you would like to learn more about the Northumberland Land Trust, its nature events, and its 13 nature reserves in Northumberland County, please visit: nltrust.ca



Improvisation, Sustainability and Collaboration

Westben's Open-Air Fall Fest 2022 Wraps Up

By Ben Finley

Here we are! Back into the cozy, crisp, rainy colours of fall. Although I'm currently based in Guelph (which is a great place to live!), my heart and shoulders always relax a little when I make it into the open, undulating fields, streams and forests of Trent Hills. Witnessing the steadily changing leaf hues, tints, tones and shades all around, syncs me with fresh life somehow. I was really happy to make it to Campbellford quite a few times this summer. Since Westben kicked off its sustainability journey this



past spring, it has been really rewarding reflecting on what sustainability means to different people—whether through conversations with Westben's sustainability team, with festival-goer friends around the barn, or with folks who have read these articles. This will be the last article of Westben's sustainability series for the time being. But don't fret! Stay tuned for more exciting arts-and-environment community events in the coming months at Westben. We are aiming to keep track of the ongoing sustainability activities on the Westben site.

My latest trip to Westben involved bringing along a quartet in which I play double bass, called the Desert Quill Quartet (DQQ). We met in Los Angeles many years ago, and our love for playing together has only grown. On Sunday, September 18th, the quartet played with incredible local animator bekky O'Neil of Cardboard Reality Farm and Studio (check out their website to learn more about their amazing blend of sustainable farming and animation!) The show began with bekky playing a short animat-

ed film called Lessons that used inks from flowers on her farm! How cool is that!? In the last piece we did together, the quartet improvised as bekky created animation loops in real-time. DQQ also played two concerts as part of Westben's 'Sounds in Nature' series in the Mary West Nature Reserve. This series explored the health and wellness dimensions of music and nature experiences for all ages. The quartet was super fortunate to share the 'forest' stage with incredible local dancer and co-creator, Lauren Lafayette-Brooks, and two brilliant youth dancers, Jessica Williams and Madeline Budgell. Attendees were given flower pots to play during some of the music (including during a live tap dancing piece on a wooden bridge). They also received Big Blue Stem seeds, a vital native tall grass. After partaking in several musical surprises scattered throughout the forest and being guided by a naturalist of the Nature Conservancy of Canada, participants returned to the Westben campfire for local flower-based refreshments and snacks made by none other than Nikki Foth-



ertingham of GreenMoxie! Thinking about the wonderful multi-talented people of this area (across many sectors) makes me feel more optimistic about collectively facing the environmental uncertainties and challenges of the future. Improvising (whether with music, dance, food, walking or otherwise) takes collaboration. To me, it takes empathetic listening to each other, being mindful of how much each member is speaking and negotiating respectful boundaries. It takes realizing and reassessing our roles in supporting each other, revelling in the joy of bringing out moments of meaning and surprise in each other—as that kind of giving fills us up too. It also involves extending our awareness to respond to the living surround-

ings we play in. Improvising takes trust, practice, humility and joy in accompanying the astounding creativity of living systems. I think collaborative and improvisatory processes also cultivate our capacity for caring about each other and our shared home. Perhaps these things create in us a resiliency we can draw on when challenges arise. See you around the bend! I hope to be back writing again here soon...

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Westben Sustainability Team: ‘Low-Hanging’ Fruits Continue the Dream! By Ben Finley

How about a thank you to the many healing concerts all around us this summer; the wind dance through flowers, leaves and branches, the crickets’ nightly sheets of sonic ambience, frogs gulping punctuations and presence, fireflies putting on spectacular light shows all around. By the time you are reading this, Westben’s Summer Festival will have just wrapped up. After isolating years, it has been so rejuvenating to be with people and re-gather with music at The Barn, Campfire, and Willow Hill. How has this time changed the way we care for the places we are in? In this article (the 5th of this series), I’m excited to share with you a few sustainability-related initiatives that the Westben Sustainability Team (WST) has implemented this season, keeping in mind we still have lots of dreams and things to work on! If any of this resonates with you or you’d like to be on the team (open to all ages), please email me at: ben@westben.ca. I’d love to hear from you!

1. **Waste:** Before this season, the festival’s waste went into either big garbage or recycling bins. They weren’t labelled very well, so many recyclable items and even some reusable items (e.g. wine glasses) went into the trash. Now, we have grey bins, blue bins, compost, and better signage at each venue. We also launched a paperless program option.
2. **Transportation:** Westben now has bike racks! Wahoo! We also have some basic bike tools if you need to do on-the-fly repairs before or after a show. (We are working on getting certified by Ontario By Bike). We held a great group ride with members of the WST and Bike Action to the Queer Songbook Orchestra show. Also, we were pretty pumped (sorry, not sorry for the pun!) when we learned that someone biked from Brighton to see Joel Plaskett!
3. **Experiences:** To my ears and heart, each concert contributes in some way to a cultural dimension of sustainability, deepening our relationships with each other and place—from the campfire poetry of Sarah Lewis (Peterborough’s first Poet

Laureate, Anishnaabe Kwe from Curve Lake First Nation), to the bird song improvisations during Eve Parker Finley’s show, to dancing to the Afro-Cuban sounds of Okan with songs about immigration, courage and love.

4. **Habitats:** Thanks to our gardening team, we have two gardens with native plants. We have also identified a few invasive species around the property and have received advice on slight habitat improvements (e.g. respecting bird breeding times).
5. **Community Engagement:** Jim Turner made us an astoundingly beautiful lectern for a suggestion box onsite; we loved hearing about your sustainability ideas! Many concerts this summer started with some nature moments beforehand, e.g. Brian Finley or Donna Bennett might have highlighted a bird song you were likely to hear during the performance! We also piloted an immersive experience in the Mary West conservation area with three musicians, two dancers and a group of naturalists from the Nature Conservancy of Canada. We received some valuable, insightful audience feedback; check out “Birds, Breezes” and “Forest Soundprints” in September. Tickets are now available at westben.ca.
6. **Conversations:** Over the past few months, we’ve been reflecting on how music/art, culture/community, and place/nature come together in our lives and our connections to the personal, familial, Indigenous and colonial histories of this land/area. Some other takeaways for me: it’s ok to ‘go’ at multiple speeds (global/local); it is important to make sure the house band is taken care of (creatures and land around The Barn); enjoy the process!
7. **Organization:** We’ve been doing monthly meetings with the WST and are drafting a Sustainability Action Plan (with a core team, a timeline, and a multi-phase approach) to implement over the next year and beyond.

Did we achieve all the goals we set out for this season?

No! Are we enjoying ourselves? I can say for myself, absolutely! It’s been so energizing and fun to come together over a shared desire to care for a small corner of the world, and I’m so grateful to the whole team and many Westben folks for making it happen. Did we do more than we thought we could? I think so! Next year we are working on a refillable water station, an accessibility guide, a waste lifecycle plan, advocating for improved bike infrastructure in the area, publicly sharing these initiatives on our site, and measuring more key areas with the free Creative Green Tools. Thanks for tuning in!



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