Corinne Bailey Rae’s ‘The Sea’

By Richard Clayton
Feb. 12, 2010

In late 2007, when Corinne Bailey Rae began work on her second album she was intent on making a “heavier” record than her eponymous, 4m-selling debut. Nowt unexpected about that, as locals in her native Leeds, in north-west England, might say, more a natural progression for a Grammy-nominated songwriter growing in confidence – Bailey Rae had charted at number one in the UK and reached the top five in the US. Besides, the sweet-voiced pop-soul singer played grunge as a teenager and still covered Led Zeppelin as a party piece. Nobody had any idea, then, how “heavy” The Sea, or at least the backdrop to it, would become.

Something like a tidal wave crashed into Bailey Rae’s life one Saturday in March 2008 after her husband was found dead on a friend’s couch. Jason Rae, a saxophonist who had toured with Amy Winehouse, had accidentally overdosed on alcohol and methadone. The British tabloids reported the story with their customary vigour. His death was “a wake-up call” for the famously rehab-shy Winehouse. Yet it’s hard to imagine a less likely person than Bailey Rae – down to earth and level-headed, brought up a Baptist, and known for her anti-drugs stance – to be touched by such an archetypal rock ‘n’ roll tragedy. In a subsequent statement, she acknowledged that her husband – her “first and only true love” – had problems with drink and occasionally took recreational drugs but was not the “hedonist” caricatured by the media. All the same, a coroner’s verdict of misadventure seemed agonisingly apt.

“You can’t underestimate the shock, the weight of that, and how long that takes to wear off,” Bailey Rae says of the impact of her loss. Her tone is measured but frank, her Leeds accent warm and ripe. She wears three rings on her wedding-ring finger, which she clasps and unclasps in slender, otherwise unadorned hands. Only when I ask about that initial press coverage do her bright, kind eyes turn flinty, momentarily fierce, as she replies: “I’ve got a lot of opinions about it but don’t want to go over that ground, if that’s OK.”

Direct questions about her marriage are off the agenda. The 30-year-old, nevertheless, talks around the subject of grief with polite articulacy – eschewing any mention of Jason’s name or the words husband, death or mourning. Bailey Rae had supposed the experience to be “this sort of linear process” through various stages and strains of emotion, as “you gradually feel better and better.” In fact, “it’s totally nothing like that,” she explains, and continues to feel “more like a maze”.

“There was definitely a big period when I didn’t do anything, anything at all,” she says. “That lasted however long that lasted: nothing, nothing, nothing. I didn’t think about my career at all in that time ... You don’t realise how much a physical animal you are until you have an experience like that that’s so overwhelming. I couldn’t take any noise or even people speaking loudly. I stopped watching TV, and I haven’t taken the habit back up. It’s so aggressive, such a sensory assault.”

We are sitting in her perfunctory dressing room at London’s Old Billingsgate hall, where she is due to sing two songs at the opening ceremony of One Young World, a conference that portrays itself – with rather too much self-congratulatory relish – as “Davos for the under-25s”.

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An English Literature graduate, whose mother is white and whose father is from St Kitts, Bailey Rae is sympathetic to the aims of the event if it helps to galvanise young people into action: "Our generation has more access to information [about world events] than we've ever had but we've never felt more powerless in the face of it all." She is pleased that the song of hers she will perform, the swelling, possibly redemptive "Love's on its Way", is the first she's written with any sort of "political engagement". If it's no dance number, she adds that she'll be playing Curtis Mayfield's motivational classic "Move on Up" that night too.

Confronting a sense of powerlessness closer to home is, of course, a theme of The Sea, which entered the album charts in the top 10 on both sides of the Atlantic. The title track is about Bailey Rae's aunt witnessing, as a child, her father (Bailey Rae's grandfather) perish by drowning. Like most of the album, it was written before Jason's death but its intense reflections about how the sea "Breaks everything/ Crushes everything/ Cleans everything" have since become astonishingly poignant. Equally, "I'd Do It All Again", penned after a marital argument, has acquired the force of a far more profound affirmation – just as the lines, "Oh, you're thirsting for something I know/ Won't make you happy" have accrued, with hindsight, an awful prescience.

Even without Bailey Rae's bereavement, such material represents a departure from her debut, which did cloy at times, and its sunny hit single, "Put Your Records On".

Corinne Bailey Rae was almost entirely an album written with others, but she wrote the new songs mostly by herself from the start. She also co-produced The Sea with trusted allies: the majority of tracks with Steve Brown, a stalwart of the Leeds jazz scene who plays in her band, and the rest with Steve Chrisanthou. The latter may be responsible for some of the old breeziness on "Paris Nights/New York Mornings", the next single, but it's impossible not to hear wisps of melancholy now.

"It's strange to feel like everyone is reading so much into the songs," Bailey Rae says. "It's absolutely fine if it relates to someone's own personal experience, but if it ever lands back at me ... " That thought drifts, unmoored. "It did have a new meaning to me when I went to listen back to it from this side," she admits in relation to another track, "Diving for Hearts", which I'd assumed to address the point at which one must let go of grief, in case it becomes too consuming, but, again, was written earlier. "A lot of the songs meant different things but, later, I thought, 'Wow, that's all in there.'"

About half the album was recorded before Jason died, which must mean several tracks (Bailey Rae doesn't say which) are coloured by her widowhood apart from the two she certainly wrote later. "Are You Here" and "I Would Like to Call It Beauty" are among the finest on the record. Imbued with the resilience of carrying on, both unfurl as defiantly romantic, with her vocals rising to a heartfelt blur. "That's how it came out," she says. "It's not deliberately so you can't understand it." The music is also in emotional spate, with rock chords tumbling under more soulful passages: "I wanted [it] to feel heady and overwhelming and claustrophobic sometimes. I wanted to have textures, and layers and layers and layers."

With a world tour in prospect, Bailey Rae maintains she has no fears about live performance: "I'd be sad if I couldn't do that. The experience itself [of losing someone] is the hard thing. I don't forget about it and then suddenly all the memories come flooding back when I'm singing a particular song. It's not like that. There's a very, very thin veil or membrane between me existing right now and all of that. All of that is always there, all the time."

Nor is she worried that The Sea, despite its greater critical acclaim, may sell fewer copies than her debut. "'What is fame? Nothing. What is wealth? Nothing. What is success? Nothing,'" she says. "The only thing [that matters] is standing on stage and being, like, 'I believe in this 100 per cent', and being transported somewhere."
Bailey Rae has, indeed, sought solace on stage, playing a series of small gigs – first, unadvertised, with friends in the sort of Leeds jazz club where she originally found her voice, and, since the album’s release, with intimate public shows in London, Paris, New York and Los Angeles. To follow a speech by Desmond Tutu was always going to be a tall order, but the singer looked rapt in a world of her own when I watched her at One Young World. The future global elite were probably thinking about networking over the free buffet but she didn’t seem to connect with this larger crowd. Then again, given how long Bailey Rae has been away at sea, perhaps her audiences will need to venture nearer the shore.

Corinne Bailey Rae plays the Shepherd’s Bush Empire, London, on February 24. Her world tour starts in Vancouver on April 9. ‘The Sea’ is out now on Good Groove/Virgin

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