

Blind Pilot speaks the language of loss

Nebeker talks songwriting, influences and his father's death

By Erick Bengel
EO Media Group

The songs in Blind Pilot's latest album, "And Then Like Lions," are strung together by themes of loss and courage.

But, according to Israel Nebeker — the band's frontman and songwriter who hails from the North Coast — the tracks don't merely meditate on sorrow and grief; they examine loss from often overlooked angles — from the way it can bring families and communities closer together, to the sudden sense of perspective it gives to those in mourning.

The album itself — Blind Pilot's first in five years — sprung from loss.

In September 2014, Nebeker's father, Royal Nebeker — an internationally celebrated artist, beloved teacher and major figure in the local arts community — died at 69 after battling cancer for nearly two years.

Shortly after his father's diagnosis, Israel had a falling out with a group of friends and experienced the end of a meaningful relationship — all within a month, he said.

"I just personally went through a chapter of my life where those were the themes coming to me, where I hadn't really experienced loss in that way before," he said.

To be sure, Israel had seen it from the outside. Some years ago, a high school friend's father died of cancer.

"I remember wanting to console my friend, or give him what comfort I could, and really being uncomfortable not knowing what the right thing is to say. And I realized I had no vocabulary for it," he said. "And then I realized: That's strange."

American culture, he said, lacks the language to grapple with loss, and with death in particular.

"It's not easy for us to share it, as a community or even with close friends. It's a little bit tricky to know what to say to people," he said.

"So I think I wanted to make an album that was a conversation about that, and an invitation into a conversation about it, from a perspective that this stuff is not nearly so hard if we experience it together."

Family focused

These unexpected turns in Nebeker's life partly account for the five-year gap between albums. "And Then Like Li-

ons" — which debuts Aug. 12 — is the indie folk band's third album, after 2008's "3 Rounds and a Sound" and 2011's "We Are The Tide."

Once they finished touring on the second album, Nebeker set off to write the third. But when his father's illness became known, "I decided to move closer to my parents' home in Gearhart and spend as much time with my dad as I could," he said.

"I was kind of spun out and didn't really know what to do," he said. "I definitely didn't know what to write about."

As a band, they "try to find that balance between sadness and happiness," he said.

"Israel came with these songs pretty complete, and then to have them filled out and do them justice — it was a good challenge for all of us," he said.

Ydstie, who sings and plays bass, said with "And Then Like Lions" the band ventured beyond their comfort zone — past the spare acoustic sound that defined their first record and, to a lesser extent, their second — and into uncharted musical terrain.

"There's a really great thing that happens when you're performing night after night, and you really get into the craft of that," he said. "So I'm excited, not only just to get out on the road and see all the great places again, but to sort of tap into that thing that we can do when we start playing in front of an audience."

Nebeker and Dobrowski performed Blind Pilot as a duo until 2008, when Ydstie, Claborn, and Portland members Ian Krist and Dave Jorgensen joined.

'This is my thing'

Nebeker, who now lives south of Cannon Beach, said the music that most resonates with him finds "a universal core within a deeply personal sentiment," citing Bob Dylan, Joanna Newsom, Neutral Milk Hotel and Talking Heads as some of his main musical influences.

Asked whether their work seeds his own, Nebeker said, "It has to be that way, right? Just the nature of art, and the way that it moves through history — it doesn't come from nowhere."

His lyrics — charged with flares of intense feeling and snapshots of nonlinear storytelling — recall the work of Beat poets like Jack Kerouac, an author he read as a teenager. Kerouac's experimental 1960 novel, "Book of Dreams," had a profound impact on Nebeker's songwriting.

"That was it for me — that idea of capturing these strange sort of gestures of expression, but not totally on solid ground," he said. "The communication seems to happen on a more emotional level."

But Nebeker's greatest artistic influence? His father.

"We kind of had an ongoing conversation about creative process," he said, "and we both just would get really excited about the ideas that would apply both to painting and songwriting."

Neither father nor son would encroach too far onto the other's artistic territory, though.

"He played banjo, and I still draw for myself and do watercolor," he said. But, "for some reason, it just always felt like, 'No, that's your thing, and this is my thing.'"

"And Then Like Lions" is now available on preorder, which comes with the single "Umpqua Rushing." Tickets are still available for the band's Aug. 20 performance at the Liberty Theater.



Israel Nebeker, lead singer and songwriter of the band Blind Pilot, poses for a portrait Friday on a trail near the house where he grew up in Gearhart.

Bandmates Luke Ydstie and Kati Claborn, who live in Astoria, had a daughter, Hazel, around that time as well.

"They weren't ready to go into the studio then, either," Nebeker said. "We mostly just focused on family stuff that we were going through. And then, eventually, it made sense again to write the album."

He scrapped his old ideas and, fueled by his recent emotional journey, took his work in a new direction. "It was a very different album than I was expecting," he said.

New musical terrain

Ryan Dobrowski, Blind Pilot's drummer who co-founded the band with Nebeker in the mid-2000s, said Nebeker always "digs pretty deep in his songwriting, but I feel like he was really ambitious with this one, tackling some subjects that people are generally afraid to talk about, or talk about in great depth at least."

Given the rather heavy content, the band "had to find the arrangements that were appropriate for that," he said. "There's that challenge of trying to find something that feels hopeful, but not just like, 'Everything's great and has always been great' — because things aren't always great."

"There are some things that will sound more familiar to people, and there are some things that are pretty different — tonal palettes and different approaches, I think, arrangement-wise and production-wise," he said.

Recorded in chunks over the course of a year, "And Then Like Lions" marks the band's first time recording with a well-known label, ATO Records.

On the road again

Once again, Blind Pilot is facing the tempest of the "album cycle": recording, rehearsing, promoting, touring and shooting music videos.

Come next month, the band embarks a cross-country tour, including two shows, on Aug. 19 and Aug. 20, at the Liberty Theater, where Nebeker is a board member.

"We're really happy to be doing these two shows at the Liberty — and incredibly flattered," said Dobrowski, who shares a house with Ydstie and Claborn. "I was pretty amazed at how fast that first one sold out. It's pretty cool to have that support after going dark for a little bit."

Touring is "what we love to do. We play music to play music," he said. "I think the band always gets much better when we've played consecutive shows."



Amy Hutmacher and Melissa Reich in the field.

New plant species are identified on mountain east of Arch Cape

Three species discovered on Onion Peak

By Lyra Fontaine
Cannon Beach Gazette



Queen of the Forest onions found growing on Onion Peak.

Onion Peak — similar in habitat to Saddle Mountain — is home to many rare plants, since some species specialize in high elevations near the coast, North Coast Land Conservancy Stewardship Director Melissa Reich said.

Three new plant species were identified this month on Onion Peak, the third-tallest point in Clatsop County at 3,057 feet.

"It's significant because it tells us a little more about the biodiversity of the site and we're constantly learning more about all lands, both conserved and not conserved," Reich said.

Certain species found on the mountain, located east of Arch Cape, have not been found elsewhere in the region. Although the recently discovered plants are not new to the region, they are new to Onion Peak.

The new species are Carolina bugbane, Pacific waterleaf and kneeling angelica. The plants were not yet in bloom. The discoveries bring the plant species or subspecies identified on the peak up to 271.

Reich, botanist Kathleen Sayce, North Coast Land Conservancy Conservation and Stewardship Manager Amy Hutmacher, and wetlands ecologist Doug Ray were on the trip.

Although two timber companies own Onion Peak, North Coast Land Conservancy manages 387 acres at the summit for conservation. Timber cannot be harvested in that area.

Although discovering new species increases knowledge of lands, Reich noted that Onion Peak is private land and access is limited to protect the sensitive habitat. North Coast Land Conservancy only visits the site once a year.

A subalpine forest and meadow habitat, Onion Peak has open treeless meadows called "balds." Other species found on the peak are Queen of the Forest and Chambers' paintbrush.

Looking south from Cannon Beach, Onion Peak is distinctly rounded at the top, Reich said.

Onion Peak is located in a coastal edge conservation initiative area, a region between Tillamook Head and Nehalem Bay with unusual biodiversity, according to the North Coast Land Conservancy.

Reich said finding new plant species in an area is rare, but they will probably continue to find more at Onion Peak.

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