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FEATURES



I'm Facing The Wind And Letting The Ghosts Fill The Sail:
An Interview With Jay Malinowski



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I'm Facing The Wind And Letting The Ghosts Fill The Sail:
An Interview With Jay Malinowski

"The ocean is freedom, solitude and hope for change but it is also a treacherous place of destruction."



Jay Malinowski wrote this in a blog post explaining the inspiration for his latest project, *Martel* by Jay Malinowski & The Deadcoast. For someone who grew up in Vancouver around the Pacific Ocean and has family roots in Cape Breton on the Atlantic Ocean, Malinowski knows a lot about oceans and how they affect a person.

That fascination with oceans, the people who sail them and the way they shape you as a person is part of what drove Malinowski to create the 18-song concept album *Martel* and the companion novella, *Skulls & Bones (Letters From A Sailor To A Long Lost Granddaughter)*, based on his ancestor Charles Martel and the seafaring Martels who came after him.

Malinowski started the Deadcoast project when he was still living in Toronto. His grandfather had passed away years before that, leaving books

filled with family stories, maps and charts, and he was really interested in "why we become who we become and all the things that go along with that."

"It's a philosophical question: are we natured or nurtured?" he says. "It came back to playing in a band, and there was always something else, something on the next horizon, and I was always trying to get away, and life on the road was a good fit for that. I found there were similar themes coming back to me, and I found there were a lot of similarities with the stories my grandfather left."

That was the galvanizing point for the Deadcoast.

"I found myself back in Vancouver and it was a cyclical thing, and I was looking back," says Malinowski. "I really related to the idea of sailors — it relates to being in a band. When you are always on the road, you leave things behind when you leave that port of call, so to speak. Although the profession was different, the reality was similar. I was searching for answers."

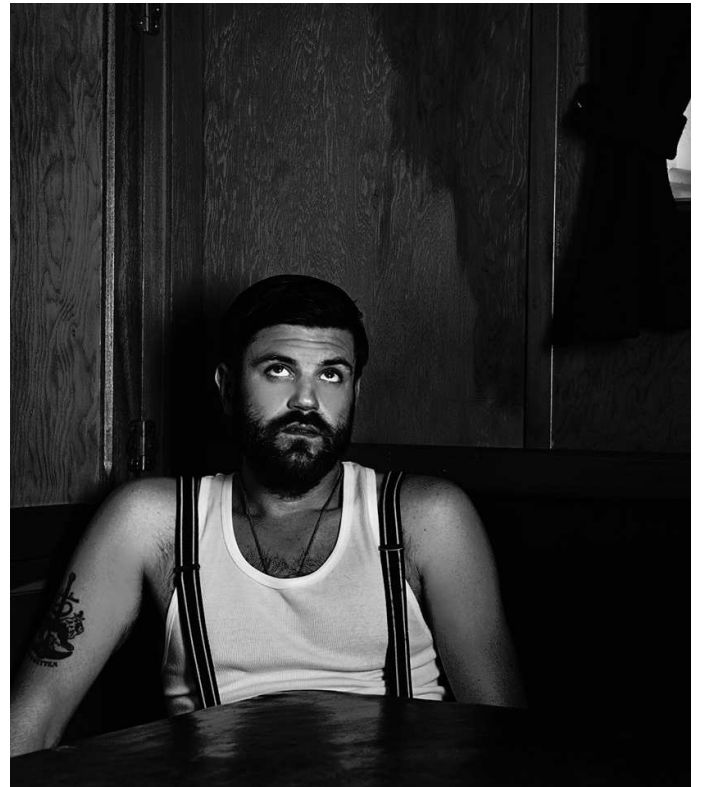
Malinowski found those answers in the story of his Huguenot ancestor Charles Martel, who narrowly escaped from France to the new world in the 1700s. He fought with General Wolfe at the battle of Louisbourg in 1758 and was given land along the coast of Cape Breton, which is where he settled and where his bones now rest. While in France, Martel saw his mother beheaded in Lyon for her religious convictions.

"Charles Martel was very interesting," says Malinowski. "He came from somewhere very different and found himself in very violent situations. He found himself in a new world that was very different ... he survived, and I found that survival instinct very fascinating."

Musically, Malinowski he wanted to get away from what he had been doing before with this project.

"I looked at a lot of the things I had done and felt music had become a Ponzi scheme," he says. "It didn't seem to have much point except to be successful, which isn't why I did it. It's about sitting at the end of your bed and writing what you feel ... and you get this feeling of fullness if someone else relates to it, even if it's just one person."

A friend gave Malinowski a book called *Sailing Alone Around The World* that he had found on Denman Island. The author, Joshua Slocum, was a sailor and he had written the book at a time when steamships came in and were replacing sailboats.



"He started just doing things for the sake of doing them," says Malinowski. "I really found it inspiring. With the *Martel* record, I thought 'I don't know who it is for.' It was just creating a story for the sake of doing it. I remember someone saying, 'Why are you telling this story?' and I said 'just for the sake of telling it.' I had to keep that in mind throughout the process. The main point was trying to get Martel around the world and how do you make that happen? It was really a cool process musically because there are so many differing elements on the album that are so disparate, and trying to pull those together, that was our only goal."

Malinowski connected with Vancouver-based string and vocal trio The End Tree when he returned to the West Coast. When Malinowski found viola player Elliott Vaughan, he approached him about working together on what he was calling "colonial-classical music" — "which was, to me, to take classical music and make it rough around the edges," says Malinowski.

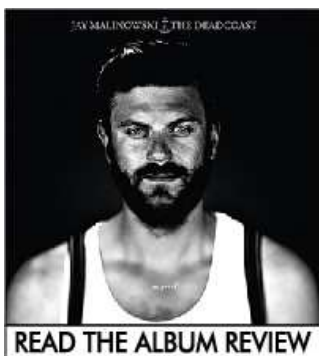
"It was amazing to work with them," Malinowski says of Vaughan, violinist Aiden Brant Briscall and cellist Martin Reisle. "It was so different, and so, I would say, West Coast. They have no interest in the music industry – none. They're doing an opera right now, and it's for community theatre. They do small things in a really real way."

These are the men who make up Jay Malinowski & The Deadcoast, and Malinowski is inspired by the way they make music "for the sake of making art."

"They just opened up a lot of possible avenues because they are so talented," he explains. "If I said 'I want the Pacific side to sound blue,' they'd say OK, and we'd figure out what blue sounds like. They're good enough that we could always do it. It was just super inspiring working with them."

The name The Deadcoast is inspired by conversations Malinowski had in Toronto and by spending time in Spain.

When Malinowski was in Toronto, a friend of his asked where he was from, and he said he was from the East Coast, Montreal, Vancouver and Toronto.



"Then he said, 'you are from the dead coast'," recalls Malinowski.

The dead coast came back to Malinowski when he walked 800 kilometres across Spain alone after finishing this album. He found himself on the western coast at the Finis Terrae, or "the end of the earth."

He jumped into the ocean and then went back to Madrid. A couple of days later, a friend there told him he had gone swimming in the Costa da Morte, the dead coast, so named because there have been so many shipwrecks on its treacherous shore.

"It was while I was walking through Spain that I was thinking about the stories behind the songs," he notes.

Malinowski had told his publisher about the songs and their stories, and his publisher encouraged him to write them down. Out of that came *Skulls & Bones*, a collection of letters and ink sketches designed by Malinowski. The first chapter of the novella went on sale March 18 through HarperCollins Canada, and *Skulls & Bones* will be released in seven chapters.

"I wanted to create allegories for Martel sailing across the world," he says.

Malinowski wrote letters from Martel during his time at sea, addressed to his estranged granddaughter named Kit.

"He's trying to pass on some wisdom from the past," he explains. "It's probably the first relationship he's had with a woman that's sweet. He's crusty, and I wanted to mellow him out a bit."

The letters will be published over the cycle of the album in the same way Martel's granddaughter would have received them. Martel never had the courage to send these letters to his granddaughter, and they're discovered by a woman named Ana who wants to deliver them to Kit.

"At the end of the album cycle, the book will be not just a compilation of letters, but also her journey back to Canada to return them," says Malinowski. "The stories we leave behind are really important, and they really affect, whether we know it or not, so many things that will happen later."

Along with the album and the novella, there is also an interactive website at www.whoismartel.com featuring Martel's captain's log. A journal log of Martel's life at sea from 1957-1963 will be released over the course of the album cycle on Twitter, and you can follow along at [www.twitter.com/whoismartel](https://twitter.com/whoismartel).

– Lindsay Chung ([Twitter @LChunger](https://twitter.com/LChunger))

I'm Facing The Wind And Letting The Ghosts Fill The Sail: An Interview With St. Lucia's Jean-Philip Grobler

Often without realizing it, we place our music into climatic categories. The sepia-toned instrumentation of Grizzly Bear feels as much like fall as a pair of fingerless mittens. In the same way, no one would deny that when winter calls, Joy Division and Bon Iver come running. The music that South-African born Jean-Philip Grobler makes under his moniker, St. Lucia, belongs to this specific class. On his debut album, *When the Night*, the sun-drenched excitement of summer arrived in "September". A former choir boy whose ascent to popularity has cycled essentially around the world, Grobler's music invites his listeners to a tropical midnight rendezvous complete with technicolour electronic beats overlaid with clear, evocative lyricism and a reoccurring throwback to the very best that '80s pop had to offer.

While signed with Neon Gold Records (Chvrches and Passion Pit) and gaining popularity in largely underground music circles, Grobler made the decision to work with major label giant Columbia, an offshoot of Sony Music. A timelessly controversial and possibly risky choice for any artist, Grobler has so far had a positive experience. "I was very fortunate to be given a team of



passionate people over there who I believe genuinely care about what I do, and want to help me to achieve the best version of what that is," said Grobler.

While he isn't naïve that labels of that calibre are looking for a more accessible direction rather than an experimental one, he is ultimately appreciative of his relationship with them. Despite his music being critically recognized, mainstream success hasn't arrived as quickly. "I'm fairly certain that if we were on another major label for as long as we've been and hadn't had a hit yet, we would have been dropped a long time ago," said Grobler.

So exactly how does he go ahead giving the label what they want? His music definitely has all the right ingredients for a cross-national hit and he seems more than capable of producing one. However, when asked about what makes a song a universal success, he's abashedly unsure. "I have no idea what makes acts a global success. Who could have anticipated the success of Psy, for example? I'm not sure there's any formula, apart from perhaps the pretty girl singing pop songs and boy band formulas. I definitely strive for success on whatever level I can achieve it in, but success itself isn't my main goal," said Grobler.

Making it clear that priority is placed on his artistry, specifically its emotional appeal, he explains that, "I just want to keep making the music that I want to make and that makes me feel alive and good, and doing whatever it takes to get it out into the world."

However, the world is an enormous place and at this point in his career Grobler sits comfortably in its ever-evolving pop sphere. Regardless of how Grobler defines himself, he is operating within the more creatively inclined, forward-thinking side of the genre. So as an accidental spokesperson, what's his opinion on the current state of pop music? "I kind of feel like pop music is always exactly the same, in terms of where it operates within the general scope of music," said Grobler. "There's going to be good stuff that feels vital and alive, and then there's going to be the 'bad' stuff that feels churned out."

The current trend in pop-oriented music seems to have an underlying love affair with pain and darkness, but Grobler appears concerned with celebrating the light as it explores some inherently universal themes. When asked if artists should strive for accessibility, he's a resounding advocate for diversity. "We need art and music that explores all corners of the human mind and reality. I love music across the board, from dark to light, weird to accessible; but my calling in this moment in time is what I'm doing now," said Grobler.

On his album *When the Light*, Grobler does just that, becoming a wilderness explorer of his own interests and looking at love and relationships at several different angles. He focuses on not only what they lack, but also their rewards by decomposing situations into their essential emotional essence. Grobler explains that his inspiration comes from his own relationship. "My whole life is consumed by my relationship to my wife, Patti, who plays keyboards in the band," said Grobler. "There are a lot of things that refer directly to stuff that we were going through."

St. Lucia's lyrics are refreshingly anonymous despite this personal influence, placing every moment anywhere in the world, and every situation between any two given people. According to Grobler, he likes his listeners to have their own interpretations of his lyrics.

Getting into the actual writing process, Grobler has taken a unique approach to translating his music from the creative stage into something tangible. "The way that I write music and lyrics is very intuitive and train-of-thought. When I'm writing a song I make every attempt to get out of the way of the words that are naturally coming out of my mind and my mouth," said Grobler.

This unusual approach to crafting his songs is hardly an accidental process. "I believe that more interesting things come out of my subconscious than what I can construct with my conscious mind, and so all of my writing becomes a process of discovery more than conscious writing," said Grobler.

But Grobler clarifies that his unique method isn't simply a string of unfiltered thoughts and ideas. "It's not just gibberish. I might not understand what I'm writing about at the time that I'm writing it, but six months or a year or even more down the line I'll suddenly realize what the lyrics of a song are about. It's almost always something that I was going through at the time of writing or a bit before, but that I might not have realized at the time," said Grobler.

Coming to the end of our interview, an essential question I asked Grobler was what forced him to take a critical look at his current



position then work his way backwards. Where does his inspiration come from and when in his life has he felt the most creative? There's no mistaking that the start of St. Lucia was when he felt the most musically inspired, however developing his identity as a musician required distancing himself from what others thought about his personal preferences. "I feel like a lot of what I was doing before was trying to be different to who I am in certain ways, or trying to cover up certain parts of my musical influence that I might have felt shy or embarrassed about at the time," said Grobler.

An '80s soft pop aficionado in his early twenties, Grobler admits, "I became embarrassed about liking that music and it became an ironic guilty pleasure." However, embracing the sounds that he resonated with the most ultimately set him free. "Once I let go of the guilt over what music I liked, my music opened up a lot more and became more unique and a lot more like me and what my life has been."

As a musician at the forefront of our rediscovery of pop music as an innovative genre, Grobler is a significant figure (even if he's too humble to admit it). Repackaging familiar sounds into a stirring output that's simultaneously intelligently produced and utterly accessible makes his lack of a mainstream hit a mystery. We'll continue to cross our fingers. Luckily for St. Lucia and company, their sights are focused on achieving artistic merit – a task I believe they've already mastered.

– Melissa Vincent ([Twitter @MellVincent](#))

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