

# Songs of the 'Betayil': Whale Songs of Phillip Island

*Laura Brearley*

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*'Whale Songs of Phillip Island' film by Terry Melvin* <https://vimeo.com/276200101>

This morning we took a Whale Search Cruise around Phillip Island. It's early in the whale migration season and already the crew of Wildlife Coast Cruises have sighted 60 humpback whales heading for the warm waters of Queensland. These numbers are good, they say, and let us know that the numbers of humpback whales are increasing every year.

For the last two seasons, I have been receiving text messages letting me know when and where whales have been sighted off the Island. It's a wonderful feeling knowing that they're there and that even with so much out of balance in the world, these magnificent creatures are holding to the steady rhythm of their migration cycle. Last year, I received one of these texts when I was stuck in a traffic jam in Punt Road in Melbourne. Knowing that three humpbacks had just been sighted off Cape Woolamai heading east, had immediately softened my heart. It was an important reminder of how connected we all are as living beings and that included the people who were stuck in the traffic jam alongside me who immediately started to look benign and even beautiful.

Today though, I had a more direct experience of the whales. For almost an hour, four humpback whales played next to our boat, surging through the water, breaching and diving with their powerful tails lifting in the air. They too were heading east and were playing with each other along the way. They looked so full of the joy of life, it was impossible not to feel the same.

I am deep in the whale zone at the moment. A few months ago, I was asked to design an intercultural arts program for the upcoming Island Whale Festival happening on Phillip Island on the middle weekend of the school holidays, 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> July. With the help of a Bass Coast Community Grant, Destination Phillip Island, the Gippsland Singers Network and Community Music Victoria (thankyou, thankyou, thankyou and thankyou), we will be bringing together musicians and artists from Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds who have been working together for many years in intercultural arts projects. Members of this community collaborate across cultures and artforms at festivals, conferences, schools and in an international cultural exchange between Australia and Canada.

Participants in the intercultural arts program of this year's Island Whale Festival include locally based and internationally known musician Uncle Kutcha Edwards (who has a heart the size of a mountain), Whale Songman Uncle Bunna Lawrie, legendary gumleaf player, Uncle Herb Patten, Boon Wurrung Elder and linguist Aunty Fay Stewart-Muir, traditional custodian, artist and ceremony man Steve Parker, Trawlwoolway artist and author Lisa Kennedy, percussion leader Steve Schulz, much loved singing leader Ruth McKittrick Chambers and other wonderful local artists and musicians. The intercultural arts component of the Festival will include a ceremony to bless the whales as well as story-telling, community singing in Boon Wurrung language, whale soundscapes, drumming circles and Deep Listening circles. Local artist Camille Monet will facilitate the creation of a community-led Whale Migration Mural using recycled materials and featuring whale artworks from Aboriginal men from the Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Centre in South Gippsland. Last year's inaugural Festival attracted 3000 people and this year, organisers are expecting 5000. By Sunday afternoon, the mural could be very long indeed.

For the last few days I have been bringing together a Whale Song Cycle in preparation for the Festival. In my song-writing, I work with Elders and linguists from different regions and following the local protocols, incorporate Aboriginal languages into songs. I write songs that are easy to learn so that people can have the experience of singing the local languages and so that the Country can have the experience of hearing these ancient languages being sung again.

On Boon Wurrung Country, I work with Elder, linguist and author Aunty Fay Stewart-Muir. A few months ago, Aunty Fay shared with me the word for 'Whale' in the local language and with her permission I can share it here. The Boon Wurrung word for 'Whale' is 'Betayil'. It is a songwriter's dream, rhyming as it does with the word 'tail'. I knew when I made the time and space, there would be some songs waiting. The new songs arrived this week and last night I sent off the Whale Song Cycle to Aunty Fay to check that I had used the language she had gifted me accurately and to seek her permission to use the language in this form. This morning, her email came back with her blessing and so today from the back of our boat, I sang to the whales some lines from the new songs. They're still very fresh and it always takes a while for new songs to grow into themselves, but the whales have heard them now and so they are out there. They heard:

'Betayil Betayil  
Beautiful whale  
Sliding through the water  
With your powerful tail'

And from another song:

'Tooroong Marnang Baany

Dancing with the heart

Dancing with the beat

Dancing with the heartbeat of the sea.'

I hope the whales liked them. If you have the chance to come to the Island Whale Festival this year, and I hope you do, you might get to hear them too and perhaps even join us in singing them together. It will be just one of many experiences on offer and it would be great to see you there.

For more information on the Island Whale Festival:

<http://islandwhales.com.au/>

For more information on our intercultural arts work and the creative language revival project:

[www.thelivingcircle21.com.au](http://www.thelivingcircle21.com.au)

For information on Wildlife Coast Cruises and their whale search cruises:

<https://www.wildlifecoastcruises.com.au/cruises/winter-whale-cruise/>

For some film footage of the whales we saw on today's cruise, Terry Melvin on Vimeo:

<https://vimeo.com/tlc21>