



Uncharted territory

The **Compass Series** brings together field recording, composition, visual media and ambisonic installation to create a dialogue between tradition and technology; indigenous culture and contemporary art practice. Abi Bliss speaks to founder Ross Adams about an incredible journey that stretches from the reindeer migration routes of northern Scandinavia to the Australian songlines.

Every spring, a great migration of reindeer takes place across Arctic Europe. Herds travel hundreds of kilometres from mountain forests to the warmer coasts, where the females calve. And for centuries they have been followed by reindeer herders from the Sámi, the indigenous peoples of northern Scandinavia.

Ross Adams first encountered the reindeer herders in 2007, when he worked on location sound for Susanna Wallin's short film *Marker*. "It was set in northern Sweden amidst a Sámi reindeer community," he recalls. "Being with the Sámi, the reindeer, immersed in such beautiful nature during the summer where there was no darkness, had a profound effect on me. I wanted to know more about the Sámi and to create something out of my experience."

Adams started shaping what would become *Nord Rute*, a project blending his field recordings with original music by electronic duo Plaid, Sámi poetry, visuals and ambisonic sound. The documentary elements interweave with the representation of the reindeer in Sámi imagination and folklore, inhabiting a landscape whose icy surfaces conceal the spirit realm beneath.

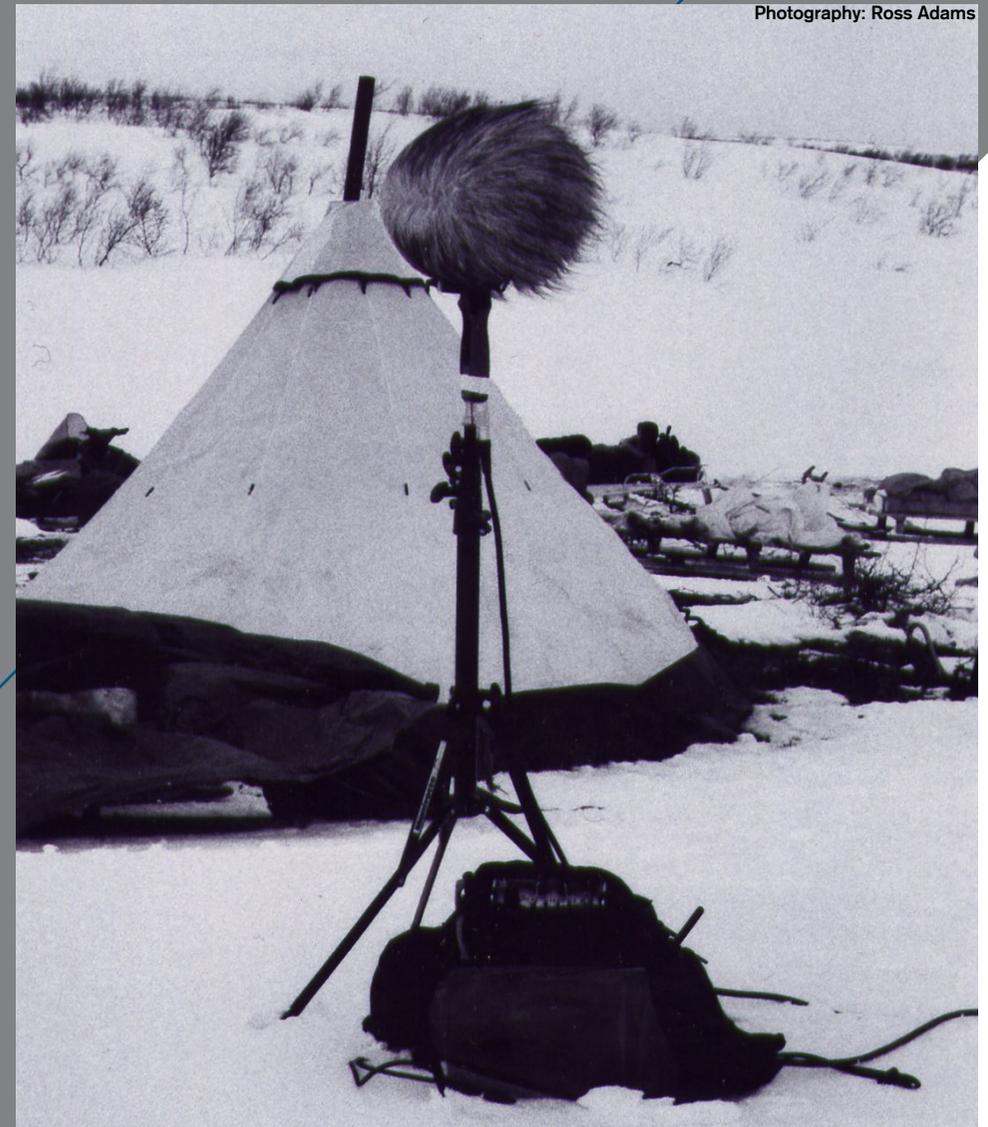
Although ambitious in itself, *Nord Rute* is just the first of four related projects under the banner of The Compass Series. Adams intends each to be a dialogue between the traditional and the contemporary in a range of global locations, incorporating music, visuals, oral tradition, ecology, indigenous

cultures and cutting-edge sound design.

This isn't the first time that Adams has envisioned such collaborations. Now working freelance in location sound and post-production with his company, Tin Roof, he grew up on the edge of Bodmin Moor in Cornwall and became a falconer and assistant gamekeeper before the acid house and free party scene drew him to DJing and electronic music. Around the turn of the millennium he travelled through Africa, living with and recording local musicians and bringing their sounds together with European and South American artists, releasing the results on his District Six record label.

Plaid's involvement in *Nord Rute* came out of Adams' longstanding admiration for Ed Handley and Andy Turner's music. "I loved a remix they did for me back in 2000 of a Zimbabwean artist called William Rusere. I've always felt that a lot of their rhythms cross over with those from folk music from different parts of Africa," he explains. "I felt that their synthetic and otherworldly timbres and textures would fit beautifully with the landscapes of Norway and our interpretation of how the Sámi underworld would be."

During his research Adams discovered the Sámi writer, painter and musician Nils Aslak Valkeapää, who saw no contradiction in being a proud ambassador for Sámi traditions while embracing outside influences. Valkeapää's poem 'No. 272' in his book *Beaivi, Áhčážan (The Sun, My Father)*



Photography: Ross Adams

'I could hear the reindeer breathing, tearing at the brush, their feet scraping at the snow and stones. The soundscape was intense'

creates an imagistic scene of reindeer migration, as the hundreds of words the Sámi have to describe the animals wind across the page like the herd itself.

Valkeapää died in 2001, so in order to capture a surround-sound reading of the poem, Adams turned to fellow Sámi poet, Synnøve Persen. "Synnøve had a very intimate relationship with Nils Aslak when he was alive, so there was a strong connection there. We went out into the forests and I recorded her reciting the words. It was the lilt in her voice and the texture of it that I really enjoyed. Again, it had an otherworldly

feel to it," Adams says.

Early last year, Adams joined a 400km reindeer migration in northern Norway. He was welcomed warmly by the herding families, sleeping in a lavvu (a traditional tent) and journeying by snowmobile in harmony with the reindeer movements. While there he saw the effects of climate change at first hand: "The frozen lakes on the migratory routes have become thinner and on two occasions we had to jump off the scooter, cut the ropes on the sledge and throw the gear – and dog – to one side or everything would have sunk."

ICE MAZE, KIRKENES, NORWAY



Photography: Bernt Nilsen

The wild reindeer proved more difficult to record than Adams had anticipated. Yet persistence paid off early one morning. "I trudged up to the top of one of the hills surrounding the camp, planted the mic and stood about 20 feet away. I didn't know where the reindeer were, but I could hear the bells, grunts and the clicking, from a tendon that snaps across a bone in their feet when they walk."

The herd appeared, descending from a nearby mountain and heading for Adams. He tried desperately to remain motionless so that they wouldn't bolt: "Before long I was surrounded and they were brushing up against me, I could hear them breathing, tearing at the brush, their feet scraping at the snow and stones. Bells were hyper loud. The soundscape was intense. I was stone still for about 45 minutes."

Once back in the UK, Adams set about bringing *Nord Rute* together. Realising the ambisonic aspect of the sound, with its horizontal 12 speaker set-up, was a new challenge for him. "What I think was tricky was trying to convey the space that I recorded the sounds in, in the live performance realm, which was a totally different space."

Nord Rute's first performance took place outdoors in Kirkenes, north-eastern Norway, on Sámi National Day, 6 February 2010. The audience roamed around a giant ice maze designed by Eric Mutel. The UK premiere was a few weeks later at London's Trinity Buoy Wharf. Listeners



NORD RUTE PERFORMANCE, LONDON

snuggled up on reindeer pelts whilst Plaid and Persen performed, accompanied by visuals from Yeast Culture. An appearance at Manchester's FutureEverything festival is scheduled for this month and Adams and Plaid are currently finishing off a proposed album version.

The next part of the Compass Series is *Where The Green Ants Dream*, an encounter between Australian oral traditions and the pan-continental grooves of London group Eardrum. Adams plans to walk a 1500 km "song-line" around the edge of the Gulf of Carpentaria, the Northern Territory home of several different Aboriginal clans.

"According to their history, their ancestors sung everything into existence. Those songs have been passed down and each one of the clans held onto the song. They speak different languages

'Identity is a very strong topic today. Indigenous artists have more of a voice now, they have a lot of control over what they do and don't want to do'



EARDRUM

and have different traditions, but each will hold a section of the songline," he explains. Eric Mutel and sound designer Skip Lievsay are on board and this time Adams is hoping for a periphonic (full sphere) speaker set-up.

Eardrum's Richard Olatunde Baker explains how his group, who previously released two albums on The Leaf Label, will incorporate the songline recordings into their existing mix of West African and Punjabi rhythms, electronics and improvised jazz. "We're going to be more appropriating stuff than trying to do some version of traditional Aboriginal music,"

he says. "It's going to be a combination of what we use already with live electronic manipulation of traditional instruments. So if I'm playing Nigerian talking drums, I can play them through effects pedals and take the sound to a different continent, so it sounds otherworldly." After Europe and Australia, Adams hopes that the third and fourth instalments of The Compass Series will feature artists from South Africa and India. He's well aware when Western artists encounter those from cultures whose creativity has historically been denied or belittled, the former risk accusations of superficial

borrowing or exploitation. "I think that's been going on for a long time," he says.

"But identity is a very strong topic today. Indigenous artists have more of a voice now, they have a lot of control over what they do and don't want to do. It all comes back to communication and being open with each other." For him, The Compass Series shares Valkeapää's spirit of respecting tradition and innovation: "They are different worlds, but when it comes to music or expression of an artform, that's an opening into both."

www.compass-series.org

Listening post



Eardrum live clip and interview

Plaid's live performance of their William Ruserer remix (audio only)



A Norwegian news TV clip showing the ice maze and a snippet of Nord Rute (starts around 3:40 in)

'Váimmustan Lea Biegga' sung by Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (audio only)