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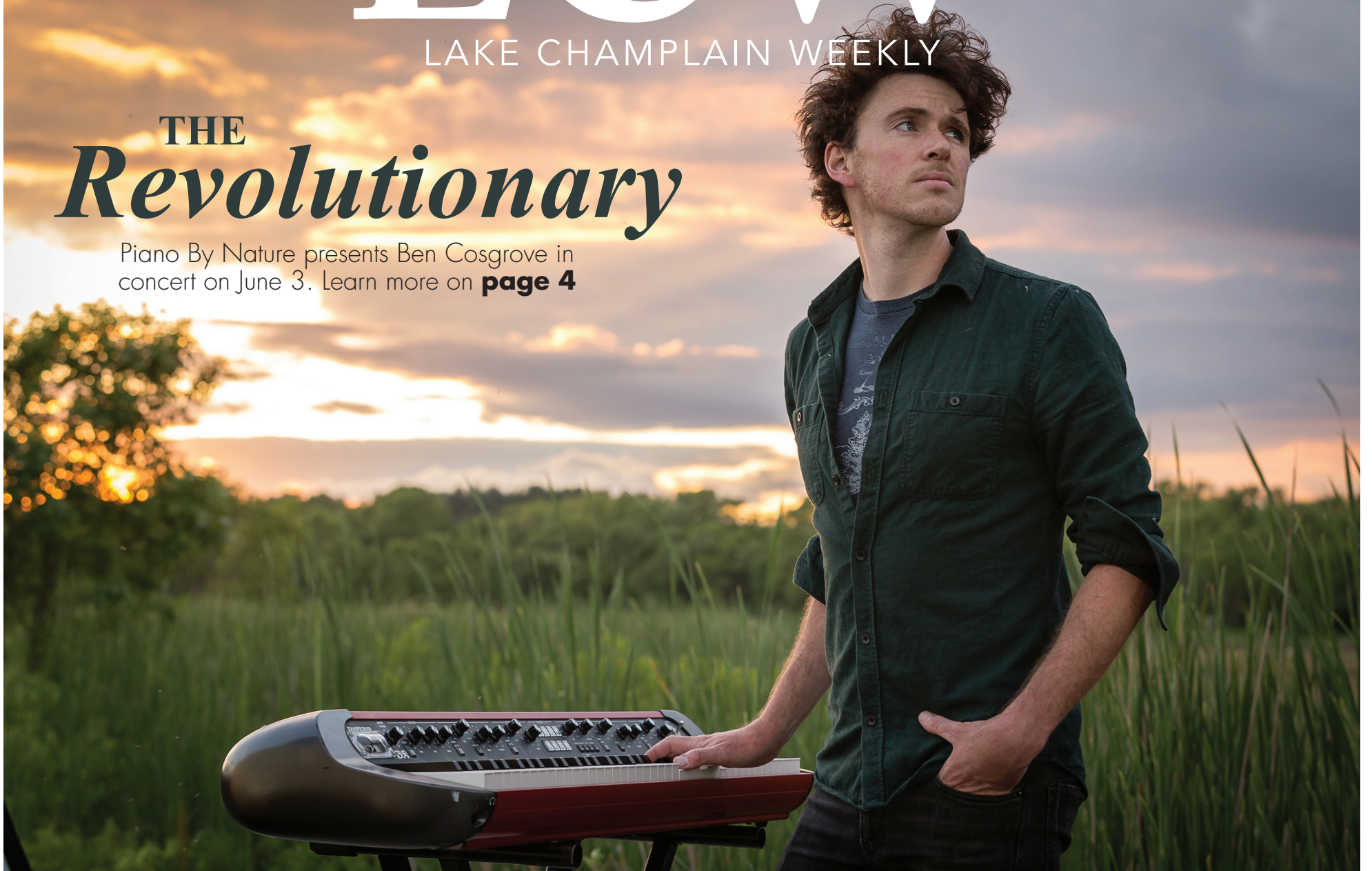
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LAKE CHAMPLAIN WEEKLY

THE *Revolutionary*

Piano By Nature presents Ben Cosgrove in concert on June 3. Learn more on **page 4**



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THE *Revolutionary*

BY BENJAMIN POMERANCE

“The time has come to rethink wilderness.”

— William Cronon, *“The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature”* (1995)

Photos
courtesy of
the artist

THE STORM crept closer by the minute. Sitting with their faces toward the piano, the audience suspected nothing. In an exposed swath of land on the California-Oregon border, they sat and watched with rapture in the oncoming dusk, fixated on one man willing to come outdoors and play the piano with purpose and intention. The music that filled the air were sounds of that place — not an exercise in free improvisation, but a focused effort to speak without words about the space in which they sat. Behind them, the ink-mottled clouds silently approached.

From his station at the keys, Ben Cosgrove could see the clouds. He realized that the crowd knew nothing about what was slipping in ominously behind them. Still, he continued to play, disinclined to break whatever spell had been cast in this windswept locale. “You have to accept a lack of control,” he

explains. “That’s part of working in the environment, right? As a pianist, you don’t bring your instrument with you from place to place. You go somewhere, and that’s your piano for the night. You meet it at its terms. In nature, that mindset is even more true.”

Which means that, yes, to get the monster out from under the bed quickly, a chance exists that the conditions may not be idyllic on the afternoon of June 3 when Cosgrove will spend National Trails Day performing his music on a grand piano located within the Essex Quarry Nature Preserve. Wind may blow. Frogs may bark at inopportune times. Sunshine might force the pianist to labor to see the keys. A couple drops of rain may even fall. And while a rain site is set in case the weather turns barbaric, Cosgrove appears set to cope with almost anything.

“It’s nice to be a little uncomfortable in the process,” he states. “That’s how you learn a landscape. It’s also how you can write a song. You move around until you can feel where the song is. It doesn’t have to all be neat and tidy and planned. In fact, it’s often better when it isn’t, even when it makes you a little nervous.”

It may feel like a gimmick, this act of placing the piano in the open air. An hour spent talking with Cosgrove, though, reveals that this is less of a clever trick and more of an earnest revolution. In a lifetime that has been anything but neat, tidy and planned, he has invested his energies primarily into two points of concentration: music and landscapes. With each passing season, he has grown increasingly creative, and audacious, in illustrating how these two threads can intertwine. The match, he says, is

logical. Still, the propositions raise eyebrows.

Including his own, for Cosgrove is the first to confess his unconventionality. “I’ve never really known what I was doing, even to this day,” he laughs. “You have to be kind of adaptable in it. And I’m not just saying that for the sake of saying it. I really haven’t had a plan. But all of this has allowed me to end up in interesting places and given me the chance to talk across genres with interesting people.”

The first of those chances came at the age of 4. His parents had just moved the family into a new home in Methuen, Mass., north of the Merrimack River and snug to the New Hampshire border. The prior owners had left an aging upright piano. Cosgrove started picking out simple melodies on its keys, showing enough interest that his parents signed him up for lessons. Into the boy’s life stepped Judy Schmidt, a teacher ready to open the child to adventure.

For the next 14 years, they explored together. “She ensconced me in thinking of music as a way to make sense of the world,” Cosgrove recalls. “She wasn’t someone who forced me to play scales for years and years. She found things that excited me, and let me pursue those things. And I’m outrageously lucky that I had such a teacher at such a young age before my brain had the time to become self-conscious.”

Without inhibition, Schmidt encouraged Cosgrove not only to play, but to compose. At the age of 7, he wrote a piece titled *Waves*, his first deliberate act of crafting music about an element of the natural world. Schmidt nudged him to write more, and so, he did, coming up with his own compositions at an age when most piano students were studying classical etudes. It was the start of an unplanned break with many of his instrumental fellow travelers. “I never sought out other pianists,” he says. “I know way more singer-songwriters than I do other pianists.”

Yet there was a predicament with Cosgrove hanging out in the singer-songwriter circles, too. “I’m a terrible singer,” he laughs. “No one wants to hear me sing.” By the time high school graduation neared, uncertainty still hovered regarding what he wanted to do. His skill set called for a spot in one of America’s top conservatories. His soul, however, doggedly questioned whether this was something that he really wanted to do.

“When I was 18, my internal conflict was conservatory or liberal arts school,” Cosgrove remembers. “In the end, liberal arts school won out. And I have never felt better about a decision in my life.”

At Harvard College, he recalls, most of his friends were biologists. He majored in composition, studying

primarily with Hans Tutschku, a pioneer of the use of technology to manipulate the timbres of acoustic sounds. Yet he deems his greatest collegiate awakening to have come not in music but in the study of landscapes, a subject in which he became enthralled during his sophomore year. “It was a field I had never even thought anything about before,” he states. “It made me realize just how much we take for granted moving through the world.”

Suddenly, he had questions about everything. He wanted to know why the streets were so much narrower in one town than they were in an adjoining community. He asked how come the highways swerved in certain directions but not others, and why particular spots were selected as the locations of exit ramps. Within his home state, there were cranberry bogs and paper mills, rolling mountains and flat beaches, urban clusters and pastoral space, yet he had never paid much attention to any of it. Internally, he asked if he had lived until that moment with his eyes closed.

And as he stared closer, he heard music. For a semester, he decamped to Northern Ireland, testing his beliefs about relationships between human beings and their environment through sound. Another trip brought him to Iceland, where he completed an internship at a recording studio. Back at home in Cambridge, Mass., he embarked on an ambitious senior thesis: a “musical map of Massachusetts” that he labeled *Commonwealth*, designed to help the consumer comprehend through music the diversity of the landscapes around them.

Still, there was more to be said. In a college dorm room, he recorded an album. The Route 128 beltway encircling Boston, separating the city from the rest of Massachusetts, spurred the name of the album: *Yankee Division*. Using multi-track recording techniques with which he had tinkered since junior high, he fashioned audio landscapes that called to mind everything from venerable stone walls to surging prairie fires.

It was 2011 when he looked over what he had done with *Yankee Division* and called it good. He was 23 years old. To his surprise, some listeners started buying into what he was doing. “There were not a lot of people out there going, ‘I wonder if there is anybody who is writing music about a highway,’” he admits. “But *Yankee Division* was the first time when I knew that people out there — people who I did not know — were actually buying my album.”

The foothold attained by that record offered him a chance to climb higher. “I became Google-able as being

this unusual guy who would make music reflecting on interesting landscapes,” he explains. “And if you are a scientist filling out a grant application, it’s pragmatic for you to float the idea of bringing in an artist who will do this sort of thing.” From these interested parties, the invitations flowed, putting him on a long-term tour of splendor: Glacier National Park, the Grand Tetons, Hawaii’s volcanoes, Michigan’s Isle Royale and many more.

It was an idyllic set of assignments, a rambling nature-lover’s dream come true. Still, Cosgrove reached a point where he was ready to pop the balloon. “I was spending a lot of time writing and playing and talking about national parks and oceans and protected wildernesses and all of these incredible places,” he points out. “These places are all incredible, and each is incredible in its own way. But — and here’s the problem — I was not spending enough time writing about the types of landscapes that people are more likely to encounter in everyday life.”

As if to force a course correction, a global pandemic descended. Grant-funded trips to faraway sites became yesterday’s fantasy. Replacing them in Cosgrove’s schedule were wanderings to outwardly nondescript spots nearby, locations that the average bystander would pass by without a second glance. For months, he repeated the process, employing the same devotion to seas of asphalt or metal that Claude Monet had applied to water lilies. Over time, as he studied the same ordinary-seeming subjects continually, novel pictures formed.

It wasn’t the Grand Tetons or Isle Royale. Instead, it felt like something even better. “We have ideas about what nature is, what nature looks like,” he notes. “Usually, it has to do with pristine places that are seen as separate from the human world. A lot of my work, I realized, was reinforcing these ideas. But then I started going to places where it was harder for people to say if it was nature or not. That new focus on the built environment gave me a lot more to think about.”

The nagging question was whether anyone else wanted to think about such things. Music about pristine locales offers a built-in audience. No one, however, knew if anyone would listen to works with themes reminiscent of a rose growing through a crack in the sidewalk. Still, a passage from historian William Cronon’s essay *The Trouble with Wilderness* haunted the pianist. “To the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilization,” Cronon opined, “we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature on opposite poles.”

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Which was why, as the pandemic stretched on, Cosgrove resolved that he would respond to Cronon's warning. On his persistent amblings, he had studied gardens that were both ordered and chaotic. He had seen wind turbines and power line corridors and stopped alongside lawns and river crossings. He had watched the local roads rise into the jaws of the interstate and walked the tightropes of urban growth boundaries. At times, he had even contemplated piles of debris. In each of these places, he concluded, humanity and nature merged.

In the recording studio, he placed microphones inside the piano. When he played, he knew, the percussion of the hammers would make it onto the recording, as would the ambient noises of him breathing. He wanted it that way. Then he played what he had seen, spinning into sounds the battery of natural elements with which humanity interacts. In a nod to Cronon's essay, he anointed this CD with the same title that the historian had used: *The Trouble with Wilderness*.

"I think the practice of formally or informally dividing the world up into a bunch of conventionally beautiful 'natural' parts and another bunch of utilitarian, unpretty, 'unnatural' ones is one of our society's more misguided and lastingly harmful tendencies," Cosgrove wrote in the liner notes to that album. The environmental blend between human and non-human elements were "weirdly and complicatedly interrelated" in many locations, he added. And from that point forward, he affirmed, those weird and complicated relationships would be his guide.

It is from these precepts that the placements of pianos in nature evolved, integrating a mechanical device into a natural setting in a manner that is helpful, not harmful. "It's a way to hear where you are," he says. "Whenever you hear music, you are hearing it in the context of a sonic ambiance. Usually, especially with the piano, we think of that ambiance as being in a concert hall. But when you bring the piano outdoors, your music becomes more than music. It becomes part of the whole abstract experience of the landscape itself."

Abruptly, he stops. The whole conversation has drifted into territory that sounds like a Ralph Waldo Emerson essay set to rolling keyboard arpeggios, and Cosgrove has no intention of producing such a notion. "I'm really not trying to save the world," he insists. "All I want to do is to get people to look critically at the landscapes that they move through." There will always be art intrinsic to a raging volcano or crashing ocean waves, he states. Yet sidewalk weeds and bands of asphalt and swirling turbines bear their own worthy sonic recognition, too.

And as that recognition churns, a new sensation inches forward as stealthily as storm clouds creeping toward an unsuspecting crowd. Soon, the jolt drops away that this work genuinely is inspired by power lines or debris piles. Replacing that shock is fear, exhilaration, loneliness and other gut-seizing feelings that one would never expect to waft from such banal subjects. From these emotions, Cosgrove hopes, will come the awareness that he desires. If it succeeds, the artist who vows that he is not a revolutionary may have won a revolution after all.

Ben Cosgrove will perform for the Piano By Nature concert series on June 3 at 3 p.m. on the Essex Quarry CATS Trail on Lakeshore Road, just outside of Essex, and on June 4 at 3 p.m. in the historic Hand House parlor in Elizabethtown. For tickets and more information, call 518-962-8899, email pianobynature@gmail.com or visit pianobynature.org.



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