Becoming
JLA

Composer **JOHN LUTHER ADAMS** talks to Brunswick's **CARLTON WILKINSON** about his early activism, his Pulitzer Prize for "Become Ocean" and his hope for the world's future.

JOHN LUTHER ADAMS, THE COMPOSER KNOWN casually as JLA, hit a new peak of celebrity in 2014 when his orchestral work "Become Ocean" landed him a Pulitzer Prize. The work, commissioned and recorded by the Seattle Symphony, also won a Grammy for Best Contemporary Classical Composition in 2015.

A resident of the Alaskan wilderness for most of his career, physically and culturally isolated from the mainstream art world, Adams was suddenly in the limelight. Did it change his life?

"No. Because I was 60 years old," he laughed in a recent interview with the *Brunswick Review*. "I've just been doing what I do my whole life, living out of the way. Someone took notice, and it was wonderful. It's great, but it didn't change anything."

Indeed, his daily routine remains what it always was. For 36 years in Alaska, he spent part of each day in a cabin in the woods that served as his studio. These days his home is an isolated spot high in the hills of the Chihuahua Desert that crosses between the US and Mexico.

JLA's music is sensuous and often pictorial. Yet in its pursuit of the mind of nature, it is also abstract and selfless, retaining the spark of experimentation that marked his early efforts. Lately, in works such as the orchestral trilogy, "Become Ocean," "Become River" and "Become Desert," he uses the performing environment itself as a kind of metaphor for humankind's relationship to natural landscapes, locating instruments around the audience to create an unrecordable experience of space. He makes use of every tool at the disposal of the contemporary composer, writing as eloquently for computers and electronic media as for more traditional ensembles. In each, he attempts to saturate the audience's awareness.

Adams' use of a structural, often mathematical rigor distinguishes him from others inspired by the natural world. A classic example of that is his "The Place Where You Go to Listen," a sound installation at the University of Alaska Museum of the North that interprets into musical sound a live data feed from weather and geologic stations around the arctic. Visitors hear a never-repeating interpretation, on a human scale, of music made by the Earth and the environment, in a space completely redesigned by the composer to host the experience. His newest orchestral work, to be premiered in the spring by the South Dakota Symphony, is titled "An Atlas of Deep Time." It draws its form from the Earth's age: 4.6 billion years compressed into 46 minutes.

"The most preposterous orchestral work yet," he says, laughing. "And I swear it's my last."

Adams is also the author of several books, including a recently published memoir, *Silences So Deep*, and articles in *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker* and *Slate*, among others.

Our conversation touched on his background as an activist, the influence of nature on his work and his discovery of birdsong—a phenomenon that has inspired musicians across the ages. He also spoke about the spiritual aspect of his work, and his ambition to overcome his own weaknesses.

How have you fared during the pandemic and what's your day look like?
My day is just exactly the way I like it. I don't know what day of the week it is often. I spend most of the day in my studio. And then usually in the afternoon I go up the mountain. A gourmet dinner, and early bed. Then up and at 'em again.

I've been like this my whole life, but I'm aging toward 70, so I'm beginning to see mortality. The pandemic has underscored that for all of us, I guess. Although I'm feeling my age, physically, artists have at least the illusion that we can get better as we age. So I get up every morning thinking that just maybe the best work still lies ahead of me.

What prompted you to move to Alaska?
My dad was climbing the corporate ladder with the phone company, and every few years we would pull up and move somewhere else. The longest that we ever lived anywhere was my teenage years in New Jersey, the suburban New York City area.

After I left home, I began to realize people would talk about going home, and I had no idea what they were talking about. Because there was no place to which I felt I belonged. It was a deep, inarticulate, spiritual, existential hunger that I didn't fully understand. Through a supreme stroke of good fortune, I found home at the tender age of 22 in the far North. The moment I arrived in Alaska, I knew that I had come home.

Before that, when I left music school in California, my girlfriend and I took up residence in an old farmhouse in rural Georgia. There I discovered the music of birds. In a real sense, my life's work began there. I sometimes think of the birds as my first teachers. As I got more and more obsessed with birds, I became fascinated with not only what they sing, but where they sing. I pretty quickly became involved in environmental issues with a local chapter of the Audubon Society trying to stop a dam on the Flint River in Georgia. And that threw me into environmental activism in a deeper way.

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At that time, the Audubon Society and a large number of environmental and labor groups and science organizations had formed the Alaska Coalition. It was a kind of unprecedented grassroots network of organizations all over the United States, all joining together in a campaign to set aside complete ecosystems in Alaska, the last remnants of original North America within US borders that was still healthy and intact. I was just on fire with that. That's what drew me to Alaska in the summer of 1975.

I was a composer—I knew from the time I was 15 that this was what I was going to do with my life. When you're young everything's happening at once. All these discoveries, all this excitement, and the sense of possibility. I imagined I could do it all and do it all at the same time.

The classical tradition has long stood accused of being an ivory tower, removed from societal concerns, but has lately faced a real reckoning over social issues. Diversity is a particular concern, but not the only one. How does this moment look from your perspective, having composed music as a kind of environmental activism?
I guess my music is a kind of activism. But I was a full-time activist before I gave myself entirely to art. As a teenager I was marching in a candlelight vigil in memory of Martin Luther King Junior arm-in-arm with people from his home parish at Ebenezer Baptist Church on the South Side of Atlanta, singing "We Shall Overcome." So my roots, not just in environmental activism but social justice, do go way back.

Frankly, I realized I didn't have the courage for a life in politics. I think implicit in that leap of faith into art was the belief that, in its own way, cultural work can matter every bit as much as politics. And I've been trying to make good on that ever since. In recent years I've come to believe that, fundamentally, it matters more. Because it is slow—"Ars longa, vita brevis." If we look back on history, mostly what we remember, at least of the good parts of societies and civilizations, is the culture.

So I throw my lot in with art first and foremost. Like all of us these days, I am profoundly troubled by economic and social injustice, by the deep-seated racism of the United States, going back to the twin original sins of this nation: slavery and genocide of Native Americans. I can't divorce my thinking about my work from that.

Yet I chose art, and I insist that the arts is my way of making a difference in the world. And it will only make a difference if it succeeds as art. So my first responsibility is to my art as art. Because anything

else I might hang on it by way of my environmental or social or political concerns—none of that means anything if the music doesn't succeed, if it doesn't touch you in some deep, inarticulate place as music, first and foremost.

Did the isolation of Alaska work to your advantage?

I guess if we live long enough, our failings become our strengths; our sins become our charms, right? I left politics because I realized it is an area where I'm inexpert. It takes a lot out of me because fundamentally I'm an introvert. So Alaska saved me in that way. It gave me a quiet place in which I could feel that I was removed. I was out, way up there on the edge, far from the competitive careerism of the music business, from all the noise.

And that made all the difference. I'm not bragging about it. I'm not proud of it. I'm just grateful for it. For someone else, it wouldn't have worked at all. Or maybe for a year or so, it would. Thoreau spent, what, couple of years at Walden? I've spent 40 years in Alaska. And again, even since leaving Alaska, I've lived in isolation, in quiet places off the grid. It's what I need. It's what the music needs. It's what my art needs.

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You must have had doubts, as young artists do, about whether or not you were going to be successful or how successful you could be.

From the time I was a kid, and especially from adolescence on, I was overconfident. No one could teach me anything. I always had to feel that I was discovering fire on my own. So there was never that kind of doubt.

Another one of these fortuitous gifts, one of the blessings of my life, was hearing the music of the wood thrush and trying to write that music down. It turns out that was the favorite singer of Henry David Thoreau, as well. From that moment, I knew. "This is magic. There is something here that I can follow for a long time. I think it means something." A year later, I'm working in the mountains in Alaska and imagining the music up there and all that space and silence and wind and stone and fire and ice.

There was a moment that you describe in *Silences*: You had just decided to quit your job to devote yourself to music. And your wife, a couple months later, decides she's going to quit her job to start a nonprofit.

Yes! She followed me over the cliff! It was so exciting. We were still relatively young—well, 40, maybe, late 30s. We were living in Alaska; we were living the dream. I had my studio in the woods, and I went there every day and composed some music that, somehow, I imagined someone somewhere sometime might want to hear.

She and I were partners in the environmental movement, too. So we had already forged this way of working together on a shoestring. Because it just didn't define us. We had everything we needed, and we were thrilled to be where we were, doing what we were doing.

With a large work like "Become Ocean," do you begin with a clear sense of how it's going to turn out? Is the whole thing sketched out in your head or is it more an act of discovery?

"Discovery" is the right word. The excitement and the thrill of discovery, just the possibility of discovery, is one of the things that keeps me going as an

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artist. Generally speaking, I try and resist composing for as long as I possibly can, because I find that as soon as I start putting notes down on paper—let alone on a computer screen—then I'm pushing notes around. I try to hold that state of "unknowing" for as long as I possibly can. So that the image, the weight, the texture, the presence of the music that I know is out there, just beyond my reach, becomes clear. I guess what I just described is deductive, isn't it? I work from something, a big idea, then gradually follow the layers down through more and more detail, finer and finer particles.

People have described your music as "beyond style" and "beyond judgment." Is that deliberate?

For me, being in touch with the Earth and the practice of my music are ways to transcend myself, to get beyond my own ego, and my own fears, and insecurities, and failings as a human being. It's my redemption. I want the music to have this sense of being larger, deeper, older, more elemental than I can fathom.

You wrote that for "Become Desert," you needed to know where the musicians were going to be on the stage before you could begin. That use of space seems important in your work.

For years, the music I write has been haunted by metaphors of place and space. It started out when I was young, taking dictation from the birds. The physical world that we inhabit, the space within which we are listening, is now a fundamental compositional element for me. So that, as you were suggesting, before I start composing now, I not only ask myself questions about what the instruments are, or the voices, but where they are located, where we hear them.

This begins to speak to what we were just talking about, of transcendence. I want to get lost in the music. I want to be inside of it, I want it to be all around me and beneath me and above me. I want to get hopelessly lost in it. That's what I want for myself, and that's what I want for you, as a listener.

What can the listeners expect from "An Atlas of Deep Time"?

Maybe this is one of my reflections and responses to the pandemic and the political and social turmoil over the last couple of years, not to mention climate change. I've been reading a lot of geology and Earth's history, again, as a way to be in touch with something other, bigger, deeper—and then all of our travails. That's a kind of the underlying tone of "An Atlas of Deep Time."

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The tempo marking is 100 million years a minute. So 46 minutes traverses the four billion, five hundred forty-some-odd-million-year history of Earth, at least in my imagination. "Become Ocean" has three instrumental choirs. "Become Desert" has five choirs of players in the orchestra, including one choir of singers. This one ups the ante: It's six different groups of instruments scattered above and around the audience. And it's big—a big sound.

I'm thrilled about this piece; I can't wait to hear it. I think it's going to be a sound we haven't heard. Beyond that, have I finally gone over the edge and into the abyss, the bottomless pit of bad taste? I don't know. But that's not my job. And, from a certain perspective, nothing is more overrated than good taste.

Was the 2005 sound installation, "The Place Where You Go to Listen," an inflection point?

I was everything on that project—the composer, the lighting designer, the architect, the construction foreman, the glazier, painter, the really bad carpenter, the janitor—I was everything. It almost killed me.

It was some kind of a landmark, for sure. It's a point of arrival and a point of departure. It's one of the most implacable things I've ever done. It takes time. You have to be fearless. You have to be patient. You have to be willing to enter into it. It doesn't care if you're like this mountain I'm sitting on now; it doesn't care whether you're there or not.

In some ways, it's the summation of 40 years of living in and being passionately in love with Alaska. It's so complex and so many moving parts technologically. Just today, my programmer is arriving in Fairbanks to do the final tweaking of our major 15-year renovation of "The Place Where You Go to Listen."

The piece is now realized in a way that is more complete, more like my original conception of it. And I'm feeling good about its future. I'm hoping that it may be there after I'm gone.

Do you have any other message for our readers?

I would say to an artist, an activist, a business leader, to anyone of a certain age: Think about the kids. Think about the next generations. What keeps me going to my studio every day is my love for and my faith in these next generations that are going to sift through the rubble that people my age are leaving to them. My generation—we have failed miserably, as custodians of the Earth and of our fellow human beings. Hopefully these new generations will bring about a new culture, a new society and a new way of being together, living together with one another, and with all other species of life on this Earth. ◆