

Artists From Around The World Meld Journalism Into Music

- By [Holly Pate](#)

Recently, four Bermudian artists decided to take part in a global collaboration focused not only on producing rich beats, but also promoting ocean awareness.

Ironically, [The Outlaw Ocean Music Project](#) all began far from the sea – not by boat, but instead within a car outside of Washington, D.C. Starting when the New York Times, Pulitzer-prize winning journalist, Ian Urbina’s son was maybe 10 years old, Urbina would drive him and several of his friends around in the car, and play a competition that came to be called “The Imagination Game.” First, Urbina would play the first 20 seconds of a song that had no words but was epic and dramatic. Then, he would abruptly turn off the music and one by one each of the kids had to describe in rich, evocative, five-senses detail what was the scene in the movie in their head that would go with the music they just heard. Whichever kid offered up the most lively and convincing scene that fit with the music, won that round of the competition.

Urbina is a journalist by trade, rather than a musician, but in some ways, The Imagination Game was a writing exercise. But it was also an experiment in reverse engineering and a form of creativity calisthenics, demonstrating that music is a deeply impactful way to communicate feelings and emotions. This game is what got Urbina first thinking about the power of music to tell stories.

Urbina spent the past several years reporting on lawlessness at sea across five oceans, 14 countries and all seven continents. In 2019, he published his book, *The Outlaw Ocean*, based on his series in The New York Times. Urbina has subsequently launched various initiatives and projects related to it, which are primarily focused on spreading awareness about the environmental, labor, and human rights abuses occurring at sea. One of these ventures stemmed from those car rides with his son and his friends: The Outlaw Ocean Music Project. [The Outlaw Ocean Music Project](#) is a first-of-its-kind collaboration of such creators. In combining their mediums, these narrators have conveyed emotion and a sense of place in an enthralling new way. The result is a captivating body of music based on [The Outlaw Ocean](#) reporting. All of that time spent at sea allowed Urbina to build an audio library of field recordings. It featured a variety of textured and rhythmic sounds like machine-gun fire off the coast of Somalia and chanting, captive deckhands on the South China Sea. Using the sound archive and inspired by the reporting, over 500 artists from more than 80 countries are producing EPs in their own interpretive musical styles, be it electronic, ambient, classical or hip hop.

The Bermudian artistry featuring Heather Nova, Jude Richardson, Detrivore and Nala Tessloff all produced varying musical interpretations, but shared a common goal of creating content that told important stories.

Tessloff said, “As the singer, I loved combining the whale songs with the crying seagulls. I wanted to sing with them, so I found a melody that captured this feeling of solitude and the overwhelming desire for freedom that the sound of the sea inspires.”

It’s hardly surprising that a music project was born from this book, since Urbina used music in various and sometimes oddball ways while reporting offshore. Certain songs were his version of Adderall, helping Urbina focus in distracting – and often dangerous - conditions. Others offered an incredible salve for deeply dark things witnessed. But perhaps Urbina’s most valuable use of music while reporting was when songs served as mnemonic devices.

When Urbina writes he usually listens to music without words. He also casts soundtracks to things that he sees. On one ship, Urbina watched 40 trafficked Cambodian boys and men work brutally long days, and he remembers late that

evening, trying to polish his notes and sifting through a playlist of instrumental songs. “Was that one scene where the boys ate between shifts more The Leftovers or Ad Astra,” he wondered? (He went with The Leftovers for its haunting and weighty sensibility). Capturing the scenes in music was for him a memory aid in that the music was an easier and more efficient moniker for the mood of a moment.

When Urbina looped back later, and tried to build on his notes at the end of a day of reporting, he would listen to the songs that he tagged to a page of scribbles in his notebook. Urbina would listen to that song again as he sat down to write the story. The song would come to embody more than his words could. It was a bit like a designed Pavlovian Effect. Each additional time that Urbina would tie his notes and a scene to a song, it would conjure up images, feelings, an entire setting.

Journalists don’t use music enough to access people. And yet, musicians are masters at telling stories with their songs. Urbina thought: Why should movies be the only things that have soundtracks? Why can’t a book have a soundtrack?

By pairing two types of creators — a journalist and a musician — around content that is urgent, dramatic, and global, the outcome is music that is tied to something much deeper: a collection of at-sea issues that connect us all.

These artists have also taken a real leap of faith in lending their creative capabilities to help spread this message, try something new and support this journalism. Furthermore, they have produced some gorgeous music. Some artists decided to choose a theme to inspire their EPs, telling a story, with a beginning, middle, and end. Others focused on conveying an emotion or feeling without necessarily spelling it out in lyrics. All struck the perfect balance between a vast, open, and ‘free’ ocean, and a melancholy, dangerous, and limiting space.

Across all of the artists participating there’s a global audience of more than 90 million, thanks in part to the geographic diversity of the artists participating. In recruiting artists from around the world, the project conscripted an army of cultural diplomats who are talking, in their own language of music, about the weighty concerns facing this offshore realm and the millions of people who work or depend on it. This disparate audience is one that could never be achieved in a traditional journalistic way, and the revenue that the project takes in goes towards the non-profit that funds Urbina’s future reporting.

The Outlaw Ocean Music Project is releasing new music every month.

Listen to the music: [here](#). Learn more about the project: [here](#).