CULTURE

Ballroom resident Rob Frye shares ‘the magic and beauty’ of West Texas birds

BY ABBIE PERRAULT

OCTOBER 28, 2020 613 PM

MARFA — Refrigerators hum, clocks tick, birds chirp — and then inevitably, humans tune out the persistent noise, until it hardly exists at all. But musician, birder and recent Ballroom Marfa resident Rob Frye wants to tune people back into the melodies of local birds and his latest album, Chihuahuan Desert Birdscapes, is an invitation for locals to begin to hear again.

The album itself relies on Frye’s field recordings from the area and his own improvised instruments from invasive grasses found on the border, along with audio contributions from Xeno-canto, a site where citizen scientists upload birdsong recordings. The artist is a trained musician, but also spent three seasons as a field biologist, counting birds by ear in California.

“One of my goals with the project is to make people more aware of their environment. It’s so vast, it’s easy to look over the whole thing,” said Frye. “For some reason, the general public thinks bird watching is over your head or...
for dorks."

But Frye is passionate about helping people begin to see with fresh eyes these creatures that have evolved intricately over millions of years. "We really should pay attention to them and stop pretending that we can't understand or stop overlooking it. It's not like people are deliberately not paying attention, but it's one of those things that's subtle. But my job as a musician and bird watcher is to show them the magic and beauty of the hidden stuff."

In the album, Frye made a point to sample endangered birds in the area, wanting to make sure to capture some of the unique threatened species in the area, "but also highlight what we share," he said. From his home in Chicago, he discussed eastern meadowlark ranges, which span from his area all the way to West Texas.

Alongside the Ballroom commissioned album, Frye has presented a "Hearing Hidden Melodies" lecture, organized with the Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute in Fort Davis. "Listen to the lecture first," Frye suggested. He admitted he's the type to read the plaques when visiting museums, and hopes the lecture enlightens subsequent listens to the album in the same way.

"Their sounds are just insanely cool to me as a musician and when you slow it down, you can hear it," he added. "We have to really appreciate it."

The lecture is available through November 1 on Ballroom Marfa's website and the album is available on Ballroom Marfa's Bandcamp.