



Looking back at the ancient peoples gives me a lot of hope and strength. I see that it is possible for us to live on this earth in a different way. Maybe we're not going to see the change in our lifetime—probably not—but time is a very mysterious thing. Things do not always happen in the way we think they are going to.

ReTurning

**Recorded in the Oracle Chamber
in the Hypogeum
at Hal Saffieni, Malta.**

*An Interview with
Jennifer Berezan*

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Life Passages

I've been working with music in a spiritual way for a number of years now, following my desire to create and integrate music into our life passages and changes. Historically, people have used music for sacred events from birthing to dying to the planting of seeds, but corporatization has turned music into entertainment so that it is no longer central to our spiritual life and the day-to-day life of the community.

We have very little music to help us through experiences of loss and change and death. My interest in using music in this way came to me partly through my own life crisis—an intense period of personal loss and change. When I made the album called *She Carries Me*, I received many letters saying, "I used this when my mother died," or "... when my lover went away," or "... when I was ill."

A Desire Catches Fire

I had been leading trips to Malta with Joan Marler for several years. About one and a half years ago, we were able to go to the Hypogeum—an "underground tomb" that had been closed to the public for many years due to a restoration project. The Hypogeum of Malta was carved from solid limestone around 4000 B.C., before the time of metal, and is one of the most beautiful and extraordinary works of art on the planet.

It was such an experience to walk those steps, three stories down into the underground chamber and to be inside the Earth, inside the body of the goddess. I had heard for many years that there is a room in the Hypogeum made specifically for sound. Even in mainstream archaeological journals and articles, this room is referred to as the "oracle chamber."

For me, as a musician, this was incredibly exciting. A wonderful man named Joe, who is the custodian of the place, allowed me to sing in the oracle chamber. This was one of the most remarkable sonic experiences of my life. The oracle is a room in the larger series of chambers that make up the Hypogeum. It is carved of solid stone. The sound of singing there is not unlike that in the great cathedrals of the world. I have sung in St. James Cathedral



Oracle Chamber Ceiling, The Hypogeum at Hal Saflieni, Malta All photos provided by Jennifer

in London, as well as in other cathedrals, and this experience was comparable. Yet it was also very different. There were overtones and qualities of different and unusual sounds, and it also seemed that the Hypogeum itself was “tuned” to particular notes. I was singing inside the Earth, in a place that had been used for thousands of years for ritual, for oracles, for prophecy. It was obvious that the people who built it had an incredible understanding of acoustics, and of the value and power of sound for healing.

After having this chance to sing and do ritual with our group in the oracle chamber, a desire to record there caught fire in me. As I was walking out of the Hypogeum, I knew that I had to come back with recording equipment. After months of negotiations with the museum authorities, and then through the help of some Maltese friends, I was given permission to go there and make a recording. This was the extraordinary opportunity of a lifetime—one that might never be granted again.

The Musical Journey

Some things that happen are so much bigger than we are. We step into a moment of time, and a door opens that takes us beyond our small personalities and ego understandings.

That is how this felt. Once the final “yes” was spoken, all the doors flew open. To the mind, it was risky to take expensive digital recording equipment to the Mediterranean, go underground into this chamber and make a CD-quality recording. But the whole process was absolutely beautiful and easy.

We were given the extraordinary gift of being trusted to be completely alone in this space for three days, with some of the world’s most important archaeological works of art. Throughout the Hypogeum and on the ceiling of the oracle chamber were 6,000-year-old red-ochre paintings. It’s very hard for me to recount what it was like. Initially I described the experience as being in an “altered state,” but as I felt into that I realized that it was a deeply “authentic state.” The world “out there,” after I left the Hypogeum, seemed to be the altered reality.

Being in the Hypogeum felt like home—comfortable, healing and grounding. A sense of compassion was awakening within me there for myself and for the friends I was with. I felt a profound peace and ecstasy—not just from being in this place, but from being able to make sound there. The whole place vibrated with our songs; it was exquisite, and beyond words.

Because I had only three days, I had prepared a chant in advance—a repetitive chant that sings, “returning, returning, returning to the mother of us all.” I also made the space to just listen to the place itself, to be with what was there, and to be attentive to what wanted to come through. Musically, it was a free and improvisational process. For three days, we recorded whatever emerged. Later we edited and mixed the tapes.

I knew I needed an incredible engineer, someone with a deep understanding of acoustics who could express and capture on tape

the profound quality of the sound there. So I asked Don Benedictson, a fellow Canadian with whom I had worked on my last record, *Refuge*. He's known for his work with Ferron. Chris Webster also came with me. She worked on *She Carries Me* and sings on all my records. Her sister, Catherine Webster, an opera and early-baroque singer, came as well. We also took some sisters who had been to Malta before, and other good friends who had not yet made this trip. I wanted to create a sense of community, and to know that friends and priestesses were holding a sacred space while we recorded.

Some Maltese friends came as well, including Marie Mifsud, a wonderful Maltese woman who has helped me with the tours and had opened many doors in Malta for Joan and me for many years. Marie helped with the logistics of the recording and was instrumental in getting us permission to record there. Marlene, another Maltese friend, also helped. This felt like a three-country project, representing the United States, Canada and Malta, and a very wonderful, mixed community of support.

Modern Entryway to the Sacred

Because the Hypogeum is being turned into a tourist site, the entrance is different than it was historically. It's very interesting, actually. You drive down a street in the town of Paola and there it is—a doorway that says "Hypogeum." This is not what most people would imagine—an ancient site oddly located in the middle of a bustling town.

You get out of your car, walk in the front door, and you are in the lobby of a new visitor's center. When we were there, they were just beginning renovation. We went through construction zones upstairs, and then descended down a spiral staircase. We emerged in the midst of a complex of adjoining circular rooms. Three floors of such rooms were carved from one solid piece of limestone, using flint and obsidian tools. Their beautiful round shapes have incredible ridges with complex lines. The shapes found in the temples of Malta above the ground are repeated underground in these egg-like, lobe-shaped rooms, resembling the forms of a female body.

The bones of thousands of people were found in one of the rooms. It was obviously used as a burial chamber, the bones apparently brought down after the flesh had decayed. We do not know about the actual ritual, but we do know that many Neolithic people practiced two-



Hypogeum at Hal Saflieni,

stage burials. After vultures and other birds of prey had de-fleshed the body above ground, the bones were brought down, perhaps at specific seasonal times. According to the great archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, the Hypogeum was not only the tomb; it was also the womb.

An area in the Hypogeum called the "Holy of the Holies" contains a model of an aboveground temple, linking what is above to what is beneath the ground. Most of the aboveground temples are aligned to the sun at the equinoxes and solstices, and to the stars and galaxies. Underground, one has the sense of being inside Earth, the deep womb of the goddess, and also of being connected to the sun and sky. To the ancients there is a continual cycle from birth to death to regeneration. It's not that above ground is life and below it is death. There is a sense that all is held within the womb of the Mother-Creator. All is functioning within that. Life is not separated or dualistic. Reality is whole, and cyclical. There were certainly rituals for the dead, but the whole of ritual life in the Hypogeum was probably very much about the living as well.

In archaeological manuals, I have seen aerial views of the Hypogeum as a series of adjacent chambers. Some theories indicate that the complex has not been entirely excavated, and that one hypogeum may be linked to another through underground tunnels. This is not a mainstream theory yet, but there are all kinds of possibilities and much more archaeological work to be done in Malta. Through the coming years, I think much more will be revealed. In fact, some underwater temples have recently been discovered off the Maltese coast. Some people believe that the dates of these temples and therefore of all the other temples in the area could be much earlier than is currently believed.

Spirals and Dreams

A major motif in Maltese art is the spiral. There are so many different kinds of spirals that they form their own language. On my last trip, I took pictures of these. The spirals that are present everywhere speak to the reality that life, death and regeneration are all being held within the body of the goddess.

A famous sculpture called the *Sleeping Lady of Malta* was found in the Hypogeum. One theory is that she is pregnant, or wants to become pregnant, and has gone into the Hypogeum to incarnate the spirit of a dead ancestor. Or, maybe the *Sleeping Lady of Malta* came



Spirals from the Tarxien temple, Malta

down into the temple to do dream incubation. Her position is similar to some Tibetan Buddhist dream-yoga poses. Associations with birth, with dreams and visioning for prophecy, greater wisdom and understanding add weight to the theory that the Hypogeum was much more than a burial chamber.

Restoration

Malta is the home of many cultures built on top of one another. Presently, its population is ninety-nine percent Catholic. Most Maltese people are not aware of the importance of these sites, and many have never been to the temples. This is partly because the government itself did not take much interest in them until the rest of the world said, "Wow! These are the oldest free-standing temples in the world!" Stonehenge dates to about 3000 B.C., and the pyramids are considered to have been built around that time. Therefore, Malta's 6,000-year-old temples are significantly older.

Several years ago, the Hypogeum was put on the UNESCO list of protected sites and closed for restoration. In 1996, sophisticated controls were installed to regulate air temperature and humidity. Now, rather ugly metal railings establish control over where people can walk, and metal floor coverings protect the stones from wear and tear. This certainly changes the acoustics, the aesthetics and the emotional impact of this awesome and powerful space when it reopens soon. The good thing is that nothing has been drilled into or attached to the stone. Everything can be removed at any time. Some people I talked with in the museum are not happy with the way it looks, but they are happy that the mobile pieces can be removed or changed as needed. It's a balancing act between protecting the structure itself and preserving the spirit of the place.

Theory vs. Knowing

In January 1999, when we made our recordings, there were a couple of metal railings, but the floors were still the original pure stone. This is one reason that our opportunity was such an historic occasion.

In my trips to sacred goddess sites, women very often have a sense of returning to something they feel they absolutely know, and of having been there before. Certainly there were moments, when we were singing, that time and space seemed to become nonexistent. It felt as if something were opening, as if the crack between the worlds were widening. That felt deeply familiar to me.

The archaeological world is interested in these sites, but its interpretation is different from that of Marija Gimbutas, who proposed a sacred goddess culture and peaceful egalitarian society in Neolithic Europe. There has been an enormous backlash against her work.

Some Maltese archaeologists are more open, but even they have been affected by those in their field who refuse to deal with Marija's evidence. Marija's theories turn established archaeology on its head and threaten the traditional understanding of history, of civilization, and of gender relations. Having gone to sacred sites and museums over the years, I have no doubt that Marija was right on.

Some male archaeologists question whether certain female figurines are indeed female, suggesting that they may be androgynous priests. One theory, published in *Scientific American*, proposed that the temples of Malta were made at a time when people were experiencing a great amount of stress due to environmental problems, and that food and survival issues made different tribes compete to build them. Such wild extrapolations and reactionary theories are being published as plausible

mainstream ideas. Yet the primary audience for such theories is academia itself.

On the other hand, a huge groundswell of people is becoming interested in Neolithic civilization to gain a broader understanding of history and of how we got where we are. People are eager to find other models for ways of living and being. Thousands of men and women are studying Marija's theories and are traveling to ancient sites to feel the energy firsthand.

Prehistoric Malta was devoid of weapons. The people were highly artistic, highly devotional, and connected to the cycles of nature. They lived peacefully in every way for thousands of years. That's a remarkable achievement.

If you look at our world, you cannot point to anything like that, and yet many people are looking for a different model to rebuild our world. People who want to go to school and work with Marija's material are having a hard time, since many professors are so narrow in their understandings. The real change is happening at a much more grassroots level. On a deeply intuitive body level, people are linking, dreaming, and starting to have a direct experience of an older tradition. That is also why there is such an interest in my music. I receive emails and calls from all over the world.

Right before the Bronze Age, the Neolithic people of Malta disappeared. No one knows where they went, so this is an unsolved mystery. Maybe they left because they knew the patriarchal incursions were moving in their direction. Maybe they moved



Two views of Mnajdra Temple, Malta

west and connected with the people who built the temples at New Grange in Ireland. There are certainly similarities in their symbolism, building technology and alignments. This is interesting to think about.

For the last two years, Joan and I have led groups to Malta, and led a spring equinox ritual at the Temple of Mnajdra. We have been witness to the fact that these ancient people aligned their temples to the rising sun on equinox morning. As the rising sun shines through the entrance of the temple, it lights up the altar in the back. This is an incredible phenomenon. There is also a theory that this temple is aligned to the Pleiades at this time, which would display a deep astronomical understanding.

Music

I have made five albums. Some reflect more of my singer/songwriter folk-music personality. *Refuge*, a very recent acoustic record with strings, cello and guitars, has a lot of Buddhist themes. Other music reflects my politics and my love of Earth. All of this music feels very personal, whether it is political in content, or a love song, or of a spiritual nature.

I began to understand the power of repetitive chanting through working with Vicki Noble in her healing circles for many years. We would sing and chant and drum for hours. Whereas pop songs played on the radio can be no more than three and a half minutes long, indigenous people understand the power of singing all night long. They

sometimes sing and dance and pray for days. Ceremonies use the power of music—drumming, rhythm and repetition—to change our state of consciousness and to heal our bodies, psyches and emotions. This opens the doorway to our most authentic selves, to the other worlds, and opens our hearts.

She Carries Me (1995) explores the realm of meditative and trance music specifically designed for rituals and life passages. This album features a twenty-four-minute multi-layered chant track in honor of the Buddhist goddess Kuan Yin, the Tibetan goddess Tara and Mother Mary. It also features a spoken work by Olympia Dukakis and music by acclaimed violinist Darol Anger. It is being used in so many ways—at countless healing centers, hospitals, in the death-and-dying movement, at birthings and other rituals, and for personal meditation.

ReTurning

For my new album, *ReTurning*, I wanted to make an entire CD without breaks. It consists of one piece that is fifty-two minutes long. At the base is the chant “to the mother of us all” that we recorded in the Hypogeum. To that we added layer upon layer of drone and improvisation. In my desire to pray to and bring forth our whole legacy of female deities from all over the world, I added in the whispered names of hundreds of goddesses.

I have been following a Buddhist practice for many years, and felt drawn to chant a prayer from the Heart Sutra in the Hypogeum—*Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi Swaha*. It is about the impermanence of life—“Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone beyond the farthest beyond” and evokes the Goddess of Perfect Wisdom. The Goddess changes everything she touches; all things are changing and cyclical. We brought back all these layers on tape to Berkeley.

I wanted to make the album a beautiful weave of various cultural traditions. African-American singer Linda Tillery added a beautiful song/prayer to the West African goddess Yemaya, the Ocean Mother. Sharon Birch, a Navajo singer, chants in Navajo for Mother Earth. Qwaali singers Sukhawat Ali Khan and Riffat Salamat sing in the Pakistani tradition, improvising in an eastern scale, which to me felt similar to music originally played in the Hypogeum. A beautiful trance-like drum carries the whole thing forward; the hand drums and percussion are played by Rick Lazar (percussionist for Loreena McKennitt).

The music came together on its own, without much planning. The entire layered piece moves and grows and changes, as an expression of cyclical reality, and turned out much more beautiful than I had planned. What

magically emerged when we mixed all the sounds together was something like an underground river: You can choose to follow different pathways, but because there are other streams flowing simultaneously at the same time, the rational mind has to let go. This great release helps you naturally enter into another state.

Bio

As a little girl, I started playing my guitar in the second grade. I grew up Catholic, and after Vatican II I noticed a more mystical-nature base and folk-music presence in the church music. I was very connected to that until I became a feminist and got an undergraduate degree in comparative religion. Eventually I left the church, but continued to develop as a musician, playing in coffeehouses, bars and lounges. Eventually, I moved into concert circuits and conferences.

I played at political events in Alberta, Canada, for peace groups, Latin-American and African solidarity events, and for every women’s issue you could think of. I moved to the States, studied with Matthew Fox at the Institute for Creation Spirituality, and completed my master’s degree in 1984. At that time I also started making connections in the women’s spirituality world and playing music in that context.

I co-teach a class with Arisika Razak called “Women’s Sacred Art” at the

California Institute of Integral Studies, lead trips to sacred sites and teach a workshop for women called “The Ecstasy of Sound” in which I use sound, song, chanting and rhythm in a ritual context to connect women to their ancient roots. I also still perform folk music.

The project I’m most excited about now is the concert/ritual we are producing on February 6, 2000. Over seventy musicians, dancers, poets and ritualists will perform *ReTurning* as a prayerful and ecstatic community event. (See ad p.13) It is being sponsored by the California Institute of Integral Studies and is a benefit for the film and book projects about Marija Gimbutas and the women’s spirituality department at California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS).

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Jennifer Berezan Photos provided