

A NEW SONGBOOK FOR A DYING PLANET

Writers, musicians, producers and festival programmers are trying to find new ways to communicate the enormity of the climate crisis. **Chris Moss** talks to them about folk song, farming, ice, industry, wonder and awe

Protest music is a genre as varied as its subject matter. Woody Guthrie used pared-back folk song to give a voice to the voiceless. Mercedes Sosa and Miriam Makeba were musically sophisticated, lyrically sublime. Quilapayún and Pete Seeger invited their audiences to share in rousing choruses. Billy Bragg punks up Guthrie. Cheb Mami uses rocky, fiery *rai*. Sting waters it down. They denounce inequality, racism, war, apartheid, military dictators; they fight for the disappeared, the exiled, the landless.

Climate change is a different order of crisis for the 21st century protest singer. For one thing, it includes all of the above subjects and touches all of our lives. It reaches deep into existential as well as political and social questions. It augurs a calamity that could wipe out countries and millions of lives. Yet it is also somehow remote: too big to imagine, too

devastating to contemplate. It is urgent for people in many different ways. What worries you more? The extinction of rhinos, the flooding of Bangladesh, the prospect of massive immigration? How do you empathise with something that is already happening, everywhere, in so many different ways, and which could, inside a few decades, spell utter disaster for billions of people as yet unborn?

In mid-October, when Extinction Rebellion's sit-down protests were making headlines and Greta Thunberg was addressing the global media and members of the political elite about her sailing adventure, George Monbiot headlined one of his columns, *'Today, I aim to get arrested. It is the only real power climate protesters have.'* Sure enough, he was picked up – literally, by his limbs – for ignoring a ban on demonstrations. The ban turned out to be, in fact, illegal.

