

# Whale Sex

David Rothenberg<sup>1</sup>

Every morning of every day in the first months of every year, Paul Knapp sets out from the shore of Tortola in the Virgin Islands in the hopes of recording a humpback whale song better than the one he heard on Valentine's Day, 1992.

"I remember that day well," nods Paul, looking up at the sky. "It was the fourteenth of February, and I was all alone. I went slowly and with respect, to the spot I always go to listen. I didn't even see the whale. I think he was used to me by then and used to the sound of the motor. The whole moment made sense. It's never been quite like that again. But I keep coming back, waiting, listening."

Last spring I spent a week camped out on a Caribbean beach with Paul strolling through the campground trying to find people to come out with us to listen for the ultimate song. We would just walk from one campsite to the next whispering to its occupants, "Hey, wanna come out and hear some whales sing?"

We took a forty year old tanned surfer babe and her teenage boyfriend out into the waves on a rubber Caribe raft. Drop the underwater microphone down and there's the song. "Oh, listen to him, he's getting there, Geez Louise, all right, that's a good one, yeah baby! Whooooee!"

I asked what she thought the song was all about.

Staring at me with disbelief she said "huh, I thought that was obvious. It's got to be something to do with mating. He really sounded into it."

When an animal gets involved in a long, complicated or excessive display we always think it's got something to do with sex. Bowerbirds painting bowers, peacocks spreading magnificent tails, gorillas beating their chests. The humpback whale sings the longest, most ornately patterned song known in the animal world. Only the males sing, so of course it's to lure in those giant females, right?

Nature wouldn't be nature if it didn't confound our suspicions at every turn. No one has ever seen a female humpback whale show any reaction to this song at all. No one has ever seen humpback whales mating. Never mind the orgasmic moaning

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1 David Rothenberg, professor of philosophy at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, has just published *Thousand Mile Song: Whale Music In A Sea of Sound* (Basic Books, 2008). Most of this sex stuff was cut from the book—good thing you've read it here. His previous book *Why Birds Sing* has recently been turned into a television program for the BBC. In the show he has to strip down to his underwear and pretend to be a song thrush.

bliss of those humpback echoes, they're almost always sung by a male whale suspended fifty feet down underwater, motionless, all alone. Sometimes he keeps singing for half a day.

Then after a while another whale does approach, to listen quietly. But he's not a female, but a male. The joiner does not sing himself. The first whale stops singing. The two go off silently for a time, then they separate. That's all we know. No fight, no sex. Just silent rorquals in the blue green light.

How could this be, you protest! Whales must always be having sex, slamming their great bodies against each other with all their might, spraying foam and sea all over the place. *Slam! Dunk! Swish!* Whale sex is as shrouded in mythology as every other kind. Humans will say just about anything about whales if we can get away with it.

Other whale species have better sex: at least we've seen it happen. With right whales, the females mate with a bunch of males all at the same time. He with the most sperm wins, which explains why their testicles weigh about one ton apiece. Their penis is up to eight feet in length, and it can curve around and find its way into the female when the two are swimming side by side. They were named Right Whales because they swim slowly, thus being the "right whale to kill," but they're also the right whale to watch making love. Two thousand pound balls! An eight foot penis! Whale sex is clearly at the limits of human comprehension.

Gray whales often congregate in one or two Baja lagoons, where they are easy to observe mating, birthing, and generally cavorting right around human whale-watching boats. Like the right whales, the grays practice the same kind of sperm competition favored by chimpanzees and dragonflies, other species where size matters. (Gorillas, for the record, do not. Their penises are only two inches long.) Smaller whales like orcas and belugas are much easier for humans to observe in the act. In Moscow a Russian scientist showed me a video he made, with a special seafloor mounted camera, of svelte white beluga whales nuzzling each other in the White Sea. Easy to see mating there. "Da, look he slidez up next to her and then sticks it in, voila! Then he svims away, and back, does it von more time just to be sure! Zhis video is especially popular with the ladies..." and he takes another swig of vodka.

So each whale species is a sexual world unto itself. Some can be seen, others will stay shy. I still wonder about that ten hour song though. Humans have been following humpback whales in particular for decades because only they sing such miraculously endless melodies which never stay the same. Each year the phrases change, following similar metamorphoses in all reaches of a single ocean, so that wildly separated groups, say in Hawaii and off of Mexico, all find their song

evolving in an identical way, thousands of miles apart. How do they do it? We have no idea. Why do they need a new tune each season? Science doesn't even know the right way to ask that question.

It's supposed to have something to do with sex, but it is a kind of sex we have never seen, something we can barely imagine. In relentless pursuit of knowledge some people have tried a more direct, interactive approach with cetaceans. Back in John Lilly's laboratory on St. Thomas in the 1960s, Margaret Howe Lovatt lived with a dolphin for six months in a specially designed house, half submerged and half above water. Here's how she described her dolphin friend Peter's sexual urges: "When his penis becomes erect, he no longer tries to run me down and knock me off my feet, rather he slides very smoothly along my legs, and I can very easily rub his penis with either my hand or my foot. Peter accepts either and again seems to reach some sort of orgasm and relaxes.... This is not a private thing, but it is a very precious sort of thing."

Thinking back about the experience decades later, Margaret remembered this: "Peter could bite me in two, but he taught me I could trust him. Thinking back about that time and what I wrote, I realize I left out things about myself. Perhaps I felt they were not important or was ashamed of them."<sup>2</sup>

Only northern traditions offer myths of people reaching out to the world of whales. The Chukchi of Siberia and the Micmac of Canada both tell this story: A girl on the beach senses a call from deep in the sea. She looks outward, and begins to dance. A deep, crazy movement stomping loud beats on the shore. She cries out, an impossible wail no one has ever heard before. A curious head breaches up in the shallow water. A right whale cautiously shimmies into the shadows and becomes a handsome man who steps out of the water. He puts her arm around her and they walked off to her shelter. This whale-man would stay for a while, then return to the sea, disappear for a time, but always come back.

The Woman Who Married a Whale gave birth to human children and whale children. The boys and girls played on the rocky beach in the sun. The baby whales swam in the lagoon by the village, but when they grew too big, they would disappear out to sea and join the pods that swam by the village a few times a year.

She would always tell her human children, "the sea gives us our food but remember your brothers the whales and your cousins the porpoises live there. Never hunt them, but watch over them. Sing to them."

Her children grew up, then they had children of their own, all human ones. The village prospered until one very tough winter. There was little to eat. One

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2 Quoted in John Lilly, *The Mind of the Dolphin*, Doubleday, New York, 1967, p. 282.

grandson told another, “why don’t we kill a whale? There’s certainly enough meat and fat on even one to get us through this season.”

“Remember what grandma said,” replied his human brother. “Those whales are part of our family. We must leave them alone.”

“What kind of brothers are they!” said the other. “They are long and slow, with penises longer than I am tall. They live under the sea, and they don’t know a word of human speech.”

“But we can sing to them, and they listen.”

“You sing. I’m not going to die of starvation,” and with that he paddled out into the sea and one right whale swam slowly up to his boat, as they were used to doing. It wasn’t very hard to spear him.

When they dragged the dead leviathan back to shore the killer went to his grandmother, proud he had found food to save his people. “I killed a whale, grandmother. There is meat and blubber for all to eat.” The Woman Who Married a Whale already knew what had happened. “You killed your brother, just because he doesn’t look like you.” She closed her eyes and died.<sup>3</sup>

It all went downhill from there. Now even when a human kills another human, no one is really surprised.

It’s easy to hear a humpback whale sing, all you really have to do is sail close to one and stick your head underwater. Without any microphone the sound is loud and clear, if you’re right above the whale. And yet no one ever noticed the sound until fifty years ago. We must have been afraid to listen, or even notice the whales enough to hear them.

Once you hear the song for the very first time, you’ll assume that, like bird songs, it’s been celebrated by humans for centuries. Too many of us have forgotten the humpback whale song since those famous records in the 1970s. It’s as hard to find anyone under thirty who knows what a singing whale sounds like as it is to find a woman of that age who doesn’t have a tattoo.

See two whales having sex, you think you’ve seen them all. But nature embraces so many differences—I guess we have to love all of them before they will reveal their intimacies to us. Paul and I and our two guests motor back to the beach. Sure, we heard a song, but nothing like the great melody of fifteen years back. Beauty, speculations, the usual questions, never answers. Nothing to do but lie on the beach for a few hours watching pelicans spear fish a few feet in front of our faces,

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3 This Chukchi story appears in Yuri Rythkheu, *A Dream in Polar Fog*, trans. Ilona Chavasse, Archipelago Books, Brooklyn, NY, 2005), pp. 104-107.

and then head right back out, hoping to see or to hear what no one has ever caught before.