# Anohni prepares to mourn the Great Barrier Reef with immersive Sydney performance



Anohni Hegarty, the British-born, New York-based avant-garde singer best known for her work with Anohni and the Johnsons, is preparing to visit the Great Barrier Reef for the first time. Her journey, scheduled for next week, will take her to Lizard Island, a remote paradise known for its pristine white sands and vibrant blue waters, located 1,600 kilometres north-west of Brisbane. However, despite the island’s natural beauty, Anohni’s purpose is somber: to document the current state of the world’s largest coral reef, which is facing unprecedented environmental challenges.

Coral reefs like the Great Barrier Reef play a critical role in global biodiversity, supporting roughly a third of all marine species and sustaining approximately one billion people worldwide. Additionally, reefs function as essential carbon sinks, and host algae responsible for producing over half of the planet’s oxygen. Comparisons are often drawn between the Amazon rainforest, referred to as the Earth’s lungs, and the Great Barrier Reef, described metaphorically by Anohni as its “left lung.”

An alarming series of six mass coral bleaching events have struck the reef over the last nine years, a trend driven by record-breaking marine heatwaves. Scientists warn these bleaching events—where corals lose their symbiotic algae due to elevated ocean temperatures—pose a significant threat not only to the reef itself but to global ecological stability, potentially precipitating cascading effects that could accelerate mass extinctions.

Reflecting on the profound scale of this ecological crisis, Anohni has pondered the cultural responses appropriate to “a loss of this magnitude.” In a wide-ranging interview with The Guardian, she highlighted the absence of collective rituals designed for gradual, slow-moving environmental devastation, contrasting them with the ceremonies—such as funerals and protests—that have traditionally followed sudden tragedies. “Where are the ceremonies fit for the purpose of naming and commemorating the times that we’re living through?” she questioned. Comparing the reef’s decline to “10,000 9/11s,” she expressed the difficulty people have in imagining the death of such a vast ecosystem.

Anohni’s upcoming project for this year’s Vivid festival involves two performances at Sydney Opera House entitled Mourning the Great Barrier Reef. These shows will feature a blend of songs spanning her career, combined with underwater footage captured at Lizard Island. Working with the conservation-focused production company Grumpy Turtle, Anohni will direct the scuba film crew remotely while snorkelling, an activity she describes with a blend of excitement and apprehension. “I feel so privileged just to go,” she said. “I’m scared and I’m very excited. But I’m with a great team, and they’re all very knowledgeable, so they’ll help me through it.”

Anohni drew poignant parallels between coral bleaching and human expressions in the face of death. She described the fluorescent glow emitted by corals under heat stress as akin to the “gold of the soul” that might show on someone nearing death. “She’s saying goodbye,” Anohni reflected, recounting a conversation with a scientist who accompanied Danish students to a dead reef where the group mistook coral skeletons for extraordinary beauty.

Throughout her musical career, Anohni has often woven the climate crisis into her ethereal and emotive songs. She recounted her 2009 track Another World, which expresses a longing for an alternative existence as the current world “is nearly gone.” Her song 4 Degrees, released at the 2015 Paris climate conference, offers a haunting forecast of ecological collapse as global temperatures rise.

As a trans artist and climate advocate, Anohni has experienced a form of alienation that she acknowledges as a vantage point for unique insight. “When you have an outsider status, you have an opportunity to see the forest for the trees,” she explained. Her artistic work addresses interconnected issues including patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, climate denial, environmental degradation, and spiritual concepts of paradise positioned beyond this world.

Anohni’s connection to Australia is personal and longstanding. In 2013, a visit to the Martu people in the Western Australian desert deeply influenced her. She recounted being struck by the Martu worldview that souls return to country after death, a belief contrasting sharply with her own British-Irish Catholic upbringing. She has supported the Martu in their activism against uranium mining, including contributing proceeds from Dark Mofo concerts in 2015 and participating in a 110-kilometre protest march. She also made headlines on the ABC’s Q&A programme by challenging opponents of renewable energy, an episode that was criticised in some media yet garnered broad public support.

Despite her environmental commitment, Anohni remains reflective about her own carbon footprint, especially related to international travel. She acknowledged the "intolerable equation" of flying to Australia for her work, underscoring a personal sense of responsibility while noting that, when she performs in the country, she donates proceeds to relevant causes.

Her Vivid project also includes interviews with leading reef scientists such as Dr Anya Salih, an expert on coral fluorescence, and Professor Charlie Veron, known as the “Godfather of Coral.” These experts have observed the reef’s decline firsthand, with Veron previously describing the outlook as “horrific,” noting that reefs as currently known may not survive beyond mid-century. Anohni praised Australian scientists for their emotional openness about the reef's plight, contrasting it with what she described as the more detached English scientific community.

Anohni’s hope is that Mourning the Great Barrier Reef will create a space not only to witness the reef’s deteriorating state but also to experience the emotional reality it represents. “For an hour and a half you can come to the Great Barrier Reef with me, and we’ll look at it and we’ll feel it,” she said. “Without understanding what we’re looking at, there’s no hope of finding a direction forward. It’s actually a profound gesture of hope.”

The Guardian is reporting.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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