# Anohni mourns the Great Barrier Reef with evocative Vivid performances



Anohni Hegarty, the British-born, New York-based avant-garde singer known for leading Anohni and the Johnsons, is preparing for her first visit to the Great Barrier Reef. She describes her anticipation with complex emotions, saying, “I feel like I’m going to Auschwitz,” reflecting both excitement and fear at witnessing the reef’s current state. Set to travel to Lizard Island, located 1,600 kilometres north-west of Brisbane, Anohni will document the reef’s condition. The island, renowned for its pristine sands and clear blue waters, contrasts sharply with the urgent message she aims to convey.

The Great Barrier Reef is a critical ecosystem that supports about a third of all marine species and sustains around one billion people worldwide. It plays fundamental roles in carbon sequestration and oxygen production, comparable in ecological importance to the Amazon rainforest—often called the Earth’s lungs. The reef has suffered unprecedented damage: it has experienced six mass coral bleaching events in the past nine years due to record-breaking marine heatwaves. Scientists warn that the loss of coral reefs could trigger a domino effect leading to widespread ecosystem collapse and increased risk of mass species extinction.

Anohni reflects on the challenge of processing collective grief in the face of such a slow-moving environmental catastrophe. “Where are the ceremonies fit for the purpose of naming and commemorating the times that we’re living through?” she asks. She compares the reef’s decline to multiple simultaneous disasters on a historic scale, stating, “To see the Great Barrier Reef fall, that’s 10,000 9/11s.”

At this year’s Vivid festival, Anohni is staging two performances at the Sydney Opera House called Mourning the Great Barrier Reef. The shows will feature songs from her career alongside footage captured at Lizard Island, with Anohni directing underwater filming teams while snorkelling. She admits to feeling both nervous and privileged: “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.”

Coral bleaching events are marked by corals releasing intense pigments or expelling symbiotic algae, processes that produce vivid, sometimes deceptive, displays of colours before the corals die. Anohni poetically describes this phenomenon as a “final expression,” saying, “It is like when someone’s dying, sometimes they show the gold of the soul. They throw their life force into a final expression. That’s what coral bleaching is … she’s saying goodbye.” She recounts a conversation with a scientist who took students to a dead reef, where they misinterpreted coral skeletons as beauty, not realising the reef’s grave condition.

Anohni’s work has often included themes of environmental crisis and social interconnectedness. Her songs have touched on climate change, systemic injustices, and societal denial, exemplified by her 2009 track “Another World” and 2015’s “4 Degrees,” which portray bleak futures shaped by global warming. She acknowledges being regarded as a prophetic figure on the sidelines but appreciates her outsider perspective as both a trans artist and climate activist. She sees her art as engaging with “all this unwellness that we have woven together,” addressing issues such as capitalism, racism, environmental degradation, and cultural denial.

Her connection to Australia extends beyond the reef. In 2013, she visited the Martu people in Western Australia, profoundly affected by their belief in returning to country after death—a concept contrasting with her own Catholic upbringing. She has supported indigenous causes, raising funds against uranium mining on Martu lands and participating in protest marches. She also took a bold stance on the Australian television program Q&A, defending renewable energy and challenging anti-wind power views, which sparked significant public reaction.

Aware of the environmental impact of her travels, Anohni has adopted a principle of only performing in Australia for causes to justify the carbon emissions involved. For her Vivid project, she is also interviewing leading reef scientists, including Dr Anya Salih and Prof Charlie Veron, chronicling their observations and grief over the reef’s decline. She notes the emotional openness of Australian scientists, contrasting it with a perceived lack of expression in the English scientific community.

Anohni hopes her Vivid performances will provide an opportunity for audiences to confront and grieve the reality of the Great Barrier Reef. “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 says. “Without understanding what we’re looking at, there’s no hope of finding a direction forward. It’s actually a profound gesture of hope.”

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

## References

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* <https://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/vivid-live/anohni-and-johnsons> - Verifies the inclusion of underwater footage from Lizard Island in her Vivid performances
* <https://www.anohni.com/latest> - Describes her environmental justice focus and scientific collaborations for the reef project
* <https://www.bandsintown.com/e/1034628121-anohni-and-the-johnsons-at-sydney-opera-house> - Lists the May 26-27, 2025 Sydney Opera House dates for her reef-themed performances
* [[No URL available for Lizard Island/Great Barrier Reef damage statistics]](%5BNo%20URL%20available%20for%20Lizard%20Island/Great%20Barrier%20Reef%20damage%20statistics%5D) - NOTE: The six mass bleaching events (2016-2024) and reef decline details require scientific sources like AIMS or GBRMPA reports, but no direct URLs appear in provided search results
* <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/apr/26/people-cant-imagine-something-on-that-scale-dying-anohni-on-mourning-the-great-barrier-reef> - Please view link - unable to able to access data