



Meeting by the Lake

How a photo project and a dilapidated piano inspired a friendship—and an unlikely collaboration **BY MICHELLE BOGRE**

The horizon is a line that separates earth and sky. For photojournalist Brendan Bannon and jazz pianist Boyd Lee Dunlop, it became a point of artistic connection.

The pair's bond began improbably in 2010 when Bannon, who had been living in Nairobi, Kenya, returned to his hometown of Buffalo, New York, to shoot a photo essay at the Delaware Nursing and Rehabilitation Center. There he met Dunlop, an elderly resident with a friendly manner and a habit of playing the home's out-of-tune old piano.

Bannon was intrigued. He'd spent most of his twenties in Buffalo caring for his mother, who was living with multiple sclerosis. "The experience of taking care of my mother showed me that behind every moment of perceived suffering there is a profound victory over circumstances," Bannon has noted. "I look at people's lives as being full of meaningful relationships, striving against odds and achieving small victories."

Above and opposite: Brendan Bannon's Lake Erie images that Dunlop used to improvise the album. Opposite, middle: Boyd Lee Dunlop in a studio session for his second album, *The Lake Reflections* (below).



That awareness drew him to Dunlop. Now 86, he was twice Bannon's age. The guy could also really play that piano. Although he had been a working musician most of his life, he had made only two recordings—as a sideman in the '50s—unlike his brother, Frankie Dunlop, a drummer who played with such jazz greats as Thelonious Monk and Charles Mingus. If anyone were going to help Dunlop realize his dream of releasing a solo album, it would be Bannon.

After a bake sale at the nursing home raised enough money to get the old piano tuned, Bannon recorded a demo of Dunlop and sent it to a friend, Allen Farmelo, a New York-based record producer and owner of Butterscotch Records. The result was an album, *Boyd's Blues*, recorded in a Buffalo studio with bassist Sabu Adeyola and drummer Virgil Day. With coverage in the *New York Times* and on NPR, the album was warmly received and even debuted at the top of the iTunes jazz chart in 2011.

A nice story—but there's more. Dunlop's resurgence inspired Bannon to resume work on a series of Lake Erie photographs that he had started but abandoned years earlier. "My house is on the lake, and in Buffalo we're defined by our relationship to the lake," he says. "I can close my eyes and see Boyd sitting alone every day playing that decrepit piano and it reminds me that we chase our creative dreams because we *have* to. When the lake makes me feel something, I grab my camera."

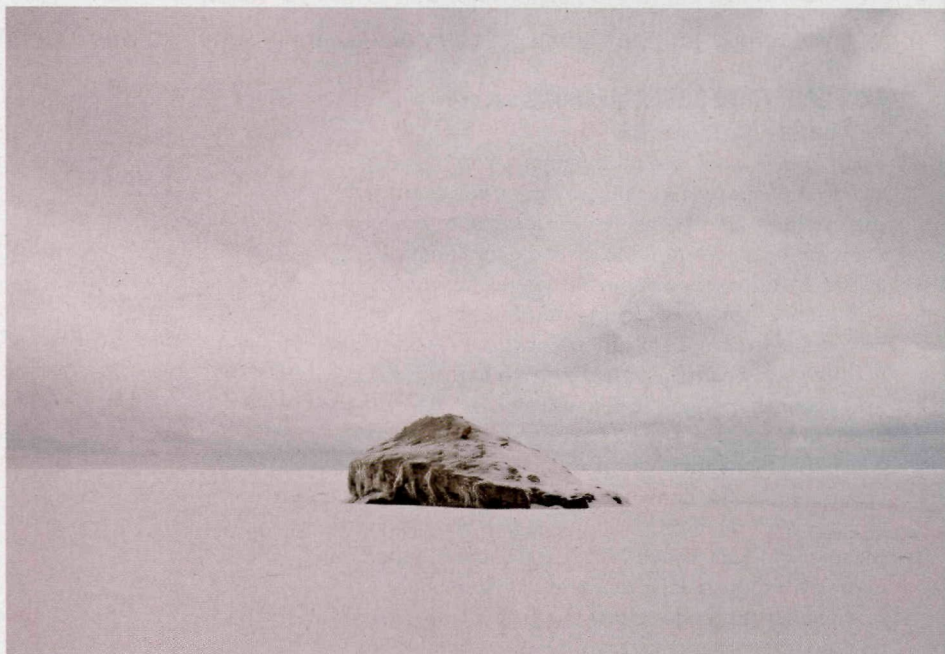
Bannon's Lake Erie images are a departure from his work documenting orphanages in Romania or the impact of conflicts in Somalia and the Congo. The quiet lake images trace changes in the horizon, lake, and sky. Seemingly simple compositions, the images vary ever so slightly in the shifting position of the horizon line; the longer one lingers, the more emotionally complex they appear. "Taking these photographs became my daily meditations," Bannon says. "One of the revelations in getting to know Boyd was that it's about keeping your eyes open and getting down to doing your work."

The lake images connected the two friends once again after Dunlop suffered cardiac arrest—he appeared to have died when his heart stopped for six minutes. When he recovered, he announced his desire to record another album. This time, Farmelo wanted to produce a solo disk with Dunlop playing original compositions, improvised at the piano. So the producer employed a technique he'd tried before: using visuals to help a musician focus and center on a feeling or mood. Farmelo asked Bannon to bring his Lake Erie photographs to a session. "I wanted atmosphere, mood—something very universal, and very little is more universal than a horizon," Farmelo says. "These images show Brendan in a different way. The side of him that's an artist had resurfaced, and I thought Boyd might respond."

It worked. "Boyd really got inside these images," Farmelo says. A photograph of melancholy ripples prompted Dunlop to say, "I've looked at the picture and cried until I didn't have anything to cry about anymore." The musician sat down at the piano and recorded eight improvisational tracks. His 2012 album, *The Lake Reflections*, is paired with Bannon's images reproduced in a 16-page booklet that comes with the CD. (The disk and images are at cdbaby.com or downloadable from iTunes. Listen to a sample at americanphoto.com/dunlop-bannon.)

Dunlop sometimes composed specifically to an image; other times to several. A shot of raindrops evoked a descending piano figure in "First Drops of Rain;" a fiery red sunset inspired "Sunset Turmoil." Like the photos, the music is evocative, graceful, and inventive. Dunlop uses the piano to "create a peace he doesn't get anywhere else," notes Farmelo.

And Bannon uses Dunlop's music to remind himself to make images that give him respite. "I listen to Boyd's music when I'm traveling. It's in my head and it weaves its way into my work," he says, off on another photojournalism assignment. **AP**



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