Sonic Sketches

Sonic Sketches is an attempt to harness the sense of mindful awareness engendered by the simple, isolated lifestyle practiced by the Kent Island Community, directing it at the island itself in the hopes of creating an album of compositions that simultaneously document and evoke the interactions between the island and its inhabitants, both human and nonhuman (as well as their interactions with each other), through the arrangement and manipulation of audio samples taken from field recordings made on and around the island over the course of the summer. In keeping with the ethos of voluntary austerity cultivated on the island, this project was undertaken with the minimum of equipment thought necessary: A small digital recorder, a laptop with two audio editing programs (Audacity and Ableton Live 9), and headphones. This process was aided by a voluntary abstention from use of phones or internet, allowing near-total immersion in the creative process (aside from time spent cooking, another substantial portion of my time on the island). Tracks presently range from 10 to 35 minutes, and generally focus on a single area, incorporating audio samples from the entire recording period to create a mental image of the location. The audio samples are generally chosen due to their innate musicality or poignance, and manipulated/arranged to emphasize this, especially in relation to other samples used within the track.

Recordings were mostly taken within the first 6 weeks of being on the island, with supplemental recordings taken as needed. I would either accompany researchers into the field to record them as they worked or go out into the field myself. This was followed by roughly two weeks of listening to recorded material and isolating usable material. After the tracks' respective sample lists were finalized, time was spent in each locale to regain familiarity, both alone and with the researchers who worked in those areas. This was followed by composition itself, which ended up following a similar process. The samples were laid out in Ableton in relatively chronological order, or if there were specific series of events I wanted to include, they would be laid out accordingly. Some would be allowed to loop, as others played their lengths and finished. I would start a few initially, listen to how they interacted with one another, and then add or subtract samples as needed. Like navigating through the areas themselves, I would move through the samples, listening for interesting confluences of sounds or important events as they occurred. After spending enough time with the samples and forming a general idea of how I wanted to represent the area through the sounds at my disposal, I would record myself navigating through the samples as I had many times before. This process was not foolproof, and many takes were needed to produce a satisfactory result. Exclusive use of prerecorded non (strictly) musical sound made overdubbing and specific changes difficult and tedious, while starting the recording over allowed me to become even more familiar with the material while avoiding making the same mistakes. Balancing this project with being the island's cook took some time to get used to, but
I was able to schedule my workdays around the 2pm-6pm block of time needed to prepare the researchers' dinners as well as take care of the day's chores. I quickly learned to never underestimate the hunger built up by spending a day in the field, and I was able to scale both familiar and new recipes up to satisfy the entire station, and more often than not have some leftovers to serve as part of the next day's lunch.