



## PARLER AVEC LES OISEAUX

Discovering Quelle Est Belle Company  
with founder and conservationist  
François Morel



A few years ago Calum and I lived in Lausanne, Switzerland. In our early twenties, and having never lived abroad, ~~we~~ we had an incredible couple of years there, discovering the beautiful alpine landscape, way of life and culture. It wasn't without challenges and we worked tirelessly to make ends meet, yet looking back, it was a very formative time for us both and we still often find ourselves wishing to be amidst the majestic mountains and vibrant cultural scene there.

Perched high above the city, next to the Lausanne cathedral, stands Vivishop. The toy shop you always wanted Hamleys to be but it never was - a magical place with a beautifully curated selection of toys that yearn to be discovered. With 6 nieces and ~~two~~ nephews at the time (now 9), slowly discover this shop we did. During our years in Lausanne, gifts for them were pretty much exclusively bought from Mr and Mrs Gratwohl, owners of Vivishop, including many of François Morel's ~~appearances~~ - bird whistles.

There is something about these simple little wooden boxes that awaken a deeply engrained childhood curiosity. Manifesting in muscle memory, you slide open the top of the box to discover not a set of dominoes but a carved wooden object that is not quite an instrument, not quite a toy — alas it is a whistle! Laying patiently below are small slips of coloured paper, “i love birds” states one, “birds sing today! please help to protect all wildlife for tomorrow” entreats the other, and glued to the bottom of the inside of the box are instructions: a concise lesson on how to perfectly mimic the call of a specific bird with this wonderful wooden device.



I love the birds

Fast forward to last November when our research for Bower was well under way and we were in one of our favourite places in the world, Le Marais in Paris. On Square du Temple is The Broken Arm, a beautiful boutique subtly camouflaged in the green of the square. In a carefully curated gift shop, amidst an array of art books and fine tartan scarves, with records playing and the coffee machine whirring in the corner, we rediscovered,

or more accurately, remembered with delight, François' whistles. Here they were! This was serendipity, a gift from the universe, a full circle moment of knowing we needed to feature the whistles in Bower Issue One.

That evening we went down an internet rabbit hole, deep into the depths of the Quelle Est Belle Company website, uncovering the scale of the whistle collection and finding ourselves moved by their sincere dedication to wildlife conservation that stretches far beyond birds. We watched many, many 30-second-long demonstration videos where François shows how to get the best out of each instrument. Upon our return to London, I immediately sent them an email and crossed my fingers.

A few emails and a couple of months later and here we are, on the mountain road from Grenoble to Drôme, with thanks to the generosity of ~~and~~ an old friend who puts us up. We set off at 7:30 am, quickly leaving the city and beginning our day's journey. Before long we have Mont Aiguille to our right, calling conference with the other massifs of the region on this crisp morning. All the while their honoured guest, le soleil, slowly rises to take his place among them, saluting us with his rays.

As we descend into the Drôme valley, my heart is racing with excitement and anticipation. As we pull up outside Quelle Est Belle Company's atelier, I turn to Calum and express my excited nervousness which I see mirrored in him.

Quickly now, out we go. François and Virginie meet us on the gravel track and I soon feel an internal calm replace my nerves — between their warm smiles, soft voices and open manner I have the same sense of knowing this is going to be good — ça marche.

The atelier is nestled against a steep forested hillside on the edge of Beaumont-en-Diois. We follow our gracious hosts inside and are immediately greeted by a colourful wall of small wooden boxes — whistles ready to be packed and sent around the world. After some hot drinks and introductory chatter, we head upstairs to the cosy office where the team mainly work. They are 8 people in total — François, Laurent, Jeanne, Cyril, Manu, Cathy, Virginie Lune and Virginie Soleil who has been my kind and courteous correspondent throughout this process; she oversees the wholesale side of the business. The four of us take up seats around the office, François opting for a

modest stool in the corner, his full collection of over 50 different whistles on a ledge to his left and a tall shelving unit full of his creations behind him — little owls, cuckoos, blackbirds, great tits, chaffinches, and many more — keeping him company.

Together we acknowledge that the business would not be what it is if not for the efforts and passion of the team, yet it is also made clear that François is the one with the vision — he is Quelle Est Belle Company. I ask him how it all started.

“It is an old history,” he says softly with a smile. “As a kid I was unschooled so I have always talked with animals and then when I was older I wanted to share this. I started to make a little box with



four whistles to talk to birds. It was for school children as I was still young myself, and so I called my business 'L'enfant à la fête'. It was a non-profit organisation and people liked it but after about 10-12 years it was clear it had to become a commercial company. At that time we created 'Quelle Est Belle Company', on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1980.

"And why the name you may ask, for three reasons. The first reason, I was young and still believed in the benefits of advertising, and I had a fascination with IBM. IBM - three letters. Three letters that the whole world knew at the time.

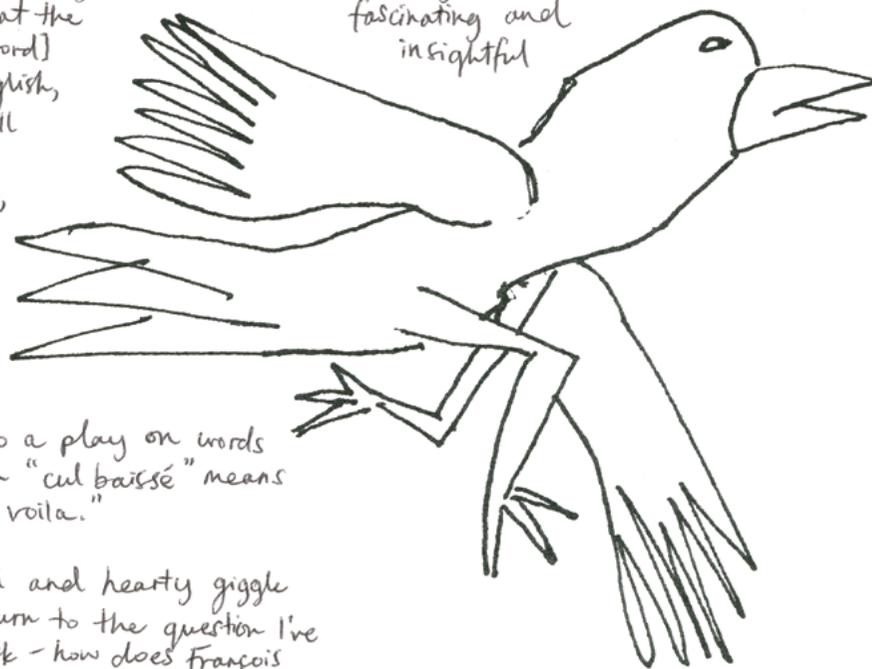
"Then in French we have this expression - 'Quelle est belle...' as in 'How beautiful is my... valley?' for example. And at the same time, [the word] 'compagnie' is in English, that is to say 'still not so good' referring to France, and so it is a beautiful English company that I created. So I had my three letters - QBC. It is also a play on words because in French 'cul baissé' means 'ass is low'. Et voilà."

After a surprised and hearty giggle all round, we turn to the question I've been eager to ask - how does François get from a bird call to a whistle

prototype that is ready to be put out into the world?

"It is a constant problem," he tells us, "I am always thinking about something. I collect a lot of things and do many tests. But I can only make a good object from that process once I know a bird's call very, very well. It is by dint of having heard them and knowing them that I can recreate it... there are lots of solutions to creating a song."

François proceeds with explaining the different methods he enlists to create bird songs, from adapting a seemingly simple flute through adjustments to form, the addition of different holes and valves, through to his use of folded bike tyre inner tubes to uncannily recreate the chatter of starlings. It is a fascinating and insightful



conversation where François demonstrates the calls of the hoopoe, green woodpecker, nuthatch, long-eared owl, black-bird and more - explaining the varying techniques used to create these unique calls.

"I started working on the [whistle for] the bullfinch. I started this before my daughter was born, she is 40 years old now and I'm still working on it... I had an idea to do a whistle for an owl we have on the road you took here. When you go through the mountain tunnel, sitting above the tunnel is the nest of the Tengmalm owl that we have only here in Drôme and at the Valdrôme mountain range. It took me 4 years to create that call, so it's fast compared to 40 years."

Like with any instrument maker, there is a lot to consider technically to make a design ready for retailing. François uses exclusively French woods and sources them as locally as possible, some coming from the forest directly around his workshop. How the wood expands over time is an important factor as this could change the nature of the call. Same to, the bike tyre inner material mentioned before was created to his specifications: once François arrived at this solution, he worked with a French factory to develop a more supple and food safe alternative to perfectly meet both design needs and safety requirements for the whistles' users.

The sun nudges us gently with his rays, recalling us from our conversation and urging us outside. As we begin

to make our way out, François casually but proudly points out a beautifully fabricated clear acrylic box with precise partitions containing an assortment of whistles, made for none other than Björk. A couple of her Utopia vinyl lie on the low table in front.



Björk's Utopia Bird Call Boxset collaboration with Quelle Est Belle Company  
Image courtesy of OLI Records

Once outside, we follow François round the side of the building and climb up a steeply inclining gravel path that zig zags upwards like the serpentine roads we took here. Little do we know that there is to be many stops on our tour yet.

First we arrive at a large shed-like structure, flanked by two large lean-tos that hug the rockface we've been climbing. With uneven compacted bare earth beneath our feet, we enter and walk a long a dark passageway



created by piles of boxes, wood, paper, fabric, furniture and everything else. François apologises for the low light on account of his tenants here: some sleeping pipistrel bats in the corner. As we emerge from the other side of the building, we fleetingly encounter François' other tenants as they retreat with a flutter. To our left, beyond the patio, among some young trees, is the best lunch spot in town. In the middle of a metal table sits a large black cast iron pot. François lifts the lid to reveal a banquet of black and white sunflower seeds inside, recalling to me memories of Ai Weiwei's Tate Modern Turbine Hall installation of the same name. Excited and animated, he tells us of regular visits from the birds he shares his garden with, as well as squirrels both red and grey, badgers and foxes.

Our attention is turned to a weather-aged arrangement of outdoor furniture,



deliberately placed a respectful but watchful distance away from the banquet. François tells me this is where he will come to work in the summer when the weather is fair, he describes a tranquil state, completely at one with nature, and how he is often kept company by the many animals mentioned above. As the sunlight and shadows dance on this scene I can't help but beam at the magic of this place and my fortune to be able to experience it.

We climb higher, passing François' 1970s Citroën DS Pallas. Out of use for many years, the earth supports its underside and moss embraces its curves. We all stop for a moment to admire its beauty. Another zig, up we go, another zag and alas we arrive at an even more



cavernous shed-like building, full of larger boxes piled high, forming a maze of twisting passage ways. Greeting us here, sitting conspicuously atop the largest mountain of boxes, is a giant fox. François tells us this was a promotional mascot he would use at community fetes and events to raise awareness for Mille-traces (Association for the Protection and Education for Environment), an organisation which he still supports today.

After a respectful bow to Maître Renard, we arrive at a make-shift curtain of yellow industrial fabric, on the right hangs a 3D paper owl, swaying softly in the breeze. I learn that this little owl is the marvelous creation of Malcolm Topp, who is known for his series of to-scale, build-your-own mobiles of different birds in flight. Malcolm has now passed but some of his remaining mobiles are available on the QBC website.

We go through the yellow curtain to find ourselves in a long, narrow workshop with windows obscured on the far side by boxes of whistles in progress, raw materials, tools, posters, and so much more. Instead of describing all that was in the room, instead I'll try to paint a picture of all that is created here:



Here, in this atelier, François has created his life's work over the last 45 years. Each piece of wood is turned, carved, sanded and varnished here; holes drilled, wood meets wood, glued, brass meets wood, glued, rubber meets brass and wood, glued. Every whistle tested for the first time at François' own lips, adjustments made, tested again, and so on. This is a mask at work, this is where the true magic happens.

While Calum takes photos, François shows me a tray of hoopoe whistles not yet boxed. They are marked 'défectueux' and he explains how every whistle is tested again before it is boxed. If the call isn't just right, back up the hill they come so that François can tweak it until it sounds just like the bird it's supposed to talk with. He tells me that he wants his whistles to be used forever. If someone's whistles stop working they can send them back and he will either fix it or replace it. As I hear this, I think 'this is a kindred spirit! In my broken French I try to express how heartily I agree with his ethos and my fundamental belief that generosity of spirit makes the world go round. I truly believe it is the much needed ~~and~~ anecdote to all the crazy in the world (by this point my French fails me and I resort to English, but François thankfully seems to understand me and agree).

Next we follow François further in to his former horse stable turned rabbit warren, this time arriving at a small, bright

room with a desk, many printers and stacks of coloured paper. This, he explains, is where they print the bird illustrations, instructions and little messages for the boxes. On the wall behind the desk is a painting of an unidentifiable seabird soaring amid blue. François tells us the painting is by his cousin and artist Lea Emmelie Adilon. To the left is a poster, sun bleached and falling out of its frame. It shows a grid of François' whistles, each beautifully interpreted in paint. He tells us it is by the same artist, I get closer to admire the details and meanwhile François disappears, soon reappearing with another poster in a cardboard tube for us to have. This small act of thoughtful generosity melts my heart.



As we descend back the way we came, we take an unexpected detour half way along the first dimly-lit shed space, through an unassuming door. We copy François in wiping our feet on a rag at the threshold without being entirely sure why. I look up and let my eyes adjust - we are in his home.

There is a peace in here - sounds from outside are dampened and the light streams in at 45-degrees, refracting through glasses and jars that cover the kitchen surfaces.



François and I shimmy around Cal while he shoots, all of us moving purposefully to avoid disturbing the assortment of ~~bag~~ belongings that make this room a museum-like masterpiece.



The kitchen leads to a larger room with faded ciel blue walls and a decorative monochromatic tiled floor. I am instantly met with warmth from an iron stove to my left, above which a beautifully make-shift clothesline holds François' laundry. But I haven't noticed any of this yet; covering all of the walls are paintings and drawings, clearly a lifetime's collection. François points out some paintings of thread bobbins in the corner, also by his cousin Lea. Cal is drawn to a pair of characterful papermâché bird head dresses perched on the mantle of the fireplace; these have been crafted by Anne-Marie Corot and have a wonderfully sculptural quality to them. From beautiful old French ~~linens~~ linens to a collection of snow globes,

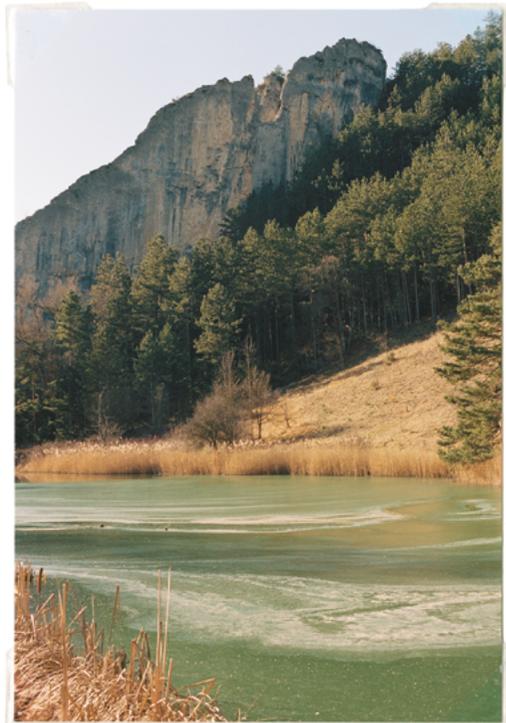


We reluctantly leave this magical home as Virginie has kindly booked us a table at a local restaurant. En route, a short drive from the workshop, we stop at a lake that is completely

frozen over. The patterns on the turquoise surface appear to ocellate in the sun, reminding me of the sensation of sherbet on my tongue. I squint against the sun's brilliance and look up beyond the lake



towards the alpine trees and sculptural rocky peaks that we were directly below not long before. François is very familiar with this spot and leads the way, jumping across an exposed weir like a child across stepping stones. We follow



the gravel path round the lake to find the perfect spot for a final portrait of François. He is drawn to this place as somewhere he regularly comes to speak with birds. He takes off his leather jacket and lays it on a tuft of grass, so that his gilet and binoculars can be better seen, and steps down towards the lake. Festing all the while, he is not beyond being the centre of a joke, comparing himself to the well-known actor François Morel. A couple of satisfying shutter clicks later and we are on our way to lunch.

Walking back to the car, we can't help but notice the large white web-like nests that pepper the trees of the region. Virginie explains that these are nests of stinging caterpillars. A real health risk, contact with them causes serious skin irritation and pets have been known to die after contact with a procession of caterpillars. Their recent prevalence, she explains, is owed to climate change - it no longer gets cold enough in winter to kill them, resulting in a population boom.



Our lunch spot is just a few minutes drive away and set against the railway track. François explains that this used to be the local train station. As we approach we are met by Lucette: proprietress, host and chef of Ancienne gare de Lesches. She greets us



Quelle Est Belle Company x BOWER

We are honoured to collaborate with QEBG to produce a limited selection of whistles painted in traditional Japanese Urushi wood lacquer. Urushi lacquer is made from sap from Urushi trees. When exposed to high humidity the urushiol polymerizes, forming a hard film. Once hardened, the Urushi retains some of the original water, giving it a perpetually wet and shiny finish. Fully hardened Urushi lacquer is very strong and able to withstand mould and mildew.



Available from [bower.world](http://bower.world) website or email [chirp@bower.world](mailto:chirp@bower.world)

warmly, as if she's known us as long as she has François (well over 40 years), and we settle down for one of the best meals we've had for a long time. "It is very hard to find home cooking like this anymore," says François as he opens a bottle of La Clairette de Die, a local sparkling wine. No menu in sight, we eat what Lucette has to offer us - a starter of leek quiche and salad followed by creamy veal stew with rice and a courgette gratin. Everything is buttery, nostalgic and so delicious.

Our mealtime conversations take on many forms from Virginie's paragliding adventures and dreams of canoeing to Japan, to a shared love of Art Brut and François' key role in an important vulture reintroduction programme in 1987. He explains that at the time the French vulture population was just 26 breeding pairs, compared with over 300 pairs today. The success of the programme has led to others following suit across France and internationally.

After lunch my questions resume in earnest, keen to understand all I can in the time we have left. In the depths of the QBC website I had found a document that discusses potential benefits of talking to birds for those with language difficulties. I want to know where this interest in education has come from.

François explains that "to raise awareness and to build knowledge of nature is part of the mission towards better



protecting nature. At the beginning I was an association but at that time schools were not so interested in what I was doing, whereas shops like Vivishop in Lausanne and Pastorini in Zürich were very interested. Pastorini supplied school materials but then increasingly people wanted to buy my whistles as presents... My desire is always the same - that people learn nature with nature. That's why, for example, we don't put the name of the bird on the label of the box. If you already know the bird, then there is less reason to learn about it. Unfortunately, I have some stockists who write the names of the birds on their own labels once they receive them.

"I have always been interested in autism and I've always been convinced that autistic people, children or adults, can identify with birds. Birds always do the same thing, always make the same calls, so they are reliable in a way. I am convinced that this could be a channel of communication for people with autism, a window through sound. My hope is that with the whistles, one could interact with birds and build a connection... Sometimes birds are like

apostles and birds in the same territory know each other very well and will speak to each other. They can therefore warn each other too. They might say to [one another], "They are not the same species, but this person can speak to us!" I hope at that moment the person might say to himself, "Ah, that's it, they answer me, I exist." This is my hope in any case although I've never had the opportunity to properly explore it.

François continues to explain other potential uses for the whistles, from aiding coordination for those with dyslexia and the elderly, to supporting speech impairments and pronunciation through learning to use whistles like the skylark. The opportunities seem numerous and underexplored.

François' whistles are instruments of a sort, and I recall the way he describes his design process, enlisting many of the same techniques one would use to create a wind instrument. I ask François if he is also musical - "I have a friend who plays guitar and I play the drums. We still play together but it's a secret," he says with a cheeky smile.

"But we sell to a lot of classical musicians and also to Thomann, a big music shop in Germany," adds Virginie. She continues to tell us about a project they are working on with Pascal Kaufmann and Dr Matthias Moser. '360° Sound World' at St Petri Church in Augustusburg will be a completely unique organ with six of its notes being birdcalls. François has been developing

adaptations to his calls and the organ # is due to be ready at the end of this year.

I have a final question for François: he must have countless memorable encounters with birds so I ask if he has any he would like to share. He takes no time at all to consider before answering, "The last thing I saw was two vultures making love. That was four or five days ago. It was pretty incredible."

As we say our thanks and farewells to Lucette, I feel the warmth that one is constantly subconsciously in search of. Warmth owed to the openness and generosity of these strangers who are now our friends. As we kiss goodbye in the customary French way, François and I look each other in the eyes, unspoken appreciation and gratitude passing between us.

The drive back to Grenoble was somehow even more beautiful than our journey there had been. Yes the sun setting over the massifs on a perfectly clear winter's evening will do that, but it was compounded by meeting François, Virginie and Lucette that day.

They had recoloured everything for us.



Words by Emmi Keane  
Photography by Cal Douglas