

ON THE EDGE



Jazz players talk about Improvisation

BILL BOTTOMLEY

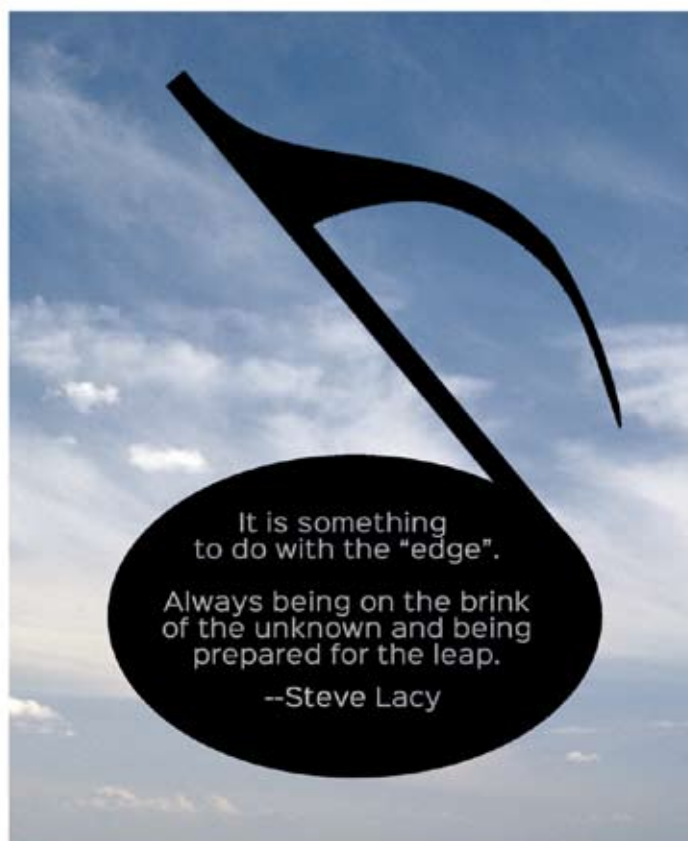
Front cover: *I came across this pic on the Net, and used it on the cover because I think it captures the difference between notated music and improvised music. I couldn't imagine a shot like this taken with the SSO.*

ON THE EDGE



Jazz players talk
about Improvisation

BILL BOTTOMLEY
2018



CONTENTS



CONTENTS

INTRO	7
MAIN THEME	12
Tony Gorman	13
Wallace Carslaw	21
Steve Brien	26
Dave MacRae	36
Joy Yates	44
Sandy Evans	48
Mike Nock	56
Alister Spence	60
Brett Hirst	67
Kevin Hunt	74
CODA	79



When we use words to communicate, we don't often read them out from a prepared script. Most of our speech is, in effect, verbal improvisation. We make stuff up as we go. Music is another way of communicating. It's a language in its own right. Since we learned to notate music – since we learned how to make squiggles on paper that stood for the sounds – much music has been made by reading from the dots. But like oral language, much music has also been made by making it up as we go. This book focuses on musical improvisation – specifically, what the subjective feeling is like to make up music on the spot.

I had a friend once who played classical piano. She could sight-read J.S. Bach like the clappers – and lots of other stuff too, of course. When I asked her about improvising when she played she threw up her hands and insisted that anything like making it up as you go was way beyond her capabilities. She was convinced that she couldn't do it, and, in fact, had never tried. And wasn't the least bit interested in trying. To me, this was a little like talking to someone, but only ever from a written script. With spoken language, everyone makes it up as they go along, but with music, only some players can do it. And with both vehicles, speech or musical improvisation, some are more articulate than others. To never have known the feeling of improvising a jazz solo that works is, to me, to be ignorant of one of the most thrilling ways to play music. Music written down by Dead White European Males has arrogated to itself the nickname "legit", as though the rest of the music played in the world was something which had mongrel origins -- was something which, by definition was "illegitimate".

But playing music from the dots, admirable though it may be, to me is like one musician telling another musician what to play, which is something that I find fundamentally uncongenial. It turns the musician into some sort of reproductive machine, whereas improvised music is new and creatively different every time.

Improvising music is a mysterious process. For instance, the definition provided by the *Encyclopædia Britannica* defines it as *“the extemporaneous composition or free performance of a musical passage, usually in a manner conforming to certain stylistic norms but unfettered by the prescriptive features of a specific musical text”*. Though an accurate summation of the process, I don’t find that that this definition tells me much. It is too generalized. But the entry goes on to be more specific. *“A common view of what a jazz soloist does could be expressed thus: as the harmonies go by, he selects notes from each chord, out of which he fashions a melody. He is free to embellish by means of passing and neighbour tones, and he may add extensions to the chords, but at all times a good improviser must follow the changes. [However], a jazz musician really has several options: he may reflect the chord progression exactly, he may “skim over” the progression and simply elaborate the background harmony, or he may fashion his own voice-leading which may clash at some points with the chords the rhythm section is playing.”*

This is more informative, but it still gives us little idea of what it *feels* like for a musician to be doing all this stuff. I wanted to probe the process further, so I decided to talk to the experts. I badgered ten jazz musos to let me interview them over the phone, and the transcribed interviews make up the bulk of this book.

Perhaps the biggest stimulus to musical improvisation has come from the jazz idiom, where improvisation is pretty much *de rigeur* – much like spoken language is. In “straight ahead” improvisation the player’s spontaneous creation conventionally follows the chord structure of the piece being played. This was particularly true of Traditional Jazz, but after things got considerably more sophisticated harmonically during and after the Bop era, “modern jazz” musicians began to experiment with the chord structure as well. In more recent times, things have become even more complicated with the advent of “free improvisation”,

where (as I understand it) the only rule is that there are no rules. Developments in jazz called for increasingly complex musical capabilities.

I should declare at the outset my own status as an improviser. Before I grew decrepit enough for my fine motor skills to decamp I used to play piano and flute, and did gigs on both instruments. I have been an ardent fan of most jazz idioms since I was a teenager, and although I practiced like mad for years to be able to make it up on the spot, I never was able to quite reach the stage where I could embark on an improvised solo and feel really confident that I was not going to screw up. Usually it was my technique that let me down. But one of the good things about improvising jazz is that you can make good jazz without having a scintillating performance technique. After all, the melody line of Duke Ellington's "*C Jam Blues*" is made up of a mere two notes, and a good jazz improvisation does not necessarily have to include hemidemisemiquavers. Bill Basie's sparse piano style is another good example.

So I got to the stage where I could play some satisfying jazz solos, but they tended to be technically modest in terms of what I tried to pull off. A saxophone player that I used to gig with called Norm Weiner told me of a gig he did with Dick Letts many years ago at the old St James Hotel in Elizabeth Street, where the piano was so flat that they had to tune up to B flat instead of A. This meant that Dick had to play every tune a semitone up, so that a blues in B flat became a blues in B natural, and anything usually in F would have to be played in G flat, and so on. And Dick did it with ease, according to Norm. Now *that's* a level of musicianship that I could never achieve! But not being that good didn't mean that I couldn't learn to come up with acceptable chunks of improvisation.

So, in this piece (**Intro**, **Main Theme**, and **Coda**) I have interviewed ten of Sydney's top players in an attempt to explore

just what it is like to be on that crest of a breaking wave, and I am hoping that my own limited proficiency with improvisation* at least qualifies me to investigate the subjective aspects of the improvisation process without asking too many dumb questions. For want of any better mode of organization I have reproduced the interviews in the order in which they were done.

.
* (There are examples of some of my efforts in this regard on my website at www.billbottomley.com.au in the bottom drawer. The two pieces entitled *Hydra Conversations* were recorded on the Greek island of Hydra quite some years ago with an early musical mentor named Bill Pownall. They are the only extant examples of my efforts to play around with Free Improvisation – Bill and I agreed only on a key before starting).

MAIN THEME





*Tony's Dad played piano in a dance band in the west of Scotland, (in Greenock, which Tony says is a great place to come from, but not necessarily to go to) and Tony grew up listening to Miles – you know, **Kind of Blue**, and **Milestones**, and to Dave Brubeck, among others. Paul Desmond was one of his heroes. When he was about 14 he badgered his father to buy him a saxophone, and took to it straightaway. When he was doing his O level music he took up the clarinet, and he was a precocious student, getting really high marks in his third year exams. Soon he was playing in a local band, at a time when Pink Floyd were bringing out **Dark Side of the Moon**, and he revelled in the electronic effects. He attended the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, and by 19 had two diplomas and was playing in rock and jazz*

bands, as well as with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and with the late Richard Hickox, who was the last Director of the Australian Opera. In his graduation year Tony played works by Messiaen, Stravinsky and Weber. Shortly after, he decided to pursue jazz over classical music.

*After he graduated, among other things he played on cruise ships, playing tenor, alto, flute, and clarinet. He married Sandy Evans in 1987 and they moved to Sydney in 1988 and co-led or played in such acclaimed projects as **Clarion Fracture Zone**, **GEST8** and **Mara!** He was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis 20 years ago, leaving him with numbness in his legs, hands and half his face, making playing a monumental challenge. His career was peaking just before the MS struck. Despite the limitations of MS Tony is still active on the music scene, producing music of astonishingly wide diversity that draws on a range of ethnic musical styles.*

Tony: If you write a book, you don't always know how it's going to end. But you know when it's not right. You just know when it's not going the way you wanted it to go. An improvising musician has to go through that process of evaluation while they are playing. It takes a lot of experience, and when you first start you might only improvise for eight bars, say, and then you build up to doing more. Then, as you get better at it, and you realize that you have, say, three choruses still to do, then you pace yourself. You don't do everything in the first chorus – sometimes it's as though you're making a weaker cup of coffee out of the same grounds. Take people like Ornette Coleman or Sonny Rollins – huge intellects as far as I'm concerned -- you know, these people can play for an hour without significantly repeating themselves, And when you get to the end of that process, if it has gone well, you feel "Oh Wow!" But if it's not working, you sort of want to bail out before then.

You asked me if I pre-hear some of the lines I might improvise. Not much any more. I stopped pre-hearing lines years ago. When you're playing tennis you don't pre-see what you're about to do, do you? You can't know how to play the shot till the other guy hits it, and if you try to anticipate that, he'll probably win the point. In both tennis and music it's

a matter of reacting instantly. But I still think you have to be aware, all the time you're playing, of what the rules are. You can play with words, but only if you know what the words mean. But even if you start playing really abstract stuff, you're still the same person, and you can make any shape you want. I've often looked on some of my musical projects as being like films for blind people.

When I improvise I always close my eyes, because the music fills my head. *(As Tony said in an article in the SMH on August 29, 2017: "As soon as I close my eyes and play a long note, everything in my body calms down. Every molecule. My nervous system, even without the MS, just twitters like a sparrow. I've got a very high energy level, and the long notes are the ultimate antidote, because you cannot play them unless you don't move a muscle."*— WB). I do a solo clarinet concert called *Songs of Hope* and I use this little Indian instrument called the Shruti Box. It's like a little electronic harp, and I have two of them. I set one note going, and to me it's like you're in absolute darkness and there's this one little light, ding, ding, and you don't know if it's a five watt bulb a couple of feet away from you or whether it's a distant star. Then I bring in a second note, and already you've got a line between those two. Then you bring in a third note... You know, I sort of create in my own a head a sort of universe, and you can change it to any shape you like because it's all happening in your brain.

I'm quite into modern art, and while I was at school I always got fabulous marks for music, but I got even better marks for English. I've been into various poets over the years who do things with words. It's only words on a page, but you wonder how they thought to do it, because it is so abstract. e.e.cummings springs to mind. So when I started writing stuff of my own, I try to bring something of that abstractness into my music. I started to see the whole length of a solo as a landscape, and I realised that you can paint different stripes over that landscape – treat it in different ways. I like the Sufi idea that *'The artist paints what the poet can't say, and the musician plays what the artist can't paint'*

There's a fine musician called Mani, and he uses the image of a paddock with a hedge fence around it. You can go to the edges of the paddock, but it's very difficult to go over the hedge, because then you're in No Man's Land. You can go to the edge, but that's a mental thing.

Alistair Spence is a co-bandleader with Sandy and me in *Clarion Fracture Zone*, and we were down at Montsalvat once. *Clarion Fracture Zone* uses a very broad palate with which to work – we did latin stuff, soundscapes, and multiphonics with the saxophone, and all sorts of offbeat stuff. Some of it was phenomenally aggressive, some of it was phenomenally relaxed and gentle – you could literally play it at a funeral. There weren't many people at the gig, and an old guy came up to us to talk to us about our playing, and what he said has stuck with me for years. He said: "What I loved about your band was that you took me through the door to the avante garde and you brought me back again." I thought that was a most beautiful thing. I think our music was like that, you know.

When I think of all the styles I've played over the years – the jazz, the classical – I was in a band once called *Mara!* with Sandy for nine years, and we played music that was Turkish and East European and other ethnic stuff that encompassed about 22 languages. (See www.maramusic.com -- WB) Through *Mara!* I was introduced to the Bulgarian and Turkish clarinet players. They made me hear things so differently. It's the same with the Indian clarinet players — you could listen to them for half an hour and not even guess it was a clarinet. Sometimes it sounded like a shawm, which is still used in the temples of Turkey. So then I started to get into Armenian music and the music of the *duduk*. I found that I could make that exotic *duduk* sound on my own clarinet. My palette as an improviser has changed every few years.

Sometimes we will use modal scales when we improvise on a piece, but it depends very much on the song, of course. And I guess it wasn't of all that much interest to me to try and do a Charlie Parker. I grew up in the seventies and late sixties period when Miles and Herbie Hancock were doing albums like *Headhunters*, and things were getting into electronics more.

I've got tapes of rehearsals we did with *Clarion Fracture Zone*, and I would set out to take you to the stars and back, but you had to build up the trust within the rhythm section, who were still playing straight ahead changes.

We didn't rehearse all that much with *Clarion Fracture Zone*, but a new

piece had to work straight away. Different people in the band were good at different things, and the band lasted for nine or ten years. Over that period of time we built up a deep level of trust, so when I started “going beyond the fence” they were quite comfortable coming with me. And when we were there I sort of had a view of the landscape, and I could come back across the fence – I knew roughly how long I had, as it were. I realized that it wasn’t unlike doing a Rubik’s Cube, or doing crazy paving where you’re not allowed to walk on the grass . I wanted to bring some of the free music that I loved which came from my actual love of the instruments. (One time when I was in college I was playing a trio for two flutes. We were standing close to each other, and pretty much in tune, when this enormous bass note just happened between the two of us). So from quite an early age I was interested in those sort of things. Then in the seventies all the electronic stuff began coming out and I was quite comfortable in the recording studio with the processing devices like echoes and reverbs.

But with improvising you get a mood of the piece...a sort of style. You don’t just dive in but... well, you can be abstract... I don’t know how to describe this but... well, the more you study classical music the more you know that there are no unusable notes. You wouldn’t have to tell me what key you were in – I could come in on any note on my instrument and instantly make sense of it.

And I use the Eastern scales a lot – they use a lot of chromatics. You can hear it in the key of C, but at the same time you can hear the minor scale that starts on B flat, and then after twenty minutes the guy gets back to the B flat then resolves to the C! And all the way along a bass player or perhaps a drone instrument would be playing a C, and you could actually stay away from that note and never play the note C. And it wouldn’t sound out of tune or anything – it would still work. It’s all a question of perspectives. And to do all this on the spot means that you have to be a phenomenal player as well.

For a while Sandy taught at Sydney Grammar, and she found that ... well, when you hear a high school big band, the time it sounds its worst is when it comes to the saxophone solo or the trumpet solo. You can rehearse all day doing the big band stuff, but that doesn’t help you do a solo. With a solo, you’re still jumping off a cliff. And a lot of people are

really sickened and stressed by it, you know. But there's one thing I've always kept in mind over the years: Don't ever forget that *nobody dies* in music! You might drop in a C sharp instead of a C, but don't worry about it – you just decide what to do with it. There's an old Irish joke that says "if you want get to there, I wouldn't start from here". Sometimes you've got no choice where you start, and it's up to your intellect to get you on the road.

I became very friendly with Don Burrows before he got Alzheimers and effectively retired. He had crippling arthritis in his hands, which were just like gnarled claws. He was playing at a jazz festival at Bungendore and I was there as well. Now my own hands are not great, because of the MS, and we were walking between venues when Don said to me: "What am I supposed to do with these?" (looking at his hands). My response was: "Well, now you've got to use your intellect. All your life you've done it because you could, but now you have to think about it". Older musicians may not be able to do it the way they used to when they were younger, but they can still participate.

Improvising is always about what am I going to do next, rather than what I just did. When you talk to people, you are improvising all the time. Sandy and I did literally thousands of school shows with *Mara!* for Musica Viva over the years, and everybody in the band would give a little talk. Sandy used to talk about improvising, and she'd say: "Who here can't improvise?" and a whole lot of hands would go up. "Of course you can," Sandy would say, "Of course you can. When you come into the playground and say hello to someone, how the person answers will affect what you say next. That's improvising." See the thing about music is that there's so much training involved – it's very hard to let that go. There are certain people, (from teachers down, by the way) who just don't know how to let go of the rules – even for a second, some of them.

This is a sort of abstract parallel thought: we've a friend in Switzerland whose job is to teach the Swiss how to interrupt the English at the EEU meetings. The Swiss are so polite that they'll always wait till the end of the sentence. Left to themselves the English wouldn't stop – they'd just take up all the time, so she trains them to interrupt. There's a lot of music that's a bit like that – you know, you're not allowed to interrupt. And what's happened with jazz since the thirties and the forties, when the

drummer started dropping bombs with the bass drum, you know – people started interrupting each other.

I've got a band called *The Monday Club*. We play locally. When I got the MS I asked myself what I could still do, and I could still play long notes, the way my teacher taught me when I was first learning. I could still sit in a room and inflate my lungs and play a really good solid note for about 45 seconds or so.

Then I bumped into a French horn player called Steve Morley, and he began to come to my house to practice his long notes. So now I have a band that we get together and we play long notes every Monday. We've met every Monday for the last eleven years. Sometimes there's only two of us, sometimes there's nobody, and once in a blue moon there's maybe six people turn up. It's all low-pitched instruments. We've got a 'cello, a French horn and a contrabass clarinet. The last gig we did was with two bass clarinets and these days I exclusively play the alto clarinet. It all came from mutually wanting to play long notes together, and we just let it develop from there. I describe these gatherings as a bit like a dinner party, or a bit like the school playground. We try to keep it bubbling along. Sometimes it's jazzy, sometimes it's orchestral – most jazz is a collective thought process with like-minded people – whether it's Dixieland or funk or hard bop or anything. A sort of fusing of musical experiences.

We even do gigs playing the long notes we play at the *Monday Club*. There is a very musical and artistic community at Bundeena, near Cronulla, and the neighbour of one of our friends who lived there had a three month old baby. They thought that listening to us would be the perfect introduction to going to a concert for their child, so they asked us to play for a gathering of their friends.. About sixty people turned up, and the ages ranged from well elderly to the three month old. It was a most unusual gig and it turned out to be quite beautiful, in its own way.

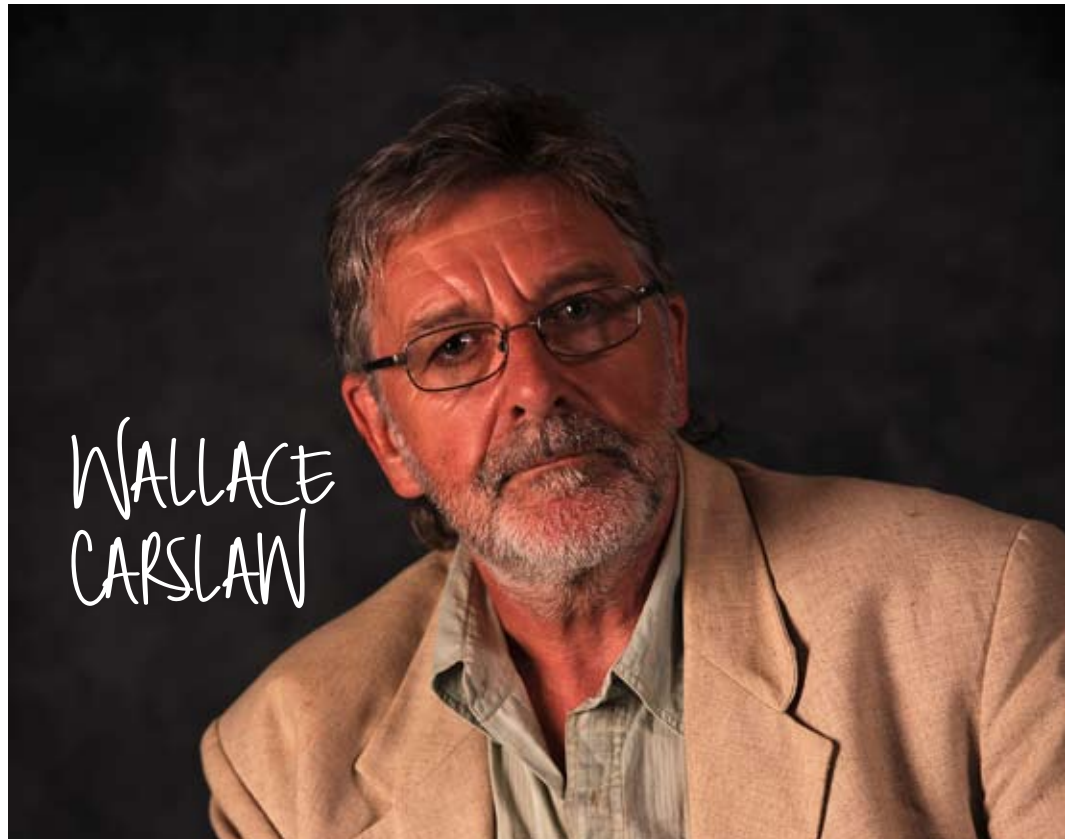
You know the Aboriginal songlines? I described our music once as being like Aboriginal songlines, but on water, rather than on the landscape. It's a bit like the two guys who rented a tinnie to go fishing, and within minutes they had caught half a dozen huge fish. One of them thought they should mark such a good fishing spot, so he puts a big X on the

boat in Texta. His mate says: “ You’re such an idiot, how do you know they’ll give us the same boat next time.”

Most of all I like to play gentle music. It’s not all gentle, by the way, because I like to have fun as well, but I don’t like unhappy music. Which reminds me: there is a youTube clip of one of the first television appearances by John Cage. It was on the Johnny Carson Show, or something like that. Cage’s music was pretty way out for most people’s ears, and the Producer of the show gently reminded Cage that some of the audience might laugh. Cage looked at him, completely deadpan, and said: “Well, I much prefer that to tears.”

I think that you have to become yourself as an improvising musician, but it takes a long time to actually do so.

June 2018



*Born in Glasgow, Wal played with George McGowan, Bobby Wishart, and Jim Mullen in his teens. Then he moved to England, and worked in nightclubs backing everybody from Engelbert Humperdinck to P.J. Proby. Next he moved to London where he played in **Godspell**, **Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat**, and with Brian Protheroe, and Billy Ocean. He moved to Sydney in '78, playing mostly jazz gigs on double bass. He played with Dave Mcrae, Col Nolan, Mick Kenny, and formed a trio with Tony Hicks & Ron Craig called **Old Kids Off Their Blocks**. The **Old Kids** produced a CD of original songs. Next Wal formed a duo with Tim Keogh on trumpet called **Acoustic Brew** which resulted in 2 CDs of originals. Currently he is in a duo called **Wal and Crofty** who have recently released a CD called **That's Enuf**.*

(Wal is the sort of bloke who is modest and economical with his answers. So much so that I've decided to include my questions in his transcript so as to flesh out the context of his replies.)

Bill: You say that you wouldn't call yourself an improvising musician, but you do improvise often when you play, don't you? Like, you don't play the same song the same way every time, do you?

Wal: Oh no. That'd be boring. But I do play improvised solos on occasion – especially on things like the blues.

Bill: And when you do, are you aware of what the chords are, what key you're in, and things like that?

Wal: Oh yeah. Well, you have to be aware of what key you're in, of course.

Bill: Well, imagine for a moment that you're jamming away, in a good groove, and it's coming up to your improvised chorus. Right when you have to come in, is it possible for you to describe your headspace at that moment?

Wal: Well, it all depends on how the band is going. The rhythm section, predominantly I think, is responsible for... if the groove is good, if it's all happening, and the feel is good, then everything seems to fall into place, you know. And if it's not good, then I suppose you tend to keep it short *(laughs)*. But it all depends what's happening with the rhythm section, I think. If you're not cooking, then it's not going to be as good. It's usually down to the drummer, I think, and if the groove's not there then it's not going to work. Yes, I'd say that it's the drummer who is responsible for the groove happening, most of the time.

Bill: So, if you've just finished a solo, how do you know if it was a good one?

Wal: Oh, well... you just know...

Bill: Is it a *feeling*?

Wal: Oh yeah. It's a feeling alright.

Bill: What about if you're in the middle of improvising and you try something audacious, and it comes off. Does that make it feel even better, because it was that bit harder to do?

Wal: Yes. *(Both laugh at the obviousness of the question).*

Bill: Nothing to add?

Wal: Well, in the time since you asked me to do this I've been thinking just what it is I'm going to say. It's not easy to talk about. I was thinking about the days when we used to come to your place with Hicks and Ron Craig. I used to enjoy playing with these couple of guys immensely – especially Hicksie. They were really good, and every time we played together it went well. And, of course, improvisation used to play a fair part in that as well.

Bill: You used to refer to Hicksie as “the best drummer in the world”, and you were deeply affected by his passing. Was it because he was so good that it all worked so well?

Wal: Oh yeah. He was the best drummer I ever worked with. Yeah. It was just so easy playing with him. It felt great every time, you know. He always provided a solid foundation, and he always knew where the groove was – it was like a natural thing for him.

Bill: And what about using impressive licks that you know you can pull off? Do you sneak them in?

Wal: Oh yes.

Bill: Often?

Wal: Oh yes! *(laughs).*

Bill: Would you say that most of the general public who listen to you play, if they're not musicians, wouldn't appreciate the musicianship involved because they have no idea how hard it is to do --what you seem to do

effortlessly.

Wal: I suppose so. But if we're all playing really well together, and it's happy, and the groove is undeniable, then I think that the punters, even without musical understanding, will still pick up on that. I can feel it when that happens. There's a touch of magic or something...

Bill: You don't have to understand musical theory for it to move you.

Wal: Yes, it's not so much understanding it musically – you can feel it. In your body...

Bill: It seems to me that understanding the musicianship involved in improvising adds a different dimension to just what it is you are appreciating. I mean, for a start, you've got be technically awfully fucking good at playing your instrument. I've heard it said that when you get good enough at playing it, your instrument becomes almost an extension of yourself and when you're really swinging in the middle of a solo, what you are actually doing becomes a bit like driving a car – you're not aware what gear you're in, as it were.

Wal: I'd say that's pretty right. Most of the time I was playing with Hicks and Ron I was the bass player. I was part of the rhythm section and Ron was the soloist on guitar, so he did most of the soloing, but occasionally I would do a solo on bass. Mainly my job was to give Ron a really solid foundation to play on.

Bill: But, even when you were doing that, you'd still be improvising wouldn't you?

Wal: Oh yes. What I played was always different each time. And Hicks used to say about Ron: "Keep watching his arse. Keep watching it, and when it starts going from side to side, watch out! Here we go!" And that's what used to happen. Ron would start just fiddling about a bit, then he would pick it up a bit, and then the next thing you know we were off. It was a brilliant thing to be part of that. Ron was the one who got the excitement going, you know, but supporting him was still a buzz. We never played the same thing twice, and it all depended on what happens, and wherever Ron decided where he wanted to go we'd be

there right behind him supporting him. It's just a magic thing when it happens. You said someone said that improvising is like "being on the edge". I think that's pretty much the case.

Bill: If you play a bum note inadvertently when you're improvising, you can rescue it, can't you?

Wal: Yeah. If you make a mistake, do it again, and people will think you did it deliberately. (*laughs*). Somebody famous like Herbie Hancock said that.

(In a subsequent email, Wal added the following:)

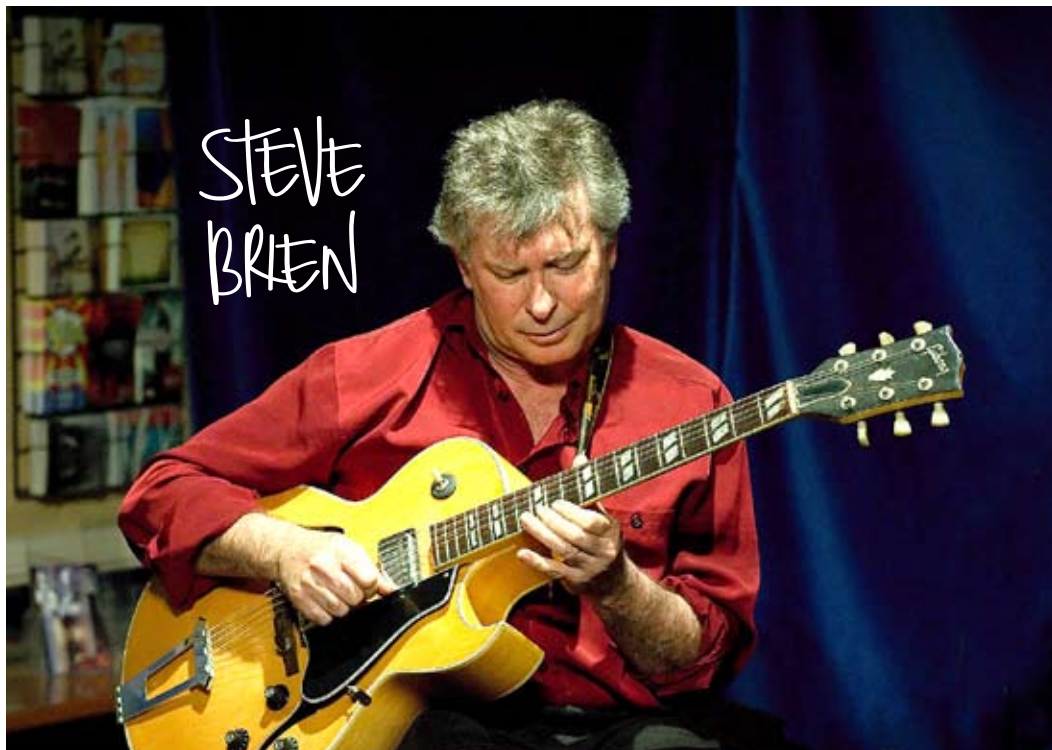
Improvising is creating something musically that nobody has done before. Yes, you can be influenced by others, but you are making your own version that is all your own. I'd say most rock musos play their licks exactly like the record, but jazz & blues players, once the groove is happening, have the freedom to play whatever they like. Two different types of playing, I think. One type uses traditional licks using phrases & lines from famous players, but playing them in their own individual way, then there are others who go totally off the wall, taking it to the limit harmonically & tonally.

Either or -- there is something magical about a bunch of musos creating as they go and loving it. Me, I just love being in a band of mates playing with a tight & loose* rhythm section, with exciting improvisation going on.

It's a funny thing about ad lib though. The fingers seem to do it all on their own. It doesn't feel like it's coming from the head. S'pose it must be, but I think the fingers are the creators, until things go wrong -- then you blame the head!

** When I returned the transcribed interview to Wal for him to check, I queried the apparent contradiction inherent in "tight and loose". He responded with: "I think you can be tight & loose at the same time! It may sound loose but it can be tight as! Loosely tight, one might say, or tightly loose! { ha ha} or if that sounds silly, just one word like 'happening'."*

July 2018



An acclaimed jazz guitarist, Steve Brien established himself in the Sydney jazz scene in the late 1970s, playing with local jazz musicians such as Dale Barlow, James Morrison and Don Burrows. In 1985 he won an overseas study grant and went to New York City, where he spent two years studying part-time with Jack Wilkins and John Scofield and playing with many New York musicians. He returned to Australia in 1987 and toured with the James Morrison Quintet, travelling extensively through Australasia and Europe. In 1992 Steve returned to the US, establishing himself on the Connecticut jazz scene where he played with many local and New York jazz musicians. He returned to Australia in 1998 to join the faculty of the Sydney Conservatorium and continues to maintain a busy performance schedule. In 2005, he was awarded a Masters of Music from the University of Sydney.

(Conservatorium of Music Website)

Steve: It's hard to describe what it feels like when you're in the middle of an improvised solo. I tend to think of improvising music as being much like a language. When you go to take a solo there's a lot going on, and a lot of it is the result of a lot of practice room stuff -- working phrases, understanding the direction of the chord changes... I've done a lot of working through drills when I'm practising -- practising and playing are two different things. Sometimes I practice licks and prepared things, and also a lot of scalar-based things that are able to be changed... it's sort of like having a vocabulary that you can mix and match a lot of the time as you go -- as you're on the fly. It's got to be intuitive, because there's not enough time to really think about it. So a lot of that stuff is done in the practice room, so that you drill yourself in the stuff that you want to get into your playing. And you might do that repetitively, over weeks, you know. Then you might practice chord progressions... there's only really a handful of chord progressions that keep recurring in lots of different guises and different keys, so you have to get very adept at adapting all your language and putting it through different keys and different situations. So you do all that in the practice room, and when you get on the bandstand you try and just let it happen -- let it come out. You try not to let your mind get too much in the way, in some ways, although you are always thinking about the chord sequence, you know -- what's coming up.

As I said, I liken it to a language. When you're talking -- as we're having this conversation -- where do the words come from? They come from practice, from years of speaking, and we're dredging them up from nowhere, in a way, and you're certainly not thinking about the grammatical structure of the sentences. It happens. You just talk and it all comes out. And I find that it is very similar to improvising jazz. You practice certain things and listen a lot to certain things, so a lot of your improvising skills start in the practice room.

If you take the two extremes, a very slow ballad and an extremely fast tune, these are the most difficult parts of the idiom. When it's really slow you've got a lot more time to think, and your mind *can* get in the way, whereas with a fast tempo it's nearly all reflex and you need to have your technique up to the point where you can handle quite fast tempos.

And a lot of it has to do with memory, I've found. As I've got older I've

realised that memory plays a massive part in music, and all the players I know who have a touch of genius seem to be able to play something once then never really forget it. I was in James Morrison's band for a long time, and when he was a kid -- about twelve or thirteen years old -- he'd read something once and he knew it. He didn't have to read it again because he knew it. And I realised pretty quickly how much memory plays a part in this process. It was the same with Dale Barlow -- he'd read it once and he knew it. So I set about improving my ability to memorise stuff -- which you can do. And I think that that's largely one of the separators between really good players and genius players -- they have the ability to remember reams of music and regurgitate it at will. So I do think that a good memory plays a massive part in improvising as well.

I suppose the Holy Grail of improvising is to get to the point where your instrument is just an extension of yourself -- a part of you, almost. In your own everyday life you have some days that are better than others, whether you're a cricketer, a football player, a guitarist... or even digging a ditch. There are some days that you are going to be better than other days -- your mind's working faster, you're feeling more alert. But I think all musicians go through the same thing. You reach a certain point in your professional playing where you don't slip below a certain standard. Some days (and nights) you can play and you can do nothing wrong and other nights you're labouring all night to get a phrase out. I'm not sure why that is, or how you combat that.

A lot of the older players back in the 40s and 50s tried to do it with heroin. They took drugs to try to get to that next level. In Australia then it was mainly alcohol. Everybody drank a lot then, but it's not such a feature these days amongst musicians as it used to be. But back then most of the band would drink fairly heavily all night. I'm thinking here of the mid-seventies, which was the tail-end of the big club era when all the RSLs and the like had at least three to four piece bands four or five nights a week, and the older guys in those groups all drank pretty heavily. That was before drink/driving laws and random breath testing. As a younger player myself I noticed that heavy drinking was a feature of the older players. I think a lot of them thought that it loosened them up, but some of them got worse the more they drank, and there others where you didn't notice if it affected them or not. When I was much younger I

met Merv Acheson, and he was a bloke who could put away quite a bit and not have it affect his playing -- in fact sometimes he seemed to play better. Then there were guys like Don Burrows who didn't drink at all, and George Golla, who did drink, but only lightly. Then there were others who took rougher drugs but still played at a very high level. Only occasionally can I remember where people were affected by what they'd drunk or what they'd smoked or taken. I did a few months on a cruise ship and the band would get pretty wiped out, and that didn't help the sound of the band, that's for sure. That was in the early 80s, and it was the only time that I can remember that the players were adversely affected by booze or drugs.

You ask me if, when you're with a good group and really cooking, does it feel as good as sex. (*Laughs*) I don't think I've thought about it in those terms. I think, as an improvising musician -- or any musician who gets to a very high level -- it is in a way therapeutic, or a bit like I would imagine meditating is like, because you can sort of lose yourself in the song, or in the moment. On really good nights you're not really thinking -- you're *in* the song and you're listening. That's another thing about jazz music -- it's hearing yourself in relation to the whole band. You're listening to everything going on around you. The only time you hear the bass is if he's in the wrong spot in the tune, or you are. That's when you realise if you missed the bridge, or that you've gone to the bridge early or whatever. These things do happen, as everyone makes mistakes, but if you're listening carefully there are ways to get around that. And if the band members notice, then they try to get you out of it pretty quickly. But there are a few things that can go wrong. If you're in the wrong place but don't know you're in the wrong place -- that's one thing. In that case, the band will probably try to make it fairly obvious where they are, and there are famous recorded examples of these things I'm talking about, where good musos make mistakes on recordings. There is a famous one with Jackie McLean the alto player who got lost on a tune during a live recording, and he never gets back! In the end the piano player stops playing in the bridge to try to mark out obviously where they are. But he was a famous junkie, so he might have been as high as a kite and not really functioning properly. But if you get lost, or find yourself in the wrong spot and can't hear your way back (especially if it's a tune you don't know and it's a little more complicated) usually the band will help you out. After all, it's a performance in the end, and there's no point

leaving someone out on a limb. The idea is to create a performance for people to enjoy. There are a few options as well. You can go to where they are, or usually what happens is the bass player or the piano player will try to make it obvious by what they play where you should be.

Even professional players can get lost. I've got lost on occasion, and I've asked the bass player where we are and he'd tell me we were coming up to the bridge or whatever. Sometimes you might get on the other side of the beat, and rather than feeling Beat One you're feeling Beat Two, and once you've sort of crossed over it can be hard to get back again.

I usually find that the players I play with have a very strong rhythmic sense (but that doesn't have to mean that it's obvious), but it is nonetheless extremely rhythmic. I'm not a big fan of music that doesn't have a feel, which is probably why I don't have much to do with free improvisation. I've only really heard it successfully done a few times in my life. It's a pretty old idiom now, as it started back in the late 50s. I appreciate that they had to go there, but I tend to think it was a bit of a cul de sac. It's a difficult one. See, there are elements of that idiom that I enjoy, and I understand what they are trying to do, but there are other elements that I find difficult to contend with because I think a lot of players can hide in the complexity of all that and feel that they don't actually have to do the work, you know? I'm an old bebop player, and I tend to think that that tradition is what jazz is all about. Everything is a pattern, including the chord progression, and the only things you've got when you get on the bandstand are your ears and the tradition, and whatever work you've done on the tunes that you're going to play. But to get up there with an open mind and play whatever you like is, to me, a bit disingenuous.

Unfortunately with jazz music, and all popular idioms as well, the general public in some ways don't really know what they like. They're told what to like and what's good by their peers and the media. And unless they've done some musical study themselves they find it difficult to know what's good and what's bad. I also find that certain musos can be a bit precious -- a bit self-centred -- and unfortunately it comes across to a large audience like that. That's why jazz is becoming less popular, because we overindulge this in jazz a fair bit.

I think that when you get on a bandstand there is an unwritten contract that you are there to entertain people -- but I don't mean by that that you have to wear a funny hat and play "Salt Peanuts". People don't understand you when you take a twenty minute solo, and because you are an entertainer you have to edit what you come up with.

It all comes down to a matter of taste, I think, and the other thing is that not everyone's a genius. I've had a teaching career spanning twenty-odd years at the Conservatorium, and a lot of kids come in there clearly thinking that they're geniuses, and I just have to tell them that I don't hear it. Clarity first, genius later. My main thing with teaching young players is to be clear with everything you do. The others on the bandstand don't need to be guessing what's going on. And in saying that, I don't mean *obvious*, I mean *clear*. After all, none of them are geniuses yet, and very few of them are even likely to be.

'Cos genius doesn't just happen. Like I said, part of that genius is an incredible ability to remember -- I'm convinced that that is a major part of genius playing. And I can count on the fingers of one hand the people who have those sorts of memory capabilities. My first guitar teacher was Tommy Emmanuel and he could do that. That's why he was such a great session player in the late 70s. He couldn't read music really, but he only had to play something and he could play it back straight away and he knew it. He wasn't a jazz player, but he knew how to play the guitar, you know. He didn't read much, but he memorised it all.

When you're improvising, in the end it's about your rhythmic imagination and your melodic imagination, and how well you know the song, but what you do doesn't have to be complex, that's for sure.

When Miles came up with the *Kind of Blue* album, the improvisations he did on that were based on modal scales. I remember hearing him interviewed... Well, when I did my Masters Degree, I did that somewhat late in life, in 2000, and I had a colleague there who was doing the same course, and she actually studied... she transcribed a whole stack of solos, of modal pieces that Miles and the band played. She transcribed Miles' solos and then she transcribed the solos of Cannonball Adderley and Coltrane. Miles was saying in the interview that they were only playing simple themes on the modes... what was it? D minor and E flat

minor. After she'd transcribed them she gave a very interesting talk, and the upshot of it was that Miles was certainly just sketching melodic ideas using the modes, but the other guys were playing, like, turnarounds that you would play in a regular bebop situation -- they were using turnarounds and other scale techniques to create tension and release in the lines they were playing. So what Miles was saying kinda went for him, but it didn't apply to the other guys in the band.

When it comes to modal stuff, you still need tension and release... sort of like you need some sort of cadence in your line. Say you've got four bars of D minor -- you can make your line sound like Dm, A7, Dm, or Em, A7, Dm. You superimpose other chordal ideas -- even though it's a static chord formula, you can, in your improvised line, give the impression of implied tension and release by employing other chord changes. That's a common sort of practice in modal playing -- in fact in all jazz playing. Having static chords is not the go because you're trained to create movement when you've got static harmonies. As an improviser you're trained to create movement within that. You can do that with an improvised line, and there's several techniques to do that, or you can get away from the harmony altogether, playing what they call "outside", and then resolve, and so that creates tension in a certain way, or else you can superimpose or imply other turnarounds that are more conventional.

It's rare for me to just use one type of scale to improvise with. Like, a modal tune might call for four bars of Dm, but I wouldn't just play on Dm for those bars -- I've practised lots of ways to have what I call "intuitive chromaticism" involved in the scale line, and that's something that I've been heavily involved in teaching at the Con, and that's a very difficult thing to teach. I think that's one of the reasons why jazz education tends to revolve around lots of exotic scales, and patterns -- all the students in your class learn the same patterns, broken thirds and so on, there are lots of different patterns. When the students have to learn how to insert notes into the scalar passage that are not part of the scale and are not part of the chord, it's a whole other technique, and you've got to learn a lot of rules about rhythm, and you've got to basically start to understand what makes our brain hear melody. If you've got a bar of 4/4 you count on the metre 1,2,3,4. But then you have a phenomenon that occurs if you place the accent on 1 and 3 -- like **1,2,3,4**-- where 1 and 3 are the heavy beats and 2 and 4 are the light

beats, so you emphasise the 2 & 4 like a drummer's high hat, creating the swinging back beat. And that's immutable. That phenomenon is the same today as it was 3000 years ago, and will be in another 3000 years. As a musician you've got to learn to deal with that and make it part of your playing. There's a sort of beat hierarchy, and you realise that the way that you hear melody is that the chord pattern of the harmony... well, when you play a scale there's four chord tones -- tonic, third, fifth and a seventh -- and they need to be accented on the beat. So when you're playing scales... I teach a method of playing scales so that the chord tones fall on the beat, and therein lie the secrets to chromaticism. You've got to learn to play the chromatics on the upbeat, on the weak point of the bar, then resolve down on the downbeat, and when they match up they enhance each other and give the passage harmony. And this takes a lot of training.

In the mid-70s the Jamie Abersold clinics came out here, and we had great New York musicians like Hal Galper, John Scofield -- it was a really great mix of young players in those days. I remember the first time they heard me play, the first thing Galper said to me was: "You haven't learned to play your scales so the chord tones fall on the beat", and I replied that nobody had ever told me to do that before. "How do I do that?" I asked, and he gave me some exercises to practise.

Barry Harris thinks of everything in terms of two chords -- it's either a major seventh or a dominant -- and I think he's right. Everything gets put into one of two types of chords. And then that means that you've only got two kinds of scales to practice. And the older I get, there's only really two types of chords -- in conventional harmony, anyway. For instance, if you harmonise a C major scale, chord I is a I type, chord II gets lumped in with chord V, so with chord II you'd treat it more like a G7. Em is a first inversion of C major, that's a I type chord. Fmaj7, called IV, is a Lydian sound because it has the B natural in it, and is often voiced as a G triad over F, which gives you a G7 chord -- so that's a V chord. Then you have G7, which is the V chord. Then you have A minor, which is a C chord with the sixth in the root, that's a I type chord. Then you have Bm7flat5 which is a first inversion G9 chord. So there are four dominant inversions and three C major inversions.

As to which inversions you play and when, it depends on what you're

doing. If you're comping -- accompanying someone -- what you're playing is fairly critical, so you have sort of default inversions, if you like -- ones you know you're going to use a lot, and it also depends on the tune and what's going on there. And using chromaticism can provide a lot of colour as well - you know, like playing a chord a semitone above and sliding in that way. Again, it creates that tension and release. Then there are all sorts of techniques, diminished chords, passing chords, dominant chords, where you put them on the beat...

So it's not all just about inversions. You can't ignore the chord scales, for instance. If it's C major for four bars you can play Em, Am, Dm, G7, you know. It doesn't have to be a static chord. It can move. But, like just about everything else, it depends on the situation, doesn't it? And you're a product of what you listen to, too. So in a way you end up being the sum total of your experiences.

Talking about these things is fairly difficult. The way I've practised and done scale drills -- that involves having to practise different rules and different rhythmic inflections. To create an improvised line you've got to be comfortable starting anywhere in the scale and to be able to make something out of that. In fact, my method involves being able to start on any note on any chord -- you can start with any of the twelve tones, but by the second downbeat you need to be in sync with the chords. You can start on a "wrong" note, but it's what you do with that note -- like, it could be part of what I call an "enclosure". So even a major seventh on a dominant chord can work -- like, you could start on the downbeat on B in a C7 chord, then, by the second beat you enclose the flat seven, or maybe the tonic. That way it becomes part of a device rather than just a wrong note. I practice that sort of thing a lot -- starting on any note and having it in sync by the second beat with the harmonic motion of the tune.

With that sort of playing you become very aware of the chords, and I notice that with horn players, as opposed to like piano players and guitarists who are involved in playing the chords, they seem to have a different way to look at improvising. Horn players don't always necessarily know all the chords to a tune, but they know the general shape of it. They seem to have a different approach to it, somehow -- maybe because they are only dealing with one note at a time. A lot of

the really good horn players also play a bit of piano, I've found. But then you've got guys like Charlie Parker who was quite vertical in the way he played -- almost like a piano player -- but you've also got guys who don't think entirely the same way. They sort of think across key areas, but they still manage to get a sort of textural movement in their lines. I don't quite know how that's done, but I do know that they think a little differently to the way I'm talking about. But it is a difficult area to talk about, and it's a creative area that I think musicians, and in fact people from all of the arts, seem to find it hard to talk about those aspects.

I don't know if you've ever got into Somerset Maugham -- do you ever read much of him? I remember reading his book *The Summing Up*, which was a book he wrote which was basically about the act of writing. He talked about when he was young, and he tried to memorise reams of stuff that he liked the style of, just to try to get some style into his writing. He'd memorise tons of stuff, like whole pages of words from other books -- half a chapter, even -- and he'd try and write it out from memory. And it struck me how much it was like what jazz musicians do: they learn solos off recordings, transcribe them...

I remember going to the Louvre Museum once, and nearly every major painting had a group of young artists with easels in front of it. These kids were transcribing the painting, in effect. They'd go up to it with a bloody magnifying glass to look at the brushstroke, then go back and recreate that brush stroke. It's all part of the immersion in the work of the masters, I suppose. You've got to get immersed in that and become totally involved with it. Trying to recreate it helps you understand what goes into it -- and it's the same for jazz solos. I suppose we're all hoping a little bit of the genius with rub off on us. So I certainly see similarities across writing, painting, and music.

I've been reading a little bit recently about conscious thought -- like, just what is conscious thought, and that's also a rubbery subject. It seems that what you think about something starts a long time before you actually make that decision. You think that you're making a decision, or having a thought that's instant, but they reckon that the process starts quite a while before you actually think it.

July 2018



Dave MacRae (born 2 April 1940) is a keyboardist from New Zealand. He studied briefly at the NSW Conservatorium of Music and then worked in Australia in the 1960s as a musician and arranger for Festival Records. He moved to the United States in 1969, playing with experimental groups in Los Angeles before joining Buddy Rich's ensemble in 1970. He relocated to London in 1971, working that year with jazz musicians Clark Terry, Chet Baker, Jon Hendricks, and Gil Evans and many others. In 1971 he was briefly with a group called **Caparius** before he joined **Matching Mole**, where he remained until 1972. In March 1973 he recorded with Ian Carr's group **Nucleus** (Labyrinth album). Concurrently he played in Elton Dean's band **Just Us**. Other activities include record production for Scott Walker, The Goodies, and others and musical direction for artists including Annie Ross and Jon Hendricks. He played in **WMWM** and Giles Farnaby's **Dream Band** in 1973 and did session work and touring for **Back Door** in 1974, but left **Nucleus** around this time to concentrate on his own project called **Pacific Eardrum**, which he led with his wife Joy Yates (see next) until 1979. He continued working with Canterbury musicians such as Robert Wyatt, Mike Gibbs, and Richard Sinclair through the 1970s. He is the father of singer Jade MacRae.

(Wikipedia)

Dave: Having been a teacher for many years, improvisation is a subject that often comes up, and you have to think about it yourself to try and work out a way to explain what happens. Just as a sort of preface, there are so many different ways to improvise, starting with a person sitting down with their instrument on their own, and just beginning to create something, to the situation where you are playing with a group, and there are other people involved. In that instance, when there are other people involved, generally you are playing something that has a musical form, and that musical form will have, probably, a harmonic structure and you kind of work within that harmonic structure. And if you are not the first soloist, and somebody else has set some sort of precedent on how the performance is going, you have a sort of a guideline before you begin on how you might approach it, even though you're trying to put your own persona into the actual improvisation that you create. Generally people come to hear your improvisation -- because of who you are and what you're likely to come up with.

A lot depends on how much freedom you have in that situation within which you're improvising. Mostly it will be a group that is playing within the confines of a chordal sequence, which will be in the form of some sort of song shape, and to step outside that too far often will leave everybody else that you're playing with kind of behind, because for the band to be cohesive you need to stay within the confines of the chordal structure. So you're aware of that chordal structure pretty much all the time.

As to how you go about creating your improvisation -- there are many ways. One of the things that I do is to listen to what has been played before me by a previous soloist, then carry on with their idea, then turn it into something of my own, and leave the next person (should there be a next person) something to pick up on -- you know, just a phrase that they might like to grab hold of.

There are lots of ways to think about this. The difficulty is, really, putting it into words. I think it was made a little more clear to me when I was watching a television programme recently about the brain. It outlined how it all works, and the things that happen to make situations occur inside the brain. One of the things that seems strongly related to what you do when you improvise, is the way that the synapses, those little connective

bits from one section of the brain to the other -- how they are necessary (and there are millions of them) and enable you to do some sort of mental function -- how they actually link things up, and it's a very quick process, obviously faster than anything you can think of. And that's kind of what happens when you improvise. One little idea links to another idea and that triggers something in your brain. And if you're trying to think in a lyrical way, (that's one of the things you could be trying to do -- to make a melodic improvisation) then that one thing will lead to another. And once you've done whatever it is that you want to do, those synaptic links in the brain tend to dissipate over a period of time -- they don't stay in your brain, they disappear. and that's kind of what happens when you've played a solo. Once you've done, it's gone.

To go right back to basics for a moment: your body needs to be able to do, on whatever instruments you play, whatever you can conceive within the brain. That means that you have to develop a muscle memory, and that's why everybody practises -- or should do -- to get your muscles into shape, as it were, so that your body can carry out the idea that you thought about. There are many volumes been written on practice routines for every instrument, and we all know about that stuff.

The next thing is that you develop a kind of musical vocabulary. We all sort of have one. Some of the things that pertain to me as a musician will have nothing to do with you as a musician, and vice versa. So you sort of retain ideas from other people that resonate with your vocabulary. In many cases they get put forward as licks, and we recognise them as licks, you know. That is the beginning of creating your own musical style. If we have listened to jazz over the years, we recognise Charlie Parker -- he's got a style of his own and we'd recognise him pretty much anywhere. We certainly can recognise people like Errol Garner and Oscar Peterson -- and Louis, of course, and there are many others.

So Bird has developed his muscle memory to play those things. There's one theoretician who claims that he only plays 27 licks and they're just reassembled when he plays. Maybe, but it still always thrills me when he does play. All this does suggest that we improvise from within our own musical vocabulary. It's very difficult if you don't have something to fall back on, and you tend to fall back on these things when you feel that you're not coming up with very much that satisfies you. So you play one

of these ideas and it will trigger something else and take you somewhere else.

Then there is what's called "free improvisation". As a teacher, I would get my students together (not very often, but occasionally) and play a certain note to them I'd tell them that that's all they've got, and that they've got to start from that note and create another two minutes of improvisation. It's quite surprising where they will go. Predominantly, they go with what I've been talking about -- they'll go with some sort of musical vocabulary that they've been learning. Some people will pull off something that's workmanlike, and relating to some scales they've been working on, or something like that.

There are only the two basic things that create music as we know it -- there's pitch, and there's rhythm. Every note you make is a duration of a pitch. Then two notes make a pulse, and that begins a rhythm. And that's really the beginning of, if you like, organic improvisation -- starting with pitch and rhythm somewhere, and seeing where it will take you. It's quite difficult to do. I've tried to do it myself, and it's a good thing to do, and it's a pretty free way to improvise.

Ofentimes free improvisation is the kind of thing that happens in jazz, and very frequently it will have the same kind of dynamic curve, and it's sometimes hard to avoid. A group might start quite slowly and peacefully, and they end up with some kind of chromatic situation. Sometimes it becomes more dissonant and sometimes it doesn't. The sort of dynamics we're used to is the one that works towards a climax -- that's the most common one. And even with free improvisers you do find that, although not recognisable as such in terms of the licks they play, it does often seem to have the same kind of dynamic. I think one of the most difficult things is to play an improvised section that has no beginning or end, in a very level way, without actually having huge dynamic lifts and getting frenetic, or whatever. It's hard to have a long, peaceful slab of free improvisation, shall we say. Most times, the general direction it goes is to get frenetic towards the end.

There's a certain amount of anarchy in free improvisation, I've always found. A bit like a primate group -- they're all alpha males, and there's always someone who feels at some point that they have to be the leader

and direct things. Without someone directing it, and the others trying to contribute, perhaps in a similar way or in a dissimilar way -- that's another way to go about it -- it's kind of hard to have anything happen. There's nearly always strong voices and weaker voices, and sometimes, in the normal way of things, often through sheer exhaustion somebody will drop out of the picture and someone else will take the lead. Just like with any other form of improvisation, really. So, there's not much architecture with free improvisation, but in general, if you play with the same group a lot there can be, because after all it's the people, and the improvisational contribution is about being your self, in a sense. Everything you learn, like the muscle memory, or a musical vocabulary, how much stamina you've got, if you have any sort of style -- that's who you are, in the end. And that's why, I think, we recognise Errol Garner, and Bird, and Albert Ayler and Cecil Taylor and all those players, because we can hear that this is that person. I suppose that's what people go to hear when they go to see you play.

When you play with other people, everyone's responsible for the creativity that happens on that night -- everyone's a contributor, hopefully. And the audience also comes into it. I don't think audiences realise how much they do come into it. You can feel it when people are involved with whatever it is you're playing, and that actually helps in large amounts when it's happening. The other thing about that is that every player, in their own minds, will feel that they hadn't done such a good job on one night, or they might feel that their improvisation wasn't all that constructive, or they played some notes they didn't like, or the fluency wasn't good or whatever, but in the end that's to be judged by the person who listens to you. On many occasions I've thought that I didn't play very well and I'll get people come up and say to me: "Gee! That's the best I've heard you play in ages!". Beauty is in the eye (or ear) of the beholder, if you will. And an audience can still "get it" even if they are completely unaware of the technical challenges that the music might be posing for you. Sometimes I think you're more likely to get an audience that enjoys it if they know nothing about it at all. And that's how it should be. If there's a performance going down, it's supposed to be for an audience to come and be involved with, and I always feel that it shouldn't matter if they know anything about structures, or whether it's in a good key or a bad key, or this person has a good voice or whatever, it should just affect them or not affect them, you know. I'm a great believer in that one, and

I've seen that on many occasions. Some of the most outrageous things are accepted by people who you'd never think would, and what they get out of it is often totally unrelated to whether it's been a good structural piece of music, the ability to demonstrate whether your solo or the whole performance has been just strong, you know. Sometimes people get all sorts of things out of the music that you just don't expect.

Very good players have refined their technique to the point where their instrument is like an extension to their body, and almost becomes a part of them. But you don't have to go that far to play good jazz. The basic premise is, I think, that you develop as much technique as you need to express yourself. Listen to some of the old blues players. They're most creative, and they express themselves, but their actual technique is often quite limited. But that's all they need. Other people have ferocious technique on their instruments and they only use it every now and then. The trick is to have it at your disposal, but not to use it all the time. Often it's much harder to play with simplicity to get to the core of a musical subject than it is to play with a technique that's been practised and learned over a period of time and developed so that your stamina is big. 'Cos often what happens is, if you have a very good technique, the temptation to use it is a very strong one. To some people it's an impressive thing to look at and listen to, but simplicity that makes some sense and creates a good atmosphere and shows a good character in a person is a far more difficult thing to do.

You raise the topic of modality -- of using modal scales when you're improvising. To me it's all just music. There are various ways to put titles on things, and modal music of course goes back a long way. The modal system is really quite an old one, and it was only picked up by jazz players at a certain point in time, even though you'll find that it was used a lot in older music, but not really talked about much. Generally, the big advantage for most improvisers using modality is that it gives you a row of notes to select from, as opposed to a continuously moving chord sequence, so the one tonality and its relative scale or scales is around for a long time. And that's an attractive thing to do, and you can generally create a more relaxed way to improvise. It splits it up for the listener, and they can latch onto the primal tonalities that are involved. Whereas, if you have a standard tune, it's going from one place to another and you have to concentrate on this bit and that bit, and the bridge, while with

modality it can be quite open-ended, and easier to play with a group, too, in a way, because you kind of know the sound you're going for and the mode dictates the kind of notes that should be used.

When you're playing with good players and you feel a kinship with these people, then the challenge is to produce something that maybe you haven't done before, and that then creates an excitement, and if that idea is reflected throughout the group then that's even better. That's an emotional thing. But you have to get into the state for the emotional state to be able to produce good improvisation, because the technique we talked about is one thing, and there are many ways to go about getting a technique, but the actual business of doing it, and to put yourself in that mood at the time, and being there "in the moment" is probably the hardest thing to do, and it requires, in a way, the same kind of practice as acquiring a good technique. In other words, if you're only ever going to play one improvised solo in your life you've got no way of knowing if it was good or if it was bad, really, or what else you could have done. So there is an element of the practice thing -- the more you do it, the more you get to know yourself. And the more you do with a group the more you get to know how they react as a group.

Like, when you arrive at a gig you have to dispel any anger to might have built up when you were stuck in traffic, or alternatively you can just sit right down and play it out of yourself. That's another way, and people are going to feel it in the improvisation, like: "Wow! That was aggressive", you know. That's because you are reflecting your feelings, but on the other hand that's not a particularly great way to do it -- generally you should be able to get into the mood of the piece you're playing or the type of improvisation you're making, to find a way to do that inside your head, and put yourself in that position, and that's an emotional thing.

Some people just play well together, and others still play well but it doesn't seem to gel as a unified group -- there's no real communal feel, shall we say? Even though the mechanics of what everyone's doing sounds fine, it doesn't get faster or slower, yet sometimes there's just no kind of feel of what is often described as "groove". And sometimes, that's just how it is. With a bass player and a drummer, if they don't like each other it's never going to sound any good, and if they can't decide on where the time feel is and how it relates to what everyone else is playing

at the time, then that's also difficult. And it's also experience. The more you play with other people, if you're receptive to other people then you find a way to make the situation work.

So, to sum up: with improvisation of any kind you have to be physically capable, you have to be able to get into the emotional state that actually serves to do what you set out to do. And you have to be able to show who you are, and to show how you feel, and you have to get along with your fellow musicians at the same time. And you also have to be aware that the audience plays a part in the performance.

July 2018



*Born in New Zealand Joy has been singing all her life. Her career spans five decades and several continents, garnering broad international credentials in concert, television, recording and jazz vocal performance education. Joy has shared time, stage and studio with great artists such as Neil Sedaka, Van Morrison, Cat Stevens, Cliff Richard, Chaka Khan, Randy Crawford, Gladys Knight, Ronnie Scott, Cleo Laine, John Dankworth, Andrew Lloyd Weber, Monty Python, The Goodies, Orsen Wells, Elvin Jones, Art Blakey, Clark Terry and many more. Since her return to Australia, Joy has been channeling this life experience back into nurturing young performers in the **Sing for Joy School** and the **Sydney Conservatorium of Music**, **The Australian Institute of Music**, **Artistic Direction of the Newport Jazz Festival at Pittwater**, **Global Vocal Focal Workshops**, **The Kiwi Waka Festival**, and the celebrated jazz/gospel vocal ensemble, **JUBILATION**. Now working on it's third CD, the group is becoming established as a major vocal force. Joy is married to Dave MacRae and is the mother of Jade MacRae.*

(Yates/MacRae website).

Joy: I think that if we're talking about improvisation, you always have to be aware of the chord structure, because once you've established a melodic line and you're about to go into the unknown it really helps to know those harmonies very well. Each time you begin improvising on a set form you are trying to create something different. Say somebody suggested that we change the key to F from B flat, I guess because I've spent a lot of time working with people in harmony groups and training people to learn about harmony, you just naturally adjust to that new key and look for new ways to make the statement, as this changes how you use your vocal range.

When you're powering along with a good groove going and everything is sounding good it's like nothing else. You asked David if it was as good as having sex, and I suppose it can get pretty close. It's just so stimulating and so exciting, you know -- you can't remain unmoved by it, absolutely not. And if you've been fortunate enough to end up with a marvellous rhythm section... gosh... that gives you even more room to stretch out. I have to say that I've been very fortunate for many years to have had David as my Musical Director/accompanist/ arranger. He is just such a master to work with, you know. Even when there are times when you're feeling not quite up to it for whatever reason, he's always there as somebody who will steer you back onto the path again and remind you what you need to be doing here. And once you're back on that path and you've got that great rhythm section with you, it's just simply fantastic. This doesn't always happen if you haven't got the rhythm section that you like to be with, but I think, from many years of doing this, you try to think about just the song itself and what you can do to make that sound as good as possible -- maybe you get into the lyrics and turn the phrasing around; certainly there is an art to lyrical interpretation.

I suspect that it is pretty much the same for just about everything creative that you have some nights where everything seems to come so easily, and then there are other nights where you really have to work at it, and it's not so enjoyable. As David said earlier, you have those nights and you come off feeling really down, yet everyone's saying how amazing you were, and you ask yourself why they're saying that. I think what you learn from that, is that you're not doing this to please yourself, but really you're there to perform for an audience, and it is important to please that audience. But also, for us, we want to be sure that we are happy with

what we're doing, you know. It has to mean something. One of the most fortunate things for me, was to be mentored by Carmen McRae, during the two years I lived in America. She was an absolute jazz master and I will never forget, (nor understand) her generosity. To be at the feet of the master!

When you're just jamming with some mates, without an audience, it is a much freer experience than performing for an audience. And then there are the very rare occasions where you get a combination of both things -- where the audience is amazing and the creative energy that is happening on the stage is amazing as well. That's a very rare experience, and it's something that carries you through for a long time. Then again, sometimes the pressure from the audience can take away the pleasure of the music, if you know what I mean.

I would say that especially in our later years we're performing more for people in their senior years who are also people who have been listening for a long time and they know what they like, so you're there to perform more or less in that style. You're still trying to make it as enjoyable as possible for yourself and the band, and for the audience, and it can still end up as a lot of fun. I also think that all of this requires physical fitness -- mental and physical fitness. I think it's absolutely vital for any creative person to keep practicing, especially as we age.

In my own case, I never ever imagined that I would become someone who people would seek advice from and become so involved in the education of people in jazz and singing and stuff. I was encouraged in London by Cleo Laine to attend her residential workshops as a tutor. I was a pretty young singer at the time, and David and I had a band called *Pacific Eardrum*, and we were having some good luck with our music and recordings and touring, and I said to her: "Cleo, I am not a teacher." And apart from doing our own stuff, I also had a vocal trio called *Bones*, which did a lot of recording work -- in fact it dominated the studio scene for a long while and Cleo ended up booking this group to sing on one of her albums. Having had the experience of working with her in the studio I finally accepted her invitation to go to her workshops as a tutor. It transpired that her daughter Jackie was a fan of *Pacific Eardrum* and liked my voice and was going to attend. That was just such a pat on the back I couldn't believe it. To cut a long story short, I ended up doing

those workshops, and it became, like, an incredible journey for me. People asking me to teach this and this and this. I was asked to do a talk on “The use of the Voice in Jazz” at the Purcell Room in the Southbank Centre in London. This took me completely by surprise, so I did a lot of research. It was a part of one of those London Jazz Summer Cultural Programs, where they invite a lot of guests. Terrifying yes, but, jazz is about challenge and I remember writing screeds of notes and 8 bars in, I abandoned them. At the time I didn’t realize the significance of that one hour of my life.

There was this room full of jazz vocal enthusiasts, and I ended up having a wonderful time talking to them, and I found that it was something that I could actually do. So when I came back to Australia I had a few of those people who had come to London to attend that “lecture” and Cleo’s workshops, ask me to start teaching here -- which I had no intention of doing, but the demand was pretty big so I started, and here I am -- thirty two years later and still teaching! I’ve been trying to retire for some years, but there are still heavy demands on my time, so I now just teach from home, but I’m down to about ten students these days. We still do quite a few gigs, and we have the occasional creative gig -- they’re always a lot of fun -- with our daughter Jade MacRae (who, by the way, is a wonderful improviser -- probably one of the best vocal improvisers I know) and we work with her in this group we call *Bloodlines*, where we write all the music, and occasionally when she’s in the country we might do a performance. She’s very accomplished. She plays piano and she majored in violin at the Con. Our son Moses is also a dedicated musician, plays drums and produces music.

People have said to us that Jade got off to a good musical start with the parents she chose, which could be the case. I grew up with a mother who was a jazz pianist and a farmer’s wife, and on the weekends she would go and play with her little group in the country towns. It was a wonderful way to grow up. By the time I went to University in Auckland, I got in with some musicians there and they kept asking me how I knew so many songs. I told them that I learnt them all from my mother. I am grateful for this life in music, it’s challenges and rewards and lasting friendships and my relationship with Dave MacRae.

July 2018

SANDY EVANS



"...this saxophonist surely ranks as one of the best contemporary jazz composers/musicians anywhere." Ian Patterson, allaboutjazz.com January 27, 2012

Dr Sandy Evans OAM is an internationally renowned composer and saxophonist with a passion for improvisation and new music. She has played with and written for some of the most important groups in Australian jazz since the early 1980s, toured extensively in Australia, Europe, Canada and Asia, and been featured on over 40 albums. She leads the **Sandy Evans Trio and Sextet**, and co-leads **Clarion Fracture Zone** and **GEST8**. She is a member of **Mara!**, **The catholics**, the **Australian Art Orchestra (AAO)**, **Ten Part Invention**, **austraLYSIS**, **Friends of Kim Sanders**, **Atma Blu**, **Waratah**, **Andrew Robson's Tallis project**, **Ben Walsh's Orchestra of the Underground** and **SNAP**. She has performed with many leading jazz musicians including Andrea Keller, Paul Grabowsky, Silke Eberhard, Ingrid Jensen, Judy Bailey, Han Bennink and Terri Lyne Carrington. In 2018 Sandy toured Germany and Sweden. She was a featured soloist in Lloyd Swanton's widely acclaimed **Ambon** project.

Sandy has an extensive composition portfolio and has received many commissions from leading jazz, improvising and new music ensembles. Recent commissions include a suite in honour of legendary Australian saxophonist the late Bernie McGann, and a CD **RockPoolMirror** based on photographs by Tall Poppies' Belinda Webster. Wesleyan University Press released Sandy's composition **Testimony**, a major work about the life and music of Charlie Parker with poetry by the Pulitzer Prize winning American poet Yusef Komunyakaa, in the US in 2013. Sandy composed **Kali** and **The Time of Change**, the title track of **The Sirens** debut CD.

Sandy has a keen interest in Indian classical music. She collaborates regularly with Sydney-based Indian musicians Sarangan Sriranganathan and Bobby Singh and recently released the CD **Kapture**, a tribute to South African freedom fighter Ahmed Kathrada. '...a masterfully performed fusion of jazz and Indian classical musics... the improvisations exemplify the virtuosic energy that is a key resonance between jazz and Indian classical music.' (Cummins 1/6/15 www.musictrust.com.au).

Her CD **Cosmic Waves**, featuring South Indian mridangam virtuoso Guru Kaaraikkudi Mani and Sruthi Laya, is released in India on Underscore Records. In 2014 Sandy was awarded a PhD from Macquarie University for practice-based research in Carnatic Jazz Intercultural music. She began collaborating with Aneesh Pradhan and Shubha Mudgal during a Churchill Fellowship visit to India. Sandy is an experienced teacher and inaugurated a Jazz Improvisation Course for Young Women run annually by SIMA. She is Lecturer in Jazz at UNSW and an Adjunct Lecturer in the Composition and Jazz Units at the Sydney Conservatorium. She appears in the Australian jazz documentaries **Beyond el Rocco** and **Dr Jazz**.

Awards and Honours:

ART Music Award for Excellence in jazz for **RockPoolMirror**, 2018: Australia Council Fellowship 2017-2018, Churchill Fellowship 2014

Vice Chancellor's Commendation for Academic Excellence, PhD Macquarie University, 2014 Performance of the Year with the AAO and Sruthi Laya, Art Music Awards 2013.

AIR Award for Best Independent Jazz CD 2011, Order of Australia Medal 2010, Bell Award For Australian Jazz Musician of The Year 2003, Young Australian Creative Fellowship 1996, 3 ARIA Awards, APRA Award, 2 Mo Awards.

Sandy is married to Tony Gorman.

(Bio supplied)

Sandy: When you are improvising, if things are going well and at their best you're definitely not thinking -- the conscious brain simply cannot operate fast enough to deal with all the incredible things that are happening when you are improvising. I think you think through things in advance, you prepare... but I also think it varies a lot depending on the context. If there is a lot of complex material within the music that you need to master, then you would have spent a fair amount of time internalising that before you get onstage and actually taking the solo.

The ideal feeling, when you're actually taking the solo, is that you are totally immersed in the sound world, you're at one with your instrument, you're relaxed with the audience, you're listening to the band, and you're in a sort of state -- almost a state of grace, I would say, where it's totally mindful -- you're totally absorbed in the moment. It's a very special feeling, actually. You have to be very relaxed, but at the same time you have to be totally alert and listening, so it's a hard state to describe. I think Duke Ellington described it as dreaming, and it's a very deep state, I think.

So to prepare for that, there are all sorts of things that musicians (myself included) find helpful and important. One of them is technique on the instrument, and I guess another very important part is your knowledge of the material that you are improvising on. Say, for example that you are improvising on something like John Coltrane's chord progression in *Giant Steps*, you need to know the chord progression very well, and you have to have a vocabulary that you can manipulate in that context. Other types of improvisation aren't so much about mastering the vocabulary that you can then speak with live, you know... some of them are much more open than that. I personally enjoy them all.

I think another important factor is having a good rapport with the band, so you would have worked on these things with the band as well. Sometimes you may not have met the band before, but you've done stuff with other musicians that has prepared you for that context. I also find that the audience, and the sound in the room are very important things in influencing how you feel at that moment when you are taking a solo. Dropping into your solo some safe riffs or licks from time to time I think is something that happens inevitably, although I think that most musicians, myself included, endeavour to transcend that.

To me, improvising music is not the same as using spoken language, but there are a lot of similarities. You know, as I'm talking to you now I have certain ways of putting sentences together. Some of them are good and some of them are not so good, but they're habits that I've formed over the years... and it requires me to know the vocabulary of English to be able to speak to you. In whatever genre of music you are working in I think you have a vocabulary. Sometimes that's drawn from things that you've learnt by listening to other people play and then assimilating those ideas yourself. Sometimes it's things you've come up with yourself -- your own language. Ultimately I think it's fantastic if you can synthesise all those things together, and then, in the moment... I think one of the most fantastic things about improvising is that you aspire to actually create new music in the moment. I don't know whether very many improvisers do totally new things every time they play, but the way they compile their ideas together is different and therefore the effect of that can be very different. And then, occasionally, something new, through your intuition, will come forward.

There's an American guy who has published a book about how people improvise -- it's called *Thinking in Jazz* -- I don't know if you know it. It's a great book. The guy's name is Berliner. He interviewed a lot of jazz musicians about the ideas that you're dealing in. He came up with this term -- I don't know if he was the first one to use it or not, but he said that we use building blocks of ideas that serve as the foundation of what you're going to do, but then you do... well, improvising is moulding those ideas spontaneously. It's as though everything is built on something else, and that applies across a pretty wide range of styles.

It depends on what the objective of the music is too. Some groups want to question what has gone before, and so, if you're playing in that kind of a context you might try and be quite subversive in the way that you work with languages and licks that you've learnt. I love the opportunity to be creative and imaginative in the moment, but it's a conversation with yourself, with the musicians onstage, and also, in a sense, with the whole history of what music is listened to and inspired by.

With all this talk of vocabulary and grammar, it is very much like speaking, or writing. You've learned the rules of grammar, but you're not thinking about those things while you're doing it. If I had to stop and think

whether every word I used was a noun or a verb or an adverb, I wouldn't be able to talk to you, because I'd be spending too much time thinking about the rules, as it were. The nuts and bolts of the grammar has to be deeply ingrained in you over the years, really, before you hit that point of improvising on stage, and the more you've been able to internalise and understand that grammar then the more fluent and free you're going to be able to be at the microphone. I'd be lying if I said that always happens. Sometimes you might be playing a tune for the first time and you come across a chord... you might know the chord, but you might never have got to that chord from a chord in another bar or suddenly you're trying to navigate that chord in a different time signature or a different key that you're unfamiliar with, or a different tempo. So there are these problem-solving aspects that come into playing a good solo, particularly on a form that you might not be familiar with. So I think that that conscious part of your brain, depending on the context, sometimes does have to come into play. The goal, I suppose, is to know the context and the material well enough that you're not having to constantly think about those things by the time that you get to the stage. But as I say, that doesn't always happen, and as a professional musician you have to be able to learn how to solve those problems on the run. I think a lot of musicians -- and I don't include myself in this category -- but thinking of people like the late Roger Frampton, who was very very quick-witted in both spoken language and musical language. He could very quickly handle these sorts of problems -- you know, musical conundrums almost.

In my case, I need to prepare a bit. As a professional you do develop the ability to respond more quickly -- you have to do that, really. So there's a whole range of different scenarios I'd say, and an important thing is that you never feel quite the same way twice, I don't think. You never play the same way twice exactly, although you always sound like yourself. You know, people who are familiar with your playing can always identify that something about your playing that is always consistent across all the performances. The way you feel about them yourself is varied. Even from tune to tune on a given night, or even from one chorus to another. One chorus you might feel is not going so well for whatever reason, and you sort of try to make it go better, you know -- to try to get out of whatever traffic jam you're in, and to get there in a way you're more happy with.

I do a lot of free improvisation -- I love that! As you know, with free

improvisation nothing is planned in advance. There are some kinds of free improvisation where you might be following a graphic score, or cue cards, or some kind of a plan. For example, in Lloyd Swanton's group *The catholics*, he came up with a plan for a free improvised piece but he has no more than three people playing at one time, so he's got a pre-determined order of who will play when, and when the next person comes in the last person drops out. So sometimes there is some kind of organisation behind what is played. I love playing totally improvised music, and I think that there is a freedom about it that can be very liberating for the musicians, and hopefully for the listeners as well. There's a potential to discover new things. It's something I've been interested in throughout my whole career.

I've become very interested in Indian music, and one of the factors that attracted me was the similarity between *ragas* in Indian music, which are improvised, and improvisation in jazz. John Coltrane is one of my inspirations, and he was probably instrumental, along with a few others like Miles Davis, in introducing the idea of modal playing into jazz, and I have always loved the feeling that can be created using just one set of pitches, and that's one of the fundamental components of *raga* in Indian music. There are probably a couple of other factors: one was the rhythmic approach. As soon as you have no harmony to create form, then rhythm takes on more importance in terms of how the music is phrased and structured. I think because of that, Indian musicians have a very highly-developed sense of rhythmic structure and form, and how to create tension and release within that.

The other thing was probably to do with the people I met. For me, music is a social act as well. The friendships that I have developed with the musicians I've played with are very important, and I'd say they are fundamental to the music we make. I was lucky to meet Guru Kaaraikkudi Mani, who is a virtuoso *mridangam* player who has collaborated a lot with the *Australian Art Orchestra* and he sort of became a guru for me -- not in the strict Indian sense, but in a sense appropriate to my relationship to him. I do refer to him as a guru, and he's helped me a lot to understand the basics of rhythm in South Indian music, and I have found that the way that he taught, the way that he plays and the way that he is as a person is all very inspiring, so I was lucky to meet him. And also, from a completely different tradition -- the

North Indian tradition -- I met the tabla player Bobby Singh. He's an amazing guy -- a really fantastic player and a big inspiration to me. He's based in Melbourne now. When I got interested in all these things I asked Bobby if he had any recommendations about a teacher I could go to, and he suggested Sarangan Srirangathan. Sarangan lives in Sydney and is a sitar player -- he comes from Sri Lanka. He is unusual among Indian musicians in that he sings in a South Indian style, but he plays the sitar and has studied in the North Indian tradition, which is quite different. He's also interested in Bollywood music and fusion, and he's a brilliant teacher. I've really enjoyed learning from him and I didn't really intend to go so deeply (not that I've gone *hugely* deeply, but to the extent that I have) into the study of Indian music, but it was really because of being inspired by the people I was lucky enough to meet.

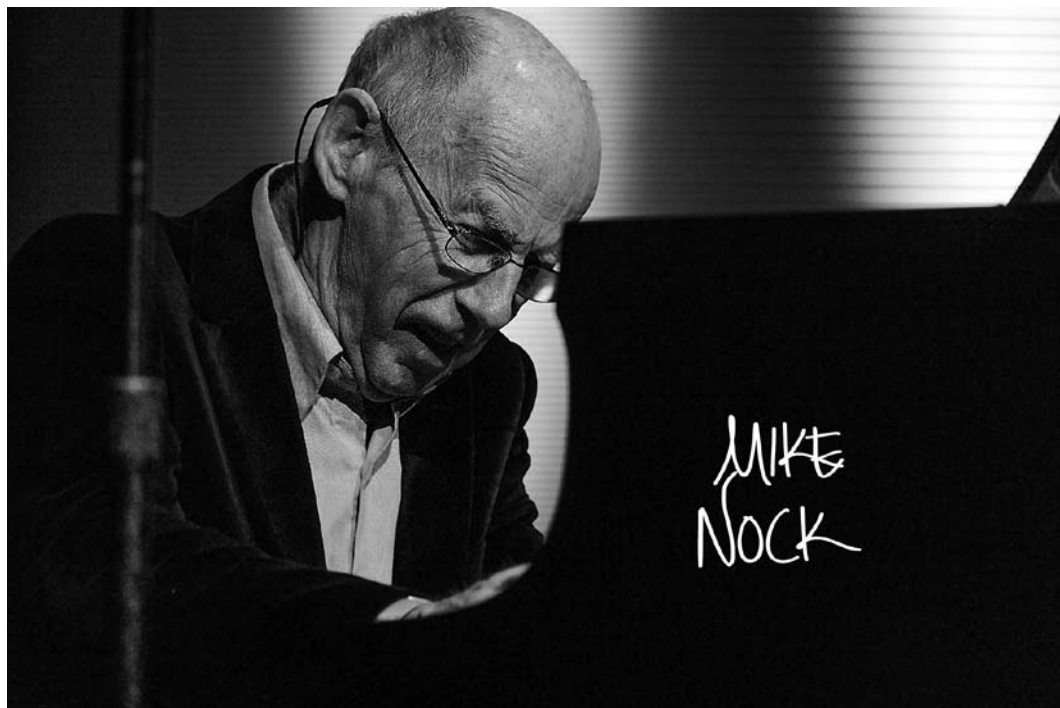
For the last couple of years I haven't been studying Indian music -- I'm actually itching to get back to it and I'm hoping that in a couple of months the space will appear for me to do that. I've still been collaborating with Indian musicians, and one of the biggest projects I've been doing over the last couple of years has entailed collaborating with Bobby's guru Aneesh Pradhan and the amazing hindustani singer Shubha Mudgal. This project, *Bridge of Dreams*, was initiated by Sirens Big Band and features them in an Indian jazz collaboration. I approached that project more from my base as a jazz musician, arranging for a big band and putting songs we co-composed into a big band context, which has been fantastic and I'm really thrilled about it, actually.

But I wouldn't classify anything I've done for that project as Indian music, because the Indian musicians bring their knowledge and expertise from their tradition. Although I might understand that tradition a bit better because of my engagement with Indian music, I think the main skills I brought to the project were from my jazz experience and background and interests. At the moment I have a job teaching jazz at UNSW, and probably because of that I've been focussing a lot on jazz. I don't think I would ever lose my connection to or love of jazz. There are so many fantastic and stimulating things happening in jazz, and there are so many interesting developments going on in jazz at the moment -- the potential, I think, is pretty much infinite. And things keep coming back. There seems to be a sort of cyclic thing where musicians look to the past to be regenerated and inspired and find deep roots in the music. It has evolved

in so many directions...

I really value the musical culture we've got going on here in Australia. After all, Australia has had a very strong connection to jazz for a long time, and if you look through the history of jazz here you'll find various engagements of Australian musician with improvised music. And I'm very proud to be a part of that. I feel like it's not easy, and it's not getting any easier. Then I look at my students and musicians among the younger generation and I realise that there are also advantages that come from technology and the Internet. But in terms of live playing it's quite difficult, and I'd like to see support in Australia for live music of all varieties. In terms of jazz and live music I think there are some amazing things going on here, and they deserve to have a higher profile and more support.

August 2018



Mike Nock's career has spanned a broad range of contemporary musical styles and he is widely recognised as an important voice in Australian modern music.

Based in Sydney since 1986, he previously spent 25 years in the USA, working with many of the world's top jazz artists.

His compositions include orchestral music, woodwind/percussion ensembles, electronic/choral works etc., and have been recorded and performed by a range of jazz & non-jazz performers.

*Attracting many awards and honours over his lengthy career in 2014 he was awarded the **Don Banks Music Award**, the most valuable individual music award in Australia.*

*In 2009 he was inducted into the **Bell Awards** Australian Jazz Hall of Fame and in 2003 was presented with the **New Zealand Order of Merit***

(Mike Nock website)

(In order to get the conversation started, I've been asking the people being interviewed to try to describe what the feeling is like when they step up to the mic to take an improvised solo. When I began with this question to Mike he was insistent that there was no way he could even begin to answer it.)

Mike: Look, Bill, you're asking me questions about what I spend my whole life doing, and I don't think about shit -- I just do it. Seriously. That's what I've done for -- well, I'm 77 now and it's all I've ever done -- for most of my life. Not just my adult life but most of my life. I don't think about... you ask me these questions and I don't have any answers because I don't think about it.

To me, it all depends on who I'm playing with. I listen to what's going on around me and respond to that. If you've got a set series of chord changes or whatever, obviously you have to keep that in mind, because that is what you're doing. Sonny Rollins once said that he always plays free, and that's the way I feel. I always play free. Even though I may be aware of harmonic matters I'm always striving to play freely, no matter what the context. But you still need to be aware of the rules, (if there are any). When things are going well your instrument is like an extension of yourself, and it's a bit like driving a car -- you don't know what gear you're in, you don't know what key you're in. You just do it.

I try to be in shape. I try to be mentally in shape in what I play. At the moment I haven't played the piano for six weeks, because I've been in hospital as a result of a car accident I had recently. Obviously I wouldn't want to play now because it's just too different for me. I have to prepare myself so that I can play the way that I like to. So I'm out of practice at the moment, but at any time you can get out of practice pretty quick, so you've got to do whatever work you need to do so that you can at least be capable of doing something -- to be able to bring to bear what you can on the material at hand.

When it comes to playing jazz as opposed to classical music, you've always got to have some kind of technique. People talk about Thelonius Monk not having any, but he had great technique to do what he needed to do. One man's technique may be another's ham-fisted stuff -- it's all relative in the end. But if that's what you choose to do, then that's what

you choose to do. It's just a different set of criteria. The thing for me is to be able to kind of work on the stuff in various ways at various times, depending on where you are with everything. Being connected to what I'm playing is what technique means to me, that's what I aim for anyway.

I don't know if anyone can count on doing that all the time. After all, you do have good nights and bad nights, you know. You try to lift the level of your bad nights so they're more consistent, but again, everyone's like that. We're people. We're human. Sometimes you're hot, and if you're hot you're hot, and if you're not you're not, as they say.

And it's not that I prefer say, free improvisation over something more structured. I actually don't have a preference. I prefer to play *music*. And that's my goal, so it doesn't matter if I'm improvising freely or improvising on a song. Again, it's all to do with context. You mention the blues... well it depends on the musicians I'm playing with, more than any other thing.

You suggest that on a bad night one might throw in more licks and phrases one already knows, but I don't function that way. For me it's about flow -- you can still be flowing whether you're playing the same shit or not, you know.

In fact, some of the gigs I've done over the years that have been really high points -- great gigs -- have been stuff that we all know really well. It just comes together in a certain way sometimes. And it's fantastic. Sometimes it just comes together in a way that is transcendent. And when you're having a really great night, everything seems like that's the only way it could have been. And when it's really great you may not even be aware of the audience. Sometimes the audience may be part of the equation, and other times they're not.

For me, what jazz is, always has been, and always will be, is about self-expression. Even when I didn't know anything about what I was doing I could always make things up. It was one of those things that I could do. I would go into a kind of a trance without even knowing it, and I could just sort of play all this stuff. I didn't know what I was doing, and as I learnt more that became harder and harder to do. I used to totally lose myself -- just sit at the piano and lose myself, and the more I learnt the harder it became to lose myself in that way. See, as a professional musician

you've got to be aware, so it's that balance -- it's an internal ongoing paradox.

I practise all the time, whenever I can -- oh shit yeah. But I think that practising means different things at different times in one's life. One practises different things, and for different reasons, you know. All the practising that I do is aimed at being free of the instrument, to get to where it's like an extension of my body.

August 2018



Pianist and composer Alister Spence is acknowledged as a significant contributor in contemporary original jazz and improvised music in Australia.

*The **Alister Spence Trio** with Lloyd Swanton (**the Necks**) and Toby Hall (ex Mike Nock trio) has enjoyed critical acclaim both nationally and internationally, being nominated twice for **Best Australian Jazz Album** at the **ARIA Awards** (2004/2007). The trio's most recent CD, **Not Everything but Enough** was voted in 'Top 10 Jazz Albums 2017' in **Music Magazine**, Japan, and also received an 'Honorary Mention, Best of 2017' in the **New York City Jazz Record**.*

*He is a founding member of **Clarion Fracture Zone**, **Wanderlust** and **The Australian Art Orchestra**.*

Alister has toured extensively over the last 25 years, performing at major festivals and clubs in Australia, and also in countries such as U.S.A., Canada, Japan, U.K, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, France, Italy, Spain, Finland, Russia, India, China and Taiwan.

Since 2008 he has toured and recorded with fellow pianist/composer Satoko Fujii. He has performed and recorded duo projects since 2009 with Scottish sax player Raymond MacDonald (**Stepping Between the Shadows**, Rufus Records, 2012). **Everything Here is Possible**, recorded with US pianist Myra Melford, was awarded an APRA/AMCOS Art Music Award for 'Excellence in Jazz' in 2014. In 2014 **Sensaround** (Spence, MacDonald, Ahmad) launched their electro-acoustic trio and released **Isotropes**: followed up by **Travelogue** in 2016. In 2015 Alister released **Begin** with Joe Williamson and Christopher Cantillo (double bass and drums, Sweden). **Begin** was nominated for an **APRA/AMCOS Art Music Award 2015**.

Alister is a Lecturer in Music at the University of New South Wales.

(Loudmouth. Music Trust e-zine)

Alister: One of your questions is about pre-hearing. I think that's a fascinating area. I think of it more as remembering sounds rather than it kind of suggests itself. Over a long period of time you just remember what things sound like, so when you get to a certain point in the music these things kind of crop up as suggestions in your mind and then you either choose to go with them or not.

You don't have all that much time to make that choice. Sometimes, like in a free improvising situation where there's no destination that you have to reach necessarily you have quite a bit of time to think about that -- the shape that things might go in, or whatever. But when you're dealing with chord changes that are running by very quickly it becomes much more instinctual, I think.

Sometimes I get that feeling that you mention of the instrument being an extension of myself, but only sometimes! It's great when it feels like that, or when you can just be in a natural situation with it, where you're not trying, I guess, -- where it just seems to be occurring... but a lot of it for me, I think, is just trying to leave my mind out of the way... well, to some extent anyway (having just been talking about making decisions). Just to allow things to be suggested, I guess, rather than to be thinking about thinking. I think when you start thinking about thinking things become problematic.

With free improvisation, you have to listen closely to what else is being played, and this is really what I like about it actually, because it is all about a collective result. I really like those situations. I like the situations where the sum of the parts -- all the different people who are contributing -- you know, whatever is resulting is due to all of those inputs rather than just necessarily one person's focus.

It can be like a musical conversation sometimes, but I think you can be also quite contradictory in those situations as well, if you want to be, and sometimes that can be quite constructive. The element of surprise can be a really useful thing in music -- whether it be for the people you are playing with or for the audience as well. And sometimes it's not so much that you're talking back and forth, but you're on a journey together. It's an interesting one. I do think about that dialogue idea, 'cos people often talk about narratives and conversation in music, and I think that's one aspect of it.

But there are other elements to it as well. Maybe painting is a good analogy, or some other... rather than speaking, in some cases. Painting brings in the element of space, to do with the way space is occupied in the music, rather than thinking of it as being linear perhaps (though of course music *is* linear), but you can think of it as a space that is occupied in some way by sound. I find that analogy quite freeing, in that I don't necessarily feel that I have to be in conversation. It's just a different perspective, I guess. All of these things are helpful ways to think about it.

Now, with free improvisation, you don't have a restrictive chord structure to worry about and that's a lot of fun. It is literally "free", and you can just invent pathways according to whatever seems to be a good way to go at the time.

Of course you have good nights and bad nights. Always. But how you handle them is a bit tricky, because everyone is different, and I think everyone has a different tolerance for playing things that they've played before, which is what happens when you're playing a lot -- you tend to play things that you've learned yourself before. I find my tolerance for that is fairly low -- I find I get... not bored, but I suppose I get a bit frustrated just hearing myself go through similar pathways. I'm not sure, on a gig, whether I'm trying to forget that I've done that before, or

whether I'm trying to just be in a place where whatever seems the right thing to do is OK -- some sort of mental preparation.

The quote you begin this book with, by Steve Lace, is a good one. When you're improvising it *is* like being on the edge. I like being in that place where you're not certain what's going to happen, and soloing puts you in that place, along with your colleagues as well -- the people you're playing with -- because they can do things as well that are quite surprising. Often I think that if you can do something that surprises yourself you can break yourself out of a certain way of thinking, and perhaps gain a new perspective or find a few different pathways that you wouldn't have necessarily taken otherwise. For me, personally, I enjoy that sort of place where I can take those risks and then find a way out of them.

I guess I like it to be a bit risky. I like surprising myself, I like the sound that comes back because of those other things that you didn't expect to hear. I've never been the kind of person who is always trying to play exactly what is occurring to me. Sometimes I will deliberately do something where I have absolutely no idea what it's going to sound like, and then figure out what happens after that. There's a lot goes on in a very short space of time.

And the audience is another factor that has to be taken into account, because whatever sounds you make, if they are appealing to people then they'll come to listen to those sounds -- or so you hope. But within that... certainly with my trio, I've tried to keep it so that whatever it is that I felt I would like to do musically I should do that. So what we've been doing over 20 years has changed quite a lot, I think, musically. I mean some things I think are still the same, like some of the kinds of sensibilities -- like a feeling for things that are in my mind quite beautiful. Those sorts of things continue in the music, but other things we... well we do more free improvising than we used to do, so some things have changed, and other things have carried on. I try to give myself the opportunity to change if I feel I need to. Then I have to see what listeners make of that.

It's often hard to say why you think one piece of improvisation is better than another, that's for sure. And sometimes it's not immediately obvious. You might be feeling that you're not having a particularly good night, and

you get feedback from the audience that they thought what you did was fantastic. It can be a bit tricky, I think. Sometimes maybe you just need more time to be reflective about it. I guess you just do what you do and see where that leads.

In terms of making choices about albums and which songs are good and which songs are not -- part of that is also consensus, like trying to get ideas from your bandmates as well, or the engineer -- whatever. And another part is, the more you do and the more experience you have you find you have frameworks to compare your music to -- whether it's people you admire from Australia or overseas -- and you start to get a picture of where you fit and how your music sort of adds up.

I think that the best part of playing for me is when I'm improvising. There's actually one tune we play now in my trio which only has a small portion of it that's improvised, and the improvising is a bit more planned in that particular tune -- it's quite structured, and that's unusual -- but it works in that situation, I think, for that particular piece of music, and I'm still quite happy to do that, despite what I just said about preferring the improvised bits. But I think I've probably always been drawn to improvising. When I first started the piano I had classical lessons up through my high school years, and at a certain point I discovered that I could actually make noises on the piano all by myself without the music, and that really was captivating, and that has always been the case. I just like making things up. And that's why I play jazz, and once I got away from playing classical music I was writing compositions and playing little pieces, and I just wanted more knowledge about how to put all that together. So that took me to jazz training, but it wasn't so much that I wanted to be a jazz performer as such -- though I did, of course, fall in love with it -- but it was more that I wanted a better language, or a bit more information for my improvising.

As for how important it is to have good technique, well I think that depends on who you are and what sort of music you play. For me, it's essential, because of the things I'm asked to do as a player. I wouldn't be able to do them unless my technique was up to it. If I was a more idiosyncratic player, or played in a different way to what I do... I suppose you invent a technique that's specialised to your needs, really -- one that suits your purpose. Of course you can still play jazz even if your

technique is somewhat limited, and some things which are quite simple can also be quite profound.

I like practising, but in the last few years I've been finishing a PhD and that has sidetracked me a bit, but I'm just getting the opportunity now to get back into it. I can't say it's every day but I'd like it to be, and I'd like it to be regular. Most of my practice these days is playing scales and the like, practising to stay limber, so that you're ready for whatever opportunities come along. It's sort of a maintenance programme, I guess, to "keep my hand in".

Different instruments have different demands, of course. People say that trumpet players really can't not be playing their instrument, because their embouchure goes very quickly, whereas I think that for piano playing, and for some other instruments, you can get away with it for a little bit longer.

I use modes quite a lot, actually. I really like that sound. It's a way for the music to sound a little bit more enigmatic, and you can find lots of colour options in those sorts of sounds as well. And it's a way of being a bit more ambiguous, I guess. Sometimes the sounds can be... well, in place of playing a C chord because you're in the key of C, you can play an Em chord or something, or maybe an Am chord. They're kind of related to C, but it's not actually C, so you don't have to... you can give a sense that you're in the right place without having to be pedantic about it.

It's interesting with the tunes that we play because sometimes you'll hear a solo piano player play, for instance, or even a solo wind instrument, and you can hear what's happening harmonically but you're not necessarily hearing all of the chords being spelled out. I think the context of the music sometimes helps a lot, whether it's the way the melody goes or... you get a bit of a sense of what's happening in the chords. And I think that's the way jazz works too -- even in the way the bass and the drums work together. They're not always telling you what the beat is -- sometimes they're playing around with the *idea* of that beat, and it's the same with chords. You play around with the idea of chords and tease it out a little bit, and people have to imagine a little bit more what the connections are.

And of course rhythm always matters. It's always been something I've loved anyway since growing up with British rock and roll. (*chuckles*). Rhythm has always been a central thing -- rhythm and bass lines.

I prefer playing to an audience to recording in a studio. I think recording is quite difficult, but I've got more used to the recording process as time goes on.

As far as booze and drugs go, I think the music culture has changed a bit over the years. I remember when I was growing up in the 80s there was a fair bit of that sort of thing going on -- a bit of sort of macho energy going around where you felt you had to perform and hang out with the boys and stuff like that, but it's not so much like that these days. In the past I've occasionally found myself playing with someone who is quite out of it, but that hasn't happened for many years.

You wouldn't say that there was huge gig scene in Australia, but there are gigs and opportunities out there. I think just about everybody that I know has another career in teaching or something. There are a few people -- maybe Lloyd Swanton of *The Necks*, whose music performance career is their only thing, but they would be in the minority.

Improvising well is pretty bloody exciting -- it's a special feeling that's quite amazing, and not all that easy to put into words. I feel like I've been very lucky, really. I was in the band with Sandy and Tony, *Clarion Fracture Zone*, which was brilliant, and was for me a kind of a realisation that we could play our own original music, and that it would matter, and that I could find a way of doing that. And it really got me started, I think. I'm very grateful to them for the opportunity, and I feel that along the way there have been people like that who have been an inspiration and encouraging. It's a great community, I think, and it has made me lots of friends. This is true overseas as well, because I have friends in Japan who I play with (in fact I'm just about to put out an album with some friends from Japan) and also in Scotland and in Sweden, so I've found the same sort of network all over the place -- it's kind of universal.

August 2018



*Brett Hirst is a bass player, born in New Zealand. He holds a **Diploma of Jazz Studies** from the **Christchurch School of Jazz** in New Zealand, and a **Masters of Music (Performance)** from the **Sydney Conservatorium of Music** in Australia. Living in Sydney since 1998, Brett maintains a busy performance and recording schedule with some of Australia's premiere musicians, as well as international jazz and contemporary artists. His performance and recording credits include: Mike Nock, Mark Isaacs, Sandy Evans, Phil Slater, Matt McMahon, James Muller, James Morrison, Lior, Katie Noonan, Vince Jones, James Greening, Mara, Josh White Jr., Wendy Matthews, Sharon Shannon, Damien Leith, Mary Coughlan, Dominique Fillon, Greg Osby, Ricky Ford, Sheila Jordan, Sean Wayland and many more.*

(Brett Hirst website)

Brett: Because I am a bass player, soloing for me is not the main contribution I make, my main role is in the ensemble. Even if we are just playing supporting roles we're all improvising -- all the time. Just what you play depends on the piece of music you're playing, and for me it depends on what's been going on -- am I the first soloist after the melody, am I coming after someone who has just played a solo that is really intense with lots of notes? My job is to try to balance everything out, and if the previous solo has been intense, if it comes down to a bass solo I'm going to try to do something that is a complete contrast.

It's not as though anybody has written down any notes for you to play. There might be some chord symbols and the form of the song, and if it's a straight-ahead jazz thing and I'm playing a walking bass, I have to choose four notes in every bar (if it's in 4/4) and try to make a nice flow happen, and make it not boring and try to create lines that fit the chords. Then, over time, I might move away from just outlining chords as they occur and try to get that feeling happening, and to try make it feel like it's opening up a bit and the soloist feels like they have some room to play with. So that's all improvising, as far as I'm concerned. It's not improvising in quite the same sense as when you're improvising a solo but it is definitely part of the improvising that goes on in jazz.

Playing the bass is interesting because you can't play chords in the same way that you can on a piano or a guitar, and you can't play a whole lot of super-fast notes like a saxophone player can, so you've got to try and come up with stuff... you know, the bass is low-pitched, and it's kind of slower-speaking, so you've got to come up with stuff that has forward motion and keeps the feeling of the music going, but within the limitations of the instrument. The other thing is when you... most other instruments would take many solos in an evening, where a bass player might only have two or three, so you're not doing it as often and are probably not quite as practised at it as those other instruments. And the bass is not exactly an agile instrument, and that's the nature of the instrument, and it's so physical to play. Even to get to play a one octave scale up one string involves a huge amount of distance to cover.

You can use all that stuff to your advantage and let yourself be more percussive within the limits of the harmonic structure. You've just got to be creative within those constraints.

The act of improvising is quite thrilling in itself. That's why you do it. You wait for those moments where it's all cooking along in a great groove, and when they come there's nothing better. It's amazing. And you lose yourself in it completely. And then the tragedy is that when the piece is finished it's all over. It's all gone. And musicians wear their heart on their sleeve and remember the bad bits that happened on a gig, you know, so you just have to take those things on board and try to keep improving yourself. Improvising is obviously the most exciting thing, and that's why... once you've experienced that feeling a few times it's addictive and you want to try and get back there -- and it's very frustrating when you can't.

I've played a fair bit of free improvisation in the past. It all depends a lot on what ensemble I'm playing with. I guess playing a little bit with Mike Nock and Sandy Evans -- they both have elements of free improvisation that creeps into the set. It might not be completely free for the whole set, but we might do an introduction, or we might have sections of a song where it gets broken down into something completely free.

Free improvisation is supposed to be sort of a musical conversation, but free means "free" and you can actually do whatever you want. Theoretically I could chop my bass up with an axe -- that's free! You have to try to forget some of the rules of music, like listening to what's happening and trying to have a conversation and trying to listen to what needs to be played or not. You can find yourself going down one path that you don't like and you might decide to do something to disrupt it, and there are so many ways to approach that. But obviously, for all music -- even if it's not free -- you are trying to listen, and those conversational elements are supposed to be there in the sense that you're reacting, even if I'm playing four notes that have been written by the composer. In an ideal world, how I'd play them would be a result of me reacting to what's going on around me musically. I suppose I feel that the conversational/listening element is always there in jazz whether it is free or not. Obviously with freer music you can do anything -- you're not bound by having to sound a certain way. There have been people who have played free music amazingly and who make it sound a certain way, and when we come to a free section we want to make it sound the way those people did it. You're always influenced by music that you like, or music that has had a profound effect on you in some way.

I think it is important to have a pretty good technique if you're going to feel at home when you're improvising. Ultimately, what you want to have is freedom on your instrument -- freedom to play whatever needs to be played, or hear in your mind, or feel how you should proceed. You could look on the instrument as a kind of hindrance that gets in the way of the music, if you like. Obviously good technique and a good understanding of your instrument goes a long way to removing that barrier. I wouldn't say that I had the world's greatest technique, but I'm still working on it all the time.

I still practise regularly, but I've had some responsibilities with my children that cuts into it a bit. But when they're at school I have some of the daytime free to get back to actually playing the instrument. I always feel better playing music when I have been regularly practising because I feel like I am more connected to the instrument and therefore connected to the music I guess. I do lots of really slow scales and stuff, you know with a metronome -- arpeggios... again, because the double bass is so physical, practising is really good for keeping up your hand strength and intonation. And also, doing stuff like that is really good just to slow your mind down and to centre you on the instrument.

Obviously, when you get to a performance there is a lot going on and there are all sorts of other inputs, and you're not thinking about it in the way that you practise at all -- you're just trying to go with whatever happens. In a performance I think I'm *in* the music a lot more, I can get involved a lot more, compared to thinking things like "Shit! This hard! This is hard to play! I've got to think what all these chord changes mean!" That just gets in the way of seeing what else is going on in the conversation part of the music, I guess.

I agree that the aim is to get to the stage where your instrument is an extension of yourself, but whether that's possible or not... For me, every day when I address the instrument it seems like everything's moved -- like everything is in a different place. I think it depends on how I'm feeling, or whether there's any tension, or maybe I put the bass two millimetres higher than I usually do without noticing or something. But in an ideal world you would always be able to sort of just bypass the instrument and get the music out.

When things are going really well, how you feel is a combination of many things. Like any great art, whether it's a painting or reading a book, all of your senses are kind of tied up. The intellectual side is tied up, along with the emotional side of it -- I think that's when you've really got something happening. It's impossible to... well, jazz is about creating a feeling and an emotion, but it's not that we're just randomly playing notes -- it's complicated music. Harmonically it's not easy, rhythmically it's not always easy, so I think it's a music which is supposed to engage all sides of things human. There's the physical side of playing the instrument -- that feels good, then there's the feeling of the group really cooking, and that feels good, and then there's the intellectual... you know, you're being forced to ... (and I'm saying this as a player and as a listener)... you're being forced to follow the soloist or you're being set up with expectations that are either being met or are going off in other directions. There's a journey going along as well, trying to follow along, and when a performance is really happening all these things are going on at the same time.

Having said all that, there are certain ensembles and players who lean more towards playing simpler on the intellectual side and going for the emotional side of it, but then there are players who are more comfortable with the intellectual side of it. It's just different ways of processing the music and playing, but ultimately I think we're all trying to get to that same goal when it's all happening at once, and there's nothing like it.

Of course rhythm is also terribly important, especially if you're a bass player. It's the rhythm that makes it swing, and what makes you want to dance along or whatever. I can only talk about it as a rhythm section player, but my job is to find a way to lock into what the drummer is doing, and to also lock into whatever the piano player or the guitarist might be doing with the comping. Then the soloists can just go for it. I suppose I would say that for me the rhythm is probably even more important.

As for the audience... of course they are important as well. But I think it's dangerous to worry too much about whether they're getting what's going on or not, because everybody hears stuff in a different way. You know, musicians can be vulnerable, and if we think that people aren't liking what we're doing or whatever, then that can pretty much kill off a performance if you start worrying about that. But the audience has a

very important role in that they are part of the coming together to share whatever is going to happen, and you've got be open and vulnerable and willing to pick yourself up and go with whatever happens. And hopefully the audience feels the same way and can go off on the journey together.

While it's fun playing in a room with a band for rehearsals there's always another level of energy and intensity when you're performing for lots of people, and I think that makes the audience hugely important. Especially if they are experienced in listening to the music and react when things are going well and we surprise them. That all adds to the energy. I think that's a really important part of it all.

You ask about modal music. Playing with modes is really just part of being a professional, I guess. I think I'm part of a generation where that kind of music doesn't seem new to me. Miles Davis came out with *Kind of Blue*, using modes, in 1959, and that's a long time ago! By the time I got into jazz, that was a record that you just listened to, as well as listening to *Giant Steps* by Coltrane, and as well as listening to Ben Webster or Charlie Parker, which is more harmony-driven. It's all part of the language, I guess, so I don't see it as... I know there are certain views that jazz should be this way or that, but to me it's all still the same thing. You've got all the same rhythmic considerations and you're still trying to make music that has a really good feeling and that flows really well. And that can be hard to do with only one scale, you know. All the same musical elements are occurring, and it's not that different to... for me it's all part of the thing that I consider jazz, so I've never stuck modal music up here as being something different to deal with.

I guess everyone's aiming for the same thing -- the community, and the music, and it all coming together and creating something that's bigger. than the sum of its parts. But it's all very personal as well. However I might come to something, it's going to be vastly different for somebody else, even though we're all playing the same thing and hoping to get the same value out of it, but just how you do that is very personal, and everybody has their unique way of negotiating what it means at any given moment in the music, or to do with what instrument they play, or how they first learned it. Some people are doing it more by ear, and others are doing it by a more intellectual process, and it's all completely valid as a way of making interesting music.

It's good to be made to think about these things, too, because sometimes you get stuck in the trenches and you don't step back and think about what's going on in the big picture, so it's always good to have conversations like this on any topic, really, isn't it, because it stimulates new ways of thinking.

August 2018



***Kevin Hunt** is a jazz pianist-composer who has performed regularly in the Sydney jazz scene since 1979. Kevin Hunt currently performs regularly with vocalist Emma Pask and pianist Simon Tedeschi.*

*As well as performing jazz music, Kevin teaches jazz studies at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and has recently completed his PhD entitled **'Perceptions of the Stuart & Sons piano: realising a creative, active vision.'** In this research Kevin analyses the unique sound produced by the Australian made Stuart & Sons piano. As an outcome of this research, Kevin collaborates musically with local and regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musicians to produce new music for the Stuart Piano. This research has instigated the annual **OUR MUSIC** Indigenous music program at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music to encourage continued collaborations between Sydney's Indigenous and non-Indigenous musicians.*

In 1981 Kevin studied jazz at the Conservatorium with Don Burrows, Judy Bailey, Paul MacNamara, Roger Frampton, George Golla, Miroslav Bukovsky and Dick Montz.

*Since the mid 1980s, Kevin has led his own jazz ensembles specializing in performances of his own compositions as well as classical composers JS Bach, Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy, Leonard Bernstein. In 1990 Kevin was awarded the **'Jazz Musician of the Year' MO Award.***

He has recorded jazz CDs with Don Burrows, Marie Wilson, James Morrison, Simon Tedeschi, TIm Hopkins, Adrian Mears, the late Janet Seidel, Steve Hunter, David Jones, Col Loughnan, Sandie White, Trevor Griffin, and Debra Decembre.

Kevin says, "I am influenced and awed by the artistry of musicians such as Oscar Peterson, Bill Evans, Keith Jarrett, Bud Powell, and George Shearing.

Since 2005 Kevin has lectured in the Jazz Studies faculty at the Sydney Conservatorium, specializing in Jazz History and improvisation.

In 2017 Kevin was appointed to the position of Academic Fellow in Jazz and Improvisation at the Conservatorium and he is currently program leader of the new Bachelor of Improvised Music degree. In 2018 Kevin instigated the inaugural Intercultural Aboriginal music ensemble program in the Bachelor of Music curriculum.

(Bio supplied)

(When I approached Kevin about being a contributor to this project he was busy preparing for an imminent trip overseas. "But I'll have loads of spare time once I'm on the plane," he said to me, and suggested that if I were to write down the questions I've been asking other respondents he would email his answers back to me, which we both did. Departing like this from the more open-ended telephone interviews I'd done with the others resulted in a rather more telegrammatic presentation of Kevin's answers, but nonetheless they are informative and warrant inclusion. My questions are in italics, and Kevin's answers are in Roman face).

What I'm interested in is the subjective dimension of improvising -- what it feels like as you're doing it. For instance, the group has almost finished stating the theme, the turnaround is coming up, and you're about to take the first solo. What's it like to be you at that moment?

1. Preparing a re-write of the first phrase of the melody or a core phrase of the melody, and 2. Introducing a contrasting rhythmic subject.

Do you sometimes have a pre-heard line in mind that you intend to start with?

Yes. Often at the beginning of a solo the preheard melody is very short -- and it helps me establish the 'feeling' of my solo -- as an introduction. On a good night though I don't need to set things up with a conscious thought or organised pre-heard phrase because when things are 'happening' I am letting the music itself speak... not so much of me. These great plays feel like they simply fall out of you without much effort or thought.

Do you sometimes use the last phrase(s) of the previous soloist to kick off on?

Sometimes I do that, yes -- but only for effect and fun - certainly I think it is better to respond with something that complements the last phrase of the previous solo... though on many occasions it is suitable to let a little space occur so the previous solo is ended in a complete and less conversational way.

Do you pre-hear lines in the middle of a solo?

Yes. Absolutely, because you're in a stream then and being led into sounds that are preheard as you are led by the muse.

Are you always aware of what key you're in, what the chord structure is?

Yes but I'm trying to let go of that these days. I'm aiming to play more with my body and less with my brain and memory. This is an ongoing objective -- I don't feel I do this completely, and I'm trying to let go of information to be more completely in the moment of 'play'.

Do you much use licks to fall back on if your inspiration is suddenly lacking?

Yes. I think licks or familiar phrases and rhythms are always coming out in my playing -- it's an alphabet I've developed both consciously and unconsciously -- or without any development... just me. It's an extraordinary thing that experienced improvising musicians sound like themselves in their earliest recorded plays! I think this could mainly be due to rhythm and heartbeat.

How do you handle wrong notes, or mistakes in general?

Move on - accept.

Does it get to the stage where your instrument is simply a part of you and you just sort of play it with all the harmonic structure etc in your preconscious, like driving a car and not being specifically aware of what gear you're in?

Not yet for me! This is the ideal that I would love to access each time I play. I have experienced 'snippets' of this phenomenal state enough times to know that this is the ideal state to be in whilst improvising. I have heard that some players practise mentally and physically to be in this state with the objective to learn how to consistently be there in performance. I'm hoping to do the same.

Is improvising all truly spontaneous, or do you sometimes have stuff in mind that you know you will be going to play?

There are 2 types of improvising that I mostly engage in:

1. Improvising on musical structures that I have organised... through either composition and/or arrangement... so there are specific themes and motifs I return to and progressively develop in some cases over a period of years.
2. The other is in jazz music... real time not arranged instant creations --- all about the conversing with both the musicians, the tune and the audience. Knowing the tune is a given here... I think I am better at No 2.

If you feel, after soloing, that you didn't do it well, what criteria do you use to decide how well it went?

Usually it's rhythm for me and that I haven't grooved well with the ensemble rhythm, or 'let go' enough to let the music speak. Don Burrows used to tell me "just think time"... this instruction still helps me most times I play.

What about totally free improvisation, where the only rule is that there are no rules. Is playing this sort of music more a matter of listening to what the others are doing than having an agenda for yourself?

I guess that would be true -- though free impro I think encourages collective instant composition and collective theme development.

Have you ever made up your own scale (a la Schonberg) and used that as a basis for improvisation?

I'm not really sure - possibly on a dom7 sound but I think I got it from Ravel's 1st movement of *Noble et Sentimentales*. It's a dom7th sound that includes both m7th and Maj7th intervals. The chordal shape for this sets these intervals 13 semitones apart. For example a left hand C7 voicing is Bb to E to B, a chord voicing containing a b5th and a Perfect 5th.

Do you think improvising on a keyboard is at all different to improvising on a single note instrument? Easier? Harder?

Sorry, I'm not sure -- possibly easier on a keyboard -- because you can create more of your harmonic terrain.

August 2018



In the Intro to this piece I remarked on the parallels between improvised music and everyday speech – the most salient being that both everyday speech and improvised music are both “made up on the spot”. I think these parallels are rather more striking than I at first thought. After taping a few interviews the thought struck me that, had I been asking the same questions about everyday speech, the respondents would have found it just as hard to talk about as they found it trying to answer with words my questions about improvised music. Am I aware of grammatical considerations when I speak with someone in an everyday context? I don’t think so. Certainly not as much as am when I am writing stuff down.

I thought that I’d arrived at this realization all on my own, but several of the contributors mentioned the similarity between improvisation and conversational speech and I was interested to find that it seemed to be a generally-accepted analogy amongst jazz musicians, and it reinforced my conviction that the parallel was an important one.

But, instead of an analogy with spoken language, some of the contributors also suggest that painting might serve just as well as an analogy – the idea of space being filled, and I can see why this is a persuasive parallel as well.

I also found interesting Brett Hirst’s remarks that there seems to be two main approaches to improvising -- an intellectual one, and a more ear-based approach that is spontaneous and less troubled by considerations of “correctness”. This seems to me to have potential as a way of describing two very different approaches to improvisation -- a distinction that I suspect can be found amongst our ten contributors.

Whatever way you might try to verbalise the subjective dimension of improvising music, it’s undeniable that it is not particularly easy to talk about (though some of my contributors were, I think, remarkably articulate about such a slippery topic despite the difficulties).

So, after we have read through the ruminations of ten improvising musicians -- all talking about the same thing, but each different in their own way -- are we any closer to understanding any better just what this uniquely human creative process is all about? Do we have a better idea of the subjective dimension of the act of making up

exciting music as you go? Can we know a little better what it *feels* like when one is doing it?

I'd like to think so. Elusive though it may be to come to grips with this complex process, I think that each interview contributes in its own way to our understanding of just what is involved when you are playing music "in the moment". And of course it depends a great deal on which instrument you are playing, as well. Different instruments put different demands on performers -- think of the chordal nature of playing a guitar or piano compared to the relative lack of agility of the lines you can play on say, a double bass, or the quicksilver, superfast lines that become available to you if you're playing a wind instrument.

There is no input in these interviews from drummers, important as they are in setting the groove going and generally getting things cooking along. What they do to lay the rhythmic foundations is certainly improvised, and drummers do take solos, of course, but usually only rarely, and with the removal of just about all traces of melody and harmony from the mix their important contribution comes in a slightly different package. No worrying about modes or other harmonic considerations for percussionists.

But despite any better understanding we may have gained, maybe using words to try to unravel what improvisation is all about will always be inadequate. Perhaps Bill Evans should have the last word here when he said "*You can't explain jazz to anyone without losing the experience. Because it's **feeling**, not words*".

August 2018

