

## What is Improvisation?

### Interviewee: Emily Bennett

#### What drew you to the world of improvised music?

It was only a matter of time after I started going to enough improvised gigs of my boyfriend's that I'd cotton on to the world of improvised music. But after years of what felt like looking in from the sideline and making sense of my "New Age" Bachelor of Music in disparate projects, I became so desperate to be involved that I applied to study Honours year and suddenly needed a band for the audition. The rest is history.

#### For readers unfamiliar with your musical output, what should they check out first and where can they find it?

<https://vimeo.com/195253862>

This clip feels outdated now, but it shows the band I got together for my audition that runs to this day, *Great rack and an empty club reverb*, in all its angsty teenage glory.

#### What are your top five albums of improvised music?

Jenny Hval – *Apocalypse, girl*

Jon Hassell – *Last Night the Moon Came Dropping Its Clothes in the Street*

Collin Walcott, Don Cherry & Nana Vasconcelos – *Codona 3*

Kim Myhr – *All Your Limbs Singing*

Josh Roseman Unit – *Treats for the Night Walker*

Jenny Ruth Barnes and Ren Walters – *we had a language of the Rabbit into the Latin Middle Ages*

That's six! But they're all the ones I could think of without being prompted so perhaps they're in the top for equal sentimental reasons?

Can you articulate your approach to improvisation?

“How’s this gonna start...? Alright, with that thing”

“Hmm I’ve been doing a lot of ‘talking’ in this set. I don’t want the audience to think I can’t sing, so maybe I should sing now”

“Everyone is doing something interesting, how can I possibly add to this? I dunno. Who cares, anyway”

“Oh yeah!”

“Are people actually watching this? Maybe I’ll start up something with that guy in the front row”

“Ah shit better reference material from the beginning of the set”

“This reminds me of a song I know”

“Yes!”

“Oh that’s the end! What just happened?”

...But most of the time it just rolls out of my mouth. It’s a combination of conscious and (mostly) unconscious playing.

The age-old question: Do you think improvisation can be taught? And if so, do you have any tips for those looking to improve their approach to improvisation?

Hmmm, yes and no. My own development owes so much to the fearless improvisers around me who have had the patience to answer my “but why?” questions and reveal an honesty and vulnerability in their playing. But I guess those “lessons” will only resonate when they’re truly ready to germinate in your mind and practice.

Is there a certain level of proficiency on an instrument needed for one to be a good improviser?

Not at all. But the more I improvise, the more I desire to be proficient in order to forget that proficiency and get on with the business of saying what I want to say.

What are you listening for and what are you responding to while you improvise?

The music. What the music needs. And what's around it. A connection. Tonality or rhythmic energy might register, but by the time I realise what I'm doing I'm already doing it.

It is often believed that the best improvisations occur when performers subvert their personal agenda and become open and receptive to one another to create something that could not have been possible without the presence of those individuals at that precise moment in time-space. We can find a familiar example in a deep, verbal, conversation, where the insights and inputs of others can draw us to new topics, or modes of thinking. With that consideration in mind, how does one improvise and reach a comparable state of receptivity, or reach these modes of thinking, during a solo performance?

I don't believe you should ever lose sight of your own personal agenda. But a state of receptivity is vital. And an awareness of how your own agenda interacts with that is important too. But I'm bound up with perfectionism and a desire to please people or be liked, so when I play that all goes on trial and is either investigated or shot down very quickly. In a solo or group setting.

When reflecting upon an improvised performance we often discuss it in terms of its temporal character; as a sequence of events. For example, the duration of the performance, or at moments when a performer interjects. However, it's far more difficult to discuss performance in regards to *place* – yet I argue that considering the experience of the performer in regards to place provides far more insight in regards to understanding the agency of the performer. Can you describe how place might inform the way that you improvise? This might include your physical environment, your cultural upbringing and/or political orientation (being Australian as opposed to American, or living in Australia but growing up in another country), and the influence that other bodies (performers and spectators) in the venue have on your performance, etc.

I struggle to describe a past performance temporally, unless of course it's recorded. But I can easily recall *place*. How I was feeling, how I felt the audience was feeling, how the venue was feeling. Of course, when I perform I can recall its temporal character but the environment inevitably shapes its output.

People talk about different styles of music being more so or less improvised than others. What do you think the boundary or limit of improvisation is?

Isn't it in the eye of the beholder?

Obviously, there is a difference in trust and familiarity when improvising with long-term collaborators versus when we improvise with people we have never met before. On the one hand, with people we know well, we might feel more comfortable taking risks, but on the other hand, we may fall into mannerisms and project certain expectations on our collaborators. When performing with someone we don't know however, we may be forced into areas where we truly improvise, but it is just as easy to revert to old habits and play it safe. Do you think your approach to improvisation changes in the two settings? If so, how?

I can't help it, but I'm a natural show off when it comes to people I don't know. I get nervous and want to impress them. But often because of that something never experienced before comes out. I'm also probably hyper-aware of my habits so I never quite let them settle with long term collaborators either, even if I could help it.

If we compare, for example, John Coltrane's approach on the track *Giant Steps* to his approach on *Ascension*, we notice two distinct playing styles. Notably, we hear a lot of patterns and repetition on *Giant Steps*, a result of the chord changes, that are absent from *Ascension*. Do you think that navigating complex chord changes, or rhythmic structures, inhibits your ability to improvise? If so, is it possible to overcome these challenges?

I think both scenarios come with their own challenges. Sometimes if there's a lot of stuff on the page I use that as a distraction from my complex chord changing insecurities (I actually had to look up *Ascension...!*). Likewise, if there's not a lot of stuff on the page. It also very much depends on who you're working with right?

There are commonly two way to consider temporality; one is that we're moving from the past, and bringing our memories and all we have learnt with us, to the present and into the future; the other is that our will to change the future dictates how we behave in the present, which is then documented in our past. When considering your approach to improvisation, do you feel that one of these perspectives on temporality is more accurate than the other? Or, can you conceive an idea that is more authentic? Ha, you just described my mode of working and my desired mode of working. But then again, I don't like spoiling the surprise, even if I could guess what is going to happen.

Outside of artistic practice, the concept of improvising is generally associated with less than ideal circumstances and outcomes; an improvised shelter, for instance. And on the surface, even improvisation within an artistic context seems relatively straight forward. Yet for those of us who have engaged in improvised music making, we understand that it can be extraordinarily complex. What makes this approach to music making so difficult? And as an aside, what makes it so rewarding that we persevere?

Ah yes, the big 'I' word. Improvising. You never quite know if you'll make it through varying degrees of the unknown. But it's a leap of faith that is exhilarating and completely side chains the notion of what is 'good'.

Do you consider the outcome of your improvised performance *before* you perform? I.e. do you work towards or within a certain idea or framework to achieve a particular aesthetic?

I try, but it never quite works out the way I intended it.

As a spectator, what would you like to see/hear more of in improvised musical performances?

Less of the same.

Is there anyone from the Australian scene that you would like to improvise with but haven't?

So many faves.

Do you have any upcoming projects that we can keep an eye out for?

*Great rack and an empty club* are recording an album this year.

Do you have any final remarks that you would like to make about improvisation that was not covered in the questions above?

Need a singer? Nah just kidding. No seriously...?