

What is Improvisation?

Interviewee: Reuben Lewis (www.reubenlewis.com)

What drew you to the world of improvised music?

I discovered it was a great way to get to know people. The majority of my social interactions have occurred through music in one way or another, mostly through listening to music or “doing” music with other people. The listening part is pretty straight forward (go to a gig, listen to an album with your mates etc...), but the “doing” bit can take time and get complicated really quick when you have to organise the other stuff around it, like charts, rehearsals, gigs and so on. One aspect about improvised music that I love is the immediacy, you can do it right here and now if you want, you don't need to organise anything else, just play. Of course there is so much more to it and (usually) there are many more aspects that need to be taken into consideration to make “good” improvised music. In any case, I think this aspect was my foot in the door.

There have been periods of time in my life (when I moved to Berlin after I finished my jazz undergrad in Canberra and also when I first moved to Melbourne) where improvising with people was like catching up for a coffee, a way to introduce myself to somebody or get to know them better. I'd set up a time, invite whoever, find a place and play. If we had a good time I'd try and organise another session, or maybe even a gig or a recording. I deal with improvised music a little differently these days, I'm more interested in continuing to build on existing relationships rather than start new ones, but a lot of my most cherished musical connections and life experiences came from those improv-instead-of-a-coffee sessions. We still had coffee though...

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

They should check out my band, called "I Hold the Lion's Paw".

There is a live album available on Bandcamp and we have recently been recording our debut studio album, so keep an ear out for that too...

<https://reubenlewis.bandcamp.com/album/live-lebowskis>

What are your top five albums of improvised music?

These are five beloved albums that contain a lot of improvised music.

MURAL - *Tempo* - <http://www.sofamusic.no/releases/index.php?id=547>

Miles Davis - *Live Evil* - <https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/live-evil/id201361440>

Don Cherry Quintet - *Live at Cafe Montmartre 1966 - Vol.3* -

<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/live-at-cafe-montmartre-1966/id1034024236>

Streifenjunko - *No Longer Burning* - <https://streifenjunko.bandcamp.com/album/no-longer-burning>

The Necks - *Aether* - <http://shop.thenecks.com/product/aether>

Can you articulate your approach to improvisation?

I like sounds. I like playing with other humans. I like texture. I like melody. I like groove. I like structure when it helps to create a flow. I like counterpoint. I like reductionism. I like being aware of my surroundings and what's in it when I improvise. I like to provoke, but I also like to respond. In both cases, I like to avoid a passive mode of interaction without being violent towards myself or others.

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?

YES. Any success I've had with teaching people to improvise has usually originated from teaching them to listen first. By that I mean that it's often easy to get caught up in getting familiar with the tools and techniques required to improvise in particular mediums (learning your scales, developing unique sounds on your instrument, building stamina etc.) and forget to listen to how those things come together and interact to create music. I know that's a pretty broad statement, but I think training yourself to listen is something that is easily overlooked when learning to improvise in any context.

Two things I do a lot that has helped me as an improviser are repetitive and immediate listening. They are pretty straight forward exercises. If I like an album or a track I'll listen to it on repeat until I can't take it any more. I'll listen to it in a number of ways, I might just sit back and enjoy the track, or I might cook with it on in the background. I might try and follow a particular aspect of the track, like a single instrument or try and follow a progression of a theme that I can perceive. I might do none of these things and simply listen without being too hung up on what I am listening for. Same thing for immediate listening, if I do a session or gig that I happened to record I'll try and listen back to it as soon possible, whilst the experience is still fresh in my mind. Sometimes I'll apply repetitive listening and try to absorb everything I can from that particular experience. I don't do either of these exercises in order to replicate the experience that I am listening to when I improvise next (at least, I usually severely disappoint myself when I fall into the trap of trying to replicate). I do these exercises to better understand how things come together and how to communicate more effectively.

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

Effective tools are important, no question about that. However, I believe it takes a well-trained set of ears to know exactly what tools are actually needed and/or effective for any given musical situation. I think this applies for good improvisers as much as it does for any other good musician.

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

When things are going well, I don't think I am trying to actively respond or listen for anything in particular. At least, I often find that pre-empting too much in a (good) improvised moment often gets me into a territory where I am stuck in my own imaginary scenario and can't respond or listen effectively to what is actually going on. I guess in the broadest possible sense I am listening for emergent structures and (hopefully) responding by supporting or running counter to those structures. I might be a little more proactive with this approach when things aren't going so well in an improvised setting.

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 do a lot of solo improvised performances, so I'm not sure if I can speak on this subject with much authority or experience behind me. Nevertheless, my position on that is one can (and should) still have that dialogue and state of openness or receptivity with the

environment around you, other players present or not. As far as the “how” bit, I’m not so sure if it is a matter of subverting one’s personal agenda. I think having a personal agenda is important, when implemented effectively it often helps me to create contrast in an improvised environment and also to steer clear of an entirely passive space. Perhaps it is more a matter of foreground and background, where or how one’s agenda sits in time-space during an improvised performance or moment.

Could it be argued that personal agenda needs to sit more in the foreground in solo improvised work, simply by virtue of it being the player’s agenda to perform solo in the first place?

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 always think of Jim (Denley) when I think about questions like these. He, in my opinion, is someone who has put a lot of thought and action into considering all aspects of *place* in his practice as an improvising musician. I think he produces truly incredible music as a result.

People like Jim have made me think more about where I am and how it relates to my practice. In the broadest possible sense, I think we absorb a lot from the places we inhabit and the people or things we share space with. I know for example that my accent changed

noticeably after living in Berlin for a year, this was the same for my improvisational approach. I have been in Melbourne for four years now and, although I have played a lot in other places throughout the world over that time, I definitely perceive a shift in my approach that is related to living and making music here. I don't yet know how to delineate what aspects of this environment has caused that shift, but I recognise that there is a feedback loop occurring.

I notice this happening to me on a more immediate and specific scope as well, as in with particular ensembles. I improvise a lot with Melbourne-based dancers Tony Yap and Brendan O'Conner. They are some of the most adept improvisers I have worked with and I believe that is because of their awareness or receptiveness to *place*. When we perform or rehearse our work we will spend a (comparatively) long time finding the "right" place for the work, often moving several times until it "feels right". We also try to rehearse with a spectator present, not so much to practice performing, but instead because the presence of an audience assists us in bringing a charged focus to the *place* where we are improvising.

None of these reflections come close to answering your question, but I guess what I am trying to say is that I am at a point in my own practice where I recognise that *place* is vital in a multitude of ways and am still struggling to articulate why.

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?

I'll try, but I can't promise anything!

There is no improvisation present when all authority (personal or otherwise) to shift the parameters of the moment has been eradicated and a completely pre-set system reigns supreme. Frank Zappa's "Jazz From Hell" album springs to mind as an example (most of the album was written for an executed by the Synclavier DMS, with the exclusion of a few live guitar solos that were grafted onto the compositions).

You could argue that there is improvisation present in the guitar solos or in the compositional process (writing the works and inputting into the Synclavier DMS). Though I would argue, in the case of compositional improvised elements, that there is no more variational agency available once the computer parameters are set and, in the case of the guitar solos, they have been removed from their original context and thus are simply material instead of an improvised element.

This brings into question how recording is to be viewed in regards to improvisation. That's another can of worms that I don't trust myself to open yet. However, I will say that I believe that Derek Bailey's statement "too little of improvised music survives recording" holds true, for better or worse depending on how you view it!

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?

First and maybe foremost, I think my approach changes in each setting simply because I have less or more history to draw on in relation to that particular group of people. I am using history here to describe all aspects of what each group has developed or accumulated in regard to how they play together. History in this context helps me to decide on what not to play or what to steer clear of more than anything else. I find that this aspect of ensemble development is always active, right from the first sound or even from when you first start to organise a session with someone (or a group of people).

From that perspective, maybe my approach doesn't change in essence. Perhaps it is just that I am further along in terms of discourse with familiar groups or people and therefore have a more personalised perspective when interacting with them.

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?

I am starting to believe any such control or perception that I think I have on the future or past of an improvised moment is a complete falsehood. In other words, and with regard to temporality, neither of these perspectives seem relevant beyond the moment an intent is drawn from me and placed into the multiplicity of converging elements that shape an improvisation.

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 don't think it inhibits me if I am prepared to deal with those parameters. If I am not prepared (as in I haven't practiced the changes or don't have a relatable connection to the situation I have found myself in) then I am in trouble. I think it all comes down to understanding and crafting the situations you choose to be in and having the necessary tools (and ears) to make music in that time-space. Obviously there are countless examples

of incredible improvisers who would have a hard time trying to play *Giant Steps*, but part of the reason why they are so good is that they recognise that their field of musical vision doesn't have to encompass those particular parameters.

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 straightforward. 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?

I guess it has something to do with constantly having to reset and rebuild the parameters of the music being made, rather than (or as well as) just executing something with intent and accuracy. Good (musical) improvisers need to be architects as well as skilled musicians because, unlike the other situations you mentioned, there is usually not much to work with (i.e. a score or pre-formed structure) in the first instance of the improvised event. I guess you could argue that as improvised music projects mature there are usually ready-made frameworks of sorts that can be built upon, but it's still a matter of setting up and building those frameworks in every performance. I guess the reward is the same as in any music, there's that indefinable but undeniably euphoric feeling you get when things really come together. An added bonus of improvised music for me is that it is often when things come together in truly unexpected ways that I get that feeling the most.

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?

This depends a fair bit on the improvised performance in question. I would say that all of the improvising groups that I am regularly involved with have developed their own unique

aesthetic and mode of operating over time. Some of these have been an unspoken or implicit developmental process, others have (at least attempted to) be very explicit about how the group operates, others have been somewhere in between. In any case, I try to use whatever each group has collectively developed to help me decide on what or how not to play more than anything else.

When dealing with a new improvising context, like a new group, I generally try to keep my mouth shut and my ears open for at least a little while. Better to allow space for the music to answer it's own questions before I start to complicate things with my opinion!

[As a spectator, what would you like to see/hear more of in improvised musical performances?](#)

More people sitting in the audience with me! I think I am actually serious as well... There is so much high quality improvised music happening in Australia. Melbourne on its own is a hive of exciting and diverse approaches to improvised music, I can't honestly say we are seriously lacking in a particular aspect of an improvised musical performance. The main problem is that it's mostly just fellow musicians checking it out.

Hardly anyone is aware or interested in what is going on around here (Melbourne) on a regular basis. It seems like unless it's polished up and presented in some ultra-hip-future-of-music-more-than-just-music festival it's virtually invisible to the public. Don't get me wrong, I love those sort of festivals, I love what they bring to the foreground of my perception, I just wonder sometimes why it takes so much hype to get people to simply walk into a room and check out something new or unfamiliar in this country. Why is the curiosity factor so lacking in Australia? What is it about improvised music performance environments that make them such an unwelcome space (perhaps closed off space is a better term) for your everyday concert goer?

This subject is a can of worms and I'm just as lost as anybody else. I do believe it is a situation where every party (audience, musicians, venues, festivals etc..) needs to carefully

consider their own input and/or effect in order to shift the culture. No answers yet on my behalf, but I'm thinking about it!

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

Jim Denley. I have improvised with him before (a few rehearsals, sessions, recordings and long chats) so I guess he doesn't strictly count. Regardless, I love his work and he is an absolute legend of a human, so I'd love to find a way to work with him more. Carolyn Connors is another one, I haven't had the chance to improvise with her yet and would desperately love to do so!

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

I just recorded with my group "I Hold the Lion's Paw" the other week! The lineup for the session was pretty special - Jordan Murray (trombone), Geoff Hughes (guitar), Dave Brown (electric bass), Tom Lee (double bass), Mark Shepherd (double bass), Ronny Ferella (drums), Christian Windfeld (drums) and myself on trumpet and compositions - and I think we captured some pretty special music.

No timeline as yet for when it will be released, but keep an eye out for it in the not so distant future.

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

I'm flat out just trying to answer your other questions!