

What is Improvisation?

Interviewee: Lloyd Honeybrook

What drew you to the world of improvised music?

Well I suppose the first time I played improvised music was learning jazz in high school, and luckily the jazz department was run by an incredible teacher/trumpeter/all-round lovely/intriguing human named Vlad Khusid who could see my ardency for the non-linear and lent me his Painkiller “Collected Works” 4CD boxset when I was 14 or so – which as a saxophonist at the time unable to reconcile my love for heavy music with my instrument choice 7 years prior was revelatory. From then I was addicted to seeking out the most extreme sounds I could, but I stumbled across Sydney's window to the free improv world thanks to the person who was instrumental in the bulk of my teenage palate-widening – I was at Utopia Records some time in 2004 and complaining to Ray Ahn (who at the time I had no idea had a vast history with What Is Music? Festival and other key Australian avant-organisations) about the lack of all-ages gigs in Melbourne, and he told me of the NOW now's “If You Like Improvised Music, We Like You” series at the Frequency Lab in Hibernian House. I'll never forget my first night there – the first set was Clare Cooper and Jim Denley (!!!), and I'd previously contacted co-curator/MC Clayton Thomas about coming along and he just made me feel so incredibly welcome and comfortable – I now realise it was the moment I found my true family, and I've never looked back. Naturally, being a saxophonist and an awkward teenager unable to converse with femmes, I made a beeline to Jim after the set and fanboyed the fuck out of him – which he weathered with the utmost of openness and patience! That very night he invited me to come over to his apartment one day and have a play, further blowing me away with his gorgeous receptiveness – and I've been utterly hooked on improv ever since.

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

I don't really think they should, I'd much rather them go out and try to find their own local scene and go support them cos live sounds are the best (especially if you're lucky enough to live in Melbourne, the greatest city in the sonoverse, where you can cop a full line-up of non-linear sounds for \$0-10 most nights).

I'm pretty sure I've got a Soundcloud I've forgotten the password for though?

What are your top five albums of improvised music?

This would be impossible for me to say definitively, especially since most of my most memorable improv experiences have been in the live arena, so here are the five maybe most influential to my initial improv forays (and please note this is from the viewpoint of a white teen male, in no way definitive):

Machine for Making Sense – Consciousness

Oren Ambarchi & Robbie Avenaim – Clockwork

Merzbow/S.B.O.T.H.I. – Collaborative

Hanatarash – 2

Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza – Azioni

Can you articulate your approach to improvisation?

Improvisation is an everyday process that just happens to also apply to sound production. For me, improvisation is simply the practice of perceiving stimuli (potentially external or internal), processing and assessing available information via aesthetic/experience, then choosing how to react (or not). People do this every single day in conversing with one another, cooking food, so much in varying levels! When it comes to sonic spontaneity my favourite improvisers are generally brilliant deep listeners and pay as much attention (if not more) to when the music doesn't need anything added to it (or indeed when they should back off on their playing) and what's going on around them as to what they're actually playing themselves.

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?

I don't think improvisation can be taught so much as facilitated for those who want to learn how to, but again, I think improvisation is something every human does every single day. The first thing I'd recommend is improvising over and over, as much as possible, and not just in a musical context. Approach even the most mundane of tasks with a chance-based creativity: walk a different route, brush your teeth with your non-dominant hand, seek out new experiences of every kind wherever and whenever you can. In a musical context, there are heaps of things you can do, but I started out improvising along to a bunch of my favourite recordings at home – as many different genres as possible! If you're at a confidence level where you're out there playing then never say no to a new collaboration, and seek out new combinations because in my experience there's no risk that you don't learn something from. Risks are the best, because that is true experimentation – going outside of your comfort zone (and of course this is a very subjective thing, for some people just the notion of stepping on a stage is a risk and one that I would highly recommend no matter who they are) – and if you're not making 'mistakes' at any point in your journeys through the sonoverse then I'm not sure you're taking enough risks!

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

NO.

If anything, I often prefer those who haven't been stiffened by western musical pedagogy, though truly I think the most important factor, no matter the proficiency level, is attitude/openness.

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

Sound, and each aspect thereof – pitch, volume, duration, tone colour and density. I'm listening for anywhere I think I can positively (whatever the hell that means) augment or contribute to the sonic environment that I'm currently in, and trying to reassess that as often as possible. As most of the improvisation I engage in is focused around textural

exploration, I tend to think more in terms of engagement via tone colours, but regardless of stylistic choice, responses tend to fall into one of four categories: *mimicry*, i.e. attempting to match tone colours from different instruments in a nonlinear way; *complementing*, i.e. attempting to play something similar in aesthetic/energy but sounding audibly different; *contrasting*, i.e. attempting to play something divergent/antithetical in aesthetic/energy; and of course my personal favourite – *choosing to play nothing at all*. If you're focused more on diatonic improvisation then I would assume the same concepts apply: consonance, harmony, dissonance and silence!

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?

Admittedly I've not performed many solo sets in my time because I find myself more comfortable in a complementary/reactive role rather than as a leader, but there are a couple of ways I consider this totally possible in solo performance. To begin with, I don't think there's really such a thing as a true 'solo' performance, save for a solo performer in an anechoic chamber. When one is the sole human performer on stage you're still not in control of every element in the space – though it won't be appropriate for every performance the audience can be a truly wonderful collaborator/source of spontaneity (whether they like it or not sometimes!), and in many spaces where improv gigs happen (in Melbourne anyway) the soundproofing is often not the best to the point that the external environment can intrude acoustically (one great example of which that springs to mind was Adam Simmons duetting with a tram and crying child at various points through a 'solo' set at Conduit Arts in 2016). Even the instrument (except for perhaps the voice and body percussion) can be considered a collaborator, especially when dealing with something like

generative/glitch electronics or feedback as I often do (there are some days where it just absolutely will not do what I want, and sometimes we are best mates). And of course, there's the space within which the performance is taking place – no two rooms (unless physically identical) will have the exact same resonant qualities, and folks like Alvin Lucier and Ellen Fullman undoubtedly collaborate with their environments!

On top of this, there's one's own internal space – and if you're constantly adding new experiences and new sounds and taking risks (as per above) then new ideas/modes of thinking will undoubtedly come, and with any luck evolve. Just be sure not to dismiss those serendipities as 'mistakes' until you feel you've fully explored their potential!

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.

Oops I think I covered a lot of this in the previous question except for the cultural notion of 'place' – and undoubtedly this is an important one for me. For starters, as I alluded to in the first question, the avant/improv communities in Sydney and Melbourne I would consider family – they understand me, support me, and give me a reason to enjoy existing (at least once a week!). As such I'm a pretty unapologetic, one could say fervent, proponent of our scene(s), and truly believe that Melbourne is the greatest city for sounds in the world (I've not been everywhere, but in meeting international artists and introducing them to the verdancy of our community they are gobsmacked every time, and 8 years after moving here I'm still gobsmacked the sheer majority of nights). This isn't a stringent closedness to sounds

from overseas, not by a long shot, but nowadays I rarely come across recordings of overseas artists who are covering such vastly different improvisatory territory to someone in Melbourne that I'm blown away (though when I do find that it RULES) – couple this with my preference for experiencing improv in the live arena and admittedly I can be a little insular to the global community (thankfully Melbourne is so fertile that I can go out every night and still manage to discover something/someone new on a weekly basis!). With that comes a certain set of tropes/tendencies that I don't think are bad at all for the most part (and are massive generalisations/by no means definitive): we tend to stick to 20-ish minute sets compared to the Europeans 40+ minute sets; humour in music is more (though still not sufficiently) prevalent; and in Melbourne people seem more open to, if not in fact eager to, collaborate with people outside of their genre/stylistic experience. Of course there are stylistic/cultural subdivisions within subdivisions right down to individual people so these are not rules by any means, simply general observations. Speaking personally, I would hazard a guess that the fact that I'm a cis white dude immersed in extreme metal culture means I like loud things?

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 really don't think there should be one. I know one should never use absolutes like 'all', but as an improvextremist (I think there are enough in the opposing camp for me to be quite happily labelled an extremist) I believe all music that wants to be considered anything resembling art and not just a commercial product (and of course it can be both) should contain some level of improvisation in its creation and/or performance, unless there's a very specific reason for not doing so (though I'm struggling to conjure one right now, probably because I'm an extremist).

I'd like the only divisions to be 'structured improv' and 'free improv' – i.e. sound that has some pre-figured parameters agreed upon by the performers (be it meticulous song structures, specific tonalities or simply identifying a theme to be explored in the piece), and sound that is created entirely as a reaction to the performer's current sonic environment. This perhaps raises the question as to whether or not there is truly 'free' improv, as there are inevitably pre-figured elements such as instrumentation, time constraints, technical

constraints of any equipment including amplification etc. – the difference between structured and free improv is always going to be nebulous at best, but I'd say the distinction lays in the intention of the performers to exclude potentialities (i.e. delineate some possible sounds as 'wrong') before a sound event occurring, as opposed to being able to embrace all possibilities and make an aesthetic decision at the exact same time the sound event is being created.

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?

Nah. I suppose when I'm performing with someone I don't know I'm more likely to be more excited cos new things are awesome, but I'm always excited to make sounds in a live performative context.

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?

Yeah, I'm not sure why diatonicism is still a thing to be honest hey...

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 think disconnecting the two is how we end up making some pretty horrendous errors (see, like, every war ever). Just like good existence good improvisation should be hinged upon a present informed by the successes and failures of the past and aiming for a better future (whatever form that may take). However, I think the focus should still be on the current moment/environment and responding thereto whilst keeping experience and aim in mind, attempting to make the most informed decision possible and not get caught up in any missteps/'wrong notes' or minutiae, all the while constantly reassessing both the environment and one's actions. Then again, we're only having this conversation because homo sapiens' ability to perceive the fourth dimension is so linear what without Einsteinian "stubbornly persistent illusion".

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?

This is just a branding issue and I'm working on it – improvisation rules supreme. And without wanting to dance about architecture too much I would just say that in our hyperstandardised late-capitalism era of existence nothing else brings me the kind of ecstatic, liberated joy as spontaneous sound making does.

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?

It's definitely a case-by-case basis, though as per above, I do much prefer to experience it purely in the moment especially when in a collaborative context. Again, I've only performed solo a handful of times but each of those have been relatively structured – as in I've had a rough game plan for each (e.g. low frequencies – mid – high over 10 minutes). I'd like to think this is an artificial way for me to create a sort of collaborator to bounce off of and react to, but it's probably more so that I just don't trust myself to not totally freak out and freeze with indecision...

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

This isn't to say that Melbourne/Australia isn't doing these things, but: more risks, new collaborations, new instrumentations, new everything, more humour, more sonic extremities, more hybridisation, more everything, and risks.

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

Yep – everyone who's not a jerk

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

Sure, go ahead?