

## What is Improvisation?

### Interviewee: Mat Blackwell / A Demon Sheen

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

When I was a kid, my dad was a big **Hawkwind** fan, so I grew up on psychedelic space-jams as a normal part of my childhood. He also played me **MC5** going weird places, and **Hendrix** smashing his amps, so the idea of long periods of “non-music” amongst the music was planted early in my brain. And whenever we visited my dad’s brother, he always had seemingly-non-stop jazz jam reel-to-reels playing, which made a big impression on me (because jazz was maybe the one form of music my dad *didn’t* play at home). Then I heard **Peril** on the radio in my mid-teens, and I was astounded by the way they circled the very edge of complete chaos, without ever quite falling in. I wanted to make music like Peril: heavy, insane, with a combination of sampling and noise and tightness and sprawling madness! So I think a combination of an exotic attraction to long-form jazz, listening to space-rock psych-outs, and a natural affinity with strange noises were my tickets to full-blown textural improv madness as an adult.

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

I’ve got too many projects to easily summarise, so I’ll just mention a few.

As far as improv goes, I really like my duet with David Prescott-Steed, **Gnaumgn**: we record with no limits, no set ideas, no intentions, no specific palette, we just make sounds and try to keep it real. **Gnaumgn** has involved trampolines, broken stringless guitars, reel-to-reel players, marbles, cardboard tubes, rockpools, tiny toy pianos, construction machinery, trains... like I said, no limits.

<https://gnaumgn.bandcamp.com/>

Another project which is probably closer to my space-jam childhood inspirations is **Intrinsic Light**, a meditation mantra metal duet with Jen Tait: we have one or two riffs per song, and make the rest up (as well as completely improvised pieces as well), following that meandering kind of aimless wandering jam style of the **Grateful Dead / Phish / Zappa** guitar solos. We call it meditation mantra metal, but it's barely metal at all, really: I mean, some of the riffs are kinda metalish, and I do a nice black metal rasp vocal, but overall it's more like some sixties psych-out than any actual metal band.

<https://intrinsiclight.bandcamp.com/>

I have a solo drone/collage/sound-art project which is entirely about improvisation, called **Grist**, in which I use sound-effects / ambient / noise / soundtrack / meditation / misc CDs as source material, layering and looping and distorting them on the fly, into these big thick dense weirdo dark ambient experimental soundscapes. This project is so dependent upon improvisation that I actually have no idea what sound I am about to use before I use it: I pick a random point in a random track on a CD and just fade it up into the mix, with no way of telling what it is going to be (I can't hear the CDs before I use them, is what I'm trying to say), so I get to hear the sound at the same time as the audience does – we're all on this strange journey together. This project is largely about taking creative decisions away from me, to guarantee a cosmic/occult/synchromystical experience for all (it's super easy to play a tune on an instrument, but it's much more challenging to get some random piece of some other CD to fit into any preconceived creative ideas I might have – it's all about creativity outside of the ego).

<https://grist.bandcamp.com/>

One more: my complete noise project **Haraam**. I was kinda sick of the use of Satanism or Nazidom in the noise music scene, it felt like everyone and their dog was using these tired old tropes for "shock" value, when they're just not really that shocking anymore, and I thought "if you really wanna scare middle Australia, you'd use Islamic imagery instead". Tied to this idea was the idea of free-market capitalism, this weird idea that a business's only responsibility is to make money, that somehow making money removes our need to behave morally: I thought, "but that means free-market capitalism would support making money off terrorists", so I kinda put these ideas together into this concept-project **Haraam**,

as a critique of the noise scene, as a critique of the amorality of capitalism, as a critique of religious terrorism, as some kind of weird multi-layered critique of a whole bunch of things, really. It's improvised, but it's impossible to tell: it's just a fat load of nicely-textured noise, really. I improvise, layer other improvisations on top of it, and use the happenstance of what happened in the recordings to decide what I'll edit and where.

<https://haraam-noise.bandcamp.com/>

I have so many other projects (**Haark**, **The Horn**, **Ili Pika**, **Stinky Picnic**, etc), but that'll do for now.

What are your top five albums of improvised music?

This question was the very hardest one to answer, literally took me weeks to nut this one out. One reason was because I'm just really bad at determining "favourites", when each album has so many factors and differences and things I like and things I don't like and weighing these factors all up against each other in some kind of definitive way is something I just find incredibly difficult, but another reason was because I'm just not certain which albums have been "improvised" and which ones have been "written" but *sound* improvised, and without being able to determine that particular factor about an album, it's impossible to move forward with answering this question. However, here are five that I really do believe are improvised, and which I do persistently enjoy even after many many listens.

- **Supersilent** - **1-3** or **7**. Supersilent are a four piece from Norway, who make an amazing improvised form of music which is kinda jazz-based but really isn't like jazz at all, with strange tape-loops and weird synths and decidedly trippy textures taking precedence over more trad jazz sounds like woodwind and drums (which they also use). Their first release **1-3** is three discs of manic exploration, and might be my favourite, although **7** is a DVD where you actually get to see them creating their music live-on-stage, and I think seeing them (eyes closed, blissing out on the here-and-nowness of it all) might actually be even more amazing than just hearing them, so perhaps that is actually my favourite after all.

- **Otomo Yoshihide and Christian Marclay – Moving Parts.** One of my very favourite albums, this was all improvised on turntables, sometimes with prepared records (records covered in rubber bands and bandaids and electrical tape, much strangeness) and sometimes not. There's a lot of good humour in this record (as in, the "vibe" is great, and it's quite "fun"), as well as a wide range of textures and interesting places visited. Getting these two absolute masters of turntablic recontextualisation together was a brilliant idea, with epic results.
- **Uchihashi Kazuhisa and Yoshida Tatsuya – Improvisations 3.** Perhaps the greatest drummer in the known universe, Yoshida is an incredible player, and his work with improv groups like Daimonji is just spectacular. But with guitarist Uchihashi Kazuhisa, it's like the two of them are fused at the cerebellum – they react to each other with split-second spontaneity, creating instant vistas of amazement in the blink of an eye. And Improvisations 3 has got a DVD wherein one can gaze slack-jawed and furrow-browed at their real-time shuffle-play improg-rock noise fiestas as they happen: it's just brilliant stuff. Magical.
- **Last Exit – Last Exit.** I wasn't sure if this was actually full proper improv, or if some of it was "written", but all my research indicates it is fully made up on the spot. High-octane aggressive powerhouse of brutal free-jazz noise-wall, with each of the players displaying massive chops and an unswerving dedication to pulling no punches in the frenzy department. Goes off, goes hard, then goes home. One of the first full-improv albums that I really liked (I was into heaviness and improvisation, but the atonal freeness of free jazz had yet to sit comfortably with me. When I first heard this album, I "got" free jazz a little bit more than I ever had previously).
- **Squirrel Pancake – Abide.** A dear friend and musical colleague, Jen Tait has always been someone with whom I musically "click", and someone with whom it's always been super-relaxed and super-easy to improvise with. Squirrel Pancake, as both her first solo project and first attempt at playing/creating with guitar, is a masterpiece of improvisation, as she crafts layered looping pieces that are just as unexpected to the listener as they are to the creator. Spires of sedimental guitars are made from

stacked sheets of loops, sometimes creating roaring towers of noise, sometimes delicate dreamcatchers of small things, sometimes growing breathing things that pulsate and strain. Magical stuff that rewards multiple listens.

### Can you articulate your approach to improvisation?

I just try really hard to listen to everyone else, and not just take over. But of course, sometimes taking over is exactly what the piece requires – sometimes everyone's being too tentative and too wishy-washy and accommodating, and so the piece will stagnate in nowhereland for ages – so I'm trying to learn how to be okay with being musically assertive when I feel it would benefit the music. I try really hard to be present and aware, to get rid of any preconceptions or aims or goals or strategies, and just sit in the moment. But yeah, my main challenge is being brave enough to take charge when everyone is simpering: as a meek, quiet, soft person who doesn't like conflict, making a bold musical statement in the face of overwhelming hemming and hawing is still quite difficult. (Luckily, I tend to work with small groups of people I know and trust, and so this doesn't actually come up as often as it maybe used to.)

### 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 think *approaches to* improvisation can be taught. I think people can be taught to listen, and people can be taught to play, and people can be taught strategies and techniques, so it stands to reason that people can be taught to improvise. My main tip is try to really get what *other* people are doing, because if you're not really getting what other people are doing, you're more likely to just squeeze out a massive dump all over their beauty and ruin it for everyone. Like, if someone's create this lovely gossamer web of texture, respect it – don't just trash it coz you've got this other cool idea. Don't come in with ideas at all, really: find out what the piece is by creating the piece with everyone organically. Listen to each other. Sometimes the best thing you can do is not do anything for a bit: sometimes the best thing is to fill in the gaps, make a sound no-one else is making. Be sensitive. That doesn't mean be restrained: if the piece requires you to make some glaring noisy fucktrumpet of a sound, then by all means, go for it. But be sensitive to when it *does* need a fucktrumpet.

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

I'm pretty shit, so I like to think not! I think sensitivity of the ear is more important than proficiency of the fingers. And indeed, if someone knows how to do all the "right things", then the chances are much lower that they will do some of the "wrong things" that would fit perfectly in any given improvisational session: knowing the "right things" can be another form of restriction (of course, it doesn't have to be, but it *can* be).

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

Like mentioned earlier, I'm kinda trying to sit in the space and get where it's coming from, sort of trying to suss out the vibe, or the intention of the vibe, or something. It's all really hard to put into words! Like, if there's a really clear sense of rhythm, I might join in with that rhythm in my own way. Or if there's a real sense of disjointedness, then I'll heighten the disjointedness. Or if there's a floaty vibe, I'll try to add my own floatiness. I'm generally trying to make whatever it is already just that little bit *more* so.

(Or not! There's two kind of vibes: playing *with*, and playing *against*, where playing *with* is kinda matching the vibe, and playing *against* is kinda making a sound perpendicular to the vibe, like a bold solo against a tight rhythm section. I tend to be more of a "with" player, but I do respect a good "against"er. Troy Naumoff is a brilliant "against"er, and I have many wonderful memories of our old band Dead Ants Trio where the drummer and I (on bass) would create amazing tight beds of awesome for Troy to hacksaw zigzagly against – some of my favourite musical times ever.)

I'm also really listening for changes / mistakes / signals: if there's suddenly this blaring noise, or an unexpected clank, or some sound that just totally stands out, whether deliberate or accidental, I like to use this sound as a signal for change, which kinda retroactively *turns it into an actual signal* for change. So, at the same time as I'm trying to make the section I'm currently in *more like how it already is*, I'm also on high alert for sounds that might turn the

section I'm currently in *into the next section*. So there's this constant push and pull of constancy versus change (*tradition vs novelty*, I guess).

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?

Well, I live hours away from Melbourne in rural Gippsland, and rarely leave the house, so kinda by necessity most of my musical improvisation is solo work. I work a lot with loop pedals and/or long feedback processes in software, so I just treat the loop/feedback process as if it were another person, constantly trying to react in the here-and-now to the sounds that already exist, either adding to them in a "with" fashion, or making strokes perpendicular to them in the "against" method. If you're deep-listening, and reacting in a here-and-now kind of way, it honestly doesn't matter if what you're reacting to is another person or a buncha loops or a long process of computerised feedback: being open and receptive is still the key.

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.

For me, being a hermit who rarely finds myself in the presence of anyone who isn't my wife or child, place is an important factor! Most of my musical expression happens in my home, and so I become accustomed to a certain level of ease and reliability: as soon as I move my tools to a different location, I'm constantly having to deal with the unexpected. At a gig, a lead which works reliably at home fails to function; using someone else's amp or going through the PA system means a sound I can reliably generate at home now sounds completely different; some pedal which usually functions perfectly now mysteriously dies; some setting on some knob that I normally use has now shifted during transit, and I'm not sure what it was any more; etc. So shifted to a new place, I'm constantly having to reconfigure my set up, which means I'm much more likely to just try some completely new setup in a live scenario. Once, all my stuff (guitar, kaoss pad, mike, loop pedals) completely failed to work, and I was forced to improvise entirely on kazoo. A change of place completely changes what I end up doing, which is great: as a youth I would've faced these kinds of things and been completely heartbroken and angry and sad and defeated, but now, thanks to many years of improv, I look at catastrophic failure as an amusing challenge!

Also, with my band **Gnaumgn**, we have recorded ourselves improvising in amongst rockpools and beachside cliffs, and I found that with such epic sounds already occurring all around us (the roar of the ocean, the call of birds, the splish of drops in small pools, the bracing wind, etc), we tended to be more minimal in our own sound-generation, as the



soundscape was already so filled with fascinating texture. Another gig, with my duet **Ili Pika**, a piece was just kinda winding down when a very loud tram screeched past the venue, which marked the perfect ending to the piece. So place can also help define what you add as an improviser, depending on what the place itself already brings to the mix, and what you're willing to allow "in" as part of the whole soundscape you're part of.

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 think it's the bit you make up, isn't it? Anything that isn't predetermined, anything that isn't practised or has a clear structure, is improvised, I think? You can have a project which is entirely made-up, or you can have a loose structure ("quiet to loud" or whatever) but the actual notes are completely improvised, or you can have a bunch of notes but the structure is completely improvised, or any combination of the above. One duet I play in, **Intrinsic Light**, has one or two metal riffs per song, but the overall structure is completely improvised around those riffs, and the end or start or middle can turn out entirely differently every time we play – sometimes a mysterious unexpected middle section might appear in a particular song, or the speed could change, or a song could go for three minutes one night and seven the next. There was a time in my life where I really loved getting stoned and listening to the **Grateful Dead**, as they'd go from this dinky little verse-and-chorus country song to some half hour megaheavy space-jam improvisation session, without any noticeable transition: they went from complete structure to complete free-form chaos in such a magically natural way, with nothing forced and nothing intended, and I think that really informed my ideas about improvisation and how it can fit in/against structure. One thing I kinda hate is where bands have a specific "16 bars of trippy soloing" in the middle of a song, where they go through the *motions* of improvisation, without allowing for any of the real *value* of improvisation: I would argue that those kinda sections aren't actually improvisation, but are actually just as structured as any verse or chorus. So is that where the limit lies? I'm not really sure. I think that if you're really making it up, really letting it go where it leads you rather than just kinda filling in time until you go back to the next bit of the song, then it counts as proper improv.

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 try to approach every session with the same dedication to deep-listening and real-time here-and-nowness no matter who the players are. Then again, I'm the kind of person that improvises along with the coffee machine every morning, and finds myself making jamming with the dishwasher, and will listen, rapt, to the weird noises the fridge makes.

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?

Well, I'm really not very good at any instruments in any traditional sense, so I've ever felt held back by navigating chord changes or rhythmic structures! I wouldn't know what to do with them if they came up. I play entirely by ear, which I think gives me a real advantage, as I'm relying entirely on real-time bio-feedback, which makes it much easier to find myself in a here-and-now scenario. I've often had "real musicians" ask me, completely perplexed, how we go about improvising – "so, do you just agree on a tempo and a key before you play, or what?" – and I have to explain to them that I have no idea about keys or notes or any proper musical stuff, and so am free to just meander and find something that "sounds good", whether that's a texture or a melody or a single note or just a wash of sound that "fits". I think that the invention of free jazz saved us a lot of heartache – if a note I play in

my meandering just really doesn't fit, it's magically transformed into retroactive free jazz, and all is right with the world.

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? For me, when I'm in "the zone" of pure improvisation, it's a lot more about acting in the purest present than bringing things from the past or trying to change the future: neither past nor future are considerations at all, as all the focus is entirely on the present moment itself. Both are interesting ways to think of past and future, but in the very best improvisation, it really is about the immediate instant, the Everchanging Now of the present. I really really try (or "not-try") to exist in the here-and-now when improvising: I don't always succeed, but I have a pretty good hit rate.

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?

Depends on what project it is: with **Intrinsic Light**, it has a focus/centre of "mindful black metal", so there are some places I won't go with that project, for instance, that I would happily go with a project like **Ili Pika**, which is a completely free improv project – even though both projects involve exactly the same personnel! In my completely free projects, I tend not to aim for anything. With many pieces that I make, I might think I'm making a piece for **Haark**, and it ends up being a piece for **Haraam**, or vice versa: the home for the piece is decided after the creation of the piece, depending on what aesthetic was actually created. And **Gnaumgn** is always **Gnaumgn** no matter what kind of sounds are made.

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

There's a couple of things: one is genuine emotion, and the other is some nice purdy tunes. As for the first one, genuine emotion is often missing in the experimental/improv scenes, as people frown into their laptops or sternly engage with their instruments: I very rarely see someone looking like they're having a good time. And if the performers are not enjoying what they're doing, then why should anyone else? And not just enjoyment, but any real emotion at all: the overwhelming expression is one of complete blankness. I think that musical exploration should be one guided by *feel*, and I often don't detect any actual feel in a lot of experimental improv.

As for the second one, I think, in the local experimental scene at least, there is a real fear of structure and/or melody, which, to me, is just as restrictive as an insistence on structure and/or melody. As a musician, I think that we should be free to use all the tools at our disposal, and not become a slave to any one of them, or to any preconceived notions. I believe that improvisation is all about freedom and listening, about a willingness to exist and respond in the here-and-now, and if that here-and-now involves structure and/or melody, then it should be okay to go there. I don't see experimental music or improvised sound as being about rejecting all traditional ideas of music, as much as widening the palette/broadening the scope. Restrictions are the antithesis of improv.

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

I have a dream of one day working with Tony Buck, as discovering **Peril** in my youth was a life-changing event for me, but I'm very happy for that to never happen.

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

I have a new project **Feast of the Korova** with the mighty **Spasmoslop** which I am mega-excited about. It will be a filth-drenched heavy mess of chaotic atonal orchestra nightmare fuel, crunching noise-doom riffs, and demented wailing. I'm imagining something like **Khanate** meets **Gnaw Their Tongues** meets **Hanatarash** meets **Stravinsky**. Loose riffs held

shivering in a mucous-membrane of blackened noise and drowning banshees. We still haven't got together and actually tried this idea, so it might be complete shit, but at this stage I'm incredibly excited.

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

No. None.

Thanks for letting me be a part of this survey across the experimental community: I hope the project yields you illuminating results!