

Phil Treloar / Feeling & Thought

Of Other Narratives

*tracings in the ground of
Collective Autonomy
people-practice-theory-history*

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Gebert-Simmonds-Treloar

...of life, and its celebration

If you're reading this then you may have already listened to the CD. And if you've listened to the CD once, you'll likely have listened to it a few times. This music, by any standards, is exceptional. It's powerful, passionate, and intense. And while being exploratory, it is utterly committed. Yes. I'm one of the players. Label me self-complementary or whatever you wish. That's fine with me. The few of us who were playing music in this general area in Sydney, Australia, in the late 1970s were certainly not that much loved for doing so. For some recipients it was just plain 'bull-shit'. For others, perhaps fascinating but much too full-on. And yet others, well, they simply dismissed it: "*That's not f---in' jazz!!!!*" I hasten to add there was a small, invaluable contingent of those with a genuine interest who kept the home fires burning regardless of weather conditions.

About the time this music was recorded a debate, probably better described as a battle, was in full swing. There were, on the one hand, those precious few with a view towards a distant mountain that *had* to be scaled while on the other, the majority who preferred seeing the hand in front of their face. Unfortunately, the hand they preferred was that of another. There was strong resistance to *any* expression if it wasn't in the likeness of *an/the* imported model. Homespun or homegrown was interpreted in its literal sense, to wit, 'unsophisticated'. That the homespun might have embraced with warmth a family of truth seekers was never a consideration and the protagonists of any attempt at the homespun were generally treated with contempt.

The notion of a genuine Australian voice in improvised music or, for that matter any other 'genre', was the reserve of the 'unsophisticated'. In the jazz world, Australia, and Sydney in particular, was being invaded by a stream of American hot-shots—players *and* educators—and by and large, the Sydney jazz community hung off of every word they uttered (inebriated or otherwise!). There was abundant funds forthcoming for these mighty visitors yet very scant pickings for the few at home who were making, in *actual* terms, a contribution towards the rise of a homegrown perspective. These few not only had a vision but were dedicated to their vision's realization. Meanwhile, the sort of stuff taught by these visitors and their acolytes—Australian practitioners who were glassy-eyed over, and enamored with, their American heros—was, to put it bluntly, standard 'jazz language'; tricks in fact, though taken very seriously as the be-all and end-all; the secret key to being a 'real' jazz musician.

Nowadays published books abound that sprout the same linguistic formula and their attendant idiomatic jargon. In more general terms the embrace of this pretentious atmosphere was effected by adherents of an American model and adherents of a European model. And, though still on its upward swing at the time, there were also the World Music adherents using various 'ethnic' models. The first of these three modeling trends generally applied to jazz followers. The second, classical, or 'serious music' as some like to refer to it. And the third? I could never quite get it... perhaps 'alternative music' covers it. But alternative to what? I was never interested in models of any kind and especially models to be emulated. With rare exception the critical bottom line was: 'If you're not playing music the way we recognize as being an aspiration to perfection, [i.e., perfection as exemplified by the American, European, or Ethnic model] then you can't play. Period!' Just a touch of diversion *was* acceptable. But only a touch.

In no uncertain terms the odds were stacked against the few. The majority—practitioners and audience-members alike—saw our efforts in negative terms. In their eyes it was temerity, audacity, and flagrance that spurred us on to walk our own path and to take our own creative journey towards the establishment and clarification of a personal voice bearing potential to contribute to the formation of a language able to facilitate creative exchange on the ground of our own habitation. *This* was an ideal. An ideal thought about infrequently, rarely discussed, more rarely taken seriously, and almost never committed to.

An editorial excerpt from the period exemplifies the situation:

"It is January once again, and when this edition of *JAZZ* hits the streets, the summer jazz clinics, organized by Greg Quigley of the Australian Jazz Foundation, will be in full swing at the NSW State Conservatorium of Music, and many of his American educators will be performing at the 12-day Sydney Jazz Festival at the Basement, January 14 ~ 25.

"It is appropriate therefore that we take a look at the practice, now well-established, of bringing American jazz educators to this country. In its fourth year, Greg Quigley's program is heavily supported by public money, by way of the Music Board of the Australia Council and the NSW Division of cultural Activities."¹

Much to his credit, in the same editorial Eric Myers acknowledges the 'developing controversy' over precisely this issue—homegrown vs. the imported model—with Eric himself making a significant contribution towards a more balanced point of view by publishing arguments from both sides of the divide, including among these a European component. For those interested in this matter so crucial to any conception of that which constitutes an Australian voice &/or perspective, the *JAZZ* issues published throughout this period make for some thought provoking reading. And indeed, they clearly indicate some of the difficulties and prejudices the handful of practitioners devoted to a homegrown voice had to face and overcome.

The majority back then felt comfortable with categories to guide them and a friendly guide who spoke a language with which they were familiar. The Americans, obviously, made a massive impact. Unfortunately, nothing much has changed in this regard, neither with musicians nor listeners. And the ever rising profile and power of communications is serving to exacerbate the damage as much as to nullify it. Nowadays one can import a model with the touch of a key on one's computer. The quick fix is ever at hand to add another component or another layer to the pile; the superficial on top of the superficial. With ease such as this, how many practitioners actually stop to consider the essential purity of their own voice as it might be *if* divested of all these influences? Indeed, those who do are the richer for it as is the communicative circle in which they happen to function.

While quite clearly there is a different ethos applicable now much of the difference remains at the shallow end of the pool. In Australia—geographic proximity notwithstanding, sadly, I include *as an import* Aboriginal Australia because the purse strings are held by white Australians just as, in the final

analysis, the enforced laws are made by like-minded whites of Euro-American persuasion—increasingly from the early-1980s onwards, the imported models of jazz and ethnic music ran a pretty tight race. As the slickness of jazz performance increased—buoyed up by musically capable, stylishly-dressed, opinionated trumpet players (among others) and their hangers-on, as well as thoroughly honed educational processes—the more insightful members, or at least potential members, of the jazz fraternity began to see the ethnic model as an increasingly attractive ‘alternative’. Jazz has by now become typical PhD fare, garnering positions in academia consonant with doctor-ship. The jazz model, though, is a small field when compared with the ethnic model which has on its side, profusion. For example, Africa’s population of about 800 million speaks more than 2,000 languages (about one third of the world’s living languages), its ethnic groups number over 3,000 and human genetic contrasts exceed those found anywhere else.² For the cultural imperialists, a veritable smorgasbord. And indeed, in the comparatively narrow field of music the past thirty years or so have been witness to some pretty solid bridge-building over the valley between improvisation and the musical stuff of ethnomusicology (yet another region ripe for PhD plunder). Meanwhile, a relatively astute performing musician can acquire some traditional performance skills and, in a performance environment outside the home source, appear to be more ‘in the know’ than factual truth might perhaps reveal. A wide base! All well and good. Licks are one thing. Structural understanding quite another. But, whatever the case in this regard, as far as I’m concerned the real issue remains one of voice and its telling of home; the myriad cultural questions fundamental to the source; intrinsic as feeling beneath the surface detail of stories and crucially, left to be what they are and what it is they signify. To what extent the adventures of adventurers in a far-off land gain access to their own ‘home’ is a moot point. And superficiality vs. depth of expression is an equation that carries a substantial load. It was around the time of this AAE recording that, through close contact with an Aboriginal man from Yirrkala, Nth East Arnhem Land, I found myself asking myself a pretty revealing question: “What am I ever going to know, let alone *feel*, about this man’s home and his people such that my expression of it might be natural (as in *innate*: my birth-right-of-place)?” The answer was as obvious to me then as it remains: “Not enough.”

So then: Is this an ethical question? And if so: Was my resolve of hands-off silence the easy way out? The first of these questions is easily answered. Yes. It is an ethical matter. The second question, however, is not quite so easily addressed and I’ll not attempt a comprehensive answer here. But I would like to assert this: *I don’t want to simply observe. I want to engage with the creative act itself.* From my perspective this, essentially, means two things. Firstly, that engagement with the act of creating something is a form of spirit-coming-into-being and by dint, is something shared. Secondly, it’s a form of enhancement and this enhancement bears benefits in some way or another for all. Who’s to be the judge? And what might the criteria be? From where I stand, to include some aspect of a culture simply for its ‘use value’ or as ‘a curiosity’ hardly qualifies as enhancement, let alone mutual beneficence. A concern for how any aspect of a culture is put to work in the creative act and its resultant benefits is, for me, fundamental to the process itself. In the end it’s not only a tall order but more to the point, a personal responsibility. We are in its service. Not the reverse. Ethnographer, Steven Feld, gives us an index to the complexities involved when he says:

“Every ethnographer carries a cultural background that includes a set of behaviors and values surrounding interpersonal style. These involve both conscious and out-of-awareness attitudes, conventionalized into a subjective palette that colors the intertwined empirical and interpretive dimensions of an ethnographic report.”³

There are many more possibilities for creative adventuring than simply stepping onto somebody else’s terrain. And these possibilities begin by stepping *into* one’s own terrain; one’s own inner self, with a view to discovering who’s at home. It is only the enlightened who discover ‘nobody’. Notwithstanding, for

most of us the inner journey can be an aspiration and remain an adventure, an inspiration, and meanwhile, generate beneficence. There is no law that renders one of these a purpose while the others mere byproducts. They can share equally in the journey. But only if the commitment to mutual beneficence is made and in this, there is no guarantee of a happy ending; that is, if happy endings are constituted by self-gain. Life, as lived-adventure, doesn't always have happy endings. At least not at every step along the way. That's the risk you take. It's the risk factor that opens up new vistas. The high-wire walker with a safety net is more like a low-wire act. 'Ah. We can breath easy!'

This music, the music of the Australian Art Ensemble, is not about breathing easy. But it is about breathing. It is about voice. And it is about life. It's also about celebration ... from an Australian perspective.

In more recent years the plot has been somewhat thickened mellifluously owing to the advent of art (or is it Art?) as *the* measure for elevation. Nowadays, prizes and awards for it abound as do their attendant competitions and derived honors, all of which assure profile and profit in some form or another. The music industry struts its awards and prizes with the award collectors tagging along in the furrows this strutting tracks. Without doubt, some form of encouragement is necessary. Paradoxically, the 'awards syndrome' has much more to do with infrastructure than it does creative expression. And, in general, the same can be said for the grant system. By and large it's about flag-waving and being politically correct, while accounted for by flavor-of-the-month, glossy superficiality. By definition, First Prize is an exclusive category. Yet it's an exclusive category nurtured on a field constituted in terms of judgements commonly held; the lowest common denominator being no more than opinion, with this, 'well informed' or otherwise. By dint, the seduction of awards will never be the progenitor of original creative thought. The latter will always be the reserve of practitioners devoted to the search and its expression and for which there is no terminus.

Viewing it retrospectively, the Australian Art Ensemble had no ambitions whatsoever regarding well rehearsed polish or canny composition that might be recognized as 'Artistic'. The art part of the name is an index towards hard-nosed exploratory endeavor and behavior; spontaneous responses to the moment. The art was about real-time processes and a willingness, preparedness, personal integrity and courage, to bear the inner self. This art bore no ostentation and was utterly un-gated.

Things change. And particularly if one happens to be gifted with (or is it cursed by?) a predilection to follow their creative inclinations come what may. This manifests as a very real, ongoing confrontation. Though, as confrontation, it is not necessarily the cause of aggression nor does it give rise to the need for isolation. What the changes *are* is a matter for discovery en route. With insight, the changes will flow of their own accord with lessons learned and experiences had, like a river, all feeding into and connecting every next moment. These sorts of connections form bridges across time in ways that are utterly unpredictable yet, ironically, and profoundly so, protreptic.

The AAE, short lived as it was as a unit, exemplified for me the sheer beauty and abundant benefits to be gained from following your heart and trusting, implicitly, the greater force. And though frames of reference have changed, it exemplifies this still, over thirty years after the event. It's not so much to do with the language as it is the spirit's embrace ... of life, and its celebration.

¹ Myers, Eric. Editor, *JAZZ - The Australian Contemporary Music Magazine*, Jan./Feb., 1982, p. 4

² Agawu, Kofi. *Representing African Music - Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions*. New York and London: Routledge, 2003, p. 221.

³ Feld, Steven. *Sound and Sentiment - Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*. 2nd. edn. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990, pp. 250 ~ 51.