

Recollections - Nine

Julien Wilson & Phil Rex

Masters Without Pretense

I arrived at Tullamarine round 11:30 p.m., the evening of August 30. I'd flown in from Brisbane where I'd participated as one of four Invited International Guests of the Australian Percussion Gathering (APG), convened this year by Vanessa Tomlinson at the Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University. This was a truly wonderful event, spread out over five days, and cram-packed with percussive happenings that turned my head around again and again. By this stage though I was feeling very tired, but equally if not more so, inspired.

I walked out into the night air after passing through the 'arrivals' area and was immediately reminded of how cold Melbourne could be. This was my first visit in nineteen years. I looked around for a face I'd never before met and as I looked I heard a voice call out, "Phil!!". Looking in the direction of the vocal sound I saw a joyous face atop of a robust frame. It belonged to Julien Wilson. We'd agreed by e-mail to meet there and I was more than grateful that our plan had come to fruition. Forgetting my state of exhaustion entirely, we raved twenty to the dozen all the way to Julien's house where, due to the kindness of himself and his beautiful wife, Justine, I was to stay for the ensuing week.

The APG invitation had become the catalyst to a string of interconnections that, even if given the chance to design ahead of time, could not have been more spiritually beneficial. With enormous support plus nuts-'n-bolts help from Julien, a tour had been established for Spaces and Streams, a new performance initiative I'd set in motion. The tour included two gigs in Melbourne (Uptown and Bennetts Lane) organized through the Melbourne Jazz CoOp, and two in Sydney for SIMA. Through Julien's instigation the Bennetts Lane gig was to be recorded. And by now, having listened to the results of Mal Stanley's Chris Lawson's, and Alex Stinson's, expertise, my gratitude to the ABC knows no bounds.

As it turned out Spaces and Streams was to see two manifestations during the tour, a trio with Julien, Phil Rex, and myself, and a quintet (the second of the Sydney gigs) with Julien, David Ades, Carl Dewhurst, Hamish Stuart, and myself. Both these groups were engaging, wonder-filled experiences, replete with creative conversations the measure of which I'd not been witness-to-as-participant for many years. Herein though, it's the trio I'd like to reflect upon. Its initiation gave me a precious opportunity in ideal musical company to resume my place at the drums; an experience, with one exception, I'd not had since moving to Japan nineteen years earlier. And the unexpected, as is so often the way, added fuel to an already raging fire.

Shortly before the APG was to convene a commission was occasioned, my task being to write a new work for seven percussionists with myself as marimba soloist. This was scheduled to be premiered at the APG's Gala Concert. I thus had next to no time to do something I desperately needed to do, namely, practice the drums. Further to this rehearsal time with Julien and Phil was limited to just a couple of two-hour meetings during which there was barely sufficient time to address the

fairly difficult notation I'd presented them with. This also meant us having to come to terms with how the notated material might relate to the open-ended improvisational concepts these pieces foster. As for my own part in the mix, suffice it to say that both Julien and Phil are compassionate people! Nineteen years is a long time to not do something as complex and intricate as improvised music-making can be.

We explored three pieces I'd written back in the late 1980s for Feeling to Thought (Mark Simmonds, David Ades, Steve Elphick, and self): *Moom Man's Main Message*, *Shades of Bhairav*, and *Directions Changing*. Earlier this year I'd thoroughly revised these pieces with a view towards the inception of Spaces and Streams. As well as revising the harmonic domain, I completely revised and wrote out in its entirety both the bass and tenor lines for the heads of *Moom Man's* and *Directions*. The relationship between the bass and tenor parts was now clear, precise, and intrinsically polyrhythmic, thus ushering a way into the improvisational domain but without tying it down unnecessarily. Put in a nutshell the material is, on the one hand, neither straight ahead nor easy to interpret and render yet, on the other hand, it is clear and precise.

My primary interest in music-making is to engage with musicians who play themselves – the people they are, as body, as mind, as spirit, as being – over and above any instrumental or genre determined style-specifics they happen to have gotten down. Far from precluding personal ways of instrumental realization or attitudes towards what it might mean *personally* to engage in musical collaboration, it utterly embraces these. It leaves open the door to infinite possibilities regarding how, when, and why, we do what it is that we do, *together*. This leaves us each with the responsibility to find malleability and balance between the specific and non-specific. Otherwise put, this amounts to finding a way to characterize ideas without over formulating them. This is an essential premise to the music I engage. And I write this in as material that constitutes each piece. How this works as group 'sound' is not only fundamental, but crucial. It's not roles played that constitute the music but rather, *people* playing. I cite these details because they function as an index towards the creative power and unmitigated presence both Julien and Phil brought to bear on the music of Spaces and Streams.

"Masters Without Pretense", the words in the title linked to the names, Julien Wilson and Phil Rex, are utterly loaded with significance. It would be easy to write a lengthy discourse unfolding the word 'master' in relation to them both. To state the obvious, at least in relation to their respective instruments, they are master-full. In terms of musical form and structure, whether invented spontaneously or within the purview of predetermined material, their uncanny ability to draw the played into the playing with an ear towards the to-be-played is truly remarkable: phrases within phrases, dynamics within dynamics, durations within durations. And the inter-related potential of these? It feels limitless in the moment of doing and sounds astounding in retrospect. Their interpretive sense is focused on the 'creative' and not merely on logistical limitation; continually looking beyond the horizon while playing towards it, casting arcs of interplay as far as the ear can hear. And perhaps above all this, they are constantly aware of the composite such that the music being made feels as if the direction chosen might have gone otherwise yet, can touch the inevitable too. And why 'Without Pretense'? There is absolutely no question left as to who they are. Julien Wilson and Phil Rex play themselves ... period. Despite the density or complexity of the music at any point in time, it feels weightless; without the burden of self-conscious imposition.

Just after the final notes of the Bennetts Lane gig drifted into memory I said to Julien, "Oh! There are microphones here. I'd completely forgotten we were being recorded." And Julien replied, "Yeah! I did too."

The Melbourne weather may have been cold but my spirit was made as warm as toast by these two remarkable musicians and their music-making. I await with patient anticipation, our next opportunity to play.

Julien Wilson and Phil Rex – Masters Without Pretense
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