Book Review

Playing Ad Lib: Improvisatory Music in Australia 1836-1970
John Whiteoak
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Although there is a notoriously slow uptake of books by academics, especially of books from countries other than their own, it still seems a little beyond reason to provide a conventional review for a book published more than six years ago. Thus, I have taken the opportunity to provide what is more of a brief commentary than such a review.

Normally a book on improvisation would grapple with the question "what is improvisation?" with direct reference to recorded or at least widely heard music. In *Playing Ad Lib*, John Whiteoak takes on the comparatively awkward task of examining improvisatory modes of music making in Australia that have gone unrecorded—music, in other words, that he could not hear. His first four chapters discuss "The Approved Genres before Jazz" (the title of his opening chapter). The last three chapters discuss jazz and its influences, commencing from around 1918. He has a special focus on Australia, and more particularly on Melbourne, his home city; but this is only deeply apparent in the last parts of the book that deal with the avant-gardes of that city. He "points to the special character of Melbourne's musical past," but also aims to provide a "benchmark for improvisatory music in Australia" (xiii). Whiteoak also provides useful pointers to the literature on Australian music that complements his own work.

The opening chapters of *Playing Ad Lib* use a diverse array of evidence, from print to anecdote, concerning the whole of Australia. Whiteoak indicates that many of the early activities he discusses "represent examples of transplanted musical culture" (xiii). He analyses these in terms of the relative isolation of Australia until recent periods. Because of the "tyranny of distance," he explains, "Australian musicians were confronted with bewilderingly out-of-sync waves of decontextualised musical influence" (xiv). This part of the book is a diligent and fascinating account, identifying improvisation within "Blackface Minstrelsy," "Ragtime and Ragging," and in "Anonymous Genres" (to quote from the titles of three more chapters). As a musicologist, ethnographer, and historian, Whiteoak makes a virtue of extrapolation from incomplete scores, published "methods" (for playing ragtime, for example), snippets of advertisement, and published stories. He also extracts much humour from some of these sources.

The book concludes with two chapters "Towards Experimentalism" and "Beyond Jazz Improvisation," which focus on "exploratory music" (xv). Many of the musicians he discusses engage in "'problem-finding' exploration: musical exploration as a highly valued process in itself" (xv). Concluding with a discussion of 1960s Melbourne, Whiteoak notes:

> For Keith Humble, an influential figure of the avant-garde [there] … the aesthetic and social radicalism signified through the improvisatory organization of sound was sometimes more important than the musical product itself. That Melbourne was entering an age in which social change was 'as easy as growing your hair' and nowism and happenings were the order of the day undoubtedly contributed to a widespread misunderstanding of the serious intent behind his approach (xx).

This comment has much broader relevance to the contemporaneous work that Whiteoak discusses. For example, Robert Rooney, innovative Melbourne artist and musician, was viewed as an *enfant terrible*, probably as much for his associations and social interactions as for his work. This in turn led to an underestimation in some quarters of the fundamental intensity and inventiveness in his music and images.

By focussing on Melbourne, Whiteoak addresses a problem not shared universally amongst jazz and improvising musicians of the period: the urge "to liberate sound from the shackles of traditional notation." Many of the musicians were part of the compositional tradition of concert music, as well as that of jazz. This remained true of much later work from Melbourne, such as that of the ensemble Pipeline, and implies

analogies more with ensembles such as Gentle Fire and Intermodulation in the UK (regardless of the differing emphases on electronics), than with contemporary jazz groups. The Melbourne work also reflected the powerful influence of the unique Australian pianist and composer, Percy Grainger, who had early and radical ideas about 'free music'; and of painters, such as Robert Rooney and David Tolley. Whiteoak also discusses the more widely shared issue of the jazz improvisers' "freedom" being "shackled to a persistent rhythmic ostinato" and other stylistic conventions which were challenged in 1960s US and Europe, even more than they were in Australia. The first influential free jazz recordings made in Australia were those of Serge Ermoll, from 1973, though they were preceded by some 60s recordings of pianist Bryce Rohde, both of whom are outside the scope of Whiteoak's book.

Whiteoak is optimistic in his overall perspective on the 1960s in Australian improvisation; he suggests that it held "potential as musical Esperanto, or perhaps, pidgin, enabling expressive cross-generational, cross-gender, cross-aesthetic, creative, harmless, educational and joyful human play" (xxii). Subsequent work in Australia has arguably fulfilled this hope, and I would suggest that it is as diverse and creative a musical community as any in the world. Whiteoak has gone on to chronicle a more recent and diverse range of this work by co-editing a *Companion to Music and Dance in Australia* with Aline Scott-Maxwell. Some volumes of my own complement these efforts (Dean, 2003, 2005; Smith and Dean, 1997), and others by Jack Mitchell provide discographical information on Australian jazz (Mitchell, 1988, 1998, 2002).

Given the title of Whiteoak's book, it is particularly appropriate that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation hosts a sound-rich web-site called "Australia Ad Lib." Developed by radical and inveterate improviser Jon Rose, the website features numerous examples of contemporary counterparts to many of the "Approved Genres" other than jazz, as well as the work of electronic and jazz improvisers.

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