

Reviews

John Whiteoak, *Playing Ad Lib: Improvisatory Music in Australia 1836–1970*

Sydney: Currency Press, 1999.

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Playing Ad Lib is a valuable addition to the growing body of historiography and musical research into Australian jazz. It is a book about the history of ideas and the evolution of ways of thinking. John Whiteoak has successfully realised his contention that 'The notion of improvisatory music can provide a unique alternative perspective on the historical, social, cultural, musicological and political aspects of music in specific sites such as Australia' (p.312) and that 'any study of Australian music that focuses only upon the composer or the score and fails to consider music as process, as cultural, social and political action ... tells only a small part of the story' (p.xiii). To make his pioneering study more wieldy, Whiteoak has directed his examination towards responses to African-American inflected musics, particularly Australian jazz, and deals mainly with Melbourne, as it can serve usefully as a benchmark for improvisatory music in Australia.

An enduring question among Australian historians has been to what extent Australia has a derivative culture and when did significant events occur that injected a unique Australian dimension into the evolution of events. This book makes an inspired contribution to this examination. An important theme for Whiteoak is the consequences for isolated musicians attempting to create qualities of African-American performance in a decontextualised environment where they were only partly informed. An aspect of Whiteoak's writing, which I enjoy, is his recurrent acknowledgement of the resourcefulness and willingness of Australians to work out solutions to problems—in this case musical ones—as a reaction to the context in which they lived. He shows why Australian jazz on record sounds different to both African-American and white-American jazz, not necessarily because of a failure to grasp certain principles, but often due to references to alternative models.

A large proportion of the book is devoted to the period before 1923 when the first dance bands from America came to Australia and played extensively for the dancing public. When I researched my own book on jazz in Australia, I was fascinated by this era, and Whiteoak has lucidly tracked improvised music-making through this pre-jazz period, covering performance in the circus, peripatetic small bands during the gold fields era, blackface minstrelsy, and musical accompaniment for silent films, with passing reference to the ongoing tradition of

improvisation in church organ music, brass band music, variety artists on stage and formal and informal socials and dances.

Another theme Whiteoak draws from this information is how improvisatory (and its corollary, non-improvisatory) music-making has been shaped by social context. He represents two divergent streams of music making: 'approved,' or one that provided participants with some form of social or cultural dividend, and 'anonymous,' associated with less socially approved or more 'irrational' forms of popular entertainment and accompaniment. For the purposes of this book, the anonymous genres attract Whiteoak because he shows how they led to an Australian tradition of improvising jazz.

Whiteoak's writing is informed by years as a musician working in dance bands and with other first-hand experience of the conditions which bred many of the improvising players. This lends his work erudition, and the book clearly displays Whiteoak's passionate fondness for his subjects and for the subject matter.

The musical illustrations are well chosen throughout. For example, the explanations of ragtime as shown in printed musical primers led to a certain style of play and an idea of 'jazzing up' dance music which was drawn from existing forms of improvisation but which missed the essence of jazz until such players as Bob Tough, Harry Danslow or Frank Coughlan came to the fore in the late 1930s. This can be heard on record, but Whiteoak's concrete explanation backed up by transcriptions is illuminating. I also admire Whiteoak's capacity to assess a performer such as Ben Featherstone, who possessed the knowledge and technical ability to play convincing jazz but who ultimately made a lesser contribution. This was not just due to personal problems, but also because Featherstone so admired Louis Armstrong that the recorded examples of his output failed to show a particularly exploratory approach to jazz improvisation.

Whiteoak's treatment of the emergence of 'traditional' jazz in the late 1930s is sensitive. The Australian traditional jazz scene became one of the most significant elements of Australian jazz history and was one of the first cultural exports from Australia to have an international impact in Europe and the United Kingdom. Whiteoak's concern is not to retrace this story but to place this in the context of an evolving intuitive and intellectual climate. For Whiteoak, a 'relationship between experimentalism and Australian jazz can be traced through progressive tendencies in jazz improvisation. It was mostly among the core community of progressive professional dance musicians ... that sufficient technical skill and theoretical knowledge was available for the exploration of the more technically advanced improvisational concepts' (p.235). The sessions at the Fawkner Park Kiosk and other venues of the late 1930s featuring leading dance musicians 'represent the first major watershed of improvisatory performance practice ... and the first comparatively large-scale acceptance of "collectively improvised" jazz in Melbourne.' In light of this, the 'traditional' jazz scene was not a unique phenomenon in an intellectual sense or as an exercise of a set of skills, and the style pursued was that which had reached a peak in America a decade earlier. Whiteoak points out that the collectively improvised jazz of the Bell band included performance characteristics that, to some extent, pointed much more in the direction of later 'free jazz' and non-jazz creative ensemble music than other forms of jazz at the time. He notes that the difference in the approach to learning to play this style was, by necessity, far more exploratory than for other styles (p.248). There he leaves his

dissertation on 'traditional' jazz and, in a book on the development of ideas, that is sufficient. However, in view of Whiteoak's premise of the importance of context, I believe he would have insights into its enduring popularity and its 'Australian' style that can no longer be attributed to a lack of accurate information or models.

Whiteoak presents with clarity the often-contradictory forces acting on musicians playing in the same historical period. He shows the conservative and progressive forces at work on music-making in both the approved and anonymous genres. The seminal figures he discusses in the period from the mid 1940s include Don Banks in relation to the development of bebop and third stream music, Doug Gamely about whom I knew nothing before reading this book, the work of McKimm, Rooney and Clayton in devising graphic notation to guide aleatoric performance, and the abiding importance of Keith Humble. Much of this involved a transition from experimental jazz to experimental art music, somewhat of a contradiction for some modern jazz players. Humble was the new broom brought to a staid and stultified Melbourne Conservatorium in the mid-1960s. His effect across the board was finally to have new music taken seriously in Australia. Young musicians were introduced to a performance climate that would prevail in their working lives, either in classical orchestras or commercial jingle sessions, coping with the demands of new sounds and being equipped with the mentality to take it seriously instead of cynically; in short, to do justice to all sorts of music.

Another contradiction Whiteoak explores is the awareness by the end of the 1960s that 'improvisatory practice in jazz was burdened with distinctive musical characteristics which could not be shed without the loss of the tradition itself' (p.xxi). It is at this point that experimentalism becomes irrelevant for skilled musicians who have found avenues of expression which are satisfying.

Overshadowing this period was rock and roll and experimental pop, which made jazz insignificant as an expression of youthful radicalism. As I grow older, I tend to think that the sixties and its youth culture was comprised of much unsustainable self indulgence and gesture for its own sake, signifying nothing. For me, jazz remains a backbone to contemporary music only as long as it remains open to lots of pollution from concurrent styles. It is the most vigorous aspect of conservatories of music in Australia.

In tracing the course of improvising music in Australia, Whiteoak correctly infers that from the late 1930s, accelerating to the mid 1960s, the evolution of various styles of jazz and experimental musics has less and less to do with the slavish imitation of overseas styles, and becomes more a result of a fully realised concept of where the music is for the players and what their intelligence can do with it. The result can be heard as satisfying and unique performance. Whiteoak ends on a positive note, briefly outlining why Australia has much potential as a place for jazz and other improvised music. The question of how much we are a derivative culture may be no more relevant for Australia than for any modern society in a corporatised world.

This book is researched in depth, and its clear exposition of complex ideas makes it valuable for all scholars of Australian cultural history and Australian jazz.

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