

Blurring Boundaries

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Feature Review

John Whiteoak (1999) *Playing Ad Lib: Improvisatory Music in Australia 1836–1970*, Sydney: Currency Press

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One of the many virtues of this book is that it slices through and across a range of musical genres. Its topic is one which forms a thread in western music history which includes various popular, 'Fine' and avant garde forms. While it might be possible to quibble with the sub-title, given the book's predominantly Melbourne/Victorian, rather than Australian, focus of its case-studies; the book as a whole opens a new, genre-crossing approach to Australian musical history. This is worth dwelling on. Whiteoak's work has been a key element in the expansion of what has usually – for want of a better term – been referred to as Australian Contemporary Music Studies. In the 1990s this scholarly initiative, which has lodged itself with tenacity in the most marginally nutritious institutional environments, has turned to the re-examination of the various forms of contemporary music which pre-dated (and/or survived) the advent of the forms of pop/rock/dance music (the area which the academic [sub]field of Popular Music Studies is primarily concerned with). Indeed, this expansiveness is the very element which gives this research its edge – particularly in contrast to the introverted conservatism of conventional Australian musicology. This sense of enterprise, ambition and sheer joy of archaeology and analysis illuminates every chapter of Whiteoak's book. While the history of Australian popular music has not – so far – been so frequently explored and analysed as to produce any rigid stratification of orthodoxies, one previous assumption that Whiteoak's work massively problematises is emblematically inscribed in the title of Andrew Bissett's book *Black Roots, White Flowers* (1979). Specifically, that Australia's jazz/improvisatory tradition was founded on the sudden, paradigm-shifting arrival of Black North American jazz recordings and touring ensembles in the 1920s and 1930s. At the very least, Whiteoak's book shows how Australian public music culture was (variously) attuned to aspects of improvisatory music prior to the development of Australian jazz performance and – tantalisingly – that some musicians (at least) would have been able to draw upon previous competences and sensibilities in order to articulate jazz-style improvisatory practices in the early years of Australian jazz.

In his Introduction, Whiteoak invokes Percy Grainger's musical career as an example of musical imagination, eclecticism and dynamic development which typifies the musical approaches Whiteoak (implicitly and explicitly) valorises. As a composer and writer-theoretician of considerable originality (and eccentricity), Grainger and his oeuvre serve as an apt totem for the range of musical practices encompassed by this book. But while the title and project of the book, not to mention the colossal research energy expended, might suggest a commitment to the theme – and 'torch' – of improvisatory music, it is a strength of Whiteoak's study that it often explains the role and nature of improvisation within a range of practical/pragmatic strategies and outcomes. (See, for instance, the illuminating analyses of circus troupe family-band performance [74–79].)

Chapter Six ('Towards Experimentation') opens with an all too brief reference to the work of Henry Tate and his "radical notion of an Australian musical language based on Aboriginal music, bush sounds and what he calls 'deflected' musical scales, derived from Australian bird calls" (233) – which might have merited slightly more expanded discussion – before detailing the (significantly different) musical experimentation of late 1940s musicians such as Doug Gamley and Don Banks. This section, in turn, introduces the book's most contemporary survey, that of Chapter Seven 'Beyond Jazz Improvisation'. This surveys a host of fascinating phenomena (such as the Society of New Music, formed in 1949 and operative until the mid-1950s; and the experimentation of Brian Brown and Bruce Clarke in the 1960s) which, while more historically familiar, merits the extended scrutiny afforded them here. While unremarked upon by Whiteoak, the end section, with its examples of graphic scoring (288–304) provides a neat point from which to loop back to Emily Patton's metaphoric illustration from the 1850s (18) – illustrating that the avant garde is linked to earlier popular ('Anonymous') traditions in precisely the way that Whiteoak outlines in his Introduction.

While a curmudgeonly reviewer might take issue with odd exclusions – such as the omission of the popular 1940s/50s practice of 'hula vamping' in Hawaiian-style steel guitar playing (which composer-guitarist Bruce Clarke practised in his early career) – the book's comprehensiveness is invigorating and inspirational. As the author of a study of musical experimentalism which involved considerable amounts of studio composition developed from improvisation, undertaken by Melbourne-based 'progressive' rock band Not Drowning, Waving [NDW] (Hayward, 1998), I was particularly interested in the issues raised in the final chapter. These involve a discussion of the relevance of the range of practices discussed by Whiteoak to the nature and variety of contemporary improvisatory practices. Whiteoak's volume offers a rich and complex map which any contemporary extension can contextualise itself against. With regard to my own book on NDW, published one year prior to Whiteoak's, I am happy to admit that its introductory sections would have been enriched and expanded by addressing the issues he raises. In particular, my attempts to globally contextualise NDW's work within an international avant garde rock 'tradition' would have been enhanced by a consideration of local Melbournian experimentalism. (Whiteoak's concluding discussion of Keith Humble's work in

particular, would have provided an excellent theoretical/typological framework for me to draw on.)

At this point of conclusion, I should also acknowledge that *Playing Ad Lib* is laced and infused with two elements which many Popular Music students and scholars still find highly daunting – musicological analyses and notational examples. Those with minimal grounding in musicology should not be deterred by this aspect, since there is much useful material to be read 'around' these sections. For those with any degree of familiarity with the field, the examples, and Whiteoak's clear analyses, prove particularly illuminating. The book's publisher, Currency Press, also deserve credit because the book's wealth of illustrations and musical examples provide excellent support for its text.

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