

# THE NECKS – AN ACOUSTIC EXPERIMENT

RESEARCH DISSERTATION – Doctor of Creative Arts

University of Technology, Sydney

Jane Galbraith

2012

## CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student

---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge the supervision and editorial assistance provided by Dr Tony Mitchell and Ms Gillian Leahy from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney. I thank The Necks for their influences and creativity, in particular the cooperation of Chris Abrahams.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTENTS	i
ABSTRACT	ii
INTRODUCTION	iv
CHAPTER 1 BACKGROUND	1
CHAPTER 2 GLOBAL AND LOCAL – NEW COMMUNITIES IN SOUND WORLD FUSION JAZZ AND FREE JAZZ	11
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY, FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW	52
CHAPTER 4 AN ACOUSTIC EXPERIMENT	71
CHAPTER 5 <i>THE BOYS</i> – FILM MUSIC	128
CHAPTER 6 LANDSCAPE PLACE LOCATION – <i>TOWNSVILLE</i>	137
CHAPTER 7 LISTENING	150
CHAPTER 8 NOTES ON THE CREATIVE PROJECT <i>PLACES</i> CD	171
CONCLUSION	197
BIBLIOGRAPHY	200
DISCOGRAPHY	206
MISCELLANEOUS	207
APPENDIX A REVIEWS	209
APPENDIX B TRANSCRIPTIONS	218
APPENDIX C COPIES OF THE SCORES – CD <i>PLACES</i>	240
APPENDIX D GLOSSARY	265

## ABSTRACT

This submission for the Doctor of Creative Arts is in two parts.

The first part is a written, analytical discussion of the work of the ambient, minimalist, free improvising Australian trio, The Necks. Despite the emerging interest in the trio on an international scale, few formal academic writings have been compiled. The thesis adopts a research-led practice methodology and framework whereby research has informed both the thesis and creative work. Research methods employed include qualitative interviews with musicians as well as qualitative and quantitative musicological focus when dealing with textual and musical analyses of recorded material. I argue that The Necks' body of work is an acoustic experiment, situating it in terms of its hybrid nature. Whilst The Necks' musical tracks are a sonic experiment in their own right, their music does not constitute the totality of the individual members' output. I will show how the influences from other genres and musical styles when combined with the free improvising approach of The Necks create the acoustic experiment. The link with American minimalists, global and local performers and world music is considered. The theme of landscape, place and location is explored throughout the thesis. The relationship between the environment and The Necks' performances is significant, and often features in their album titles.

Included is a document (Appendix B) that contains transcriptions of their main musical themes relevant to the analyses of The Necks' body of work. These are specific examples from which various conclusions are derived in order to prove the theory that their work is usefully described as an acoustic experiment.

The second part of the Doctor of Creative Arts is the creative component. Chapter 8, 'Notes on the Creative Project *Places* CD', accompanies a compact disc (CD) audio recording which is an original body of work exploring contemporary improvising practices. I have composed and performed a set of piano pieces based on the theme of location, place and identity. This links with a section in the thesis, Chapter 6, 'Landscape Place Location – *Townsville*'. I have explored a number of ways the acoustic piano can create subtle shadings in tone colour. The solo piano works of Chris Abrahams have been a source of inspiration and I refer specifically to his album *Glow* (2001) in discussing the evolution of my own work. I have also been influenced by Debussy's tone colours, use of the pedal and his impressionistic solo

piano compositions. Asian music and the art of simplicity and clarity has been a contributing stylistic consideration. Repetition and minimalism are also explored in ways of creating new sound.

Thelonious Monk's bold, angular, percussive style and the music of free improvising jazz pianists such as Cecil Taylor, Carla and Paul Bley are other influences. Australian jazz pianists such as Mike Nock and Roger Frampton (my teachers) and the way colours, new sounds and new music are created in a contemporary Australian context are inspirational for this work.

## INTRODUCTION

### a) Aims of the thesis

Jazz has been described as the first world music (Clare 1995, p. 187). Like many art forms, new ways of approaching and performing jazz are constantly evolving. The music has been and continues to be an extraordinary adventure. The aim of this thesis is to prove that the body of work produced by the Australian free improvising group The Necks constitutes an acoustic experiment. The hybrid nature of their work, something which has not been discussed at length to date in a contemporary musicological sense, will be considered in this context. Their work is a particular experiment in certain contexts, but is not the total output of each of the individual members. All members of The Necks bring a wealth of diverse experiences through their work with a variety of other musicians and in working with other bands, hence the contribution to the hybrid nature of their work.

Structurally the thesis moves in a through line, beginning with Chapter 1 which contains biographical and stylistic information about the individual members of the group as well as a brief historical background to the beginnings of The Necks.

The thesis sequentially develops an argument that The Necks' music can usefully be considered as an experiment with the parameters of sound. Through a detailed analysis of The Necks' body of work, I will show how each of The Necks' albums explores various aspects of an acoustic experiment, and chart the progress and evolution of their work in these terms.

I reinforce this idea of their music as an acoustic experiment through referring to key writers on the subject globally and locally, drawing conclusions from these which both augment and support the thesis. The issues of free jazz, notating improvisation and repetition and minimalism are discussed in these terms. Acoustics play a particularly significant role in The Necks' work, as does the relationship between performer and audience.

The opinion of critics is central to the arts in general, and I refer to two concert reviews (one favourable and the other less so) in providing an added dimension to studying their work. These are considered in terms of their validity and perspective, and I comment on my own relationship to and opinion of them in considering further

analysis of their work. I have focused on only two contrasting Necks' reviews as it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to include every review of their work. This in itself is a huge undertaking and possibly lends itself to a future separate project.

The Necks' work has, in itself, informed the creative component of the DCA project, and in particular interviews with, and the music of, their keyboard player Chris Abrahams. When discussing aspects to do with my own work, specifically in Chapter 8, I draw on inspiration from The Necks in both analytical and aesthetic senses.

The thesis is framed in terms of research-led practice. I will show how the research has informed both the thesis and creative work. I also argue how and why I have chosen a research-led approach as opposed to other methods such as practice-led research whereby the creative work informs the thesis argument and creative work. I draw on the work of Roger Dean and Hazel Smith who have explored these areas extensively, as is evidenced in their book *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*. Practice-led research is a term developed by creative practitioners and an area of recent status within the university environment dealing with how creative practice can lead to research insights. Research-led practice suggests 'that scholarly research can lead to creative work' (Smith and Dean 2010 p. 7). Research-led practice, as with practice-led research, is a developing area, and is mainly conceptual and driven by critical and cultural theory.

#### b) Chapter overviews

Chapter 1, 'Background', is a precursor to the discussion of The Necks' body of work as an acoustic experiment, and provides a significant contextual basis in which to inform such a discussion. The Necks began in 1986 and the original modus operandi was a foil for all the other individual projects the members were working on, the initial intent being for the band to exist on more of a personal as opposed to professional level and not to perform publicly. Initially the focus was to create a collaborative process in which members 'seek their own expression' (Clare 1995, p. 147). In this way the diverse background experiences of each of the members contribute to the acoustic experiment idea, and it will be shown that a plethora of musical styles ranging from popular music, rock, jazz, electronica, world music and contemporary music traditions provide a hybrid, collective, cross-genre musical



outcome. This is hybridisation, and this musical diversity contributes to the difficulty in defining The Necks' music. Apart from the rich, profound breadth of experience drawn on by its players, there is still a common thread which runs throughout. This includes the narrative aspect of their work, the performance act and the influence of contemporary music traditions. It will be shown how The Necks explore not only an ongoing approach to new ways of performance but also an experimental direction in forging new communities of sound.

A 'unique ensemble syntax and sound' (Whiteoak 2004, p. 5) where musicians work together over a period of time and develop a specific rapport and musical direction is discussed further in this chapter. I argue that the notion of collective improvisation (a technique used in Dixieland bands from the early 20th century) has been revisited, reformatted and reworked to incorporate this aspect of traditional jazz in a contemporary setting.

Chapter 2, 'Global and Local – New Communities in Sound World Fusion Jazz and Free Jazz', begins with an informed discussion of free jazz in a global and local context. Improvising music, especially jazz, has often been at the forefront of creating new sound. This discussion is informed by world fusion jazz and free jazz. In order to fully understand the significance of The Necks, a discussion commences dealing with a global overview of related creative practices and practitioners, then moving to a consideration of local jazz developments. The relationship between free jazz groups on a world scale and the local free jazz, avant-garde Sydney-based scene is considered, with these aspects situating The Necks' work within this context. I focus on the similarities between The Necks' music and American minimalism (Charlemagne Palestine, La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich and Philip Glass) and jazz (Mal Waldron) and Australian contemporaries such as Clarion Fracture Zone (CFZ), The Catholics, Wanderlust, Alister Spence, Jackie Orszaczky, Sandy Evans, Matt McMahon, Mark Simmonds, Phil Slater and Mike Nock.

Similarly, in moving from a global to a local perspective, I make reference to a number of relevant sources in relation to The Necks' work. These range from European and US writers such as Jacques Attali, Derek Bailey, David Borgo, Jeremy Gilbert and Christopher Small to Australian writers such as John Clare, Roger Dean, Tony Mitchell, John Shand, John Whiteoak and others.

Chapter 3, ‘Methodology, Framework and Literature Review’, deals with a discussion of the methodology and framework of the thesis, situating this in the context of a literature review based on influential readings. I outline the research-led approach in a case study of The Necks, incorporating empirical evidence based on both qualitative and quantitative research. In developing the preferred methodology and approach, I researched and read extensively on the topic of free jazz and world music, beginning with a global approach, then moving to the local Sydney-based jazz scene. A process of summarising and synthesis then followed, as well as an interview phase where a significant body of primary resource-based material was collected.

I take an organic approach to situating The Necks’ work within contemporary free improvised music and a world music perspective. I refer to David Borgo’s book *Sync or Swarm* as a major source of influence. The way Borgo uses connections with the scientific and natural world in discussing chaos theory, swarm intelligence, network dynamics and complexity theory is used to draw parallels with The Necks’ music. Judy Lochhead’s article ‘Joan Tower’s *Wings and Breakfast Rhythms I and II*: Some Thoughts on Form and Repetition’ formed the basis of some thoughts on form and repetition in regard to The Necks, and presented some useful options for situating their work in this way. Repetition and minimalism are key factors inherent in their work and I refer to Schwarz’s book *Minimalists* in discussing and applying certain aspects of his work. In researching musical analysis in general, I considered the approach of the German musicologist and composer Schenker, and whilst his entire work is beyond the scope of this dissertation, I nevertheless found his account of the laws of organic coherence useful, particularly his spatial (and graphic) representation of sound – that of foreground, middle ground and background perspective of sound and placement. I draw various parallels between his ideas on sound perspective and apply these in part to The Necks’ work.

A section in Chapter 3 deals with the topic of ‘Repetition and Minimalism – Stuck in the Groove or Evolving the Groove?’ and discusses the significance of these two concepts as defining structural and stylistic parameters of The Necks’ work. Specific aspects detailing meanings and connections with the concepts of repetition and minimalism are dealt with on pp. 68-69.

Chapter 4, 'An Acoustic Experiment', explores The Necks' body of work (audio output), examining the acoustic experiment research question and charting the progress of this experiment since their first album in 1989, and how it has developed over the band's 25 years together.

I then articulate the steps involved in setting up the acoustic experiment, positing it in terms of controls and variables, discussing the constant elements evident in their work and those which are more experimental. The specific context and meaning of the word 'experiment' is dealt with on p. 72. In summary I use the term 'experiment' to mean an innovative process involving trying new approaches and deal with this on a number of levels including behavioural and musicological, both in the 'laboratory' (studio) and 'field' (live) situations. The term 'experimental' music has been discussed in detail by Michael Nyman, John Cage and others. The musician and writer David Cope describes experimental music as that, 'which represents a refusal to accept the status quo' (Cope 1997, p. 222).

The methodological framework is situated in terms of an analytical apparatus which is central to each stage in the music of The Necks. I will demonstrate using research-led practice via the chronological analysis that, whilst there are similarities with American minimalism, their work is hybrid in nature. The research-led approach has facilitated a thorough and detailed foundation on which to base the acoustic experiment and inform my own creative work. This has been necessary in order to fully understand and argue the case for an acoustic experiment.

The analysis of The Necks' work is based on original empirical research. This case study has involved much background reading and research (books, articles, emails, reviews, listening to their CDs and radio pieces, watching television and films for which they have composed soundtracks, live performances and integrated cross-genre performance art projects such as *Life After Wartime* and *Food Court*). In addition primary resource-based material includes two lengthy interviews with Chris Abrahams, articles I have compiled for various magazines such as *Music Forum* and my own documentation based on live concert situations. The direct transcription and analysis of main musical themes in The Necks' work is used to reinforce various stages of the acoustic experiment and has been compiled as a point of reference and a pool of material on which to draw in order to prove the general argument.

The acoustic environment impacts on The Necks' music. Live albums take on a different persona from studio albums. In the live context the group is directly linked to where they perform and are influenced by place and location, something which is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 6. In live performances an added dimension of chance and acoustics are additional parameters impacting on the overall musical outcome. The issue of acoustics is discussed further in Chapter 7, 'Listening'. The studio albums are much more constructed, with multi-tracking and the addition of other instruments adding scope for experimenting with sound. The formulaic use of silence as part of the opening performance ritual is a foil for the subsequent build-up of the musical narrative progression. It is also linked to the way tension and release is highlighted as part of their performances.

Chapter 5, '*The Boys – Film Music*', looks at an analysis of the music written for Rowan Woods' film *The Boys*. Apart from their large body of work produced as CD albums, The Necks have been involved in a number of collaborative projects involving other media such as writing music for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC's) three-part television series *In The Mind of the Architect*, Episode 1, *Keeping the Faith*, Episode 2, *The Public Good*, which I refer to in Chapter 7, 'Listening', and Episode 3 *Corrugated Dreams*. Produced in 2000, the series comprises 3 x 55 minute programs which explore the diverse world of architects and their contemporary creations. The series explains the process of architecture and the various philosophical and relational connections with people. These collaborative projects often feature a connection with visual media such as the collaboration with Ross Gibson and Kate Richards on *Life After Wartime*, a suite of multimedia artworks based on black and white crime scene photographs post World War II. I describe the process of film composition adopted by The Necks in *The Boys* and the significant connection with place – whereby they draw inspiration directly from their surroundings. The link with minimalism is discussed in a holistic and overarching sense. There were clear directions from Woods in this area – the link with repetition and minimalism (heightened by the trademark use of minimalist pitch sets) here is strong (*The Boys* liner notes 1998). Whilst a large amount of material was recorded, less than 10 minutes of music is used in the film. I also discuss the use of extending the choice of sonic material, with the inclusion of Perth-based composer and biomedical research scientist Alan Lamb's innovative 'wire

music’ – recordings of power lines over seven years under different temperatures (Alan Lamb website) – forming an integral part of the soundtrack.

Chapter 6, ‘Landscape Place Location – *Townsville*’, focuses on the musical act of performance in relation to the whole in terms of the external world and its social constraints and cultural identities. It is here that a consideration of the individual cognitive and aesthetic improvisatory aspects of The Necks’ work will be discussed. This is a complex issue, and contextualises the music from their 14th album *Townsville*. Although drawing extensively on European, North American and Asian minimalist musical influences The Necks’ music is distinctly Australian in many ways. The idea of repetition that slowly changes to become something else is a feature. In dealing with the concept of linking music with external influences, I will consider the question of whether there is there a direct link with the abstract through the music itself and more concrete programmatic aspects of landscape, place and location.

Chapter 7, ‘Listening’, deals with this concept in a broad sense, and I refer to a number of influential writings on the subject. These include the works of David Borgo (*Sync or Swarm*, 2005), John Szwed (*Jazz 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving Jazz*, 2000), Pauline Oliveros (*Deep Listening*, 2005) and Christopher Small (*Musicking – The Meaning of Performance and Listening*, 1998).

I will also discuss the difference between live acoustics and the studio environment paralleling conclusions drawn from the effect of altering the acoustic space and manipulating it into non real-time through the use of multi-tracking. Using a review of an actual Necks’ concert, I describe the active listening experience directly and as part of a first-hand account of their work. Discussed also is the concept of minimalist pieces demanding a new kind of listening.

The section ‘Performer and Audience’ examines the cause and effect in relation to performer and audience in the context of improvisation’s ‘responsiveness to its environment’ (Bailey 1992, p. 44). Ways of listening and the effect and impact of repetition on the listener are considered.

In the section ‘Reactions and Controversy – A Pain in the Neck or the Next Best Thing?’ I deal with the issue of reactions to The Necks’ music. It takes the form of a

comparison between two different concert reviews, one a negative review by American jazz critic John Litweiler and the other a favourable review by *The Guardian's* John L. Walters. I then discuss Lloyd Swanton's (The Necks' bass player's) response to the harsh criticism by Litweiler. Whilst The Necks have built up a cult following both here and overseas, their music can polarise both general listeners and music critics.

Chapter 8, 'Notes on the Creative Project *Places* CD', deals with the issues of source, impact and the creation of ten short piano pieces I composed and recorded. It documents a creative interpretation of places I have visited and captured through a suite-like set of pieces. These are inspired by places and the Australian environment and a strong visual connection with landscape, place and location links directly with Chapter 6 in the thesis. There is a parallel with The Necks' work in a programmatic sense. The significance of place is central to The Necks, with the live and pre-recorded studio settings impacting in different ways on their musical output (as discussed in Chapter 3 and 4 of the thesis). Copies of the music for each piece are included, and are more of a structural scaffold or imprint as improvisation and free interpretation are encouraged in their live performance. Some are more literal in their representation, others include either repeated fragments based on semi-improvised motifs, while others feature entire sections of improvisation. Various techniques inherent in The Necks' music have proved a source of inspiration for the creative project. The use of repetition and minimalism, tremolos, glissandi, short motifs, blues-based riffs, extremes of register of the piano and the use of the sustain pedal are examples of this. There is some use of free improvisation and percussive use of plucked notes and chords using a plectrum on the inside of the piano. There is some use of pre-recorded multi-tracked sound effects (water, traffic noise, cars, and environmental sounds), as is evident in some of the Necks' work. These are used as reinforcement and to add colour and vibrancy to the overall sound. Borrowing from world music, Tibetan finger cymbals and chimes are also used to provide contrast and ambience.

In considering the research argument in terms of my own work, I draw comparisons with some of The Necks' characteristics, and specifically make reference to one of Chris Abrahams' solo piano CDs titled *Glow* (2001), discussing both philosophical and aesthetic choices in terms of the creative journey undertaken.

I conclude that the body of work produced by the Australian free improvising group The Necks may be usefully understood as an acoustic experiment. Historically The Necks was set up using a private mode of playing, the initial experiment with improvisation continuing to evolve over their 25 years together into a long-standing collaborative project. The individual musical experiences of The Necks' members contribute to the hybrid nature of their work, as do a diverse set of musical styles and world music. I chart the trajectory of the acoustic experiment through a detailed analysis of their body of work and draw on significant readings, both on a global and local scale, in order to prove this.