

DOMI NIDES ON THE UP

Our Aus-resident correspondent **Jane Cornwell** meets some of the leading lights of the vibrant Australian jazz scene, from AAO's Paul Grabowsky and Peter Knight to composer-saxophonist Jeremy Rose

Questing, resourceful, unique: if any entity embodies the relationship between the improvising musician and the idea of Australia, it is the Australian Art Orchestra (AAO). For really, what is the vast, challenging Australian continent but an improvisation? A land whose apparent un-inhabitability underscores the age-old ingenuity of its traditional owners; and whose conditions demand creative solutions to problems, the ability to make decisions on the fly.

"The notion of the improvising musician is something particularly suited to the Australian way of thinking," says Paul Grabowsky, the polymathic composer, bandleader and pianist who founded Australian Art Orchestra in 1994 after returning from a stint in Europe (impressed by the boundary-pushing brilliance of Mathias Rüeegg's Vienna Art Orchestra), writing a suite for music for a large ensemble and needing a like-minded cast to play it.

From what would become the seminal 1995 album *Ring the Bell Backwards*, a meditation on memory and history via the reimagining of European wartime songs ("I doubt anything of its kind has been released since, and little before it, either," wrote UK critic John Gill), this orchestra has amassed a multifaceted repertoire involving some of the most exciting collaborations undertaken in Australia. Such projects have included Danish trumpeter Palle Mikkelborg and the late American soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy, and alliances with musicians from India, Indonesia and remote Arnhem Land in northernmost Australia.

"Paul's vision recognised that we live in a place of abundance and as 'jazz' musicians and artists we need to respond to what is around us rather than look primarily to America and Europe for inspiration," states Peter Knight, composer, trumpeter, sound artist, literature graduate and since 2013, the AAO's artistic director, on the AAO website. "That vision is more relevant than ever."

Today, sitting in his studio in Seddon, in West Melbourne, dressed in a Necks T-shirt and surrounded by instruments including gongs and bamboo percussion – features of *1988*, a forthcoming live show co-composed with Sydney-based multi-instrumentalist Dung Nguyen that fuses contemporary jazz and Vietnamese folk music – Knight emphasises the AAO remit with a reference to American experimental music scholar, George E Lewis.

Photo: Sarah Walker

Main photo:
AAO artistic
director Peter
Knight, pictured
earlier this year.
Right: The AAO
in action, with
Grabowsky on
the left and
Knight on
the right