

"Lewis says that the defining feature of jazz is not idiom and style, but the fact that it is improvised music that reflects a cultural context and story," says Knight.

"Increasingly, jazz in Australia is connecting with Asian Pacific cultures" – he cites projects by drummer Simon Barker, trumpeter Scott Tinkler and current AAO members, pianist Erik Griswold and percussionist Vanessa Tomlinson – "as well as with First Nations music, which has informed AAO for many years."

Grabowsky's commitment to reconciliation was evident in such early AAO projects as 2004's *Ruby's Story*, a cross-genre telling (with Ruby Hunter and Archie Roach) of experiences of the Stolen Generation. Last March at Hamer Hall, alongside the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (Grabowsky is 2021 MSO Composer-in-Residence), Yolgnu songmen and longtime AAO collaborators Daniel and David Wilfred; and soloists from the AAO on double bass, violin, bass clarinet, trumpet and electronics, he gave us *WATA*, a conversation built on the 'manikay' ceremonial song cycles of north-eastern Arnhem Land.

"The Wilfrids sing in language, in song cycles that are the oldest continually practiced music tradition in the world," says Knight. "David and Daniel have been working with Paul and the AAO for 15 years, and it's always been through improvisation that we connect. Improvising is integral to most non-Western music cultures, and for jazz musicians this means a powerful set of possibilities."

Indeed, from the freestyling of late alto sax hero Bernie McGann – whose raspy, rich tone drew inspiration from the harshness and beauty of the Australian bush – to the off-the-cuff flair of, say, bassist Linda May Han Oh (she of the Pat Metheny quartet) or Czech-descended pianist/scholar/AAO member Andrea Keller, jazz practitioners in Australia continue to be informed by place, and by the multicultural, pluralistic society they find themselves in.

The irreverence intrinsic to the Australian character is channelled, too – deftly captured, for example, on *Iron in the Blood*, a 2016 exploration of Australia's colonial past by composer/saxophonist Jeremy Rose. Written in response to Robert Hughes's 1986 tome *The Fatal Shore* (a book that helped inspire Wynton Marsalis to pen *Blood on the Fields*) and compared by critics to Max Roach's *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*, Rose's *Iron in the Blood* was informed as much by Aussie larrikinism as by anti-colonial sentiment and a sense of space and timelessness.

"Our ideas about strong connections to land are borrowed from Australia's indigenous population," says Rose, whose group The Vampires won global acclaim for a 2017 album with West African guitarist Lionel Loueke, and whose Earshift Music label has fostered a community of musicians throughout Australasia intent on rewriting definitions of jazz.

"One way of perceiving the music of The Necks," he adds, "is to imagine driving across an endless Australian landscape with its slowly unfolding nature."

In the late 1980s Grabowsky was in a jazz ensemble (the award-winning Wizards of Oz) that featured The Necks' bassist Lloyd Swanton and drummer Tony Buck. Projects that allowed him to be simply 'the piano player' are partly why he stepped down (in 2000) as artistic director of the AAO, albeit not before

controversially reforming the ensemble and its 19-strong line-up to allow for different group projects: "It was the right way to go to sustain our financial existence, and it started our connection with First Nations Music," says Grabowsky, whose current project, the trio Torriol, features Mirko Guerrini on saxes and former AAO member Niko Schäuble on drums.

And so back to Peter Knight, under whose aegis the AAO has flourished in a plethora of configurations as it continuously chips away at the barriers between disciplines and cultures, navigates the path between improvised and notated forms, arriving at

music that sounds like something new. Forthcoming recordings include *Closed Beginnings* [see review, p34], a Covid-engendered collaboration with performance poet Tarira Mavondo and trumpeter/sound artist Reuben Lewis that sees trumpet lines delayed and warped by a Revox B77 tape machine.

Hand To Earth is an album Knight developed with Daniel Wilfred and Korean singer Sunni Kim from an AAO residency in Tasmania, with vocal approaches – and songs of stars, fire and cooling rain – folded into Eno-like atmospherics.

Then there's *Crossed & Recrossed* – two large-scale works composed by Knight in response to the mappings of imagined places by Italo Calvino and Australian author Gerald Murnane in their books *Invisible Cities* (more specifically, the excerpt 'Diomira'), which we'll be reviewing

next month; and *The Plains*. It's a series of musical mirages – an eco-soundscape – that shimmer at the intersection of jazz and minimalism, literature and music, deconstructing the tropes of minimalism in the process.

"I often use poetry and literature as a sensory starting point for musical composition, to give a feeling of an emotional space," says Knight of *Crossed & Recrossed*, whose line-up includes Andrea Keller and Simon Barker, and whose live renditions wowed crowds at the 2016 Metropolis New Music Festival in Melbourne (*Diomira*) and the Jazztopad Festival in Wrocław, Poland in 2018 (*The Plains*). *Jazzwise's* Martin Longley wrote at the time: "Words were intoned, usually as text-poems ... Fanfare horns and boom drums made them sound like a thicker Necks, or a Liberation Music Orchestra with Reichian pulses ... climaxing with drum solo thunder, garrulous trombone interjections and a megaphone vocal crackle."

"I always found Murnane's depiction of space and its relationship with the self very interesting," Knight continues. "And Diomira is a place where people live in their memories, so for me this piece is about the relationship between memory and the present; it ends with a field recording of my son playing with a little electronic toy on a balcony. You can hear the sounds of the night. There's something about that recording that evoked the feeling I had when reading *Invisible Cities*. These creative processes wind and meander their way around; both of those pieces are also about the actual process of making music."

"TS Eliot said that poetry communicates before it's understood, and that's where I'm trying to get to with music. 'Cause you know, you can put together free notes in a particular order or rhythm and the sensation that arises is really nothing to do with them."

He pauses. "That's the mystery."



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