

Playing, Together.

Sitting in Brussels listening to a CD of the London Improvising Orchestra's *Freedom Of The City* while on a European tour in 2002, Clayton Thomas and Jim Denley got to talking about how amazing it would be to see a large scale improvising ensemble in Sydney. At the time the inaugural *Now now* festival had just been held earlier that same year and, as it seemed to them both, there was a healthy scene of emerging improvising players in Sydney which could be involved in such a project. Shortly afterwards Clayton Thomas returned to Sydney and within months the Splinter Orchestra was born.

Initially referred to as the Space 3 Orchestra, in honour of the Cleveland St institution which so often housed their performances, the group was comprised of a mix of jazz players and established local experimentalists such as Martin Ng, Michael Sheridan, Robbie Avenaim, Chris Abrahams and Amanda Stewart, as well as younger players, including most obviously Clayton Thomas himself, Clare Cooper, Adam Sussman, Mike Majkowski and many more. By the time of their performance at the second annual *Now now* festival the following January, the group had already developed a sophisticated improvisation language of it's own, reaching beyond free jazz traditions to develop it's own aesthetic based around the use of loose compositional tools to guide improvisation.

Apart from regular performances, the Orchestra began to function as an improviser's workshop of sorts, welcoming new players and providing a forum for members to test ideas and hone their skills. Performing commonly with anything from 20 to 30 players involved, the group would also play with visiting musicians and by the time of the *Now now* festival in 2004 had swelled to over 50 players, including international guests such as Cor Fuhler, Jeff Henderson and Thomas Lehn. Over this period the group also began to develop an increasingly conceptual attitude towards its work, attempting to play a music which moved as one, comprised of the individual players as a tree is of it's splinters, without ever emphasizing one over any other though no less reliant on them all.

Mirroring the development of the *Now now* festival and the *If You Like Improvised Music, We Like You* series of performances, the group began to look outside itself to new and alternate approaches and, consequently, new players. It was at this point that I met Clayton Thomas and, shortly thereafter, came to become involved in the Splinter Orchestra. Although I had been aware of the Orchestra and more broadly the *Now now* concerts and players for several years, I was involved myself with another strand of experimental and improvisational music culture in Sydney, that of electronic music and audiovisual performance. At the time, the two cultures still existed largely distinct from one another in the city, with only occasional crossover between the *Now now* events and the other regular experimental and electronic music evenings and festivals with which I had been involved, such as *1/4 Inch*, *Disorientation*, *Impermanent Audio*, *Liquid Architecture*, *Electrofringe* and *What Is Music?*

It was at *Electrofringe 2004* that I would eventually meet Clayton Thomas, when at one of the performances he came up to me, introduced himself and quite immediately asked me, 'Would you like to join my band?' Upon further explanation of this 'band', the

Splinter Orchestra, I confirmed my interest and only a few weeks later found myself in a lounge room overlooking King St, Newtown preparing for my first rehearsal with the Orchestra, along with several other new recruits from the electronic part of the spectrum, including Emily Morandini, Monica Brooks, Luke Callaghan and Shannon O'Neill, among others.

In the time since the Splinter Orchestra has continued to play and develop, with new players regularly joining in, either briefly or permanently, and others leaving. Playing regularly at *If You Like Improvised Music We Like You*, as well in its expanded 'International Edition' with visiting artists at the *Now now* festival each year, and elsewhere, the group honed its sound and approach. Given the group's ethos of improvisation and live performance it is perhaps unsurprising that the idea of recording together in a serious way, though occasional recording sessions to investigate various ideas were not uncommon, had never really come up. However, eventually that was to change.

In early 2006 the ABC began production of a new TV series, *Set*, which was to feature live performances from Australian experimental musicians. The show's producer Brendan Walls, known for his work producing *The Movie Show* as well as his own work as a musician in the Australian scene, invited the Splinter Orchestra to take part, and so it was that in April of that year the group headed into the ABC studios for the taping for *Set*.

Performing in the legendary Studio 22 at the ABC studios on Harris St, Ultimo the group faced conditions unlike anything we had previously known with plenty of space for all the players and everyone recorded with either their own close mic or line into the mixing desk. After extended sound checks, lightning setups and test camera runs, it finally came time to record. Roughly half an hour later and it was done. No one really knew how it went, but despite the concerns of the ABC engineers and handlers the group was convinced that was it, one take. It was only weeks later when we got hold of a copy of the finished recording and listened to it together that we heard what we'd done. We heard it like we had never heard it before, with every minute detail there and all players heard alongside each other without the distraction of extraneous noises or interference. We finally heard what the Splinter Orchestra really sounded like.

It was after hearing the Studio 22 recording that I think we all knew the band should record and eight months later, after endless rehearsals and a failed three night open recording session in the old Silos in Newtown, we decided to head into 301 studios in Alexandria to record this record, a record of the work of all those involved over the last five years.

In the month preceding the record date we had held extensive rehearsals, attempting to hone our skills improvising, and more importantly listening, together but also attempting to negotiate how we would approach the recording session. Eventually we decided that the obvious approach was also the best and we would focus on free playing but in order to do so would counter balance such playing with some simple rule based pieces that would hopefully concentrate our playing. Previously pieces devised by Adam Sussman had been particularly important to the group's development in its earliest stages and the 'Nemesis' piece, which we presented at Liquid Architecture 7, had been crucial in honing our understanding of the impact of any choice to play on the resulting music, and so a return to such methods seemed a logical approach to the enormity of the task of preparing the group to record. In particular we worked extensively with a series of *Tutti* pieces introduced to the group by trombonist Gerard Crewson, in which the group was divided into three sections, each signalled when to start playing and stop playing by one member of the group and otherwise allowed to play as long as each played continuously and each player worked with only one sound.

Walking into the orchestral recording space at Studio 301 in December 2006 it was clear none of us knew what to expect. After an inordinate amount of time spent setting up and sound checking everyone we finally gathered to play. As planned we recorded a mix of free improvisations and *Tutti* pieces for several hours, again completely unsure of what it was we would end up with but aware that the music created was immensely varied and unlike any other the Splinter Orchestra had played previously. Particularly notable was the dynamic nature of pieces as well as their density and immensely complex textural development, inspired largely by the influence of the *Tutti* pieces.

Initially the Splinter Orchestra was known as an intensely focused and disciplined group, infamous for quiet, spacious live performances that while always thought provoking were as commonly frustrating as engaging. At the Studio 301 session, however, and in the numerous sessions since spent listening to, mixing and mastering the recordings it is clear that the Splinter Orchestra has developed into a group capable of much more complex and varied performances, combining the disparate voices of its players into one unique sound. Despite all the changes in personnel and ideas throughout the years, at its core the Splinter Orchestra remains focused on an approach to large ensemble playing based in improvising and that idea of a music that moves as one body of sound. It is this that we hope you hear in this record. Oh and us just playing, together.

Ben Byrne