

## INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS ABRAHAMS

by Innerversitysound\*

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*This interview took place on May 22, 2018. It can be read on the website of Cyclic Defrost at this link <https://www.cyclicdefrost.com/2018/05/chris-abrahams-for-the-peggy-albummusic-needs-a-social-context-for-it-thrive-interview-by-innerversitysound/>*

**C**hris Abrahams, is a pianist based in Sydney. He has performed from the late 1970s in *The Benders*, *The Laughing Clowns* and *The Necks*. Among the artists with whom he has had collaborations are Clare Cooper, Melanie Oxley, Clayton Thomas, Mike Cooper, Sabine Vogel, Allesando Bosetti, Lucio Capece, Magda Mayas, Burkhard Beins and Jon Rose. He has also worked as a studio musician for artists such as *The Church*, *The Whitlams*, *Midnight Oil*, *Wendy Matthews*, *Skunkhour* and *Silverchair*. Chris Abrahams has recorded nine solo albums and 13 collaborations. His work in *The Necks* has produced 22 albums.



*Chris Abrahams: he has recorded nine solo albums and 13 collaborations ...*

**Innerversity Sound:** You have been a friend of Jon Rose's for a long time. How did you get roped into this particular experiment?

**Chris Abrahams:** Over the years we've played together quite a lot in various things, not necessarily in formalised concerts, although we have done a little bit of that. But we have known each other from the early eighties. Jon asked if I would like to play a duo concert at the Peggy Glanville Hicks house with him and we decided that maybe we should record it and also record the next day. I first saw Jon play at a place called the Sculpture Centre, which was down near Circular Quay in the days when there

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*The author of this piece is identified on the internet as Innerversitysound, with this photograph.*



*Jon Rose (left) and Chris Abrahams: they have known each other from the early eighties...*

were quite a number of places to play in the CBD in Sydney. That was in the late seventies. He used to put on concerts there with Rick Rue. At the time Rick was playing saxophone, it was before he went into the tape, four track stuff that he got into in the eighties. And I think Louis Burdett may have been involved in those. I was also at the time aware of the Free Kata thing with Jon, Louis, Eddie Bronson and Serge Ermoll.



*Free Kata at The Basement in the 70s, L-R, Serge Ermoll (piano), Jon Rose (violin), Eddie Bronson (tenor sax)... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ DOWN UNDER*

At that time I didn't really know Jon personally but he had an affiliation with the record company that released albums by the group I was in – a modern jazz group called The Benders. I recall he released an album with Martin Wesley-Smith called *Tango* – in the early eighties – and Martin was playing a Fairlight sampler. This was all before he moved to Berlin in the mid-eighties. He continued to play in Australia after that. He came back to make radio features for the ABC and also to put on various bigger events – a big tour by the Relative Band, and a tour with Eugene Chadbourne and David Moss. He also put on a number of more theatrical, bigger format pieces – the game-based performance pieces of *It's Not Cricket* and *Perks*. I took part in his *Violin Music in the Age of Shopping* project. We've kept up a relationship musically and socially over many years. So the short answer to the question is that it seems quite natural that we would have released an album, a duo album, together at some point.

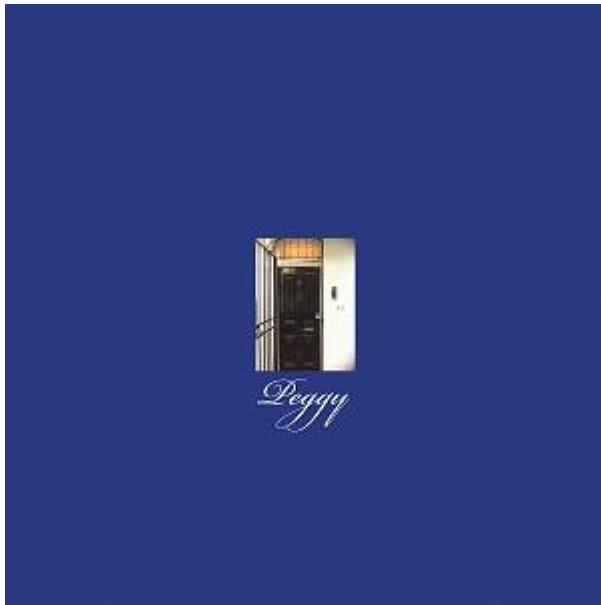


*The Benders in 1984, L-R, Andrew Gander (drums), Jason Morphett (tenor sax), Lloyd Swanton (double bass), Chris Abrahams (piano)...*

**Innerversitysound:** Jon had a long discussion about the distinction between the violin and the piano and what he sees as the limitations of the piano. What is your take on the piano as a limiting device in Western culture rather than an expansive device?

**Chris Abrahams:** Some people see the quantised tuning of a piano as being limiting – the tempered tuning scale and the way the piano is looked at as a non-microtonal instrument in its intended position in western classical music. But I think you can achieve micro tonality even in a perfectly set up conventional A440, tempered tuned piano. I mean you hear micro tonality in the envelope of the decaying note, as the string struggles towards stasis. The pitch wavers in a glissando like way and that has always been something that I have been drawn to with piano, release decay of the envelope after the initial attack. I also think timbrally the piano is capable of achieving quite a wide variety of textures or colours through methods of over-hammering which tends to distort the string and cut out quite a lot of the lower frequencies so that it has kind of hammered dulcimer effect can be achieved, for instance. You can also go the route of the prepared piano.

**Innerversitysound:** You did a bit of that in the *Peggy* Album?



**Chris Abrahams:** Well no, not prepared piano, I don't really do prepared piano.

**Innerversitysound:** Jon was saying that you played the strings in one track.

**Chris Abrahams:** Yes, well I see that as a sort of outside technique. This is something I tend to do more in an improvised music setting. In *The Necks*, I tend not to do that. I work more with the way the piano has developed, evolved over the centuries. I like to have a dialogue with its technology – on its own terms – rather than completely subvert its build and get timbral complexity through hacking it so to speak. I have a physical and emotional relationship with the pressing of the keys and the subsequent throwing of the hammers at the string. This has come about possibly due to not having had my own grand piano. And upright pianos are not that great to prepare. I like to use an upright piano in an improvised music setting, I do dampen the string and I pluck the string with a plectrum. Or I might get sounds out of the various coils of the bass strings by scratching them. But I don't actually put bolts or paper or screws on the strings, or bow them or use Ebows. I might in the future. I mean I love prepared piano, I am not saying that it is bogus. There is some great music like Reinhold Friedl, or Magda Mayas, or Sylvie Courvoisier or Cor Fuhler, those people I think do some incredible things on prepared piano.

**Innerversitysound:** Are you a full-time working musician, rather than a part-time academic, or have other bows that you play.

**Chris Abrahams:** In the past I have done other things but at this point basically music is my main source of income. I've been fortunate enough, in the last ten years, to get soundtrack work and have *The Necks* touring a lot.

**Innerversitysound:** I thought the joke about *Peggy* being both about name of the house and about the tuning aspects of both violinist and pianists having to work with pegs to change the shape of the sound. The humour aspect of it and the behavioural aspect of it about how it shapes your lives.

**Chris Abrahams:** Jon has always incorporated, I think anyway, a considerable amount of humour in what he does. Whether in the radio programs he's made or on stage at concerts. I remember seeing him playing with Eugene Chadbourne which would have been in the late eighties. It was hilarious. I think Jon is a naturally very funny person. Works like *Violin Music in the Age of Shopping* or *Not Quite Cricket*, have large humorous components. That idea of the play on words with the title Peggy Glanville Hicks, I think it is very much in keeping with Jon's humorous aesthetic. Personally, I find humour very difficult to put into my music. I've tended not to do that, I don't know whether it's through fear or through not being particularly funny. So I think we kind of differ on that. I really appreciate Jon's sense of humour but as an artist I find it quite difficult to put it into the aesthetics of my music. Verbally I've attempted to be humorous in the past. How successful that has been I don't know. Not very probably.



*Eugene Chadbourne: Jon Roses's playing with him in the late eighties was hilarious...PHOTO COURTESY WIKIPEDIA*

**Innerversitysound:** There is an aspect of Dada that seems to come through his work, that when it approaches very political topics, it is knife edge about whether it falls into cynical farce or even dark humour that can be misinterpreted. But when it's in a space where it is not so politically charged, it just shows up our foibles. It doesn't seem to me that listening to your work that the Dadaist post Second World War reassessment of the sanity of Western culture doesn't seem to come through how you approach music or sound.

**Chris Abrahams:** No I think that's fair enough. I tend not to see my work as making discursive comments. I don't try to overtly state criticisms of an overarching ideology. I don't really want to be clever with music and also I'm not that interested in leading the consumer in his or her interpretation of the music I make. I myself don't understand it. That's not to say it's not political, but I don't make it with that front and foremost. If it had a verbal dimension to it, that could be a different thing.



*Abrahams: I don't really want to be clever with music and also I'm not that interested in leading the consumer in his or her interpretation of the music I make. I myself don't understand it... PHOTO COURTESY LOUDMOUTH*

**Innerversitysound:** What would you say is your driving concern with music as a project in life?

**Chris Abrahams:** I think that is a very complex question and I would probably give you a different answer every time I tried to answer it. I see music as an emotional, as an expressive, thing. I don't really see myself as an experimental musician with a methodology that produces outcomes unrelated to an emotional utterance.

**Innerversitysound:** And is it your emotions or the audience's emotions? Are you trying to elicit responses or are you trying to demonstrate your emotional state or your psychological state through it?

**Chris Abrahams:** The music I make is primarily for me. That's not to say that the presence of an audience isn't important. I think music is a communal endeavour and it's important to me that music have relevance to other people. But I guess I am trying to make things that I like to listen to and I will use anything to do that whether it be sampling, FM synthesis, digital sound processing, atonal or tonal piano playing, or using micro tonality. I think my Room40 albums are evidence of this. Playing music with Jon is always for me a very physical thing. It utilises conventional instrumental technique and contains attempts at a kind of virtuosity. It's very "play full".



*Abrahams' Room40 album "Thrown": I guess I am trying to make things that I like to listen to and I will use anything to do that... I think my Room40 albums are evidence of this...*

**Innerversitysound:** You did an organ tour a while back in the UK. Are you still exploring organ more?

**Chris Abrahams:** I haven't been doing that much organ playing of late. About eighteen months ago I played a solo at the Sydney Festival, opening for Ellen Fullman and that was the last thing I've done. I also have a project with the Potsdam-based flute player, Sabine Vogel called *Kopfuberwelle* (head over wave). We released an album about three years ago and hopefully we are going to do some more playing and recording towards the end of this year. I approach the organ more or less like I would a synthesiser. I have never had lessons and I have never tried to play any of



*The Potsdam-based flute player Sabine Vogel: Abrahams has a project with her called Kopfuberwelle (head over wave)...*

the music in the standard repertoire of the organ, so I feel removed from the established culture. I find the quantity of the sound producing components to the instrument gives it a sonic quality that sets it apart from other instruments. It produces sounds that are huge due to the coalescence of hundreds of “speakers” as opposed to those made huge through stereo amplification. Some of the instruments have a somewhat daunting colossal quality – Leeds Town Hall organ is like this huge sea monster. I believe the current instrument actually “swallowed” the original organ. I tend to prefer a smaller organ; one that’s a not midi-controlled. I like to be able to modulate the pitch with air pressure to create micro tonal, vocal sounding utterances. I used this a lot on my Room40 album *Thrown*.

I had a great time playing the organ at the Gedächtniskirche in Berlin. I was allowed uninterrupted access to the instrument from 6pm till 5am for several nights leading up to the concert – which was with The Necks at the Berlin Jazz Festival. Although it’s a four-deck, large organ, it is also subtle; it fills the room effortlessly. Each organ is different and I like to be able to have a few rehearsals before I play a concert. This makes things a bit tricky trying to put together a tour.

**Innerversitysound:** So when you were talking about the Room40 album, where you incorporate synthesis and other aspects beyond your improvised live albums, could you tell me more about your studio base? What are the different aspects that you bring into it that you don’t bring into your live improvisation?

**Chris Abrahams:** These are very highly constructed pieces that I make. I’ve tended to make them in three stages. The first one would be a kind of gathering period where I do a lot of recording – solo piano, percussion, field recording, synthesiser programming and playing, guitar. For instance, I’ll explore a particular synthesiser



for a week – playing and recording it, and store the files for later. This stage will last for several months, well it goes on indefinitely really – until I feel that I have got enough material to work with – and then I move into the second stage where I start listening back to what I've got – finding things that are interesting having not heard them since I recorded them. Hopefully I have a more objective opinion than the one I would have had at the point of performing. And then I slowly construct and put together pieces, combining bits of recordings from, often, disparate sessions. At this point I will probably decide on the form of the album; whether there'll be one or two or four pieces. Then when I've got things in a very rough sort of state, I move in to the third stage which is one of refining the material; editing and mixing. I've done four albums with Room40 now and hopefully I will have another one done by the end of the year. I've refined and developed my work flow over the trajectory of the four albums. I hardly ever write music for other people to perform – writing for an orchestra for instance. This is sort of the closest I get to making instrumental music that's not totally to do with improvisation as such. The Room40 albums have been more time-consuming to make than anything else I do.



*Tony Buck: Abrahams played with him when still in high school in 1977... PHOTO CREDIT BARKA FABIANOVA*

**Innerversitysound:** Did you go to all the live performances at the Peggy Glanville-Hicks House?

**Chris Abrahams:** I went to a few of them. I was away for a bunch of them, but when I was in Sydney I think I went to all of them.

**Innerversitysound:** Jon was talking about how community building and experience building was a big part of how he sees the job of making music now. And I remember early in the 80's when The Necks were playing in Melbourne at the Athenaeum, groups of my friends would go off in waves to see you. Do you see this community building or social aspect of music being a primary function or is it just something that goes with music?

**Chris Abrahams:** I think it is very important. I think The Necks, we were very much the product of a community in the eighties in Sydney. We formed the group in 1986 and each of us had played in very many different groups beforehand - from 1979 to 1986. I played with Tony Buck when I was still in high school in 1977. I met Lloyd in 1979. In the community were a lot of people in the same generation and we all played music with each other. There was the Keys Music Association that I was part of and that put on concerts and festivals. I think that was very much what The Necks came out of. It provided a social context.



*Abrahams (right) met Lloyd Swanton (left) in 1979. Here they are in Aarhus, Denmark in 2015, performing with The Necks... COURTESY WIKIPEDIA CREDIT HREINN GUDLAUGSSON*

I think it is incredibly important for people to work with other people. I mean isolation is very difficult. With the decimation of the live music scene in Sydney it's very difficult. There aren't as many opportunities to play and socialise. A lot of people have moved to Berlin where there's a thriving improvised music scene and a strong feeling of community. I think that musicians at some point have to confront that. Because you can leave a community, a few people I notice have left Sydney to go and live in Berlin. I do think music needs a social context for it to thrive. I also see that music creates a social context for it to thrive in. I also believe music making is necessary and will find a way of being made and performed even in the most unfavourable conditions.

**Innerversitysound:** Do you see another album with Jon down the path a bit?

**Chris Abrahams:** I would like to. Maybe a few years. There is a trio record I made with Jon. I don't know if you know it. It is called *Artery* which was with Clayton Thomas. So this is not actually the first release we've had together. It came out in 2005, 2006, sometime around there.



**Innerversitysound:** An offshoot of the NOWnow festival?

**Chris Abrahams:** Yes I guess you would have to say that. It was before Clayton moved to Berlin. That's about the time I met Clayton and Clare Cooper. It's great that the NOWnow is still going and is still a functioning brand. An amazing achievement.

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