

JON ROSE: MUSIC THROUGH THE TIME BARRIER

by John Clare

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Even those who detest the avant-garde music of Jon Rose must, however grudgingly, admire his enterprise. Since he arrived here from England in 1977, he has staged many concerts and has formed a record company, Fringe Benefit, on which he has so far released no less than ten recordings of improvised music.

As I can be heard, very briefly, on one of these recordings (*Towards A Relative Music*) it might be wise to define my relationship with Jon Rose, so that readers can decide what axes, if any, I might be grinding. Apart from that consideration, Rose's ideas might be best presented by me from the point at which I dropped by the wayside.



Jon Rose, pictured in 1980: one must, however grudgingly, admire his enterprise...

I first worked with Jon when he joined Serge Ermoll's Free Kata, a band dedicated to free jazz improvisation. I improvised words, sounds, and sometimes more conventionally musical vocal lines. Jon played violin, which he sometimes augmented with sung notes and vocal sounds.



John Clare, pictured in 1977: Rose asked him to drop the use of words in a linear, storytelling or image-creating mode... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ DOWN UNDER

When Free Kata broke up, Jon formed a number of other improvisation groups, which included such people as bassist Dave Ellis, percussionist Peter Kelly, saxophonists Tony Hobbs and Rik Rue, and sometimes myself. I enjoyed these performances, but after a time Jon asked me to drop one aspect of what I had been doing and develop the other — or leave. Very politely of course.

The aspect he wanted me to concentrate on was the singing, production of a range of vocal sounds, use of words in a cryptic manner for their sound and free associative properties. The aspect he asked me to drop was the use of words in a linear, storytelling or image-creating mode. There was still a lot I wanted to do in the latter idiom, but I could see it was interfering with Jon's concept, so I dropped out.

Jon described his music to me at the time as 'fast music', music of rapid change, which did not develop in a linear mode. I suspect my position is similar to that of many readers. I enjoy modern and avant-garde music, but not all the time. I crave certain satisfactions which I can only get from traditional music. Jon Rose, on the other hand, is very consciously trying to create a music which is wholly of our time — the post Einstein age.

The title *Towards A Relative Music* was not chosen merely to sound high falutin'. At 28, Jon Rose looks a wisp of a lad still. He is bespectacled, has delicate features, tousled brown hair and a thin moustache. As you get to know him he begins to look less the pale aesthete and more the shrewd and stubborn fox.



Rose received formal training on the violin from the age of nine until he was 12. He then gave it up, but began playing again at about 19. He has taught himself composition, and has had a piece for classical ensemble published by United Music Publishers in England. He also studied the sitar for two years, and for the first year he was in Australia he studied modes and arranging at the Conservatorium of NSW, where he now teaches. Before coming to Australia, Rose had played in improvisation groups, in rock groups, and in a West Indian band. He had been a recording engineer at the Royal Academy of Music, and he had done session arranging and playing, sometimes on commercial singles.

After Free Kata, Rose gathered people about him who could "Do concerts, promote them, get the music known. Things that musicians usually expect other people to do for them." They began a series of concerts at the Sculpture Centre in Sydney's Rocks area, which continues at the rate of about one a month. Soon he began recording these performances (as well as one at the Central St Gallery) and improvisations which he performed at his home on Dangar Island in the Hawkesbury River, or with other musicians in hired studios. Then he formed Fringe Benefit and began releasing them.

"There are a number of small independent record companies devoted to contemporary music in England and Europe," he says. "We maintain close links with them. I see ours as an international music, though it has roots in American jazz.

"The forming of the record company is not so important as everybody just getting together and doing it. We are making in each case a record of an event rather than a recording for an industry.



Rose: he is not operating in a big way, but he has created an enviable situation, whereby the scale of the venture fits the market almost exactly... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

"We do all the distribution ourselves, in person or by post. We are able to make use of the facilities of the Conservatorium Electronic Music Department for mixing, and we have the records pressed at EMI.

"My wife Chris and I are both trained in graphic arts, so we do all the cover designs and organise the printing ourselves. It costs us about \$350 to put money back on the first album (*Solo Violin Improvisations*)."

Jon Rose is not operating in a big way, but he has created an enviable situation, whereby the scale of the venture fits the market almost exactly. He has an audience, and he is practically self-sufficient. Concerts at the Sculpture Centre are well attended. Again, the small space is almost always exactly filled. And the response is usually enthusiastic. Nor do the same faces turn up all the time.

Not surprisingly, many people find involvement comes much more easily at a live performance. The involvement of the musicians is obvious, and their ways of achieving new sonorities often border on the surreal. For instance, I have seen Jon Rose playing with a huge saucepan over his head, with which he creates a resonating chamber for his voice and violin. Louis Burdett has constructed a tuned framework which completely overarches his drum kit. Bassist Dave Ellis — who is also a classical

orchestral player — may stick mallets through the strings and saw away on them, creating a weird thrumming buzz.

The most potentially controversial of the Fringe Benefit records is called simply *No 24*. On this, Rose, Ellis, Ermoll, Burdett, Kelly and Rue played a number of solo improvisations with only a predetermined duration and the knowledge that the other musicians would improvise for the same durations, out of earshot, and that the results would be overdubbed to make a series of 'collective' improvisations! Each, in other words, had to improvise alone, while imagining that the others were improvising with him.



No 24: the most potentially controversial of the Fringe Benefit records...

There are many listeners, I am sure, who would not be able to tell the difference between these and genuine 'collective' improvisations. I put it to Jon Rose that this could constitute a devastating criticism of his music.

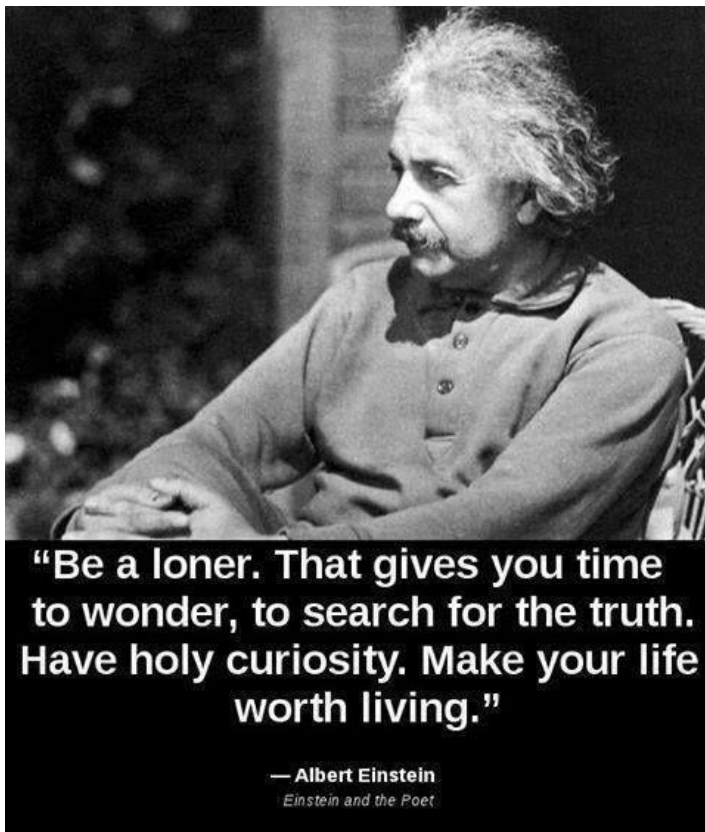
"Everyone has a fixed idea of what music is, and of what takes place," said Rose. "We are in the space age. On this album I had the idea of someone hovering a hundred miles over the earth, able to tune into everything that was going on, simultaneously. Everybody reacts and reflects each other. There are three distinct time areas which don't relate to each other, except that they ended up on the same record.

"However, everybody was asked to play in such an open manner that it could be related to anything. Asymmetrically, in other words. Distinct but very open musical ideas which could be changed or developed in other directions.

"On another level, it was a kind of a send-up of the commercial sessions I've played on, where you may not even meet the guitar player, or any number of other people in the band, but it is all contrived to come out 'together'. It is an anti-version of a music industry product.

"You have heard me say that it is pointless to try and improvise in a twelve-tone form. That would be as mechanical as the sort of studio product I mentioned. But there are ways of improvising atonally, where you use tonal centres, but pass through them very quickly. You might have two notes in one key, and then two in another. There are sequences you can practise to lift yourself into that area where all that matters is the relationship between intervals. Sequences which go through all the keys fast and automatically open your ears up tonally.

"This is fast music. Change is the magic word. It is the natural expression of today. It is 60 years since Einstein made his discoveries, yet people are still playing as though we did not have that knowledge."

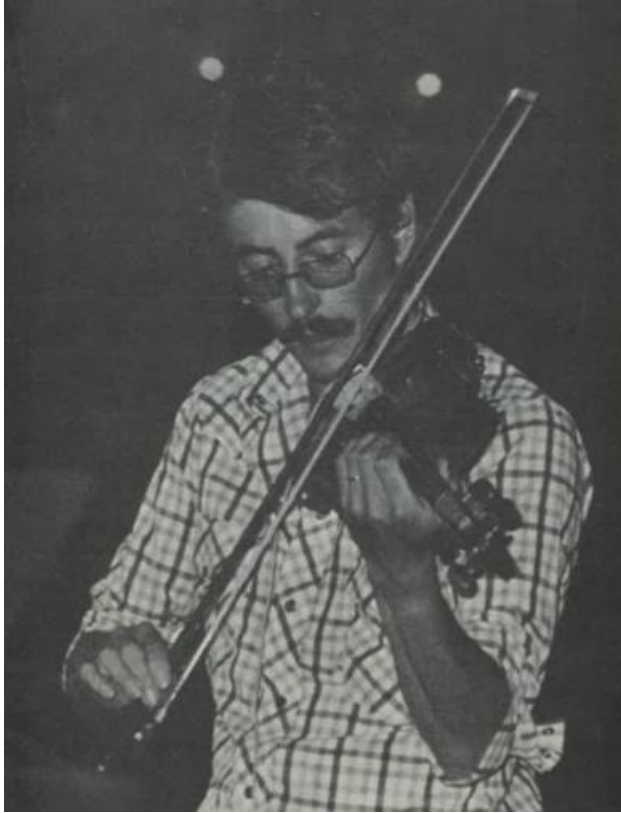


Einstein: it is 60 years since Einstein made his discoveries, yet people are still playing as though we did not have that knowledge...

Jon is referring specifically, I assume, to the verifiable phenomenon of time moving at different speeds as one goes out into space, and, it would appear, coming to a standstill as one approaches a 'black hole'. Also time changes at the speed of light. Black holes, however, are still, I believe, an hypothesis which could explain certain hitherto mysterious phenomena. The time changes which are likely to be experienced by most mortals amount to no more than billionths of a second. They are scarcely

experienced at all. However, we are now beginning to be able to conceive of these things, and that may amount to experience in itself.

"I think," says Rose, "that linear development —where you think ahead towards a climax or resolution — is a big con. It works on the assumption that time is fixed. It is an illusion."



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PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ DOWN UNDER

In a sense, all serious music, which does not rely on predictable singalong devices, has played with time, through rhythmic displacements, rubato, rapidly changing time signatures. Similarly, all serious music has teased at the edges of its own tonal areas. However, until recently, Western music, and indeed most music, has taken its liberties with one eye on an assumed pulse or tonality. How much we lose or gain by consciously excluding reference points can only be decided by the individual listener.

One could introduce many counter arguments. Freedom from pulse or tonality is in one sense an illusion. Time would appear to be moving uniformly at each level of altitude and speed, and that movement keep re-asserting itself. If, on the other hand, you accept time and tonality as illusions, and you strip them away, as Brecht stripped away the illusions of the theatre, that very process can quickly become a convention, as the exposed mechanisms of much modern theatre now constitute a convention.

Nevertheless, it had to be done. Jon Rose is by no means the first to do it — not even in Australia —but he looks like being the first to sustain the endeavour over a really significant period, so that we might eventually understand what it all amounts to.