

CODY'S 10 x 10. INTERVIEW 1, Helen Svoboda, jazz bassist/singer/composer

Interview with: **Helen Svoboda**
Interview by: **Chris Cody***



Pianist Chris Cody... PHOTO CREDIT PAUL FAURE-BRAC

This interview appeared in “Loudmouth”, the e-newsletter of the Music Trust, on August 2, 2021, and can be read there at this link <https://musictrust.com.au/loudmouth/codys-10x10-chris-cody-puts-10-questions-to-10-australian-musicians/>. It is number 1 in Chris Cody's series of 10 x 10 interviews, in which he puts ten questions to ten Australian musicians.

CODY'S 10×10 is a musician to musician interview series outside the usual format that is brief, relevant, informative and colourful. It gives a glimpse into well-known musicians from diverse fields and backgrounds by asking questions about their music making, experience and more.

**Chris Cody is a jazz pianist, composer and band leader. Based in Paris for 25 years, he performed across Europe with Chris Cody Coalition and musicians including Herb Geller and Rick Margitza, and released numerous albums of his own music on international labels. He has written for theatre, dance, and cinema. Since returning to Australia he has released several albums and composed recent larger works “Astrolabe” and “The Outsider”.*

Of Finnish-Australian heritage, Helen Svoboda is a fast-rising innovator in the Australian jazz world, a composer, bassist, singer, band-leader, conceiver and manager of projects, and nature enthusiast. Having recently returned from the Netherlands, she won the 2020 Freedman Jazz Fellowship and is 2021 Pathfinder Associate Artist with the Australian Art Orchestra. With her Freedman prize, she is creating the score for, and producing an animated film on the industrial degradation of vegetable production.



*Helen Svoboda... PHOTO CREDIT
VIVID VISUAL CO*

Chris Cody: What do you think of being a musician in Australia, and how does it compare to your experiences elsewhere?

Helen Svoboda: There is a certain stigma about being a musician in Australia and the geographical isolation that comes with it. We are a huge country, and our major cities are much more spread out than on the other continents (ie you can drive from Amsterdam to Cologne in four hours, but it takes 24 hours to drive from Brisbane to Melbourne). My experience living in central Europe was vastly different in this regard, as I felt like I was existing in the middle of a dense melting pot of different scenes across large musical cities including Amsterdam, Brussels, Cologne, Ghent

and Aachen. Pre-covid, it was incredibly easy to tour across three to four countries in a single weekend. This was really exciting to experience.

One of the biggest hurdles that Australian musicians face is the lack of governmental support. In countries such as Germany or Finland the arts are valued to a high level, and musicians and artists are fostered through easier access to generous grants, subsidies and residencies; there is a founding culture that revolves around art and performance. As an Australian artist, one has to possess a level of advocacy and forward momentum to push past the issues that we experience in the absence of these available subsidies. This within itself has the power to bring communities closer together to create independently, albeit with some difficulties in realising larger scale projects unless one is prepared to self-fund.

In Europe, I also found that each city I travelled to or lived in possessed a specific aesthetic in regard to the style of jazz and improvised music being performed – ie Cologne has a bustling experimental scene with normalised use of extended technique and a large focus on contemporary improvisation in the jazz scene. I can't speak for all of Australia, but in Melbourne I find that the city is popping with smaller micro-scenes, collectively encompassing influence from different continents, cultures and countries into a rich array of original projects and artistic offerings. As a newcomer in this city, I am constantly being introduced to new artists across a variety of mediums and backgrounds and I feel that this will be a never-ending discovery.

Most of all, I feel that similarly to my impression of Europe, the Australian arts scene is diverse, exciting, and most of all – resilient. We continue to be pummelled with lockdowns and funding cuts, but our arts community continues to produce incredible creative music.



Svoboda: In Europe, I found that each city I travelled to or lived in possessed a specific aesthetic in regard to the style of jazz and improvised music being performed... PHOTO CREDIT FRANK HIRSCHHAUSEN

What is the main thing that nourishes your music?

Exploration, surrender to intuition and spontaneous composition. I often get inspired at unexpected times of the day – quite often driving home from work when my brain feels like mush, or occasionally early during a morning run along the creek. Nature is also a major musical nourisher for me – it offers continual inspiration. In addition to this, other artists and mentors are vital to my musical nourishment. They give me inspiration, and through collaborating with others I am offered ways of approaching ideas with a fresh outlook. A sense of malleability allows me to adapt my music into different situations, and to add improvements or changes when needed.

List three things you would introduce to Australia to improve or enhance the music scene here.

1. More government funding and support. When I was in Germany, the amount of arts funding available was unheard of to me. Similarly, having grown up in Finland, I came from a country that revolves around the arts and offers free education in recognition of sustainable artistic careers.
2. More cross-over collaboration between musicians from different disciplines. Akin to ‘People Festival’ in Berlin, which brings together a list of incredible artists who have never worked together before, and are given the space, time and freedom to create something in the moment.
3. A deeper integration of experimental artistic practice into society to encourage and grow audiences and demand.



“When I was in Germany, the amount of arts funding available was unheard of to me...” PHOTO CREDIT VIVID VISUAL CO

What are you practising or working on at the moment?

I am currently deep down the rabbit hole of composition for my next project which I proposed for the Freedman Fellowship 2020 – a large scale collaboration with filmmaker Angus Kirby. *The Odd Bunch* is a six-piece work about mass food production, and I'm approaching the finishing stages of writing prior to our first recording in September. The current climate of repeated lockdowns brings with it a lot of uncertainty, so I am taking a different direction with this music and imagining lots of overdubs to be done after the bare bones are tracked for each piece. As part of this, I'm learning a variety of post-production techniques, and have started applying these to my compositional demos.



Filmmaker Angus Kirby (left) with Helen Svoboda & saxophonist Andrew Saragossi (Meatshell)... PHOTO CREDIT BRODIE McALLISTER

Would you like to share with us your best and worst musical memory?

My worst musical memory was (cringes) when I took part in a seven-month cruise ship gig in the Caribbean. I had just finished my Bachelor of Music, I was 21, and I really had no idea of what I was getting myself into. Never again! My best musical memory is hard to choose – there have been so many moments that have shaped me as an artist. If I had to name a recent one, it would be performing as a soloist with the Australian Art Orchestra and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in *WATA – A Gathering for Songmen, Improvising Soloists and Orchestra* – a new work composed by Paul Grabowsky, featuring Daniel Wilfred (voice, bilma) and David Wilfred (yidaki) from South-East Arnhem Land. The opportunity to contribute to this extraordinary performance was both special and rare, enhanced further by the experience of performing in Hamer Hall (sold out at 75% capacity) during a time of lesser restrictions in March.



Svoboda's best memory was performing as a soloist with the Australian Art Orchestra and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in "WATA – A Gathering for Songmen, Improvising Soloists and Orchestra", a work composed by Paul Grabowsky (above left), featuring (see above) Daniel Wilfred (voice, bilma) and David Wilfred (yidaki) from South-East Arnhem Land... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Can you describe your challenges and how you surmount them ?

I have always been very scattered in my double bass practice. I've never been one to follow a strict technical regime, and this used to weigh on me a lot in the light of self-expectations. I recently surmounted this aspect of my growth somewhat through the making of my debut solo album *Vegetable Bass*, in which I focused each composition around a newly learned technique – mostly regarding the overtone series. Through this, I found that I work best when I combine my instrumental growth and knowledge with applied ideas in a creative/compositional context. This is something that I continue to do, documenting new sketches and ideas regularly through home-recording and tweaked with post-production for some fun. How much reverb is too much reverb?



Helen Svoboda's debut album "Vegetable Bass"...

If you could wave the magic wand over your music making, what would you wish for ?

Ten extra years of vocal technique! And while we're at it, ten extra years of classical double bass technique. I grew up as a classical pianist and flautist, and came late to the latter two, so sometimes it feels like a catching up process.

If you weren't a musician what would you do?

I have never truly considered pursuing anything else, as I grew up in a musical family. However, my work with the Australian Art Orchestra this past year has introduced me to elements of arts production and marketing, and I could definitely see myself continuing in this area of work behind the scenes long-term in a small arts organisation. I find it really fulfilling to play a part in realising performances and major works without always performing in them.

Who or what are you listening to at the moment?

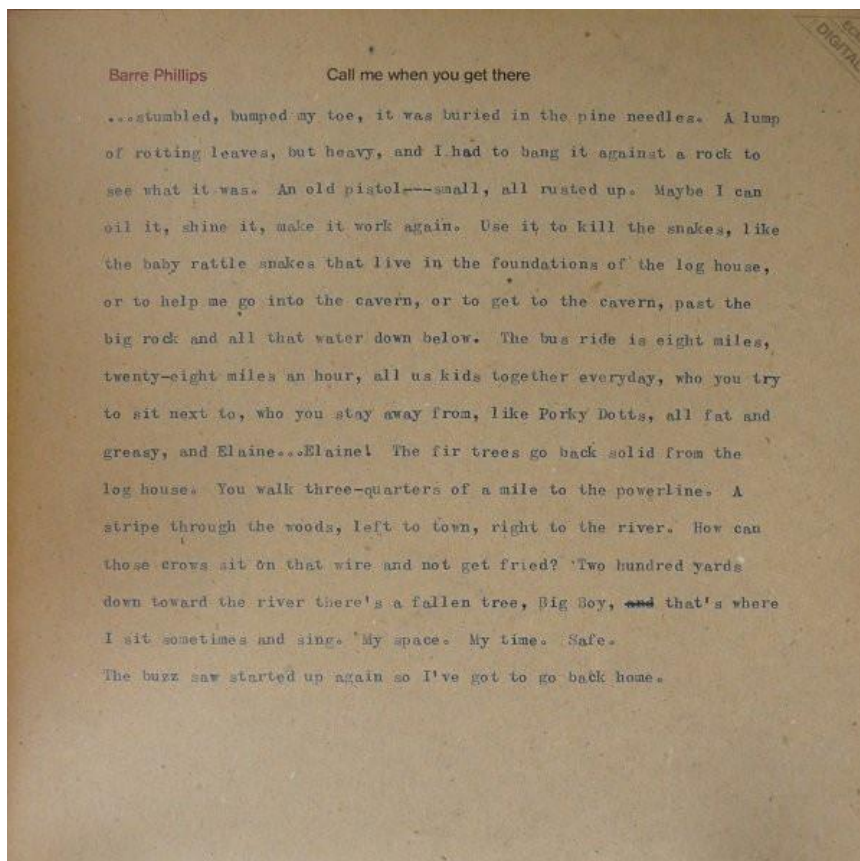
I have recently discovered Berlin-based guitarist Julia Reidy (originally from Sydney) – her album *Brace, Brace* has grounded me during this year. I also recently re-discovered legendary bassist Barre Phillips, and his album *Call me when you get there* from the eighties. Both are masterful soloists and propel unrivalled uniqueness through their music.



Berlin-based guitarist Julia Reidy (originally from Sydney): her album “Brace, Brace” has grounded Svoboda during 2021...

What have been your main influences?

I'll say his name again – double bassist, Barre Phillips. His music was introduced to me from one of my teachers in Cologne, and I was blown away by his refreshing and soloistic approach to the instrument. He is a true pioneer of the cross-over between jazz and contemporary classical/minimalist aesthetic – a sound that has really shaped me. Favourite track: *Grants Pass*. I also draw lots of influence from minimalist music, particularly Steve Reich and Phillip Glass. I love repetition and gradual sonic morphing.



Barre Phillips' album "Call me when you get there" from the 1980s...

What are your other interests?

At my core, I'm a complete music nerd. I find it nearly impossible to wind down without being engaged somehow with my craft – even subconsciously. But the three things that successfully distract me from this are drawing, running and nature. I'm working on expanding this list.

Where and what do you see yourself doing in ten years time?

Writing this in Melbourne lockdown 5.0, it's hard to see further than a day in advance! Ideally though, I would see myself based in Melbourne in a post-covid life, where plans can actually go ahead as planned. I am gradually establishing a satisfying work/performance balance, across a nice mix of teaching, arts admin work and creatively-fulfilling projects. I also hope to have finished a PhD, specialising

further on the overtone series of the double bass and graphic scoring methods, and in turn, be presenting this knowledge at bass conventions and contributing to research in this field.

I would also like to look forward to a time where international travel is possible again, allowing me to re-connect with friends and mentors in Europe and the US with semi-regular touring between Cologne, the Netherlands, Finland, New York and Australia. I left Europe without any idea of how long it might be before I can get back there on a visiting basis to continue projects that were never recorded.



*Svoboda: I have always
been very scattered in my
double bass
practice....PHOTO
COURTESY AUSTRALIAN
JAZZ.NET*

Other 10 x 10 interviews in this series

Chris Cody's 10 x 10 interview 5 with Lloyd Swanton, can be read on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-101>