

CODY'S 10 x 10. INTERVIEW 5, Lloyd Swanton: bassist, composer, producer, bandleader and radio presenter

Interview with: **Lloyd Swanton**
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 December 2, 2021, and can be read there at this link <https://musictrust.com.au/loudmouth/chris-codys-10x10-interview-5-chris-interviews-double-bass-player-lloyd-swanton/>. It is number 5 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”.*

Bassist, composer, producer, bandleader and radio presenter, 61-year-old Lloyd Swanton was born and raised in Sydney. Apart from leading The Catholics, and co-leading The Necks, he has performed with many of the cornerstones of Australian music and numerous top international names. He currently also performs with MARA!, the Alister Spence Trio, Chris Cody, Vazesh, and W.E.S.T.



*Lloyd Swanton...
PHOTO CREDIT IAN
STENHOUSE*

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

Lloyd Swanton: I can't separate out my answer to this, from being a musician in Australia in the era in which I grew up. I think what formed me as a developing musician was not just Australia's unique characteristics, but all of those characteristics in conjunction with the realities of the time. We will always be physically isolated from the major centres of the world, but back then there was none of the instant-click communication of the internet and mobile phones. Those things bring the rest of the world so much closer now, but they also pose a massive distraction and time sponge. The pace of everything was different: physically pulling an LP out of the rack, taking it out of its sleeve, laying it on the turntable, dropping the arm onto the disc... and then getting up to turn it over 20 minutes later! For that matter, you had to get up off the couch just to change to one of the three other stations on your TV! Waiting months for a new album to arrive from overseas. I guess I'm sounding like my parents' generation with their "In the days before TV, we had to create our own entertainment" but it's true. The way we go about day-to-day life, and how we engage with creative expression, is *really* different now.



Swanton: “In hindsight, I think I was incredibly blessed to grow up in a place like Sydney, in a country like Australia, in the era in which I did, under far more enlightened governments, with far less economic pressure on creative artists...”

Compared to elsewhere... well I’ve toured overseas a great deal, but in terms of living and working elsewhere, I’ve only lived and studied in London for eight months in 1985/86, and for six months in Los Angeles in 1991. And again, the past is a different country. Those places have changed so much since then. But both are amazing music towns, and my time in each of them was a huge influence on what I am today as a musician.

It’s also a little hard to say anything definitive about the music scene in Australia right now, because like much of the world, we haven’t really had one, for getting on to two years now! But pre-COVID, I think the issues facing musicians in Australia were the same as everywhere – decreasing job security, diminishing remuneration, competition from other very sophisticated forms of entertainment, gentrification leading to venues closing... But there is always *something* exciting happening, all the same.

In hindsight, I think I was incredibly blessed to grow up in a place like Sydney, in a country like Australia, in the era in which I did, under far more enlightened governments, with far less economic pressure on creative artists, with the music

scene suddenly rediscovering the double bass... I just wish I knew how the upcoming musical generations are going to find an outlet for their incredible abilities and imagination, and earn some sort of living for it. I fear we're rapidly reverting to the days of patronage from princes and dukes.

What is the main thing that nourishes your music?

Vibration. The aliveness that vibration gifts to music. I'm interested in many forms of artistic expression, but I feel that music, by dint of it being a product of vibration, stands apart from all other art forms. We are keying into the fundamentals of the universe when we play music. Vibration is a glimpse of the infinite.



The Necks, L-R, Tony Buck, Swanton & Chris Abrahams. In Europe this trio can play in little villages and get a crowd... because much of the audience have come from the two or three fair-sized cities just half an hour away by train... PHOTO CREDIT DAWID LASKOWSKI

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

*A water table that allowed dozens of towns of 10-100,000 to sustainably exist between the huge capital cities... we're not just a long way from the rest of the world, we're a long way from each other, all clinging to the cooler edge of this giant frying pan. In Europe there is such a complex web of small to large settlement. The Necks can play in little villages and get a crowd, not because most of the locals are

particularly into our music, but because much of the audience have come from the two or three fair-sized cities just half an hour away by train.

*A government that supports and values music and artistic expression rather than the barely-concealed outright hostility that we see from the incumbents.

*Local and state governments that aren't 100% owned by property developers, so we could see fewer back lanes being subsumed, and buildings being repurposed for artistic activities rather than just knocked down for more residential blocks and shopping malls. It really can be done – look at Berlin.



*A current iteration of Swanton's group The Catholics, L-R, Jonathan Pease, Gary Daley (rear), Fabian Hevia (front), Swanton, Sandy Evans, James Greening (front), Hamish Stuart (rear): a regional tour of New South Wales coming up...
PHOTO CREDIT ROB GORDON*

What are you practising or working on at the moment?

In terms of practise, very little! I've been using the lockdown as an opportunity to step away from the instrument – and music in general, to a degree. It's been very refreshing and revelatory.

For most of my musical life when I practise, I simply try to hone my skills at playing in time and in tune – whatever either of them mean!

On a more general scale, I have a lot of activities coming up early next year to prepare – a Necks Australian tour, The Catholics' regional NSW touring, gigs with the brand

new MARA! Big Band, gigs with the Alister Spence Trio with Ed Kuepper, recording a new album with The Catholics, and never-ending listening to various Necks recordings including some studio stuff we did in June. I also have really enjoyed performing your new swag of North African-inspired pieces Chris, *The Outsider*, and I hope we get to play them some more soon and record them.

I've never been a prolific composer, but I wrote a couple of new tunes earlier this year for The Catholics, both of which I was really pleased with. They're very different to each other but they both came out very quickly, to the point where I wonder why I can't do that more often! But though I'm not a very prolific composer, I've been very happy with almost everything I've ever written.



*Alister Spence Trio (left),
L-R, Toby Hall, Lloyd
Swanton, Spence: gigs
coming up with Ed
Kuepper (below)...
SPENCE TRIO PHOTO
COURTESY MELBOURNE
JAZZ CO-OP*



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

No single memory stands out at either end! Honestly, I've been so fortunate to have had so many incredible musical experiences over the years. I have to scratch myself. Looking back, it's incredible to see how it all evolved from being a Year 12

student from the North Shore doing an arrangement of *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy* for a school revue.

The catholics playing in front of 80,000 Quebecois going berserk at the Montreal Jazz Festival was pretty wonderful (postscript – the number of CDs we sold at the festival shop after that gig: four. Fame and fortune may take a little while yet). The Necks have played so many incredible venues in Europe and the US, and been in so many wonderful collaborative situations – working with Brian Eno was a highlight – so professional, so imaginative, so not up himself.



Swanton at the 1994 Montreal International Jazz Festival, where The catholics played to 80,000 Quebecois...

Recording at AIR Studios with Underworld. Having the incredible Ilan Volkov get an entire symphony orchestra improvising along with us. The big chain pieces we performed with so many great musicians for our 30th anniversary celebrations at the Bimhuis and the Issue Project Room. Too many others to mention!



One of Swanton's best memories is "having the incredible Ilan Volkov (left) get an entire symphony orchestra improvising along with us"...

But the thing is, even in the early days of The Benders' residency at the Paradise Jazz Cellar, I had some truly transcendent experiences, but I'd honestly forgotten about them two days later. I think this is healthy. I think it suggests I tend not to rest on my laurels. I always tell up-and-coming musicians that one of the most important skills to learn (not just in music, but in life itself) is honest self-assessment. Knowing when to pat yourself on the back, and when to give yourself a kick in the pants. Maybe I have that.



The Benders, L-R, Andrew Gander (drums, obscured), Dale Barlow (tenor saxophone), Swanton (bass), Chris Abrahams (piano): some truly transcendent experiences...

As to bad experiences – most of them involve commercial gigs, and unfortunate mismatches between the client and the band. I've done a few weddings where the whole room hated us and I just wanted to crawl under a log. I always say that those function gigs are completely unlike anything else a musician gets called to do – almost everyone else in the room knows each other; they haven't paid to come and see you; they want you in the background, not in their faces; there's a hell of a lot of nervous tension in the room; you're basically being inserted into an intimate family environment for several hours; most of the people there would have no further exposure to jazz than Louis and Ella's greatest hits – they do not know what to make of lengthy solos on *Inner Urge* at their beloved daughter's wedding.



Most of the people at a wedding gig would have no further exposure to jazz than Louis and Ella's greatest hits...

Also, times when I've been booked to play nice background jazz at a function, and that's gone just fine, but then they want to get up and dance, and they think it's perfectly reasonable to expect this trio of acoustic bass, acoustic guitar and flute to pull off that objective, and alcohol may be involved, and some people get a little offended, and some people get a little offensive, and you walk back to the car thinking "why did I put myself in this position?"

I still enjoy doing these gigs these days. When they go well, that is! People might be surprised that I still do this sort of work, but to me, when they go well, you're actually being a satisfying and active part of one of the primary uses of music, which is as a major element of a human gathering, commemoration, and celebration.

Another classic mismatch was The Benders getting booked to play for two weeks in a posh restaurant in the Thredbo ski resort. That was *very* uncomfortable.



Another shot of The Benders, this time with saxophonist Jason Morphett instead of Dale Barlow. L-R, Andrew Gander, Morphett, Swanton, Chris Abrahams... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

Can you describe your challenges and how you surmount them?

I am such a fatalist! Consequently I encounter very few challenges in my life, because I refuse to even categorise much of anything as “challenges”. The only exception to my fatalism is my maniacal dedication to fatalism.

Those close to me would probably suggest I should start to take the bull by the horns a bit more.

However, looking back at the path my life has taken, I realise that something very deep down has driven me all these decades, so I guess for all this self-describing as fatalistic, I must have a certain doggedness that I’m not even aware of day-to-day.

And maybe I have a certain knack for not panicking, for looking at a situation and saying, “OK, what exactly are we dealing with here?”, and for seeing if there is an unforeseen positive outcome possible from a negative situation. Let’s face it, if you’re an improviser you’d be mad not to apply that valuable lesson in day-to-day life anyway. The whole trajectory of The Necks, after all, can really be traced back to the fact that we had just this one half-decent idea, but we decided to see how far we could take that idea.

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

The sort of stamina and effortless density that Chris Abrahams and Tony Buck can call on. If I started playing bass again from scratch I would put a high priority on being able to articulate and sustain all sorts of trills and tremolos at a considerable level of density.



If Lloyd could wave a magic wand, he would wish for the sort of “stamina and effortless density” that Chris Abrahams (above, left) and Tony Buck (above, right) can call on...

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

I had no idea what I wanted to be when I left school. I was enjoying playing music but I could hardly say I was passionate about it. I think my “passion” for music has always been a slow burn, subliminal, decades-long thing. Also, I was yet to be convinced I had any particular talent for it. My Dad was an insurance assessor and I actually spent my first year out of school working in his office. He was hoping that one of his children would be interested in taking over the business. I don't know if I would have had the business acumen, but it would have been an endlessly interesting job. Not desk-bound at all – you'd be out on the road a lot, inspecting burnt-out buildings, or interviewing victims of robberies, and so on.

Who or what are you listening to at the moment?

Being a busy parent, and also being one third of a trio that generates enormous quantities of very long pieces which often have to be listened to and considered, my days of recreational listening, let alone deep focused listening, are pretty much over it seems. I tend to just put on whatever I find in the vicinity of the CD player. I am so uninterested in engaging with music the streaming way. I would get indigestion very quickly.

Right now, the CDs closest to my CD player are these. I'm going to use the adjective "incredible" a lot to describe them because it's late and I can't think of any other words.

Lake Aloe Festival – Kraig Grady. Kraig is a remarkable musician/sound artist/shadow puppeteer from Los Angeles who we're lucky to have living in Australia now. I'm not sure if my description will do his music justice (so apologies if you're reading this Kraig!) but he has created this mythical island called Anaphoria and he composes amazing ritual music for it. This album features ten imaginary percussion ensembles, roaming and stationary, in the imaginary Lake Aloe Festival where, as one part of the festivities, the island leaders are seated in a mud pit amid a sprinkling of orchids while ridicule is hurled at them, around the imaginary Port of Barsa. He evokes so beautifully the polyrhythmic overlap of parade ensembles playing completely different pieces.



Kraig Grady: a remarkable musician/sound artist/shadow puppeteer from Los Angeles...

Cantus, Descant; Figures in Open Air; Laurus – a boxed set by organist (among other things) Sarah Davachi, originally from Calgary, now Los Angeles. I just discovered her and I'm loving her stuff. She does very still music which is never very still.



Organist Sarah Davachi: doing very still music which is never very still...

Breath for Organ, by Eva-Maria Houben, who makes Sarah Davachi sound like Franz Liszt.



Eva-Maria Houben: she makes Sarah Davachi sound like Franz Liszt...

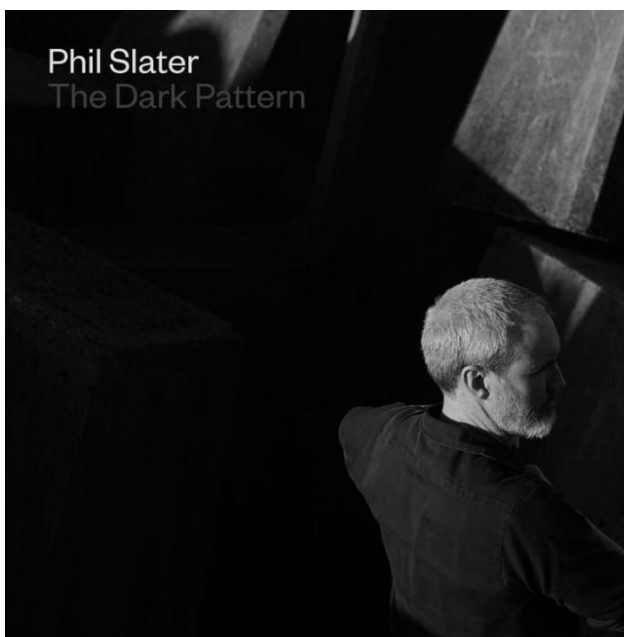
Restless Creature by Brendan Gallagher. Beautiful, respectful, affectionate history-of-rock-pop-and-rhythm-and-blues stuff from one of Australia's best singer/guitarists.



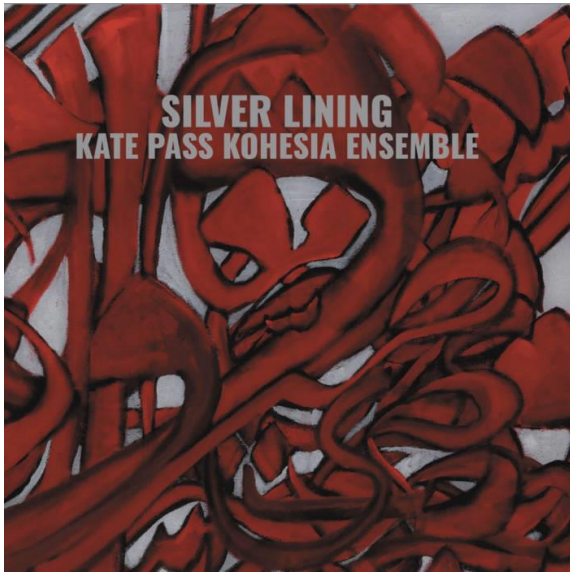
Brendan Gallagher, snapped at the Stanmore Festival of Music...

Hearts and Desires by Close to Forever. Lovely new album by musical friends of mine – Ben Fink (vocals, guitar) and Dale Caldwell (vocals) along with Chris Abrahams on piano and Hammond, Peter Hollo on cello, Sam Golding on brass and bass clarinet and Danny Heifetz on drums. It has an openness and innocence that took me back to folk records of the 60s, and the early encounters between folk and rock. Lovely stuff!

The Dark Pattern – Phil Slater – is a conceptually striking double CD from Phil, with Matt McMahon on piano, Simon Barker on drums, Matt Keegan on tenor sax. And Brett Hirst showing such admirable restraint on bass that I'd suspect money had changed hands, if I didn't know Brett to be such a fine incorruptible fellow. OK, maybe I have been following NSW and federal politics a little too much lately.



Silver Lining – Kate Pass Kohesia Ensemble. Last year, I had the pleasure of doing some mentoring sessions arranged by SIMA, with Kate Pass, a hugely talented bassist, composer and bandleader from Perth. Kate has an ongoing fascination with fusing jazz with Persian music. In Kohesia Ensemble she incorporates oud, ney, daf and saz seamlessly beside her double bass, as well as piano, saxophone, trumpet and drums. I was very interested to see what she is doing, having of late been involved in that crossover myself. *Silver Lining* is so strong in every respect – great tunes that achieve exactly what they set out to do, with fantastic authoritative playing from all concerned, and great recorded sound.



“Silver Lining”, from the Kate Pass Kohesia Ensemble. Kate Pass (below) is “a hugely talented bassist, composer and bandleader from Perth”, with an ongoing fascination with fusing jazz with Persian music...



An incredible el cheapo dub reggae compilation called *Dub Chill Out*. Probably the best reggae album I own.

Oh, and how could I forget! A set of four CDs that never leaves my stereo: *Handel's Sixteen Organ Concertos*, recorded in 1975 by American organist Daniel Chorzempa, with Concerto Amsterdam led by Jaap Schröder. For years now, I have put on one of these discs at random pretty much every Sunday morning. I don't know what this compulsion is about. Some atheist yearning for lost Sabbath religious ritual perhaps? But they're not religious pieces.



I find these pieces far more timeless than many of the pompous, better-known classical works we're told are timeless. Modest, unassuming offerings played in a modest, unassuming, pre-bombastic manner. That's not to say they're not packed with charm.

I don't know what it is about the grain of the baroque organ against the accompaniment of the small, unspectacular baroque orchestra, but it connects with something deep inside me, and has done so since I first bought these albums as remaindered LPs from a record shop in Pitt Street for \$2.50 each, on my way home from the Conservatorium in 1980. To me these pieces are music of the purest kind. I have heard other performances of them but I think I struck gold hearing Chorzempa's versions first. Possibly my only undisputed Desert Island Discs.



What are your other interests?

Reading and arguing politics and culture on the internet, reading voraciously anyway (fiction and non-fiction), religious cults, the AFL and specially my magnificent Sydney Swans, birdsong, mid-century modernism, my family, Aboriginal art, walking in the Blue Mountains, collecting, eating, World War II, energy-efficient architecture, keeping modestly fit and healthy, thinking. I bought myself a mandolin for my 60th birthday and have enjoyed getting acquainted with that, though it's a lot more physical than I expected!

Other articles on this website which may be of interest:

Eric Myers, "Young Lions of Australian Jazz" at this link

<https://ericmyersjazz.com/ericmyersreviews19808789>

Eric Myers, "The Necks: A Unique Kind of Success" at this link

<https://ericmyersjazz.com/jazzchord-articles3>

Ian Muldoon, "Lloyd Swanton's Ambon: Quite an Experience" at this link

<https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-42>

Ian Muldoon, "Lloyd Swanton's catholics: The Seriousness of Jazz" at this link

<https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-61>

Glen Goetze, "The Necks: A Very Silent Way" at this link

<https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-99>

Eric Myers, "Chris Cody's Suite Inspired by La Pérouse", at this link

<https://ericmyersjazz.com/theaustralian-2015-13>