

CITY OF LIGHT: THE NECKS AT THE OPERA HOUSE

by Mark Mordue*

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The fine art of forgetting is perhaps The Necks strongest attribute. A concert by the Australian three-piece slips between the tautly engaged and extended atmospheres of organic drifting, utilising bass, piano and percussion to become something so trance-inducing you lose track of where and whatever you are.

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It's hardly surprising at the close of their opening night on February 9, 2022, in the Utzon Room at the Sydney Opera House that double bassist Lloyd Swanton thanks everyone for coming together to experience music with them at this time. But when he chooses the word "metabolising" to express that collective experience it feels as if the word has peculiar charge for all of us.



Lloyd Swanton: he chooses the word "metabolising" to express the collective experience of coming together to experience music with The Necks... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ REAL BOOK

Two years into the pandemic there is still something peculiar in looking around a room to see only masked faces. All the stranger, by night's end, for gaining an intimacy with everyone through the journey The Necks have taken us on. Beyond each other's eyes, clothes, gestures, an uncomfortable burst of coughing, an asthmatic oppression, we mostly spend our time disappearing into ourselves. A yoga class might seem rowdy and excessively social by comparison.

Tonight is structured around a typical Necks concert strategy of two sets: one more reflective; one more aggressive, even frantic. The meditative opener is led by Swanton on the double bass. At first, percussionist drummer Tony Buck and pianist Chris Abrahams appear to be struggling to meld with, and catch up to Swanton, who is soon playing out of his skin. Yet the circling rhythmic and melodic patterns still feel like The Necks in second gear. Very good, but only that. And when you're one of the finest instrumental groups in the world this is somehow disappointing for hardened Necks 'trancers'.



Sometimes pianist Chris Abrahams (left) and percussionist drummer Tony Buck (right) appear to be struggling to meld with, and catch up to Swanton...

What The Necks do is often categorised loosely as 'jazz'. But if it is jazz it is about a way of thinking far more than a genre you might be familiar with. The group are so into improvising, minimalism, and ambient soundscaping they're as close to Brian Eno or Harry Partch (who invented his own instruments) as, say, Keith Jarrett. Unlike most avant-gardists, The Necks sense of space and slow-circling sonic play – so slow it can feel as if the physical condition of each instrument is itself under exploration – adds up to a very pleasurable listening experience. Hypnosis is their only demand upon you. You don't have to try.

Patience is certainly their strong suite as a unit. Not rushing in; listening very, very closely to one another; finding complimentary or opposing relationships in order to advance what is occurring. Some listeners will say it just washes over them. Others will go swimming so deep it takes a while to return to the surface.

After feeling they are not in top gear form, I begin to lose myself in that alchemy. Angry, frustrated thoughts arise within me, counter to the calm exploratory music. Then childhood memories. Then a sense of the water so close us beside the Sydney Opera House it is as if we might be sliding into the harbour. And this eerie, unsettlingly specific conjuring of being inside the hull of a wooden ship. It makes me feel very vulnerable. As well as quite grand.

First set over, it's clear a wonderful night is already under way. Things are going so good I buy myself a T-shirt with 'The Necks' written in a large 1970s font that might have done *The Partridge Family* proud. The '70s vibe also makes me think of the 'prog' music expansiveness of The Necks, and parallels to strange cousins like Yes and Radiohead.



The 70s vibe makes me think of the 'prog' music expansiveness of The Necks, and parallels to strange cousins like Yes (pictured above) and Radiohead (below)....



Second set in I totally lose myself. By now Buck and Abrahams are well and truly in the fray. Sharing the energy with Swanton and making leads that the others then follow, before being tagged and shifting the course of action in their own collaborative way.

Buck is just phenomenal, using brushes, voodoo bells, Asiatic and African flourishes, a world music directly available from his quiver of percussive instruments. Then a simple sustained drum pattern for five minutes, so disciplined, so steady and mathematical, you sense a collapse *must* come. It is as if he only *just* makes it to the end. And it is rare to be so transfixed by a drummer's energy and the thought processes that enter into his approaches. For me he equals – and transcends – the Laughing Clowns' Jeffrey Wegener and the Dirty Three's Jim White; a demon of silences, pauses and ghost rattles answering their more furious qualities. On another night maybe I will change my mind.



Tony Buck: it is rare to be so transfixed by a drummer's energy and the thought processes that enter into his approaches... PHOTO CREDIT BARKA FABIANOVA

It's worth asking here why Australia has created two of the most important instrumental bands in the world in the Dirty Three (sadly no more) and The Necks over the last few decades. And why each is so utterly Australian and suggestive of our urban and outback landscapes, and more significantly a haunted atmosphere to the way we think and feel about our world? In the most primitive and basic terms, I think of the Dirty Three as fire – and The Necks as water. I do not believe anyone will ever come close to what they do again. What they achieve belongs to the ritual of live performing more than any other medium that tries to catch them. I am sorry you are not here.



Over the last few decades Australia has created two of the most important instrumental bands in the world in the Dirty Three (pictured above) and The Necks...

I don't have any special answers to the questions and thoughts that enter into me tonight. I just remember the second set exploding in activity. Abrahams has centred himself on the middle of the piano, melodic, minimal, yet roomy, for most of the evening – as if he has only one third of his instrument to work with – but in one one deft movement, he hammers the far left of his Steinway Grand and the entire room vibrates with the staining heaviness of what he does. One note. Perhaps the greatest moment of the night.

The Necks cease. Applause. Swanton gestures to Buck and Abrahams. Names them. More applause. People leave, talking of their two years of anxiety and fear and some constant of inertia draining their energy. This feeling that digital life is crowding



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their minds. This sense of not sleeping well. Of not being able to think and dream – and then dreaming bad. Of this night now in our minds, liberating us for a while.

As we walk the foreshore of Sydney Harbour, the Bridge is ignited by a river of cars, its shape reflected in the water. Something like a hundred roller-skaters pass by us as we stroll along. Mutual ropes of people in the night: those metabolised by The Necks; and this other group on the move, their wheels glowing in spinning circles of pink and blue. Laughter, voices. The lit city ahead for all of us.

Other articles on this site which may be of interest:

Glen Goetze, “The Necks: A Very Silent Way”, <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-99>

Eric Myers, “The Necks: A Unique Kind of Success”, <https://ericmyersjazz.com/jazzchord-articles3>

Eric Myers, Review of The Necks album “Body”, <https://ericmyersjazz.com/cd-reviews-page-12>