

LLOYD SWANTON'S AMBON: QUITE AN EXPERIENCE

by Ian Muldoon*

I attended a performance of Lloyd Swanton's *Ambon* at the Wangaratta Jazz Festival in October 2015. It was a late evening performance as if it was not all that important. My four colleagues chose not to attend. The venue was the WPAC Theatre. There was an audience scattered about. The performance by the 12-piece ensemble was quite an experience. It touched a nerve in me, so to speak. More than one as it happens.



A shot of the performance of the Ambon suite at the Wangaratta Jazz Festival in 2015...

Firstly, I felt that *Ambon* and its musical narrative mirrored the evolution of jazz itself insofar as it drew on church music, military music, music made from "bits and pieces" and more. It made me reflect once again on jazz as the pre-eminent music of the 20th century and its beginnings in the blues.

**Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child's ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York and Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Coffs Harbour.*

A pop song from the 1950s *Birth Of The Blues*, written in 1926 by Ray Henderson, was given a dramatic and rousing turn in 1954 when it was recorded by Sammy Davis Jr. It touched on the subject of the blues. It had the Buddy De Silva and Lew Brown lyric (inter alia):

*From a whippoorwill
Out on a hill
They took a new note
Pushed it through a horn
'Til it was worn
Into a blue note*



Sammy Davis Jr: his 1954 recording of Birth Of The Blues was dramatic and rousing ...

This lyric brings to mind, or may be a reference to, the humble beginnings of “the blues” and of course, “jazz” which is to say taking the sounds of nature, the wind, animals, the cry of a baby and using the sounds to make music, a new music. The origins of jazz were the ultimate musical expression of over 12 million enslaved Africans transported from 1619 to the Americas, about 1.8 million of whom died on the Middle Passage, their bodies thrown into the Atlantic.

Their labour provided the basis of the economic wealth of the South of the USA through cotton and sugar plantations. The music called jazz was the outcome of the ability of the slaves to appropriate any and all physical and cultural means to make

music, a music which, in their former village life was an integral part of their daily existence.

Slaves had their voice, then anything to hand such as leaves, cans, sticks, bottles. Eventually access to the whole panoply of European instruments occurs - brass instruments from military bands, pianos in music halls and brothels, and ultimately to the musical instruments of the world. In contrast to so-called "classical music", "jazz" seemed to be the people's music, reflecting the revolutions that had pervaded Europe over two centuries, a music rooted in the lived feelings and experiences of ordinary people as opposed to classical music, which was mainly music commissioned by churches or the aristocracy for the entertainment of the upper classes. Or so it seemed.

Jazz was music of the people, but as Louis Armstrong once remarked " I ain't ever heard a horse play trumpet." Louis Armstrong sang *Black and Blue*, a song by Fats Waller and Andy Razaf:

*How would it end? Ain't got a friend
My only sin is in my skin
What did I do to be so black and blue?*



Louis Armstrong: what did I do to be so black and blue?

I feel jazz has a poignancy and beauty and transcendence that might be preferred even over the musical beauty and melodrama of say *Un bel di vedremo*, by Puccini.

Nevertheless, from Armstrong's humble orphan beginnings through the glory of his musical evolution, jazz has evolved on and on from the collective improvisation of traditional jazz, to swing, bebop, free jazz, culminating in the collective improvisation of today. A good example of the latter is the Sydney group of young Australian musicians Microfiche including Max Alduca (double bass), Nick Calligeros (trumpet), Holly Conner (drums, percussion), Sam Gill (alto saxophone), Novak Manojlovic (piano, keyboard), Emma Stephenson (piano, keyboard). Through such an improvising ensemble and composers' collective, jazz continues to grow and evolve. It is the most significant development in music in human history. It has an appeal which fuses melody, and harmony and especially rhythm in its most effective, powerful, passionate and intellectually stimulating way.



Sydney improvising ensemble and composers' collective Microfiche: back row L-R, Nick Calligeros (trumpet), Frank Dasent (trombone), Max Alduca (double bass). Front row L-R, Novak Manojlovic (piano, keyboard), Sam Gill (alto saxophone), Holly Conner (drums & percussion), and Emma Stephenson (piano, keyboard)...

Of course music even in its most abstract form - say Bach or Eno - can appeal and stimulate, but jazz has the voice of the individual musician developed to an especially high degree in contrast to the classical musician apparently striving for purity of tone, the glory of harmony, valid interpretation, and the “perfect” (recall Miles Davis urging his players to play their ‘mistakes’); the compelling complexities of rhythms evolved over thousands of years where they were the means of communications and much more; and the willingness, like the English language, to appropriate whatever music there is to its own ends.

Underpinning the glory of this music is the deeply significant narrative of its origins: the yearning of humans to escape enslavement and to be free, whether that enslavement is the kind suffered by those living in once totalitarian Poland such as the late Tomasz Stańko, or the many millions enslaved to the production process powering global trade or to actual human slavery or simply personal liberation.



Polish trumpeter Tomasz Stańko...PHOTO COURTESY HENK VAN LEEUWEN

Ambon is a major suite of 14 compositions by Lloyd Swanton for a 12-piece ensemble including Swanton (double bass), Sandy Evans and Paul Cutlan (woodwinds), James Greening and Alex Silver (brass), Chuck Morgan (ukulele), James Eccles (playing Stuart Swanton’s viola), Michel Rose (pedal steel guitar), Jon Pease (guitar), percussionists Ron Reeves (Indonesian kendang), Fabian Hevia (cajon) and Hamish Stuart (drum kit). The genesis of this work was drawn from the secret prison diary of Swanton’s uncle Stuart Swanton, who died a prisoner of the Japanese in World War II. Along with the evolution of jazz, *Ambon* reminded me of my neighbour Gordon Nicholls.



Lloyd Swanton's uncle Stuart Swanton who died in a Japanese POW camp on the island of Ambon the day before WWII ended.

Gordon Nicholls lived at 10 Parkes Street, Manly Vale, NSW from about 1948 and was my neighbour until I left No 12 aged 15 to join the RAAF. He was married to Irene (Rene), an Aboriginal woman from Narrabri, and they had two children, both boys. Rene was very beautiful and quietly spoken. Gordon I found interesting partly because there was usually no man in my household and I looked to him as some sort of guide to how men (fathers) were, and partly because he was a statuesque, handsome, blonde-haired man who was an ambulance driver which I, and my nine-year-old friends, saw as a romantic occupation, where yellow vehicles tore through the streets with sirens going, on a mercy mission to save lives of ill and injured members of the community.

Gordon also spent a great deal of time keeping his house and its surrounds in immaculate condition with lawns edged carefully with concrete, neat paths and tidy flower beds. By contrast, our front yard consisted of long grass with the remnants of a Stanley Steamer car chassis plonked on it whilst the backyard had a large rock extruding from the ground on the left shaded by a Pussy Willow, long grass, and in the rear, a dunny and a chook pen surrounding a large mulberry tree with five or six chooks scratching in the dust.

Although Gordon Nicholls had spent five years in Changi prison as a Japanese prisoner of war, he never joined my grandfather and me on the Sydney, or any other, Anzac march. Nor did he belong to the RSL. When I was 40 I was the lead role in a play at the University of New England about Australian prisoners of war and the effect on them of having worked on the Burma Railway (The Death Railway). The play was called *The Floating World* written by John Romeril. As part of my research into the character, I called on Gordon who now lived alone, but still at Number 10.

When I asked him about Changi and survival he said, “The important thing was to keep clean.” That was it. My character Les Harding, on a Cherry Blossom Cruise to Japan, was as unlike Gordon Nicholls as it's possible to be, a deluded loud-mouthed drinker sinking into a mental collapse the closer the cruise ship got to Japan, which country was the cause of all his pain, as he saw it.

The secret diary of Swanton’s uncle as well as the silent grief of Gordon Nicholls and many others seems to have been given glorious voice through the music of *Ambon* with the most powerful part (to me) being the musicians Sandy Evans and Paul Cutlan (woodwinds), James Greening and Alex Silver (brass) as I recall them using just bits of their instruments (mouthpieces, etc) to make sounds into music.



The Ambon ensemble, back row L-R, Michel Rose, Fabian Hevia, Lloyd Swanton, Sandy Evans, Hamish Stuart, Alex Silver, Paul Cutlan. Front row L-R, James Greening, Ron Reeves, Jon Pease, Chuck Morgan, James Eccles...
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Lloyd Swanton’s *Ambon* manages to capture the lived historical experience of his uncle whilst placing the music in a journey paralleling that of the evolution of the music itself. It can stand as a major Australian work which will perhaps be recognised as a masterpiece. Perhaps a professional Australian actor such as Hugo Weaving narrating would have made the work even more powerful.

No one can deny the beauty of Mozart and say his Great Mass in C minor, K427, or hundreds of other examples. But the music known as “jazz” has the ability and power to connect the lone, alone, unique individual with the voice of the other, and people wherever and whomever they may be. It is the music of “democracy” and like democracy, it will prevail.