

THIS MUSIC

by Ian Muldoon*

When I first heard this music my skin stood on end, and when I learnt about its African American heritage my ambition was to live it”, explained tenor saxophonist Julien Wilson, on stage before he performed at the Cedar Bar, Bellingen, NSW, on Wednesday night, February 26, 2020. The musicians with Wilson were Mike Nock, piano; Jonathan Zwartz, bass; and Hamish Stuart, drums. They were finishing a tour of northern NSW towns playing music from their latest CD release *This World*.

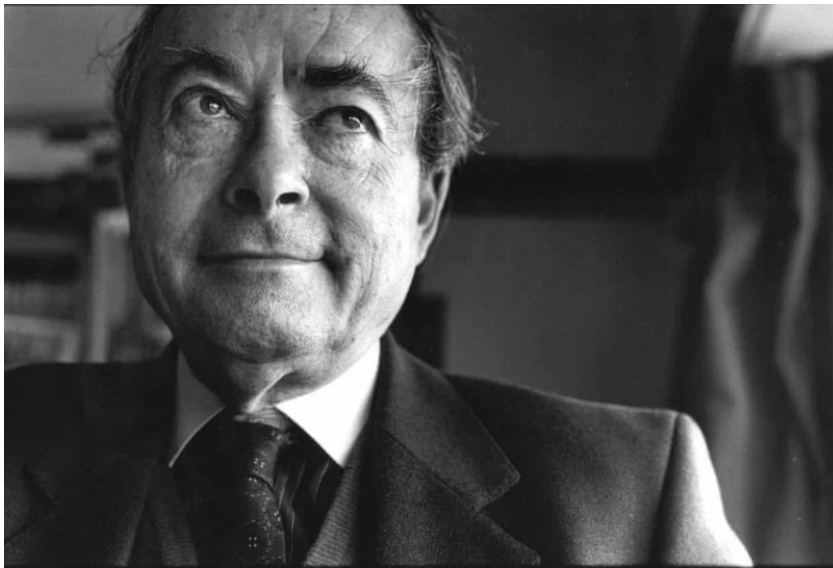


L-R, Hamish Stuart, Mike Nock, Jonathan Zwartz, Julien Wilson...PHOTO CREDIT ANTHONY BROWELL

There was something startling for me, like an electric charge, a flash of recognition, when Julien Wilson began playing. That flash is like the repeat of the feeling perhaps as a child when one *first* hears “this music”; it’s more than “the sound of surprise”; it’s something like a silent but powerful message that comes from the player to the

**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.*

listener through the ether to one's core which seems to make one sense that yes, I am a human being. The public intellectual George Steiner once remarked that "music often puts me 'beside myself' or more exactly, in company far better than my own."



George Steiner: music often puts me 'beside myself' or more exactly, in company far better than my own... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

But music generally, not just one's preferred music, may have a profound impact on a listener depending on the context, whether situations may be in extremis or when alone in "tune" with nature. In the former, in his book *Life and Fate*, Vasily Grossman describes the arrival of trains at Auschwitz and the division of the freight into living and soon-to-be-dead. The air stinks with garbage, is dark with smoke and streaked with the glow of the gas ovens, but is "filled with music". The music at



Vasily Grossman: music resurrects in the soul of a man about to die... simply the blind, heartbreaking miracle of life itself...

Auschwitz is music made by a dozen prisoners, as ill-kept as their instruments “on a wooden bandstand like in a public park”. A sob passes down the column of the condemned, and Grossman observes that “music resurrects in the soul of a man about to die... neither hope nor thought but simply the blind, heartbreaking miracle of life itself.”

Lloyd Swanton creates a similar context in his suite *Ambon* when the musicians in one part of the suite recreate the humble self-made “instruments” made by prisoners in a Japanese prisoner of war camp, eg, tin cans, wooden boxes, pieces of string, or combs. Swanton’s musicians use mouthpieces or other parts of instruments or the sides of instruments, to give a masterful feeling to the experience of creating joy out of despair and horror. Though the music may be functional in the sense it is “military” music in style, the recreation of it in *Ambon* resonates with a brilliant creativity.



In his “Ambon” suite, Lloyd Swanton’s musicians use mouthpieces or other parts of instruments or the sides of instruments, to give a masterful feeling to the experience of creating joy out of despair and horror...

In the context of nature, W C Handy in *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography*, relates how he learned his notes by listening to the sounds of nature. Adjacent to the District School for Negroes in Florence, Alabama, were woods and fields and “robins carrying a warm alto theme, bobolinks singing counterpoint, mockingbirds

trilling cadenzas, distant crows improvising the ‘jazz motif’, the whippoorwill, a clarinet”. Miles Davis did the same whilst at High School in East St Louis and was considered somewhat “weird” for so doing.



W C Handy: he learned his notes by listening to the sounds of nature...

Peter Sloterdijk is a German philosopher and cites four contemporary types of music: new music, popular music, functional music and performance music.



German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk: he cites four contemporary types of music...

The first, **new music**, is exclusively concerned with exploring the means of production of sound and the processes of composition. It is not concerned with the listener and hence is admired for its technical brilliance and has retreated into isolation and perfectionism.

Popular music “which should be called distracting music or sedative music, is assured of a mass audience because it is serious about protecting the listener from the risk of hearing something new. Anybody who plays sedative music does this precisely to tune into the surprise-free world of sounds, regardless of the level. The sound and resonance of popular music convey the happy message that the known has eliminated the unknown. On this view there are only irritatingly minor differences between the classical concert business and pop music. Both branches represent music as a medium of age-old conservatism that always offers harmony and repetition in predictable syntheses”.* Opera for example reaffirms the audience of their place in the world as they indulge in the familiar sounds of the aristocratic music of the 19th century.

Functional music uses effects of musical structures to make useful sounds for specific purposes: eg, march music, elevators, shopping malls, Fresco fruit markets, operating theatres, yoga meditation, phone loops and so on. Sloterdijk writes, “By usurping harmonies, these practices forge the link between the peaceful oases of deep relaxation with musical backing and the acoustic patterns of totalitarianism with a smile.”

Performance music, Sloterdijk continues, is energetic in its efforts to reach audiences but gives priority to creativity (sonic and stage events) rather than trying to meet listener expectations whilst struggling to appeal to listeners.



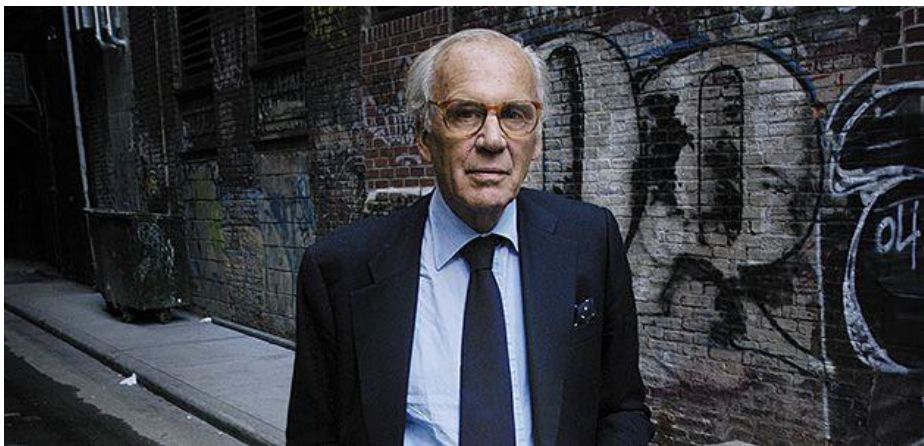
At the gig Julien Wilson (above) enjoined the audience to clap when it wanted, yell or otherwise express itself in response to the music... PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY IMPROVISED MUSIC ASSOCIATION

*Sloterdijk, “The Aesthetic Imperative”, edited by Peter Weibel, translated by Karen Margolis.

Julien Wilson at the gig referred to above, enjoined the audience to clap when it wanted, yell or otherwise express itself in response to the music. These invocations were touching in their naivety as Australian audiences, at least audiences in love with modern improvised music, are strikingly polite, even reverential, out of respect for the art. This is perhaps a fault of the audience but it is a minor fault - better than the conversation, clinking of glasses and use of phones which can mar a concert in a club or pub or restaurant setting as Bellingen was. The positive feeling was palpable at the Julien Wilson gig and the music blossomed even when the audience lacked the emotional outbursts or responses (apparently) desired by the players.

Performance music Sloterdijk calls "at risk music in action (which) offers the best and worst of listening for the contemporary ear, whether vulgar pop vitality a la Prince or aristocratic free jazz."

In terms of witnessing the performer in his or her performance Lewis Lapham wrote of this encounter with Thelonious Sphere Monk in 1964: "Sometimes, when listening to Monk's complex rhythms and the abrupt far-fetched chord progressions, I could hear echoes of late Beethoven. Seated at the piano, Monk was utterly possessed by the music, his whole body following the rise and fall of the melodic line, the expression of open-mouthed surprise on his kind and trusting face like that of a child watching a magician changing oranges into rabbits. When standing up to conduct his band, snapping his fingers, thrusting an open palm to call for a solo from Charlie Rouse on tenor sax or Butch Warren on bass, Monk never stopped moving. He looked like a man dancing on hot coals".*



Lewis Lapham: an encounter with Thelonious Sphere Monk in 1964...

Even accepting Sloterdijk's categorisation of music into four types, a performance by a jazz artist can be both performance music, full of risk and powerfully moving, and also functional, at least in part. For example the performance of Shannon Barnett at The Newsagency on March 8th, 2020 accompanied by Andrea Keller on piano, and Sam Anning on double bass, was entertaining and representative of women in tribute to International Women's Day, as well as being full of risk and powerfully moving. It both fulfilled a function in celebration of women, and provided a moving performance.

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Trombonist Shannon Barnett: a performance full of risk, and powerfully moving...PHOTO CREDIT GERHARD RICHTER

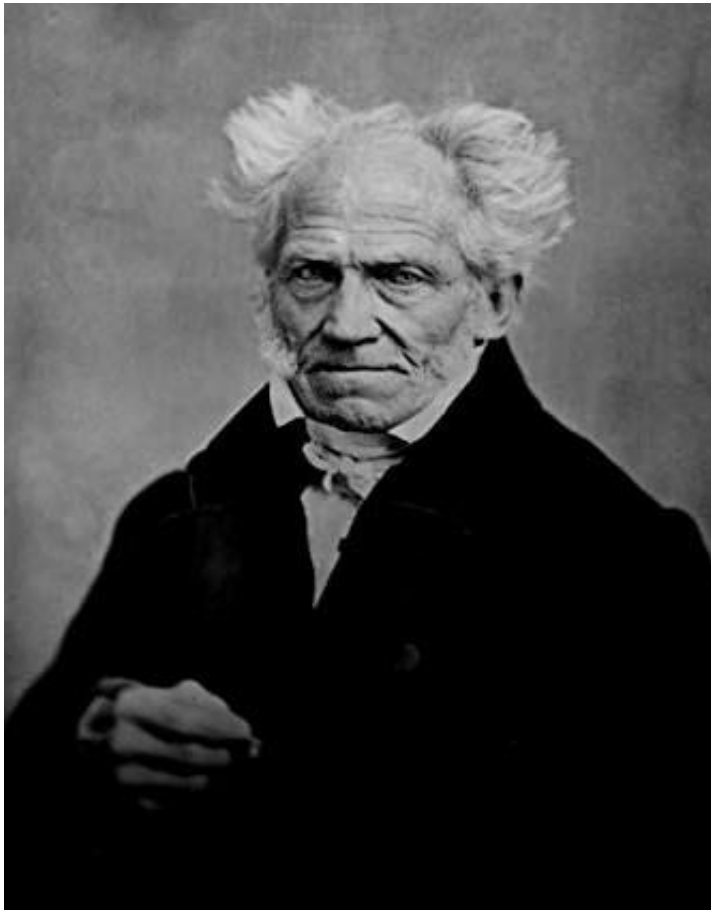
Two of Ms Barnett's compositions were played by the trio at this gig: *Lembing* and *Mantra II*. The first was noteworthy for its rhythmic sophistication, beginning with a statement from the trio led by the trombone. It segues into the rich walking bass of Sam Anning and a swinging up-tempo trombone solo of expressive lyricism and pulsing energy. There is then a tempo change and another statement by the trio, followed by a swaggering trombone solo with Anning's bass pulsing along, and then stunning piano from Ms Keller. I seem to recall elements of free jazz in the work by this trio in this performance*.



Sam Anning (left), Andrea Keller (right), pictured here with Julien Wilson (centre)...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

*A review of this performance by Eric Myers, entitled "Shannon Barnett Trio On Song For SIMA", published in "The Australian" on March 11, 2020, can be read on this site at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/theaustralian-2015-16>

The second work reflects the courage and trust of Ms Barnett as a performing artist: it depended on silence to release its power and the audience complied reverentially. Strangely, no sounds seemed to leak in from outside such as traffic or bar noise: no one coughed or moved. It was an electric moment worth treasuring and was a moment that recalls what Schopenhauer has written: "...the effect of music is so much more powerful and penetrating than that of other arts, for they speak only of shadows, but music speaks of the thing itself." (*The World as Will and Representation*).



Schopenhauer: the effect of music is so much more powerful and penetrating than that of other arts...

Mantra II was a simple piece Ms Barnett claims, and in it Ms Keller uses plastic spoons to create delicious sounds from the strings of her piano, Sam Anning plucks a note out of the silence that resonates like a joyful beat of a singing heart, and Shannon Barnett uses her exquisite voice, and clear and wondrous trombone, to embody the work with the soul of a performer who possesses a deep musicality.

The document *Hype* featuring herself on trombone, with Stefan Karl Schmid, tenor saxophone; David Helm, double bass; and Fabian Arends on drums, was recorded in November 2016, in Bonn. All nine compositions are by Ms Barnett and its programme provides an overview of her composing skills and of her improvisational mastery in a small group setting. The title track reveals speed of execution and control at an up-tempo performance; *Lembing* some lyrical beauty in her sound; tight harmony with the tenor on *People Don't Listen to Music Any More*;

some comedy in a fast and intriguing harmony on *Speaking in Tongues*; and a moving solo on *Chasing the Second*. Her writing for the “concerto for bass” on the final track *The Spirit is Willing but the Flesh is Weak*, is a highlight and a fine climax to the proceedings.



As a 14-year-old I eagerly devoured paperbacks of all sorts. One I bought in a newsagency (which pre-dates Humphreys on the Corso, Manly) was on philosophy. St Augustine featured, and I was struck by his message on “original sin”.



St Augustine: As a 14-year-old I was struck by his message on “original sin”...

His view was that we humans are intrinsically flawed, flawed by nature in our very being. We suffer, argue, feel lost and lonely, lack empathy, sulk, obsess and hate. On reading that, I saw articulated what seemed self-evident to my senses, to my



Ian Muldoon, pictured here while in attendance at “The Coltrane Project” at Foundry 616 in Sydney: “this music” puts me ‘beside myself, in company far better than my own...

thinking and to my observations. Despite the millions of advertisements I’ve been subject to, the ideology associated with the pursuit of so called “happiness” mainly through shopping, or fashion, the parental rubbish about “you can be anything you put your mind to” and the Walt Disney, National Geographic (circa 1950s) views of the world, I’m convinced St Augustine got it right, atheistic though I am.

One of the greatest avenues to a better place, has been “this music” which puts me “beside myself”, or more exactly, in company far better than my own.