

LLOYD SWANTON: HIGH PRIEST OF THE CATHOLICS CONFESSES ALL

by John Shand*

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Remember FUN, the thing you had in your late teens? The ingredients were sex, drugs, alcohol and, of course, music. Some music we associate with fun in a nostalgic way: the songs that were current during those first shy-and-eager forays with the pants off, or when you smoked your first joint, or threw up copious quantities of some vile, teenage booze confection. Other music actually radiates its own sense of fun: Louis Armstrong, early Beatles, early Frank Zappa, chunks of Lester Bowie, Erik Satie and Jon Rose all spring to mind.



The Catholics L-R, Sandy Evans, James Greening, Toby Hall, Swanton, Dave Brewer, Michel Rose, Fabian Hevia... PHOTO CREDIT ERICA MURRAY

And The Catholics. They present pure aural fun, seemingly unadulterated by arty or commercial considerations. Theirs is music to smile and dance to. On stage, The Catholics spend a lot of time smiling - at each other and at the merrily dancing

**In 2019, John Shand had written about music and theatre since 1981 in more than 30 publications, including for Fairfax Media since 1993. He is also a playwright, author, poet, librettist, drummer and winner of the 2017 Walkley Arts Journalism Award.*

audience. But if you just want to listen, you can delight in the fact that this is exceptionally well-made fun, with Lloyd Swanton on basses, Dave Brewer, guitar, Sandy Evans, saxes, James Greening, trombone, Toby Hall, drums, Michel Rose, pedal steel guitar, and Fabian Hevia on percussion.

But what stands out is how different it is. I mean, pedal steel? Happily, there is no label for this infectious conglomeration of jazz, latin, afro, reggae, country and blues. The common denominator, other than the effervescence of all the players, is the man who put it all together and who writes most of the songs, Lloyd Swanton.

Born in Sydney in 1960, Swanton was glued to the pop charts by the age of nine, falling in love with such hits as *Born to be Wild* and *Maggie May*. It was a period of his childhood that he recalled with affection, as we chatted on the terrace of a bar overlooking Bondi Beach.

"Then I got side-tracked," he explained, "and wasn't into music until my mid-teens, when I got into heavy metal: Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin and the like. My best friend bought an electric guitar, so I said I'd get a bass guitar, not really knowing what a bass guitar even was. I think I had observed it had four strings, not six. Then, around sixteen or seventeen, I realised there were two double basses at home."



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This, I observed, rather contrasts the Swanton household with your average family home...

"My dad, who was a non-professional violinist, bought them to muck around on. One of them was brought up to scratch for me to play. The other one was pretty much unusable. My dad bought it off this guy who not only dropped it down some stairs, but then fell into it!"

At this stage, Lloyd's only contact with jazz was a much admired Ellington record of his father's, with *Black and Tan Fantasy* on one side, and *Mood Indigo* on the other. Some school friends were aware of Dave Brubeck, but it was the virtuoso rock guitarists like Jeff Beck who really fired his imagination. John McLaughlin was then only one step away, which paved the way for Mingus and Miles Davis.



John McLaughlin (above) was only one step away, which paved the way for Mingus and Miles Davis...PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

"I definitely had this perception that the bass player got a better share of the limelight in the jazz idiom," he said, which led him to apply to do Jazz Studies at the New South Wales Conservatorium. "I think they needed bass players in the course, because I could barely play a 12-bar blues. I could read music on the bass - I'd played in theatre musicals at school, and in some orchestras - but I didn't know a great deal about the idiom at all. It's kind of scary to turn up on the first day, and there's Chris Abrahams, Dale Barlow and James Morrison, none of whom I'd ever heard of, but I could hear that they certainly knew how to play their instruments."

Together with pianist Abrahams, saxophonist Barlow and drummer Andrew Gander, Swanton formed the band that catapulted the four of them to prominence fifteen years ago: the Benders. They may not have broken much new ground musically, but they did offer a kick in the pants to the local jazz scene with their youth, exuberance, ambition and dedication.



The Benders, in rear L-R, Chris Abrahams & Dale Barlow ... in front L-R, Andrew Gander and Lloyd Swanton...PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

"We approached the band like a rock band in terms of our loyalty. We never used fill-ins unless it was a last-minute disaster. This was at a time when the freelance mentality was very strong in the jazz scene. But we had grown up under the rock and pop idea that a band sticks together. We rehearsed very, very intensely. 'We're going to be stars' was the approach."

Would they play together again? "No," snapped Swanton, before laughing at his own vehemence. "Absolutely not. Not only were there some real personality clashes, but also, musically speaking, it doesn't make any sense. And I wouldn't want to do it out of nostalgia. That doesn't interest me in the least.

"I have nothing but pride for what we did at the time, but I think we'd make a mockery of it to do it again. It might surprise people, but I actually see the Necks as what the Benders should have evolved into. I was the first one to pull out of the Benders, and I think it was partly that I wanted to get more into the area the Necks are doing, and it obviously wasn't going to happen with that line-up. So, after a bit of a cooling-off and a think, I got together with Chris, because I knew that he was

probably the most like-minded in the Benders. And Tony [Buck, drums] turned out to be the perfect third person. We didn't need a quartet. Despite the fact Buck currently resides in Amsterdam, the Necks continue to be the number one priority for all three members.



The Necks continue to be the number one priority for all three members, L-R, Chris Abrahams, Tony Buck & Lloyd Swanton...

"I would say the band I feel I'm doing the most profound thing with is the Necks, with The catholics close behind. The catholics' music is something I'm very proud of, but I don't think we're trying to turn people on their heads as much as the Necks. Putting together that combination of musicians has brought about an actual style of music which it is hard to find many stylistic precedents for. It's not that often that you come up with a whole style of music just by the combination of people in it. Terms like hypnotic or minimalist have been used, but none of them really distinguish the Necks from other music that would be described like that. I had frequently found [with other bands] that I enjoyed the fade-out on the vamp more than the hoary old standard. So why not just play endings? Play one chord."

Though his number two priority, The catholics certainly consume more of his time, and are a more visible presence on the music scene. In the middle of the year they completed a tour of Canada that took in 25 shows in 13 days in eight cities. Their burgeoning popularity reflects the broad appeal of their unique blend of music.

"It really does reflect my taste," said Swanton, "and my own ideas about how to put a band and a piece of music together. Like a lot of freelance jazz players, I'd played in various combinations in different styles of music, and found it very exciting. It was my idea to bring together all these things that I was enjoying, and see if it worked."

"I'm finding out lots about it as I go along. I try to draw from a whole new genre with each piece of music I write. The instrumentation defines the sound to a great extent. I couldn't get across the ideas so effectively if I had alto saxophone, piano, bass and drums. It's not as if just by putting together this weird combination of instruments you'll create a whole new style of but by putting the same old combination together, you're really limiting your chances of coming up with anything new. That's why the quartet format I mentioned is one of the last things I'd think of if I was trying to make a fresh statement, because it's just such a narrow tonal range."

The catholics' particular array of instruments and players helps the band to work on two levels. Firstly, it allows for authenticity of sounds from particular genres, and secondly, when an instrument is used in a context not normally associated with it, it throws a whole new light on that music.

Swanton agreed. "We can pare down to two horns, bass and drums, and it sounds like a jazz group. You bring in percussion, and it starts to sound a little less specific to that genre. You bring in Dave [Brewer] playing Buddy Guy and funk and soul idioms on the guitar, and it's really pushing it out. Then you bring in an instrument like the pedal steel, which is not central to that tradition in any shape or form, and you're really giving yourself a lot of room to move in."



The catholics at Foundry 616 in 2014... PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY

Talk of room to move made me curious as to what extent Swanton wanted The catholics to be treated as a dance band. "I like people to think that they can do anything they want to. We have a flexible repertoire. If it turns out that the dancing has more or less taken over the night, then we'll just play the totally jumpy end of the repertoire. But if it's a sit-down audience, or a combination, then we'll do some - 'cerebral' is not a word that leaps to mind with The catholics - but stuff that is not so physically inclined. I love people dancing. It's a real instant communication."

The other way of instantly communicating with the wider audience is to have a singer. Swanton is keen on the idea, but does not want the whole repertoire to be vocal.

"I really like the ambiguity of instrumental music. I love the way you can hint at moods. What I would have is a singer who sings three or four songs a night, and basically just causes havoc in the band-room the rest of the time... If it does come about, it will probably be someone who can sing well and happens to play an instrument I can use. My first instinct would be a percussionist, because I would very much like to increase the percussive element even further."

Other than the Benders, the band that probably established Swanton's reputation as one of our premiere bassists was the Bernie McGann Trio, which he has been a member of for some 13 years. "I really liked the way Bernie played the first time I heard him, so it was a great privilege to work so much with him. He's much more identified with the tradition than I would ever be, and yet he can't help sounding like he does. The only person I can really hear an influence of is Sonny Rollins."



Swanton (right) with the two other members of the Bernie McGann Trio, John Pochée (left) and McGann (centre)...

Beyond McGann's trio, Swanton is currently involved in Clarion Fracture Zone, and has recently been regular bassist with Mike Nock, Jeremy Sawkins and Alison O'Carroll. Nonetheless, he can go for three weeks at a stretch without a single gig. "I think people assume that if you're running your own band you're playing with them all the time. But if they actually looked at a gig-guide, they'd see that's not the case."

Swanton's view of Australia's place in the wider world of jazz is refreshing: "I think we should see ourselves as a little eddy off to the side of the mainstream, where all these amazing things can develop, informed by the rest of the world, but more or less unmolested by it. There's a freshness here that you just can't deny. A few people here are wise enough to see that there's no great tradition that they should be obliged to pay allegiance to. I love the Black jazz tradition. My preference is from Charlie Parker onwards - that's really the music that I fell in love with when I started listening to

jazz. But I don't get a great thrill out of achieving an authenticity of style. And let's face it, how many foreign jazz musicians have gone to the jazz mecca, New York, and really made it? You can name Joe Zawinul, John McLaughlin, Dave Holland... Basically, you've got to be American and Black, and that's just the way it works out.

"It seems so much easier to work on home turf with musicians that you can relate to, who understand your own personal approach to things, your laconic Australian wit [laughs]. I get really tired of having to explain myself when I'm working with people from a whole different background. I almost have to speak in baby talk sometimes with American musicians when they come here - not the way I'm accustomed to bantering with my friends."

While someone like Dewey Redman can repay the hassles, Lloyd's experience with James Carter definitely did not. He found the young American saxophonist prone to excessive stereotyping of who was the "star", and of the role of the rhythm section, which appeared to Swanton to amount to little more than slave labour, as Carter played interminable solos. "I don't want to sound ungrateful to the people who came to hear it, or the people who brought him out, but it was far removed from my idea of playing music."



Playing with James Carter (above) was far removed from Swanton's idea of playing music... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Favourite bass players? All the great names came tumbling out, with Charlie Haden on top as a soloist. Jackie Orszaczky and Doug Williams received warm accolades, before Lloyd moved on to his special interest in bass players who write and produce, including such diverse figures as Sam Jones, Mingus, Bill Laswell, Marcus Miller and Robbie Shakespeare.

"I've always felt that it's really unhealthy as an artist to idolise anyone, because I think that, by definition, idolising someone is saying you'll never be as good as them. Though I'd never be so arrogant as to say I'm going to be as good as Ray Brown, I'm certainly not going to say that I won't be as good. You might as well give up if you're

going to say that. I think a lot of people have given up already by putting those people up so high - they put themselves down so low."



Swanton is certainly not going to say that he won't be as good as Ray Brown (pictured above)... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

For the future, The catholics have return invitations to many of the festivals they played at in Canada. The albums are close to being released in Europe, which should lead to a tour there, as well.

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Touring has been expensive, both because of the size of the band and Lloyd's desire to "do everything properly". He has ploughed most of his money into such tours and the albums.

"A lot of people doing things for themselves have been scared off too early in the piece. They think, 'Oh, I can't find \$4,000 to do an album'. But if you really want to do an album, you find it. You've got to be serious. There's a certain amount of investment involved. The catholics and the Necks are my two best chances to actually make some money, eventually, which is a really rare thing to do with jazz records. So that'd be nice."