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REIMAGINING THE DOUBLE BASS: LLOYD SWANTON AND THE NECKS

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In this article, I address how Australian-born bassist Lloyd Swanton has reimagined the role of the bass in The Necks and, in doing so, expands on the musical practices with which the bass player is associated in academic literature. Drawing on fieldwork with Swanton and musical investigation, I provide a perspective on Swanton's processes of making music through the lens of his most well-known project, The Necks, a collaborative ensemble with pianist Chris Abrahams and drummer Tony Buck. I argue that the equal ensemble role and the removal of soloing in The Necks creates a context in which Swanton reshapes the role and sound of the bass. Integral to reimagining the sound and role of the bass is an element of cultural hybridity. I also suggest that the sound of the bass and the role it plays is more diverse than the academic literature presents and actively shapes music making, a change that has been occurring since the 1960s (Dowdall 2018). The case study of Swanton suggests a vision for the bass role that does not necessarily need to keep precise metric time but can mark time differently and can be a primary source of musical information even when not soloing. This musical role would not be possible if the hierarchies of the ensemble were not levelled by the removal of the soloist as the featured performer in The Necks. The research that informs this article was gathered over a sustained six-month period of ethnographic inquiry in Sydney and musical analysis that both informed and was part of the dialogue in the interview. I begin the article by exploring the established bass role in academic literature and the changes that have occurred to how the role is understood. I then address the emerging scholarship of the ensemble, The Necks, before exploring Swanton's musical development and the development of his innovative approach to the bass in The Necks, which demonstrates his reimagining of both the role and sound of the bass.

Changes to the Established Bass Role in the Academic Literature

Scholarship on the musical practices of double bass players has predominantly been centred around the traditions of swing, bebop and the association of the instrument in jazz with the walking bass line. Some of the earliest academic literature on the double bass examines the limited regard critics had for the instrument and the abilities of its practitioners (Chevan 1989). Despite many significant developments taking place in

jazz double bass players' playing, perceptions of the role of the double bass player are still predominantly linked to the harmonic and rhythmic foundation of the music (Berliner 1994; Monson 1996). More recent studies have demonstrated the development of more virtuosic, melodic and interactive approaches facilitated by changes to jazz styles (Rush 2017) and the influence of technology on how the bass is played (Dowdall 2018). The role of the bass player in jazz has been recognised, as in the ethnographic work of Berliner (1994) and Monson (1996), to have significance to the most characteristic qualities of the music such as swing and interaction. Berliner (1994: 319–22) describes a bass role which is focused on being the harmonic and rhythmic foundation of the performance. Monson (1996: 29–43) expands this to include the concept of ensemble interaction as accepted and necessary in bass accompaniment, but it is always secondary to dominant melodic material from the soloist. Both texts, while crucial in defining the bass role and its musical practices, are indicative of the broader discourse of jazz literature that focuses on conventional soloist-accompanist relationships, with the bass player being the accompanist. There is a clear accompaniment role carved out for its activities, which means the bass has a subordinate role in the hierarchy of the ensemble: 'convention dictates that drummers and bass players receive fewer solos than other musicians' (Berliner 1994: 29). These texts tend to ignore relationships between instruments that have a greater degree of equality, such as in Ornette Coleman's Quartet, *The Shape of Jazz to Come* (1959).

Charlie Haden's approach in Ornette Coleman's Quartet has been a source of inspiration for Swanton's (pers. comm. 2014b) exploration of the expressive, textural and melodic capacities of the instrument, such as Haden's use of strumming. Haden can be seen as a critical precursor to Swanton's approach along with David Izenson, who utilised different forms of bowing with Archie Shepp and Coleman[1]. These players' approaches are not considered archetypal models pedagogically and historically: instead, they are positioned as exceptional or on the margins of jazz performance. Their exploration of the capacities of the instrument, incorporating techniques such as strumming and bowing and Coleman's harmolodics approach to tonal organisation, is part of why they are not the core business of jazz bass playing. Rush (2017: 8) discusses how harmolodics gives 'equal consideration' to each player and replaces improvisation over chord changes with improvising over the 'ethos of the composition'. Harmolodics includes balancing improvising both inside and outside the harmonic structures of the composition, playing with rhythmic and harmonic tension and manipulating timbre (Rush 2017: 9). Despite not being the core business of jazz bass playing, Coleman's ensemble's approach is a core point of reference for Swanton's innovations. Robert Hodson (2007: 171) refers to how the musicians in Ornette Coleman's free jazz ensembles 'weave lines contrapuntally around one another', changing the ensemble organisation. According to Rush (2017), Coleman's ensembles were a challenge to the jazz ensemble structure through the participatory nature of the harmolodics approach. Rush (2017: 8) discusses how harmolodics gives 'equal consideration' to each player and replaces improvisation over chord changes with improvising over the 'ethos of the composition'. Harmolodics includes balancing improvising both inside and outside the harmonic structures of the composition, playing with rhythmic and harmonic tension and manipulating timbre (Rush 2017: 9). Charlie Haden's 'plaintive and melodic approach to bass' was a key part of exploring the instrument beyond 'the strict characterisations found in bebop' and Rush (2017: 140) discusses how this ensemble allowed the bass role to be expanded in terms of its melodic role.

Performance-based scholarship at the beginning of the twenty-first century has often focused on the study of improvised solos by bass players that demonstrate the capabilities of the instrument beyond this role. These studies, at times, neglect discussion of changes in the musical hierarchies at play in favour of pedagogical description of musical materials, melodic and rhythmic. Examples of studies which present a more melodic role for the bass in jazz include Butterfield's (2008) study of *The Improvisational Language of Niels-Henning Orsted-Pedersen* and Wilner's (1995) *Interactive Jazz Improvisation in the Bill Evans Trio (1959–1961): A Stylistic Study for Advanced Double Bass Performance*.

More recent scholarship has sought to build on and diversify the practices and role with which the double bass player is associated in jazz. According to Dowdall (2018), changing perspectives of how double bass players play in jazz ensembles have been significantly influenced by developments in recording and amplification technology. He discusses the importance of electric bass players, such as Jaco Pastorius, whose use of the instrument and technical facility was combined with musical ability to bring the bass to the forefront of jazz developments. Pastorius utilised the greater dynamic range of the electric bass to shape interactions clearly and 'challenge the soloist' as an equal party on albums such as Pat Metheny's *Bright Size Life* (Dowdall 2018: 127). Similarly, bass playing in small ensembles by double bass players of the same period, such as Dave Holland, were often interactive and influenced by the use of electric bass in rock, funk, and pop. Holland continues to demonstrate these influences in his small and large ensembles (see e.g. his recording, *Critical Mass* (2006)).

Some contemporary bassists, such as Christian McBride, adopt what is at times a more conventional approach to the bass role. However, the innovations and sound of the electric bass continue to impact bassists' approach along with the incorporation of elements of hip-hop and rock (Dowdall 2018: 178). Bassists, such as Chris Lightcap, adopt the melodic and sometimes asymmetric riffs of rock in their double bass playing along with an interactive approach that suggests the transference of elements of Pastorius' approach onto the double bass. Lightcap's approach is partly reflective of his listening to the Beatles and James Brown, who also influenced Pastorius (Tamarkin 2019). In the same way, Travis Jackson's (2012: 169–78) discussion of Larry Grenadier's playing in contemporary jazz groups still performing parts of the bebop and swing tradition, notes that, despite performing this repertoire, Grenadier is demonstrated to be a key instigator of interaction while recording Steve Wilson's new arrangement of 'Perdido'.

Developing Scholarship on The Necks

The formation of The Necks has been well documented in John Shand's (2009) book, *Jazz the Australian Accent*, and Tony Mitchell's (2013) interview, 'The Necks 25 Years on: A Changing Same?'. It is worth noting, however, that The Necks stemmed from a mutual disaffection with the musical role of accompanying frontline solos and a mutual creative desire to explore the possibilities of extended vamps without solos. The ensemble disrupts some of the different expectations of improvisation in jazz and free improvisation, as its focus is on the process of musical performance. This approach to performance is framed by forty-minute to one-hour sets, and only one performer may start the performance. Small musical ideas are used and they tend not to be complete melodic phrases and song-like structures. These musical ideas slowly change in relation to the other players' responding musical ideas to shape the improvisation. An example of this can be found in The Necks' performance, 'Ohioan', in Copenhagen (2014) where Abrahams begins the piece with subtle variations on a musical fragment for a minute and a half before Swanton joins and then Buck. The Necks responds to trends in contemporary jazz, such as complex harmonies and virtuosic improvisation with an alternative that uses an egalitarian ensemble hierarchy. As such, the ensemble reflects thinking emerging from free jazz, particularly Ornette Coleman who has influenced Swanton. The trio's musical performances, however, reflect an ensemble structure hierarchy in which they are equal accompanists rather than simultaneous soloists as in Coleman's group.

Thinking in terms of minimalism and repetition dominate perceptions of The Necks. They are just as easily associated with more participatory musical events, however, which emphasise interaction through group entrainment in performance, necessary to the structures of music from Africa both Swanton and Buck were interested in (Williams 2010). The performance context of The Necks is a space in which we can see how Swanton develops and reframes musical practices using approaches to improvisation from jazz, Western art music and a range of world musics as core musical processes. The examination of two specific techniques will help explain how he has reimagined the bass role and the extent to which it has developed from the traditional accompaniment role.

Galbraith (2014) has argued that the significant changes made by The Necks to the jazz piano trio extend the traditional ensemble format. Galbraith's (2014: 277) argument builds on similar trends in media commentary on The Necks, which describe the group in terms of a fusion of 'minimalism, ambient, new music and world influences'. Such thinking often compares The Necks to musicians such as Brian Eno and Steve Reich (Shand 2009: 97). Galbraith's argument that The Necks provides an innovative take on an established ensemble style by utilising a range of influences is, of course, true. However, the innovations of its performative processes and levelling of ensemble hierarchy remain unexplored (2014: 193). The academic literature on The Necks is limited to Galbraith's work and a brief case study of The Necks that appears in a book chapter by John Whiteoak (2008) which surveys the development of jazz in Australia. Whiteoak (2008: 55) discusses The Necks in the context of the development of jazz in Australia, noting the importance of cultural hybridity to the development of jazz in Australia. Whiteoak (2008: 50–5) focuses on the group in relation to minimalist and post-punk aesthetics, which relates to the use of repetition and experimentation in the ensemble's approach. Swanton's bass playing and the processes of music making it reveals are not the direct subject of either study. By focusing on Swanton's changes to the bass role in the ensemble, this article builds on the important work begun by Galbraith's and Whiteoak's scholarship on the impact of The Necks from the specific performance perspective of the bass role. In doing so, it demonstrates some of Swanton's distinctive and original contribution to jazz and improvisation.

The literature on The Necks and Swanton appears overwhelmingly in informal publications, such as interviews and reviews in online magazines. Along with Galbraith (2014), this literature views The Necks' approach to the piano trio and improvisation and the group's broad cultural impact as significant. The group's interview with cultural studies scholar Tony Mitchell (2013), 'The Necks 25 Years on: A

Changing Same?', and several popular monographs on jazz and improvisation, such as Richard Williams (2009) *The Blue Moment* and John Shand's (2009) *Jazz the Australian Accent*, all view the group's approach (improvisation without soloing) as innovative. This informal literature, however, stops short of in-depth musical and cultural analysis. Academic and informal literature is absent, as such, particularly in terms of Swanton's bass playing and there is room for further contribution to its study. The performance practices of the musicians are especially significant for examination as they help reveal the processes involved in the group's idiosyncratic approach to improvisation and the nature of the ensemble structure.

I argue, in what follows, that the changes to the ensemble hierarchy of The Necks has opened up a place to reimagine the established bass role and its sound. Swanton builds on the practices of bass players in less orthodox jazz ensembles, drawing on his diverse listening and musical experiences. Swanton's changes to how the bass role is played, however, are not confined to his work with The Necks, and the development of these ideas extends to more mainstream jazz contexts.

The Roots of The Necks: Engaging with Improvisation, Jazz and the Double Bass

Swanton trained in jazz at the New South Wales Conservatorium of Music, learning the standard repertoire and the performance of a traditional bass role. This involved mastery of the bebop idiom and the designated role of bass accompanist discussed earlier. Swanton's pursuit of the bass accompanist role with assigned solo space continued in his initial professional period following the Conservatorium of which he comments:

> I could certainly say that in the early days, as I was learning to play jazz in particular, I was really going down the orthodox template of learning to be a soloist and learning to accompany in a way that would provide the soloist with the sort of things that they're expecting … and that is still totally valid. But I guess I came to a realisation early on that I didn't have a talent for that particular virtuosic soloing, and I had to reassess what I was really good at. One thing I'm really good at is questioning the status quo. Whether I've got an answer or not, I've always thought about what music means. I've always thought about the role of the bass in jazz (Swanton, pers. comm. 2014a).

Swanton chooses to characterise the broadening of his musical practice in a self-effacing manner. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, he was, in fact, highly regarded and renowned for his jazz standard and bop playing by his peers and was employed by the legendary Australian saxophonist in the bop idiom, Bernie McGann. His questioning (Swanton, pers. comm. 2014a) of the status quo and the role of the bass in jazz demonstrate the centrality of critical reflection and learning to the development of his musical practice. In his work, Swanton has questioned why time must be kept in particular ways and why tonality must move in a strict temporal relationship with rhythmic duration to demarcate chord progressions. It is from this questioning that Swanton reimagines the bass beyond its definition as a harmonic and time-keeping instrument into a more fluid role in The Necks and The catholics[2].

While Swanton enjoys swinging and grooving, he sees the bass role as more flexible than merely accompanying and soloing. Such a view helps to explain his part in the development of an ensemble approach in The Necks, where no one solos, or his approach to The catholics in which the bass lines are often melodic (e.g. in the tune, 'Home' (1994)). Swinging remains significant to Swanton's performance career because he still performs in ensembles under others' leadership[3]: it is one of many approaches in what is a necessarily hybrid overall practice, like many of his contemporaries. It is a significant practice for the way it maintains the relationship to the social and the musical signs of the jazz bass role.

Swanton (pers. comm. 2014a) also considered becoming an orchestral musician after a 1985 European tour with The Benders that included the North Sea Jazz Festival. He studied with renowned classical virtuoso and London Symphony Orchestra principal bassist Thomas Martin during an extended period in London but decided not pursue a career in classical music. The knowledge transmitted by Martin, however, particularly in regard to techniques and principles of relaxation and ways to physically approach the instrument, has been important in facilitating Swanton's (pers. comm. 2014b) efforts to create a range of sounds with which to improvise. Swanton (pers. comm. 2014a) also expresses respect for the use of dynamics in the performance of classical music and sees a place for greater attention to them in jazz performance.

It was the chance discovery of Christopher Small's *Music, Society and Education* (1977) at a bookstore near London's Ealing Tube Station following a bass lesson with Martin, however, that would have the most significant effect on the conceptualisation of process in his music. Swanton's interest in this book is briefly mentioned in Shand's (2009) *Jazz: The Australian Accent* as a factor in the development of his approach to improvisation with The Necks. Swanton's engagement with the text extends much further, stimulating his music making philosophically. Swanton (pers. comm. 2014b) made contact with the publisher, after reading Small's book, and obtained copies of reviews of the book. He then began corresponding with Small about the book: a correspondence that would intermittently continue, exchanging thoughts on music and recordings, until Small's passing. Small's work helped Swanton formulate a conception or philosophy, which focuses on process as the music's main point, positioning style as secondary in The Necks. This focus on process has guided the approach of The Necks and its innovations beyond the regular format of the jazz piano trio (Galbraith 2014: 278). The musical performances of approximately 40 minutes to an hour are built almost entirely around process and the ensemble's piano trio instrumentation. One member begins the performance playing a small musical idea which the other two players eventually join. They very slowly change small aspects of the intertwined fragments that they play until new material emerges. The structure of the ensemble reflects egalitarian thinking with no player soloing and all three simultaneously accompanying.

While process has always been important to jazz, removing solos, song forms and metric organisation as stylistic features of performance and implementing egalitarian or level ensemble roles was a rather radical departure (Litweiler 2009)[4]. Swanton comments that for him:

> focus on the process rather than the outcome — for me personally that was huge, that was the notion that excited me most. In terms of putting the band together (The Necks), I just wanted to pursue a band that only existed in the moment, and the final outcome was irrelevant. (Swanton, pers. comm. 2014a).

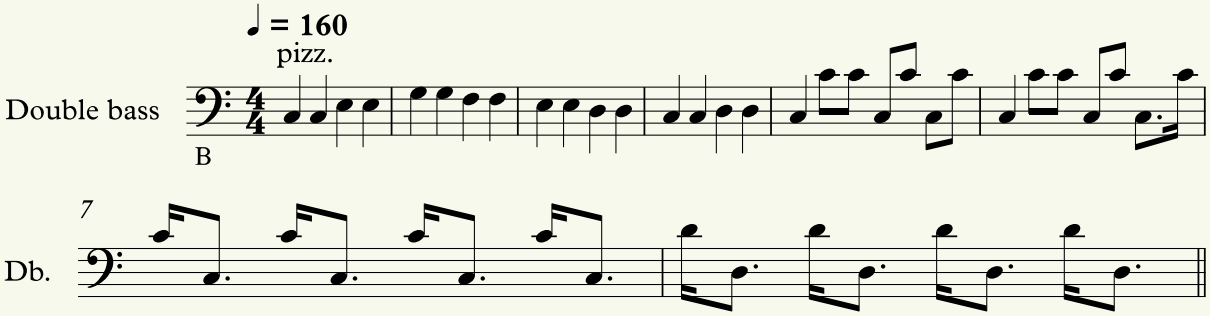
Small's focus on process reinforced Swanton's experiences playing and listening to music without precomposed structures and aided in articulating a vision for the improvisational approach used in The Necks. Swanton notes that Miles Davis' *In A Silent Way* (1969) and ālāp sections of Indian classical music performances were particularly influential on the sound of the ensemble, although these influences are not always apparent. The discovery of Small's book coincided with a time in which Swanton was also absorbing the sounds of the U.K.'s diasporic populations from Britain's former empire, particularly reggae and musics from Africa and the Caribbean. The coalescing of these experiences led to an approach to music that sought to change musical practice through the process of learning.

Improvising to a Different Tune in The Necks: The Genesis of Swanton's Approach to Strumming the Bass

There is also an underlying theme in Swanton's work congruent with his leadership of The catholics[5] that looks at different conceptions of structuring time and feeling groove. The group primarily uses traditional jazz piano trio instrumentation with Swanton on bass, Chris Abrahams on piano and Tony Buck on Drums. The style of the group is often compared with minimalism and, to this effect, the sound of the drone from ālāp sections of Hindustani music can be perceived as the music evolves slowly and primarily uses a static tonal centre. Whereas Galbraith (2014: 278, 293) has argued that The Necks extends the jazz piano trio format and eschews the virtuoso profile, implications for ensemble roles and how it affects specific instrumental approaches, go further.

In The Necks, Swanton has developed an approach to the double bass that expands on the traditionally perceived time-keeping role in jazz in which he was trained. An important point in developing this has been the work of Charlie Haden with Ornette Coleman, and how he created interest without harmonic change. Shand (2009: 217) writes that John Coltrane's *My Favorite Things* (1961) and the repetitive bass ostinatos of Steve Davis underpinning vamps and 'Shhh/ Peaceful' from Miles Davis' 1969 masterpiece *In a Silent Way*, led Swanton to the question, 'What if everybody stuck to their small, repetitive rhythmic cells, and only advanced the change slowly?'. Shand then goes on to comment that Swanton's employment of a bass technique from Charlie Haden's work with Ornette Coleman was integral to Swanton's ability to maintain movement rhythmically while holding the harmonic movement. In this technique, Swanton (pers. comm. 2014b) stalls harmonic movement by adopting a pedal point function but maintains forward movement by alternating octaves and inserting rhythms which accentuate syncopation. For instance, his demonstration of the technique in Fig. 1 (Swanton, pers. comm.

Figure 1. Excerpt from an unpublished interview of Swanton's interpretation of Charlie Haden's pedal-point bass line (Swanton, pers. comm. 2014a)



2014b). Swanton has taken this technique beyond imitation and the initial experimentation process detailed in Shand's monograph. It is also more complicated than Shand's (2009: 117) suggestion that Swanton thought about 'removing the conversation' and 'staying with the vamp'. Swanton sees this technique as interactive in a rhythmic sense, giving him the opportunity to improvise by 'picking out rhythms' (Swanton, pers. comm. 2014b).

The conventional bass player, drummer and piano player accompanist roles in jazz ensembles do not constrain the way the performers approach their instruments in The Necks because of its limited but specific structures. The Necks might not seem overtly conversational because the performance is not held together by regular structures, but all ensemble performances are predicated on musical communication. It is also important to consider that The Necks has no predetermined form delineating harmonic movement or organising larger periods of time except for the hour-long set length, so interaction does not need to be instantaneous and can be drawn out over time, allowing the improvised process of creating musical ideas to come to the fore. In this way, The Necks offers a different musical perspective, which reflects the culmination of long-term changes to the ensemble roles of jazz musicians.

Swanton's development of this technique is part of a nuanced attempt to improvise in as many ways as possible: harmonically, rhythmically, texturally and dynamically. After The Necks had been performing some time, Swanton recognised that he needed 'to create more density' and so adopted a technique from Charlie Haden's playing where he 'was just basically strumming with; I suspect the side of his thumb' (Swanton, pers. comm. 2014b). An example of Haden using this strumming technique can be heard on 'Ramblin' from Ornette Coleman's album, *Change of the Century* (1960). This variation occurs twelve seconds from the beginning (see Fig. 2). Haden's use of strumming is reminiscent of guitar strumming and interrupts a swing walking bass section over which Coleman and Don Cherry play the melody. Swanton demonstrated his interpretation and use of this technique which is transcribed in Fig. 3. Once Swanton adopted this technique, he began to use it creatively and has gone on to expand the concept of maintaining rhythmic momentum while deferring harmonic movement.

> But my conclusion was he was trying to slow down the rate of harmonic change but still provide forward propulsion and rhythmic interest and so with that kind of realisation that's really something that I try to do a lot in The Necks (Swanton, pers. comm. 2014b).

These developments have also occurred through interaction and listening to other double bass players. Swanton continues (see Fig. 4):

> I've noticed John Lindberg (American bassist) and he was playing much more with it looked to me like the fingernail (plays example on bass). I like that, as almost like a ukulele sound and it's almost like comical and pissy but it cuts through really sharply … and then a revelation I had while I was playing with Madeleine Crispell (American pianist Crispell toured Australia with Lloyd on bass in the early 2000s) a few years ago and I'd never thought of this before because the strumming's fantastic but it's quite hard to narrowly focus it on one note. And then I thought well you can do octaves, do that on the lower note and use kind of a variation of the fingernail strum

Figure 2. Bass line excerpt from 'Ramblin'', *Change of the Century* (1960) (00:00:12)

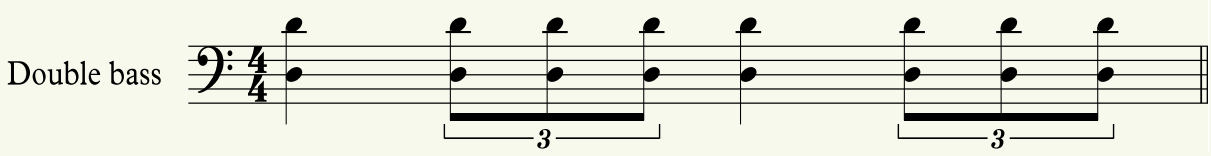
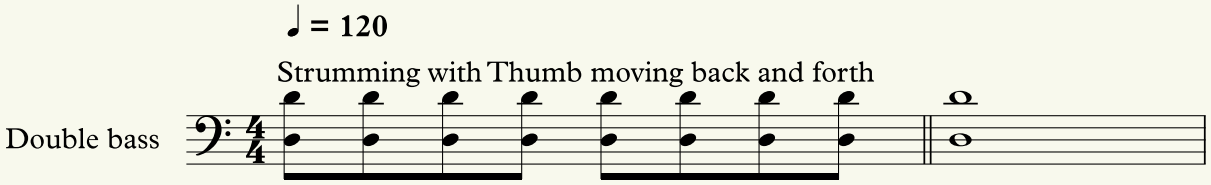


Figure 3. Swanton's interpretation of Charlie Haden's strumming (Swanton, pers. comm. 2014a)



on the higher one [Swanton plays example on bass transcribed in Fig. 4 using the thumb on the lower octave and index on upper simultaneously], and you can even do tenths. It took a little bit of work I had to emphasise the thumb because it was getting drowned out, but it gives a nice rumble underneath (Swanton, pers. comm. 2014b).

The harmonic and rhythmic capacities of this strumming technique have become a core way in which Swanton approaches the ensemble's level hierarchies in performance and the bass' different role, demonstrating both the influences on his playing and his creativity in applying them to The Necks.

The Development of Swanton's Arco Practice in The Necks

Swanton's particular development of an individual arco approach is evidence of the use of learning to stimulate creative practice and affect changes to the established sound and role of the double bass in jazz. It builds on the use of arco melodically in jazz and the exploration of its textural capacities begun by players such as David Izenson. This is significant because it is both a feature of the performance unlike a bass line and yet helps to drive the trio rhythmically in a way not usually associated with playing arco. Swanton has used the bow particularly in conjunction with tremolo practices to expand his improvisational approach, combining them to manipulate and obfuscate the rate of rhythmic and harmonic movement in improvisation. According to Swanton (pers. comm. 2014b), this technique allows him to explore the subtleties of timbre and dynamics, which are often thought difficult to achieve on the double bass. Swanton's (pers. comm. 2014b) development of a range of tremolo techniques with the bow can be heard on recordings and in performances over the past 10–15 years[6]. His motivation in developing this approach has also been practical. About ten years into The Necks, he realised that in order to maintain pace with Buck and Abrahams, he would need to develop ways to maintain intensity without causing injury during the hour-long sets:

> I use the bow a lot with The Necks but it's mostly about what has very much obsessed me the last 10 or 15 years, which is about creating texture or density without getting RSI and without being a totally unpleasant kind of sound. So I'll do a lot of tremolos and trills for example and the bow is fantastic for that (Swanton, pers. comm. 2014a).

The origins of his palette of rhythmic and textural techniques with the bow are as equally complex as those related to strumming, relying on the knowledge of multiple musics to achieve Swanton's goals. Swanton recalls his first encounter with the sound of the tremolo bow combination on an Archie Shepp piece with Dave Izenson playing bass[7]. Indeed, this is a technique that Izenson used widely including on prominent live recordings with Ornette Coleman released as *At the "Golden Circle" Vol. 1 & Vol. 2* (1965). His double bass teacher, Dave Ellis, played him Steve Reich's 'Music for Eighteen Musicians' (1978), and some 10–15 years later, in The Necks, he would find that by using tremolo bowing in the higher registers he could similarly invoke these sounds. While Swanton draws attention to these influences, it might also be possible to hear in his playing reference to the sound of Miles Davis' *In a Silent Way* (1969) or the drone-like tanpura and slow rhythmically attenuated evolution of the melody in ālāp sections of Indian classical music.

Figure 4. Swanton's development of the octave strumming (Swanton, pers. comm. 2014a).

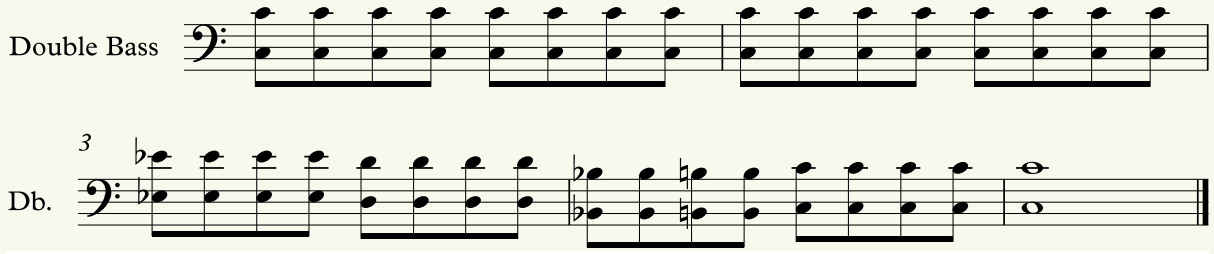


Figure 5. Transcription of tremolo bowing and cymbal rhythm from 'Townsville', *Townsville* (2007), (00:17:16)

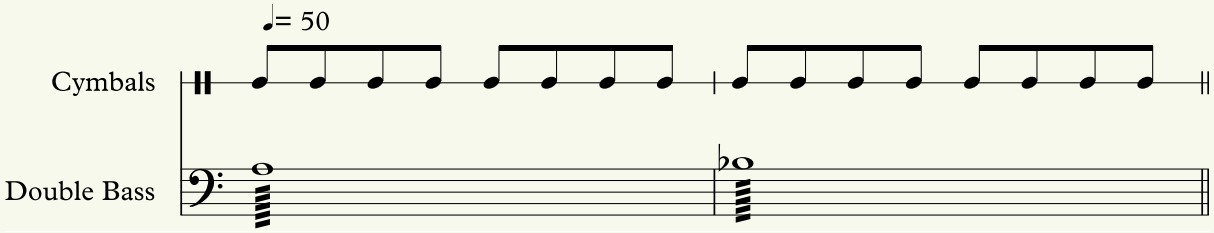


Figure 6. Transcription of tremolo bowing and cymbal rhythm from 'Townsville', *Townsville* (2007) (00:17:39)

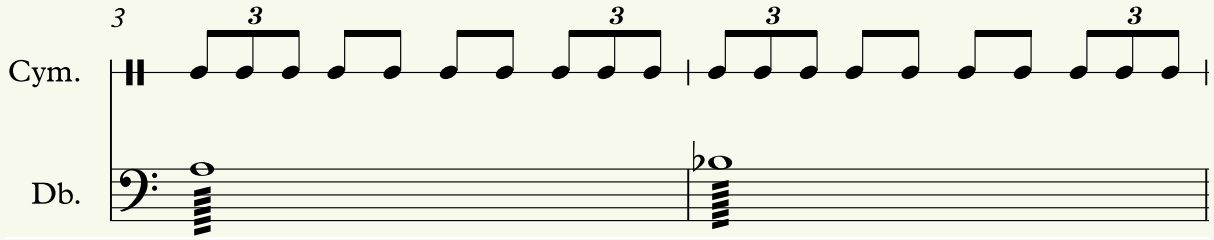


Figure 7. Transcription of tremolo bowing and cymbal rhythm from 'Townsville', *Townsville* (2007). Tremolo bowing and cymbal rhythm. {00:18:16) Transcription.

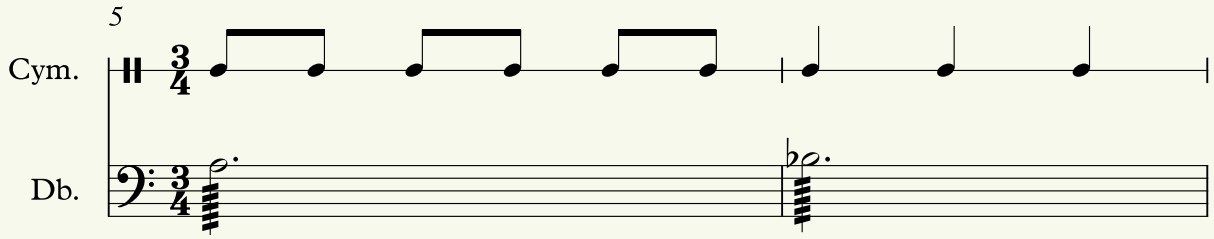
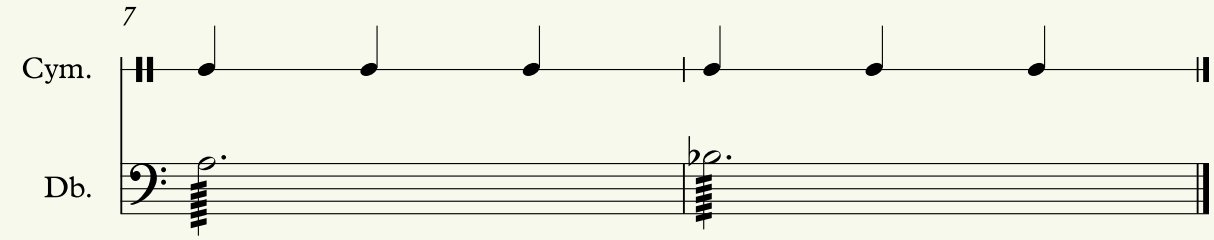


Figure 8. Transcription of tremolo bowing and cymbal rhythm from 'Townsville', *Townsville* (2007) (00:18:35)



The subtleties of Swanton's tremolo practice are achieved by changing bow speed, physical pressure and duration in different variations of a recurring idea. These actions lead to changes in the music's volume, to brighter or darker tone colours, and allow the bass player to imply multiple tones when using combinations of double stops. Swanton reveals that this is partly to accommodate the realities of this performance context, which requires responses to problems caused by the piece's hour-long duration. An example of this tremolo bowing can be heard on The Necks' live album, *Townsville* (2007). From 00:17:30, Swanton can be heard applying tremolo bowing, moving between A and Bb: this gesture varies with Swanton giving the note approximately 12 articulations on the string. Each time the bowing uses slightly different amounts of pressure: sometimes sounding thick and resonant with bow pressure applied and a medium bow speed, other times it sounds more like a flautando with little pressure and less of the fundamental note resonating. Sometimes the speed of the bow begins the phrase quickly creating increased volume and then decreases in speed, creating differentiation in dynamics as the volume decreases. At other times this approach is reversed. The nature of tremolo bowing means the rhythmic articulations, while generally felt in groupings, are ambiguous in a metric sense of pulse but time is still present. It could be felt in groups of two, three, four or twelve depending on where the rhythmic emphasis is placed. The ambiguity is reinforced by the relationship between Swanton's tremolo bowing and Buck's drumming which varies in its articulation of a pulse in three or two on the cymbal: a tension that underlines most swing and blues shuffle feels. Here the tension between groups of three and two is drawn out over a longer period: moving from groupings in two implying an overarching time feel in 4/4 towards groupings which imply a pulse based around 3/4. The relationship between the cymbal and the bowed double bass begins with the approach in Fig. 5 (at 00:17:16): the tempo is fairly rubato but the rhythmic pulse is still discernible despite the ambiguity. Gradually it moves to this variation approximately 23 seconds later, as seen in Fig. 6, implying a tension between groupings in three and four. The drummer then uses the cymbal to assert a pulse more clearly in three about 44 seconds later (shown in Fig. 7) and begins to decrease the density of the groupings it plays, leading to Fig. 8. The use of recurring material with subtle changes in texture and dynamics and the developing rhythmic groupings shows that the entrainment of the three players enables the groove to be felt even if there is not a clear downbeat. In this performance, Swanton's interest in exploring grooves inspired by James Brown, Miles Davis and the vamps of John Coltrane is expressed in a decidedly different form. Swanton's experience learning Western classical music is reflected in his ability to explore, and his interest in, the processes of improvising texture and dynamics with the bow. Dynamics were a feature of performance that was valued in his experience rehearsing with the Guildhall School of Music Orchestra. It is important to note that The Necks allows Swanton to incorporate the use of the bow to achieve textural and dynamic variation to the extent that he does not find appropriate in more traditional jazz performance contexts.

Certainly, it is not the predominant method of generating sound on the instrument favoured by jazz double bass players across styles when accompanying and is used when there is less need to outline time firmly such as during a bass solo. The development of these techniques and the sounds that they allow him to explore through improvisation with The Necks is integral to his work and part of his reimagining of the double bass player's role.

Conclusion

Swanton's work in The Necks presents an alternative way of using improvisation and moving into a different performance and cultural space by eschewing jazz's repertoire and forms. I have, in this article, demonstrated that the changes to the way musical roles are structured in the ensemble changes the sound of the double bass and continues to increase its importance beyond the time-keeping role (Jackson 2012; Rush 2017). Swanton's exploration of texture and dynamics, in particular, set out his developments as distinct from the way contemporary double bass players have been discussed in the scholarly literature (Jackson 2012; Rush 2017). The capacity of Swanton to utilise the bass in ways that are simultaneously grounded in pulse but are rhythmically ambiguous, particularly with the bow, sheds new light on some of the diverse ways the double bass can be viewed in jazz and improvised performance contexts. Swanton does not argue The Necks is free music or a democratic and non-structured mode of improvising without a prior reference point. This is important, as previous media articles such as Swanton's interview with Eric Myers' argued the ensemble was 'completely spontaneous' (Myers 1999: 4). Swanton's descriptions of the ensemble have become more nuanced over time, focusing more on musical process and the levelling of musical roles. The Necks' characteristic ensemble structure, along with its formative links to various traditions of performance, has helped make it a marketable and sustainable project over 26 years (Galbraith 2014: 293). The level ensemble hierarchy means that Swanton can draw on the arco and strumming practices he has developed and experiment with ambiguous ways of keeping a pulse that would not be seen as appropriate in traditional performance contexts. Due to the focus not being on equal melodic soloists as

in the performance setting that Rush (2017) discusses, but instead being on equal accompaniment, Swanton's practice illuminates areas of bass playing that are rarely foregrounded in discussions of the instrument and its role in jazz.

The use of these arco and strumming approaches at times in more conventional ensembles, such as the Alister Spence Trio, is evidence of not only the ensemble's roots, but also the close connection to jazz that Swanton has maintained whilst also performing with The Necks. The degree to which these ensembles accept Swanton's development of the bass role outside the traditional accompaniment role is indicative of Swanton's influence in reshaping how musicians understand the bass role. The way The Necks levels ensemble hierarchies allowing for the development of bass role and sound means that its influence goes even further than the extension to the piano trio format Galbraith (2014) has discussed. The interpolation of both classical music technique and world music influences have served as important ingredients in this approach. It is, however, the focus on process as the ensemble's core objective and the importance that this places on the development of performance practices to be used in improvisation that characterises the ensemble's output more than any particular genre.

ENDNOTES

1. Both Haden and Izenson performed in groups with Ornette Coleman. Izenson makes use of the bow particularly on performances, such as 'Dawn' playing heterophonically to Coleman, or rhythmic phrases, which are metrically even in comparison to Swanton's (pers. comm. 2014b) use of the bow but can be seen as a precursor to his tremolo approach.
2. 'The catholics' is deliberately spelt lowercase.
3. Notable examples include Alister Spence's Trio, which is a well-established ensemble in Australia
4. This combination has been known to elicit negative responses from well-known jazz critics. The most famous perhaps is a review of The Necks' performance by John Litweiler (2009) reprinted at <jazz.org.au/the-necks-in-north-america/>
5. Swanton has led the jazz and world music ensemble, The catholics, for over 20 years.
6. Examples of this practice can be heard on The Necks' Open (2013) and Townsville (2007).
7. This approach can be heard on Ornette Coleman's *At the "Golden Circle" Vol. 1 & Vol. 2* on the track, 'Dawn' (1965), from 1:32 at 2:40 with chords and at 3:32 with string crossing over double stops.

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2. _____. 2014b. Interview with the author, 2 December.

ABSTRACT

The literature on the role of double bass players has predominantly focused on musical practices which reflect the tradition of swing and the walking bass lines. The performance practices of contemporary jazz musicians, however, are far more diverse and reflective of the music’s hybridity. Taking as a case study Lloyd Swanton, double bassist with acclaimed Australian trio The Necks, I explore the ways that double bass players have reimagined the roles and sound of the double bass. I argue that the development of Swanton’s musical practices goes hand in hand with the changes to traditional jazz ensemble roles that occur in the group which open up space for innovative performance practices which reimagine the sound of the instrument.

Keywords. double bass, improvisation, jazz, Australia

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Benjamin Phipps’ research examines how musicians develop their improvisational practices, particularly in jazz and world music. Previous research has examined the development of improvisational practice amongst double bass players using ethnomusicological

methods. As a musician and teacher, he is passionate about developing students' musical abilities to improvise and is currently working on quantitative research that explores the relationship between student motivation and the experience of learning improvisation at university. He currently works as a Lecturer and Educational Developer at the University of New South Wales.

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