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Liminal Electronic Musics: Post-Punk Experimentation in Australia in the 1970s- 1980s

Abstract

This paper presents a survey of some key experimental electronic music scenes in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s that were situated outside the frame of music institutions and the electro-acoustic music tradition. Specifically it focuses on experimentalism in the popular music field in this period, outlining the 'little bands' scene in Melbourne and the scene around the Terse Tapes and M Squared labels in Sydney. It locates a set of international reference points in No Wave, industrial music and krautrock and discusses the work of some individuals who traversed the popular music and experimental music scenes, acting as a nexus for musical ideas. The paper proposes that experimental practices in popular music exert a significant force on experimental electronic music practices in a wider sense and the links to more academic forms of music experimentation need to be better understood. In doing so the paper calls for a more expanded and complete view of the historical development of electronic music as a way of better understanding current experimental electronic music scenes in Australia.

Introduction

When one considers the contemporary electronic music scenes that have coalesced around artist-run spaces and warehouses in Australia since the late 1990s, one is struck by the differences between these scenes and the electro-acoustic music scene associated with conservatoires and tertiary music schools. At the same time, one is struck by the similarities between these contemporary scenes and the 'DIY' post-punk scenes of the late 1970s and early 1980s in Australia. Despite these strong resonances, there has been little attempt to connect these scenes historically, or to see contemporary electronic music scenes as having roots in these scenes, or indeed in any tradition other than the electro-acoustic or western art music traditions¹. I would suggest that an expanded view of music history, which accounts for sonic experimentalism in popular music scenes alongside developments in the electro-acoustic music scene, provides the necessary context to understand contemporary electronic music scenes. This paper constitutes a small step towards drawing some of these links.

The rise and subsequent canonisation of serialism, *musique concrète* and *elektronische musik* through the 1950s and 60s fuelled the proliferation of electronic music studios in music institutions, radio stations and research institutes throughout Europe and the USA. Such facilities became critical sites for musical experimentation. Due to the somewhat conservative institutional climate in Australia during this period, it took some time for comparable studios to be established in institutions, a process which commenced in the late 1960s. Whilst there is evidence of some small private electronic music facilities outside music institutions, almost all were contained within institutions. Such a concentration was largely due to the fact that, prior to the mid 1980s, music and studio technologies were extremely expensive and mostly out of the financial reach of independent artists.

From the late 1970s the hegemony of institutions was disrupted, as tools for electronic music production became affordable for independent musicians outside institutions. Accordingly the sites for musical experimentation became more diffuse and much exploratory electronic music was made outside an institutional context. In a popular music context, experimental approaches to electronics and production were thriving in Australia in the late 1970s, as they were in other parts of the world. This diffusion of experimentation yielded significant outcomes, rarely accounted for in mainstream accounts of the development of electronic music in Australia.

It would be fair to say that the continuing diffusion of powerful tools for electronic music decentred the long-held view of innovation in electronic music practice to the point that the electro-acoustic music scene became viewed as somewhat 'traditional' in comparison to the innovative practice happening in experimental electronic music scenes from the mid 1990s onwards. These tensions and debates are well documented and came to a head when electronic dance music artist Richard James (aka Aphex Twin) and video artist Chris Cunningham were awarded the Golden Nica in the Digital Musics category at Ars Electronica in 1999. The trend toward critiquing the dominant paradigm of electro-acoustic music continued. The statement from the 2001 *Ars Electronica* Digital Musics Jury was direct.

¹ The former is actually a sub-branch of the latter.

It's a fact: on the cusp of the twenty-first century, the most innovative, compelling and startling work being produced in the impossibly broad area of Digital Musics comes from musicians whose backgrounds have largely bypassed academic study and customary career paths. Instead their work speaks of an intense, autodidactic engagement with the hyperlinked worlds of post-industrial cultures: conceptual and performance art, installation and video work, improvised music, post-industrial cultures, eco-activism, post-colonialism, as well as the post-techno/hip hop/dub grass-roots diaspora of blunted beatnuts and bedroom boffins. (Digital Musics July 2001)

Such a statement proposes that electronic music practitioners find relevant histories outside the western art music tradition. One might ask how the above might be understood in an Australian context, specifically what local reference points might exist outside the western art music tradition to support such a notion?

It has been suggested on many occasions that musicological engagements with new music in Australia have been scant. I might add to this that most musicological engagements with music scenes in Australia tacitly and uncritically accept a split between so-called 'art music' and 'popular music'. The same shortcoming can be observed in the majority of writing around both popular music and western art music in Australia. I would suggest that uncritically accepting this split prevents us from fully understanding contemporary electronic music practices. Rather than suggesting that we should ignore musical differences arising from different musical contexts and traditions, I would argue that different contexts and traditions have significant fields of intersection and these are significant drivers of musical innovation. To fully understand developments in musical practice we must acknowledge this. Whilst the dialogue across different musical scenes is ever present, I wish to focus on flow between the experimental electronic music and post-punk music scenes in the 1970s and 1980s, as this marked a particularly active time, driven by the diffusion of technology into the wider musical community for the first time. The visual arts scene can also be seen to have exerted a significant influence on both music scenes, as art schools were an important site for experiment in a broad range of time based media, including sound.

Interactions with Post-Punk Music

Whilst it may be the musicological norm to draw sharp distinctions between popular music practices and art or experimental music practices, the experimental electronic music scene in the late 1970s and

early 1980s had a demonstrably robust set of engagements with the punk and post-punk music scenes in Australia. This is evidenced by the significant quantity of experimental music distributed through post-punk's extensive DIY infrastructure network consisting of vinyl and cassette labels, fanzines, venues, specialist publications and radio programs. Rather than simply serving as distribution networks, the post-punk scene was an important site for musical experimentation in its own right and referenced a different set of histories from the contemporary classical tradition.

Beyond post-punk music as a site for experimentation in itself, an interesting and fertile set of interactions took place between musicians working in the more adventurous end of the post-punk scene and musicians in other areas who were interested in exploratory music. The principal sites for these activities and interactions were Sydney and Melbourne, although there was significant interaction between the experimental art and post-punk music scenes in Brisbane at this time. Art schools, galleries and visual artists² with an interest in music were part of the network of interactions. The post-punk and art school scenes were critical to the development of experimental music in Australia and again, posed challenges to the classical music establishment. These scenes could be interpreted as antithetical to the conservatoire scene due to their close association with popular culture and 'non-musicians' respectively. Ironically, their exclusion from the classical music mainstream made them powerful sites for unbridled musical experimentation and much important work arose from this engagement.

The Clifton Hill Community Music Centre as a Liminal Space

The Clifton Hill Community Music Centre (CHCMC) is one of the better-documented scenes in Australian experimental music history. Whilst it is understood to have occupied an important place in the history of new music in Australia, it operated in a liminal space between the institutional (read 'academic') new music scene and non-institutional scenes. When David Chesworth took over the directorship of the CHCMC in 1978, he was young, still a third-year student at La Trobe University Music Department and had broad musical interests which included popular music. Importantly he was a friend and collaborator of Philip Brophy and the involvement of both in the CHCMC and in the Melbourne experimental music scene would be pivotal in terms of generating a dialogue across popular music and experimental genres. It became a liminal space in terms of genre. Embracing the post-punk DIY aesthetic, Chesworth and Brophy established a label, Innocent Records, and a magazine *New Music*, with the latter fulfilling the

² See John Nixon's *Anti-Music* project 1980-83.

similar function of a post-punk fanzine by serving as a tool to connect a community.

Both individuals had avant-pop projects drawing on hybrid electronic/amplified resources that they started in this period. Brophy had formed the band tsk tsk tsk (the group's name was technically three arrows – pointing to the right, up, and to the right respectively) in 1977. Chesworth formed the band Essendon Airport in 1978 with guitarist Robert Goodge and a drum machine. Both Essendon Airport and the various incarnations of tsk tsk tsk were regular performers at the CHCMC during Chesworth's five-year tenure as director. Due to the cross-overs created by Chesworth and Brophy, CHCMC audiences started to build in the following years, augmented by the audience for post-punk music, which was thriving in Melbourne at the time. At the time, Chesworth and Brophy's bands were performing in post-punk music such as the Crystal Ballroom, considered the home of the scene at the time. Chesworth (1980), cited in Fox (2002) says,

The musical ideology of punk / new wave is in many ways similar to that of early, new and experimental music. Both basically involve a rejection of accepted musical values and formats in favour of re-asserting and re-defining the fundamental processes involved in music making the "anyone can do it" attitude figures prominently in both areas.

Chesworth's music at this time reflected his eclectic influences. Listening to his solo album *Layer on Layer* (Innocent Records, 1981) one cannot help but hear his influences, from the American repetition-based minimalism of Steve Reich (most likely encountered through his academic studies at La Trobe), the funk-crossover of key post-punk albums such as Talking Heads *Remain in Light* (Sire Records 1980), and the processed guitar, vocal and synth gestures of UK post-punk bands from this period. Both Chesworth and Brophy were not afraid to create exploratory music with groove, two concepts which were not usually connected in the Australian scene at the time.

This blending of the experimental music scene with the post-punk scene in Melbourne was important in understanding how other genres may have influenced the experimental music tradition. However, the enthusiasm for the work of these two individuals was not shared by all, and there are some accounts that the CHCMC scene around Chesworth and Brophy was too 'intellectual' in the context of popular music. As Clinton Walker (1996), a well-known popular music writer and authority on post-punk, noted,

The scene centred around the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre was...

cerebral, abstract. Although the CHCMC also embraced older guard musicians like David Tolley, its stars were the likes of tch-tch-tch [tsk tsk tsk] and David Chesworth, who had taken to the mini-Korg like it was the key to a whole new kingdom.

Walker's comments, coming from someone with no connections to the experimental or academic music scenes, are illuminating, in that they give an insight into how the CHCMC might have been seen from the outside the experimental music scene at the time. They indicate that, from a post-punk perspective, Chesworth and Brophy were viewed the most notable figures associated with the CHCMC (the 'stars'). This provides a somewhat different perspective to that represented in the much of the musicological and artist-centred writings about the CHCMC where a strong ethos of egalitarianism is emphasised. That Walker cites Chesworth and Brophy as the stars of CHCMC is probably due to the fact that they were traversing the experimental and post-punk music scenes at the time and were therefore the most visible to Walker (a popular music writer).

Tsk Tsk Tsk and Philip Brophy

Whilst not a purely electronic band, but one of mixed instrumentation - drums, synthesizer, guitar and saxophone - tsk tsk tsk proved to be influential in serving as a nexus for ideas to flow between the experimental music scene and the popular music scene in the late 1970s/early 1980s.

Tsk tsk tsk was at the same time a band and a series of eclectic art projects. It was strongly informed and influenced by Brophy's reaction against contemporary classical music pedagogy, which he encountered briefly as a student at La Trobe University music department, and his emerging body of theoretical critique around high and popular culture dynamics which followed. Brophy often stated that he saw no problems in being interested in Stockhausen and Gary Glitter and "that there seemed no obvious way of relating the two seemed to offer a cultural lesson" (Jenkins 1988). Tsk tsk tsk became a vehicle to explore this liminal space between art and pop.

The work of tsk tsk tsk is at the same time an analysis of the concept of genre, and a form of 'writing' (to use Brophy's term) to communicate ideas that emerge from this process of analysis. This level of abstraction, a music about music, a *meta-music*, seeks to create a space where ideas from popular culture and experimental art can freely mingle.

In the following passage from his 1987 article *Avant-Garde Rock: History In The Making?*, Brophy attempts to unpack the position of avant garde in

popular music in relation to the histories of the avant garde in art music, in an attempt to define a space for avant garde music to exist outside the unreasonably tight constraints of western art music.

There are two possible ways of doing this. The first is to see the avant garde of rock as a pitiful bastardisation of the original thrust of twentieth century avant garde art, a cooption of the polemic intensity that motivated the radical nature of its ideas and pursuits. The second is to acknowledge its nature as mutation, as an artistic activity born of visions that arise more from a developed social environment than from a studied historical lineage. The first approach is idealistic. The second is realistic...[A]vant garde purists in the academic realm of the contemporary, experimental and new music fields, rarely display the flexibility to accommodate the often sloppy approaches to rock experimentation, while the bulk of avant garde rock can at times be frustratingly uninteresting and uninspiring. (Brophy 1987)

Brophy's criticism that experimental and new music fields cannot accommodate sloppy and amateurish playing proposes that this sonic quality is worthy of musical investigation itself and can be considered an essential aspect of the whole work.

[I]n the reality of a pub gig, we generally appear to be incompetent, unoriginal, impersonal and anonymous. In short - the essential rock band. (Brophy 1983)

Brophy embraced and aestheticised this aspect of a band. He called for an understanding of the musical material as a total sonic experience rather than a compartmentalised understanding that seeks to separate notions of musical content from its execution in performance. Interestingly, this could be seen to be advocating a form of total, or abstracted listening akin to the listening modes identified by Pierre Schaeffer (1966) and refined by subsequent artists and theorists (Smalley 1997).

Both Brophy and Chesworth would become well known in the Melbourne post-punk scene at the time, which of which two prominent strands were developing. The first was around Nick Cave and band The Boys Next Door (later called The Birthday Party), a strikingly original band with a dark rock sound and angular dissonant guitars from Rowland S. Howard. This represented the experimental end of the post-punk scene in respect of standard rock instrumentation. The other prominent scene was not so much around a band, but a collection of bands, many of whom used

electronic resources. This was called the 'little bands' scene³.

Melbourne: The Little Bands Scene

The little bands scene, which flourished from 1978-1981, grew out of North Fitzroy, where two bands at the centre of the scene lived in adjacent houses. These were Whirlywird (core members Ollie Olsen – vocals / synthesizer / guitar and John Murphy – drums, along with various other members, including Arne Hanna - guitar) and The Primitive Calculators (Stuart Grant – guitar / vocals, Denise Rosenberg - keyboards, David Light – bass / keyboards, and Frank Lovece - drum machine / vocals). These bands had been influenced by early electronic bands such as the Silver Apples, the UK industrial act Cabaret Voltaire and the New York No Wave bands including Suicide, DNA, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks and James Chance and the Contortions. Most of the bands used some form of electronic instrumentation and the music ranged from abrasive drum machine driven sounds of bands such as the Primitive Calculators, to angular electronic pop exemplified by Whirlywird among others. Like many music scenes of this type, there were blurred boundaries between the bands and their audiences⁴ and people were encouraged to form bands, hence the proliferation of 'little bands' that formed the essence of the scene. The emphasis was on being part of the scene rather than aiming for commercial success. The scene was given its name when a local record store owner paid for and released a compilation EP entitled *Little Bands* in 1980 which featured tracks from several bands in the scene (Griffin 2006).

The comparison to the New York No Wave movement, emerging at around the same time, was a significant one. Centred on downtown venues such as CBGBs, the Mudd Club and Max's Kansas City, the No Wave scene lasted for only a short period but proved to be very influential. It was a reaction against the new wave music coming out of the UK and what was considered to be the conformity and commercialism of punk rock which was still seen as conventional rock and roll by many in this scene. The No Wave bands were angular, abrasive, atonal, used dissonant tunings, were sometimes primitive in their musicianship and drew on eclectic musical influences. The most cited musical reference was Alan Vega and Martin Rev's electronic duo Suicide, who abandoned guitars in favour of a synthesizer, drum machine and vocals. Other common influences were the Velvet Underground, Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music* and the 'krautrock' bands Can and Faust.

³ A fictionalised account of this scene can be seen in the 1986 Richard Lowenstein film 'Dogs in Space'.

⁴ The same could be said of contemporary experimental music scenes.

Central to the No Wave movement was a conscious desire to push artistic boundaries and to approach music from a more experimental, anti-commercial perspective. Martin Rev, keyboard player for Suicide said "I think No Wave was a valid avant-garde extension of rock, and it incorporated free and often atonal improvisation. I think... it was comparable to the avant-garde in any other form, such as jazz or European classical" (Nobakht 2004). This was perhaps due to the fact that No Wave was more than just a music scene. The musical activities served to connect individuals from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds including visual arts, film and music, many of who had relocated to New York to study or to further their careers. Influenced by the punk aesthetic, they formed bands, even if they had limited musical abilities in a conventional sense.

Significantly, both Glenn Branca and Rhys Chatham would go on to gain a level of acceptance in the contemporary classical music scene, perhaps due to the fact that they possessed traditional musical literacies and were versed in the contemporary classical tradition. In Australia, a comparison might be drawn to David Chesworth, or to a lesser degree Philip Brophy, who although accepted to some extent, rejected the contemporary classical tradition early in his career.

The Australian connections to the No Wave musical sensibilities cannot be underestimated and many musicians active in the more adventurous ends of popular music at this time cite similar reference points. The connections were more than just musical - they extended to the overall cultural milieu of the two scenes. John Murphy of Whirlywird, in an interview, draws similar links in his description of the little bands, outlining its connections to the visual arts scene and how experimental practices were blended with a punk aesthetic.

The little bands thing was meant to be wild and chaotic and punk... art, experimental stuff, and not just electronic. A lot of the original participants were actually artists who applied the dada... approach of their painting. It was the attitude and idealism of punk, but applied to a post-punk art thing. (Walker 1996)

Such a description is remarkably similar to those of the No Wave scene. Given the ages of the participants at the time, many of these visual artists would have been at art school, or recently graduated, which underlines the role that art schools played in providing a platform for young artists to experiment across a range of media, which often included music. Murphy, in the course of this interview, emphasises the differences between the little band scene and Philip Brophy's work at the time, which sought to avoid the 'emotion'

associated with punk and post-punk. From Murphy's perspective it was more academic and detached.

In Australia, the reactionary drive of the little bands (and the similar scenes in other cities) was generated more in response to the mainstream dominance of rock and roll in Australia at the time as to the failings of punk rock to deliver a radical alternative. The reaction was manifested not just in attitude and musical influences, but in sonic terms. The prominence of synthesizers and primitive drum machines opened up quite abstract sound worlds and these bands would prove to be influential to later bands in electronic scenes. The sonically adventurous attitude of the Primitive Calculators motivated them to push sonic boundaries, which made for some extreme sonic outcomes, "In a time when synth based 'new wave' was losing its edge the Primitive Calculators made clangour sounding like the destruction of a collapsing building. (Lunsford 2004). Alan Bamford, a musician (Alan Bamford Experience, Hugo Klang), sound technician and radio presenter on alternative station 3RRR, provided this account of mastering the Primitive Calculators LP in 1979.

When I mastered the Primitive Calculators LP...I didn't have a clue what I was doing and Stuart [Grant] said 'maximum bass and treble' so we did that but then we had to reduce the bass when we cut the acetate, as it cut right through to the plate. The Primitive Calculators always cut right through. (Bamford 2004)

This evidences the band's desire to explore extreme sonic terrain in their production processes.

Despite the strong punk element and obvious differences between this scene and the more academic end of the new music scene, connections prevailed. Two of the main figures in the little bands scene, Ollie Olsen and Arne Hanna from Whirlywird (who were flatmates in the 'Whirlywird house' in Fitzroy), studied composition and electronic music with Felix Werder - a German/Australian composer who had himself studied with Stockhausen. They would, therefore, both have been well aware of the European avant garde. This link to the contemporary classical music scene is not mentioned in the popular accounts of the little band scene, and underlines that the experimentalism of the little bands scene had roots that extended further than common accounts might suggest.

Sydney: Alternative Venues, Terse Tapes and M Squared

Sydney was also a site for crossover between the experimental music scene and the post-punk scene.

Like in Melbourne, a sense of community was formed around venues, bands and social networks. Interactions across post-punk and experimental electronic music scenes occurred through shared venues, labels, record stores and social networks.

A venue which played an important role in Sydney in the late 1970s was the Paris Theatre, which had been vacated by the Hoyts cinema company in 1977 and became used as a venue for live music, cabaret and theatre performance frequented by punks, hippies and alternative types. It rose to particular prominence as a post-punk music venue and its bills for all the main acts of the day, including the Laughing Clowns, the Birthday Party and the Go-Betweens. In 1977 the venue has become host to an emerging punk scene with local and touring bands such as X, JAB, Rocks, the Survivors, News, and the Babeez all playing gigs there (Coomber 2000; Morris 2000). The experimental music scene also intersected with the space. Rik Rue, a prominent Sydney tape collagist and improviser was organising gigs there in the late 1970s (Jenkins 1988) and 'Towards a Relative Music', an early Fringe Benefit Records release from Jon Rose and the Relative Band, credits one of the tracks as being recorded live at the Paris Theatre on May 25, 1978 (Rosenstein and Roussel).

Art Galleries also hosted a number of gigs for both experimental music and post-punk groups. These included the Sculpture Centre, Art Unit and Central Street Gallery (Rosenstein and Roussel; Jenkins 1988; Blades 2003). Squat spaces were also important, one of the most significant being Side FX, an artist squat in a former Catholic school building in Darlinghurst, which hosted music gigs and experimental film events⁵. Consulting the gig lists of post-punk bands and experimental musicians from the late 1970s and early 1980s indicates a strong overlap in the venues used. These venues were associated with a particular cultural milieu and ideas were exchanged across different media and disciplines. Ideas from contemporary art processes mixed with ideas from popular music and contemporary western art music.

Sydney was home to a strong culture of tape cut-up and collage, and many artists in both the post-punk and experimental scenes experimented with tape manipulations. A key early figure in Sydney was Ian Hartley, a musician, music venue promoter and publisher of the *Spurt* punk fanzine. Hartley also owned a shop called *Skin Deep* in inner-city Sydney which sold post-punk and mod clothes and fanzines into the Sydney subculture

scenes. A late 1979 issue of *Spurt* featured a cassette of Hartley's tape collage and he would go on to release more tapes of collage under the name Mice Against God (Blades and Andrews 2007). Other exponents of tape collage at this time included Rik Rue, visual artist and musician John Gillies, The Horse He's Sick (Ian Andrews), Sw Sw Thrgh (John Jacobs) and Severed Heads. Many of these tape collagists and manipulators were involved in radio at the time. They were members of the 'contemporary collective', a group of individuals who presented experimental or adventurous radio programs from midnight to dawn on 2MBS-FM, a community radio station. This scene eventually spawned The Loop Orchestra in 1983 (core members - John Blades and Richard Fielding), a well-known Sydney group that makes music exclusively from tape loops. The Loop Orchestra, through its shifting guest membership, would act as a hub connecting a range of individuals from the post-punk and experimental scenes in Sydney.

There were two main experimentally influenced music labels that emerged from the post-punk scene in Sydney. The first was Terse Tapes, established in 1979 by Tom Ellard of Severed Heads. Terse Tapes was named after the TRS-80 home computer, which Ellard was using to make music, and the logo consisted of a clipping from an advert for the computer with the label name written over it in white-out fluid (Ellard 2008). As the label name suggests, the output of Terse Tapes was mostly in cassette format, but some vinyl was produced.

The first vinyl release on Terse was the collaborative album *Earbitten 12"* in 1980, a shared release featuring Severed Heads material (featuring extensive use of tape loops and electronic synthesizer noise) on one side and tracks from the group Rhythmyx Chympx on the other. Severed Heads had already been receiving radio play, after sending Peter Doyle (2-JJJ announcer) some of their earlier cassette releases (Ellard 1990). Tom Ellard, the principal musical force behind both Severed Heads and Terse Tapes, had a reputation as a technology futurist, adopting and employing new technologies before their more generalised uptake into the market⁶. For the track *Dance* on the *Earbitten* EP, Ellard wrote a computer program in BASIC to generate interference tones on a nearby portable radio. The range of sounds made by the radio as the tuning was adjusted was then employed as part of the track (Blades and Andrews 2007).

⁵ A number post-punk groups and experimental music practitioners were experimenting with experimental Super 8 film at the time, fuelled by its widespread use in art schools. Examples include Philip Brophy, David Chesworth, SPK, Debra Petrovich.

⁶ Ellard cites his early musical influences as David Bowie, Brian Eno, Eno, Roxy Music and Kraftwerk, and the industrial band Throbbing Gristle as his first encounter with experimental music. He cites seeing the posters for Philip Brophy's 'Punk Gunk' gigs on New Years Eve 1977 as his first encounter with the Melbourne 'underground' music scene. Ellard, T. (2007). Email correspondence with Julian Knowles. October 9, 2007. Brisbane.

Ellard's dry, humorous account of early Severed Heads gigs provides an insight into the climate in the more adventurous ends of the post-punk scene at the time.

[In 1980] we were offered a 'gig' at a venue called I.C.E. [Institute for Contemporary Events] run by Ian [Hartley] and Michael (who now runs DOME, Kinselas etc.). I think I bumped into Ian at a record shop or something and he thought we were the sort of people who frowned a lot and wore camouflage. Anyway 33 people turned up to a pretty messy tape loop extravaganza, including Stephen Jones [who would later join Severed Heads as its video artist] (Ellard 1990).

Various elements within Severed Heads consciously strove to innovate and react against what was seen as the boring Australian rock and roll mainstream at the time. Ellard describes Richard Fielding being particularly sensitive to this issue and in his dry style describes how Fielding left the band for a period to pursue more experimental work "Richard started to react against the way the band was becoming even the tiniest bit 'rock and roll' - gigs, records - and developed his own group The Nobodies - a collection of tape recorders for which he was the roadie" (Ellard 1990).

Like many bands working with electronic resources, experimentation was critical to their process and their approach to constructing tracks was adventurous. In addition to employing emerging technologies, they developed novel processes with existing technologies - modifying tape loops, physically manipulating vinyl through the addition of holes, cutting, warping and modifying the surface. Notably they developed some interesting techniques for controlling analogue sequencers. All of these insights they happily shared with their fans. This quote provides an insight in the creative process behind the track *Epilepsy 82* from the 1983 album *Since the Accident*.

This one is tricky so you'll have to watch closely. Now, we fold a tape loop so, and we record drum sounds thus. Here we place a pulse signal with a hi-hat sound, run a line from the desk to John Blades' Pro One, load a sequence here and behold we have a sequence clocked by a tape loop. So add two sections of Gamelan orchestra, a lecture regarding membrane depolarization, baying wolf and yapping cat, mad gorilla and serve. When we remixed this we added a wolf baying every now and then stuck in a digital delay. (Ellard 1990)

Not content to confine their experimentation to the music, they also experimented with visual aspects of their live shows via "slide shows, film loops, bubble machines, blow up backing singers and computer graphics". In 1982 video artist Stephen Jones organised a collaboration with Severed Heads for which he employed a video synthesiser. This collaboration resulted live shows and the album *Blubberknife*, released as a C90 cassette, shrink-wrapped with electronic television components. Jones would subsequently join the band as a resident video artist (Ellard 1990).

Arguably one of the most important contributions from Terse in this period was the release *One Stop Shopping*, a three-cassette survey of Australian underground music⁷, released in March 1981. This was a national survey (not just of Terse artists). It included contributions from the Melbourne scenes - Clifton Hill artists David Chesworth (solo and with Essendon Airport), Ernie Althoff, Graeme Davis and Philip Brophy (tsk tsk / tch tch tch); and the little bands - Alan Bamford Experience, Use No Hooks, Swinging Hogs and the J.P. Sartre Band. Alongside this there were a range of tracks from Sydney bands from Terse and from the other important Sydney label, M Squared including the Sydney Quads and Systematics. Such a release evidences an awareness of a national scene around exploratory 'underground' music, embracing both the post-punk and experimental music scenes, and a desire to present it as a coherent and sustained movement. Interestingly, according to Ellard, this network came into being through live performances. In his experience, most of the bands which underpinned the Sydney scene were independently formed by individuals who had been accessing music and publications entering Australia from overseas and that they only met each other when their bands started playing live (Ellard 2007).

M Squared, the other important Sydney label from this time, was established in 1979 and operated as a collective of electronic bands who shared a recording studio facility in Wilshire St. in Surry Hills. Key personnel in M Squared were Mitch Jones (who was a live sound engineer for both Ed Kuepper and The Numbers), Patrick Gibson, and Michael Tee. The most well known acts associated with M Squared were Scattered Order, the Systematics and the Makers of the Dead Travel Fast. All these bands employed extensive electronic instrumentation including analogue synthesizers and drum machines alongside the more traditional instruments of electric guitar and voice. None had drummers. The music had a strong machine-like quality with primitive and somewhat bare electronic rhythm programming which was highly distinctive to both the label and

⁷ 'Underground music' was the term used by Terse Tapes.

the period. Many consider M Squared to be similar to the scene around the little bands in Melbourne and while the Primitive Calculators and Whirlyworld were seen to drive the Melbourne scene, Scattered Order, the Systematics and the Makers of the Dead Travel Fast were considered the principal bands of the Sydney scene.

This description from Michael Tee of M Squared paints not only a picture of their musical reference points, but their curious (and by all accounts real) reactions to their drum machines.

In 1980...PiL had just done *Metal Box*; Ian Curtis was still warmish; The Residents hadn't stretched their muse; the ghosts of Can + Neu + Faust still lived on; synths were still monophonic (not poly) and analogue; Eno's voice and lyrics were still potent; Bowie hadn't done *Let's Dance*; Cabaret Voltaire... and Throbbing Gristle... made noise... people would shout out "where is your drummer!"; the Australian Musician's Union would hassle us about our drum machines putting drummers out of work. (Tee 2003)

The reference points, as they were for so many of the 'underground bands' in Australia at the time, were the more adventurous ends of English punk and post-punk (The Pop Group, PiL, Wire, Joy Division), early industrial bands (Throbbing Gristle, Cabaret Voltaire), glam and art rock (Bowie, Eno) and the German 'krautrock' bands from the 1970s (Can, Neu, Faust). This list was often extended to include the prog rock / art rock bands Henry Cow (featuring Fred Frith), Slapp Happy, This Heat and Pere Ubu along with New York No Wave.

Such musical reference points stood in stark opposition to the mainstream Australian culture of pub rock and many ironic references were made to distinguish the scene from the mainstream. M Squared dubbed themselves the "builder's labourers of the avant garde" as a form of ironic self-deprecation (Tee 2003). The label's releases promoted strong and diverse reactions from writers in the independent music press as the following quotes indicate (Tee 2003)

Some of the music has bordered on the un-listenable, being extreme, erratic, naive and experimental. But at it's best has been amongst the most inspired and original music recorded in recent years (Stuart Coupe)

M Squared specialises in non rock n' roll. Describing these records is impossible, they cannot be related to other music, because they aren't music. (Peter Botrell)

When one considers the output of M Squared and the bands with whom the label was associated, it is clear that that they were considered to be pushing musical boundaries and re-defining to a certain degree what might be considered popular music. A spirit of experimentalism and a reaction to mainstream rock was mixed with an electronic pop aesthetic. This engagement was fuelled by musical reference points in innovative popular music and electronic music scenes from other cities and from the more adventurous ends of 70s electronic music and conceptual rock, as opposed to the western art music tradition.

Conclusion

The cross-overs between post-punk and experimental electronic music practice in this period mark the beginning of a sustained period of cross-fertilisation through the 1990s to the time of writing. One could trace similar connections and intersections between experimental electronic music and the various offshoots of industrial music, hip-hop, turntablism, minimal techno, downtempo, ambient music, post-rock and new electronica hybrids. This is a complex set of interactions that has scarcely been documented. By way of contrast, the electro-acoustic music tradition has remained comparatively 'pure', maintaining close links to the conservatoire and the contemporary classical music tradition. Fairly minimal impact is seen when one examines the programs of international events such as the International Computer Music Conference. As such, the experimental electronic music scene continues to drift further away from the electro-acoustic music mainstream, although in recent years some experimental music festivals included work from electro-acoustic music composers who are seen to be 'influential' to practitioners in this scene. Evidence would suggest that electro-acoustic music festivals and events have not been so porous to other electronic music practices.

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