

**Over Hill and Far Away**  
***Chris Rainier and the Trautonium***

It's mid-morning on the third and final day of the Great Escape Festival, a rock and pop festival running over the April long weekend out at Newington Armory – a decommissioned naval armaments depot which is now part of Sydney Olympic Park.

Chris Rainier fires up the trautonium sending fuzzy low frequencies out into the marquee-barn space of the Terrace Stage. This is the first major public performance of the instrument, and Rainier plays tentatively, still searching out its dynamics and boundaries. As he says, "... [a new] instrument doesn't always behave in the way you wanted or intended it to, although often with unexpectedly pleasing results. There is an element of chaos and unpredictability which often results in surprises with regards to the sounds produced by an instrument."

Rainier's trautonium is a replica of Friedrich Trautwein's original 1930s Telefunken Trautonium - the first commercially produced electronic instrument. More precisely, Rainier's version uses a combination of vintage electronics with more modern devices to create a hybrid instrument – somewhere between Trautwein's original Trautonium, and Oskar Sala's post-WWII incarnation, the Mixtur-Trautonium.

Up on stage Rainier shifts to the more familiar terrain of his lapsteel guitar, gently working out mesmerising phrases. As a lapsteel guitar player, Rainier's music has incorporated the use of alternate microtonal tunings (namely Just Intonation). The fingerboards of string instruments have proved to be very popular with people wanting to adapt instruments to play music in different tunings – beyond the standard 12-tone equal tuning. Rainier also incorporates alternate tunings into his playing of the trautonium, "... there is always room for new tunings and modes of expression within a musical culture... tunings are a valuable indicator of diversity."

Aside from the vintage electronics and the monophonic yawps, it was the method of playing the trautonium - with its metal ribbon slide roughly similar to that of a string instrument's fingerboard - that first caught Rainier's interest. He was particularly excited by the possibilities of playing in alternate tunings on an early electronic instrument.

Joining Rainier on stage is Mat Watson, who works with assorted electronics, field recordings and, excitingly, a recently obtained 1946 valve-driven Univox organ (complete with crocodile skin case). The organ's monophonic tone grumbles through the subtle layers of beats, scratches, incidental noises, and Rainier's lapsteel whirls.

The unique sound of this duo slowly unfolds through the set – the combination of found audio, subtle rhythms, scratches, and processed sound, entwined with North African and Middle Eastern-styled melodic phrases via Chris's lapsteel, and burly vintage electronic sounds.

Rainier and Watson most often perform in Melbourne, and have most recently been creating live improvised soundtracks to various films and documentaries. Today they play to clumps of third-day festival goers who have shuffled under the plastic canopy of the Terrace Stage, burying themselves in newspapers and drinking coffee

amongst disintegrated bales of hay. As the mood of the music intensifies, more passers-by are drawn into the space. Next door the gravity-defying, vomit-inducing Top Gun ride revs, and the dodgem cars rumble to life - rides that didn't quite make it to the Easter Show, over hill and far away.

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*Chris Rainier and Mat Watson performed at the Great Escape Festival (6-8 April 2007) as part of clatterbox's line-up of music featuring new musical instruments. For more information, and to read an interview with Chris Rainier, go to: [clatterbox.net.au](http://clatterbox.net.au)*