

The Necks at the Basement. Wednesday the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2007

Review by Damian Castaldi

Like many Sydneysiders I've grown up on a healthy, sometimes fluctuating diet of experimental music and sound art/performance. From my own crazy performance nights with the Unconscious Collective at the old Taxi club on Foveaux St, to the fast, jazzy, smoky nights with the Benders up at the Cross, it's always been my mecca.

Chris Abrahams, Tony Buck and Lloyd Swanton have in their various manifestations been at the core of that experience, so when my friend Geoffrey G suggested we head off to the Basement to sketch and review a final Necks show before they head off to Berlin, I was there.

I arrived at the Basement early enough to land a prime spot, on a stool at the ledge looking over the seated audience in the middle of the gathering crowd. You could have drawn an apex triangle between the Steinway, the drum kit and me so I was happy. The dinner crowd tucked into their meals, the gallery filled up and before I knew it the Necks were on stage, no fuss, no introductions just focused and ready to play two 45-minute sets with a break in the middle.

As Geoffrey sketched away I sat there slowly, slowly absorbed in the atmosphere, often closing my eyes and letting the body soak up, move sporadically to the building fusion of piano, bass and drums. I'm not hearing Jazz; it's more like sonic, jazzy atmospheres coming from a Steinway piano, a big acoustic double bass and a basic, finely tuned drum kit with added hand percussions. It's hypnotic, fluctuating, slowly building on a theme, you can sway to the rhythm, immerse yourself in the ever-present piano notation and feel the low frequency of that big fat double bass.

Solo piano opened the first set, little groups of repeated notes (5 over) in a rotating sequence. Two more evenly spaced notes closely follow on the bass as Tony started rolling his soft mallets on his snare drum. They build slowly, very slowly, then Lloyd picks up the pace between the piano and rolling mallets. Tony introduces the floor tom to his rolls, Chris adds a note, ripples on the keys, flams on the tom, and the drums build the tension. *Rumbling Tony, metronomic Lloyd, and hypnotic Chris.* Tony up front on left stage, Lloyd slightly back in centre, Chris to the right close to the edge. An intimate setting, you can see their faces intensely focused on their instruments, occasionally a peep to the audience but only from Tony. He looks exhausted, Lloyd

squints (almost painfully), and Chris sits with an evangelic look of concentration on the keys. They progress deeply into the set, tambourines jangle from Tony's left foot, Lloyd bows his bass, and I don't know where sounds are coming from any more. It blurs into a climactic fusion. It's so free I feel like I could be playing it myself, I feel so much a part of the performance, taken in slowly, gently and then explosively by these masters of mood. After the first set I can image the Necks doing a live acousmatic performance behind, instead of in front of, the big red backdrop at the Basement. The lights dimmed to virtual darkness, just the sound, enveloping the room.

The second set was much the same as the first. Tony started this one up shaking and swishing two hand fulls of shells on the snare and floor tom. A little rumbling bass and sharper, syncopated piano notes abruptly making their statement. The delicate sound of crackling bamboo builds the dynamic and the double bass is again bowed. Then ever so gently Tony introduced his sticks on cymbals, single hi-hat, rolling his shells to the bass and piano rumble. They all three latch onto a theme with the kick drum and piano accent on the 2<sup>nd</sup> 4/4 offbeat. As Tony and Chris pick up the tempo, big bass notes pull them together. Tony makes the big difference to this set doubling up sticks on both cymbals, introducing the snare roll and accent on the 5<sup>th</sup> note. As it crescendos to an almost free for all I can see the sweat dripping from Tony's nose, he's picked up a small cymbal in his right hand and is playing it on the skin of the floor tom. It stops as quickly as it started, no dynamic fade out, the room fills with applause, and they're off to Berlin. The Hungarians sitting next to me say they are big in Europe, bigger than anywhere else, still this aussie crowd seemed to soak it up with rapture tonight.