

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the aims of the research, provides a background to the project, and discusses the key terms and concepts that are pertinent to this study. It also outlines the limitations of the research and identifies the prime focus of this investigation, which is a phenomenological examination of the creative processes undertaken by the *By a Thread* ensemble within a performance-research context.

### Aims of the Research

This dissertation investigates the role of individual musical identity in ensemble collaboration as a means of constructing a ‘collective consciousness’ within a modern jazz ensemble. I identify key attributes of interaction, play, identity and creativity exhibited by a distinguished exponent of modern jazz, the 1960s Miles Davis Quintet,<sup>1</sup> and compare these to ‘*By a Thread*,’ a trio consisting of trumpet, guitar, and drums of which I am a member. The *By a Thread* compositions and collectively created language<sup>2</sup> were designed to allow optimal elasticity within the ensembles’ music, enabling each repeated performance of a work to reflect the ‘mood’ of individual players, and of the ensemble and its sonic and social context. A specific aim was to determine if the *By a Thread* project could be a useful tool in examining questions such as: how can individual and ensemble identities co-exist? How do soloists improvise collectively in such a way as to encourage a sense of ensemble and develop a collective consciousness? What attributes does a collective group improvisation need to exemplify in order to deem that improvisation as ‘successful’?

The majority of the research was undertaken within a performance context. The *By a Thread* ensemble aimed to incorporate the approaches identified from this study to

---

<sup>1</sup> The Miles Davis Quintet that existed between the years 1965-1968 is referred to by jazz historians as Davis’s second great quintet. In addition to Davis, the ensemble consisted of Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, and Tony Williams. The group recorded a series of landmark albums, including *E.S.P.* (1965), *Miles Smiles* (1966), *Sorcerer* (1967), and *Nefertiti* (1967), which demonstrate what was at the time a new approach to jazz – the combination of post-bop and free-jazz styles. In addition to the new musical direction created by the ensemble, the musicians and resulting compositions were highly individual, and they exerted a large influence on much of the jazz music that was produced thereafter.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Collectively created language’ encompasses the language created and developed as an ensemble. This may include language created from the music elements of harmony, melody, form, cues, rhythm etc.

develop an intuitive group response within their compositions and improvisations. The purpose of this research was to extend the boundaries of mainstream jazz styles in ways that remain aesthetically and essentially compatible with those styles. The goals of the *By a Thread* project were: to create contemporary mainstream jazz that is dynamic and inventive in structure and detail, to achieve insight into the processes of collective improvisation, and, as a professional practitioner, to obtain a greater understanding of my art.

## **Background to the Study**

The formation of the *By a Thread* ensemble arose in response to a feeling of *desideratum* within my creative music-making. Something seemed to be missing or lacking in the experience, but I could not clearly identify it as any singular thing. I often felt disconnected from the musicians with whom I was playing, and subsequently, also from the music. Often, it felt like I was performing amidst a group of individuals, rather than in an ensemble that ideally would be strengthened and united by the culmination of the individual voices.<sup>3</sup> Partly, this situation may be attributed to the less than optimal musical settings in which these experiences took place, including ‘jam sessions’<sup>4</sup> and one-off performances, which required me to assume a stylistic role that was not synchronised with my personal creative aesthetic. Due to a lack of shared musical and personal history between the musicians involved, connection on a deeper musical level was rare.

Although diversity and knowledge of jazz styles and traditions is arguably necessary, neglecting to nurture music that is true to one’s heart can lead to disarray, disconnection, and confusion for the creative practitioner. An individual or ensemble may become so entrenched within a particular style that very little creativity takes place within the ensemble as a result of strict adherence to particular stylistic conventions and role-playing (Derek Bailey, quoted in McMillan 1996:4). In questioning my creative musical pursuits, it seemed advantageous to fuse elements of various styles rather than be bound by any one particular style. In particular, I felt a need to pursue a project

---

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘voices’ here refers to the unique artistic identity of each individual.

<sup>4</sup> A ‘jam session’ is a performance in which musicians gather and play without extensive preparation or predefined arrangements.

which encouraged group interaction, one that left room for interplay and stretching of the music's parameters without abandoning structure. I wanted to develop a project that would allow me to express myself with total conviction when I played, and also one in which I could develop a collective language and rapport with the individuals of the ensemble. The crux of this aspiration seemed to be the connection with other practitioners, which fostered a sense of community in which to undertake a collective musical journey. Although I had been fortunate to be a member of jazz ensembles with extended life spans, including several projects of my own, the music often left little room for variation once the initial blueprint was established. I wanted to create and play compositions and bring together an ensemble that had the inherent flexibility to evolve over time.

## **Terms and Concepts**

### **Collective Consciousness**

The term collective consciousness is used to describe broadly shared beliefs, values and attitudes of a community. Within the domain of music, an ensemble comprised of individual practitioners can unite to form a type of community. When collective consciousness or interconnectedness<sup>5</sup> exists between practitioners, sharing of musical language, gestures, influences, goals, and aspirations occurs. A type of collective consciousness also exists between a performer/ensemble and audience, though the depth of the shared experience may vary greatly. This shared collective experience is arguably one of the main attributes that attracts an audience to be part of a performance.

In order to facilitate collective consciousness within an improvised music ensemble, a practitioner conceivably must negotiate a balance between the required 'ego'<sup>6</sup> of the individual consciousness and that of the collective. Arguably, collective consciousness contributes to the production of an ensemble 'sound' or identity, within which individual identities remain prominent. In examples such as distinguished music

---

<sup>5</sup> The term 'interconnectedness' is used here to describe a joining of the musicians that comprise an ensemble. Key elements of interconnectedness that characterise the interactions that occur within a musical ensemble include the sharing of a common musical language, the prioritisation of trust, experimentation, dialogue, and flexibility.

<sup>6</sup> The term 'ego' is intended here to signify a musician's personal style, musical signature or ambition.

ensembles or sporting teams, the individual identity appears heightened within the collective consciousness.

### **Intuitive Collective Response**

Intuitive collective response refers to a collective understanding, insight, knowing, or sense, which is independent of any reasoning process, nor is it inferred by previous cognition. This allows the individual and ensemble to act via intuition, and therefore enhances the sense of playing and reacting in the moment. The importance to jazz improvisers of adopting intuitive collective response is its real-time application during performance, which facilitates spontaneous creative interaction within the ensemble (Whiteoak 1999:297).

### **Ensemble**

The term ensemble is used in this dissertation to describe the collective of individual improvising musicians viewed as a whole. Ensemble also implies that the musicians interact within rule sets that are established by negotiation between the players or the scores.

### **Jazz Improvisation**

The Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics defines the act of improvisation as “to do or produce something on the spur of the moment ... a spontaneous activity in which the improviser simultaneously practices the interdependent functions of composition and performance” (A.Alperson 1988:478). This suggestion of improvisation being a spontaneous act implies heightened elements of innovation, inventiveness, technical agility and an element of risk (A.Alperson 1988:479). Whilst jazz improvisation *is* comprised of numerous spontaneous acts, it also draws on considerable pre-learned musical language and stylistic conventions, including commonly known harmonic structures,<sup>7</sup> melodic material, role-playing, and rhythmic ‘feels.’<sup>8</sup> These pre-existing elements, which are used as a basis or starting point for improvisation, are themselves open to expansion and loose interpretation. As a result, it is likely that no two jazz improvisations will be identical.

---

<sup>7</sup> These structures include the blues, jazz standards, rhythm changes, Latin tunes, and ballads.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Feel’ is a term used by musicians to describe a unique rhythmic ‘groove’ or patterning played by a band’s rhythm section.

## **Contemporary Modern Jazz**

Contemporary modern jazz refers to current improvised music that is influenced by a combination of the multiple jazz styles emanating from 1940 onwards. The Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics states that jazz is a constantly evolving genre (Brown 1988:1), and contemporary modern jazz is no exception, comprised and fused from diverse influences from the modern jazz music canon of the last seven decades. Contemporary modern jazz can be loosely defined by its harmonic and rhythmic complexity, a tendency to draw on established jazz forms and styles, a sense of swing, improvisation, and emphasis on both individual and ensemble identity.

## **Free Jazz**

The term *Free Jazz* has accrued many connotations. The definition used in this dissertation refers to the music movement of the early 1960s, which was brought to prominence by jazz musicians such as Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and Sun Ra. Although at the time a distinctly new style of jazz, *Free Jazz*, which was also referred to as *Avant-garde*, was largely based on the language of the jazz tradition,<sup>9</sup> and was not a negation of standard-practice jazz (Hodson 2007:118). Its main difference was a looser approach to formal parameters such as harmony, rhythm, melody, and meter, and it often discarded predefined form in favour of spontaneously co-created structures.

## **Play**

The term play has definitions in the social, natural and biological sciences, but no single agreed definition. Definitions range from the structural, such as defining play as typical gestures or movements, to functional or causal definitions such as play being enjoyable but having no clear function (Smith 1985:1042); however in this dissertation such definitions will not be explored. Play as it relates to this study can be defined as an action or activity that is fun, done in jest and not taken too seriously. For the purpose of

---

<sup>9</sup> Author Robert Hodson states that “Both styles involve interactive improvisational performances in which the musicians transform musical materials, and the main difference lies in the source of these materials: in standard-practice jazz, the musicians transform predefined materials, and in free jazz the musicians transform materials improvised in the course of performance” (2007: 117).

this research, play is a term used to describe a freedom of action or activity that may be both serious and lighthearted. Play is also understood as a way in which an individual understands his relationship with external objects and concepts – a way of knowing.

## **Creativity**

The Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics proposes that creativity means, “to produce something original” (Jarvie 1988:456), often interpreted by musicians and musicologists as the need to create something new. The concept of ‘new’ is contentious in jazz, as music which is dubbed ‘new’ or ‘original’ is arguably comprised of traceable musical influences and elements. What may be more applicable to jazz practitioners (irrespective of whether the music is ‘new’ or otherwise) is that the music is ‘new’ to their artistic discovery, rather than new to the broader art form. Creativity may also apply to how well a practitioner(s) is able to be particularly imaginative, expressive, and able to transcend the traditional rules, forms and patterns to present ideas with freshness.

## **Synopsis of Content**

This chapter provides the rationale for the research undertaken for this dissertation. It introduced and defined the aims of this study, the background, terms and concepts as well as the limitations of the research. Chapter Two outlines the methodology of this research and examines relevant literature. Chapter Three investigates existing models of constructing collective consciousness within a jazz ensemble, focusing on the distinguishing features and processes of the Miles Davis Quintet. Chapter Four presents an analysis of the *By a Thread* ensemble’s application of the processes exemplified by the Davis Quintet.

## CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, the methodology of the research is outlined and focussed on the following key areas relevant to the creation, conception and objectives of the *By a Thread* ensemble: the identification of key exponents of the modern jazz ensemble, the creation of compositions, rehearsals, co-created language and cues, live performances, refining the material, and recording.

A review of the relevant literature is presented in two sections. Firstly, a review of literature pertaining to collective creativity, collaboration and improvisation is presented in order to deduce the perceived importance of these factors in facilitating the development of collective consciousness. Secondly, an examination of literature that provides insight into the Miles Davis Quintet is undertaken. In particular, the scope is narrowed to literature discussing the quintet's distinctive interaction, play, creativity, and individual and collective identity.

### **Methodology**

The methodology of this research topic was largely informed by the dissertation of academic and musician Anita Hustas, which investigated communication and perception within an improvising ensemble (Hustas 2008). The topic of this dissertation is similarly focused around developing musical and personal relationships in order to facilitate the construction of a collective consciousness within a jazz ensemble. Like Hustas, I chose to centre my research on the development of an ensemble of performers that included myself. However, rather than use a questionnaire<sup>10</sup> to form the basis of my research, a comparison between *By a Threads'* development with that of the Miles Davis Quintet was used to elucidate objectives and outcomes within this dissertation.

---

<sup>10</sup> A questionnaire was used to assess individual ensemble members in the Hustas study.

The following methodological steps and processes were undertaken in this research:

### **1. *By a Thread*: Conception and objectives of the ensemble**

*By a Thread* was formed to explore and develop a collective consciousness within an improvising music ensemble comprised of three like-minded but distinctly individual musicians. In particular, the areas of collective creativity, interpersonal communication and interaction and musical concepts were investigated and incorporated into performances. Before these areas could be incorporated into *By a Thread*, it was necessary to identify a successful model of an ensemble which exhibited these characteristics.

### **2. Identifying key exponents of a distinguished modern jazz ensemble**

The key exponent of a modern jazz ensemble famous for its collective and individual identity is the Miles Davis Quintet. This ensemble was analysed in order to gain insight into strategies, processes, and approaches to facilitate collective consciousness, creativity, and interaction within *By a Thread*. The aim of the *By a Thread* ensemble was not to replicate or re-create *what* the Miles Davis Quintet played but to gain insight into *how* they went about creating music as an ensemble, and then attempt to apply the learnt processes to *our* music.

### **3. Compositions: Composing music that will cultivate and allow for collective consciousness within the *By a Thread* ensemble**

*By a Thread* wrote original compositions that encouraged group interplay, interaction, and allowed for deviations from predetermined parameters. The ensemble believed that the music should accommodate the individuals' voices, shaping the music to the performers, rather than the musicians shaping themselves to the music. Room within the compositions for spontaneity was made a priority in order to encourage the musicians to venture into unplanned territory, and to allow the flow<sup>11</sup> and unfolding of the music to be uniquely shaped to each individual performance. The idea of incorporating unplanned segments amongst the predetermined elements of the

---

<sup>11</sup> Flow is a term coined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to describe a particular state of heightened consciousness. He discovered that extremely creative people are at their peak when they experience "a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past present, and future" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; 43).



compositions was a deliberate attempt to encourage interplay, to break away from predefined role playing, to incorporate elements of risk and randomness and to allow for expansion of ideas during improvisations. It was hoped that the inclusion of these processes as departure points would create a greater sense of flow.

#### **4. Rehearsals: Editing, developing the compositions, co-created language, and cues**

*By a Thread* shared a mutual desire to obtain a connection beyond that of a casual jazz ‘standards’<sup>12</sup> performance. In order to develop a band sound<sup>13</sup> and rapport, *By a Thread* rehearsed regularly to encourage trust and understanding, qualities that were deemed necessary for collective creativity and interaction. Rehearsals were also essential in facilitating the editing and development of compositions and cues, co-created improvisatory language and discussions between the ensemble members. The importance of rehearsals for the *By a Thread* ensemble is discussed further in Chapter Four.

#### **5. Live performances**

Ten performances at several different venues were organised for the ensemble. The venues varied from jazz clubs to concert settings at festivals. In addition to the desire to play music for an audience, a mutual belief within the ensemble was that live performance would accelerate the evolution of the music, underscoring what did and did not work, therefore providing a platform from which to build for future performances. A conscious decision was made to play sets in a single unbroken continuum, an approach influenced by the Davis quintet. This involved setting the order of the compositions, but leaving the transitions between tunes to be decided in the moment. Live performances are discussed more comprehensively in Chapter Four.

#### **6. Reviewing and refining the composed material and processes of improvisation**

At the conclusion of the live performances, the ensemble engaged in rehearsals to attain a more elastic and interactive approach to several of the more technically challenging

---

<sup>12</sup> The term ‘standard’ refers to a song or composition that is widely known, performed, and recorded by musicians as part of the jazz musical repertoire. Many standards are originally Tin Pan Alley or Broadway show tunes.

<sup>13</sup> The term ‘band sound’ is defined here as an identifiably united sound, which is facilitated through sympathetic and compatible musical identities.

compositions. These tunes involved musical parameters such as odd-meters, extended harmony and rubato improvised sections. It was crucial to the ensemble to discover individual and collective freedom within these parameters rather than spontaneously creating structures and parameter in a *Free Jazz* approach. In other sections, a choice was made to relinquish the predetermined parameters in preference to playing off the fragments<sup>14</sup> or mood suggested by the compositions. These processes are discussed further in Chapter Four.

## **7. Recording**

Three days were scheduled for the recording of the music for *By a Thread*. As a back-up plan additional days were designated if required. We recorded at the guitarist's newly built home studio. This arrangement afforded us the gain of minimal cost and minimal time restriction. The guitarist had the dual role as both an ensemble member and the recording engineer. The recording process and outcomes are outlined in detail in Chapter Four.

## **Literature Review**

### **Collective Creativity, Collaboration and Improvisation**

The literature examined for this dissertation investigates the processes involved in the phenomenon of improvisation, in particular, literature that addresses collective consciousness within a jazz ensemble. Prior to the 1980's, the literature addressing collective improvisation was limited, with the majority of ideas stemming from outside the field of music, in the work of philosophers (Theodore Adorno,<sup>15</sup> for example) and psychologists (Carl Jung,<sup>16</sup> for example). Within the field of music, musicologists' books on improvisation have traditionally been either biographical<sup>17</sup> or formalist in nature, often neglecting the processes that occur in the 'real-time' act of improvisation.

---

<sup>14</sup> 'Fragments' refers to parts of the melody or harmony of a composition which has been divided into segments.

<sup>15</sup> An example of relevant Adorno literature is his book '*Essays on Music*'.

<sup>16</sup> An example of relevant Jung literature is his book '*Memories, Dreams, Reflections*'.

<sup>17</sup> The books and writings by jazz musicologist Leonard Feather.

In such cases, the focus has been on the analysis of solos of distinguished individuals,<sup>18</sup> rather than investigating the ongoing preparation and real-time processes for both the individual and the collective.

To an extent, musicologists' literature has unintentionally abstracted the language used in jazz improvisation from the environment and context in which it is used. Author and academic Barry Bignell, describes this disconnection when he suggests, "we have evolved into creatures who think in the abstract ... there is a dislocation of meaning and concrete experience" (2009:8). In the case of improvising musicians, the dislocation has been from the fundamental experience of interacting and making music with others. Arguably, this emphasis on abstracting language within literature on improvisation has inadvertently diminished the importance of collaboration and interaction. As a result, many practitioners are equipped with a musical syntax that allows them to play together that relies on role-playing rather than on any substantial interaction. This lack of interaction may be a contributing factor in practitioners feeling unfulfilled and disconnected from both the music and musicians, and results in little room for further musical innovation.

A factor in the increased interest in collective improvisation has been the rise of education in jazz and improvised music, in particular in the tertiary sector. Additionally, the eclectic development of improvisation since 1960 has resulted in a need and desire by musicians and musicologists to elucidate the improvisation process, as can be found in books by authors Berliner, Bailey, Hodson, Werner, Sarath, and Monson.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, the contributions of philosophers and psychologists such as Csikszentmihalyi, Nachmanovitch, Pirsig, and Sawyer<sup>20</sup> have made invaluable contributions to the understanding of the role of collective consciousness within improvisation.

---

<sup>18</sup> These analyses have predominantly focused on the decipherment of musical parameters such as harmony, melodic note choice, and rhythmic elements.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*; Derek Bailey, *Improvisation*; Robert Hodson, *Interaction, Improvisation, and Interplay in Jazz*; Kenny Werner, *Effortless Mastery*; Ed Sarath, *A New Look at Improvisation*; Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something*.

<sup>20</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*; Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*; Robert Pirsig, *Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*; Keith Sawyer, *The Creative Power of Collaboration*.

Due to its existing complex, ineffable nature, literature is unable to offer a ‘how to’ method or a concrete view of the roles of creativity and collectivity in improvisation. Rather, there are many different views on the phenomenon of improvisation. Common themes that improvisers recognize as being of importance to real-time improvisation and successful collaboration include: a sense of flow, which encapsulates the establishment of goals that are open-ended enough so that creativity can emerge (Sawyer 2007:45); remaining open and listening to others (Sawyer 2007:46); the need for equal participation; and the blending of egos (Sawyer 2007:49). Practitioners have also acknowledged the importance of play<sup>21</sup> in improvisation, as it potentially makes them more adaptable and free to explore their creative endeavours (Nachmanovitch 1990:45). Wayne Shorter, saxophonist from the Miles Davis Quintet reiterates the importance of play to the creative process, describing that when he improvises, “I still have to think as a 10 year old to keep the inner child play going” (2004). Author Paul Berliner cites the metaphor of conversation as key to the idea of group improvisation (1994:348). Other factors significant to collective improvisation that can be likened to “the flow of unscripted conversation” (Lee 1996:354) are familiarity, embracing risk, conflict and tension (Hustas 2008:12), an existence of hierarchy, preparation, communication and trust.

The construction of a collective consciousness in jazz music arguably evolves from the collaborative act of collective improvisation. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi suggests in his book *Flow* that in order to realise these collective actions, a departure from self-consciousness is of prime importance (1990:62). This development of a collective consciousness can depend on its prescribed importance for the ensemble and individual practitioners, and can vary depending on factors such as the style of the music, the setting for the performance, knowledge of musical conventions and technical ability. A theory of Gestalt psychology that is seen to be of importance in the process of collective improvisation suggests that “the whole is greater than the sum of the parts” (Ellis 1999). Authors David Bastien and Todd Hostager reiterate this notion, suggesting that jazz is “built on the assumption that each individual musician simultaneously and consciously adapts to the whole, supporting the other players, and influencing the

---

<sup>21</sup> The idea of ‘play’ is central to the author Stephen Nachmanovitch’s book *Free Play*. He asserts that play is essential to humans’ existence, be it in sport, art, ritual, or statecraft, and makes us more adaptable and free to explore. The author suggests that when playing with the materials of our chosen pursuit we are being creative and focusing on the process, not merely the outcome.

overall outcome” (1992:95). This suggests that the combination of contrasting individual styles within an ensemble has the potential to be an asset, bringing together a greater range of concepts and bodies of knowledge than that of any one individual (Sawyer 2007:72).

Inevitably the search for insight into improvisation and collective consciousness within music will remain an area tinged with mystery that cannot be fully described by words. Partly the mystery is due to the creative process varying so much from one person to the next, and therefore defies a singular definition. Moreover, as Berliner describes, “verbalising about essentially non-verbal aspects of improvisation” is difficult (1994:348), as language is often too specific to describe a complex, nebulous, and somewhat equivocal phenomenon. Improvisation belongs to that fleeting moment in time in which it is performed, as author and musician Derek Bailey suggests, “Its reality is its moment of performance” (1992:142). As a result, documents that relate to the moment of improvised performance, be it scores, analysis, recordings, reviews, or memories, are only recollections beyond that relevant moment, and therefore the accuracy of documenting the process and experience of the original moment is marginal. That is to say, many consider true understanding of creative processes and experience to be attainable only through experience.

If there is truth to the notion that within improvisation “the present is heightened and the past and future are perceptually subordinated” (Sarath 1996:1), then it may be argued that the importance of literature investigating these previously neglected ‘real-time’ processes, is vital to gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of improvisation.

### **The Miles Davis Quintet**

This review of the literature pertaining to the Miles Davis Quintet aims to gain insight into the interaction, play, creativity, and identity, both individual and collective, which existed within the ensemble. This literature is varied in type and approach, including autobiographical, biographical, liner notes, analytical books, dissertations, interviews, magazine features, and internet sources. Books by authors Carr, Chambers, and

Yudkin<sup>22</sup> provide insightful commentaries on the individuals, the ensemble, and the various contextual factors that influenced the resulting music. Whilst these books provide a somewhat unbiased and objective view of the music, as they are written from a perspective beyond that of the actual practitioners, the accuracy of their commentaries is subject to the authors' interpretation. At times they tend to reflect on the music with grandiosity and attach the concept of genius to the quintet, occasionally making the accuracy of such inflated opinions questionable. The autobiographies and interviews contained within the books and papers by authors Mercer, Troupe, Taylor, Berliner, Smith, and Kirchner<sup>23</sup> offer a less formal, but no less insightful perspective from the primary sources, the musicians themselves.

It is commonly acknowledged that the Davis Quintet was “one of the most cohesive and original groups in contemporary jazz” (Morgenstern 1967:243) and one embodying a “radical reinvention of jazz style ... a dangerous, high-flying, exhilarating act of communal communication, virtuosity, and trust” (Yudkin 2008:120). Davis assembled individuals of exceptional creativity, and made use of the ensembles combined consciousness allowing a balance between the ego of the individual practitioners and that of the collective. In order to encourage collective input, Davis relinquished control over the music, “allowing space for the band to be part of the direction” (Gene Santoro 1988:140). Of particular importance to the evolution of collective consciousness in the Davis Quintet was a stronger emphasis on collective improvisation.

Davis made a deliberate attempt to keep the performances of the quintet fresh; as stated by Wayne Shorter, “he was the only bandleader who paid his personnel not to practise at home ... so as to avoid the polish that makes even some improvised music boring ... he always wanted it fresh” (Chambers 1983:87). Whilst this may have been true, the Davis rhythm section constantly discussed and analysed their performances and the development of the music. Bassist of the Davis Quintet, Ron Carter, recalled that “after gigs the rhythm section would talk for hours trying to understand and analyse as best we could what took place and to have a clearer view of it to work on ... for tomorrow

---

<sup>22</sup> Ian Carr, *Miles Davis: A Biography*; Jack Chambers, *Milestones*; Jeremy Yudkin, *Miles Davis: Miles Smiles, and The Invention of Post Bop*.

<sup>23</sup> Michelle Mercer, *Footprints: The Life and Work of Wayne Shorter*; Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography*; Arthur Taylor, *Notes and Tones: Musician to Musician Interviews*; Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*; Chris Smith, *A Sense of the Possible: Miles Davis and the Semiotics of Improvised Performance*; Bill Kiechner, *Miles Davis Reader*.

night” (Hodson 2007:69). The group also had a busy performance and recording schedule. It may be fair to conclude that connectedness, excitement, and musical trust within the quintet were ingredients vital to the musical freshness, irrespective of how familiar the musicians were with the music at hand.

A conscious decision within the Davis Quintet was to move away from ‘playing it safe’ and instead to adopt a spontaneous and less determined approach, which involved “a lot of chance taking” (Beldon 1995:163), according to the quintet’s saxophonist, Wayne Shorter. The quintet was searching for increased levels of collective interaction and creativity, in the process redefining the stereotypical concept of an ‘ensemble’ within jazz. To an extent, the quintet members were not sure exactly what the outcome of their search would be. As author Michelle Mercer states, “The musicians acted on ‘common knowledge’ intuitively, in real time, before it was articulated in later discussions” (2004:113). The ensemble identity, which comprised contrasting but musically sympathetic individual approaches, seemed to intensify the potency of the individual members’ artistic voices. This co-existence of ensemble and individual identity would appear to be a key attribute of high level improvising ensembles.

A review of the literature relating to the Miles Davis Quintet shows a number of key characteristics that are seen by critics and audiences alike as defining the concept of cohesion in improvised jazz music. Therefore, it seemed appropriate to examine the music of *By a Thread* according to these characteristics, which are defined and discussed further in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 3: EXISTING MODELS

This chapter will outline the key processes and strategies employed by the Miles Davis Quintet to extend its musical boundaries and encourage collective improvisation, thus contributing to the establishment of a collective consciousness.

### **Existing Models: Processes and Strategies Employed by the Miles Davis Quintet**

“Prepare for the unexpected” (Davis 1969, cited by Chambers 1983:93).

The unique ensemble interaction and collective consciousness of the Miles Davis Quintet were enabled by the culmination and convergence of like-minded musicians. Much of the collective consciousness needed no verbal explanation. As a bandleader Davis was interested in encouraging his band members to think about the music at hand rather than be given specific instructions. As academic and author Smith states, “Miles intentionally supplied, withheld, and distorted performance information because of a quality of attention that such ambiguity evoked from his players” (1998:262). Herbie Hancock, pianist of the Davis Quintet, describes the “group’s defining quality was trust, and acceptance. Whatever happened musically was supposed to happen, and you were supposed to make it work” (Mercer 2004:100). Arguably, this response may have evolved out of necessity to due Davis’s unpredictable style as a bandleader. Even with the instant rapport of the Davis Quintet, the members were conscious of the ensemble being a unique chance to explore and push the boundaries of the music. The outcome of this activity was one of the most distinguished and identifiable jazz ensembles in the modern jazz genre.

Davis was astute in his belief that in order to achieve his superlative ideal of an ensemble, one of exceptional creativity, spontaneity, and collective consciousness, a balance between the ego of the individual practitioner’s consciousness and that of the collective needed to exist. Whilst Davis himself was a jazz celebrity, when on the bandstand he was conscious to “not hold the reins too tight” (Chambers 1983:82) and instead relinquished his role as bandleader for that of “musical meritocracy [where] the best ideas ruled” (Mercer 2004:110). This practice allowed each member to be an equal contributor and enabled unbridled space and creativity to imbue the music. Ron Carter



reflected on the effect, stating, “That’s freedom for me, to have that kind of musical awareness, where the ego is not part of the music” (Mercer 2004:112). A sense of group democracy also influenced the group’s solos, as Herbie Hancock stated, “It was clear the improvised solos were to be collectively forged” (Mercer 2004:110). Smith describes how Davis’s stage manner would encourage ensemble interplay:

Miles wanted a quality of attentive musical flexibility that would lift the players to the level of co-composing interpreters; one that would encourage them to respond to the improvisational moment with the same alert freedom that he did. Ambiguous, nonverbal communication meant that Miles' players were forced to engage with him by interpreting what they thought such communication demanded. (1988:262)

The quintet’s performances evolved to what may be considered a deconstruction of the music, as both soloist and rhythm section more often than not “tended to blur these [structural] boundaries, creating performances that sound more fluid and less structured” (Hodson 2007:107). The more structurally loose and radical avant-garde musicians of the 1960’s influenced the intensity and freedom of the quintet’s outpourings (Mitchell 1980:117). Author and academic Robert Hodson aptly describes the quintet’s music as that of “freedom anchored in form” (2007:123).

Observable processes and strategies characteristic of the Miles Davis Quintet include:

- Flexibility of meter, tempo, harmony and melody
- The freeing and experimenting with deconstruction of form
- Space built into compositions
- Performance of an unbroken continuum of music which served to link compositions
- Freely improvised transitions between tunes
- Sonic and gestural cues
- Variation of ensemble combinations: Solo, duo, trio, quartet, and quintet combinations
- Musical and personal rapport between musicians
- Musicians were technically endowed and well-versed in the jazz tradition
- Clear direction from the bandleader when required

- Assimilation of like-minded sideman creating instant musical rapport and ensemble sound
- Regular discussions and analysis of their performances by the ensemble members
- Band members individuality afforded space within the collective ensemble
- Band members encouraged to take more chances
- Contrasting voices of band members
- Band members allowed to stretch out on solos
- Band members were influenced by 1960s *Free Jazz*
- Busy rehearsal, gig, and recording schedule to develop music and ensemble
- Greater use of 'rhythm section' instruments as individual soloists
- Collective simultaneous improvisation
- Repetition of a set repertoire that evolved in order to sustain the bands interest
- All band members contributed creatively on a high level
- Interplay within rhythm section
- Distinct effort to keep the music fresh by bandleader
- Nothing in the music is determined to be fixed or unchangeable
- Playing off the 'flavour' or 'mood' of the composition
- Breaking away from strict head,<sup>24</sup> solos, head arrangement
- Loosening of instrument's traditional roles
- Music that combines elements of Post-Bop and *Free Jazz*
- Creating concert setting performances
- Occasional departure from the inclusion of distinct solos sections
- Use of minimal structure to enable exploration of mood
- Mutual respect amongst ensemble members
- Sometimes abandoning harmonic and melodic resolution in tunes
- At times, deliberately ambiguous direction by bandleader

### **Summary**

The Miles Davis Quintet was searching for new ways to play old material, as author Ian Carr states, writing that they "had taken the technical and emotional exploration of standard song structures as far as was possible before [the structures] disintegrated

---

<sup>24</sup> The term 'head' is used in jazz to describe the melody or theme of the composition.

completely and metamorphosed into something else” (1982:139). The emphasis for the ensemble to embrace approaches that were new in their time is noteworthy, as it is often in the pursuit of new approaches to playing material that collectively created language and consciousness are formed. In the Davis quintet, new approaches included radical ones such as reducing the emphasis on solos as the focal point of the music, as was exhibited on the recording of the album *Nefertiti*, in which “improvised solos became secondary to mood and fragmented riffs” (Mercer 2004:123). Concurrently, the Davis quintet was striving for collective improvisation that would facilitate interactive spontaneity. The aspiration for increased spontaneity arose out of feelings of predictability and staleness within their performances, and to counteract the process “each musician attempted to fake the others out with his own erratic stream-of-consciousness, [and] the group was pushed to a deeper level of musical consensus. They’d found a way to make those old songs new again.” (Mercer 2004:114). In discussing risk-taking in the Quintet’s music, Miles Davis states:

See, if you put a musician in a place where he has to do something different from what he does all the time, then he can do that-but he's got to think differently in order to do it. He has to use his imagination, be more creative, more innovative; he's got to take more risks [...]. So then he'll be freer, will expect things differently, will anticipate and know something different is coming down. I've always told the musicians in my band to play what they know and then play above that. Because then anything can happen, and that's where great art and music happens. (Troupe & Davis 1991:220)

Rather than diminishing the individual identities, the ensemble identity that was comprised of contrasting but musically sympathetic individual approaches seemed to intensify the potency of each individual’s artistic voice. Identity seems to be an important attribute of high level improvising ensembles – the co-existence of both an ensemble and individual identity, or in other words, the continued existence of individual identity within an ensemble’s collective consciousness. Significant to the evolution of collective consciousness in the Davis Quintet was a larger emphasis on collective improvisation than had been previously embraced by the majority of contemporary modern jazz ensembles.<sup>25</sup> The pursuit of process was much more highly valued than was the product. However, due to the rapport and exceptional technical and

---

<sup>25</sup> Two notable contemporary jazz ensembles whose music was heavily infused with collective improvisation were those of Ornette Coleman and Charles Mingus.

creative attributes of all members of the quintet, more often than not, the risk-laden processes resulted in an exceptionally high musical outcome.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> This is exemplified by the audibly high level of both process and product on the *Live at the Plugged Nickel* recordings that document a week of the quintet's performances during their new approach to playing the music.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF THE *BY A THREAD* PROJECT

This chapter contains an analysis of the preparation, development, and outcomes of the *By a Thread* project by measuring them against the key attributes identified within the Davis Quintet, and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Despite the fact that *By a Thread* comprises different instrumentation and performs compositions different to those associated with the Davis Quintet, it can nevertheless be demonstrated that many factors observed in the Davis Quintet deemed conclusive to balancing the musicians' self identities with that of the ensemble's collective consciousness, have been purposefully applied to *By a Thread* in the context of this research.

### **Common Language: The Individual and the Ensemble**

Each member of *By a Thread* is equipped with a well-rounded knowledge and command of the jazz language and its various styles, in conjunction with a high level of technical ability on their respective instruments. This pre-existing common knowledge, or collective consciousness, can be viewed as a kind of ready-made history (Bastien & Hostager 1992:101). Although these common-language tools and skill levels enable individual performers to 'converse' instantly, as was observed in the Miles Davis Quintet, it became apparent to *By a Thread* that a deeper collective rapport was needed to have a more meaningful and interactive musical conversation. To facilitate conversing, each individual sometimes diminished the focus on their individual voice, and instead, made their contribution relevant and compatible to that of the other ensemble members. Berliner describes this process for performers when he observes that they "at times modify[ing] their own ideas, occasionally even abandoning them for other ideas complementary to the group" (1994:497). Adjustment ideas to compliment the musical conversation of the ensemble did not mean that players sacrificed their individual identities, but rather that the individual identities were combined to build an ensemble identity. The recording of *By a Thread* suggests that the individual voices have remained distinguished within a unified collective ensemble. This collective sound is unique to the ensemble's combination of individuals and therefore, any change to the personnel would create a different collective identity.

## Compositions

Like the Miles Davis Quintet,<sup>27</sup> *By a Thread* decided to write and play exclusively original compositions within the ensemble for several reasons. It was the intention to compose music that was more personal to us individually and as a collective ensemble, instead of interpreting someone else's music. It was felt that the music should be written to accommodate the individuals' personalities and the particular instrumental possibilities of the ensemble. This approach to composition focused on shaping the music to the performers, instead of the one-directional approach required when interpreting someone else's composition wherein the musicians often shape themselves to the music. We also wanted to use the compositional process as an outlet to develop specific musical and conceptual ideas that we were currently pursuing, which were often centred on strengths or weaknesses within our playing. Developing the ensemble through original tunes helped construct a collective consciousness achieved through the collaborative effort of developing a language together. The compositions were designed to extend, and at times break free from, traditional forms and structures, which forced us as practitioners to establish new rules and conventions, which aided in making the music more personal (McMillan 1996-06:73). As the composers, we felt a greater sense of ownership of the music, and therefore we were comfortable editing the compositions as we were developing them.

Having control over the material and structures we played facilitated the ensemble's improvisational flow. *By a Thread's* role model for achieving elasticity within the contemporary jazz style was the Miles Davis Quintet, who exhibited an ability to merge seamlessly between improvisations based on contemporary jazz parameters and extend those into spontaneously created structures. Another feature of the Davis Quintet was to constantly evolve compositions to the point where the interpretations were often merely fragments of the original structures. Whilst still containing the essence of the original composition, performances became malleable to the mood of the ensemble (Chambers 1983:101). When the compositional structures allowed creativity of the individual and ensemble to flourish, *By a Thread* experienced its most collectively created and distinguishably unified music.

---

<sup>27</sup> This refers to the studio recordings of the Miles Davis Quintet, and not the live recordings and performances, which were comprised mostly of jazz standards.

The *By a Thread* compositions contained obstacles, challenges, and risk elements as described in detail below:

- *You're Only a Muppet*: Fast tempo, meter changes within the form, technically demanding melody, inbuilt space, an unusual 56 bar solo form, reliance on cueing, a 'loosening' of distinct role playing. (Refer to score and audio track 3 in the Appendix section).
- *Green Lands, Grey Skies*: Harmonically complex, unusual 42 bar form, loose and broken pulse. (Refer to score in the Appendix section).
- *By A Thread*: Loosely interpreted melody, sections with no designated harmony, a loosely stated pulse that relies on cueing for each section, open form with extended periods of static tonality encouraging improvisation on the mood, lots of inbuilt space. (Refer to score and audio track 2 in the Appendix section).
- *An Evening in the Bathroom of Reason*: 5/4 meter, repetitive short form, challenging bass line, non-distinguishable climax points. (Refer to score in the Appendix section).
- *Toey*: Technically challenging melody, use of referents such as indeterminate pitches in melody, alternating meters, implied harmony but no set harmonic structure, inbuilt space in the solos, absence of traditional role-playing, simultaneous improvisation. (Refer to score and audio track 8 in the Appendix section).
- *Amelia Takes Two*: Loosely interpreted pulse and melody. (Refer to score in the Appendix section).
- *If-Ism*: Demanding melody, meter changes, open solo section, loosening of role-playing, requires cueing, in-built space, simultaneous improvisation, odd meter sections. (Refer to score and audio track 1 in the Appendix section).
- *In the Aftermath*: Odd meters, inbuilt space. (Refer to score and audio track 5 in the Appendix section).

- *Counterpoint Fairies*: Rubato tempo and phrasing, requires cueing, indeterminate pitch melody, inbuilt free play, interactive soloing, use of referents to extend language, simultaneous improvisation. (Refer to score and audio track 7 in the Appendix section).
- *Same Time Same Place*: 5/4 meter, repetitive bass line, short form, challenging harmony. (Refer to score in the Appendix section).
- *Green Circle*: Rubato melody and solos, requires cueing, mood exploration, simultaneous improvisation. (Refer to score and audio track 4 in the Appendix section).

### **Rehearsals**

Whilst the regularity of rehearsals was initially deemed to be the priority for *By a Thread*, it became evident that equally important was the quality. Rehearsal quality greatly fluctuated for the ensemble dependent on a number of variables, the environment and place we rehearsed, how much time we had to interact socially before and after rehearsal, the business of each individual's day, the amount of prior musical preparation undertaken by each individual, whether there were time constraints, and our ability to communicate musical ideas and concepts to each other.

During the rehearsal process, it became apparent that compositions needed to be edited to allow the music to evolve and to ensure it was playable and musically suitable for the trio. Some of the compositions were technically demanding and were adjusted to allow for interaction. Changes were also made to compositions that locked the members into rigid role-playing for extended periods. Points of departure were identified, and in particular the challenge of elasticizing form within compositions, as inspired by the Miles Davis Quintet, was discussed. It became evident that a system of cues was being developed within the group, some of them discussed and others more intuitive. Cues were predominantly sonic, but they also included gestures as well as and some graphic and notational cues to encourage a controlled amount of randomness. Familiarity with these cues and consistency in execution needed to be developed by the ensemble members in order for them to be understood and reliably acted upon.



Memorisation of the music was important in freeing attention away from visual distractions and implications of the notated scores. It was an ambition of *By a Thread* to play on ‘the mood’ of the composition, rather than perform an accurate rendition of the notated part. The discarding of the musical scores was a catalyst in abandoning our reliance on the initial ‘road-map’ of the music. Our prime road-map became a sonic one. Once the ensemble members were familiar with possible departure points, important landmarks and potential destinations, we were free to navigate according to the individual performance. The intention of co-creating the compositions and improvisations was to take the emphasis off pre-conceiving ideas and placing the focus more on reacting to the ideas of the ensemble.

The rehearsals were run democratically, with all opinions being considered important irrespective of whether an individual was the composer. With much of the music co-created and collaborative, it was not necessary to have a single leader, however at times a stronger musical direction may have been more quickly achieved had a leader been more established. To an extent we all assumed the role of the leader, expressing what we each thought was intrinsically important to the music at hand. Discussion after each composition was encouraged. Sometimes the music wasn’t evolving, and we were unable to articulate or pinpoint what was inhibiting its development. During these moments of obstruction we tried not to control or force the creative process, and agreed to re-visit the music on a regular basis with the hope that with repeated attempts over time we could make musical sense of it. We hoped that this would allow a more organic evolution of the music to occur over time.

## **Cues**

Cues are often essential for communication, especially within a collectively improvising ensemble such as the Davis Quintet, and were crucial in both liberating and grounding the musical compositions and improvisations within *By a Thread*. Cues were utilised in various forms: sonic cues were imbedded within the music or suggested by one or more of the individuals; verbal cues were used when other cues had been misinterpreted; gestural cues such as eye contact or hand signalling, subtle body language such as postural changes. Greater understanding of one another’s body language helped in the precision of executing the music together. Within the

compositions, notational and graphic cues were utilised to elicit less predictable responses out of the practitioners to encourage elements of randomness and chance.

### **Co-Creation**

The collaboration, co-creation, and development of the composed music and improvisations were objectives inspired by the Davis Quintet, and were utilised by *By a Thread* to reduce the need individuals to pre-conceive ideas, and to place the focus on reacting to the ideas of the other ensemble members. Psychologist and author Keith Sawyer stresses the benefits of the collective over the individual contribution when he states that, “when groups of individuals work together to generate a collectively created product, the interactions among group members often become a more substantial source of creativity than the inner mental processes of any one participating individual” (2009:83). Co-creation encouraged stretching and conceiving musical ideas that *By a Thread* felt would not have been possible had we been improvising solely as individuals.

### **Live Performances**

With each additional performance the group accrued a shared pool of language, cues, gestures and utterances from which the ensemble members could recognizably draw upon and react to in future performances. The ensemble tended to play with a greater intensity and sense of commitment during these live performances, and in search for variation within performance more duet and solo combinations were explored. Without the luxury of being able to stop, as is possible in a rehearsal, the practitioners were forced to find a way forward when faced with obstacles in real-time performance. Sometimes these moments were the trigger for delving into new, uncharted and exciting musical territory for the ensemble. At other times, the inherent risks of creating in the moment resulted in the musical interaction of the ensemble suffering and feeling disjointed. However, the less successful performances were often catalysts for fruitful post-performance ensemble discussion. These discussions helped the ensemble negotiate ways of improving future performances, providing insight and greater understanding of each other’s musical experience and preferences and inspired the musicians to fine-tune their approach in the time leading up to the next performance.

*By a Thread* experimented during performances with the set-up of the band's position on stage. In certain configurations, members felt they could not hear one another adequately, thus their ability to feel connected and interact was diminished. It was a challenge for the ensemble to balance the aural and visual requirements of acoustic and non-acoustic instruments in order to facilitate the optimal environment for communication. In regard to the band's visual presence, we wanted to avoid the visual suggestion of division that a traditional formation created by having a horn player in front of the two rhythm section instruments creates, which is one of soloist and accompanist.

The result, after these ten performances was a further refinement of the compositions, understanding and experimentation of individual and group input and roles, and a greater understanding and development of the co-created ensemble language.

### **Elasticising Musical Parameters**

During initial rehearsals and performances, many of the forays into elasticising the meter, tempo, harmony, melody, in-built space and form were predetermined by the ensemble members in discussions. These initial attempts at elasticising the music were daunting, as they forced the individuals to rely on a musical mutual trust that had not yet fully developed. As the ensemble built rapport and understanding of the co-created musical language, it became possible to extend many of these elements in 'real-time' without prior arrangement or discussion. The group became sensitive to sonic and gestural cues that had the power to realign the music. As an ensemble, we felt that the freely improvised transitions between tunes were often our most enjoyable performative moments. These transitions correlated into highly interactive and spontaneous segments, often including forays into sections of solo and duo interactions, which allowed additional space for individuality within the group to be prominent and offered a contrasting sound, texture, and density to that of the combined ensemble.

### **The Unbroken Continuum: Facilitating Flow**

Performing the repertoire as a single unbroken continuum, which was influenced by the performances of the Miles Davis Quintet, impelled *By a Thread* to develop musical journeys over a larger expanse of time. After several performances we abandoned the

predetermined set list and let sonic cues guide the composition order. This practice added excitement for the practitioners, with an increased element of risk. During these continuous sets a dichotomy was experienced: that of balancing a combination of creating and reacting ‘in the moment’ with the forward planning of the ‘overall structure’ of the larger continuum of music. When an individual was experiencing a musical ‘blockage’ the continuum activated feelings of flow, helping to submerge them within the music. At other times, individuals struggling with the music would instigate a new idea or composition in order to re-align their musical focus. Sometimes the struggle of another ensemble member – a mistake or unintended action – resulted in a new collective response, thus becoming a new tangent for the ensemble. The loose interpretations of the compositions in conjunction with the free transitional sections alleviated the need to infuse new compositions into performances; to an extent, new interpretations became new compositions.

### **Changing Roles: Bandleader, Soloist and Accompanist**

The lack of a designated bandleader during performance initially created hesitation within the ensemble. A bandleader often harnesses the ability to control the focus of everyone's attention and maintain the right unity of mood throughout the performance. In many cases, each member of *By a Thread* fulfilled this role as our approach to the music and the ensemble interaction demanded that all individuals were equally leading the music. It became apparent that certain pivotal junctions in the compositions and improvisations required individuals to assume the role of a leader. The role of each individual was in a constant state of flux, switching between that of soloist(s) and accompanist(s). The ability to assume multiple roles, which is somewhat contrary to the stereotypical tradition in mainstream jazz, was difficult to negotiate. In a sense, *By a Thread* had to learn new ways of playing in order to avoid succumbing to the stereotypical roles of accompanist and soloist. The ensemble tried to adopt the meritocracy approach present in the Davis Quintet (Mercer 2004:110), and to stay malleable and open to following such ideas.

### **Fostering Ecology Within the Ensemble**

The importance of building relationships had considerable impact on the development of creative consciousness within *By a Thread*. It served to enhance communication,

allowing the members to establish a greater understanding of each other, and helped build a more playful sense of interaction by breaking down personal barriers. The exchange and inspiration of ideas, giving and acceptance of support, both whilst playing music and away from it served to unite the individual identities, transforming the group into an ensemble (Hustas 2008:34). The ensemble ecology encouraged the music to advance beyond the focus of notes and compositions to a collective conversation between the practitioners. It became evident that events beyond performance assumed a considerable influence on the quality of our interaction and music. Essentially, influences on the music journey began before, and continued after each performance.

### **Exploration: Stretching Out, Taking Chances and Embracing Risks**

The increased musical rapport and trust developed within *By a Thread* facilitated the stretching-out of improvisations and bridging transitions. The individuals became familiar with the sonic cues that could be initiated if the improvisation became stagnant. In post-performance discussions, the ensemble openly agreed that it was a worthy process to stretch out and take chances during performance, even if this did not always result in the most successful or interactive performances. The discoveries made during such performances seemed to far out-weigh the importance of controlling the outcome of the final product. After several performances, many of the compositions became condensed in duration, evolving into more concise and poignant versions.

In her PHD thesis, '*Terrible Honesty*' author and academic Rosalind McMillan highlights that taking artistic risks is important in shaping individual and ensemble 'voices' or identities (2006:49). The music of *By a Thread* contained elements that had inbuilt risk including:

- Extreme technical demands
- Ensemble interaction
- The inclusion of spontaneously created transition sections
- Playing original compositions featuring unusual forms, meters, harmony, and rhythmic devices
- Avoidance of traditional jazz role-playing
- Simultaneous improvisation

The inclusion of risks into our performance encouraged us to extend beyond our pre-existing language, and helped contribute to the development of the identity of the ensemble.

### **Combining *Free Jazz* and Post-Bop**

The Davis Quintet's music was comprised of a combination of *Free Jazz* and standard practice jazz. Similar to the Davis Quintet, *By a Thread* was looking for ways to deviate from the stylistic rigidity of bebop-based jazz. We wanted to incorporate the looseness of the *Free Jazz* approach into the compositions and improvisations in order to stretch the rigidity of strict parameters, but not entirely abandon them. For us, the parameters served as meeting points within the larger improvised structure.

Although the *Free Jazz* approach was comfortable for the musicians of the ensemble, merging it into the compositions was challenging. Letting go of the strict parameters often resulted in disintegration of the composition itself. During the course of rehearsal and performance, we became familiar with parameters that were integral binding agents within each composition and which elements we could expand or discard.

### **Keeping It Fresh**

Connectedness, excitement, and musical trust within the Davis Quintet was identified as a key ingredient in keeping the music fresh, irrespective of how new or old it was. The balance of musical freshness within *By a Thread* was in constant flux. The individual preparation sometimes required the development of ideas in advance in order to be able to negotiate the challenging forms, harmonic and rhythmic elements, tempos and odd meters. However, if this ingrained preparation became overly dominant, it resulted in the opposite effect, that of a more constrictive and rigid approach to playing the music and interacting within the ensemble. Berliner describes this problem faced by the improvising musician when he says, "in one of the great ironies associated with improvisation, as soon as artists complete the rigorous practice required to place a vocabulary pattern into their large store, they must guard against its habituated and uninspired use" (1994:206).

The ensemble members discovered that after the initial rehearsals in which we became familiar with the compositions, it was best not to rehearse the compositional improvisation forms too often, but rather save that for the performance, therefore keeping it fresh. Instead, we developed improvisations that were unrelated to the compositions, which helped develop collective improvisation and language, fostering a collective consciousness that we could draw upon during future performances. *By a Thread* initially set distinct parameters and ‘signposts’ within the compositions to hold the improvisations together. After several rehearsals and performances, adherence to these parameters tended to infringe on the ‘freshness’ of the music. The feeling of freshness was most apparent when the unexpected interpolated with the familiar. The emphasis was not always on striving to play something new, but rather to look for new ways of playing old or existing ideas. Often one idea by an individual triggered a new and fresh musical journey for the ensemble. The key in these instances was the ability of the practitioners to stay open-minded, and to be flexible to depart from their current idea or place in the composition, and support the ensemble in the newly implied direction.

### **Simultaneous Improvisation: Building a Sense of Ensemble**

One of the aims of *By a Thread* was to adopt an alternative approach to traditional role-playing, that of soloist and accompanist, by pursuing a more collective type of improvisation. Collective improvisation proved challenging within the trio format, as the underlying rhythm, pulse, and harmony was often implied rather than played. This collective approach to improvisation resulted in the creation of space, allowing the music to breathe. The interaction resulting from departure from defined roles also helped create music of increased texture, density and dynamic variation.

### **Contrasting Voices: Individuality Within the Ensemble**

The sonic blend of the instruments in the ensemble, or at times lack thereof, forced the players to make adjustments depending on the musical setting. In particular, the amplified guitar and acoustic trumpet/flugelhorn often had to manipulate their sounds to blend when sharing a melodic phrase or motive. It became apparent that certain sections of the music lent themselves to a collective blending sound, whilst other sections were more open to dominant influence of the individuality of a particular

practitioner's sound. The stylistic and artistic diversity of the individuals helped create more original and diverse music. As Sawyer describes in his book *Group Genius*, "in group flow, each person's idea builds on those just contributed by his or her colleagues" (2007:50). Therefore, if the individuals are too alike, the interaction may no longer be challenging, or may lack musical interest and inspiration to inspire group flow.

### **Variety Within a Set Repertoire**

Adhering to a set repertoire allowed the ensemble to become familiar with the structural material of each composition and co-create many permutations within each tune. The loose interpretations and the free transitional sections alleviated the need to infuse new compositions into performances. To an extent, the different interpretations became new compositions based on the existing compositions. This constant reinvention ensured that the repertoire avoided feeling stale for the ensemble.

### **Refining the Compositions and the Processes of Improvisation**

Further rehearsal prior to recording offered the ensemble members further chance to discuss and workshop elements that were deemed either intrinsic to the music or a hindrance, or that had become habitually linked to compositions during the performances. A looser and more flexible approach to stating the pulse was an objective that we continued to rehearse in order to allow for less rigid group interaction and interplay. *By a Thread* also incorporated a collective solo approach to contrast with the traditional soloist and accompaniment role-play of jazz. This approach also helped create variety in the density, timbre and dynamics of the music. Another by-product of these post-gig rehearsals was the additional socializing time between the ensemble members. Socializing helped open the lines of communication which transferred to the ensemble's making-music.

### **Different Settings: Jazz Club and Concert Settings**

The environment within which *By a Thread* performed had considerable influence on the music. In smaller jazz clubs, we felt comfortable exploring softer or slow developing ideas due to the more intimate setting. In larger performance halls, we felt



more comfortable presenting a concert consisting of music played in a single unbroken continuum.

## **Recording**

Recording at the guitarist's newly built home studio created conflict between the guitarist's creative focus and his role as the recording engineer. The negotiation of small, but compounding technical problems was an additional distraction and stress for the guitarist. In hindsight, these distractions were somewhat detrimental to the quality of the recorded music. Beyond the initial minor problems, a major technical problem with an unknown and randomly recurring sound glitch<sup>28</sup> stunted the flow of the recording sessions. Technical problems reached a climax on the second day when recording had to be abandoned completely due to the frequency in occurrence of the glitch during takes. On the third day, which had been rescheduled, issues with the sound quality had a negative impact on the individuals, and the quality of the takes and the ensemble interaction suffered. Another recording day was scheduled.

On the final recording day, the sound problems had been resolved. We began the session by recording some freely improvised duets. Apart from their potential use as material for the CD release, they served to warm-up and synchronise the practitioners' musical and intuitive realms. Several compositions were recorded in quick succession, obtaining several alternative takes of each. The flow of this session was great – without the impeding distraction of technical problems, the ensemble members could wholeheartedly concentrate on the music.

During the recording process, many of our live performance experiences reversed. The studio atmosphere was in many ways devoid of the energy and inspiration of a live audience, and as a result, it was difficult to replicate the slow unfolding space and organic development that were intrinsic to the compositions. Often, the ensemble members became overly conscious, and tended to rush the music's development. In contrast, several technically challenging compositions that we tended to find difficult during the live performance, were much less stressful in the recording setting. In these

---

<sup>28</sup> A loud distorted white noise sound that was randomly coming through the headphones, and was also being transferred to the recorded wave files.

cases, we had time in between takes to prepare and focus our creative energies on the individual composition.

Throughout the recording sessions, the in-built social activities such as a cup of coffee and a chat before the start of each recording, the lunch break, and the relaxed conversation in between takes, served to enhance the bond between the musicians. These social activities appeared to contribute to a sense of ensemble when we created music together. Whilst developing deep friendships to play interactive music at a high level may not be a prerequisite (although arguably it may help), it appeared to facilitate the breaking-down of barriers between the members of *By a Thread*. By gaining an understanding of each other beyond the music, a mutual sense of trust was developed. As *By a Thread* evolved, it became apparent to me that the music was influenced by the uniting of the individuals as much as it was the notes of the composition or improvisation.

## **Summary**

In using the Miles Davis Quintet as a model, the members of *By a Thread* were able to examine their individual and the collective ensemble identity. This insight was facilitated by the development of a common language, co-creation of compositions tailored to the ensemble, developing cues, elasticising musical parameters, facilitating flow by performing in an unbroken continuum, collective improvisation, fostering ecology within the ensemble, exploration and taking risks, combining *Free Jazz* and post-bop, striving to keep the music fresh for the practitioners, variety within the set repertoire, and performing in different settings.

## CONCLUSION

The process of identifying key attributes of interaction, play, identity, and creativity of the Miles Davis Quintet as a model for *By a Thread* resulted in tangible strategies and outcomes. The strategies facilitated the development of *By a Thread's* identity, cues, co-created language, elasticity of compositional musical parameters and approach to performance. The conscious effort to elasticize musical parameters and perform sets of continuous music incorporated elements of risk and randomness to the performances. To counter this increased inclusion of risk, the ensemble developed a shared musical language, which acted as a kind of insurance during departures from the structures and parameters (Bailey 1992:90). Embracing risk-taking became less daunting with the development of musical relationships. Performances were not always optimal, however the feeling of communal support and a sense of a collectively undertaken journey ensured a musical experience that was neither negative nor unfulfilling for the practitioners. When the process of co-creation was fluid between the ensemble members, the music became playful and conversational, seemingly lifting the players to new heights of performance. Whilst it cannot be definitively shown that individual identities were heightened, it can be said that they were in no way negated by the development of collective consciousness. Individual members noted increased inventiveness and freedom when the collective consciousness felt synchronised. The act of composing also contributed to the evolution of both the individual and ensemble sound.

The level of quality of each improvised performance of *By a Thread* was different; some had more of the characteristics of the Davis Quintet and some less. Due to the subjective nature of these judgments from the members of *By a Thread*, it was impossible to determine 'good' and 'bad' performances. The ensemble members experienced a greater feeling of connection and inventiveness in their live performances than during the recording sessions. The task of negotiating the different contexts of live performance and recording was not an easy one, for *By a Thread* had honed its interaction within the context of live performances. Despite recording a large amount of material, only seven of the twelve compositions were included on the CD. We believed these best reflected the processes the ensemble had tried to embody, including key areas of interaction, individual and collective identity, and the

development of a collective consciousness. It is my opinion that the gravity of musical performances within the live context far exceeded that documented on the CD. The distractions experienced during the recording sessions, which were due to technical problems, were detrimental to the quality of the recorded music. Additionally, the ensemble had far less time to develop and come to terms with the recording environment, and with further immersion in the process, I believe the quality of the live performances could be replicated in the recording studio. Predominantly, the goals of *By a Thread* focused on the process more than product.

This research has broadened my perspective beyond musical scores and performance. It has changed the way I undertake forming, developing, participating within improvised music ensembles, and my approach to teaching small-ensemble jazz studies. Admittedly, the positive outcomes of this research will not be achievable in all of my musical encounters. Performances in less than optimal musical settings will still take place, ones that require restrictive stylistic role-playing, and performances that fail to be fulfilling due to a lack of shared musical and personal history between the musicians. However, on the whole it has helped me to obtain a greater understanding of my art and re-establish a connection with the music and musicians with whom I play.

### **Limits to the Research**

This research was approached from my perspective as a professional practitioner, in particular from my experiences within *By a Thread*, an ensemble formed specifically to explore the issues raised in the investigation of this dissertation. In addition to personal reflection, this research draws on the methods and processes employed by distinguished music practitioners, in order to gain further insight into the nature of creating and developing improvising ensembles. Arguably, within the practice of making contemporary jazz music, practitioners are the primary source of knowledge, and therefore their opinions and insights are a pertinent inclusion in this dissertation. Whilst the vernacular utilized by these practitioners does not always equate to that demanded of a formal academic document, it conveys information that is both relevant and insightful.

Whilst the broader objectives of the research were known from the outset, the areas of key importance to the study only became evident during or after the research processes occurred. As a result, the investigation predominantly occurred in retrospective analysis and contemplation. Prior knowledge may have altered the approach to the research, including the foresight to include video documentation, which would have been an extremely informative tool in the analysis of group interaction and collaboration. In hindsight, a greater knowledge of the literature specific to the fundamental concepts of psychology and phenomenology would also have been advantageous in providing a more lucid view of collective consciousness.

This dissertation does not include a formalist approach of analysis or transcription of the compositions or solos, but will include an audio CD of *By a Thread* and relevant scores<sup>29</sup> as a reference for examples given. The approaches undertaken in this dissertation are by no means definitive, however the limits of a minor dissertation such as this determine a narrower and more specific area of focus, and in this case, one that has been shaped to the author's professional musical development and activities. As a result, many of the processes and conclusions drawn from this study are predominantly relevant to the modern jazz genre, and may have limited application to other music styles, both within and beyond the jazz context.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

The study of consciousness within the field of improvised music is relatively new to the academy, particularly from a practitioner-led perspective. In embracing the practitioner as researcher, new methodologies are likely to arise that deepen the understanding of not only musical improvisation, but also human creativity more broadly.

---

<sup>29</sup> The Audio CD and scores are included in the Appendix. It is vital that the audio CD accompanies the scores, as the scores only represent the initial sketch from which the music evolved.

## REFERENCES

- Alpers, P. 1988. 'Improvisation,' in K. Michael (ed.) *Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Adorno, T. 2002. *Essays on Music*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bailey, D. 1992. *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*. New York: Da Capo Press, Inc.
- Beldon, B. 1995. 'Miles ... What Was That Note,' in F. Alker (ed.) *The Miles Davis Reader*. New York: Hal Leonard Books.
- Berliner, P. F. 1994. *Thinking in Jazz*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bignell, B. 'Creativity and Music Performance.' Unpublished Research Paper presented to 2nd year music students at the Northern Metropolitan Institute of Technical and Further Education, Melbourne, 2008.
- Brown, L. 1988. 'Jazz,' in K. Michael (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1996. 'Musical Works, Improvisation, and the Principle of Continuity.' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 54, No. 4, pp.353-366.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2000. 'Feeling My Way: Jazz Improvisation and Its Vicissitudes – A Plea for Imperfection,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 58, No. 2, pp.113-122.
- Carr, I. 1982. *Miles Davis*. New York: W. Morrow.
- Chambers, J. 1983. *Milestones: The Music and Times of Miles Davis*. New York: Quill.
- Csikszentmihályi, M. 1990. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Ellis, W. 1999. *A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology*. New York: Routledge.

- Hodson, R. 2007. *Interaction, Improvisation, and Interplay in Jazz*. New York: Routledge.
- Hostager, D. T. & Bastien, T. J. 1992. 'Cooperation as Communicative Accomplishment: A Symbolic Interaction Analysis of an Improvised Jazz Concert,' *Communication Studies*, Vol.43, No.2, pp.92-104.
- Hustas, A. 'An Investigation of Communication and Perception within an Improvising Ensemble,' MMus.Perf. diss., Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, 2008.
- Jarvie, I.C. 1988. 'Creativity,' in K. Michael (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jung, C.G. & Aniela, J. 1965. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. New York: Random House.
- McMillan, R. 'Terrible Honesty, The Development of a Personal Voice in Musical Improvisation,' PhD diss., Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, 2006.
- Mercer, M. 2004. *Footprints: The Life and Work of Wayne Shorter*. New York: Tarcher/ Penguin.
- Mitchell, C. 1980. 'Miles: Resting on Laurels? Changing His Silent Ways?,' in F. Alker (ed.) *The Miles Davis Reader*. New York: Hal Leonard Books.
- Monson, I. 1996. *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Morgenstern, D. 1967. 'Miles Davis, Miles Smiles Downbeat Review,' in F. Alker (ed.) *The Miles Davis Reader*. New York: Hal Leonard Books.
- Nachmanovitch, S. 1990. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam.
- Pirsig, R.M. 1999. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values*. New York: Quill.

- Santoro, G. 1988. 'Miles Davis: The Enabler, Part 1,' in F. Alker (ed.) *The Miles Davis Reader*. New York: Hal Leonard Books.
- Sarath, E. 1996. 'A New Look at Improvisation,' *Journal of Music Theory*, Vol. 40, No. 1, pp.1-38.
- Sawyer, R.K. 2007. *Group Genius*. New York: Basic Books.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1999. Improvised Conversations: Music, Collaboration, and Development. *Psychology of Music*, Vol.27, No.2, pp.192-216.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2000. 'Improvisation and the Creative Process: Dewey, Collingwood, and the Aesthetics of Spontaneity,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol.58, No.2, pp.149-161.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2006. Group Creativity: Musical Performance and Collaboration. *Psychology of Music*, Vol.34, No.2, pp.148-165.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2009. Distributed Creativity: How Collective Creations Emerge From Collaboration. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, Vol.3, No.2, pp.81-92.
- Smith, C. 1998. 'A Sense of the Possible: Miles Davis and the Semiotics of Performance,' in B. Nettl & M. Russell (eds.) *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*. London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, P.K & Vollstedt, R. 1985. On Defining Play: An Empirical Study of the Relationship between Play and Various Play Criteria. *Child Development*, Vol. 56, No. 4, pp.1042-1050.
- Steinbeck, P. 2008. 'Area By Area the Machine Unfolds: The Improvisation Performance Practice of the Art Ensemble of Chicago.' *Journal of the Society for American Music*, Vol. 2, No.3, pp.397-427.
- Taylor, A. 1993. *Notes and Tones*. New York: Da Capo Press.
- Troupe, Q. & Davis, M. 1991. *Miles: The Autobiography*. New York: Simon and Schuster.



- Werner, K. 1996. *Effortless Mastery*. New Albany, IN: Jamey Aebersold Jazz.
- Whiteoak, J. 1999. *Playing ad Lib: Improvisatory Music in Australia 1836-1970*.  
Sydney: Currency Press Limited.
- Young, M. & Blackwell, T. 2004. 'Self-organized music.' *Organized Sound*, Vol. 9,  
No. 2, pp.123-136.
- Yudkin, J. 2008. *Miles Davis, Miles Smiles, and the Invention of Post Bop*. Indiana:  
Indiana University Press.

## DISCOGRAPHY

Davis, M. 1965. *E.S.P.* Columbia CS 9150, recorded January 20-22, 1965, compact disc.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1965. *Live at the Plugged Nickel.* Columbia CK 40645, recorded December 22-23, 1965, compact disc.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1966. *Miles Smiles.* Columbia CS 9401, recorded October 24-25, 1966, compact disc.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1967. *Nefertiti.* Columbia CS 9594, recorded June 7, June 22, July 19, 1967, compact disc.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1967. *Sorcerer.* Columbia CS 9532, recorded May 16-17, May 24, 1967, compact disc.

Shorter, W. 2004. *Carlos Santana and Wayne Shorter: Live at the Montreaux Jazz Festival.* Paris: Special Ops Media.