

Rebuilding the stratocaster

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Published

2011

Journal Title

Griffith Review

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Rebuilding the Stratocaster

Synthesising work and play

Paul Draper

'In my music, I'm trying to play the truth of what I am.
The reason it's difficult is because I'm changing all the time.'
– Charles Mingus

I FOUND myself collecting guitars. It was an imperceptible transition. Two decades ago I'd owned just a couple of instruments at a time, as working tools of the trade when I was a professional musician, composing, playing and recording for a living. After I joined Griffith University and its Conservatorium of Music, in 1995, this process slowly waned as my academic responsibilities grew. Somehow, though, guitars crept back into my life, each an extraordinary portable artwork and collectively an ever larger inspiration that seems to be approaching critical mass.

At the time of writing this piece I own ten guitars. Not only am I collecting them – I'm analysing, listening to, modifying and rebuilding them (the web being an incredible research tool). And the unique music of each instrument is starting to surface. The hot-rodding fetish is driven by a quest to find the right voice, the music that wants to emanate from each guitar. The guitars are dictating a practice regime that listens to the instruments themselves: for example, throwing away the plectrum and wrestling with extracting a certain language from an electric guitar with fingers, flesh and nails; suddenly exploring exotic Eastern scales because there seems to be a resonance in a particular maple guitar neck; exploring pathways that had never occurred to me in my former professional life, but now the guitars are wanting to tell me something.

They niggle more and more: is it time to rebuild my musical past in a way that makes sense, that still serves my students, faculty and academic career? A bit confronting, really – I haven't 'lived' musicking for fifteen years or so, like a sports person needing the regular physical engagement and execution: practising, rehearsing, performing, composing. This new collecting and rebuilding of guitars has taken me by stealth.

Perhaps it is akin to Guy Claxton's notion, in *Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind: How Intelligence Increases When You Think Less* (Ecco, 1997)¹, of the 'undermind' or subconscious hard at work on resolving matters, if you let it. Yet there is still something about the metaphysics of the situation that is intriguing, overpowering. While music has always been central to my life, a driver, I am beginning to realise that the ways in which I have seen this have constantly changed. In the early days the guitar was utilitarian, simply a conduit for the execution of (hopefully) original ideas; at later stages, perhaps more a symbol of 'project-based outputs' or academic engagement. But, most recently, it is a love affair with the instruments themselves, each with such wonderful physicalities and personas that I seem to be listening to them in new ways.

I decided to write about it, to plan for it, and to change direction in a manner that aims to recapture the past, incorporate the present and challenge a future fusion for the two.

I'M A BABY boomer who grew up in the sixties. Fresh out of school, as an eighteen-year-old guitarist, I bypassed university and joined a rock band, promptly heading off to Melbourne to find fame and fortune: good times, cold weather, Lygon Street, Aussie Crawl, Skyhooks, Countdown, shared band houses, and life in pubs and on the road. We never quite cracked the big time, whatever that really means in the stardom-or-bust vernacular. Maybe this was to do with my attitude to money and pay scales – somehow those record company deals never seemed to quite add up. In any case, I became interested in adding more strings to my bow, and there was no way to avoid the fact that this would require an arsenal of practical skills and musical technique. I owned various guitars through this time, but they tended to come and go depending on immediate needs or fashion whims, and I am sorry to say that most of them are not still with me.

I relocated to Sydney in the late 1970s, feeling the need for a change of scene and better musical chops. New fusion musics were emerging and Sydney had a burgeoning jazz scene, along with a Conservatorium of note that offered programs led by the jazz stars of the time. I auditioned and enrolled. Trouble was, I didn't much like it and I didn't agree with how they taught. It seemed much more connected to the teacher's past rather than my own gigging present and imagined future. This is something that has stuck with me for a long time, and what I later came to understand as 'problem-based learning' became a centrepiece for my doctorate. It was also a focus for my own curriculum designs, where theory and practice aim to be driven by and understood through personal contexts – 'student-centred learning', as the current jargon puts it.

I found this first taste of academia disconnected from working. So I sought private tuition from a number of younger gigging fusion players with serious

practical credentials, dropped out of the Sydney Con and, for the next five years or so, played and practiced harder than I ever had before. I began to focus more on lucrative but demanding session playing in the recording sector, and moved back to Brisbane in the early 1980s to take up a number of recording and touring offers. This was at the birth of the CD, digital sound, the PC and MIDI (the musical instrument digital interface). The last of these changed the music business almost overnight. Where once there were many large local bands and crews, suddenly there were small duos with backing tracks everywhere in pubs. Software like Band-in-a-Box undercut the live acts by a huge margin and, moreover, many audiences didn't seem to notice or mind.

In the recording scene the same transition was underway. I jumped in, using my experience and love of traditional recording studios to build a small facility in Brisbane, probably one of the first affordable home studios in town. Guitars were still very much in my life, but now they were accompanied by a growing array of technologies, including synthesisers, computers and effects devices, as well as designs for acoustics and isolation spaces. I had successfully exited the dying live scene and reached the new technological frontier. It was at this time I spied and bought a lovely black Fender Stratocaster (still with me today, but now rebuilt): nice to look at and good to play, but essentially a stable vehicle to retrofit with pitch-to-MIDI convertor technology. This meant that I could directly control and play much of the digital technologies and synthesisers directly from the guitar, subsequently opening up more film soundtrack work that could be completed efficiently and cost effectively.

I became what they call in the music business the producer – in this case, of a lot of original music in the next decade or so, and across many sectors: for bands, solo artists, advertising agencies, radio, TV documentaries, films, local council and state government projects. I began to find myself delivering in-service training to schoolteachers who were receiving bucket loads of computers and music software that they had no idea what to do with: the 'education revolution' of the late 1980s.

It was this trajectory that led me to deliver my first invited lecture on film music and recording technology, at a Brisbane tertiary music school in 1990. That seemed to go well, and was followed by regular casual teaching. I started full-time work at the Con in the mid-1990s, as a lecturer in music technology – the technology moniker stuck. I somehow became the default 'PC guy' because of my work with computers, while my rock, R&B and jazz music never really got much of a look-in at what was then a mostly traditional classical-music institution. From time to time this annoyed me, but the idea of scaling and teaching what I had learned as a career musician was an exciting challenge at age forty-two. An idea of legacy was emerging, and I loved teaching and being part of a team to bring the conservatoire into the twenty-first century – something that we still seem to be doing.

I WAS MOVING out of the professional recording industry, and so too was the rest of the world. The dotcom bubble burst around the turn of the millenium and with it came the digital download revolution, the 'file sharing is a crime' outrage from corporates, lawsuits against university students, and eventually the complete unravelling of record company control of musicians' intellectual property (some might say loss of livelihood, but many statistics would seem to refute this). This so-called digital independence² also changed the ways in which we aspire to train future generations of artists. Rather than expect a principal position in an orchestra, or a lucrative pop record deal, we have in some ways turned full circle: craft and portfolio career skills have become favoured buzzwords, along with a new one called 'web 2.0' – meaning Flickr, YouTube, user rankings, 'folksonomies' and the idea that artists can be successful in the 'long tail' economies of an interconnected world.³

The design of online ('flexible' or 'blended') learning has been a research interest throughout my academic career. I had to build and establish higher education credibility, and in 2000 I completed a doctorate in education entitled *New Learning: The Challenge of Flexible Delivery in Higher Education*. Drawing on this work, and influenced by web 2.0, in the early 2000s my efforts turned to building online multimedia, podcasting and music communication platforms at the university. I lobbied for the creation of a professional doctorate-by-research in music. In 2005 we introduced a Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA), which these days is bursting at the seams with candidates developing practice-led research aspects of their music.

Taking on the conservatorium's research dean portfolio, in 2009, has allowed me considerable scope for reflection. Steering research and university reporting responsibilities for an academic team and assuming responsibility for research postgraduate candidates has afforded me a bird's eye view of complex viewpoints that I now deal with every day. Might this be linked to my recently morphing perspectives about my own music and my guitars? For example, we develop and assist some outstanding people to attain their doctoral qualifications in the arts through multi-exegetical theses that incorporate creative works. Yet it remains problematic for academics to be recognised for their own creative works. That makes me want to approach the future in a different way.

A COLLEAGUE SUGGESTED that it might be time for me to think about a monograph. Probably considered *de rigueur* for someone who is a professor, this usually means something like: 'an academic must publish monographs over the course of his or her life. These scholarly treatises provide evidence that the academic is carrying out research in the field and analysing already published information. A monograph usually brings new light to the subject, and it may contain breakthrough research. It also further refines the academic specialty of the author, and establishes

the author as an authority on the topic⁴.’

On the face of it, this approach sits uneasily – ‘scholarly treatise’, a book, yet more text outputs substituting for music making? Perhaps, like many other artists in the academy, I found myself slowly drifting away from practising arts simply because of academic demands: my PhD, grants, administration, strategic planning and so on. It’s odd, too, in the light of so much talk and gathering of research ‘equivalent’ outputs across the university sector in Australia from the moment I started in the sector – from the 1998 Strand Report, *Research in the Creative Arts*,⁵ to the Howard Government’s *Research Quality Framework*⁶ and Labor’s *Excellence in Research for Australia* (ERA) initiative in 2010.⁷

Despite these attempts to chase the idea of ‘practice-led research’, I see and hear around me that many academic artists struggle to keep up their chops or significant ‘alternate’ research outputs (artworks, new music, films), given the demands of ever-interconnected, ‘flexible’, policy-driven, compliance-oriented university life. It may be easier for some to produce and count journal articles – and, in my case, also immerse myself in recording albums for academic colleagues.

Not that I’m complaining. On the contrary: working in the university over the past fifteen years has taught me much about reflection, analysis, planning and research, while challenging my assumptions and intellect.

Again recalling my colleague’s recent suggestion to ‘think about a monograph’, I want to work this through, consider its shape:

mon·o·graph [mon-uh-graf, -grahf] – noun

1. a treatise on a particular subject, a biographical study or study of the works of one artist.
2. a highly detailed and thoroughly documented study or paper written about a limited area of a subject or field of inquiry: scholarly monographs on medieval pigments.
3. an account of a single thing or class of things, as of a species or organism.⁸

I want to flesh out what seems to be emerging as a plan for my next eighteen months or so. But broadly – as way to fuse and re-examine my music in the light of the intervening decades of experience, and to think about the project in terms of ‘practice-led research’, one end point being the production of an album of original music I’ve decided to call *Monograph*.

My Fender Stratocaster, after twelve months of consideration and tweaking, is now complete. It is one of many guitars in my collection, all with individual stories, but this guitar has emerged as the CI for the project (Chief Investigator, in grant-speak). Beautiful, inspirational and, for me, a seminal moment: the guitar’s

transformation becomes a metaphor to understand the transition from professional musical life into the academy, and back again, drawing on the two. This guitar, in its original form, was at my side in every musical undertaking since the mid-1980s. It was a lot uglier then, with a MIDI interface strapped across its brow, but always a wonderful workhorse.

One half of the instrument is now located in the present and the future. It represents what I have learned in the academy as well as what I have brought to the academy. Every single electronic and metal component has been carefully thought through and replaced, tweaked and sometimes rejected before moving on. Twenty-first-century technology, specialisation and refinement is remarkable, compared with the earlier decades in which the guitar originally operated. In tandem with eBay's international reach, search engine power and web 2.0 culture, this makes the restoration a revealing and reaffirming exercise. It brings together new meanings for the idea of 'music technology' (beyond computers and the 'PC guy'), as well as helping me to remember and acknowledge central musical truths.

The historical aspects are retained in the timber – both the neck and the body are untouched, genuinely road-worn relics of the past life, twenty-five years ago. The wood resonates with every note, blazing venue light, sounds of audiences, loud music, the recording studio sessions, the film soundtracks, my own sweat. All are in the neck and the body: the maple and basswood, in the dings, markings and battle-scarred wear and tear. The guitar is not only a remarkable artwork in itself, but also a living musical personality that continues to inspire and reward, whether through just gazing at it, or in playing it and revelling in the glorious sounds it makes. It also smells wonderful, vividly reminding me of many musical settings: dingy bars and beer, sleek recording studio air-con, sunny outdoor concerts and crowds that go back forever, late-night jams on the porch...

ONE SATURDAY NIGHT, after much playing, the Stratocaster felt done. Where to next? This was still under-realised, a vague feeling in the back of the mind, a few notes on an A4 ream in my studio. Next morning I got up to read the Sunday papers with coffee, something I hadn't done for a while, having been immersed in either work or the guitars. For some reason I turned to that awful 'Body & Soul' liftout, opened at the back page and read my stars (sad but true). It said, 'tomorrow is the first day of the next seven-year cycle...forget everything, await tectonic change, this is the beginning of the rest of your life.' On it went, no oblique comments here, no, no. The page screamed at me: *Be prepared, you poor bugger!* So I put it away and tried to read something else, but couldn't put this seven-year itch out of my mind.

Later, I was talking with friends, both senior American academics, at dinner prior to them returning overseas. I mentioned the seven-year idea and they lit up. They started taking about 'seven-year cycles', both retrospectively and forwards. They

asked about details – ‘is it a five plus a two?’ – and offered all sorts of other confusing but intriguing comments. I’ve never been into astrology or numerology, but the older I get the more I notice that I tend to look for and respect omens. I wasn’t sure what my friends’ comments meant, but I went back to my notes for *Monograph*.

I’d already been jotting down vague concepts for the music, a possible album structure, some ideas for what roles the guitars might take, and what stories they might reflect upon as a monograph about my university career. This worked arbitrarily in decade-like slices from my start at the university. I reworked the notes, now figured across three seven-year cycles. Like a road map (and a graphic artwork), a ‘five plus two’ approach lined up – stunningly – with events and people; the first period overlapped and captured the transition from professional musical life into the university, during those years from 1990 where I worked as a casual lecturer alongside gigging and studio work. A better plan was emerging, but from somewhere in the back of the mind, from intuition, and one very different to the ways in which I’ve worked more recently, with planning and explicitness.

I’VE BEEN PLAYING every Friday, my research day. Jamming, blowing, improvising, working out the guitars and chop-building with a drummer, a close friend, at his recording and teaching studio in Brisbane. Now we’re starting to record and work on some really good stuff. When I mention ‘research day’, there’s been this quick, faint smile that passes across academic colleagues’ eyes. Just for a second, but it’s as if this is somehow false. Because of academic responsibilities and union agreements that offer a shopfloor model, research time tends to be conceptualised in somewhat nonsensical weekly workload allocations – usually Fridays at the Con. But I tend to do long slabs of intense research activity on weekends and in the evenings. I keep on talking up my Friday research days, though, and especially the playing that happens, the jamming, recording and development of musical ideas. And I notice that colleagues no longer offer the faint smile, but ask me how it’s going. MP3s are starting to circulate – and, more importantly, my musical confidence and chops are improving by the week.

Several academic writing themes are emerging about ‘improvisation, composition and instrumental technology’, and the notion of a parallel between ‘jamming’ and ‘proper’ research. That is, when we set out for a new research project or grant bid we review a lot of literature, file, distil, build our arguments and choose core items, then ‘remix’ an outcome. So too in musical improvisation, as I am finding: investigate the sources (practice, fingers, guitars, metronome, chord structures, musical analysis); improvise, play and record, drawing upon a lifetime’s aural library⁹ constantly stimulated through physical update; listen; evaluate, remix and produce the output of this research as music.

I recently submitted my first Academic Studies Leave application. I intend to do some traditional writing, and my literature reviews indicate that the field is ripe for

work about the nexus between musical improvisation and composition. Moreover, there's my potential contribution to the widening of universities' public and academic profile in the creative arts, through my own ways of seeing 'the artist in the academy': my transition from professional music and casual teaching to a continuing appointment, under Vice-Chancellor #1; to building an academic career through PhD, teaching, designing and convening undergraduate and postgraduate programs, under Vice-Chancellor #2; to establishing a research centre and new doctoral programs, and gaining my chair, with Vice-Chancellor #3.

It will be a series of musical concept performances and the album *Monograph* that reflects on events and people over twenty-one years. And a thank-you note to all.

'WRITING ABOUT MUSIC is like dancing about architecture,' Laurie Anderson once said. This was a belief I once subscribed to, being more interested in art than its critical analysis. However, recent experiences are telling me that the truth is a good deal more fuzzy: working through my instrument collection in intellectual and tacit ways is opening up pathways that I hadn't considered. What will emerge is still unclear, but it is becoming more than a simple binary of practice-and-play or listen-and-write. The writing helps think it through and gets filed away in the undermind, often unexpectedly raising its influence at the point I'd once imagined to be pure inspiration and improvisation. At other points it clarifies, or takes a position on what has occurred in the past, and so rolls the imagination into the future.

I think I've made peace with the 'dancing about architecture' view. Writing and publishing reflections, the processes, the artefacts and so on, seem more and more to be a natural process that highlights an idea of practice-led research in music. It is neither an art critic's point of view nor that of the artiste too busy to write, but a blend of the two stances that tries to speak directly to other academic artists as an authentic group of peers (rather than across disciplines, trying to argue an 'equivalency' to ARC science-based research awards, seeking carrots from the feds and the university sector).

Ultimately, though, I believe the work will be judged not with the forebrain by others, but by something much deeper and primal in human beings' understandings of, and responses to, the music itself. And this is something I have seen so often. Senior managers and academic leaders from all backgrounds talk the talk and walk the walk in research, federal funding, outputs, key performance indicators and the like. In day-to-day work this often appears to translate to one-size-fits-all for artists' academic activities.

Yet human nature, something fundamental, comes to the fore when we experience music, when these same people attend concerts, talk about records and relive their past through music's incredible power. There is not a person I know, not a senior colleague I have worked with, who does not retain a childlike enthusiasm

and reverence for the music in their lives, somewhere, sometime. The associations, the memories; the futures it can make, the Esperanto it shares.

Some kind of new fusion is coming for me. I intend there to be interesting research pieces for other musicians along the way but, mostly, I want the music to speak to everyone who listens and contributes their own inner meaning.

I'm still collecting guitars and they are collecting me – sweeping me up and steering me toward new music, new thinking and, I believe, a reconciliation between two careers that, until now, I'd thought of as work and play. My most recent discovery has been the French-Canadian Godin guitar. Mine doesn't seem to need modifications or personalisation just yet, but time will tell. It has a glorious deep-blue flame top that plays wonderfully, with its hybrid electric-classical flat neck and huge humbucking pickups. Godin guitars speak of the old world – rock, jazz, ethnic and classical instruments built with great craftsmanship and love. But they also look to the future, with a vision unrivalled in the contemporary guitar-manufacturing industry. My new guitar features transparent yet twenty-first-century-powerful electronics that provide for direct computer connection (much more elegantly than those I'd forced upon my poor black Stratocaster in the 1980s). A conduit from the mind and the fingers to digital – into software recording, production, remix and onward to the web. And, I hope, to be downloaded into the hearts and minds of others.

Thanks to Glyn Davis and Brydie-Leigh Bartleet for their encouragement and being a sounding board, and to Fred Haefele's inspirational *Rebuilding the Indian* (2005).

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² Draper, P. (2008). 'Music two-point-zero: Music, Technology and Digital independence'. *Journal of Music Technology and Education*, 1(2), 137–152.

³ Anderson, C. (2006). *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*. New York: Hyperion.

⁴ WisegEEK. (2010). 'What is a Monograph?' At <http://www.wisegEEK.com/what-is-a-monograph.htm>

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