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Master of Musical Arts

Exegesis: The bass-less trio

Jazz Thing – (Tim Hopkins)

Jazz is an attitude an art form that spans
Through culture, styles, from critics to fans
Born in the melting pot of New Orleans
Rhythms from Africans harmony from Europeans
It started with the blues then it took to the air
The jazz seed started spreading and it went on from there
Dixieland swing bebop cool jazz and more
Freeform and funk to orchestral scores
Through every kind of change it reflected the sound
Of whatever was there, of what was going down
But you'd never find it selling to the highest bid
It always stuck to its guns unlike some other did
You say that times have changed and styles have too
But have we lost our way in our search for something new
Jazz per se may have gone but its ashes still flare
In the spirit of the music in the notes on the air
Jazz Thing
Jazz was the popular music of its day
You could turn on the radio and hear someone play a line, a phrase
Something that got to you
Lyrics that caught your ear
A note that somehow rang true
There was Basie Bird Duke Coltrane and Miles
They were mixing it up, redefining styles
Satchmo and Ella, Billie, Prez and Ron
Herbie and Wayne, and the list goes on
Such dedication to an art is rare these days
Yet there are thousands of jazz musicians even today
Young men and women working at their craft
Most of them struggling helping redefine the art
You say that "times have changed", as it tends to do
But have we lost our way in our search for something new
Jazz per se may have gone but its ashes still flare
In the spirit of the music in the notes on the air
Jazz Thing

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Background

The Objective

Miles Davis asserts in his autobiography, that “a great artist needs to be able to stretch” [Davis, Troup, 1990]. While I may not a great artist, I aspire to make art with my music, and in my own musical journey I have been interested in trying out new ideas. Jazz musicians, because of their various skills (and in particular, in the art of improvisation) find themselves straddling musical boundaries and genres, just to pay the rent. In my own projects however, this musical adroitness was born just as much out of artistic curiosity as it was necessity, leading me to compose and perform in a variety of contexts and styles for a broad range of instrumentation. These contexts and styles include: duos for saxophone and piano accordion; Bach sonatas with string ensembles; improvising live dance music with DJs; organ trios; in electronica contexts; art and poetry collaborations. The need for creativity has expressed itself in all of my work, to varying degrees. On reflection, it’s the need to create something new and fresh out of work and ideas that are already explored to some extent. This desire is consistent with the jazz legacy I have inherited. In much the way Louis Armstrong began transforming popular songs into jazz vehicles, Charles Mingus took ideas from older African American musical traditions and transformed them to offer a fresh perspective on those traditions, and Miles Davis borrowed ideas from rock and soul music to pioneer new directions in jazz during the 1960s and 1970s, I too am looking for new avenues of expression for jazz musicians.¹

The Problem

For some, the idea of being a jazz musician today means upholding certain stylistic traditions and playing by idiomatic rules. Consequently we have musicians who define themselves as beboppers, swingers, Dixieland players and so forth, all in the 21st century. They are happy – and often proud – of being able to play melodies, solos and transcriptions note perfect, sometimes with little variation from the 60-year old (and older) originals they are inspired by.

Perhaps these keepers of the flame who act as curators of culture are necessary to preserve aspects of the jazz tradition? But the danger of jazz becoming a fossilised relic remains a

¹ Olly Wilson (1983) makes a great deal of the value of borrowing and transformation of music by African Americans in the development of jazz. pp.10-12

serious threat to its relevance without the revitalisation of its essence.² My contention is that it is perhaps closer to the original spirit of jazz to create something new from one's personal cosmology and cultural roots, albeit informed by the jazz tradition *per se*. I'm not sure that spirit involves regurgitating someone else's muse.

Creative jazz musicians have been – in one way or another – extending the genre's boundaries since the inception of the music. When bebop first exploded onto the scene in the early 1940s, it was considered nothing less than a musical revolution; a complete and violent upheaval of the old order. Maybe this aggressive take over was inherent in its style, as some births and transitions are innately bloodier than others. But not all of jazz's great innovations have been marked as assertively or explosively as was the arrival of bebop; subtler stylistic changes and shifts, just as influential, have surreptitiously taken place and changed the face of jazz forever. These developments have included hard bop, cool, modal jazz, Bossa Nova, jazz rock, electronic jazz, free jazz, acid jazz and many more.

The development of so much variety, all under the umbrella term jazz raises a serious question for musicians interested in playing this music today: What does it mean to be a jazz musician of the 21st century? In attempting to answer this question, I believe it's important to understand these past influences, as artists in all mediums must assimilate from what has already taken place in order to create something new and fresh; things are never created out of nothing. It's always been my mantra to, "learn from the past, look to the future, live in the now."

In order to look to the future and to find new avenues of musical expression I have tried many approaches over the past twenty years. The first two recordings I made (for ABC) were very much in the jazz idiom. The first, *Good Heavens*, is a bop-infused outing with some piano accordion added on two tracks. The second, *Pandora's Box*, is an aggressive record, which uses sophisticated quartet techniques but still within the traditional jazz concept. By contrast, my next four recordings – *Funkenstein*; *Upon my Camel*; *Popcorn*; and *Hear now after* – all have various elements of 'world', funk, dance music and hip hop while remaining very much of the jazz genre, albeit on the fringe. Stylistically they are more ambitious than the straight-ahead approach of the first two albums, but while there is strength in the

² For extensive comment and discussion on these ideas see Stuart Nicholson, *Is Jazz Dead?*, and Eric Nisenson, *Blue: the murder of jazz*.

multiplicity of their influences, there is also a lack of cohesion and focus across these records.

If there is a thread or a strength that is constant throughout all six recordings, it's diversity, and the flexibility to be creative within that diversity. Whatever approach I've taken, it has always been a priority for me to extend the idea of what jazz can be; I'm more excited by the suggestion of pure inspiration than playing bebop licks or digital patterns.³

I'll admit that with my own music the results haven't always been successful. Indeed one critic wrote, *"Tim Hopkins is somewhat of a musical Don Juan and has been into the pants of all sorts of music, but it has always been more of a fling rather than a deep and meaningful, however intense."*

As a young man I had certainly 'gotten into the pants' of other styles and genres. Now as a mature musician I'm looking at exploring something at a deeper level, and with a personal voice that draws on both my cultural roots and my jazz education. So, rather than explore the possibilities offered by combining different genres with jazz (what Margaret Boden [2009] would term 'combinatorial creativity') I decided to investigate the possibilities offered by undermining one of the foundational values of jazz.

When asked what combination of instruments made for a good octet, Count Basie, so the story goes, replied, "A bass, and seven other instruments." The inclusion of bass in jazz ensembles – music which was traditionally for dancing – is a central value. For this project I decided to return to the focus of my earliest recordings and renew my commitment to my jazz roots; I determined to do this by using jazz instrumentation and harmonies, complex melodies, odd time signatures and arrangements heavily steeped in the jazz tradition.

However, I also sought to trouble that jazz basis by looking into the musical implications that arise from removing the bass from an otherwise standard jazz instrumentation. In this way, perhaps a different kind of creativity might arise, one that Boden (2009) has termed 'transformational creativity' – creative work that leads to new paradigms.

³ I wasn't interested in harmonic or rhythmic sophistication in my early work. At the time I was listening to just as much pop music on the radio as I was jazz; my populist ears at the time tended to suggest jazz had gone about as far as it could go in that direction.

The Project: Background

The idea of a bass-less ensemble is something I became aware of even before I was a musician, on one of the many long road trips my family took at Christmas break. Like most people of that era, the car stereo was a cassette/radio player; a far cry from today's hi-tech CD/MP3 players with tweeters and sub woofers taking up most of the boot and sometimes back seat. The over-all sound quality was of course less than ideal, with most if not all of the bass being completely lost to the engine drone and the hum of the tyres as they chewed up mile after mile. What I did hear were the midrange to high sounds, chords, a melody, and the higher frequencies of the drum kit, such as cymbals, hi hats and the snare.

It wasn't until my first gig with Mike Nock many years later that I gained first hand experience of a bass-less trio (piano, saxophone, drums). From memory it wasn't an intentional decision on Mike's part to explore the concept of playing without a bass player; this "accidental innovation" was the result of necessity forcing his hand when his regular bassist caught his fingers in a car door prior to the gig.⁴

The gig itself was at the iconic *El Rocco* in Kings Cross, and I shared the stage with Nock who was playing piano and keyboard with drummer Phil Treloar. Nock filled in a lot of the missing space by playing repetitive bass lines with his left hand on his keyboard, so the overall sound wasn't too much of a departure from the usual quartet sound. However, even though it was the first and last time I ever played in a bass-less format with Mike, it opened my mind to possible futures I would later explore in my own ensembles.

As part of my exposure to genres other than jazz and – as it turns out, bass-less trios – many years after the *El Rocco* experience with Nock's ensemble, I spent 3 years recording and touring with Australian indie guitarist/singer/songwriter Ed Kuepper. Kuepper came to prominence in the seminal Oz rock band *The Saints*, and later forged a successful career as an artist in his own right (including a spin off group called *The Aints*). We would sometimes tour with drummer Mark Dawson as a trio (voice/guitar, saxophone, drums) in a line-up not unlike the one I chose for this project.

⁴ As Gilbert (2006) reports: "...accidents happen—and we're all better off because they do, the microwave oven was conceived from a melted candy bar, saccharin from an accidental chemical spill, and the Daguerre photo process via a shattered thermometer" – *The Accidental Innovator*, Q&A with Robert D. Austin, July 2006, Author Saran Jane Gilbert, Harvard Business Schools

Together these experiences have focussed my approach to this project. As a performer on a single-note instrument, the primary focus of my compositions has by and large been with melodies. Until now, my secondary concern has not been with harmony, but in developing a strong and melodic bass line, particularly with my last four CDs which were heavily influenced by a loose, jazzgroove concept. In taking away the secondary focus of my compositional voice – that of the bass – and replacing it with harmony (while maintaining the primary focus of melody) this project signals a significant change of direction for me, both as a composer and as a saxophonist.

Why the bass?

The role of the bassist traditionally speaking, has been a supportive one, anchoring the beat and establishing the chords (and to some extent their functionality) by emphasizing the bass notes and relative chord tones. As jazz has evolved however, bassists have taken on more of a melodic and interactive role, as well as maintaining their respective responsibilities in a supportive capacity.

In keeping with this stylistic progression, it is my contention that the role, function and evolution of *all* instruments in a musically creative context is governed by three things:

- the kind of music being played (genre)
- how it's being played, and more specifically, who is playing it
- creativity (and specifically the imagination of the musicians involved)

More creativity can lead to a loosening of roles within the ensemble: why can't a melody be played on a drum kit? Why can't a saxophone play the beat? With this concept, traditional roles are up for grabs. By allowing this kind of creative license it should be possible to further extend the roles of not just individual instruments, but also change the ways the instruments interact.

Paul Bley (1988), remarking on a standard instrumental configuration that included bass, said:

There's so much history to that instrumentation that by leaving out the bass you avoid the history and the problems of dealing with it. Also, you make everybody the bass player, because they're always thinking of the bottom of the music as well and taking on an added responsibility, so to speak, of a different range of the music. Having mastered the various trios and so forth, it seemed

to me that part of the problem of finding spontaneity and originality was in the fact that the instrumentation was too fixed. Hence the lack of a bass player on this record.

The context Bley is speaking to is that of a piano and drums duo recording, but the principle he advances applies equally well to this project.

What has been done before?

It seems to me that one of the most persistent bastions of role playing, and one of the most immutable pre-requisites of a jazz combo, is the bass player. Examples of piano-less, drum-less, and horn-less groups are fairly common. Bass-less groups are not common.

Among the few examples of such a line-up is drummer Paul Motian's trio with guitarist Bill Frisell and saxophonist Joe Lovano.⁵ The composition of this group is obviously the product of an artistic decision to explore the jazz genre without the ubiquitous presence of a bass player. While the level of playing recorded by this group is unquestionably high, the music is largely interchangeable with more or less the same 'free' (harmonic and rhythmic) approach being employed in most of the compositions. In these recordings I got a little bored after the 4th track, let alone the 5th album, I found myself skipping through track after track of more or less the same thing. World class musicians, but I found it too formulaic and predictable. However, Bill Frisell's spacious and unmistakable sound is something I like to hear in a guitarist and was a sound I was mindful of as I prepared the music for this project. Generally however, while Motian's trio is successful in its own terms, the group's music could be seen as a lost opportunity to creatively explore the artistic possibilities this line-up offers. In particular, greater rhythmic variety (and at times rigidity) might have led the group into some potentially interesting musical areas.

Saxophonist Chris Potter's group 'Underground' has also investigated the bass-less combo idea in a line-up which I personally prefer, with the use of guitar and Rhodes electric piano proving particularly versatile. Potter's *Follow the line red: live at the Village Vanguard* was the first jazz recording I heard with the bass-less line up and probably the one I listened to the most while working on the music for this project. For sheer command of the instrument, saxophonist Chris Potter is arguably the one of the strongest contenders for torch bearer

⁵ I don't necessarily enjoy Lovano's playing, but always admire and respect his work. I first heard him on John Scofield's quartet album *Meant to be* and was blown away; of the many recordings he has made that one remains my favourite.

since the passing of Michael Brecker; it doesn't get much more impressive. His compositional approach within this context is more groove-based (drawing in particular on 4/4 funk) than Motian's freer concept, and the tonal/textural palette is wider, giving it a slightly 'poppier' feel and sound. The music is part jazz, mixed with rock, blues and even country influences; a real potpourri of styles - dare I say the word fusion? As beautiful and inspirational as this music is, Potter's concept gets around the absence of a bass player in largely groove-based music, by having the Rhodes and/or guitar playing bass-like figures to substitute for the absent bass in every song. This music is therefore quite different to my bass-less concept (of saxophone, guitar, drums; no keyboard) in that in some pieces I want the musicians to be free to play or *not play* bass parts, as the music dictates.⁶ Potter's compositional approach in terms of structure also differs from the one I adopted with this project.⁷

Dave Douglas's Tiny Bell Trio was also a source of ideas. Not unlike Motian's trio recordings, with echoes of Bill Frisell's playing in tunes like Kurt Weill's "The drowning girl", this is a bass-less trio that nevertheless heads in quite a different direction to the straight ahead/free jazz approach of the other groups studied. I liked the European influences on this, such as a traditional Hungarian "Czardas" and two pieces by the Hungarian/French composer Joseph Kosma. I'm glad they didn't try substituting the bass parts with another instrument, and I felt their improvised sections had a similar dynamic interplay quality to the group I convened for this project.

From popular music I was drawn to a couple of interesting examples of bass-less groups. Ed Kuepper's *Today Wonder* is definitely not a jazz album, and there's not a saxophone in sight, just a man, his guitar, a drummer and a cardboard box. I was first made aware of Kuepper's music when he asked me to play with him in the mid 90s; before then I hadn't heard of him. *Today Wonder* has since been one of my favourite albums of its kind and the

⁶ Organ Trios, a common line-up during the 1950s and 1960s, are similar to Potter's group in this respect; while they do not possess a bass player, the role of the bass is covered by the organists – using a combination of foot-pedals and left hand. For this reason I have not addressed organ trios in this exegesis.

⁷ Potter's compositions often have two distinct parts: the composition/ melody; and the solo section which is often a much simpler interpretation of the first movement, presumably not just for improvisational purposes and but also to get around not having a bass player, and providing accompaniment with simple repetitive motifs and riffs.

first time I'd ever heard a pop group play without any kind of bass or substitute. It may have taken a little while for my ears to acclimatise to the nakedness of the sound, but on repeated listening I didn't miss the bass at all, and in some ways actually preferred the openness.

The Shaggs and their album *Philosophy of the world* (1969) was described by Frank Zappa as "More important than the Beatles and probably better," and Carla Bley said of their music, "It brought my mind to a complete halt." The Shaggs bass-less line up (of vocal, two guitars and drums) is not something I consciously tried to imitate, nor should anyone for that matter, their sound is uniquely their own. But like the finger paintings of a child, there is rawness, an innocence and looseness in tempo, tuning and concept which is closer to jazz than the sterilised, produced and affected world of pop music. Like Kuepper's *Today Wonder*, to me this album was like an entre to the ear for the bass less group idea.

Seven

There are many analogies of explorers setting out in search of unknown lands, sometimes the reasons may be for personal or state gain, or conquest, but the journeys that have always interested me have been the journeys of discovery, and how the journeyman returns home with this new knowledge. One of my favourite examples is in Paulo Coelho's book *The Alchemist*, in which a young shepherd mysteriously finds a treasure map and, leaving his flock and everything he knows, sets out to find it. He travels to distant lands in search of this treasure, learning and growing from each new experience until finally, after much trial and tribulation he ends up finding it, in exactly the same place he started. T S Eliot also summed up the same paradox in his fourth poem from the *Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

After the various musical explorations of the past 10 years and in choosing a direction for my MMA, it became clear to me that it was a good time to return home, "where I started" as a jazz musician, and hopefully "know the place for the first time."

In general terms, when I started composing for this project, there were some core ingredients that were vital to me and the projects aims.

- The tunes needed to work without a bass
- The music and concept ought to be relatively unexplored terrain; something new and fresh
- The musicians open and versatile to this new direction
- It needed to be acoustic as I wanted a "classic" sounding jazz group, to "trouble".
- The forms would work well in a fairly traditional format (head, solo, head) to support the underlying neoconservative approach
- Strong melodic content, either in unison (sax and guitar) or melody with chords, or counterpoint
- The music had to work 'horizontally', i.e. the function of each instrument more linear than the conventional vertical (drums underneath, bass anchoring, chords in the middle, melody on top)

- There needed to be something distinctly New Zealand about the vision, sound and approach
- Each composition should have a subtle yet distinctively different approach to the soloing

In thinking of a title, the number *Seven* kept popping up:

- Seven tracks on the album
- Seventh album as leader
- Seven letters in my first and last names (Timothy Hopkins)
- In numerology the number seven is the most spiritual of numbers 0-9, and this is arguably the closest thing in the jazz spirit I've recorded
- 7's rugby

Something is bound to happen when you take away the bass player, there's no doubt it's removal leaves a pretty big sonic hole. This project has explored the possibilities raised by the emergence of that hole: Does the hole create new opportunities for other instruments to fill? Does the concept of time become a lot freer with each instrument able to float over melodies and harmonies without the restriction of being anchored to a down beat or a particular way of playing the chord? Does omitting the bass create a sonic vacuum to the ear? And if so, would that gap need to be filled by the other instruments (the guitar or saxophone, for example) in order that the music didn't feel empty?

What might be perceived initially as a limitation can also become a blessing in disguise, leading into largely undiscovered territory. But such limitations can also create new problems you otherwise wouldn't have had. And being in uncharted territory, those problems are ones that may not be easily or obviously fixed.

I didn't expect this would necessarily be easy, or without restrictions, particularly when approaching music that has a pulse or beat without a bass player. My intuition suggested some of the space created in the bass's absence would likely be filled by either the guitar or the saxophone, but I had also anticipated a revitalisation of not only my compositional approaches, but new ideas and fresh approaches for improvisation within a bass-less

format.⁸ However, if necessity is the mother of invention, out of this sonic void I had hoped to get a unique sounding ensemble, free to explore and emphasize melodically, harmonically and rhythmically where ever this aberration of a jazz combo lead. In addition to having tenor saxophone, guitar and drums, I included open introductions in several of the compositions for a fourth voice. Traditional Maori instruments are largely atonal and elemental by nature, they are able to work in a wide variety of musical settings and give the music a very distinctive New Zealand sound, adding sonic textures which help fill gaps left in the bass player less ensemble. This suited my aims.

The Music

In terms of developing the repertoire for this exploration, one significant influence has been the often maligned world of pop music.⁹ Songs from groups like The Police and some elements of Sting's later projects (such as *The Dream of the Blue Turtles*) have interested me for their creativity *and* as having something that is immediately identifiable (the bass line from 'Walking on the Moon' by The Police, for example). It's this creative propinquity that has been consistent with all my groups – the combination of fresh ideas with memorable music – whilst staying true to my roots as an improvising jazz musician.

Another strong influence on me has been jazz pianist/composer Mike Nock, whom I first met through my father in 1984. I was part of Mike's various line ups for 12 years, which was a profound experience for me as a young musician. His music has an elegance and lyricism with roots in classical music and leaves space for the listener's imagination; a kind of door into the music. He is also a New Zealander and there are elements of his music that are characteristic of the landscape, "*rolling hills that go on forever....the flowingness of water*", things that I would like to evoke in my own work. (Mike Nock, quoted in Meehan, 2010: 248)

In my own recent music, there have been three fairly consistent ingredients:

- strong melodies
- strong rhythmic and melodic bass lines

⁸ I think it's important to make a distinction here in terminology between "bass-less" and "bass player less". For example, while my trio will be "bass player less", the music will still have bass elements albeit from other instrumentation, my concept is in no way meant to abdicate anything below a certain decibel.

⁹ My interest in this genre is documented on my fifth CD as leader *Popcorn*, which features pop songs with jazz sensibilities (including the theme from the "Odd Couple", and "Tea in the Sahara" and "Synchronicity" by The Police)

- opportunity for creativity

I've never really taken a studious approach to my own playing and compositions, preferring instead a more intuitive approach. If I were to analyze it however, far from being random, certain patterns start to emerge. One such pattern of making a melody strong is having it played in unison, such as saxophone and piano playing together. When this is combined with a medium tempo funk groove, (usually understated in the style of, say, Massive Attack,) the music can have a very populist sound. The down side to this approach is it can also end up sounding like muzak or elevator music, so I've sometimes employed a more creative approach to the melody to avoid this kind of musical cliché.

One of the most successful examples of this within my own music would be the composition "Sex on the moon" which features a hypnotic 4-bar funk groove played by the drums and bass, with the primary melody played in unison (by saxophone and piano) freely. When the melody is played a second time, the bass line changes from that of a repeated 4-bar figure to long sustained bowed notes that correspond to certain parts of the melody, which are then followed by a return to the original 4-bar figure for a piano solo.

Another pattern to emerge is actually more of a non-pattern. My third album *Funkenstein* for example, is a collection of compositions using different styles of funk grooves with a variety of melodies and harmonic concepts. From the New Orleans funk on "Peaceable" to the fast and furious "Oh Henry", *Funkenstein* really is a monster of an album, having gleaned bits and pieces of musical styles from all sorts of places. While it may not be completely self-aware, what it lacks in identity it makes up for in an abundance of creativity, with each composition offering a different direction for the musicians to explore.

Taking the bass player out of the artistic equation for me was in some ways a frightening perspective, particularly when approaching music that has any kind of beat to it. With the bass almost as important to me as the melody itself, I expected to feel either like a duck out of water or creatively inspired. Or a little of both.

The musicians

If the premise of a bass-less trio was going to work, I had to find musicians who were capable of not only understanding the idea quickly, but responding creatively to it as well. I wanted to hear that classic acoustic jazz guitar sound, as well as being able to access more ethereal textures and effects through pedals. Guitarist Dixon Nacey was my first and last

choice. We have a long history together of playing all sorts of jazz-related music, from classic jazz quartet mode to dance music to originals; I knew there probably wasn't anything I could write that he couldn't play. I also knew he was musical and creative enough to find a way of improvising without a bass player present. I also needed to find a drummer, one who could dig in and play time without a bassist and also make musical sense of it, with little or no time to rehearse, ideally a drummer who was also a strong composer; I found all these things and more in John Rae.

The compositions

One set to rest

An anagram for 'testosterone', this is the most muscular of the seven compositions and an ideal opener. Based loosely on Gershwin's 'I got rhythm' structure (with a traditional 4 bar tag at the end of each melody) it starts with a repetitive guitar riff on a single low note, effectively acting as a bass substitute, which is then joined by the drums with a driving funk groove played on an open high hat. The melody, played on tenor (and in unison with guitar during the bridge) is a digital pattern exploration on the traditional chords of the tune, using various harmonic substitutions, permutations and extensions.

The solos start with the tenor improvising over the same structure as the original melody for one chorus, after which the guitar becomes more interactive and the tenor soloing in a more interactive manner, mirroring the role taken by the guitar. The drums then solo over a riff (played by tenor and guitar) before the original melody/head is played, ending on a dissonant chord in an open voicing and corresponding melody note.

All blacks and blues

I wanted to write something slow and bluesy (and of course jazzy) and was thinking of the 'great unwashed', the masses, the mainstream of society. In New Zealand that of course implies rugby (which are also played as 'Sevens') and both the concept and title of 'All blacks and blues' was born.

Like the first track, the guitar starts by playing a repeated bass-like pattern. This time it's a slow moving line, coloured by open 5th voiced chords (for the openness of sound) at the end of every second bar. The drums join in and play a traditional slow swing-type pattern on

the ride cymbal, but the cymbal is held in the hand to prevent it from ringing which creates a very effective and subtle, almost humorous variation to the jazz cliché of the same pattern on an open cymbal (making the cymbal darker and duller than usual, which is more audible without the bass). The melody is then stated on tenor, using extended harmonies such as sharp 5^{ths}, flattened and sharpened 9^{ths} and is joined by the guitar at several key points with an open chord voicing.

The solos were intended to evoke a blues based feeling, with both the tenor and guitar solos making extensive use of the blues scale, blues based lines, ideas and articulation (listen to the tenor 2.10 – 3.49 minutes; and the guitar, 4.07 – 4.24).¹⁰ The final head is played in unison, punctuated by chords that correspond to the climaxes within the melody (5.09 – 5.14 minutes) before returning to the original 4-bar repeated figure. Ending on the sub-dominant was perhaps the second most obvious choice next to ending on the tonic chord, which for me would have been too obvious; this way the song doesn't quite resolve, but points so strongly back to the tonic chord, I decided to leave it hanging.

Road from Perdition

Probably my favourite track of the set, 'Road to Perdition' is a uniquely 'New Zealand sounding' composition, one which features Dr Richard Nunns on traditional Maori instruments. When I was writing this, I intentionally left room for an introduction by Richard but not being very familiar with his work, I wasn't sure exactly which of the instruments he played would be best suited for this track. However, I knew the mood that I wanted to create and the textures needed to be sonically low to create them. When it came time to record, after some discussion the instrument Richard ended up playing on the introduction was the *Pukaea* (long wooden traditional trumpet), an instrument used to summon or gather people, and announce a major event. Nunns also had numerous other instruments with him, including a *Pahu Pounamu* (a jade gong/bell) and a *Porotiti* which creates a humming subsonic bass sound and is very much associated with chanting and incantations. Both of these were ideal in nature and texture to the track and were played throughout, the *Porotiti* was particularly effective and would not have worked had a bass

¹⁰ It's worth noting here that I stuck closely to the traditional format of "head, solos, head" as a compositional idea (with the soloing order of tenor then guitar) because I wanted to contrast the bass-less sound with something more familiar.

player been present (here is an example of the music finding new spaces because of the absent bass). Added to the mix was John Rae playing drums with his hands during the initial melody statement to give it a darker, earthier sound, which in context suited my aims. Inspired by the title of the movie *Road to Perdition*, I wanted to write a reflective piece of music that had a forward momentum to it, but also to make the philosophical statement that one can return from hell; this might be the soundtrack in that journey back from perdition.

The Sleeping Giants

This composition is the only track in the set where the melody is played rhythmically freely, there were two reasons for doing it this way. First, one of the things playing without a bass player enables you to do more of is to take a freer approach.¹¹ ‘The Sleeping Giants’ is the only ballad in the set and I love ‘free ballads’ for their openness and space. Second, I wanted there to be plenty of gaps/space in the melody to make room for Richard Nunns, making this tune the perfect vehicle to feature him.

A small *Putorino* provides the haunting melody line and introduction, and with John Rae’s Spartan use of cymbals creates a visual soundscape of “rolling hills that go on forever”. (Nock, quoted in Meehan 2010) When the melody begins, it is stated freely on tenor with corresponding chords from the guitar. The melody includes a recurring melodic pattern with a large two-octave intervallic jump, from a low Bb to high C (1.02 – 6.12 minutes), a compositional idea that might not have worked as well with a bassist playing in a similar register to the first of these notes. Also heard is a small *Koauau* (small 3 holed bone flute) which provides an additional timbre that thickens the overall texture and acts as a kind of non-melodic timbral counterpoint to the saxophone melody.

The solos start with tenor playing for half a chorus, followed by guitar in the second half of the form. As the melody is free of time and structurally long (25 bars with pauses on the 16th and 17th bar), when it came time for the solos, a time feel (in the form of a subtle pulse) had to be introduced, but it is implied rather than stated. When the melody is brought

¹¹ Paul Motian realised this with his bass-less trio format and he did so for the simple reason that playing without a bassist, normally the “anchor”, does free the roles and therefore function of each of the instruments, in principle. Over the 5-6 albums recorded using this line up the music is largely interchangeable and the players sound more or less the same as they do on other recordings. It’s my contention that removing the bass should not only change the function of each instrument, but how they interact as well.

back, time is once again suspended and Nunns roams freely in the spaces in between the notes.

Brown Frog

Brown Frog is a solo saxophone composition that bubbles and bounces at times like its names sake.¹² The melody is in two parts – the first half is written in such a way that it can be freely interpreted rhythmically by the player, the second half moves through several different time signatures and has a pulse. There is a middle section, which is improvised and here I stuck closely to the concept of the piece by working off the melody. Thematic improvisation is a regular feature in most of my compositions, as it is very important for me to try to maintain the integrity and character of each piece, like a sign post or point of reference. It is also useful to have slightly different soloing approaches to each track as it helps keep it interesting and varied.

23rd Century Love Song

Originally written in 3 / 4 with a completely different melody, this tune was thrown into the recycle bin until it was resurrected and rewritten into 5/4 (which is a more interesting version of 3/4, I think) and with a completely different melody. The chord sequence is familiar enough to be played without the bass player, and the melody specific enough in outlining the chords, particularly as it's played in unison with the tenor and guitar, albeit loosely at times.

The solo section was different to the other pieces. The brief I gave Dixon and John was that when it came time to solo, we were all to develop it together. This is not as easy as it may sound; at times it required the saxophone to play in a more supportive role and act as a substitute to the bass, or to leave space so that the notes not played becomes just as important as the ones that are played. This was true for the guitar and the drums also. Developing a solo together is not same thing as soloing together; you have to listen a lot more, leave a lot more space and play a lot less. This approach may not be as possible if the bass is anchoring the time and root movement, as the music can become too cluttered and

¹² The inclusion of a solo saxophone piece may seem out of place in a bass less trio concept, strictly speaking however, it was well within the aims of this project to explore and expand the creative possibilities within this format.

the possibility of spontaneous counterpoint between guitar and saxophone would inevitably be affected. The idea of writing a love song in this way - represented here by counterpoint and melodic lines weaving around each other like lovers - would be undermined with a bass player in the band.

Biting the Big Apple

A 12-bar blues in Bb at a medium tempo in common time, is arguably one of the most used formats in jazz music; a veritable plethora of melodies, riffs, arrangements and variations have utilised its simple structure as a foundation to build countless ideas and songs upon, and for most jazz musicians it's the first thing they learn to improvise on, and paradoxically the last thing they want to play. My idea, at first conceptual, was to try to breathe some new life into it by resurrecting it in the bass-less format.

The melody, stated on tenor in unison with guitar, starts in the lower register then continues to move up in fourths, while the drums play stop time at slightly displaced rhythmic intervals. The solos begin with a four-bar section, which is played in a similar stop time way to the melody. I did this for continuity and interest. This rhythmic organisation happens for the first 2 choruses of each soloist, after which the usual 12-bar blues repeats until the next soloist.

Not having the bass in this composition worked as I'd hoped, pushing the musicians to a level of interplay and creativity, extending both the function and role of each instrument into something new and breathing new life into a blues in Bb.

Commentary

Taking the bass player out of a jazz group (probably more than any other any instrument, if omitted), potentially has the most significant impact on the musicians left, and the music created. This might explain why there are far fewer bass-less combinations on record than say piano-less, guitar-less, drum-less, or 'lead instrument'-less ensembles; it's a difficult line up to make work because the bass's primary function is the time keeper, a kind of musical anchor, and a ship without an anchor is a ship easily lost.

But what if the music didn't get lost and instead of being anchored – in effect tied to the bass – what if we let the musical current and flow of the remaining musicians interact without the safety net of the bass. Where might that lead?

As I started to think through the difficulties associated in playing without a bass player, "what would happen to the time?", "what effect would it have on the harmony?", "could we play grooves?" I began to see some very creative possibilities. Once I got used to the idea of working without a bass, the music began to develop into something quite unique and homogenous, where traditional roles could be re-evaluated, compositional ideas explored, and the musicians interact in a new way.

What worked/ what didn't work

My last album *Hear now after* began with a few loose ideas running around in my head during a 6-month tenure in NYC, during which time I was studying and playing. By the time the album had been recorded and mixed it had 4 years to develop. I spent hundreds of hours editing and mixing the many parts recorded from the more than forty musicians involved in the project, and while there were definitely some good moments, the overall result was convoluted and lacked direction. By contrast, *Seven* took two days to record and another two days to mix, yet the music is much more coherent than its predecessor. This is testimony to its strength of vision and focus.

The compositions worked beautifully, in particular I was drawn to 'Road from perdition' and 'The sleeping giants' for their harmonic and melodic sophistication, and the stunning introductions by Dr Richard Nunns. Other high points were the interaction between Dixon and I in the solos, coupled with John Rae's musical sense and dynamic wizardry, ensuring that a constant stream of fresh ideas kept bouncing between the trio members with an edgy, driving momentum.

There were various problems we had to overcome, like getting the right sound in the control booth which when we started was proving to be problematic. During the actual recording process there seemed to be quite a difference between what we were hearing sonically in the hall, which was round and full, and what we heard in play back from the control booth, which sounded thin and flat. As everything was initially close miked, to get more of the hall's natural acoustics we set up an extra room microphone to capture some of the depth and resonance of what we were hearing as we played. Then it was a question of getting the right mix between the close mics and the added room mic.

Other challenges within the music itself included the pieces that had a groove of at least 130bpm, such as 'One set to rest', 'Biting the big apple' and 'Road from perdition.' Groove-based compositions invariably rely heavily on the lower sonic end of the bass to secure the beat, adding feel and stating various primary chord tones. But in its absence, rather than a hole I saw space, where vibrant interaction and ideas were born and the level of interplay reached new heights.

The guitarist had the most difficult job, playing difficult melodies at times with chords, comping during my solos with no one to comp or support his own solos. It should be noted here that the melodies and voicings on particular chords were not composed on guitar; this proved an interesting challenge for guitarist Dixon Nacey who comments, "The complex nature of some of the pieces and the fact that the melodies and voicings were not written on guitar meant that memorization of almost all the written music was imperative – this was not going to be a reading gig. Many linear parts were difficult to find positions for and it was challenging to play both melodies and chords at times also." (Email correspondence with Nacey, August 2011)

Whilst the idea of not playing bass lines provided a certain amount of harmonic and rhythmic freedom, it also meant the element of trust was moved to the fore in that each instrumental voice would interact without the usual safety net of a bass line laying down the changes and the time. This proved especially challenging when soloing on odd meter tunes. In order for the improvised sections to work, I knew that Dixon had to internalise the music and 'make it his own' in a fairly short time frame, and writing music he had to memorise was perhaps subconsciously a way of helping him absorb it.

What we're doing in the final recital and why?

As discussed earlier on, taking the bass out of a jazz group potentially has more impact on the musicians left and the music thereafter created, than any other instrument if removed. Further, as there were large chunks of music on *Seven* that were improvised, the issue of trust became paramount. Because of this the recording has galvanised our ability to play within this unusual and challenging line up. Mindful of this, for the recital, I have chosen to use some of the same compositions, but with a much clearer understanding of what worked and what didn't work without the bass. The purpose of playing these tunes again in the recital will be to display a progression, particularly within the solo sections. This will be most obvious in that the live context will offer the musicians the opportunity to stretch out during these sections, and explore the many possibilities offered by the bass-less trio dynamic. The written parts of the compositions probably won't vary significantly.

I have also composed/arranged another three compositions for the final recital. These focus on more contrapuntal ideas in the melodies between saxophone and guitar than the recording. The thing I kept coming back to with this project was the importance of strong compositions, and how could I further develop the concept in the bass less format? The way the band interacts without a bass player should also create opportunities to grow and develop as a group with these new arrangements.

Conclusion

The biggest effect that playing without a bass player can have is that it frees the music up from time constraints; it also has the potential to open many other doors, notably harmonically, melodically and conceptually. On the various recordings of this line up I listened to, there were many examples of this spacious approach in action (particularly those by Paul Motian) where time has a more floating feel to it. This of course makes perfect sense, as a sense of rhythmic freedom is primarily what playing without a bass player will give you.

Early on we toyed with the idea of either the guitar or sax playing approximate bass lines whilst the other instrument took a solo. This would essentially perform the same harmonic and rhythmic function as the bass, providing the listener with a sense of both the time and harmonic structure (chords) of the tune. However, the central idea behind using a bass-less trio for this album was for the guitar or the saxophone to deliberately *not* fulfil a bass role. On *Seven* I tried to incorporate different ideas too, the solo saxophone piece 'Brown Frog', funk grooves in 'One set to rest' and 'Biting the big apple', guests like Dr Richard Nunns on traditional Maori instruments in 'Road from perdition' and 'The sleeping giants', different soloing approaches within each track and thematic improvisation. The writing was much easier to conceptualise than the improvisations however; with little time to rehearse I had much less of an idea how the improvised sections would sound without the bass, so trust played a big part in my calculations.

Paul Bley (2008) stated, "in leaving out the bass player, you also make everybody the bass player because they're always thinking of the bottom of the music as well and taking on an added responsibility". In this recording however, one of the central ideas behind using a bass-less trio for this album was to allow the musicians *not* to play bass or have a bass-like substitute. So, while lower register parts were written in some tunes, mostly instruments were left to their own devices.

This recording, which is a documentation of the first time we played together as a group in a bass less line up, is a testimony of the strength of the compositions, the robustness of the bass-less concept, and the musicianship of the four musicians involved, who found a way of interacting quickly in a very challenging environment, producing music of a very high calibre.

In choosing Dixon Nacey and John Rae, I found like-minded musicians skilful enough to play the intricate compositions, take direction, and able to adapt to the challenge of improvising without the bass.

Nacey – “Tim’s direction, melodic depth, huge ears, musical savvy and sense of humour allowed the songs to be fun and serious at the same time. I feel we created many special sonic moments as an ensemble – the interplay was intense and always searching and it was certainly a great joy to be a part of the creation of this album.” (email correspondence: 08/08/11)

Rae – “Playing of 7 was a challenging experience as the line up was unorthodox. However due to the quality of composition and musicianship of my fellow musicians, the whole experience was a total joy and a pleasure to be involved in.” (text correspondence: 06/08/11)

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