

## Unlimited Editions

The collective ethos of the Sydney experimental music scene finds an outlet in the **Splitrec** label, whose ear is turning toward the natural world. By **Noel Meek**



Rhys Mottley, *Parasite* (2019)



The Splinter Orchestra, *Mungo* (2017)

“If I was to talk about what sort of listening is big on the Sydney improvised music scene, it’s a listening that I’d define as altruistic,” declares Jim Denley.

We get talking about the art of listening while discussing Splitrec, a record label Denley founded and now helps run with a collective, and The Splinter Orchestra, a large scale improvising ensemble that shares members and resources with the label. I speak with him via Skype, along with Laura Altman, Rhys Mottley and Nick Ashwood, all musicians involved with both outfits. Listening is a key concept for the community of musicians and artists gathered around these two interrelated Sydney organisations, guiding not only their music, but also their interpersonal relationships, political organisation and interactions with the wider world.

Splitrec emerged in the late 1980s from the activities of Denley and other Sydney musicians. It was originally run as a small collective, but by the late 90s the rest of the members had dropped away, leaving Denley on his own. “Which always felt pretty uncomfortable,” he admits. “It had always had a collective impetus.”

In the early 2000s the label found fresh collective energy in the form of The Splinter Orchestra and its many attached musicians and groups. The label and orchestra found themselves falling into natural alignment: “It occurred to me that everything that Splitrec was doing was an extension of what Splinter was doing.”

A focus on Sydney experimental and improvised music developed, with the wellspring being The Splinter Orchestra. Sharing resources in what can be a difficult environment for underground music was an important element – Sydney is currently one of the most expensive cities in the world. “It’s easy to be making this music in terms of the richness of the community,” Altman tells me. “But in terms of making a living out of it, it’s a real challenge.”

The orchestra itself developed from a community based around the Now Now and What Is Music? festivals, but in the last decade it has developed its own unique set of practices. Part of this is a dedication to non-hierarchical democracy. Decision making for the orchestra, as for the label, is a collective effort. “You can’t just say you’re non-

hierarchical,” states Denley. “You have to work at that.” The open nature of the group is a complication – anyone can join, regardless of their background or experience. This sets up a major challenge: how do you incorporate new members’ voices into a group with wide-ranging experience and skills? “It’s not an easy thing. Whether you get it right all the time? Probably not.”

One solution is that close attention to listening, through which they attempt to engage with the most fragile and subtle elements of the group. This means that a Splinter performance with 20 plus members can be quieter and more delicate than most solo performances, with all participants endeavouring to maintain meaningful aural contact with each other – and often external and non-musical elements as well. Altman describes the experience: “You’re sharing something that can be quite profound through playing. You can put yourself into a position of being very open.” This may lead to a blurring of boundaries between musics, social groups, political ideas and even species lines.

Since 2016 Splinter, and by extension Splitrec, have been influenced by three trips into the Australian Outback. The whole orchestra travels to remote areas of New South Wales to spend a week camping and playing music with the local environment. “That was a really formative adventure for us,” says Altman about their first trip – to the deserts of Mungo National Park. “A new era of Splinter.” This adventure is presented on Splitrec’s triple CD release *Mungo*, which captures beautifully the delicate relationship the orchestra has both internally within its varied membership, and externally with the landscape and soundscape they recorded in.

“The delicacy is an incredibly beautiful thing,” Denley tells me. “And for an orchestra to allow space for that also then extends out beyond the human into all the other sounds in the environment. The altruistic listening that we give to each other goes way beyond the human... as a principle or a way of listening to the world this seems to be a place where humans beings need to be right now. To listen in a much deeper way to all the other delicate humans and then to all the other delicate structures in the ecosystems we play in.” □ [splitrec.com](http://splitrec.com)

## Unofficial Channels Sound Tapes

For nearly 70 years the sound system has been at the beginning of every development in Jamaican music and, for a brief period in the early 1980s, cassette tapes recorded live and direct in dances superseded the 7" single as the reggae aficionado’s favoured format. I first heard a live tape of a Jamaican dance in 1979, with deejay Joe ‘Ranking Joe’ Jackson, formerly known as Little Joe, performing on U-Roy’s Sturgav/Stereograph sound system, on two tapes full of brand new vocals and versions with Joe doing his inimitable thing.

The sound tape explosion was upon us and performances that had previously dissipated into the balmy Kingston nights were now captured forever. Deejay records also exist, but are rarely a portrayal of what they actually chatted on the mic in a dance – by the time they reach the studio, a different dynamic is in play. Tapes were cheaper and longer, and eventually would be sold commercially by enterprising entrepreneurs on street corners in Kingston, London, New York and Toronto.

Sound tapes have now assumed the mantle of historical documents of a musical movement that helped give birth to rap and hip-hop in the US, and whose availability in the UK gave the confidence to homegrown artists to tear up the rule book. Almost immediately, the popularity of sound tapes made it financially viable for Jamaican sound systems to tour abroad – in 1980 singer Errol Dunkley invited Ray Symbolic (The Bionic) Hi-Fi with Ranking Joe on the mic and Paul ‘Jah Screw’ Love as selector to England. Indeed, they became the first Jamaican sound system to ever tour the UK. Their English counterparts looked, listened and learned, coming up with something completely different that became the UK MC phenomenon.

Sound tapes in their original cassette format are rarely circulated and sold these days, but expert in-depth opinion and a serious selection of tapes, a number of which can be downloaded, can be found at [whocorkthedance.com](http://whocorkthedance.com). To pick out some of the classic recordings that can be found online, the thrill of hearing Ranking Joe on U-Roy’s Sturgav still resonates today; a King Tubby’s tape with U-Roy on the mic from 1975, originally brought back from Jamaica by Robert Allen of Nasty Love Sound, makes the hairs on the back of the neck stand up; and a 1980 Gemini Sound tape showcases some of the earliest stars of the dancehall style. And I have to mention the 1979 Coxsone tape from London Wandsworth Town Hall because I was there. Lloydie Coxsone’s selection of unreleased dubs was legendary, and with Ranking Dread on the mic, it was an unforgettable night. □

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