

DAVID TOLLEY: ORIGINAL AUSTRALIAN MUSIC FREE OF TYRANNY

by Adrian Jackson*

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David Tolley is hardly a household name, but if originality of conception and strength of execution are any yardstick of musical worth, then he is surely one of the most important musicians in Australia. Over the last four years, he has worked in an atmosphere of apathy, even hostility, to develop his uniquely original approach to creative music, electronic music that he describes as 'soundscapes' or 'spontaneous compositions'.



A stocky, bearded man with close-cropped hair, David Tolley suggests a minstrel of the 22nd Century...PHOTO COURTESY ENCORE MAGAZINE

Previously, Tolley had earned a reputation as the most formidably gifted bassist on the Australian modern jazz scene, particularly when, from 1974-76, he was a key voice in the nationally acclaimed Brian Brown Quintet. That band made some steps toward developing the use of synthesisers in jazz, and when Tolley and percussionist Durel Dara left the band, he forsook the bass to concentrate on teaching himself to play the synthesiser.

After a good deal of work, Tolley reached the stage where he could "forget about the instrument and concentrate on the music". He and Dara formed the band Connections with Sydney percussionist Phil Treloar; the band attracted considerable interest in Sydney, but none in Melbourne.

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Tolley had earned a reputation as the most formidably gifted bassist on the Australian modern jazz scene. Here (on far left) he is pictured performing at The Basement in Sydney in 1975. Others L-R, are Brian Brown (tenor sax) Howie Smith (soprano sax), Roger Frampton (alto sax) & Jack Thorncraft (bass)... PHOTO CREDIT HARVEY SHIELDS COURTESY JAZZ DOWN UNDER

Tolley and Dara's subsequent band, False Start, made some stunningly brilliant music, but, apart from a debut series of Arts Council sponsored concerts, was never viable. Much of the apathy and confusion received from audiences was, Tolley maintains, due to the fact that "Most audiences here still need the support of knowing that what they see and hear in concert originated in or is connected to, European or American traditions."

But gradually, Tolley has been gaining some recognition for his talents. This year, he has performed solo at art galleries in Sydney and Melbourne, and has staged several series of concerts, with assistance from the Australia Council, at the Universal Workshop in Fitzroy. Audiences have been encouraging both in size and response.

David Tolley, a stocky, bearded man with close-cropped hair, suggests a minstrel of the 22nd Century as he positions himself behind his battery of synthesisers and other electronic instruments. As he becomes absorbed in his performance, he begins to sway or dance, perhaps break into wordless singing; meanwhile, a projectionist is showing images, strangely evocative slides or films, on a screen above Tolley or somewhere to the side.

The whole effect can be numbingly confusing, forbiddingly obscure. Like, for example, the music of pianist Cecil Taylor, it can seem difficult to come to grips with on any level, apart from its obvious intensity. And, without doubt, Tolley's music can at times be too abstract for the average listener to enjoy. But more often, once you have allowed yourself to become absorbed in the music, it is difficult to see how any open listener could fail to grasp the rhythmic power, melodic charm and emotional depth of this music.



Dure Dara: she moves around her arsenal of miscellaneous percussion instruments, adding another dimension to the performance... PHOTO CREDIT HARVEY SHIELDS COURTESY JAZZ DOWN UNDER

Tolley has recently returned to performing in partnership with Dure Dara. It is most interesting to hear Tolley in this context, combining his infinite spectrum of electronic sounds with her resourceful range of acoustic sounds. As he operates half a dozen synthesisers simultaneously, producing rhythms, cross-rhythms, textures and melodic improvisations at will, she moves around her arsenal of miscellaneous percussion instruments, adding another dimension to the performance.

Dara further emphasises the art/theatrical aspect of the performances, which no doubt relates strongly to Tolley's background in the art world (he concentrated on sculpture for some time in the '60s, and still teaches art at Preston Institute of Technology). Dara says, "The imagery and theatrical rituals we perform are simply there, like the music, for the audience to respond to as they wish."

David Tolley refuses to categorise his music: "My music is so full of contradictions and idiosyncrasies, I can't put a name to it. I suppose," he grins, "it simply reflects me in that sense. And if people say the music is self-indulgent, that's fine, because I don't think anything of any real worth artistically has ever been created without being self-indulgent".

Indeed, reflection of his own personality in his music has been the essential aim of Tolley's musical experimentations. "I've worked very hard to play my own music, and I've found myself in my music," he says. "I only wish other musicians would start to care less about what goes on overseas and play music where it ought to come from, and that's from somewhere inside of themselves.

"And if musicians free themselves from the tyranny of American music, maybe the audience will too, and we'll have more people creating music that is uniquely Australian."