

Experimental as anything

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Matt Buchanan takes a look at live music outside Sydney's rock, pop and jazz mainstream.

Stand on a Sydney street long enough and you will eventually hear something like the groaning feedback squall of a heavy metal guitar, or the telltale percussive whump and thump of a kickdrum.

Except it won't be either of those instruments - just something like them. After an instant you will recognise not a guitar but the moaning release of a truck's air brakes. And those drums? Just the noise of beer kegs as they rumble along planks into a hotel cellar.

If these disorienting auditory moments tell us anything, it's that all music is, at root, noise. Of course, this isn't news. The rocks our hairy ancestors banged together created a beat before they sparked a fire.

More deliberate sonic experimentation has been going on for millennia, and I'm not just referring to Stravinsky, Cage and Stockhausen. Only a few years ago that pop hipster Beck was cavorting about on a makeshift stage with an amplified leafblower. All of which is not to say you should immediately head down to your nearest traffic island and dance to the sounds of grit in the hubcaps of passing Taragos.

What these aural hallucinations do encourage is the understanding that, if skilfully and imaginatively harnessed, there exists a world of auditory pleasure outside the forms of musical expression we typically enjoy, such as pop, rock and even folk. And the good news is that much of it can be found in Sydney.

"Oh, definitely," says Andrew Khedoori, music director at 2SER, a community radio station known for its alternative bent. "There are regular nights such as Impermanent Audio, which was regularly housed at the Imperial Slacks art gallery in Campbell Street, Surry Hills [reopening in the New Year at the Frequency Lab in Elizabeth Street].

"It's curated by Caleb K, who presents an experimental music show here [2SER] called Audio Daze," Khedoori says. "He's secured really interesting acts, local and international. And one of the most amazing gigs I've seen this year was by the Spanish artist Francisco Lopez, who travels the world collecting sounds. He puts them together and amplifies them.

"It sounds simple, but it's not. The sounds converge. He asks you to blindfold yourself. There's a speaker in each corner of the room. The sound is amazing; you don't know whether it's coming or going. The sound tickles your familiarity with nature and what's out there."

Khedoori says probably the most popular experimental musician in Australia at present is Oren Ambarchi, now widely recognised internationally. Ambarchi, who can be found playing more conventional guitar music in Sydney's pubs, has a deal with the well-regarded Touch label, carrier of cutting-edge music for 20 years. Ambarchi has also been a promoter of Sydney's annual What Is Music? festival, held last year at popular pop and jazz venues, the Newtown RSL and Harbourside Brasserie.

Set up in 1994 by Ambarchi and Robbie Avenim, the festival aims to feature, in Avenim's words, the "highest calibre experimental material we can find - the cream of the crop". With the likes of brilliant improvisational pianist Chris Abrahams (a member of astounding jazz minimalist trio, the Necks), Necks drummer Tony Buck and violinist Jon Rose as regular guests, Avenim's is no idle boast.

Even if you're concerned experimental music might be just a fraction too close to Mars for your tastes, you should still try it anyway. Sure, the odd soundscape will sound like a zoo burning down. But imagine what a "lower case" zoo burning down might sound like.

That said, there remain many alternative options to the regular and well-established rock, jazz, classical and acoustic shows in Sydney.

While rock has to some extent shaped Australian culture since the '50s, few would argue non-Western, traditional or ethnic forms of music have enriched our culture to a huge degree during the same time. Consider Sydney's Carnivale.

Each year the Carnivale festival corrals music from around the world and brings it bumping and jiggling right to our doorstep. Last year Carnivale celebrated its 25th anniversary with its most diverse global music showcase to date. Imported acts included trip hop trio TUFA and Chilean guitarists Victor Martinez and the Brothers Martinez, while the Wheels of Steel hip hop festival at Marrickville's Steel Park featured DJ-ing, turntablism, breakdancing and graffiti demos.

Even the austere Sydney Opera House reverberated to the Global Sounds Series, which included performances from fusion rhythm-masters Passionfruit, hardcore hip hop sound artist **Khaled Sabsabi** and the Spanish-German poet Jose Olivier, who presented his work in collaboration with flamenco dancer Diana Reyes.

And then there was the launch of the Freedom of Expression Bravo! CD, a collection composed and produced by prison inmates.

Looking forward to this remarkable event in 2002, you can't help but think that, as lucky as we are to have it, it's a shame that for many of us it takes something like Carnivale to open our eyes to the riches around us. Once our eyes are open, however, there's much in the way of international music to see.

The salsa dance scene in Sydney has enjoyed something of an explosion in popularity over the past few years (especially with its many female converts relieved to find rooms where the men not only dance, but want to dance and do it well). And while the immediate future of the Harbourside Brasserie (the Sunday night salsa evening has been the epicentre of the Latin craze) is undecided due to a management change, there remains a multitude of other venues and events available year-round.

Next Thursday, for example, sees the return of the Bacardi Latino Festival where local and international Latin bands invade Darling Harbour for two weeks (Thursday to Sunday in the first week and Wednesday to Sunday in the second).

But what if you're after an alternative to the traditional rock menu - a variation, say, on something you like rather than a wholesale challenge to your musical palate?

"One thing to consider," Khedoori says, "is how the live music scene has progressed, insofar as musicians who were once pretty much plugging away at one thing like rock or grunge, are now adding other influences like jazz and electronica. These days it's more about moods and tones and feels, rather than genre.

"There's a lot of cross-breeding, and I think that's how the live music scene is evolving."

You won't have to wait until the next annual What is Music? festival in February to catch the Sydney scene in mid-mutation. Each Sunday evening the Hopetoun Hotel in Surry Hills devotes an evening of crossover electronic music titled Frigid.

Interestingly, Sydney's more artful musical outfits, Hopetoun performers such as cocktail pop-rockers Prop or Yukio E, or a low key electronica stylist such as Quark Kent, are not alone in pursuing a hybrid path. What's been happening in Sydney, and indeed Australia, with sample rock bands, such as the Avalanches, reflects a global trend.

"Just look at Radiohead," Khedoori says. "When [lead singer] Thom Yorke said he'd been listening to Warped's back catalogue in preparation for Kid A, I'm sure a lot of people flocked to check it out too and discovered a lot of new sounds. I think that's happening quite a lot.

"A lot of people are going backwards, or stepping sideways, to go forward. And that's a really good thing for the live scene."