

**Timed summary of interview with Alan Lamb in 2015 – interviewed by John Bannister.**

This is an interview with Alan Lamb a New Music sound artist best known for his work with the Aeolian Harp and recording the sound produced when wind is cut by telegraph wire. He has been associated with the Western Australian New Music Scene since the 80s and talks of helping to set up New Music group Evos.

He looks at some of his numerous collaborations including work done with Peter Sculthorpe for the soundtrack to the record Australian film Burke and Wills. He speaks at length about his interest in recording the sound of wind cut by wire; a sound he first heard as a boy in Scotland. He discusses numerous sound recordings including perhaps his best known work Primal Image. Alan has also been involved with numerous installations and performances and he discusses some of these during the interview.

Alan talks of making electronic music machines that he developed in an attempt to create the sound of wind and wire. He discusses the way they are constructed and how they work and how they are played. He looks at the development of the New Music scene in Western Australia and reflects on the joy he has had in being involved in it and in creating his music.

A video of Alan's Infinite Music Machine is house in The State Library of WA.

**15/9/2015**

00:00:00

Introduction and background information. Alan Hamilton Lamb born in Edinburgh in Scotland. Childhood recollections. Growing up with a silver spoon. Memories of early childhood in Scotland. Father was an ophthalmologist in Perth in Scotland. Being looked after by a nanny who takes him walks in the countryside to listen to the sound of singing telegraph poles. Becoming interested in listening to the poles.

Listening to telegraph poles.

00:03:50

Coming to Australia at the age of seven. Learning to play the piano. Being uninspired to play the piano. Studying medicine graduating in 1968. Becoming interested in kinetic art. Beginning to work away on ideas of 3-D illusionists. Experimenting with sculptural concepts which included the ideas of movement.

Australia, Sculptural concepts

00:07:40

Inventing machines in the cellar. Creating three-dimensional photographs. The artistic scene in Perth. Musicians and artists and music clubs and folk clubs. Classical music being played at the Concert Hall and Winthrop Hall.

Machines, Photographs, Winthrop Hall

00:11 00

Sir Frank Callaway and the School of music at U.W.A. Percy Grainger. Having no contact at all with the artistic crowd. A very interesting hobby. Travelling in 1970 with friends. London a melting pot of artistic creativity. Working in hospitals. Being inspired to do neuroscience. Doing a Ph.D. in Edinburgh.

Sir Frank Callaway, Percy Grainger, Edinburgh, University of Western Australia

00:16:07

Doing 20 years of neuroscience. Studying the development of the nervous system. Improving on the human condition. Being involved with kinetic art. Spending spare time making things. Using light modulated by water to make moving images. Needing a sound that couldn't be music. Sound in mind was the sound of telegraph wires. Starting off by building electronic devices for making sound.

Nervous system, modulated water, moving images

00:19:10

Understanding how the brain could sense sound. Best ideas came when looking down a microscope. Being interested in electronic sound. Sending pulse down a wire in magnetic fields is like strumming a guitar. Creating musical machines. Hearing wires sing in Mull Scotland.

Music machine, Mull Scotland, hearing wires

00:23:52

Recording singing wires. Electricity in the brain. The process of brain activity is analogue. The singing of a long wire being vibrated by the wind is chaotic. Hitting fence post wire. The wire cutting the wind. Most people have grown up on a file are familiar with the pitch. Different lengths along the wire will be interacting with one another. The result is the production of sound.

Wind, chaotic, cutting, pitch

00:27:03

Interaction along the wire with the different segments. The humming changes. The timbre is changing all the time. A natural music as opposed to a noise or a sound. If you listened long enough you could hear a complete symphony. Sitting about trying to record that symphony. Completing Ph.D. Finding wires to record on a farm. Camping for two of three weeks and continuously recording. Creating own compositions from the recordings. Talking about the recording equipment. Getting power in the middle of nowhere was very difficult. Problems with electrical noise. Using the most basic equipment available - cassette tape.

Equipment, cassette tape, recording, symphony

00:30:57

Doing composing on reel to reel. Quarter inch tape. The old Porter studio. Four channel machine. Using graphic equalises and home made equipment and expander compressors. Abandoning microphones. Using peso electric elements out of record player cartridges. Creating own recording equipment.

Recording, studio, electric elements

00:33:30

Recording equipment - having imaginative mind. A long time to perfect the method. Using a microphone in a box. Putting the pickups on the wire in exactly the right of way. The recordings in 1979. Father's comments when hearing the noise. Using filters and equalises. Being surrounded by noise.

Recording equipment, wire, filters

00:36:59

Sounds already available at the ABC archives. Interested in creating own musical composition that stands in its own right. Didn't want sound effect of wind and so on. Sound of a bird landing on the wire and singing. But producing wonderful accidents. Creating recordings before computers with chorus. Using natural sound and natural accidents to create something. Hearing whale song. Hearing harp seals. Capturing natural sounds

Natural sounds, whale songs, creating

00: 39:42

Sitting down and listening to the sounds. Hearing the modal structures and harmonies and so on. Making notes and putting together a film. Topping and tailing highlights. Motifs that are repeated. There were certain structures that could be repeated. Sitting back and thinking about what can be made. Working backwards and forwards. Taking up to 6 months to complete composition.

Modal structures, listening

00:44:15

Primal Image was the first proper composition. Revision of Primal Image. Some compositions just fall into place. You feel that there is a structure that is being told to you by the sounds. When you get it right you know you've got it right. Having people offer to compose music to recordings. Sarah Hopkins was one of the first collaborators. Playing cello and singing.

Sarah Hopkins, compose, cello, Primal Image

00:47:15

It's not often people are able to hear it for what it really is. Hard for the average Westerner to hear anything outside the normal scales and keys. Measuring tonal distances in less than a quarter. Measuring tonal distances in a fraction. Trying to create the symphony that was first imagined on the Isle of Mull. Never managing to get a recording remotely like that sound. An infinite repertoire. If you don't recording it you will never hear it again.

Measuring tonal distances, recording, repertoire

00:50:25

Hearing sounds in space. Company of spheres and sound in a vacuum. The hearing of other ears. Comparing human hearing to animals hearing. Animals can hear ultrasonic sounds. Losing hearing. The reactions of cats and dogs to compositions. Son listening to the sound. Having a property down at Baldivis. An experimental lab and the effect on the local live stock.

Animals, hearing, listening

## **Session 2 Alan Lamb**

conducted by WJE Bannister

**10/7/ 2015**

00:00:00

Listening to the sounds of recordings of a piece called Night Passage. Manipulating wires. Playing with the tensions of the wires by pulling on them. You can get the wires to start singing. Hearing the slipping of the wire through the insulators.

Wires singing, manipulating wires

00:04:15

Origins of the cuts of sounds in the piece. Listening to the Aeolian sounds. Sound grows in amplitude. Recordings of seven minutes straight. The creative physics of what is going on. Mathematic chaos. Understanding better what is happening at the physical level. The wind hitting the wire is like putting a twig in a flowing stream of water. Self feedback and vibrating wires.

Origins, Aeolian sounds, creative physics

00:07:50

Places along the wire vibrate and contract. Another layer of sound and rhythm is a classic case of a chaotic system. Recording for a long time while camping and becoming more expert at it as time goes by. Getting the best of the material at the end of the stay. Memories of working with Peter Sculthorpe.

Peter Sculthorpe, chaotic system

00:10:20

Joining with Peter Sculthorpe in producing the soundtrack for Burke and Wills movie. Memories of the story associated with making the soundtrack. Not meeting Peter personally. Lamb's work. Orchestration and nature's own creation.

Peter Sculthorpe, Orchestration,

00:14:10

Sharing the idea of wires for the desert scenes. Having to rewrite the score in a week. Producers were afraid of scaring the audience. How people had heard about Lamb's music. Historical documentary about Telecom. The closing down of the last manual telephone exchange. People hear music in the eastern states on radio.

Ideas, wires, sharing

00:20:39

Not looking at things from a commercial position. Things created by natural events and being invited to play it at concerts. Darren Harvey head of composition at RMIT. Running a music label called Dorabo an avant-garde label. Recording was a hit. It went viral in a way. Getting more and more requests from various people to use the music. Like-minded people in a place.

Commercial, Dorabo

00:23:50

Fremantle Jazz Society. Tos Mahoney had a part the festival. Meeting Ross Bolleter and Mark Cain. Playing something for the 1985 Fremantle new music festival. Starting a movement and having a wonderful conversation about what new music would symbolise. EVOS. The evolution of sound. And evolution and Cosmos. A lot of new music going on at the Brass Monkey hotel. A lot of students from U.W.A. and WAAPA become interested and join in. It was very new and fresh and exciting. Students tell their teachers about what we are doing and the teachers then started to turn up. Cathie Travers and various others bring in a new quality.

Cathie Travers, EVOS, Ross Bolleter, Tos Mahoney

00:28:40

Roger Smalley. Being swamped by intellectual conversation. U.W.A and Nedlands teachers College. Shutting down Evos. Monthly functions carry on but the numbers drop away until there is no more interest. Academia taking over the sound.

Roger Smalley, Evos, academia

00:31:30

Genuine interest in the work. It was very much a Perth brand. People are drawn in by sheer curiosity. The percentage of manipulation and sound created in a piece. Description of the listening and categorising. Making decisions about what was usable.

Manipulation, listening

00:34:25

Rudimentary editing on current computer programs. Lack of technology at the beginning. The original recordings and sliding and blending of music together. Painstaking work. Finding the work very invigorating. Music isn't necessarily human made. John Blacking was no musicologist. Music could be made by natural causes. Bird song. The sound of a bird landing on a wire is a real joy. They hop and skip up and down the wires.

Recordings, editing, John Blacking

00:38:00

Birds are singing and the vibration is passed through into the wire. Magpies are very good on a wire. Butcher birds. Part of harsh section on primal image is caused by some cattle pushing the wire. Evos and composition and becoming part of a group. Compositions. Collaborative work. Collaborating on music projects and dance projects. Theatre and films. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't.

Evos, collaborating, theatre

00:41:23

Non-tempered nature of music and micro tonal changes. The public structures. Putting up concerts. Devising and playing around with musical inventions. Memories of the great bow. The standard Pythagorean harmonics. Producing a very restful kind of music.

Micro tonal changes, Pythagorean harmonics

00:44:31

Peice of meditating music. The drone of a didgeridoo or the drone of a meditation bell. Aeolian music in tune with the hum of the earth. Defining meditation. Agitating music. Covering the whole range of emotions. Being drawn to particular new music composers. Fan of American minimalists. Steven Reich, Philip Glass. Terry Reilly. Warren Burt an experimentalist. Interested in how mathematics can be transformed into music. Challenges.

Meditating, Aeolian music, Steven Reich, Philip Glass, Terry Reilly, Warren Burt

00:48:20

Enjoying music. The 53 note scale turning numbers into sound. Number theory and relation to sound and a sound structure. The 42 note scale and Hitch Hikers guide to the Galaxy. Indian modes and the Chinese pentatonic scale. Travelling through Middle Asia and hearing a lot of notes and scales.

53 note scale, number theory, Chinese pentatonic scale

00: 51:39

Singing and listening. Creating sound out of computer zeros and ones. The danger of numbered generated music. Switching off. A bunch of sounds all glued together. Amazingly powerful. People listen to primal image while doing house work every day.

Number generated music, computer

00:00:00

Popularity of the word. Collaborations. Sarah Hopkins collaborates with Alan Lamb. Methods of composition and writing of a score. Getting a grant from the Bicentennial Australia for concerts with dancers, Ian Ferguson. The stage show tours Australia. Critique of being new agey.

Collaborations, grant, dancers

00:04:13

Getting used to the new music scene here in Perth. Seeing the CD being funded. Getting grants - being verified. Having a broader appeal. Building a wind organ at Leighton Beach. Residents complain about the noise.

Funded, wind organ

00:07:57

Recording music for a show. Talking about Evos and Tura music. Memories of club Zho. Getting funding from all over the place including the Australia Council. Tos puts a lot of money into the project himself. Ideas expand into the Totally Huge New Music Festival. Concerts and seminars. Organising outback festivals.

Club Zho, Evos, Totally Huge New Music Festival

00:13:14

Playing at Mount Magnet in the North West. Cat Hope and Stuart James and Decibel. Building an instrument for Decibel to play. New music grows in a place like Perth - liquid architecture. Exchange of ideas and methods. The Western Australian arm of the Australian Music Centre. A lot of eastern states musicians come to Perth. In isolation something can emerge that is different. Tura still exists.

Decibel, Australian Music centre, Tura

00:18:20

Something special happening in this part of the world. Decibel. Music machines performed in an event in Japan. Building a wind organ in Japan. High voltage electron synchrotron. Memories of building them in Japan.

Decibel, Japan,

00:23:45

Students help to reconstruct the wind organ. The great bow is a musical invention. The Japanese play the great bow. The reception of the great bow. People are frightened by the open space taken aback by the scale of the instrument. The great bow cannot be compared to anything else. The drone of the great bow. You have to be fit to play the great bow.

Great bow

00:28:15

Doing something with new sound. Music is taken up by academic musicians around world. Cat Hope and Lindsay Vickery. Descriptions of new music machine. Memories of previous music machines. Building music machines. Including magnets in the machines. Sending a pulse down the wire.

New music machine, Cat Hope, Lindsay Vickery

00:32:40

An electric storm or an electric wind blowing past the strings. Constant magnetic field and pulses down the wire. Changing the pulse rate. Hair fine tantalum wires. Heating the wire and changing the pitch. Playing the machines. Computers are adding to the mix. Never having been into computers.

Electric storm, machines, computers

00:36:24

Analogue works wonderfully. Memories of Baldivis. Money for making music. Putting up wires in different configurations. A playground for Lamb and his friends. A chaotic music developed. Description of wires used experimenting with using different diameters. The wire has to be even along the length and perfectly circular. Difficult to get the right kind of wire.

Baldivis, wire, analogue

00:42:00

A lot of hard physical work. Memories of nanny. The reason why the wind organ is called the Far Away wind organ. Looking at the pleasure that the music has brought to other people.

Far away wind organ

00:46:35

The beliefs in the health properties of music. Personal good health as a result of making music. The contribution to the new music. Alvin Lucier.

Alvin Lucier, contribution, health properties

00:50:35

Affecting people within the music scene. Memories of the wired lab in the Eastern States. David Burraston. Understanding the subtleties that are involved. Moments that stick out in the creation of music.

Wire labs, Eastern States, David Burraston

End of the interview