

who plays music: six interviews



ROBERT COOK

Here are interviews with four artists who play music, one musician who plays music and one psychologist who plays music. The inspiration to do them came from Marco Fusinato's email notices advertising the You Don't Have to Call it Music, music by visual artists series of gigs. It seemed like something was going on. It seemed to be going on in Melbourne. The idea I had was to document this scene from the other side of the country. From Perth. My particular interest in this was, simply, that I love not being a part of things. The rush of exclusion is my emotional and intellectual bread and butter. Why not make that into a contemporary history of a scene?

Why not? Because I quickly grew bored and annoyed with trying to represent the breadth of it. It was too big. There were too many people to talk to. Too many angles. There was too damned much to get *wrong*. It also dawned on me that it was not my story to tell, not even as absent, melancholic non-observer. Plus, and this was the clincher, as I talked to people other issues more genuinely intrigued me. I became increasingly interested in how artists approach the music they make. I was curious not about what we have been taught to think about art and music within the glimmering expanded field with its dynamic blurring of creative borders and all, but how they actually think and feel about the music they make. I was interested in what logic drives it, what attitudes and hopes they bring to it, how they negotiate fandom, how they consider it differently or similarly to their visual art, and whether music might function as art's other, a place of freedom. Simple matters. These are, therefore, simple, un-intellectual, un-intellectualising interviews.

Anthony Pateras aside (whom I have not yet met), I spoke with people I had existing professional and personal connections with. They were easy to approach, easy to talk to, or at least email (John Nixon was my only phone interview). Two of these people live in my town—Kevin Robertson and Rosie Rooney. I also chose this group because they represent different aspects of art making and music making. Geoff Newton's music is intense, muscular and knowledgeable. It references and embodies a whole range of sounds and eras. I still haven't heard Darren Sylvester's music. The CD he posted me was for an

MP3 set up and I hold no truck with new technology. That aside, I wanted to know more about the musical approach of someone who is famously deliberate in his art making and who has equally famously worn his musical affiliations on his sleeve. I have always loved John Nixon's artistic and musical work for its brilliant clarity of articulation, design and purpose. I wanted to get at what programs his music at this point in time. Kevin Robertson is a lo-fi figurative painter who plays in the experimental band Abe Sade (led by Cat Hope) and the pop band diode (with Jenny Griffiths and Rosie Rooney). His music and painting are direct and emotional, felt, not ironic, and inflected by a happy-sombre indie styling. Anthony Pateras is an incredible pianist, composer and improviser who organised (with Robin Fox) the recentish Melbourne International Biennale of Exploratory Music. I was basically interested in his musical take on the art-music interface. There was more to ask but we were both busy. Finally, I took the opportunity to ask Rosie Rooney, in her dual roles as pop musician (diode) and psychology academic, a few questions about my own current music-fan dilemmas. My rule there is never miss the opportunity for some free analysis, even if it is in public, in print. Some questions asked, some questions answered. The documentation of the Melbourne art-music scene, or even the Australian art-music scene can be written by someone else. The essay on art-music in general, dutifully referencing La Monte Young, Christian Marclay, Jim O'Rourke, Michael Schumacher, Mike Kelley, Oliver Sacks and Andy Warhol *et al*, can wait for another time. Then again, maybe Alan Licht has already diligently taken care of that field.

1. GEOFF NEWTON:

ROBERT COOK: From our discussions about music, and from seeing your band Van Newton perform, it seems to me you have pretty eclectic tastes and musical interests. Can you describe your personal musical history—as a listener, as a fan?

GEOFF NEWTON: I grew up listening to Neil Diamond and The Steve Miller Band, then graduated to buying cassettes of metal bands like Pantera, Metallica, Anthrax, AC/DC, and rap groups like NWA, RUN DMC, 2 Live Crew, the Beastie Boys and skate bands like Black Flag, Suicidal Tendencies, No Means No etc., a total early 1990s type of mainstream alternative. I'd get into bands through watching a lot of *Rage* on ABC TV and through soundtracks to films, like Time Bandit's Send Me An Angel from the movie *Rad*. When I started going to university I guess I developed a broader appreciation for other styles through reading up on guys like Arnold Schoenberg (who worked with Kandinsky), Bartok and Mingus respectively; then guys like Beefheart, Zappa, Xenakis, Mertzbow and John Zorn. The first exhibition I did out of art school was about trying to decipher sound into action paintings. Soon afterward I met Ronnie van Hout who told me that it was almost impossible and I believed him. In the context of trying to conjure up a sweating heaving mass of bodies saturated in noise by making a painting on a canvas, it seemed a little pale.

RC: Does art sometimes feel lacking for you therefore? Like it doesn't have the grunt, the oomph, the fire? I guess maybe Pollock would have been a rock musician if he lived in a different age. To me, though, your work does have that heaviness. Are you aware of that? I see it as 'visual rock' in a way. So how about making music for you? When and how did you get into that?

GN: When things don't work out on canvas, take it to the stage eh? Or at least sounds feel closer to ideas sometimes and can be spliced like drawings. I played the recorder in primary school and started learning piano when I was about twelve. A few years later my younger brother started taking guitar lessons and I got instrument envy. When I began electric guitar lessons, I just brought along tapes for my teacher to transcribe the riffs.

RC: On the guitar, can you tune by ear? Are you on top of all the scales, and modes and stuff, or do you play intuitively? Do you practise? Do you wish you were technically better, or are you happy where you're at? If you could play (and maybe you can) like Steve Vai or someone, what would you play?

GN: I can tune by ear a bit. I used to get into scale charts and such, but I never had the patience to completely learn them—they're all about the same shape in different spots. If I could play like Steve Vai I'd probably have to consider a new wardrobe.

RC: Your own art practice is, as I've said elsewhere, critically reflexive and restless in a way, how does your music making sit with that? Is it part of that continuum, or is it a separate thing?

GN: The first art exhibition I did was an attempt at transcribing sound into paintings, and then I tried to turn the pictures back into sound. They were short, quirky riff-driven songs, some of which sounded like a three piece band rehearsing jingles for Thai commercials in a rusty garage. I've been recording things on a four track for about ten years. Most of that stuff is more personal I suppose—more of a diary. One of the first things I did was cover a room in papers from the Yellow Pages and improvise songs based on the advertisements. But when I make music I don't feel limited to one style—I guess I feel more freedom from not having the artist tag attached. But sometimes I feel that it's nice to give an art exhibition a soundtrack or have another medium to bounce off. Something like, I can't act, but I'm one hell of a waiter.

RC: I like that idea, of another medium to bounce off. It heightens the feel of abandon, of things not being fixed. Does it seem like that for you?

GN: I suppose it's like trying to develop the understanding of the work as it evolves outside of the studio, like attaching merchandise to a blockbuster film or creating an adaptation of a screenplay into a mini-series.

RC: It seems like you enjoy, at least on some level, the performative dimension of being a guy in a band on a stage. You have a strong physical presence. Is the act of being present, of being the artwork significant to you or something that you actually have to overcome in a way? What do you think about the art-music interface in Melbourne at the moment, or even historically in Melbourne?

GN: I enjoy it, but at the same time I think I get a bit conscious of the posturing of rock—it's hard to be ironic on stage. And I guess I've never thought about not being present. Maybe you need to see the hand of the artist—but I've never thought about being in a band as making work. Presently there's a lot happening, but I think there always has, it just depends on how much you scratch the surface. I can recall a friend of mine travelling down here from Canberra for the 'What Is Music?' Festival about eight years ago. When he came back he told me of a guy who bounced around on a trampoline which would sonically intonate every bounce he made through mikes on the springs. Wild, huh? I think a lot is spawned from the universities. Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology has Philip Brophy churning out sound artists and the Victoria College of Arts has Jon Campbell teaching rock 'n' roll, and I think Monash University has Michael Greave teaching sound art too—so students tend to form bands at art school and sometimes they're more successful.

2. KEVIN ROBERTSON:

RC: When did you start making music? Was it before or after becoming an artist? What drew you to music? What did you play? What were you listening to?

KEVIN ROBERTSON: I started making music in late high school, before I went to art school. However, I was making art for a long time before that. I liked the secret world it offered that was a buffer to the school world. Listening to a beautiful Factory 45 in the morning gave me the strength to face the social scene. A girl at high school, Liz, gave me a tape of all this music I had never heard before. She called the tape 'Infamous Hits'. It had Nico, The Only Ones, The Cramps, Richard Hell and The Voidoids. I started to see there was more to music than Queen. It was a very private experience that helped me cope.

RC: What then drew you to art? What possibilities did you see there that music didn't offer? Why didn't you want to be a pro' muso? Is there a different mindset that you get into, or need to get into, to make art versus making music?

KR: The glib answer is I liked the idea of being a young painter at forty and not an old rock star at forty. Also when I was younger I was too shy to perform in public (I think) and art seemed to offer a more challenging experience that I am now inclined to doubt. I think they are different, but I find it very hard to articulate what the difference is. I do know I feel very awkward about doing both. Art is a more grounding experience and music is a more elusive fantasy world that I would find hard to stop pursuing. The similarities are that they both begin in notebooks, but eventually require some kind of execution, either psyching up to play drums or physically making a painting. However, one is an entirely singular activity (painting, obviously) and being in a band is a nice counterbalance, because it is extremely social.

RC: Is there something about the feedback from music that is good to receive as an artist? I mean, people clap. No one claps when you have an exhibition.

KR: People seem to be more supportive and spontaneous in their responses to a live performance. They don't come up to you (like they do at exhibition openings) and say; "I'm not sure about your work" or "why are you doing this?"

RC: For want of a better description you make pop music in diode and experimental stuff with Abe Sade. How do you approach the different modes?

KR: diode is about finding exciting ways to combine mostly pre-formed ideas, whereas Abe Sade is improvisation—you simply have no idea where it is going. diode songs can start the same way, but they eventually have to be structured. We first started writing diode songs that were long turnabouts, so it didn't matter if they were played the same way or not. We still do it that way and it keeps things interesting.

RC: What are these pre-formed ideas?

KR: Lyrics, sound ideas and rhythms that are like separate units that have to be put together.

RC: One thing I am keen on knowing is whether there is more ego, or a different kind of ego at play in making music than art? How do you feel about being a stage presence?

KR: Yes, there is much more ego in painting. It makes it harder to do, whereas music is much more communal and therefore less of yourself is at stake. Stage performance was hard at first, but now I feel less self-conscious when I play, it really is fun.

RC: Do you see pop as relief from the discourse of art, its heaviness?

KR: Pop can be that, but it is generally, I find, good not to have to think about the validity of what you are doing in music.

RC: Why is that? Might it be the case that the validity in the music is more felt than understood? Because when I hear your music there is a lot going on, and it is not just any old noise, or any old tune-making, it comes from a precise alternative/indie tradition that it then adds to.

KR: Yes, that describes it really well

RC: Can you name your musical influences?

KR: The Velvet Underground and Joy Division influenced me early on and Young Marble Giants still sound mysterious. But I listen to a lot of composers from different genres, Praetorius to Xenakis. The spoken word bit in diode was inspired by Betjeman. I am always picking up new things through music.

RC: Your music is very lo-fi and direct, do you see that linking to the way you make paintings? The way you embrace tech though is very lo-fi as well. You make do with simple instruments. You extract an expression from your simple tools. And are happy to let the materiality of that resonate? Is that the same with your painting, like you are doing a latter day Manet thing?

KR: I suppose I like direct things because you can just get on with it and not get tangled up with technology, but oddly I love technology as well, so I can embrace more of that through diode. I like the rough-but-precisely-directed approach. Very happy to be compared to Manet. Thanks!

3. DARREN SYLVESTER:

RC: Can you describe your personal relationship with music?

DARREN SYLVESTER: I began by playing ukulele along to various songs on *Rage* as a child. By the time I was at university I was in a number of bands. We invented new chords so as we were different to other bands, played in stupid outfits in redneck bars, had beer thrown at me, smoked pot before gigs, then picked up by my parents afterwards. Unfortunately bands are so democratic and about compromise, which I couldn't handle, so I fell out of them for a long time and became an artist instead.

RC: So art, in some ways, is about control for you? You could control all aspects of production and, to an extent, distribution? Did you feel the same making art as making music? Was the thrill the same, the libidinal rush? Or do the different modalities seem entirely different?

DS: Art is pretty much about control. Artworks may take a long time to conceptualise and construct, so it's very slow burning. Music is a way of creating something instant, especially live, because as a visual artist I find you can become bored and dragged down with the minutia of a large project.

RC: What figures, what bands, have been important and why?

DS: When I was younger the artists that struck me were the ones that had big personalities, much bigger than I could imagine myself to ever be—Boy George, David Bowie, Morrissey, Springsteen. They all had their own trips and it was fun to delve into each artist's mythology.

RC: How did you deal with the conflicting visual and attitudinal modes of those heroes? Morrissey is very different to Springsteen. Did you feel conflicted? Was there a sense of having to make a choice between them? And did you really try and be like them at all? How have these people affected the way you approach art making?

DS: It's conflicting. It seems strange but it's so true. I simply would go through a Springsteen phase for whatever reason, then realise it seemed so fake in comparison to Morrissey, and then a few months later I would go back again. It might be a summer/winter thing. David Bowie, Kate Bush and Bruce Springsteen have all been referenced in my work in some way. And with the Springsteen tribute video I made, *Time Keeps Running, Never Changing, Never Ageing* (2006), was special in that I filmed it in his hometown of Asbury Park, around all the old haunts referenced in so many of his songs and videos, especially as I recognised them—the Stone Pony Bar, The Ferris Wheel and Boardwalk from the *Tunnel of Love* album videos. And cars would go by with American flags, actually playing the Boss, as we were filming a video about the Boss. It was a great day.

RC: Is there a reason why Morrissey hasn't been referenced in your work?

DS: Because you can't touch Morrissey. I know the rules of being a Morrissey fan.

RC: I have heard you talk, parable style, about The Carpenters too in relation to your work. Is music something that you are channelling, that it is a reference point, like a story, a mythology, your work unfolds within and around?

DS: All of that. In my head I approach art making in clichéd music terms all the time. Each exhibition is an album. The invite is the introductory first single. Group shows are compilation albums—give them a big single if you think it's worth it. Send a more album-like work for others. I reference an artist who sells a work as 'shifting a unit'.

RC: When did you start making music again? How has it evolved?

DS: A lot of friends are in bands from Melbourne, and often these people have appeared in and helped with my art practice—Spider Vomit, Beaches, Lindsey Low Hand, Jessica Says, Fatti Francis, St Helens, Kes, Downtown. Check out their Myspaces. Some of them had asked/forced me to play at a house party, so I spent some time figuring how to do something solo and it's continued from there. Unfortunately it's complicated. I play pretty much like a rock band does, except I play each instrument one at a time and use a loop pedal to go over each track. Either beginning with a drum pattern or playing drums on a sampler, I then play bass, guitars, vocals, keyboards over the top. So each song has three to four parts and overdubs to run through and depending on how accurate I am on each passing loop depends on how in time I sound.

RC: Can you describe 'The Sylvester Sound'?

DS: Actually I can't...

RC: Come one. Sonically, what does it relate to? VU? T-Rex?

DS: I'm in the middle of making a debut album at home and was told by a producer friend to listen to albums you like the sound of through monitor speakers to hear production, because everything plays in its raw state. So two albums I reference for this are Fleetwood Mac's *Tusk* and Paul McCartney and Wings' *Band on the Run*. Both have the great FM radio, dead snare sound I quite like.

RC: What do you think about your performance wardrobe?

DS: Robert Palmer once said that the great joy he had in being wealthy was to afford to wake every morning and wear a freshly laundered, crisp white shirt. And so far I wear the same on stage, although I've no idea why.

RC: Do you see these performances as part of your oeuvre or as something different? In 2030, when the Whitney does your retro, would you mind the old recordings being shown of you on stage? Or do you think of music as art's other in a sense?

DS: No, they're related. Making an album is the same as making a video or photograph, it's just a different medium. It comes back to the enjoyment in exploring a medium that I can produce faster than how I've evolved into making art objects.

RC: You have talked in the past about your work being in this popular zone of the everyday experience, would you want it eventually to be as popular as pop music? Is that an aim? Is that a place where music and art coincide for you?

DS: When I've said art should be as popular as music, I guess I talk of an aim, where the public loves art as much as the art community does. And I see the music industry has musicians/artists, who are very popular, however not as clever as nearly any artist I currently know. Creating music means I'm not trying to bridge the gap. I'm just going to the other side. A similar thing in the art world today is art and its bridges to fashion. However, I don't always think this is such a great idea. Fashion devours the trendiest fad, sleeps five minutes, gets bored and moves to the next thing. Artists can get lost in the glitter of association and then realise they're dumped in the next issue. Maybe more artists should have their own fashion lines.



4. ANTHONY PATERAS:

RC: Can you first explain your history with and interest in experimental music?

ANTHONY PATERAS: I've been interested in experimental music since about 1995, but then started seriously around 1999. I had a rock hangover I had to deal with. Fundamentally it appeals to me simply because it strives for unique and novel outcomes and provides a satisfying option to the bullshit we're all forced to listen to on a daily basis, which only seems to be getting worse. This isn't going to change so I choose try to numb the pain through listening and practice.

RC: Do you think there's any meaningful difference between music and art? Why do you think that there's such interest in the art-music cross in Melbourne at the moment?

AP: The tools. That's about it. To my knowledge and experience, there is no other city in the world where there is as much cross-pollination of ideas, influences and communities as Melbourne. Historically (at least since the 1970s) there have always been visual artists making sound in Melbourne, and vice-versa.

RC: How did the Melbourne International Biennale of Exploratory Music (MIBEM) come into being, and how did you tackle the curating of the program? What is the difference between experimental and exploratory music?

AP: The MIBEM came out of the Articulating Space series and festival, a series from 2002-05, and then a festival in 2006. I used to run it at the Footscray Community Arts Centre by myself, then Robin Fox came on board 2005. We decided to get serious for 2008 and do a biennale, also because we didn't want to have to do this every year. Every two years seems manageable. Experimental music by Cage's definition is music where the outcome is unknown. As experimental music has progressed and branched out to include other idioms, and in many cases embrace form and pre-determinacy, the term becomes problematic, because then if you use it, some purists argue that the outcome is known in a composed piece or whatever. So, exploratory simply acts as a buffer term to that situation, while meaning something similar. At the same time, the basis for many people in Melbourne's practice for example is just that—to explore new sonic outcomes. It works nicely. Lots of people have commented on it being a more appropriate definition.

RC: Have you ever danced to exploratory music?

AP: All the time.

RC: What pop music turns you on?

AP: Killer stuff from Brasil and the Balkans.

5. JOHN NIXON:

RC: I believe you have a music group now. What is it?

JOHN NIXON: The Donkey's Tail is an experimental, abstract, free noise, improv, garage ensemble using electric guitars, drums, percussion teamed with banjo, triangle, dog squeaking toys, melodica, kazoo, trombone and the like. The group was principally formed as a recording project. To date, fifteen CDs have been released, with me solo or in combination with one or two other members of the ensemble. We have a live group, which comprises three to six members of the ensemble, depending on the gig.

RC: Do you call what you do music and when did you start? Tell me about The Donkey's Tail.

JN: Music is a big field, and something I have always enjoyed. I am happy to work within music. I am not a sound artist. I am coming from music. What I do is not sound sculpture, sound art or performance art. I am happy for it to come from music. I understand what I am doing with it and I am adding to the lexicon of music. I formed my first anti-music group in 1979. I had been in London and was inspired by the punk DIY scene at the time in 1978. It was easy to see bands. So music was on my mind and when I came home to Melbourne I thought I can do this too. I took on music as part of my wider practice at that time. The anti-music groups were me and my friends. We went under various group names, though we used our initials on the recordings so people could suss out who was who if they wanted to. The important thing was that we weren't pushing our own names. The anti-music groups were not based on ego. I saw music as being broader than that. I was interested in music as an artist not in the performance. When you listen to something at home the authorship is taken away from the artist. There is no individual presence of the maker anymore. So for me making music was always about making recordings; my groups were recording groups, not live groups. In 1996, I started again making seven-inch records and started *Solver* with Marco Fusinato. At that time we had similar ideas. Our first opportunity to play was in Italy, in Florence, where we made a small concert. Our art was in one room and our records and the magazine we jointly edited, *AXE*, was in another. There was a context. Two years ago I started The Donkey's Tail. Marco's interests had become focused on a more electronic sound and I was interested in improvisational noise music and instruments.

Primarily, The Donkey's Tail is a recording group—actually an ensemble. We also play live, but we do things a little differently. For a start, we all sit down. We have our own chairs, which we use at each live performance. This gives us the visual presence as a group. The other thing we do is we change instruments. There is no idea of who is the best guitarist, who is the best drummer, and letting the best players play those instruments. This diffuses the normal understanding of a gig. I am the musical director of The Donkey's Tail. I know what I want, what zone I am trying to be in at each recording session, what amplifiers, what sounds, what instruments. So I have this idea and define the overview. The live situation just gives us another opportunity for recording. The members of the ensemble are John Bartley, Ljiljana Green, Danny Lacy, Matt Hinkley, Warren Taylor, Emma Nixon, Daniel Argyle, David Palliser, Sean Bailey and Simon Stephenson. You can find more about us, as well as gig information, at our Myspace site: www.myspace.com/thedonkeystailmusic

RC: But tell me, do you all actually play your instruments?

JN: No. I was never taught any music. I don't know scales and chords. But I have a loose control of the sound, and this comes from the practice I have had with instruments. What they can do is something you learn over time. What I make are sound collages—the noises are appropriate to the final outcome. Chords and the like, scales, keys, are of no interest to me. I know what happens if you use a piece of metal to scratch over a string. It is the difference between realist painting and abstraction. If you say to yourself, I don't want to do that (realism), then you can find other ways to do things. Jackson Pollock was all about that; if you don't want to follow the conventions then you find other ways to make sense of things. It was the same with John Cage in many ways. I see him as an important minimalist. The influences come more from 1960s experimental music onwards, for example The Godz,

The Village Fugs, The Holy Modal Rounders, Sun Ra, Art Ensemble of Chicago, Captain Beefheart and The Magic Band, Moondog, Henry Cowell, early Red Crayola, Spontaneous Music Ensemble, AAM, Nihilist Spasm Band, ESP sampler records, Folkways records, New Orleans trad jazz, Jandek, Smegma, Sonic Youth, The Garbage and The Flowers, Francis Plagne, Paeces, Chris Smith and The Louisiana Shakers.

RC: What is the experience for the listener at a The Donkey's Tail gig? How is this feeling different to art?

JN: I don't know. I find it very exciting. At a gig, there is a lot going on. It is very electric to me. The difference is in one's knowledge. There are different audiences for music than for art. I see the similarity, though, in my silver paintings. They are structured, but also improvised in the same way as my music. The audience for music is much younger though. They are informed and are interested in noise. They are into it.

RC: What effects are you trying to produce with your music that are different from your visual art?

JN: I am involved in developing a platform for the analysis of sounds, but this is what I do in my art too. Both are abstract and I like the effects for what they are.

RC: So your music is about being present, not in imagining other spaces?

JN: Yes. I stay in the moment and the moment goes by.

RC: I am interested in your interest in traditional jazz. It sits oddly with me, especially when I think about your music and your visual art.

JN: It's attractive to me. I don't know. I like it. The thing is you've got to understand its place in twentieth-century popular music and its function within Modernism. It was the popular music before rock and roll. I like how it sounds. It was the first musical movement of my youth I was interested in. There was a band with these older kids than me that I used to go and see. Recently my interest returned. You grow in experience and reflect on things differently. Then there was rhythm and blues, the Rolling Stones, the Yardbirds. They came along and transformed things. I came back to this scene later as a record collector and I did the book about the Melbourne trad jazz scene. Today, I go and see the Louisiana Shakers. They are men who've been playing since the 1950s and some are now in their eighties. They are very enjoyable to hear. It was their first music and they stayed with it their whole lives and it's very joyous. For me, this has influenced The Donkey's Tail. While we are not a jazz band, there are good noises you can make with these instruments. We have trumpet, trombone because I like the way they sound. The only reason why we don't have a clarinet is because I haven't sourced one. The other important thing to know is that there are some wild players, some wild playing, in trad jazz. It's not all Salvation Army band style. There are individuals who play very raucously, and I am interested in that.

RC: How do you see your presence, then, as a part of the performance?

JN: You're a conduit. In all expressive art the artist is a conduit. Expressive arts need an author, a conductor.

6. ROSIE ROONEY:

RC: You are a professional psychologist, an academic at Curtin University, as well as a musician. It is with both hats on, I suppose, that I have some questions for you. They relate, well, to me mostly. The first one is about the function of pop music in our emotional worlds. Do you think that it retards our psychological development as we identify with often pretty dumb lyrics, because the music seeps in and gets into our emotional mindscapes?

ROSIE ROONEY: I don't think so. I don't believe that emotional development is linked to a psychological quotient, anything that helps access emotions, a smell, a sound, a dumb lyric like "Ziggy played guitar", "Lucy in the sky with diamonds", "angels in the architecture, "spinning in infinity", "slicing up eyeballs I want you to know", or "you're so pretty when you're unfaithful to me" may all connote something at some level and when you add a melody,

it can access things that no clever words can ever come close to. The music by itself can plough through psychological boundaries, confront old holes, bring tears and panic in a second. Adding a dumb lyric can be superfluous, embarrassing, or critical to the moment as it may be part of the experience. There are often many clichés strung together in songs. But they can still be meaningful. It's all in the interpretation. And then there is the music which can connect at levels where words become a little clichéd. I also wonder if it suits the Australian tradition of underplaying things so a few words expressed say a lot more than the "yeah, a bit" suggests. Pop can include few words but the effort and risk involved in articulating something, admitting to a thought, opinion, or feeling, can be disproportionately large. Expanding our stunted emotional development with a mantra may be a healing process.

RC: I always feel I should grow up and stop buying pop. Is there something to that? Is it pathetic to like pop still, at the age of thirty-eight? This might be a Perth thing though. In other places older folks go listen to pop and its not frowned upon.

RR: It can be a constructive thing. It's hard though, especially as there are so many young people you have to share the same sounds and lyrics with. Maybe that's one of the things that makes it a little embarrassing to admit you crowd surfed at the 2008 Big Day Out.

RC: In terms of developmental psychology, is there a particular age where we are more influenced by pop than others?

RR: I haven't looked it up but I would guess adolescence is when identity development is a milestone. By eighteen or twenty-five at the latest you are meant to have worked out who you are and what you want. Individuation from your parents has traditionally involved a bit of rebellion and perhaps rock (not so much pop) has been handy for this—Sex Pistols, Beatles, Rolling Stones, Pixies, goth stuff. It expresses disgruntlement with the status quo, with what we imagine our parents like/condone so we can rebel against them by liking it. The problem is, parents now often like the rock music so you hear about children being different from their hippie parents by earning as much money as possible, as soon as possible.

RC: Something I have found recently is that I have only just stopped using pop figures as models for being. This has freed my tastes considerably because it doesn't label me the way I felt it used to. Yet at the same time I feel I have lost something, some form of soulful connection that I had when I really wanted to be Robert Smith etc. What's going on there? Is this just growing up, or a form of mid-life depression which could well be the norm for everyone?

RR: It sounds like you are freeing yourself from others' opinions. Maybe just see it as a freedom you have found that has required that you have an identity that doesn't need Robert Smith to connect with. But his songs are so evocative and beautiful, of course it is lonely. Can't you find a way of connecting with him without needing to be him?

RC: There are a couple of ways of listening to music. One is the thing of staying in the moment, hearing the grain of the music as it passes, as it exists in time. The other is more about identification and yearning and projecting yourself into the space of the music as a form of melancholic free-association. When you make music do you consider these binaries at all?

RR: I try not to think at all; if I did I would feel like a complete idiot. Exposed. I just try and be real and authentic and if dumb words come out, that's OK. I take the angle that if a word comes out, it has a reason to be there.

RC: I think you just summed up my philosophy for life and certainly my philosophy for writing!