DRESS

By the mid-1990s, there was a quietly thriving underground in Wellington, New Zealand, made up of a number of loosely aligned operatives – Surface of The Earth and their World Resources imprint; Fever Hospital and 8 Dec; and the music made by the members of The Garbage & the Flowers after that group temporarily dissolved in 1992. The latter had also learned from their friends at World Resources how easy it was to release a lathe-cut record. Pressed in the sleepy South Island town of Geraldine by Peter King, an autodidact creative who was more than happy to do runs of releases in the low teens, lathe cuts liberated the means of production from the major label pressing plants who’d effectively tied up the processes of record-making in Australasia, even to the point, as urban legend has it, of eventually taking the EMI record press to the middle of Wellington harbour and tipping it overboard to languish at the bottom of the sea, all to make way for the coming of the era of compact discs.

One such Geraldine release was the sole 10” by Dress, a group who, on record, consisted of Helen Johnstone and Yuri Frusin (both of The Garbage & the Flowers), and Kristen Wineera (who would later join Entlang with Johnstone and Frusin). Released on their Hell On Records, it sat tidily alongside other releases on the label, from groups like Entlang, The Drugs, and The Slow Scrape. But it also connected to a much wider history of music-making, and creative endeavour, in Wellington. Indeed, seeing Dress as simply a Garbage & the Flowers offshoot is a misnomer at least, and misrepresents both their genesis story and their aesthetic development.

In short, then, there’s a lot more going on under the hood than there would seem. Dress was originally formed by Wineera (piano) with Brian Hutson (saxophone), under the name The Still Point. At the time, Hutson was a member of Wellington legends Tongue, an industrial rock group he shared with Stuart Porter and Brendan Ryniker, both of whom had recorded The Garbage & the Flowers [TG&TF]. (Johnstone had also played, briefly, with Tongue, as did Porter in TG&TF.) Paul Yates, another member of the TG&TF family, would also become involved in this broader circle, forming a large-scale free improvisation group with Hutson, named Improvisation Concrete. Porter also contributed a historical connection, back to the musicians around Braille Records, a Wellington imprint dedicated to free music from the city – during the mid-’80s, he was a member of Primitive Art Group, The Family Mallet, and The Black Sheep. (He also turned up on a few albums by Bill Direen’s Builders.)

As Wineera tells it, The Still Point, too, were purely focused on improvisation, at least at first. For Johnstone’s part, since the end of TG&TF, she’d been involved in making music for theatre, working often with Red Mole, the theatre company co-run by Sally Rodwell and Alan Brunton. “Red Mole was one of New Zealand’s best-known avant-garde theatre companies,” Johnstone says. Her connection with Red Mole began with the film and live theatre piece *The Navigators*: “I was pulled in on viola,” she recalls, “but didn’t really compose, just provided background colour.”

Johnstone would continue working with both Red Mole and Rodwell; she composed and performed the music for Rodwell’s play with Madeleine NcNamara, *Crow Station*, where Johnstone “drew on gamelan riffs I’d been learning at Jack Body’s free lunchtime workshops at Victoria University.” After one season at Taki Rui Theatre in 1994, the troupe received an invitation to perform the play at the Magdalena Women’s Theatre Festival in Cardiff, Wales. “It was the anniversary of Women’s Suffrage in New Zealand, so grants were growing on trees,” Johnstone smiles. “We even had a per diem!”

Soon after, McNamara would direct Rose Beauchamp’s play *Stone Telling*, and Johnstone was invited, again, to write the score. “Rose Beauchamp had been in Red Mole and was a great niece of the writer Katherine Mansfield,” Johnstone recalls. “I thought she had a similar refined creativity. I felt a bit out of my depth so asked Kristen to jump in. Kristen and Torben Tilly [of TG&TF] had been friends since kindergarten, and Heath Cozens, TG&TF’s first bass player, was part of the same crew… We played the whole ‘score’ live on stage dressed as Victorian women.”

After working together on *Stone Telling*, Wineera asked Johnstone to join The Still Point; Hutson left the group – “I can’t actually remember how Brian came to leave,” Wineera wonders, “family matters or something,” though Frusin mentions that Hutson was also keen to focus more on Improvisation Concrete – and Stuart Porter re-named the new line-up Dress. With shows at the inaugural Wellington Festival Fringe impending, Wineera and Johnstone turned to Frusin, asking him to join. “I jumped at the chance to get back in a band with the two of them when they asked me to replace Brian so they could plough on ahead towards the planned performances,” he recalls.

At this point, Frusin was living in what Johnstone calls a “tumbledown cottage” in Karepa Street, Brooklyn, a suburb of Wellington, with Donald J. Smith (of Surface of the Earth) and Marcel Bear (of Empirical). The new Dress trio fell quickly into a new practice of making music, though it was notably different to how Frusin and Johnstone had previously worked together in TG&TF. “I came in with most of their pieces already composed and had to learn Brian's guitar parts,” Frusin remembers. By this stage, Dress was very much a combination of Wineera’s initial vision and Johnstone’s complementary aesthetic.

For Wineera, Dress was initially about the “improvised, non-song-based approach set in motion by Brian and myself. From the start, Dress (as me, Helen and Yuri) was playing quite repetitive, hypnotic stuff.” This is evident in the material on their 10” – spindly, variegated, entwining like ivy crawling up the side of a decaying old building, the various parts of the music are threaded together with a sensitive balance of care and freedom; there’s space for exploration, but it’s kept in place by the weave of phrases, riffs, and micro-melodies drawn together by Wineera, Johnstone and Frusin.

There was also a conscious effort to avoid anything ‘rock’. “Right from the start, Helen banned me from playing anything vaguely resembling rock music,” Frusin says. Johnstone confirms this, adding, “Sometimes I would kick him if he rebelled, which was quite draconian.” Hence the curious sound of Dress – something situated between the fragility of pointillist improvisation, a kind of refined ‘art song’, and classical music. “Vocals-wise, it was spoken word instead of singing, at least initially,” Wineera says. “I guess musically Dress was a little like a shift toward abstraction.”

Expanding on her approach, Wineera continues, “I did have a natural tendency to improvise, to play patterns, and to steer clear of songs. I wasn’t a song writer at all. So, I guess that tendency, coupled with the fact that I was playing piano (which is note-y rather than chord-y) helped to create the different starting point for Dress.” Johnstone pinpoints several interests that converged to make Dress sound the way they did: one particularly intriguing connection is her studies at the time, in Applied Linguistics and German Language. Wineera was also studying the latter, alongside Ancient Greek and Latin. “She and I were really concerned with the rhythms of language and making them an equal part of the sound mosaic,” Johnston nods. “They weren’t just riding on the top like with conventional songs, but contrapuntal. All the parts – voices and instruments – were meant to have equal weight, travel independently.”

“I wonder if there’s ever been a band like it before or since,” Frusin marvels, reflecting on the unique sound Dress developed. “Primitive or naive classicism, perhaps. We attempted to play a kind of minimalist classical music but approached the problem like a rock ‘n’ roll band would, though all vestiges of rhythm and blues had been stripped away.” Thinking of music as a ‘problem’ – to be explored, perhaps to be solved, most likely to be puzzled at and left unresolved – reminds me of The Red Krayola, and there are some loose parallels between what Dress did, and the arcane logic of Mayo Thompson’s song writing, particularly when Thompson was working with the conceptual art collective, Art & Language. The way Dress’ songs follow phrases and notes, rather than chords, also recalls Thompson songs like “Oyster Thins” or “Janie Jones”.

But there’s plenty that makes Dress compellingly unique, and the Krayola/Thompson comparison only stands insofar as you could, at a stretch, consider Dress as much a conceptual art practice as a music group. That comparison falls apart, however, when you broach the sheer, seductive *musicality* of Dress’ playing and writing. Even when the phrases and riffs do chafe at one another – see the tense, abstruse beginnings of “Somer” – they make a kind of musical sense. This was partly down to the skills, and compositional approach, that each member brought to the group. “The pure improv didn’t last,” Wineera reflects. “That wasn’t of great interest to any of us. We were into having more structured pieces, but the structure was more like ‘Okay, we’ll do that riff for a while until so and so starts doing that other bit.’”

Frusin, for his part, remains in awe of the other members’ playing: “Kristen was a highly trained classical pianist and was enjoying branching out into playing original, often improvised music and both she and Helen had a beautiful, instinctive touch to both their musicianship and composition.” When asked what made Dress work, and how the three members interacted, Johnstone says, “Me and Kristen tended to be more perfectionist and uptight, Yuri was more relaxed… I was relieved they were both so technically adept, Kristen has such an amazing touch, imagination, so does Yuri. I’m more of an ideas person.” (Johnstone, here, is rather underselling both the rugged beauty of her viola playing, and the sensitivity of her vocal delivery.)

The four songs on the 10” were recorded in houses – “Mildred’s Thorts” and “Brown Holland” in Wineera’s Kilbirnie home, “Somer” in Kelburn, while Frusin was house-sitting at the university vice-chancellor’s residence right beside Wellington’s lush, storied Botanical Gardens – and the closing “Seven” was recorded live during Dress’s three-night stand at Taki Rua. None of this is a surprise once you’ve heard these four songs. There’s something homely, lived-in, hermetic, slightly everyday about this music – everyday in that, much like our daily life, these songs pivot on repetition and rhythm, the modalities of everyday life that writer Rita Felski once recognised. It’s a music of floorboards, of wood panelling, of musical instruments in light-dappled corners, of dusty home libraries filled with once-read books.

Indeed, Dress probably nabbed a few books out of those libraries. “Mildred’s Thorts” borrows from the poetry of Gertrude Stein: “The repetitive droning language that just went round in circles, elliptically, with a really loose attitude, not haughty in tone, really suited our riffing,” Johnstone nods. “I also had a tape of her reading in a calm and warm Boston accent, with a feeling of sunlight that kind of transferred to the recording, just the humour. A total modernist.” “We played that backwards,” Frusin notes. On “Somer”, Johnstone draws from an Anonymous Old English poet from her studies: “Raw and slangy,” she continues. “The song reminds me of the Wellington summer - short and gone before you know it. We didn’t bother to tidy it up much, left the lyrics fragmented… I call it ‘funky medieval.’”

For Johnstone, Dress achieved their goals most thoroughly on “Mildred’s Thorts”. She talks about the way the music pivots between structure and improvisation: “Getting the riffs all entwining majestically was our big aim. J. S. Bach writes like that and was an inspiration. Also Kraftwerk, who as Kristen said, were ‘note-y’, not chordal. I had some vague idea with our plucking and plinky-plonky crisscrossing arpeggios, we could achieve a similar hypnotic propulsion.” The Kraftwerk connection also builds a link with dance music culture, which Johnstone and Wineera were exploring at the time. “I thought the German DJs were great,” Johnstone says, “really in the Kraftwerk tradition of carefully defined vertical composition. That influence went into the mix too, though you wouldn’t think it: morphing patterns.”

The four songs on the Dress 10” seem to capture a liminal moment for Dress, a gentle yet slightly precarious see-sawing between structure, song, and improvisation. It’s part of what makes this record such a compelling mystery – for me, ever since buying a copy from Frusin back in the mid-late ‘90s, it’s always been one of the most confusing, yet endlessly riveting, pieces in the puzzle that was Wellington’s musical underground. But the group would soon find songs more compelling. Frusin notes that it didn’t take too long for the trio to feel that pull: on a South Island tour, when their line-up was extended by Stuart Porter and Gerard Crewdson (another improvisor from the Braille gang, who appears on The Family Mallet’s 1986 album *Bosch’s Bottom*), they would finish Dress sets with a number of old TG&TF songs as well as one or two Bob Dylan covers. Indeed, Dress would end up running parallel to the more song focused Entlang, in which Wineera switched over to guitar, with Donald J. Smith completing the Entlang line-up on drums.

Dress still explored a few more possibilities, though. Enamoured of Dress’ music, Dean Roberts – who had been a member of Auckland free-noise trio Thela and was also recording solo as White Winged Moth – had shown interest in working with the group. “I think he liked the way the music was vaguely classical, but somehow a bit fragile and grimy too,” Wineera suggests. Roberts had already caught them live, either in Wellington or Auckland, “in a kind of chamber/art music context in a little theatre,” he recalls. Later, Dress would visit Auckland, and they and Roberts would hang out together at the beach and catch up for dinner at a Malaysian restaurant. “We had a really great time listening to Big Star on the car ride out to the west coast beach,” he remembers.

After their time together in Auckland, Roberts caught the train to Wellington, resolving to record with Dress. “Helen and Kristin met me in the famed Cafe Bodega,” he explains, “and we had a quiet chat and then went out to their place which was a small bungalow in Lyall Bay, quite a distance from the city… It is a place which is quite desolate, the beach is west coast Tasman sea and perpetually windy, hard to describe but the atmosphere anywhere on the west coast of NZ is quite haunting.” They recorded together on Roberts’s TEAC four-track, Roberts joining in on guitar and cello. “We were so shy of each other that we barely spoke,” Wineera remembers, “just played.” The material has remained unreleased, though Wineera smiles, “that cassette did go on to have some unreleased adventures.”

Their connection to theatre and other creative forms was also ongoing, as was their endlessly fruitful relationship with the Red Mole theatre troupe. They would help out Red Mole’s Sally Rodwell, again, when she directed the Victoria University Russian Club’s production of Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master & Margarita*. For this performance, Dress was joined by Porter on saxophone, and performed their score in the venue’s orchestra pit. “I played a violin to symbolize the Devil,” Johnstone recalls. “Feeling unobserved loosened us up, that and having a story to focus on. It was some of our best playing, nice and fiery.”

Some of the music for *The Master & Margarita* also bled over into the soundtrack for *Heaven’s Cloudy Smile*, a thirty-minute film produced by Rodwell. Asked about the film and the soundtrack, Johnstone proclaims, “My big silk dress! Shooting around Wellington, the fun of concocting costumes. In the end, we only appeared in one scene as the dance band. It comprised folky dramatic interludes acted out by members of the Victoria University Russian Club, juxtaposed with Alan Brunton and Michelle Leggot reading their poems.” “That was quite fun,” Wineera continues. “We recorded that with a guy called Mike Gibson, who was associated with Stuart Porter and Brendan Ryniker too.”

*Heaven’s Cloudy Smile* was completed and first screened in 1998. By then, Dress had quietly folded. They did perform overseas in 1997, at the What Is Music? Festival in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia, where they appeared alongside an impressive cast from the Wellington and Auckland “noise” scenes – The Garbage & the Flowers, Pit Viper, Thela and Empirical all played the festival, too. But Johnstone moved to Sydney, a path Frusin would follow soon as well; Torben Tilly, of TG&TF, was already there, studying sculpture. “It was chain migration, really,” Johnstone says. “We just disintegrated, as bands do. Kristen moved to Auckland.” But here, you have, disinterred from time’s dusty archives, the Dress EP, a lovely reminder of one of New Zealand’s most quixotic and compelling groups.