

MANI NEUMEIER THE TOFF, MELBOURNE

Legendary German drummer Mani Neumeier's first Australian concert was organized under the aegis of Melburnian guitarist/sound artist Oren Ambarchi who has chosen Brendan Walls (second guitar) and Edmondo Ammendola (bass) to play behind the Guru Guru leader. The Toff show is divided into three parts: a dual percussion and voice set between Neumeier and his wife Etsuko Watanabe, a drum solo, and a band improv session with Ambarchi, Walls and Ammendola. Watanabe brings her own intriguing musical pedigree to the venture, being a former member of 70s Japanese psych free folk collective Maru Sankaku Shikaku.

Sprightly and slight sexagenarians, Neumeier and Watanabe introduce themselves to their audience with a shy friendliness. They perform their percussion set as though it were a ritualistic blessing for the whole gig, sitting cross-legged and opening with a simple, affecting form of Oriental plainchant before tapping out busy cross-rhythms on coral shells. There is a lot of reaching across into each other's performance space, a practice accentuated when they switch to small hand drums, their arms arcing through the air like taiko players restricted to tiny instruments. The joyous incantatory intimacy on display suggests Neumeier has finally found in his partner the 'Woman Drum' he first eulogized on Guru Guru's eponymous fourth album in 1973.

Neumeier then moves behind his drum kit for an extended polyrhythmic exploration. His formative influences as a free jazz drummer in the 1960s with the Irene Schweizer Trio and Alex von Schlippenbach's Globe Unity Orchestra are discernable within the rock energy on display. The exquisite dynamic control in the execution of complex kit-spanning cyclical patterns at low volumes brings to mind Chico Hamilton while the exuberant *forte* attack and sensitivity to the harmonic and tonal qualities of tom toms is comparable to Max Roach.

If his famous krautrock power trio comes to mind when Ambarchi and co enter the stage, then the version that plays tonight is a Guru Guru for the noise/sound art generation. The cosmic psychobilly anthems and ur-stoner rock of yore have been abstracted via the alchemical reductionism of the Ambarchi/Walls/Ammendola guitar axis into a burnished sonic alloy equal parts Big Black's ominous amp hum afterglow, the La Monte Young-avant metal drone connection and the concentrated force of Keiji Haino's mystical psych rock emanations. Such parallels, however, can only give some slight pointers for identifying a unique sound.

Ambarchi and Walls share the same open tuning through which they fabricate reverbed laminae of sympathetic resonance encrusted with distortion, ring modulation and wah-wah to form a buzzing, raga-less tamboura drone. Ammendola's bass is an amorphous, subliminal rumble of low tones. This ambient setting provides Neumeier with a substantial amount of musical space in which to operate – a different working situation to Acid Mothers Guru Guru in which the energy of his own playing is often matched by the spiraling banshee scree of Makoto Kawabata's teeming guitar lines. He goes with the freedom cautiously at first, employing a variety of rattles, cymbals and small gongs to add textural counterweight to the electrical pressure systems swirling around him.

Before long he's in full swing, deciding perhaps that attack is the best form of defence, or playing the Electric Miles wise old captain role - providing guidance through sheer musical authority to the wild avant garde youngsters. There is one truly thrilling passage in this group's extended set redolent of those moments of almost psychic genius scattered like jewels throughout *kosmiche* history: a huge collective increase in volume and intensity from out of nowhere engulfs the room like an uberklang tsunami. Eventually Ambarchi decides he's done with the texturist role and steps forward for a psych rock solo redolent of his hero Keiji Haino, but also the malefic microtonality of *White Light, White Heat*-era Lou Reed or, most fittingly in the context, the stratospheric screams of Ax Genrich. As though in recognition of the spirit of an old colleague, Neumeier throws some rockabilly rebel yells into his microphone, at last conjuring the Guru Guru of old.