

For the last five or six years, London based baritone saxophonist, improviser and composer Cath Roberts has devoted her considerable energies to running the quintet Sloth Racket. What began as a commission from Gateshead International Jazz Festival in 2015 to assemble a one-off dream team resulted in an ongoing band with six albums to their name and an enviable live schedule. "It's like a lab," says Roberts. "I'm using it to play around with composition and different methods, so a touring, working band is really a brilliant place to introduce new stuff. It's not like a scratch project or a thing that's just coming together once. It's a constant thing and it develops its own voice and vibe over the years."

Together with her crew of committed collaborators – saxophonist Sam Andreae, guitarist Anton Hunter, double bassist Seth Bennett and drummer Johnny Hunter – Roberts explores the intersection of composition and improvisation, using a system incorporating standard notation and graphic scores. Watching Sloth Racket perform is a thrilling experience, conveying a palpable sense that the musicians are navigating the scores by the seat of their pants, making real-time group decisions that sculpt the compositions into unique shapes each time they're played. "It's everybody's collective job," Roberts clarifies. "Obviously, I like writing music but the real buzz is in collective music-making in the moment. I like the hive mind. The group does the arranging and makes it into an actual piece of music. I'm just setting something up and then we're going to explore it and make something of it and I don't know what that is."

This atmosphere of high-wire unpredictability was amplified further at Sloth Racket's first post-

lockdown gig at the Marsden Jazz Festival in October 2021 (with cellist Hannah Marshall depping for Anton Hunter while the guitarist was on paternity leave). Here, her musicians were encouraged to choose from a selection of commands and instructions to change the course of the music in mid-flow. "I made these little booklets with material in," Roberts explains, "as an experiment to get away from the score on the page and more towards a big mess of random elements." It made for exciting viewing too, seeing Johnny Hunter holding up his booklet with a mischievous grin on his face after triggering a riff without warning.

A similarly Cageian aesthetic of intervention and disruption informs Roberts's latest project cr-ow-tr-io, featuring double bassist Otto Willberg and trombonist Tullis Rennie, which mixes improvisation with indeterminacy. "I like inserting stuff into the improvised music," continues Roberts. "The improv will happen anyway and everyone knows that, but it's just cool if there's some other random thing that comes in and sends it off in another direction."

In performance, this element of chance has relied on a selection of collectively assembled props and prompts. "We settled on this idea of everyone bringing something – it could be an object or a piece of paper with some instructions on it – and we had a little table in the middle of the stage and the stuff was there with percussion and other little instruments. When we did it the first time, Tullis had these little tins and he'd put stuff in them. At any time you could stop playing, pick up a tin and open it up and it would have a message in it. One of them had a tiny reindeer in it made of Play-Doh. The fact that you'd opened it up and you'd found that reindeer and you'd gone, eh? – that's going to change what you do next."

For cr-ow-tr-io's new commission *And then the next thing you know*, at this year's Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, Roberts created a graphic score measuring six by four metres, designed to be cut into smaller fragments to create a large hanging sculpture. "We're going to stand around it and play, using it as a score," she explains. "That's going to be our jumping off point but, also, we'll have a set of cut-up recordings from some online sessions we did in lockdown. Each person will be able to trigger or manipulate bits of sound."

Comprised of short vignettes of just a couple of minutes each, culled from a day of studio time, cr-ow-tr-io's debut album *Hold Music* is due to be released this month. "We just chopped and chopped and chopped until we ended up with 17 tracks," remembers Roberts. The album will be released on her Luminous label, which is also home to all but one of Sloth Racket's albums and a handful of other releases. The imprint grew out of a series of gigs organised by Roberts and saxophonist Dee Byrne in London from 2013, which led to two iterations of the LUME festival in 2016 and 2017.

It's something she won't rule out happening again – though she's wary of the amount of work organising a festival can involve. "Artist-run stuff – that's what I'm all about: artists putting on festivals, artists putting on gigs and running labels. That is what I do and what I love, but it can tip over to a point where you're like, actually this is a whole other job. I like all the parts of making a record, I like doing the design and the artwork, and I actually quite enjoy doing the press. I really enjoy it, but sometimes I think, why am I doing all these jobs? This is insane!" □ cr-ow-tr-io's *Hold Music* is released by Luminous. cathrobots.net

Group

Improvising saxophonist and composer

Cath Roberts

injects the alchemy of chance elements into the hive mind of ensemble work. By **Daniel Spicer**

Dynamics



Sophie Starford