

# THE GHOSTS OF NOTHING IN MEMORY OF JOHNNY B. GOODE

7 JULY – 19 AUGUST 2018

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COVER Image used for artefacts associated with *In Memory of Johnny B. Goode*, based on found postcard ca. 1900–1910, original artist unknown

**T**he *Ghosts of Nothing – In Memory of Johnny B. Goode* is the first full-scale public realisation of an experimental, radically open-ended project developed nationally and internationally, over a four-year period, across multiple media forms and locations. Combining visual art, music, performance and multi-media installation, *In Memory of Johnny B. Goode* creates a dark, slippery, tragicomic fictional world that is simultaneously bizarre, desperately sad and playful.

At its core, the project anachronistically fuses two fictional characters – that of the rock-star figure Johnny B. Goode, with the nineteenth century tragic clown known as Pierrot – to create the central character of “Johnny”. A dark narrative, elaborated across time and space unfolds. The rapid rise and inexorable decline of “Johnny” towards alienation and self-destruction, is at once familiar and complex—a classic story of the rock-star come undone, with disconcerting twists and turns.

Blurring the lines between the real and the imagined, the project has resulted in a radio play, a “rock opera” by a fictional rock band

called *The Ghosts of Nothing*, and an associated “world tour” – with twelve performances at sites worldwide from 2014 to 2017. Presented in three acts, this “world tour” included the *World Tour of Abandoned Music Venues 2014–2015*, *World Tour of Remote Wildernesses 2015–2016* and *World Tour of Abandoned Gaol-Houses 2016–2017*.

The visual iconography of this merged world draws upon a series of antique postcards of Pierrot and circus clowns sourced over a period of several years from a variety of global second-hand markets dealing in printed ephemera.

Taking its curatorial cue as that of a “rock tour” retrospective museum exhibition, *The Ghosts of Nothing – In Memory of Johnny B. Goode* is the final culmination of the project’s multi-year trajectory. The exhibition presents the rich universe of the project and includes video documentation of the performances, material artefacts, images, texts and “tour” memorabilia and brings the project to its grand conclusion with the thirteenth and final live performance on the exhibition’s opening night.

Familiar yet otherworldly and disturbing, the work presents a series of contradictions, puzzles, allegories, and questions about the nature of visual art and music.

Conceptually driven, continuously unfolding and epic in their vision, artists and producers *The Ghosts of Nothing* (aka Sean Lowry and Ilmar Taimre) draw on their extensive experiences in both art and music worlds to push the limits of both.

During the four years of the project’s evolution, *The Ghosts of Nothing* have collaborated with nine other Australian and international artists, with elements of the project performed and/or produced in countries including Australia, New Zealand, UK, USA, Belgium and Norway. These artistic collaborators include: Tasmanian artist and puppeteer Laura Purcell; New York artist Frank J. Miles; Central Coast dance artist Lyndall Johnston; Brisbane-based performers Zoë Tuffin and Coleman Grehan; Sydney-based artist Mark Titmarsh and musicians Lee Devaney and Charles Famous; and Newcastle-based performer Zackari Watt.

In conjunction with the exhibition, *The Ghosts of Nothing* have curated a retrospective book that contains the full radio play script, and two essays alongside project images.

*The Ghosts of Nothing – In Memory of Johnny B. Goode* at *The Lock-Up* is the first time this ambitious collision of contemporary visual art, popular culture and music industry practices, can be experienced as a complete story.

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irector Jessi England posed the following questions to Sean Lowry (SL) and Ilmar Taimre (IT) in the lead up to the exhibition opening at The Lock-Up.

**How did the project start out? What seeded the idea and how did it first manifest? Did you imagine it as a multi-year project initially?**

**SL:** It began its life as a collection of songs that we initially brought together to produce an album of “expanded cover versions.” We wanted to see how far you can push a popular reference until it breaks.

**IT:** From the outset, we saw this as an “open work,” without any up-front expectations about timeframes or limitations on potential scope. The overarching aim has been to set in motion the possibilities of creating a continually evolving and sometimes surprising “world”.. the “world of the work”

**The project was presented as a radio play in New York in the fairly early stages of the project's trajectory. How did that come about, what station did it play on and when? Who wrote the script and who performed it?**

**IT:** We then decided to try and make an extended “radio play” version of the album. When arranged in a certain sequence, the recorded song titles almost naturally told an archetypically clichéd story about the “rapid rise and tragic fall” of a rock star. We decided to deliberately emphasise this narrative and add some weirdness about another archetype, the tragic clown. So, we overlaid spoken word sections on each remixed track, and included some strangely evocative rondels from *Pierrot Lunaire* by the Belgian French poet Albert Giraud (1860–1929). By deliberately mistranslating “Pierrot” as “Johnny” in the English versions of the rondels, we simultaneously hint at the parallels between rock’n’roll and a distant past era, while leaving plenty of scope for additional interpretations. The spoken word parts were recorded by my daughter Linda, an actor who currently lives in Brussels.

**SL:** We couldn’t get it on the air in Australia, so we looked further afield. We were delighted when WGXC 90.7-FM in New York agreed to put it on air!

**How did the jump from a radio play to a series of mime-based performances occur?**

**SL:** We were trying to think of crazy ways of “touring” it. Then, the idea of doing a “world tour of abandoned music venues” came to us, and it all just unfolded from there!

**You’ve worked with numerous other artists as collaborators on this project? What were you looking for in the artists you invited to join the project? Did they need to have a particular practice?**

**SL:** We were looking for autonomous performing artists who might be as excited as we were about this crazy idea. It was really important to us that our collaborators would also feel a sense of ownership toward their contributions. We have been really lucky to work with some amazingly talented people.

**IT:** The common factor for all our collaborators is their deep interest in mime and mime-based performance. The original Pierrot, even from *commedia dell’arte* times, was always mute. He communicated only through his facial gestures and body movements.

**As part of the project you have advertised both the real and imagined performances of the “world tour” in the Italian art magazine *Mousse*..... These ads have become part of the “tour memorabilia”. Why this publication?**

**SL:** We wanted to give the project an art world presence whilst playfully pointing toward its partly

imaginary music world presence. *Mousse* is a beautiful publication that really screamed out to us.

**IT:** Also, it was important that our advertisements went to the artworld, not the usual music-oriented publications.

**The project is one that can be endlessly explored through a conceptual lens. What are the key aspects you see as pushing the perceived boundaries of contemporary visual art?**

**SL:** We are really interested in the mutual insufficiency of material and contextual elements in the world of a work of art. For us, the formalists and the conceptualists both threw the proverbial baby out with the bath water during the twentieth century.



**IT:** It is the possibility of working with ideas and concepts while staying firmly – even extravagantly – in the material realm.

**You have talked about this project drawing upon popular culture and music industry practices. You both spent time touring in rock bands in your “misspent” youth. How did these experiences shape the project and your ideas surrounding it?**

**SL:** My early 1990s band Def FX was only ever an art school experiment that unexpectedly became a successful band (I had plenty of other less successful musical projects). Suddenly, I found myself touring internationally and making commercially successful records. Yet I had always felt a little bit like an artist pretending to be a musician. Conveniently, around the same age that you stop being taken seriously as a rock musician, you begin to be taken seriously as an artist and academic.

**IT:** I spent a lot of time playing “cover versions” The idea that a “work” of music is always evolving and being added to by everyone who experiences or touches it – whether the musicians or the audiences – has stuck with me.

**The pairing of historic imagery with conceptual, contemporary art and music is a key element in the iconography of the project. Historical referencing seems to be strong component in both of your practices. Can you tell me about this interest and what drives it?**

**SL:** I was always really interested in appropriation art and sampling in pop music. I managed to get away with it for a long time without being sued by actively burying things. All that remained were ghosts that still felt strangely familiar. In time, it became a means of production that feels infinitely richer than straight out ironic distancing.

**IT:** The historical references are inevitably present in all art and music, not just ours, once you start looking closely enough. We probably just emphasise it a bit more than some.

**Despite the darkness of the subject matter, it’s been obvious as we’ve developed the exhibition and discussed it over the past two years that you have had a lot of fun developing the work and that there is a joy in its experimental and expansive nature. That for me is part of the beauty of the project. Can you share a bit about how you see the project personally and within the trajectory of your own professional practices?**

**SL:** For me the whole project has felt like a wonderfully playful way to test our capacity to unite seemingly disparate worlds in the production of new meanings. On a more personal level, it enabled be to simultaneously do three things that I love doing at once: making art; making music; and writing about making art and music.

**IT:** I have loved the freedom to explore the possibilities and limits of how far a post-conceptual artwork could potentially go and still remain plausible.

**Now that the grand finale has occurred, where to from here? Will the project continue to evolve in new directions or will Johnny go on the international touring circuit with his repertoire now complete?**

**SL:** Although we still have plans to take the completed exhibition for *In Memory of Johnny B. Goode* on tour in various incarnations, there are no further plans for Johnny. His story now seems complete. The Ghosts of Nothing do however have big plans for a new project. Next, we will attempt to bring the worlds of classic instrumental surf music, psychedelic dub, vintage seaside postcards, unriden waves and post-conceptual art together to build a new universe of playful possibility. Stay tuned!

The Ghosts of Nothing (feat. Laura Purcell) *Black Butterflies* performed at Hobart Convict Penitentiary (The Trench), Hobart, TAS at 6:00 pm on 18 November 2017  
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**THE GHOSTS OF NOTHING (AKA SEAN LOWRY & ILMAR TAIMRE)**

**SEAN LOWRY**

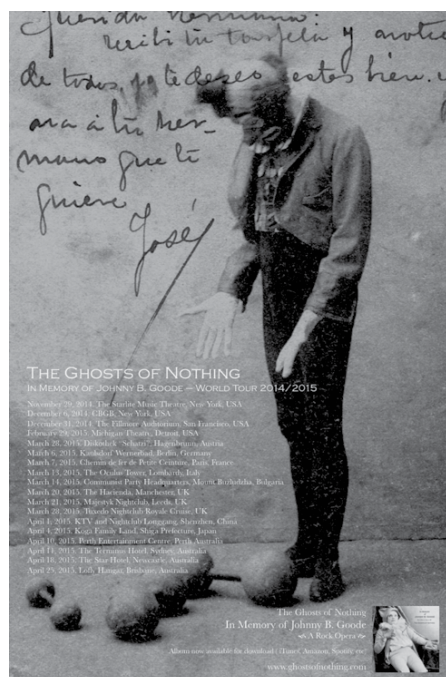
Sean Lowry is a Melbourne-based artist. He holds a PhD in Visual Arts from the University of Sydney and is currently Head of Critical and Theoretical Studies in Art at Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne. Lowry has exhibited and performed extensively both nationally and internationally as an artist and musician, and his published writing appears in numerous journals and edited volumes. He is also Founder and Executive Director of *Project Anywhere* ([www.projectanywhere.net](http://www.projectanywhere.net)).

For more information visit [www.seanlowry.com](http://www.seanlowry.com)

**ILMAR TAIMRE**

Ilmar Taimre is a Brisbane-based artist, musician and composer. He has recently completed a PhD in Music at the University of Newcastle. His thesis is titled “An Interpretive Model for Conceptual Music”. Taimre has been a performing musician in Australia and New Zealand. He is a member of the Editorial Board for *Project Anywhere* and has exhibited a number of intermedial works informed by his concerns with post-conceptual currents in contemporary art.

For more information visit [www.ilmartaimre.com](http://www.ilmartaimre.com)



Advertisement for *In Memory of Johnny B. Goode: World Tour of Abandoned Music Venues 2014/2015* as published in the Italian art magazine *Mousse* #45 (October – November 2014)

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