Timothy Jones is indeed a man of many talents: a consummate performer on drum set, 6-mallet marimba, classical and world percussion. He is also a master educator, composer and author of a major textbook Rock ‘n Roll: Origins and Innovators published by Kendall Hunt. Born and educated in Adelaide, Tim now makes his home in Las Vegas, USA where he is the prime mover of the UNLV percussion department.

I recently caught up with Tim in Canberra during his recent residency at the ANU School of Music:

Can you tell me about your music education

Like many children I was encouraged by my mom and dad to start piano when I was 7 years old. John Allison, my first piano teacher had me working through standard piano literature theory ear training etc. in weekly lessons, that lasted all the way through to high school. at 13, I took up percussion, although I really wanted to play electric guitar, but unfortunately it was not offered at my school. So, I took up percussion because I thought I would be playing drums “and impressing the girls”. little did I know that my piano background delegated me to the xylophone, glockenspiel and timpani etc. My teachers at this point were Ray Horne and occasionally, one of Australia’s pioneering percussionists, Richard Smith. My weekly lessons with Ray focused on rudimental Snare Drum, Xylophone, Timpani and multi percussion. And Ray’s rule was: “If you complete all of the material on percussion I will give you some drum set instruction.

In year 11, Ray referred me to Adelaide jazz drummer Laurie Kennedy for specialists instruction. Laurie exposed me to the great drummers of the jazz era including Max Roach, Philly Joe Jones, Elvin Jones, Buddy Rich and more contemporary drummers such as Vinnie Colaiuta, Steve Gadd, and Dave Weckl. We focused on tone, touch, style, groove and most importantly soloing techniques. Through out High School I played in all kinds of ensembles including orchestras, percussion ensembles, concert bands, stage bands and Jazz and Rock combos made up of my high school buddies. I recall at the end of years 11 and 12 I played drums for the Blackwood Cadethmeric Club in a percussion and piano duet with my future percussion colleague Vanessa Tomlinson (on piano). After HS, I enrolled in Adelaide University continuing my Jazz Drum set studies at the Elder Conservatorium again with Laurie Kennedy. I didn’t leave the Classical percussion behind, as I was always involved with local shows, productions and other opportunities that, actually paid pretty well, but my real passion at this time was still my drumset. Jumping to 1995, still enrolled in the Jazz program, I found my self with a vast amount of information to process and needed a goal/direction to focus on. I decided to utilise all of Laurie Kennedy’s prescribed materials: transcriptions, solos etc. that I had collected over the past few years and in working through this material I realized that I should send a tape to the Ultimate Drummers Competition. I was fortunate to receive a call from Frank Cappola indicating that I had become a finalist in this years competition. This was a great experience, I met some of my idols including Chad Wackerman, Dave Weckl, Darren Farrugia, and Virgil Donati.

Concluding my studies in Adelaide in 1996, I decided to take a year to see the world and most importantly get a feel of how music could fit into my life. I visited Asia, Europe, England and the USA checking out as much music in as many different styles as possible and taking the occasional lesson. I attended the summer Jazz program at the Berklee College of Music (Boston) and the Stamford Jazz Workshop in San Franciso. Upon returning to Australia I began playing with local bands in Adelaide and touring with the show “Rocksia”, a children’s show that tours throughout NSW and Qld. It was during one of these tours that I received an invitation from a Jazz pianist I met at Stanford Stefan Karlsson who invited me to begin a Masters degree at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV).

I completed my Masters and moved straight on to a DMA studying with notable marimba soloist and composer Dean Gronemeier. During the American summer breaks I spent my time in England and Australia taking lessons with Jim Bailey (Adl), Michael Skinner and Kevin Hattway (Royal College).

How did you become involved in University Education

Although my interest has always focused on performance I developed an interest in teaching at the college level through the study of Percussion Pedagogy, Psychology and the mechanics of our craft. I began teaching as a percussion graduate assistant (GAA) to Dean Gronemeier at UNLV teaching Percussion Pedagogy (methods), individual tuition and percussion ensembles. Grad Assistants in US Universities often are treated like sessional staff at Australian Universities. They receive full tuition scholarships and a modest salary which covers rent and cost of living. This situation, unique to the USA, is designed for future university educators to work and be mentored by an experienced Professor as they prepare for a career in Tertiary Education while completing their doctorate.

In 2003, I had just completed my DMA and was a finalist for a community college job in California when I was asked if I’d be interested in teaching at UNLV for one year as a Visiting Lecturer while Dean Gronemeier filled the position of Associate Dean for one year. The decision to take an unsecured position at my alma mater, was risky, but my reasoning was that it put me into a university level job with a year of experience before applying elsewhere. This, as you know, has since turned into a permanent situation as Associate Professor and a, so far, successful career. I’ve been fortunate to have Dean Gronemeier do such a great job in the Dean’s office that he’s been able to keep our foot planted in percussion and provide support and direction for all of my adventurous ideas and proposals.

We’re supposed to live life on the edge though, right? If you don’t start new things and dive into wild projects you and your program can easily become irrelevant. Most of the successes I’ve had at UNLV is because I was simply curious about something and decided, let’s do that. We started doing a contemporary percussion ensemble concert about 5 years ago in our black box theatre in collaboration with lighting design and dance students. The first concert was Xenakis’ Persephoai, which ended up selling out and had standing room only. I have to acknowledge Ryan Simm (another Adelaidian) who compiled all of the click tracks and a massive amount of work while he was working on his Masters to make that happen. We then had to add...
idea, but the door opened at that moment and it all came together with a great residency, concerts, TV appearances and a lot of fun. In turn, I brought the UNLV marimba band to Australia in 2006 to visit Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. We raised all of the money to travel through corporate gigs on the Las Vegas strip and invited Jeff Koep, the Dean of our college as well. He loved the tour and noticed there was a great opportunity for education and exchanges of ideas in Australia so he asked me to coordinate a trip to the Adelaide Fringe Festival for students in all disciplines of the arts in 2007. This trip also had us spending several days in Canberra before heading to Adelaide. Through Jeff, a good “friend” of the college and currently endorse Vic Firth, Sabian, Grover Pro Percussion and Yamaha Marimbas. And currently I’m looking for other interested Australian percussionists!

One of my responsibilities when I was hired at UNLV was to coordinate the History of Rock course and review it’s content to make sure it met university academic guidelines and served the students more than just a fun elective. At that time the course had around 300-350 students a semester and had no consistency between the classes as to the requirements. We now have 400+ students a semester, a uniform syllabus, an introduction to college research through popular culture, our own website and our own book that Jim McIntosh and I authored titled: Rock n Roll Origins and Innovators.

The book we authored was necessary to the success of our program because the books we were using were 600-800 pages, hugely expensive to the students, and we could only cover about 25% of the material in a semester. We now use 100% of our book with our classes and it’s less than half the price of the ones we were using. The students still think it’s too expensive, but all university books are overpriced in my opinion!

I’ve also been able to sustain a fairly active playing career in Las Vegas with a variety of performances, tours and recordings with the Las Vegas Philharmonic, The Desert Chorale, Opera Las Vegas, the Southern Nevada Musical Arts Society, the Amadeus Orchestra, Andrea Boccill, Mary Wilson, Sarah Brightman, Classical Mystery Tour, the Killers, LMFAO, Natalie Merchant, the Dirtbears, the Shires, Michael Buble, Josh Groban, Peter Cetera, David Foster, Don Rickles, Tommy Tune, Buddy Greco, the Wild Celts, Moje Risić, Nick Hawkins, Stefan Karlsson, Carl Fontana, The Irish Tenors, Las Vegas productions of We Will Rock You and Hairspay, Nebojsa Zivkovic, and as a featured percussion soloist. Some of my other activities have included serving as Vice President of the Nevada PAS chapter, several published percussion articles, compositions, chapters in books, coordinator of the Las Vegas Music Festival Percussion Institute, ZISAMP-USA (Nebojsa Zivkovic’s summer academy), serve as adjudicator for solo and ensemble, honor band and all-state auditions, guest lecturer and clinician, received UNLV’s College of Fine Arts Outstanding Teacher of the Year and Alumnus of the Year awards, gained several grants for percussion projects, coordinated the donation of materials and space for the UNLV Gary Cook Percussion Library and currently endorse Vic Firth, Sabian, Grover Pro Percussion and Yamaha Marimbas.

All in all, Las Vegas has been really good to me and I think it’s too expensive, but all university books are overpriced in my opinion!

I’ve also been able to sustain a fairly active playing career in Las Vegas with a variety of performances, tours and recordings with the Las Vegas Philharmonic, The Desert Chorale, Opera Las Vegas, the Southern Nevada Musical Arts Society, the Amadeus Orchestra, Andrea Boccill, Mary Wilson, Sarah Brightman, Classical Mystery Tour, the Killers, LMFAO, Natalie Merchant, the Dirtbears, the Shires, Michael Buble, Josh Groban, Peter Cetera, David Foster, Don Rickles, Tommy Tune, Buddy Greco, the Wild Celts, Moje Risić, Nick Hawkins, Stefan Karlsson, Carl Fontana, The Irish Tenors, Las Vegas productions of We Will Rock You and Hairspay, Nebojsa Zivkovic, and as a featured percussion soloist. Some of my other activities have included serving as Vice President of the Nevada PAS chapter, several published percussion articles, compositions, chapters in books, coordinator of the Las Vegas Music Festival Percussion Institute, ZISAMP-USA (Nebojsa Zivkovic’s summer academy), serve as adjudicator for solo and ensemble, honor band and all-state auditions, guest lecturer and clinician, received UNLV’s College of Fine Arts Outstanding Teacher of the Year and Alumnus of the Year awards, gained several grants for percussion projects, coordinated the donation of materials and space for the UNLV Gary Cook Percussion Library and currently endorse Vic Firth, Sabian, Grover Pro Percussion and Yamaha Marimbas.

All in all, Las Vegas has been really good to me and I think it’s too expensive, but all university books are overpriced in my opinion!

I’ve also been able to sustain a fairly active playing career in Las Vegas with a variety of performances, tours and recordings with the Las Vegas Philharmonic, The Desert Chorale, Opera Las Vegas, the Southern Nevada Musical Arts Society, the Amadeus Orchestra, Andrea Boccill, Mary Wilson, Sarah Brightman, Classical Mystery Tour, the Killers, LMFAO, Natalie Merchant, the Dirtbears, the Shires, Michael Buble, Josh Groban, Peter Cetera, David Foster, Don Rickles, Tommy Tune, Buddy Greco, the Wild Celts, Moje Risić, Nick Hawkins, Stefan Karlsson, Carl Fontana, The Irish Tenors, Las Vegas productions of We Will Rock You and Hairspay, Nebojsa Zivkovic, and as a featured percussion soloist. Some of my other activities have included serving as Vice President of the Nevada PAS chapter, several published percussion articles, compositions, chapters in books, coordinator of the Las Vegas Music Festival Percussion Institute, ZISAMP-USA (Nebojsa Zivkovic’s summer academy), serve as adjudicator for solo and ensemble, honor band and all-state auditions, guest lecturer and clinician, received UNLV’s College of Fine Arts Outstanding Teacher of the Year and Alumnus of the Year awards, gained several grants for percussion projects, coordinated the donation of materials and space for the UNLV Gary Cook Percussion Library and currently endorse Vic Firth, Sabian, Grover Pro Percussion and Yamaha Marimbas.

All in all, Las Vegas has been really good to me and I think it’s too expensive, but all university books are overpriced in my opinion!

I’ve also been able to sustain a fairly active playing career in Las Vegas with a variety of performances, tours and recordings with the Las Vegas Philharmonic, The Desert Chorale, Opera Las Vegas, the Southern Nevada Musical Arts Society, the Amadeus Orchestra, Andrea Boccill, Mary Wilson, Sarah Brightman, Classical Mystery Tour, the Killers, LMFAO, Natalie Merchant, the Dirtbears, the Shires, Michael Buble, Josh Groban, Peter Cetera, David Foster, Don Rickles, Tommy Tune, Buddy Greco, the Wild Celts, Moje Risić, Nick Hawkins, Stefan Karlsson, Carl Fontana, The Irish Tenors, Las Vegas productions of We Will Rock You and Hairspay, Nebojsa Zivkovic, and as a featured percussion soloist. Some of my other activities have included serving as Vice President of the Nevada PAS chapter, several published percussion articles, compositions, chapters in books, coordinator of the Las Vegas Music Festival Percussion Institute, ZISAMP-USA (Nebojsa Zivkovic’s summer academy), serve as adjudicator for solo and ensemble, honor band and all-state auditions, guest lecturer and clinician, received UNLV’s College of Fine Arts Outstanding Teacher of the Year and Alumnus of the Year awards, gained several grants for percussion projects, coordinated the donation of materials and space for the UNLV Gary Cook Percussion Library and currently endorse Vic Firth, Sabian, Grover Pro Percussion and Yamaha Marimbas.