

Jazz in Vancouver

by Scott Lewis

The jazz musician who eschews fusion-style rock-influenced jazz faces a tough road in Canada. To start off with, save the occasional prodigy, it takes many years to develop the instrumental proficiency and improvisational maturity necessary to perform jazz music. Add the scattered directionless nature of the jazz field as a whole these days, and, in Canada, the lack of a thriving scene to nurture the young players (sorry, but college teaching just doesn't make it in jazz.) Then there's lack of media exposure and supportive record labels, and lack of promoters and venues to allow the music to be seen live — always the lifeblood of jazz — and you've got a tough situation. It takes a lot of dedication to stick with it.

Still, there is a group of Canadian

performers, now reaching maturity, who have developed their craft and their art under these forbidding conditions. I'm going to look at four recent cassette releases from the subset of these musicians currently or recently based in Vancouver. These men and their compatriots have worked together and apart in many different situations over the years, giving each other the support not forthcoming elsewhere. Support them yourselves; buy their tapes, and see them in concert if you get the chance.

Bruce Freedman, tenor sax, Clyde Reed, bass, and Gregg Simpson on drums make up the Vancouver Art Trio; their new tape is called *The Mad Nomad* (5854 Inverness, Vancouver, B.C. V5W 3P5). The music is aptly self-described as "improvisational jazz in the tradition of Albert Ayler, John Coltrane, and Ornette Coleman." This is a difficult style to carry off. The lack of reliance, to unfamiliarized ears, on song structure and resulting sameness of sound render any deficiencies in instrumental proficiency or improvisational creativity all too apparent. Then, the three influences mentioned are such powerfully individual musicians, that it's difficult not to sound derivative. These three musicians can carry it off; in fact, they blossom in this context. Freedman can play impassioned Coltranesque arpeggios a mile a minute, but avoids overkill with greatly slower sections and bouncy harmolodic runs. Reed provides an anchor for the band, both tonally, and, when the drums start to play around with the beat, rhythmically. Simpson is awesome playing this style of music, varying his attack with sticks and brushes, pushing the beat here, reining it in there, driving Freedman on to fiery pyrotechnics. The tunes are all originals save for a powerful cover of Ornette's famous dirge "Lonely Woman". If you like this style of music, you can't go wrong with this tape.

Reed and Simpson are also the rhythm section of Lunar Adventures, with a front line of Coat Cook on sax and Ron Samworthy on guitar. Their tape *Full Moon* (895 W. 7th Vancouver, B.C. V5Z 2E5)

has a very different sound from *The Mad Nomad*, however. Cook has a much lighter style than Freedman, and the music tends towards Latin and rock styles, mercifully almost completely avoiding vapid fusion cliches. Their sound is accessible to a much wider audience. If they could gain wider exposure I believe Lunar Adventures could become rather popular. Cook and Simpson share compositional chores; for me the highlight is the suite where Simpson explores his ancestral roots; believe it or not, regaling us with Celtic harmolodics. It works amazingly well, although every time I listen to it I have this strange desire to leap up and dance the Highland fling with wild abandon. Samworthy continues the tradition of fine Canadian jazz guitarists (check it out sometime, it's amazing how many there are). Keep your ear on him; he shows signs of mastering a wide variety of styles.

Paul Cram abandoned Vancouver for the hopefully more supportive city of Toronto a few years ago. I doubt he'll get rich — Canada Council grants don't go *that* far — but he is producing some rewarding music. In line with his rather bizarre sense of humor (I like it), the tape I'm reviewing is entitled *Jazz in the Zebra Zone* (Cargo Culture, 2-496 Euclid Ave., Toronto M6G 2S9). Cram and Robert Leriche play saxophone and the sadly-neglected clarinet, James young is on bass, and the ubiquitous Gregg Simpson is the percussionist. Leriche is the instrumental standout; at times you get worried his saxophone will explode or at least burst into flames when he gets wound up. Although Cram is an interesting soloist, his greatest contribution to the group sound is his compositions. Both they and the tape itself have grown on me with repeated listening. I think Cram's skewed viewpoint takes a little getting used to, as it really is an individual development; no strong influences come to mind. This tape will reward the careful listener; both it and the next also offer better production values than the first two.

Paul Plimley has gathered a collection of the finest younger — mid-twenties to midthirties, that is — jazz

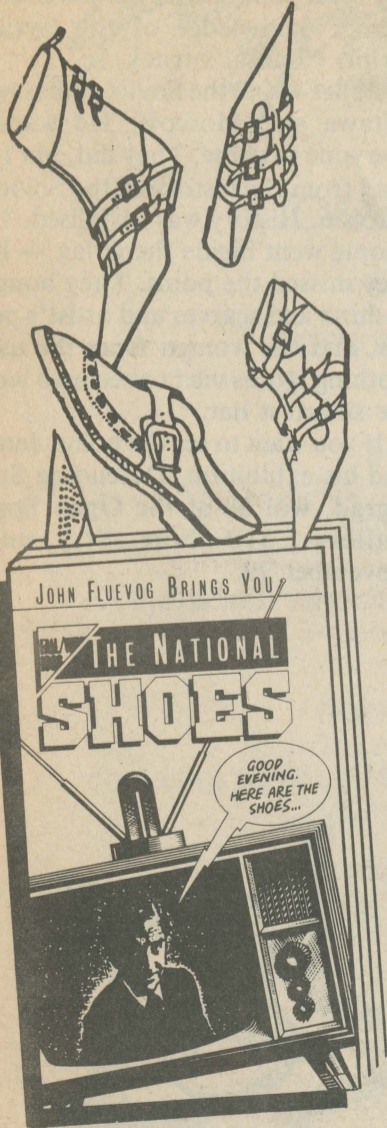
musicians in Vancouver. The result is a band that has it all: individual virtuosity; empathy, musical and otherwise, among the musicians; a real sense of fun in their playing; and an ability to transmit all this to an audience. Plimley exploits these plusses to the fullest. Functioning as an easygoing taskmaster, his bubbly geniality serves as the focus for all this musical energy and creativity. He is a mature, well-trained composer, able to exploit the wide range of timbres and personalities available to him in the Octet.

The Paul Plimley Octet recently spent some time in the studio; the result is a tape called *Hidden Shades* (670 Union St., Vancouver, B.C. V6A 2B9). Side One is taken up by a long tune, "Diary of the Dreams of a Garishly Dressed Globetrotter". Plimley's song titles, while expressing his puckish wit, are programmatic; he always has a story to tell. The piece moves through a tremendous variety of textures, the tonalities at times evoking India, the Far East, and elsewhere. I've played it for a number of my friends, jazz-lovers and otherwise, and all were appreciative. Even the "free" sections are well enough integrated into the musical flow that they never come across as cacophonous.

The band funks out on the opening piece on Side Two, Coat Cook's clever "Lunar Exploits of Bike Rickety". I don't know you could funk it up in 5/4 time. Then it's on to the title cut, redolent of Charles Mingus and Duke Ellington. After a quiet slowly-building intro, the band moves into Ellingtonesque horn colorations, then cleverly and almost imperceptibly find themselves pouring out driving Mingus riffs. Back to another quiet section, another sneaky transition to more riffing, a slow decrescendo, and you're left with a peaceful feeling in your soul. I can't recommend the Octet or this tape too highly. Since it was recorded, trombonist Hugh Fraser and trumpet player Bill Clark of VEJI have joined the Octet for summer performances all across Canada. Who's going to give them the record contract they deserve?

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