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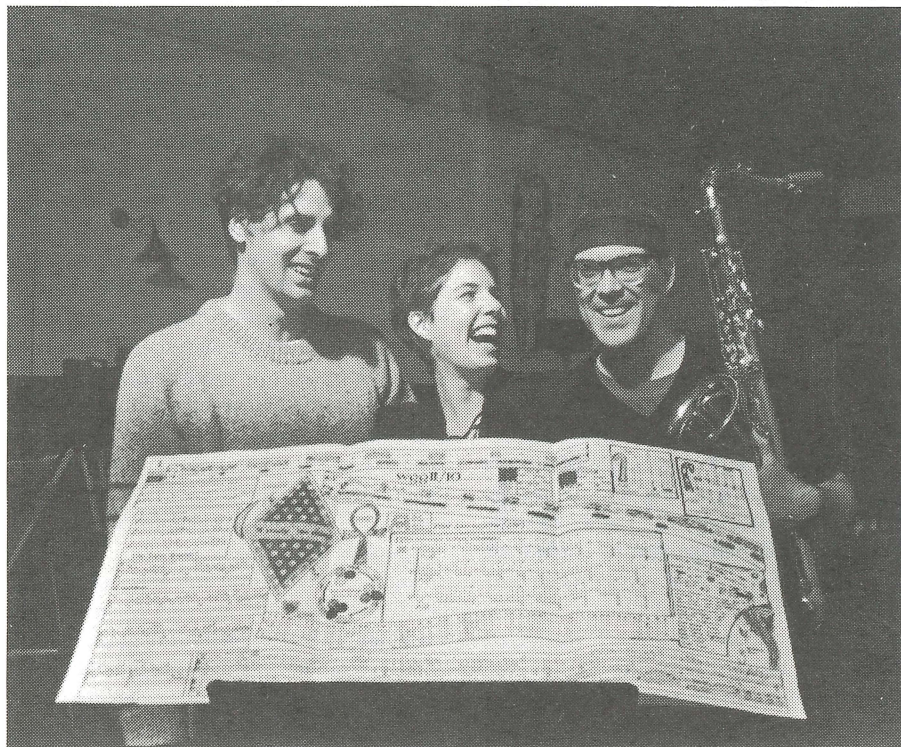
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A PROFILE OF THE **NEW ORCHESTRA WORKSHOP**



NOW ORCHESTRA HISTORY • By Laurence Svirchev

NOW is 1977 and NOW is 1994. If you think that NOW can't be two different times at once, then consider that NOW stands for New Orchestra Workshop and this year it is celebrating its seventeenth birthday, one of the longest lasting innovative new music collectives in North America.

Longevity and innovation may be at a premium in the music world, but NOW has a proven track record with a documented history of recording, workshops given by its own members and guest artists, and creative music festivals.

The New Orchestra Workshop was set up to provide a focal point for the creation of an original West Coast Canadian musical idiom by seven musicians, all of whom are still active in that music: Paul Cram, Lisle Ellis, Gregg Simpson, Clyde Reed, Paul Plimley, Ralph Eppel and Coat Cooke.

Ellis and Cram were the main initial organizers of NOW, with Ellis doing the writing of the Canada Council Explorations grant for funding their first initiatives, including their first studio at 1616 (Rear) West 3rd Ave. Ellis had visited the Creative Music Studio in Woodstock, New York in 1975 and came back not only amazed by the extent of the creative music scene across the continent, but also dissatisfied with the lack of new approaches to music in Vancouver. This was a period of time when musicians were being kicked wholesale out of clubs in favour of canned music for dancers. A space controlled by musicians was desperately needed.

Ellis says, "We met up with Paul Plimley and Gregg Simpson and wanted to organize ourselves, get people interested in this music, and start to play it. One way to do that was to sponsor a series of workshops, so we brought in Karl Berger, who had experience in doing these things."

The invitation to the first workshop, Explorations in Creative Music, reads: "In the workshop sessions, we will explore the elements basic to any style or form in music, the nature of sound, rhythm, timing, tuning, basic natural harmonies and rhythmic cycles, all of which are the building stones of all the music on earth."

The concept of the workshop has stuck through all the years. Among the long list of international collaborators have been: Sam Rivers, Muhal Richard Abrams, Joe McPhee (1978), Ran Blake, Charlie Haden (1987), Steve Lacy, Jay Clayton (1988), Vinny Golia (1989).

But NOW has not simply been a vehicle for bringing in non-Vancouverites. The idea of the community of Vancouver musicians has always been the anchor. Throughout 1979-80, Lisle Ellis held "Basic Practice" every Tuesday. There were workshops preceding Friday, Saturday and Sunday performances each weekend by Vancouver musical ensembles. In those pre-inflation days, Basic Practice was free, Workshops \$5.00 and performances \$2.00. The groundwork of those early workshops has continued with each generation of NOW. For example, Kate Hammett-Vaughan and Ron Samworth conducted a workshop at the Vancouver Community College during the 1988 Time Flies Series, Weekly Workshops were held in the Glass Slipper in 1991, as well as at Vancouver Community College by Coat Cooke and Samworth in the fall of 1993.

NOW has always had an interesting structure. There has usually been a group of core musicians who were members of NOW and they in turn belonged to bands that revolved around NOW. There has almost always been a large ensemble under the direction of NOW.

In the beginning, there was the New Orchestra Quintet, composed of all the founding members except Clyde Reed. At a time when acronyms flourished and community experimentation was officially encouraged by government, the large ensemble was CORD (Community Orchestra Research and Development). Some of the satellite groups were Sessione Milano and the Resident String Quartet. In 1986, new groups, such as Lunar Adventures (Cooke, Samworth, Simpson, Reed), the Paul Plimley

AN ARTICLE/REVIEW BY LAURENCE SVIRCHEV & BILL SMITH

Octet and the Vancouver Art Trio (Bruce Freedman, Simpson, Reed) sprang up. Of the currently active bands, the Paul Plimley/Lisle Ellis Duo, and Garbo's Hat have recorded compact discs, and the NOW Orchestra recorded with bassist Barry Guy.

Once they were on a roll, the original NOW was able to set up Music Festivals and special events that were first thought of as yearly. Things didn't turn out to be quite as cyclic, but the first Festival, held in 1979, featured guitarist Bob Bell, the NOW Quintet, and the CORD Orchestra. In 1980, the CORD Orchestra played the Vancouver Museum of Anthropology. Derek Bailey and Evan Parker were presented in duo. During the 2nd Vancouver Creative Music Festival, NOW sponsored a concert by Al Neil at the Western Front, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago played the Queen Elizabeth Playhouse. They also presented the Steve Lacy Quintet in their first North American Tour.

The discography of NOW also reveals intense activity for the first few years, including Paul Cram's *Blue Tales in Time* and New Orchestra Quintet's *Up 'til NOW*. But like many adventurous things, NOW's original energy dissipated with lifestyle changes; Ellis, Cram and Simpson all moved from Vancouver. Only Simpson has returned to make Vancouver his home.

After a period of non-activity, Plimley, Simpson, Cooke and Reed of the old direction formed a new incarnation of NOW with Samworth and Bruce Freedman in 1986. Kate Hammett-Vaughan, Roger Baird and Graham Ord later joined the Board of Directors.

The result was leap of activity in the Vancouver creative music scene. The grunt gallery series has now run for seven years, providing a home for experimentation. NOW co-produced four creative music series with Vancouver's Centre Culturel Columbien, including the 12 gigs spread over four weeks of sold-out houses that formed the 1988 Hear It NOW! series. During 1988-89, NOW co-produced the Time Flies series. The NOW Orchestra performed concerts at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre including a piece written for Marilyn Crispell as guest pianist in 1988.

The Glass Slipper, which has become internationally known as a creative music space, was operated by NOW from 1988 to 1992 for rehearsal and performance. In 1990, NOW groups were show-cased at New York's Knitting Factory. Two NOW compilation compact discs were released on the 9 Winds label: *Now You Hear It* and *The Future Is NOW*.

The latest recording initiative of NOW was the concert and recording session with British bassist and composer Barry Guy held in February of this year. The compact disc is being issued in Britain on the Maya label with international distribution. An application for a Canada Council Recording Grant was turned down, making a Canadian release financially prohibitive, but the grant funding agencies saw fit to provide funds for the concert. NOW will also be performing with Guy at the summer du Maurier, Ltd. International Jazz Festival Vancouver.

If there is one latest project that sums up the spirit of NOW, it is their recent organization of Al Neil's 70th birthday party this March. In his younger years, Neil was the premier west-coast improvising pianist, a co-founder of the legendary Cellar Jazz Club, and a source of inspiration to several generations of visual artists, musicians, and poets. Ron Samworth, Coat Cooke, current artistic directors of NOW, and Hank Bull of the Western Front organized a morning surprise birthday parade, with flags waving and horns and percussion playing Now's the Time. That afternoon, a mammoth party was held at the Western Front with Al's many collaborators and friends, as well as new emerging artists.

NOW has always been a community organization, mindful of the past, but always with a clear vision of the direction of the music. □

The **NEW ORCHESTRA WORKSHOP** can be reached at 435 West Hastings Street, Vancouver, British Columbia V6B 1L4

HEAR IT NOW • By Bill Smith

The proof of the pudding is in the eating, a quaint old saying, but so true. And the feast that was provided by the New Orchestra Workshop to begin its series of events for 1994, was a treat for sure. For a week in February NOW presented to the Vancouver public, bassist **Barry Guy**; solo at Western Front, in duet with **Paul Plimley** at the Glass Slipper, and a week-long rehearsal, workshop, performance, recording with the NOW Orchestra. This would seem to be enough, but of course there is more. **Myra Melford** with bassist **Mark Helias**, drummer **Reggie Nicholson**, and special guest, local clarinetist superb, **François Houle**. A wonderful party at the grunt gallery, with **Garbo's Hat** (Kate Hammett-Vaughan, Paul Blaney, Graham Ord); music for three evenings at the Glass Slipper, which featured, apart from the Guy/Plimley Duo, a duet of drummer **Gregg Simpson** and transplanted Toronto pianist **George McFetridge**, and the culmination of the Orchestra's week long intensive with Barry Guy, with a wonderful performance of his compositions *Study* and *Witchgong Game II /10*.

As often happens, it was a gathering of old friends, a brief encounter full of the joy that such projects exude. The solo bass concert that kicked it all off set a new standard as to what can be achieved with one instrument. Barry theatrical and in costume for Jacob Druckman's *Valentine*; explaining in a humorously serious and informative manner the structure of composers Iannis Xenakis, John Anthony Celona and Bernard Rands written forms, and the brilliance of his own pieces which had such charming and self explicit titles as *She Took The Sacred Rattle And Used It* and *Hilibili Meets The Brush*. A serious man for sure, a master musician in fact, but also a performer in the complete sense of the word.

Myra Melford's quartet was full of the energy that she has become known for, the grunt party just that, and the Simpson/McFetridge duo just what was needed on a Saturday night. But the centrepiece of it all was the NOW Orchestra performance.