

# Planet Jazz

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# Vancouver Jazz Scene:

## *Variety in a Spectacular Setting*

by Paul Serralheiro

As a Montrealer who spent three seasons in Vancouver, I came to appreciate the characteristics of this beautiful city and collect impressions of its jazz scene. One telltale sign of the orientation of jazz thinking here came from observing a busker on Granville Street in the heart of the downtown shopping area playing on an acoustic guitar, not any ditty by Bob Dylan or the Tragically Hip, but scratching and plucking the strings with a pick for colors and textures in a free, creative spirit.

One cornerstone of creative jazz in Vancouver is the **New Orchestra Workshop** (also known as the "Now Orchestra"), a group that emerged in the mid-1970s from an improvising musicians' collective. Directed by saxophonist and composer Coat Cooke, the group has many members in a fluid come and go—many of Vancouver's creative musicians have spent some time in the band. With a few recordings to its credit, the group is developing an international reputation and recently returned from a concert in Portugal's *Jazz em Agosto* with trombonist George Lewis. Along with concerts, the Now Orchestra offers a series of workshops each fall where professional and amateur musicians alike are trained by guest conductors/facilitators,

thus nurturing the creative approach while building an informed public for this music.

These free sessions, which attract musicians of all stripes and backgrounds for an exploration of sound and composition, happen at **The Western Front**, an artist-run center housed in a quaint old blue wood-frame building on East 8th Street. Since 1973 the center has been home to an eclectic range of creative work and is definitely another cornerstone of the jazz scene in Vancouver, with a tradition for encouraging cross-fertilization among the arts in its galleries, performance spaces, spoken word events and its monthly magazine.

In February, at the Western Front, I attended the 16th annual presentation of *Time Flies*, an important event in creative music in Vancouver. Curated this year by bassist

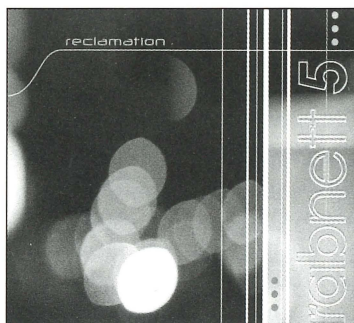
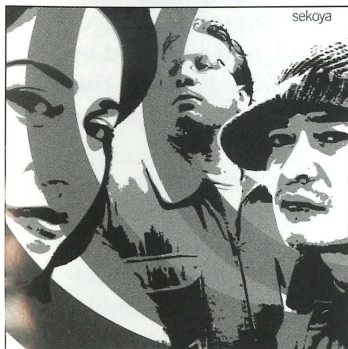


Photo courtesy of Gusti Callis, Artistic Director

The **Kaslo Jazz Etc. Festival** takes place on a long weekend in early August each year, adjacent to Kaslo, a pretty village in the Selkirk Mountains of S.E. British Columbia, about a nine hour drive from Vancouver. What is unique about this festival is the floating stage on which musicians perform. Known as the little Switzerland of Canada with its lakes, mountains and beautiful views, Kaslo is an ideal spot to sit outside on a warm summer's day, listening to jazz. Visit [www.kaslojazzfest.com](http://www.kaslojazzfest.com)

Torsten Muller and Ken Pickering, artistic director of the **Coastal Jazz and Blues Society** (the organization that also presents the city's international jazz festival), *Time Flies* provides a unique setting for the interaction of creative improvisers. This year, the artistic goal of the event, which is loosely modeled on English guitarist Derek Bailey's Company Week, was to "shift away from the more typical free-jazz style of hard blowing ... toward a distinctly contemporary improvisational chamber setting that allows for nuance, texture, and subtlety."

Eight musicians met in various combinations over four nights: Steve Beresford, an Englishman best known for his work with the group Alterations; Norwegian guitarist Ivar Grydeland and his fellow Osloite, drummer Ingar Zach; English harpist Rhodri Davies; Montreal trombonist, keyboardist and composer Tom Walsh; Vietnamese master musician Bic Hoang; Vancouver trumpeter J.P. Carter; and Muller himself. The first evening began with all the musicians on stage, and from there they broke up into different groupings over the four nights. The audience in the intimate concert hall was treated to solos, duos and trios and, on the last set of the last night, a reunion of all eight musicians.

While the experimental, creative approach is a striking aspect of this city's jazz scene, the mainstream scene is no less interesting and active, and can be accessed at a handful of clubs

