

The Future Is NOW on Local Jazz CDs

Thirteen years ago, a group of adventurous jazz musicians founded the New Orchestra Workshop to "provide a focus for the creation of an original West Coast Canadian musi-

Off Beat

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cal idiom". Thirteen years is a long time, longer than most marriages last, longer than the average jail term, longer than you or I plan to stay at our jobs, too, no doubt. But for these 13 years, NOW has endured the hardships of little or no funding, little or no press, little or no public recognition...and has come out of the tunnel with its positive attitude intact, with a growing group of friends and associates—including the principals of the Coastal Jazz and Blues Society, who produce the annual du Maurier International Jazz Festival—and now with a shiny new set of compact disc recordings issued through the internationally respected, Los Angeles-based 9 Winds record label.

To celebrate the appearance of the NOW CDs—one compilation of works by five NOW groups, one by Celtic jazz explorers Lunar Adventures, and one by the Vancouver/Montreal collaboration of Paul Plimley and

Lisle Ellis—and to raise money to send a NOW contingent to New York City's Knitting Factory club, the centre of creative music activities in the known universe, NOW and the CJBS are presenting two nights of music by NOW members, at the Glass Slipper on Friday and Saturday (September 28 and 29). Garbo's Hat and Lunar Adventures will perform on the first night, the Paul Plimley group and Chief Feature on the second.

Of course, there would be cause neither to celebrate nor to send a bunch of Vancouver musicians to the Big Apple were the music not up to what other, less Pacific cities might call "world-class" standards.

It is.

Of the three NOW CDs, *The Future Is NOW* is probably the best introduction to the creative stance that the Workshop has taken: it collects six tracks by five NOW units in a sort of cross-section of current trends in the Vancouver creative music scene.

There's not a bad track here, but two pieces are especially strong. Paul Plimley opens the disc with a heraldic blast of horns on his "Pages from the Diary of Dreams". This composition draws from several styles and eras of jazz—from the muted moods of early Ellington to the brassy punch of

Frank Zappa's jazz period, with particular nods towards the albums Gil Evans arranged for Miles Davis in the '50s—and glues them together with Plimley's hallmarks of bubbling verve and subtle humour. The flash and bustle of Plimley's solo piano sometimes obscure the fact that he is one of Canada's premiere jazz melodists: on this carefully considered, exuberantly produced piece, that side of his nature emerges full-blown.

Chief Feature's "Tibetan Tears of Joy and Sadness" is a less multidimensional experience, but is perhaps the more profound for that. Drawing on composer/tenor saxophonist Bruce Freedman's love of Tibetan culture, religion, and ritual, the work is a moving elegy for a way of life that is increasingly threatened by Chinese imperialism and Western indifference. Freedman's sax and Clyde Reed's bass blast the soul-shaking drone of Tibetan ritual music, while Claude Ranger's drums whirl a dervish dance around their solid centre and Bill Clarke's trumpet sings above, in one of the more satisfying world music/free improvisation fusions I've heard.

The Future Is NOW also includes fine performances by Turnaround (the wholly improvisational vehicle for the husband-and-wife team

of singer Kate Hammett-Vaughan and guitarist Ron Samworth), Unity, and Lunar Adventures.

Lunar Adventures get a disc to themselves with *Alive in Seattle*, and while the band has already eclipsed the achievements recorded here there are still many moments of interest in its 57 minutes. Cultural cross-pollination seems to be something of a theme among NOW groups, and on *Alive in Seattle* the most successful track is Greg Simpson's "Celtic Calypso". The title is pretty much self-explanatory—a sweet, swinging calypso melody is put through some Scottish dance steps—but it doesn't explain how the shifting harmonies of Ron Samworth's guitar and Coat Cooke's saxophone refer to Ornette Coleman's harmolodic theories, or how this band manages to put so much joy into their sound.

In Cooke and drummer Simpson, Lunar Adventures have two of the most interesting West Coast jazz composers, and their work is well supported by Samworth's occasionally electronically altered sounds and Clyde Reed's strong presence.

Paul Plimley and Lisle Ellis were founding members of NOW, way back in the dark days when real improvisation was practically unheard—if not quite unheard of—here,

and although Ellis has since moved to Montreal, where he's the music curator for the Oboro gallery, the two still get together on a regular basis to continue the ongoing conversation that they started so long ago. *Both Sides of the Same Mirror* is an exceptionally apt title for their first duet recordings: Plimley and Ellis share a fire, a buoyancy, and an ability to go for the dramatic gesture. While *Both Sides* is an intimate album—it really does sound like two friends talking—it is also vital and communicative. Ellis treats his bass as if it were as much of a sound source as an instrument frequently seen in the company of classical musicians, and his mysterious textures—full of odd plangings, percussive sounds, and low, guttural moans—give textural relief to Plimley's hyper-articulate arpeggios and glissandos. Sometimes the two musicians seem to share a single brain—Ellis the unconscious, Plimley the speaking mind—so close and so complementary are their intuitions. In an ideal world, all music would be as finely wrought.

These three CDs show that, in Vancouver, the future has truly been NOW for some while. And the society's upcoming concerts should give evidence that NOW will continue for years more to come. ■