

Trio played at Trips Festival

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hanging cage where composer Gerry Walker fiddled with a rheostat. From the ceiling hung a collection of mirror shards, one of which fell one night, narrowly missing a bystander.

The trio opened for Janis Joplin and the Grateful Dead at the 1966 Trips Festival in Vancouver, and Ken Kesey and The Merry Pranksters parked their magical bus at Motion Studio.

In those days, says Simpson, "everything seemed to intersect."

It wasn't that Neil and the trio set out to redefine jazz music, or to follow the New York jazz scene of the time, which was transfixed by free jazz. "We changed because it was in the air," says Simpson.

The short-lived Motion Studio was followed by the four-storey Intermedia and the Western Front, still active today — a lineage of West Coast multimedia art that Simpson traces back to Neil's collages of sounds and mediums in the little Kitsilano studio.

Alongside the boundary-pushing jazz of the trio, which became a duo in 1968, ran the

"No composer or improvising jazz musician can create original music out of his ego-memory mind. The new original music can only be discovered in the sense that Columbus discovered America. Well, America was already there."

— Al Neil, *Changes* (Coach House Books)

aesthetic of collage, infiltrating the music scene and inspiring unique strains of art.

In 1966, Neil moved into a barge on the water near Cates Park — Simpson recalls struggling to get an upright piano down the hill to the property — and made it collage writ large, a workshop and assemblage of treasures and junk.

Wrote reporter Rick McGrath of the waterfront digs, "One comes close to the house and one enters a strange world of decay, of rusted bits of metal, of old pieces of this, of broken hunks of that..."

At parties, Neil created performance collages out of found objects, making up a far-fetched story, then grabbing random books off shelves and

interjecting passages from them.

"He's got this voice, Al does," says Simpson — something like a crotchety, ill-mannered grizzly bear.

"He would just have people on the floor just laughing their heads off."

In the late '60s, Neil brought the live collages to the public, in performances that married storytelling with music and noise. While Neil wove yarns from nearby texts, Simpson played tapes and records — Spike Jones, or Mad Magazine — aiming for unexpected intersections.

"Sometimes the collusion of stuff would be amazing — you get a radio recording, and then Al would incorporate that into the reading, like the story about Lulu and the Blue Eagle," says Simpson.

More collages followed. Zen Glass featured bottles being broken into a bucket, joined by a sound recording of breaking glass. (Due to safety concerns, notes Simpson, the piece was short-lived.) Then there was The Dome

Show, featuring Al's then-wife Marguerite as a goddess of vegetation, and Al as "sort of this gnome," says Simpson.

The collages, innovative and impossible to categorize, drew crowds to venues like the Vancouver Art Gallery, as the underground scene bubbled up into the mainstream.

Despite the great gap between bebop and the boundary-pushing music and performance art Neil was producing by the end of the 1960s, Simpson says, "Al always liked to still think of it as jazz, because you're improvising and you're into it."

In his novel, *Changes* — written from the perspective of jazz pianist Seamus Finn, likely a doppelganger for Neil himself — the author riffs on the limits and possibilities of jazz, in between tales of sex, drugs, tattoos, love and Hepatitis.

Like the rest of Neil's work, his writing refuses to stand still in one category — but these meditations on jazz, both gritty and lovely, crop up throughout: love letters and hate mail from an artist who took the genre and wrestled it into an enormous new shape.

"The bop syndrome made manifest by five guys in time. That will do for a start," he writes. "Now and then a sweet hint of an unknown symbiosis. A little better, well said. And then you blow your hip licks again and so it goes. Other bands, other burns. Magic out of a C 7th and then bullshit out of an F."



photo submitted

AVANT-GARDE icon Al Neil has been a major figure on the Vancouver art scene for more than half a century.



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AL Neil was instrumental in establishing the Cellar as Vancouver's first jazz club in the '50s.

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