

jazz festival

HOMAGE COLLAGE: IMPROV FOR AL NEIL

Improvisers pay tribute to unique artist



Between the Lines
Caroline Skelton

■ **Homage Collage: Improv for Al Neil**, June 29, The Roundhouse (Performance Centre — Innovation Series), 2 p.m. Music and multimedia show featuring Gregg Simpson, Paul Plimley, Clyde Reed, Viviane Houle, Stefan Smulovitz and Krista Lomax. Admission free. Info: www.coastaljazz.ca.

IT was the summer of 1968 in Vancouver, and the man at the cutting edge of the underground art scene was riding a big, red bouncy ball.

The location was the Vancouver Art Gallery; the event, 39 Wonderful Years in Showbiz — a 20-minute collage in which the artist bounced up and down a series of neon steps, each specially designed to beat out a different tone, whilst wearing a football helmet with a lightbulb in the ear that flashed on and off.

It was a time when collage art — a merging, in this case, of dramatic performance and musical experimentation — and free jazz were in full swing all along the West Coast. Media were being melded, boundaries were being ripped down and tossed out.

The man on the ball was Al Neil — writer, jazz pianist, multimedia artist, would-be priest, liberator of Paris and



photo Michael de Courcy

THE Al Neil Trio (Gregg Simpson on drums, Neil at the piano and bassist Richard Anstey) rehearse in their third floor studio space at Intermedia on Beatty Street in 1968.

post office employee. An artist informally crowned king of Vancouver's artistic underground.

Or maybe not king, exactly. "I wouldn't say king because he never lorded it over anybody," says Gregg Simpson, Neil's longtime friend, a North Vancouver visual artist and drummer in the seminal Al Neil Trio.

Seer, maybe.

On June 29 at the Roundhouse, as part of the TD Canada Trust Vancouver International Jazz Festival, Simpson and friends will perform a fitting tribute to Neil, now 84 — Homage Collage: Improv for Al Neil, will feature piano, bass, drums and vocals alongside video, images and electronic experimentation.

Neil, after all, has spent

much of his long career orchestrating diverse media into unsteady synchronicity. Books meet music. Music meets theatre. Musical neon steps meet football helmets.

"He's a real purist and uncompromising," says Simpson. The philosophy behind his work, if you need to name it, is something like Dada meets mysticism — a man who at one time wanted to be a

priest; who adored the bebop piano of Bud Powell, Elmo Hope and Sonny Clark.

"So freedom," says Simpson. "Yeah, he was part of it: artistic freedom."

Both politically and musically. As a young man, Neil fought in the Second World War, playing boogie-woogie piano in the bars of Paris during the liberation. When he returned to Vancouver,

he started playing jazz piano, frequenting the Cellar in the '50s and early '60s.

But when Simpson met him in 1965, Neil had stepped away from the Cellar scene, sick of horn players instructing him to play the straight changes. So in the years that followed, he rewrote the score.

Calling on Simpson and bassist Richard Anstey, he assembled the Al Neil Trio in 1965. As Simpson, who was just 18 at the time, records in his writings about the era, their first practice together was prescient of the years to come: the 'score' for the evening was a collage of chopped-up musical paper and magazines.

The trio rented a piano, and a studio at Fourth Avenue and Bayswater in Kitsilano. The small storefront is now occupied by a sushi restaurant, but in those days, it was the Sound Gallery, a practice space and all-purpose hangout.

A few months later, they tacked up a cardboard sign advertising Al Neil and his Royal Canadians, and launched a series of evening concerts. "For donations only," notes Simpson. "We found out that was the way to get around the fire regulations."

Even in the early days, the performances in the shoebox of a space featured not just the trio, playing an oft-improvised and frequently apocalyptic jazz and noise music, but also dancers and multimedia artists.

"This was the beginning of the kind of Carnaby Street invasion of Vancouver," says Simpson. "There wasn't anything kind of raw about it yet, but it did get that way later."

The Sound Gallery soon upgraded to a larger space at 1236 Seymour, dubbed Motion Studio — there was a spot for aspiring poets, and a

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photo submitted

AL Neil (piano), Bob Frogge (vibraphone), Freddy Schreiber (bass), Bill Boyle (drums) and John Dawe (trumpet) made up one of the Cellar "house" bands during the late '50s. For a history of the Vancouver jazz club see John Dawe's article, The Cellar April 1956-Jan. 1963, at www.greggsimpson.com/Cellar_Story.html.

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