

NOW Has No Room for Egos

What's the best thing about Vancouver? For the working musician, that could be a hard question to answer. Faced with an underdeveloped music-business infrastructure, regressive and restrictive liquor-licensing laws, the aloof insularity of Toronto's show-biz

Off Beat
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power brokers, and the active hostility of our daily newspapers, despair would seem a more rational response than civic pride.

Yet outbreaks of hope occur with the regularity of B.C.'s infamous November rains. Every time the world boots local music in the face—a club burns down, a label deal fizzles, a tour falls flat—our performers get up, dust themselves off, and return to work. In fact, the more community-minded musicians among us act as a welcome antidote to the rampant self-interest that pervades municipal politics.

Artists Helping Artists might be the unofficial motto of these groups, which run from the MoDaMu (Modern Dance Music) initiative of the punk era to the Bluebird North songwriters' showcase of today. Collectives as diverse as the indie-rock gang behind Music Waste and the conservatory-trained specialists who organize the Little Chamber Music Series That Could contribute far more to the scene than they are given credit for. The concerts they produce are important, but beyond that, they give musicians a sense of context and community in an environment that often supplies neither—and this gives those musicians the strength to go on.

The importance of a supportive environment was driven home to me last Saturday night (September 16), when I ventured out to St. James Community Hall to hear the NOW Orchestra perform a concert of American trombonist George Lewis's music. NOW, which has been around in one form or another for 23 years, is perhaps the city's oldest musical collective and a dynamic example of what artists can do when they band together. Over the years, the group has played an important role in nurturing such internationally recognized talents as Paul Plimley, Peggy Lee, and John Korsrud. By collaborating with Quebec's René Lussier, England's Barry Guy, and Americans such as Butch Morris, Wadada Leo Smith, and Lewis, it's brought cosmopolitan energy to our sometimes insular jazz scene. Beyond that, its outreach programs have helped spawn a second generation of like-minded performers who are only now beginning to make an impact in our city's clubs and concert venues.

But, best of all, NOW is beginning to sound spectacularly good.

In Saturday's performance the 15-member band had the benefit of Lewis's carefully constructed compositions and of his considerable presence. Bouncing on his toes on an improvised podium, he conducted the band with the kind of balletic flair many might consider surprising in such a large man.

What really shone was the feeling of mutual respect—even love—that radiated from the stage. The NOW players had just returned from a weeklong concert tour of Eastern Canada, and it was clear that on this little jaunt they'd renewed their trust in each other and in the sometimes difficult musical idiom they've chosen to pursue. There have been

times when I've seen this band and the stage has been full of furrowed brows, but not last weekend; this was one happy group.

I hadn't intended to review this concert and therefore wasn't taking notes, but I was also struck by the singularity of purpose the group showed. Although Lewis's complex scores can be both polyrhythmic and panstylistic, there wasn't a missed cue or a botched note. Indeed, there were moments—as in the opening "Endless Shout"—when the band played as one, producing gloriously dense chords that sounded as if they were emanating from some celestial organ.

It was beautiful work, and it fully justified the confidence Lewis showed in the group when I interviewed him a week earlier.

"I really feel that the NOW Orchestra is one of the best large ensembles to have emerged from improvised music in the past 20 years," he said. "And I think its strengths are these: its extreme openness to trying out new ideas; the absence of serious ego problems, where people are fighting among themselves or trying to jockey for some kind of position or doing star turns; and the total commitment that everyone brings to what we are trying to do in the moment."

As a scholarly postmodernist—he teaches music in the critical-studies/experimental-practices department of the University of Southern California, San Diego—Lewis would no doubt reject the kind of hierarchical ordering implicit in the notion of a "best of" list. But there's no doubt that by building on its individual strengths and its collective spirit, the NOW Orchestra has become very, very good—and for an hour and a half last Saturday, it just might have been the best. ■

BTS Eager to Make a Scene

BY JOHN LUCAS

Good intentions count for a lot, but they can only take you so far. When Nadine Davenport, along with her partners—singer-songwriter Mark Crozer and *Radio Bandcover* host Mark Bignell—launched Building the Scene Productions in May, it was with impossibly high hopes

Local Motion

of revitalizing the local music community. The scene, as anyone who cares enough to pay any attention to it realizes, has been in something of a rut for the past several years, and it has been hard to detect any light at the end of the tunnel. Davenport, herself a singer and songwriter, told the *Straight* she cherishes memories of a golden age, seven to 10 years back, when local acts thrived. Now, she contends, we are living in dark days.

"Musicians are leaving town and going to Toronto and other parts across Canada, and there's obviously a reason for why things aren't happening here," she says during a telephone interview. "And I guess it [Building the Scene] is an attempt to look at that and start discussion and to try and do something about it."

The original concept behind Building the Scene is encapsulated in the name. Seeing a distinct lack of any unified musical community in Vancouver, Davenport and her partners set out to create one. In its first few months, some 15 acts got the BTS bandwagon rolling, buying three-month memberships and signing on for showcase gigs



Building the Scene founder Nadine Davenport has trouble figuring out what comes first: the chicken or the egg. Shannon Hemmett photo.

nobody wanted to get involved, which was really disappointing."

Nonetheless, Davenport—who is also the brains behind the *Grrrls With Guitars* concert series and accompanying compilation CD—remains as dedicated as ever to the essential principles of Building the Scene, and it's a venture she intends to continue. Precisely what form it will take remains a matter under discussion, but it's almost certain that BTS Productions will be scaling back its schedule of live shows. "We were basically programming seven venues three nights a week throughout the summer, which,

but the real trick is building an audience, which is a factor that Davenport and her cohorts perhaps gave too little attention with their initial efforts. How do you convince a city of *Survivor*-addicted couch potatoes that the musical acts in its back yard are worth venturing downtown to hear? This, alas, is a question for which Davenport admits she has no answer. "That's a hard thing to understand, I guess, from everybody's point of view," she says. "It's sort of like the chicken or the egg. I don't know. We thought of a way to try to encourage bands to support each other, to maybe