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Jazz Fest Welcomes Slew of New Yorkers

By Alexander Varty

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One of the pleasures of the Vancouver International Jazz Festival is the way artistic director Ken Pickering tends to focus his programming on particular locales, allowing listeners in the Pacific Northwest an in-depth look at such hotbeds of improvised music as Chicago, London, Amsterdam, or the various Scandinavian countries. And this year, according to information released at a Thursday (April 29) press conference, his spotlight seems trained on the world's greatest jazz venue, New York City.

Or is it?

"I hadn't even noticed, to tell you the truth," says Pickering, who founded the festival in 1985, along with partners John Orysik and Robert Kerr. Calling from his Vancouver home, he points out that while the festival has always had a strong Big Apple quotient, he's not backing off on his long-standing policy of treating jazz as an international phenomenon.

"Maybe there's a little less Dutch music and a little more Scandinavian; that's the way it's working out this year," he says. "But I think the balance between groups from throughout Europe, from the States, and from Canada is not that much different than it has been in the past."

Nonetheless, many of the 2004 festival's most interesting artists hail from Manhattan and its environs--including Dave Douglas, a frequent visitor to Vancouver who has developed a particularly strong rapport with the husband-and-wife team of percussionist Dylan van der Schyff and cellist Peggy Lee. "He'll be spending a few days in town," says Pickering, explaining that the trumpet innovator will present two separate programs, at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre on June 25 and 27.

"The first is the Mountain Passages project, which had its premiere in Italy. It was originally designed as a site-specific project performed at the top of a mountain, and it involves Peggy and Dylan, and also [tuba virtuoso] Marcus Rojas and [multi-reed player] Michael Moore. Dave and I talked about it and decided that we'd try to make it happen in a non-site-specific place, in the Cultch. So we're going to do that, and then they're going to go into the studio to record it the following evening. The other project Dave is going to do is something he developed with Dylan. We had a discussion about Dave playing with some of the more interesting Vancouver players, and came up with something Dave and Dylan call the Iron Giant Project."

In addition to Douglas, van der Schyff, and Lee, the latter includes saxophonist Jon Bentley, keyboardist Chris Gestrin, trumpeter JP Carter, guitarist Ron Samworth, violinist Jesse Zubot, and bassist Torsten Müller.

Other noteworthy New Yorkers who'll appear here between June 25 and July 4 include the ferocious free-jazz bassist William Parker and his band, ace saxophonists Joe Lovano and Tim Berne, swing guitarist and singer John Pizzarelli, the dazzling violinist Mark Feldman, and the inspired piano stylist Brad Mehldau. But the East Coast affair Pickering is proudest of helping to assemble features a relatively obscure performer, veteran trumpeter Herb Robertson, along with an all-star cast of support players.

"That's one of the things I'm really excited about, because Herb has been very underrated for quite some time now," says Pickering. "There was a point in the mid-'80s when he was the man, the young guy on the New York scene, but he lost a little bit of his profile when Dave [Douglas] emerged. But he's really highly respected among his peers, and we've had a relationship with him that goes back 20 years, so this is the time to try to give him his due as a leader."

As always, the jazz-festival lineup is far too long to explain or even list here. (For the details, visit the Coastal Jazz and Blues Society's Web site at www.coastaljazz.ca/.) But Pickering calls attention to what might be the



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moment: "Slipping

event's best-ever selection of soul and R & B artists, including a June 30 performance at the Orpheum Theatre by the resurgent Al Green, one of his favourite male singers.

"That's been a dream of mine for 20 years," he says. "It took a lot of effort to land him, but he's been an icon and a hero for me for most of my life. I'm still going, 'Wow, we actually got Al Green! I can't believe it!' And it's exactly the same feeling with Oscar Peterson [who kicks off the festival at the Orpheum on June 25]. We've been trying to get Oscar for a long time. It's not easy to pull those icons in, but it seems to be the year for that kind of thing."

In fact, it's a year for almost anything, as even a cursory look at the jazz-fest schedule will show. With sounds ranging from the smooth urban rhythms of Beady Belle to Tony Allen's hot Afrobeat to the extraordinary multiphonics of saxophonist Evan Parker, this event has grown into our city's biggest musical celebration without losing any of its charm.

and falling down a bowling lane while on a date on two separate occasions."

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