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Vancouver jazz fest stays on vanguard

By GREG BUIUM
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VANCOUVER -- On the surface, Vancouver's TD Canada Trust International Jazz Festival, which kicked off its 19th year yesterday, doesn't seem unfamiliar.

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Like any number of sprawling, big-city jazz fests, you'll find a handful of safe, solid names (Oscar Peterson on opening night, singers Al Green and Aaron Neville next week), a healthy dose of the modern mainstream (pianist Brad Mehldau or guitarist Pat Martino) and a smattering of funk, blues, turntable artists and world music as well.

In Vancouver, however, the trick is to dig a little deeper.

Here, the word "jazz" is pulled well to the left-of-centre, with new and exploratory improvised music given pride of place all over town, in large venues and small, indoors and out.

This is seen with the greatest clarity, perhaps, in a series of special projects and one-time meetings. Saxophonist Evan Parker, a legendary figure in the British avant-garde, practically takes up residence here, with eight performances in four days with seven different groups. American trumpeter Herb Robertson premieres his all-star quintet next Saturday, before breaking it up into smaller units. And Dave Douglas, another American trumpet player, arrives with a set of compositions, *Mountain Passages*, he's never performed in North America.

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"Why would you go all the way out to Vancouver to cover Oscar Peterson, [singer] Kurt Elling or [saxophonist] Joe Lovano?" asks Jason Koransky, editor of DownBeat, the venerable Chicago jazz magazine, referring to the more conventional players booked this year.

"It does such a great job at being on the vanguard of the music," he says, "A great festival provides artists a stage to do something unique, something that challenges them artistically. Vancouver does

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that."

Indeed, it is among only 10 summer festivals worldwide that the magazine reviews.

Dave Douglas, who has been appearing here since the early nineties, thinks the festival's artistic director, Ken Pickering, deserves all of the credit.

"Who else would have had the crazy idea that you could present jazz and improvised music from every part of the globe, that you could put all different kinds of genres in the same package. That you could have Han Bennink [a particularly exuberant Dutch drummer] play public venues in the street, and just have people **who have never been** exposed to anything like that blown away."

Pickering, 52, a one-time record shop owner who grew up in the city's east end, admits to having his own favourites, especially in new and improvised music.

"But I love a lot of stuff," he says, "and I think that really helps me do this job. I don't feel that I have the blinders on, or a rigid sensibility about what should be included. I don't run **away from the commercial** stuff, either."

Pickering, along with friends John Orysik and Robert Kerr, started the festival in 1985. It was a seven-day event with a \$9,000 budget, most of which came out of their pockets. It drew **10,000 people**.

Now, as the Coastal Jazz and Blues Society, they have an annual budget of more than \$3-million, part of which goes toward the 10-day summer program. They expect **500,000 people this year at over 40** venues around the city, from the plush **Orpheum theatre** to the Roundhouse complex in Yaletown.

"To me it's important to move out of the ideological jazz ghetto, where it's just putting music out there for 100 people. It's exciting to attract thousands and thousands of people to Gastown," he says, noting the free outdoor performances there by Norway's Wibutee and Vancouver's Sekoya, a pair of challenging electronic groups.

Education and outreach count, too, with a series of free workshops and panel discussions scheduled all week.

Vancouver is so eclectic, it's curious to know where Pickering found his models.

As a Canadian, he says, it was impossible not to be inspired by the festival in Montreal. But he's also an admirer of smaller European events, such as the FMP festival in Berlin or Nickelsdorf in Austria.

"What we're doing is taking elements [from other festivals] and creating something that is unlike anything else that is happening," he says.

He's also tried to develop a real network of connections between local musicians and international artists.

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Pickering is renowned for mixing and matching players, often introducing people for the first time. Sometimes long-term musical relationships develop.

Take cellist Peggy Lee and drummer Dylan van der Schyff, the Vancouverites who are part of Douglas's *Mountain Passages* project. They've been working with the New Yorker quite regularly since the late nineties after meeting him here one summer.

Van der Schyff, for one, doesn't know of any other festival that is as supportive of local artists.

"Vancouver is so isolated, often there's no other way to meet these people and to play with them," he says.

Pickering agrees.

Indeed, part of the Coastal Jazz and Blues mandate is its year-round programming. "We want to keep our best artists in the city. We don't want them to feel that they have to move to New York or Paris or Amsterdam."

Pickering takes real pride in mentioning a core of established players who keep Vancouver as home base, pointing to Lee and van der Schyff, guitarist Ron Samworth and bassist Torsten Muller, all of whom are featured heavily this year.

Muller, a noted German improviser who moved to Vancouver four years ago, loves the challenge of meeting players for the first time in so many different situations. This year alone, he has 10 gigs.

"You just get to take part in things you'd never normally have the chance to do," he says, referring, specifically, to a quartet he'll be doing with van der Schyff, local pianist Paul Plimley and Norwegian saxophonist Hakon Kornstad.

In the end, however he thinks the festival fosters an unparalleled level of openness -- especially in its audiences.

"You'll have 300 or 400 people [at a show], which you'd normally never get. That's what makes it a joy to participate in: You don't have this feeling of being some kind of rarity or weirdo act. You have the feeling that you're there because your music is valued."

The Vancouver International Jazz Festival runs until Sunday, July 4.

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