

When the final concert of last year's Victoriaville Festival International de Musique Actuelle is released this spring as a three CD set on Victo, it will appear to some as a moment of inspired programming: a triple bill, with pianist Paul Plimley and alto saxophonist John Oswald preceding solo piano performances by Marilyn Crispell and Cecil Taylor.

That Plimley and Oswald were scheduled, however, was hardly by design. Working in nearby Québec City, they'd come on a whim as tourists — to hear Taylor. "About an hour and a half after we'd arrived," Plimley explains, "Michel Levasseur [Festival Artistic Director] came to my side in a sort of mysterious and hushed manner, put his arm around me, which was unusual for him, and he said, 'Paul, I have to talk to you.'"

Indeed, Levasseur needed to be discreet: his Taylor-Crispell finale was falling apart. Dealing with personal matters in New York, Taylor still hadn't arrived, and there was a strong chance he wouldn't. Levasseur quietly asked Plimley and Oswald to fill in. Needless to say, Taylor eventually appeared, and the Canadian duo quickly agreed to terms: opening the proceedings with a bookends structure (solo-duo-solo), barely a word between them. "No talk," Plimley says. "That's the way John is." But Paul Plimley must have felt entirely at home. Ever since studying at Woodstock's Creative Music Studio in the late 1970s, he's been pegged as a Cecil Taylor acolyte, a fate he shares with Crispell. And his mentor's habits have loomed large, though they've become far less pronounced over time: Plimley's extensive use of clusters has faded, and unlike Taylor, who piles up massive walls of sound, Plimley is still attracted to the linear aspects of soloing. "He's a little more vertical," Plimley concludes, "I'm a little more horizontal."

Without a fuss the 48 year old Vancouver pianist has gradually built up an original and highly inventive body of work. While he remains a powerful force on the Vancouver scene — a founding member of the New Orchestra Workshop (NOW) and a fixture at the city's Du Maurier International Jazz Festival — Plimley may be best known for his recordings with bassist Lisle Ellis, a former Vancouverite now living in San Francisco. Plimley and Ellis's sessions throughout the 1990s opened a running inquiry into content and form, blurring lines between composition and improvisation. That they favoured duos (including the exceptional *Kaleidoscopes*) and trios (with drummers, from Andrew Cyrille to Gregg Bendian, or the occasional horn player — the majestic *Sweet Freedom* — *Now What?* features Joe McPhee) guided a laser beam to this discourse. Even on his own, Plimley has eschewed crowds, preferring to working in duos (such as with guitarist Henry Kaiser on *Passports*) or completely alone (*Everything In Stages*).

Speak to Paul Plimley and you're thrust into these issues mid-conversation: tracking the subtle distinctions between freedom and self-indulgence, balancing carefully designed settings with open and ambiguous forms. Improvised music's possibilities — and limitations — absorb him. "I'm not interested in presenting a confusion of random sounding performance ideas," he says, "but rather the providing of maximum freedom for each player and still, still finding a certain kind of way in which the end result of the music grooves."

Take what he calls the "angular rhythmic character" of his work: by developing "a more flexible, looser format" where each player can set the tempo "according to how one's body feels... to move on one's instrument so that tempo and material can change quickly or slowly", Plimley compels his colleagues to listen,

although "they're also encouraged to play independent of whatever they may hear at any given moment". And, as he explains, when each musician's playing "has this marvellous kind of angular fit in relation to the pulse of the other musicians, then you can still maintain the beauty of a groove".

To engage both the musicians and the audience is clearly one of Plimley's goals. His music embraces discord, to be sure, but it isn't knotted up in the abstruse or the frivolous. "Music, aside from being shocking and sometimes being an onslaught, also has the virtuous function of offering something warm, alive and beautiful to the listening audience," he observes. "I don't go into concerts wanting to play it safe. The melodies are not presented to appease people; they are there because I genuinely believe in the value of beauty, point blank. But of course I want to play so that there's a kind of ecstasy and the feeling of freedom as the end result. And I don't always get there."

Taking paths disparate and bold, Plimley's creative music continues to evolve. While he still seeks out smaller projects (with bassist Dominic Duval and drummer Donald Robinson this spring), his first large-scale composition, *Fingertips To Freedom*, written with Mark Armanini for improvised piano and orchestra, will soon be recorded. "It's not a polite, easily regimented world I wish to express," he declares. "That's what you're trying to get away from. On the other hand, there's nothing wrong with coherence, focus, something which has been distilled. So it's not about chaos: it's about achieving a sense of hard won clarity and the ability to say something strong with a concise amount of means." □ *Kaleidoscopes and Sweet Freedom* — *Now What?* are on hat ART. *Passports* is out now on Spool. *Everything In Stages* is on Songlines

Paul Plimley

Freedom at his fingertips. By Greg Buium

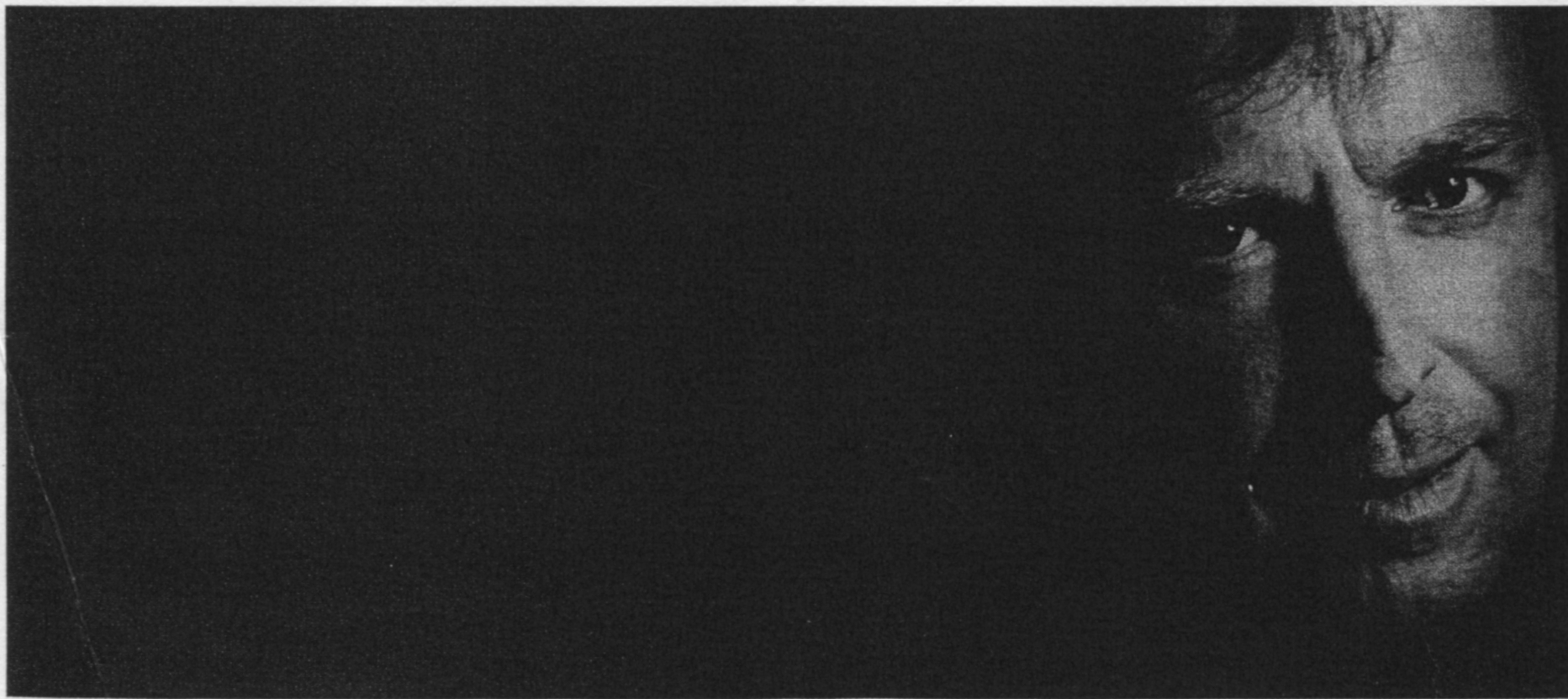


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