

# PAUL PLIMLEY

PAUL PLIMLEY - OUT INTO THE WORLD  
Canada's premiere pianist interviewed by Scott Lewis

Cover Photograph  
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With a customary twinkle in his eye, the man whom Vancouver writer Alex Varty has called "perhaps the finest performing pianist in Canada today" turns to the piano keyboard and begins a series of lush chords peppered with fast single note runs. Before you know it, layers build on layers, and the flow of ideas becomes almost overwhelming in intensity, but embedded with almost surprising moments of lyricism. Like the best of the "post-Taylor" improvising pianists, Paul Plimley has technique to burn, but eschews virtuoso displays in favour of personal expression. I've always pictured him as dancing at the keyboard and indeed he has recently been re-exploring collaboration with dancers.

Above all, Plimley is a *performer*, with a sense of theatre reminiscent of European improvisers like Han Bennink and Willem Breuker. His best performances feature a strong connection with audience, cemented by his puckish sense of humour. I've seen him accidentally break a key on an inferior piano, and just as quickly balance it on top of his head and continue to spin out dizzying strings of notes. Paul has that uncanny ability to make each member of the audience feel a personal connection with his music.

Like so many improvising pianists, Plimley has been flattered by the comparisons to Cecil Taylor, but dogged by them as well. There are elements in common (the unceasing creativity, the cascades of notes, the ability to juggle a number of themes simultaneously) but there are great differences as well. Where Taylor's touch is muscular and aggressive, Plimley's tends to be more delicate and lyrical. And when he does "attack" the keys, it is with a slyness and wit rarely apparent in the welter of notes produced by Taylor. Mind you, they are certainly brothers of the keyboard, united in their admiration for each other's work and that of the many great pianists who have preceded them.

It is only in the past few years that Plimley has concentrated on solo performance, usually of his own compositions. He also performs standards and originals in a variety of settings, enjoys a ten-year association with now-Montreal-based bassist Lisle Ellis, writes rather romantic charts in the spirit of Ellington and Mingus for an octet which is unfortunately dormant at

this time, and is a pretty mean vibraphonist, drummer, and percussionist.

Plimley was born in Vancouver 36 years ago. His paternal grandfather played classical violin and paternal grandmother classical piano, and music was always his greatest interest, the inevitable piano lessons starting at age seven. But no matter how much he loved the music itself, music education has never been one of Plimley's greatest loves. European classical, African-American, and classical Indian remain his favourite musics, but as to those lessons...

**I went till I was 11 and then I quit for five years. After I stopped taking lessons for good, when I was 20, I felt that I had to undo a lot of the values and ideas which were transmitted during those piano lessons, which concerned European classical music. I wanted instead to play the music which would express what I most deeply feel.**

Stints at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University in Vancouver resulted neither in a music degree nor a great deal of satisfaction. At least at SFU the academics recognized and supported the development of the compositional gifts that set Plimley apart from many of his peers in improvised music. His pieces are not just heads designed to lead into long improvisations, but glow with feeling thanks to his gift for beautiful melodies and interesting voicings. As well, at SFU began the collaborations with theatre and dance, and an exposure to electronic music which opened his ears to the new possibilities of sound.

Still, improvised music was a godsend to Plimley, allowing him the freedom to express what was inside without any restriction but his own physical limitations. Even in conversation, you can tell that he's a born improviser. The verbal byways and ideas multiply, but somehow the original conversational spark is returned to after innumerable verbal detours and usually at least a few puns. Actually, something Paul has been working on for a few years is editing that whirlwind of ideas when he sits down at the keyboard so as not to more clearly reveal the logic of their unfolding.

Plimley discovered the improvised music scene in Vancouver at just the right time, as the "children" of the legendary

## OUT INTO THE WORLD \* BY SCOTT LEWIS

pianist/poet/visual artist Al Neil, people like Gregg Simpson and saxman Ross Barrett, came into artistic maturity. Plimley was soon a founding member of the superb New Orchestra Quintet with Simpson, Lisle Ellis on bass, Paul Cram on reeds, and trombonist Ralph Eppel. Besides recording a very good album, *Up Til Now*, these players and others founded the New Orchestra Workshop, a cooperative with an emphasis on performance and education. After putting together a 15-piece orchestra called CORD (Community Orchestra Research and Development), setting up an office, and producing many workshops and concerts and several recordings, NOW fell prey to the seemingly inevitable tensions of underfunded volunteer organizations and disbanded in 1981. Luckily, however, NOW was reformed in 1986 with some new blood as well as "oldtimers" Plimley, Simpson, saxophonist Coat Cooke and bassist Clyde Reed, and continues to this day to be the vital force on the West Coast improvised music scene.

After playing vibes and piano on Paul Cram's Sackville recording, *Blue Tales in Time*, Plimley spent some time travelling before returning to Vancouver to work on his compositions and put together his octet. Besides his work with NOW, his view remains pointed outwards. He has spent time in Europe over the past few years, performing solo on Dutch and Belgian TV and with the Cecil Taylor Orchestra in Berlin, and enjoyed the chance to play with Steve Lacy in Paris. Paul has found Europe an extremely cogent environment.

**You're exposing yourself to a completely different cultural stimulus and history. You've got a group of nations whose history goes back so much fur-**

**ther. The climate there is artistically such that people are beckoning you to express yourself without conforming to media expectations. People are looking for the individual. Art transcends being merely entertainment for passive con-**



**sumption. Of course, it's important to say that music that is entertaining is not per se a negative experience, but the concept of the market mentality...**

Plimley still takes on students when he's in town, but the media attention and opportunities for performance are steadily on the increase. He has recently recorded with master percussionist Andrew Cyrille in New York, and with Lisle Ellis at the Banff Centre, concerts in Montreal and Victoriaville with Cyrille, Ellis, and bassoonist Karen Borca, and he is coordinat-

ing an exchange between NOW and the Knitting Factory in New York for the fall of 1990. The early part of 1990 promises a collaboration with New York-based dancer / choreographer Dianne McIntyre, a tour of Texas with innovative trumpeter/

composer Dennis Gonzales, and a project with irrepressible guitarist Henry Kaiser. Vancouver is a good home for an improvising performer, with a loyal audience and supportive media, but Paul Plimley has reached a level where his music deserves to be recorded, and listened to, around the world.

**The primary focus of my energies and aspirations is making music, and central to this is being true to the feelings that made me want to play in the first place. You must maintain that truth inside yourself in spite of external obstacles which come from the realities of the music industry, the media, even the opinions of your musical peers. My first priority will always be the continuing development of the music itself rather than my career as such.**

Available recordings: Besides the New Orchestra Quintet and Paul Cram records, presently available on cassette from the artist are a fine octet session from a few years back

called *Hidden Shades*, and a recent recording with the trio, *Swinging Planets*, whose effervescence and spirit easily overcome an indifferent piano and budget production values. A CD of duets with Lyle Ellis will soon be available from Nine Winds, as will a limited edition cassette of duets with Clyde Reed from the artist himself. Write P.O. Box 69665, Station K, Vancouver, B.C. Canada V5K 4W7. The Paul Cram recording, *Blue Tales In Time*, is available from Coda Magazine for \$10.00 pp.