

# step

A MAGAZINE ABOUT VANCOUVER'S CREATIVE PEOPLE

## CONFESSIONS OF A FOLK BAND

The shocking never before told true story of the band called Nyetz



## Mad & Bad

The clown in Gina Bastone



## On the edge of a creative solution

It is unfortunate that one of the city's most important creative events did not appear as a feature in this issue of Step Magazine. But its spontaneous nature and occurrence so near our press date has precluded any extensive coverage.

Still, the convergence of a group of artists involved in the Vancouver Dance Centre's "City on the Edge" project, and a group of Native Indians protesting events at Oka, Quebec show the powerful force of creativity.

As featured elsewhere in this issue, the City on the Edge project, directed by Vancouver choreographer Jay Hirabayashi was to be set up in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery for the month of September. Hirabayashi had brought together an eclectic group of artists, singers, actors, dancers and musicians to create in an urban environment under the watchful eye of Vancouverites. The project was an experiment - a chance to see what ideas could be developed when a group of creative people come together and start thinking about producing art in a city that is changing faster than most of us care to think about.

Then something else happened; something that could have potentially spelled disaster for Hirabayashi's project if he and the other participants had not been open-minded and flexible, which is of course the first prerequisite for creativity. A group of people protesting the military and police intervention in the Mohawk crisis in Quebec had camped out in front of the Art Gallery - right where City on the Edge had planned to do its thing. Instead of conflict arising, however, an unusual event for this country during these troubled times took place. The two groups decided to work together. One group of artists that was thinking about ways to influence the changing face of its city was meeting with another group of Native people that was thinking about ways to gain greater power in their life. They decided they had enough in common to work and create together.

Of course it is too soon to say anything about the outcome of this event. And in many ways the final outcome may not be important. What is important, however, is that in the face of struggle and challenge over conflicting views, creative solutions can be found if there is a will and flexibility by the parties involved. What a small group of artists and protesters have done is point the way to others in positions of authority - whether dealing with Native land claim issues or dealing with urban housing issues - that there is a way to meet on a common ground if we choose to do so.

These artists and protesters have discovered the true power of creative thinking. It is not something isolated among the painters and dancers and writers of our society. It is something possessed by all of us, the inherent ability to find new ways to do things, of finding solutions to conflict by being open to change and challenging ideas.



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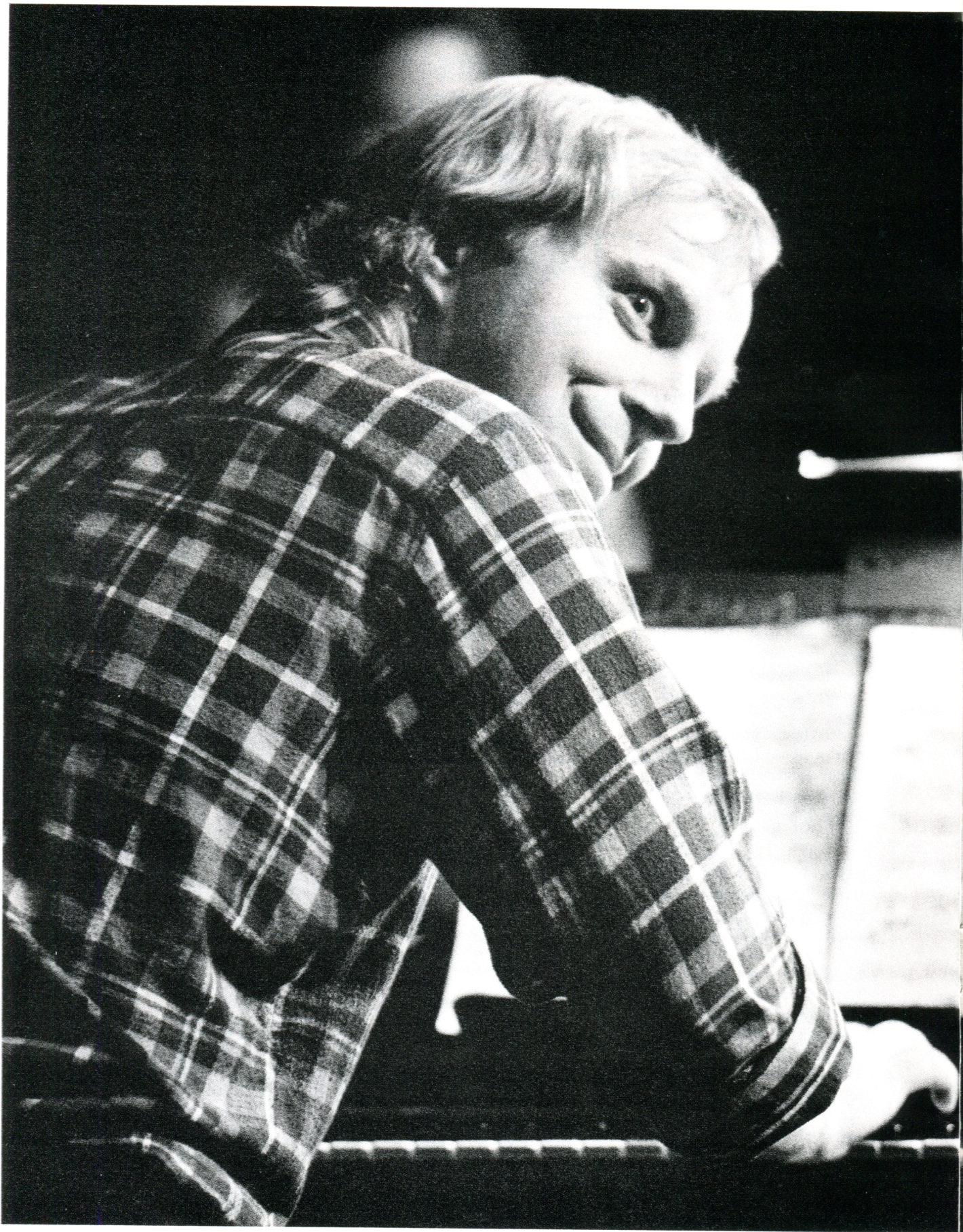
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# HEART of a jazzman's MUSIC

The music of Paul Plimley is intelligent to be sure. But the wild antics of one of Canada's finest jazz musicians prove it is also from the heart.

by Laurence Svirchev

Paul Plimley is bouncing up and down on his piano bench like a gleeful leprechaun. As if playing a childish prank, he clasps his hands together and arcs like a diver plunging into the ocean of one piano key.

The next moment, the music changes, and the leprechaun has become an auditioner for "The Phantom of the Opera Visits the Planet Pluto." His hair looks as if a fan is blowing in his face, and he oscillates rapidly from the hips, an inverted pendulum out of control. His hands are blurred on the keyboard; the sounds are blocks of concrete hurtling by so fast that the listener may wish to duck out of sight. So begins another concert by one of Vancouver's most creative musicians.

Plimley's main instrument is the piano, but he also works with the vibraphone, marimba, synthesizers, and percussion. A well-travelled Vancouver native who has played the major cities of Europe and North America, he has not followed the pattern of many other West Coast musicians of going to the United States to gain recognition.

Plimley writes extensively for small to large ensembles, including Vancouver's own New Orchestra Workshop, of which he is a founding member; he has led groups from trio to octet.

His current musical focus is the small group: duo, trio, and quartet. During the recent du Maurier International Jazz Festival, he played in various combinations with percussionist Andrew Cyrille, tenor saxophonist Glenn Spearman from the United States and bassist Lisle Ellis from Montreal. Plimley will be a featured player in the upcoming New Music America to be held in Montreal, as well as in the exchange between the New Orchestra Workshop and the musicians of New York's Knitting Factory.

The following conversation, held with Plimley just after his success at the du Maurier

Jazz Festival, reveals the self-confidence he is feeling as he gains Canadian and international recognition.

The Nine Winds label has just issued a compact disc, "Both Sides of the Same Mirror" by Paul Plimley and Lisle Ellis. It has been met with critical acclaim, the jazz critic of the *Globe and Mail* calling the music "A revolution in the making."

Plimley's music is certainly different, but he makes no bones about drawing from all musical sources. One of the cuts on the CD is Jimi Hendrix's "Third Stone From The Sun." On the original Hendrix recording, Jimi sang a line "We'll never hear surf-music again." The banalities of the Beach Boys will certainly not be heard in the music of Paul Plimley. But with ears open, the force that creates the tides and waves just might be heard.

LS: Do you think when you're playing?

PP: Yes, sometimes, but I won't be the only musician to say this: the best music comes when I'm not thinking. I make the best music when the music is flowing from me, when my mind is being told to chill out, lay back, and trust in myself and trust in the other players if they are of similar ilk. The best music comes when I let the forces that made me want to play in the first place just pass through.

Mind is a necessary function in the making of music in terms of the preparation and the steps needed to hone one's material. Mind acts as a kind of superintendent. But it's a means and not an end. One can't have great music by merely thinking: if music was about mind alone, we'd only have scores and printouts, and not sound.

I always used to think music was primarily about an

inspiration or a whole end-product, or perhaps an expression of raw sensation or feelings. It is that, but it's also about responding to sound.

LS: Part of your sound is percussive. You were using a hand-drumming technique the other night while playing the synthesizer at The Glass Slipper.

PP: I play what strikes my heart. Ah yes, that clicking on the keys. That came from frustration: the synthesizer keyboard

is not touch-sensitive. If you press it strongly or softly, you'll get a dynamic variation, but there's low resistance to the feel of the keys. On the piano, however, there's a physical sensation of pushing the keys down.

LS: Still, visually you move at the keyboard like a drummer; depending on your mood, you tend to dance at the keyboard. And you are much harder to photograph than drummers, because you move so fast.

PP: I don't even think of the fact that I move around a lot. Rhythm is wonderful and magi-

cal. Think of the rhythm of the blues - that's part of my spirit.

LS: Your music is written, but the playing of the music is not confined to the charts. When did you get to the point where you could play without saying, "Structure demands that I do this next thing?"

PP: It started happening as far back as 1973. It doesn't happen all the time now, but it's much more consistent and de-



veloped. It's not a linear pattern, though.

Playing the music is a matter of connecting with the centre of oneself. And that centre is not just the mind or calculating energy. It's an overlapping process and can change. Sometimes you got it and sometimes you don't.

Maybe the qualities of thinking, intuition and feeling are not so terribly opposed as we sometimes imagine. Thinking helps as long as it doesn't become master. There is a tendency for our thoughts to dominate our lives in terms of acting mechanically or going on automatic pilot.

LS: Do you write what you want to hear, or is there something else going on?

PP: When I first started writing for the octet, I wrote what I heard, but now I feel that in the next incarnation of whatever ensemble there is, I'm going to think more of the players, make the music comfortable for them. From the political viewpoint, it seems to me to be very democratic to allow each player to make his or her contribution to the overall shape of the music.

LS: Politics, as in protest, is often linked to music, but democracy is not a concept that is often even considered in relation to music.

PP: Well, Max Roach talks about democracy being exemplified in the tradition of American and European improvised music. In music-making there is an intelligence at work within each of the players, especially if they're good musicians. If they're not so good, we may as well watch that old TV show Batman (sounds out the bass line).

LS: There are times when you come off stage and you are very exuberant. You've raised the stage and you are very happy about the results.

PP: For over a year now, there's been a marked upturn in the percentage of times I do feel happy after I play. That's a change I've been working on for awhile. I'm getting older and all eternity is not ahead to get this music happening.

Ultimately, music is a product of many things. It becomes more tangible the more one cares about the spiritual properties within. When I was in my late teens and twenties, there was a degree of self-doubt and denial of the possibilities within me.

Being an artist tends to be accompanied by a neurotic, egotistical framework. A lot of this is unreal. Things would be more real if people didn't get so possessed with their own purported greatness. At the same time there's nothing wrong with believing in oneself. It's all right to feel confident with what one does, but there are those people who stretch the point of self-importance. I'm walking a tight-rope when I say this.

I want to make a strong sound and a strong statement to make the music come alive. The alternative side that I want is the lyrical ballad, the sensibility of playing in a beautiful, hushed way; ultimately in a way that brings peace. I want a beauty of sound through tenderness and gentleness that allows for openness and vulnerability.

LS: Extending vulnerability to an audience must be far harder to project than hard-driving music that gets the audience to their feet.

PP: What's the point of presenting music to the public when you're not really behind what you're saying? In considering Cecil Taylor's music, he usually puts the ballads towards the end of his statements. In so doing there's such a sense of contrast to what's come before. There is then an increased intensity of meaning which makes the spirit more heartfelt. This points up the nice thing of music expressing so many qualities of life going from one extreme to another.

LS: Paul, you speak often about how you create your music. The first part of the process for you is dreams and love. Can you talk about that?

PP: The dreams are of imagining utopia, and if not the physical reality of utopia, then having the attendant feeling that would issue from utopia.

That kind of thing happens in youth when one's spirit is intact. We're able to

exist on a level removed from society, such as school, religion, peer pressure. We're living more from an internal framework than responding to external stimuli. At the time of being a small child, it's easy to fall in love with lot of things. Being an artist is partly dealing with the fulfilment of potentials that were exemplified and lived through at an early age.

It's easier as a child to deal with life being benign, equal, fair, loving, than what so often happens to us when we get older. Well, some young people are shut down and brutalized so badly that what I just said doesn't exist for them. But at a certain age, I wanted to become a musician because I fell in love with music, being struck by the beauty and realness of it.

When the music is really working, it is transcendent of mere mind alone, and that transcendence enters the realm of the spirit, of a connection with a larger strata of life. One hopes to become linked with the forces that imbue nature. This doesn't happen all the time, it's not a constant companion. I don't visit Saturn every time I sit down at the keyboard. There's a lot of hard work and frustration too. It's all part of life, but there is also the ultimate trajectory and destination: we travel the spaceways, but sometimes we lose our tickets!

You know, speaking about these things makes me want to play!▲▲▲

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