

INTRO •

Pianist Plimley Finds Magic in the Musical NOW

BY ALEXANDER VARTY

For some, having one's name in lights could bring on a glow of well-being, a sense of acceptance and status. For others, the burden of fame might prompt soul-searching and insecurity. But for Vancouver pianist Paul Plimley, now 38 and just beginning to carve a niche for himself in the hectic world of the international jazz scene, it's no big deal. And it was no big deal even when he was a child, when the Plimley name used to tower over a West Broadway car lot full of Dodges. This son of the long-established car-dealing family took it for granted that the radiance of his family name all but eclipsed the lights of City Hall, just as, today, he projects an air of nonchalance and, perhaps, even bemused amusement that he has slipped out of the world of commerce and into the more rarefied air of jazz's most creative circles.

Plimley is happy about the creative and professional gains that he has made in the past two or three years, with recording offers arriving in surprising profusion and an External Affairs-sponsored European tour in the offing, but he is still essentially the same person he was when he first started taking the idea of playing music seriously: driven by an almost spiritual belief in music's ability to promote greater understanding between people and by an intense curiosity to see how far its parameters can be pushed.

Music—though not considered a professional option—was always a

strong presence in the Plimley home. Several of Plimley's relatives were accomplished amateur players, and the young pianist discovered an aptitude for the classical repertoire that led him into serious conservatory studies and, eventually, UBC's music program. But that formal emphasis was balanced by other interests. Plimley insists that any biographical sketch includes mention of his stage debut as a 14-year-old rock 'n' roll guitarist with the band Volume of Devotion: he remembers sounding like a cross between jazz avant-gardist Derek Bailey and "a lot of hideous feedback howling". Through this rather short-lived phase, he came to the realization that there was more to music than reading scores and practicing scales, and he soon began applying the idea of musical freedom to his piano (he also plays bass clarinet, vibraphone, and drums, all with some degree of competence and inspiration). It wasn't long before he was an adept new jazz pianist...but there was nowhere for him to play.

At this point, the Plimley story splits into two parts: not necessarily mutually exclusive parts, but certainly separate facets of his life's work. Plimley became an organizer...and that gave him room to continue as a creative musician.

In the summer of 1975, he started to run into a number of like-minded musicians: drummer Gregg Simpson, saxophonist Paul Cram, trombonist Ralph Eppel, and bassist Lisle Ellis. They were bored with and limited by the city's conservative jazz clubs, and their response was to form their own secret society of jazz radicals, the New Orchestra Workshop. "We formed



Jazz pianist, composer, and musical philosopher Paul Plimley works to promote the idea that sound "still possesses the power to enrich, expand, and inform our lives in an apparently infinite number of ways". Lincoln Clarkes photo.

NOW when, after two sessions—and feeling quite exhilarated by the music that we had made—we decided that we wanted to not only cement our

relationship but to extend it to other musicians in the community, and hopefully beyond that to the national scene," Plimley says.

In a very real way, NOW—which in its current configuration operates the Glass Slipper concert venue, brings like-minded musicians to town, and provides support services for a number of local ensembles—was responsible for a lot of the groundwork that has made this city an exciting place for lovers of jazz and creative music. In conjunction with dedicated fans like the people who run the Coastal Jazz and Blues Society and the du Maurier International Jazz Festival, NOW has significantly raised the public's awareness and understanding of jazz. More significantly, the organization has shown that musical creativity is not the exclusive province of Europe and New York—that great music can happen here.

But Plimley has at least temporarily relinquished his activist role to focus on his own work.

"There's a time factor involved," he says. "Just how much time can you spend trying to get gigs for the half-dozen or so groups within the New Orchestra Workshop? Now it's a matter of working with the music that I'm developing, as well as putting some time into finding work for myself and my own ensembles.

"I feel that through most of this year, and possibly into the next, I'll be concentrating primarily on piano. After that, I'll want to start up a larger ensemble."

Plimley's extraordinary pianistic abilities are currently best heard in conjunction with the equally powerful bass of his long-time playing partner, Lisle Ellis. Although Ellis now lives in Montreal, the two have retained a profound telepathic rapport. This weekend, they can be found working with New York-based drummer Gregg Bendian (an occasional sideman with Plimley's primary

creative model, Cecil Taylor) at the Western Front on Friday (June 28) and, joined by saxophonists Bill Grove and Vinny Golia, at the jazz festival's free Jazz at the Plaza extravaganza the next day.

Of Ellis, Plimley says: "I feel that Lisle is a formidable musical presence and therefore inspires me to do my best."

Ellis has the rare ability to transcend his instrument; it's not necessarily a bass you're listening to—it's music. It's a stunning achievement to render the listener unaware of the technical means for such emotional impact.

"That's right," Plimley says. "And that's interesting. I guess that really speaks very much of the strength of presence of that particular person."

Plimley goes on to speak in more abstract terms about the nature of music itself. "With making music, it's wonderful to discover that there are many means and many levels of one's conscious world—and perhaps one's unconscious world—that play upon what comes out," he says. "It's wonderful to put oneself in a state whereby you transcend music made solely upon the basis of thinking or contriving. You're looking for a way to clear the mind so that you can let the music just be or speak for itself, but also at the same time you're letting yourself enjoy it profoundly. It's a wonderful state to be in. It feels magical. I wish I could be in it all the time.

"I think it's important to resist the kind of tunnel vision that music is often presented as through the media, as a sort of AM-radio mentality. Music still possesses the power to enrich, expand, and inform our lives in an apparently infinite number of ways. And even though music is handled as a commodity, it can authentically point towards a sense of liberation from various oppressive elements within world society."

LIFE IN HELL

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