

URGENCY PERVADES MUSIC

by Brian McLeod

Vancouver Sun, June, 1968

Unorthodox is the only way to describe the Al Neil recording session at Intermedia Friday night. Rather than the usual assortment of cables, deadened sounds and wall-to-wall balding technicians, this event happened in the confines of a deserted and converted warehouse.

One might seriously debate the classification of this festivity of sound into the category of music, at least in the traditional sense. Nevertheless, the element of urgency, one which pervaded the everything the trio had to offer, was always present in super-saturated quantities.

With the possible exception of periodic drum bursts, there was little of the rhythmic life-blood of jazz present in the works. Neil instead seems to be concentrating his efforts on a fragmented and brutal revision of counterpoint, a conception as distraught as the social fabric of our times.

Individualism is another key factor in the total creation. There one is rarely conscious of a dominant instrument taking a definite solo, and yet the coarse and entirely individual expression never really subjugates itself to a peaceful integration.

The final element of the performance, and by far the most dominant, was the almost religious adherence to technology and electronic aids. Nothing is left to the imagination as cats, dogs, birds and ghosts troop grotesquely into the inner recesses of the audience's mind. Then the silence floods in, rolling over all like a tide, soothing ruptured and naked traumas, and leading them back into semi-consciousness.

CD Reviews

Legendary is a term that gets thrown around too often, but in the case of Al Neil the word sticks. *Retrospective*, a new two-CD set documenting his trio with drummer Gregg Simpson and bassist Richard Anstey, shows why.

The album contains many rare performances including a track, *Dreamers Exposed*, from their first live concert in December 1965.

Neil was a major player on Vancouver's burgeoning jazz scene during the 1950s. Living in Lynn Valley at the time and working at the post office during the day, he helped to establish the Cellar jazz club and became its house pianist. Bebop to the core, Neil developed his style listening to the music of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Bud Powell after taking piano lessons from local teachers Glenn Nelson and Jean Coulthard.

West coast jazz musicians such as Barney Kessel, Sonny Redd and Art Pepper visited the Cellar as singles to play with Neil's rhythm section. He was also the man responsible for booking Ornette Coleman's quartet for a week-long stand in 1958.

"Amazing times," recalls Gregg Simpson. "Vancouver was so small in a way. It was just an unusual place. It was a city that acted like a little village. Around the time the group started I knew everybody with long hair in Kitsilano. A year later the hippy thing hit and it was all different - but that became our audience."

Simpson and his buddy Richard Anstey were both 19 when they hooked up with the 42-year-old bebopper to form the Al Neil Trio in 1965. "The original trio was a quartet with Bob Buckley on alto. He lasted two rehearsals - one of them was at his mother's place in Shaughnessy. Then we got a little loft downtown."

All three members of the trio were visual artists as well as musicians. Everybody knew everybody else at the time - there was only one scene with everything centred around activities at UBC and its environs.

Simpson rented a storefront space at Fourth and Bayswater to paint, and called it the Sound Gallery. The Al Neil Trio played their first live date there on Dec. 15, 1965 before an audience of invited guests. The group performed several improvised pieces building their sound on melodies such as Summertime. "We started doing concerts on the weekends and charged donations to pay the rent on the place. It was a very local neighbourhood kind of phenomena." They met filmmaker Sam Perry and composer Gerry Walker and very early on they added their talents to the mayhem. "There were all these light projections and film loops before light shows. We were in this art experiment period that by 1966-67 segued into the psychedelic era. It seemed like a natural fit so we just kept on doing what we were doing."

The group's repertoire originally consisted of bop and standard tunes but they quickly took off into uncharted territory. "The music was very different," says Simpson. "We were still improvising jazz but we were starting to blend all this weird stuff in. And then Al would bring three or four books in - books on alchemy, a western novel. He'd start cutting up and reading patches of each of them with his own little segues. Al was such an out-there guy."

Gradually the sound collages began to become more prominent in the performances with the readings drawing heavily from writers such as Artaud, Rimbaud and Jarry. The bebop references disappeared in the new media mix generated from a multitude of sound sources. Simpson added tape recorders, record players and radios to work in tandem with the live instrumentation.

Their experimentation gave them access to the counterculture just beginning to develop on the West Coast. The trio opened for Janis Joplin and Big Brother and the Holding Company, and Ken Kesey brought his Merry Pranksters by to visit their studio. One show at the Vancouver Art Gallery drew over 500 people.

Becoming too popular for the Sound Gallery, the trio closed up shop in search of a new venue. "The place got too small for us and we eventually moved down to Pender St. (to the Motion Studio) just before the Trips Festival," says Simpson. "It was a three-ring circus by this point - the trio performing with Sam Perry's whole light environment, Gerry Walker's musique concrete, the Helen Goodwin dancers and the occasional poet. We had moving mirror strips on the walls, one of them actually broke loose and almost decapitated somebody one night."

The Motion Studio was considerably larger than their previous space, with several rooms buffeting the main performance area from the street. Live weekend shows continued through the fall of 1966 until the tragic suicide of Sam Perry in November. The Motion Studio closed about a month after his death.

The trio moved on and was a part of the next phase of the Vancouver art scene, Intermedia, at the start of the '70s before going their separate ways.

Retrospective brings them back together on disc and revives the legend of the Al Neil Trio. **John Goodman -[North Shore News](#)**

"The world of designer clothing, video games, youth obsession, the latest everything masks the serious details that constitute reality. So it is quite possible that you have never heard of Al Neil.

In the middle sixties, after a short sabbatical, he reappeared with Richard Anstey (bass), who also produced this set, and Gregg Simpson (drums), both twenty years his junior and both also visual artists. Musically, the trio have arrived at a sparkling integrated configuration rarely achieved, not only in its powerful surging lyricism, but now containing messages for future language that would be considered prototype concepts for generations of musicians. Utilizing voices, radios, tapes, toys, noise-makers and LP records, all being manipulated as improvising sound sources — likely early examples of turntable DeeJaying and sampling — they collectively generate an astonishing, intimate and personal concept.

The enclosed 36 page booklet contains photographs, reminiscences by Simpson and Anstey who paint clear pictures of the circumstances surrounding the adventures, process and evolution of the trio, plus a selection of reviews. Simpson described Al's piano playing as "...a kind of mystical music, a cross between Bud Powell, Edgar Varese and Claude Debussy", and the music as "...nothing short of extraordinary... combining snippets of melodies like Summertime, which appeared through waves of arpeggios, polychromatic chord clusters, whirling dervish modal lines, and atonal free passages." A spirited free-wheeling high energy extension of all their bebop histories.

The *Al Neil Trio, Retrospective 1965-1968*, Blue Minor Records 121 2001 (2 CDs) is a documentation of those heady times. This is not a document to be dissected, but rather to be relished as an example of a most distinct period (December 1965 - June 1968) in a somewhat invisible Canadian history, a personal development of three of our most creative artists." **Bill Smith** -[Coda Magazine](#) January 2003

"All Neil basically started the Vancouver jazz scene with a club called the Cellar and was eventually considered by many to be the finest jazz pianist to come out of Canada - including Oscar Peterson." *Calgary Herald*

"From the outset of this collection, it is obvious that Anstey and Simpson were kindred spirits and exceptional instrumentalists with a hearty appetite for experimental techniques and technology. On their respective solos on the earliest track, the lengthy, 'Summertime'-like 'Dreamers Exposed' from late 1965 Simpson combines an Elvin Jones- derived power with rim effects that would soon be in vogue with first generation European free improvisers. Anstey uses glissading chords to fluidly pivot between chromatic and motivic materials. More importantly, Anstey and Simpson complement the veering Neil, instead of attempting to closely follow him. The cohesion of Neil's Trio stemmed from this elasticity.

Plugged into an emergent Vancouver scene of musicians, dancers, poets, film makers, and light show artists, Neil's Trio soon found themselves opening for Janis Joplin and Big Brother and the Holding Company during Vancouver's Trips Festival of 1966, a three day event whose fare spanned The Grateful Dead and Michael McClure.

A most welcomed and necessary document, *RETROSPECTIVE 1965-1968* confirms Neil's status as a Canadian original, whose passionate abandon blurred the line between genius and goof." **Bill Shoemaker** -[Wire Magazine](#) (<http://www.thewire.co.uk/date/223sep.htm>) September 2002

"the muted and bowed effects of Anstey and Simpson's uncommon mastery of complex rhythms, serve to highlight the work of maestro Neil." **Vancouver Sun**

"Some of the straighter pieces sound sort of like Paul Bley on an acid trip. The more open ended tracks are the most valuable of what's here, but developments in the intervening years make it difficult to realize what a departure these performances represented at the time." **Canadian New Music Magazine**

"There is a sense of high excitement and interest, which is partly theatrical, partly musical and partly just weird, but after listening to this record, you won't soon forget it - fascinating." **Cadence Magazine**

"The **Al Neil Trio** created a challenging and demanding music with a sharp critical edge, filled with wit and verve. Their musical investigations represent some of the highest levels ever reached in any genre of Vancouver art in terms of their complexity, originality, commitment and intensity. These two CDs are a sample of the finest and the most original art of this or any other period in the history of the Vancouver art community, a true record of the best avant garde musical art of that time and place. *RETROSPECTIVE* is an invaluable contribution to the reintroduction of some of the most valuable moments in the history of Vancouver art and music."

Jamie Reid -vancouverjazz.com

"Canadian pianist Al Neil may be little known except for a circle of old Vancouver enthusiasts, but it makes this two-CD *RETROSPECTIVE* all the more fascinating to study. As a writer and poet, he imported his spontaneous cut-up technique into the music, which added to drummer [Gregg Simpson](#)'s tape loop contraption (the "vortexerola"), and bassist [Richard Anstey](#)'s uncanny vocalizations produced some very weird real-time sound collages. Neil's style combines elements of [Bud Powell](#), [Thelonious Monk](#), and [Taylor](#) (even though he wasn't aware of it); he has power, over-spilling emotions, and a certain form of madness that actually pushes the music further over the edge than what [Taylor](#) was doing at the time. It takes you back to the days when experimental music meant taking risks. A definitive document."

François Couture

-[All Music Guide](#)