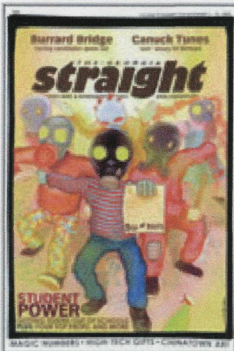


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This

year's edition of the LIVE Biennial of Performance Art is dedicated to the notion of the artist as prophet, shaman, masochist, addict, and anarchist—and with that in mind, the event could find no better figurehead than Al Neil, Vancouver's 81-year-old master of interdisciplinary art, psychic exploration, and creative chaos.

Neil's life is being celebrated in a variety of ways during LIVE's seven-week run: with a concert and video screening at the Western Front on Saturday (October 15); with a reading by Downtown Eastside artists at the Vancouver Public Library's central branch on October 21; with a NOW Orchestra—organized big-band tribute at the Roundhouse Community Arts & Recreation Centre on November 10; and with a performance featuring his long-time partner and collaborator Carol Itter at the Vancouver Art Gallery on November 25. But the biggest honour being paid him is the fact that LIVE exists at all: without Neil's pioneering work during the 1960s and '70s, the performance-art scene in Vancouver would be much smaller than it is, and it's likely that it wouldn't be capable of supporting such an extensive survey of the genre.

Neil got his artistic start in the relatively conventional field of classical music; surviving documents indicate that he was a promising student of the piano. But the Second World War intervened with his training, and during his military service he was introduced to the music that would serve as a touchstone through the entirety of his career: bebop, the then-radical jazz genre that mixed advanced harmony with a vivacious sense of urban life. He rapidly switched allegiances, and through most of the 1950s was B.C.'s premier bop pianist, a position he upheld by helping organize Vancouver's first avant-garde jazz club and by producing concerts for a number of like-minded American musicians, most notably Ornette Coleman. He also adopted the bohemian lifestyle, which proved a mixed blessing: along with his growing interest in the visual and literary arts came a taste for heroin and alcohol, as documented in his autobiographical novels *Changes* and *Slammer*.

The '60s saved him. Art and acid freed Neil from the worst of his addictions, while the counterculture gave him an audience for his staged happenings, which mixed music, literature, and theatre with elements of shamanic ritual. Just as bop offered Neil a way out of postwar Vancouver's stifling conservatism, these new multimedia productions introduced younger artists to a milieu in which nothing was forbidden, and the pianist soon emerged as

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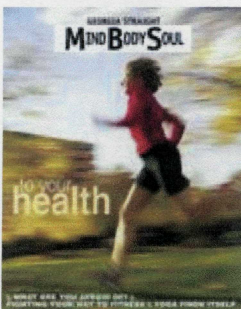
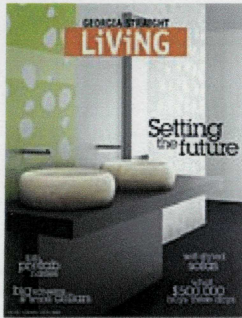
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the local scene's equivalent of Allen Ginsberg in New York City or Ken Kesey in the Bay Area: an intrepid explorer of psychic conditions that might resemble madness, but that unlocked the creative impulse in profound and unsettling ways. Locally, Neil's legacy lives on in genre-bending institutions such as the Western Front and the Video In, in our city's thriving free-jazz and experimental-music scene, in the memories of all those who had the chance to collaborate with him in his prime, and, of course, in LIVE.

Over the years, I've had a few encounters with Neil myself, and they've ranged from the sublime to the psychotic. One highlight was performing with him at the Western Front, as part of a band that also included electronic-music pioneer Martin Bartlett on Buchla synthesizer, author David Lee on upright bass, and sound artist Howard Broomfield on percussion; I was thrilled to be in such august and eclectic company, and deeply saddened later on, when we lost Bartlett to AIDS and Broomfield to suicide. But I also remember receiving menacing late-night phone calls after Plunderphonics mastermind John Oswald and I had taken on a project that Broomfield's death left unfinished: organizing and duplicating Neil's extensive tape archive. We were primarily concerned with making sure this body of work didn't disappear; Neil, however, was convinced we were going to steal his ideas and make a fortune from them. Needless to say, that wasn't going to happen—and it didn't.

More pleasant are my memories of the first time I visited Neil at his legendary Dollarton squatter's shack sometime during the early 1980s. After taking a hidden woodland trail to his rough cabin—which, perched on top of a small, permanently beached barge, seemed as much houseboat as house—we drank tea and discussed art and music to the accompaniment of his cat, making its delicate way across the keys of a battered upright piano. Slanting through dusty windows, the sun lit up Neil's flotsam assemblages just as surely the pianist's wayward yet erudite conversation illuminated the idea that it's possible to build a life around constant exploration. For that lesson, I'll always be thankful, as will the thousands of others who learned it under this madman, mystic, and living legend's persistent tutelage.

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