

Musician-artist with more staying power than his work

TRIBUTE | At 81, it's much easier to find Al Neil than his books, collages

BY GREG BUIUM
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For more than two decades, the idea of Al Neil — Vancouver musician, artist, writer and wild, subterranean seer — seemed to have more staying power than his work.

Unless you remember him playing bebop piano at the old Cellar in the '50s, or his experimental multi-media projects at the Motion Studio in the '60s or his readings around town in the early '80s, it's hard to find anything solid to stand on. The Vancouver Art Gallery owns a handful of his collages; his long out-of-print books — part-memoir, part-acid-laced stream-of-consciousness — can't be removed from the central library's stacks.

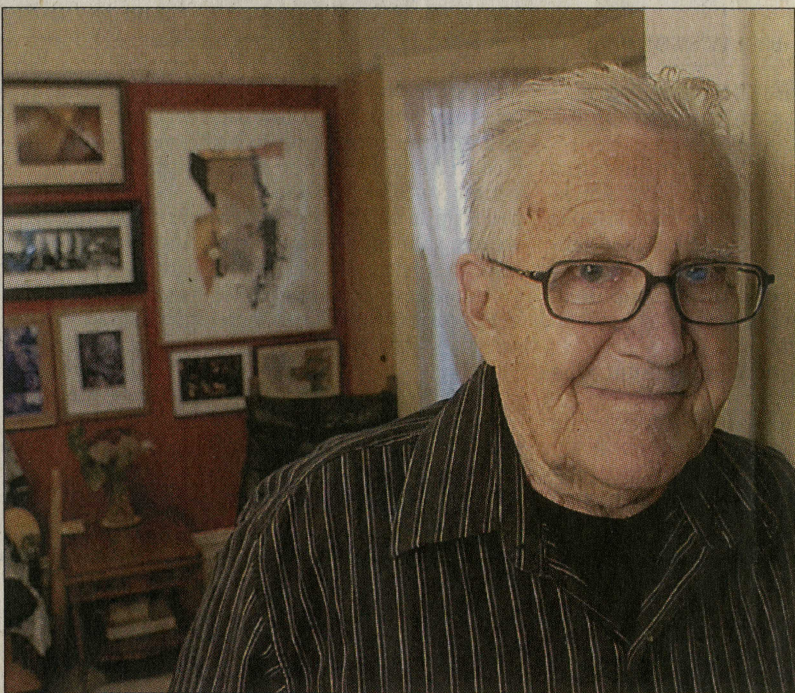
"He left fragments in every community he was in," says Glenn Alteen, director of the Grunt Gallery, who helped spearhead the four-part Al Neil Project, the core event at this year's LIVE Biennial of Performance Arts. "Al was a huge interdisciplinary artist in the '60s but as time went on, all those works went back into their disciplines and in some ways he disappeared."

So, during the next six weeks, the entire spectrum of his performance oeuvre will be celebrated, beginning tonight at the Western Front with readings, a screening of David Rimmer's film, *Al Neil: A Portrait*, and vocalizations of text by Kate Hammett-Vaughan. The project continues Friday at the central branch of the Vancouver public library with Michael Turner's reading series, *Under the Influence*; Nov. 10 at the Roundhouse Community Centre with a concert by the New Orchestra Workshop; and Nov. 25 at the Vancouver Art Gallery with images of his performance art wedded to electronic music.

Now 81, Neil himself won't be performing. He hasn't played piano publicly in more than 10 years. He hasn't written in far longer, although he still gathers stray material — some might say junk — for assemblages at his Dollarton cabin, the legendary spot he's maintained since the mid-'60s.

"That they're doing this, I'm pleased and embarrassed at the same time," Neil told me recently when we spoke in the Strathcona duplex he shares with his longtime partner, artist Carole Itter.

Sitting with him in his beautiful, bright Hawks Avenue home seemed in its own way a kind of surreal, three-dimensional collage. Here was a small, gracious old man: neat, short,



WARD PERRIN/VANCOUVER SUN

Al Neil has influenced the Vancouver Art community during the last 60 years. Several events will honour him during the next six weeks.

thinning grey hair, black pinstripe dress shirt, new Levi's, socks and sandals. Art, both his own and Itter's, packed the walls, a copy of *Retro-spective*, the only CD available from his '60s trio, on the shelf.

This wasn't some 21st-century Beat-pad of his past. The images of him performing in outlandish, homemade costumes, long-hair and scratchy beard, in near complete disarray, a kind of shock and awe of Dada experiments, sex, drugs and subversion seemed a bizarre dream.

He considers himself a musician first, an artist second. His early love of bebop, when it still stood on the genre's outer fringe after the Second World War, was where his artistic life began, although he soon tore down its structures, too, following Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor into freer forms. By the early '60s he had become arguably Canada's first avant-garde pianist. Hooking up with drummer Gregg Simpson and bassist Richard Anstey, his trio experimented with projections and text and electronics (Simpson even fiddled with turntables) in a unique aura collage.

"I never really talked to them about it," Neil says of today's Vancouver improvisers, many with the current New Orchestra Workshop, who have been inspired by his example. "But I put it together pretty easily. I broke

with the past and was probably one of the first to do that in Vancouver when I gave up the bebop."

He was a talismanic figure to any number of communities: diving into performance art and poetry and, as a devoted junk collector, a builder of huge assemblages.

"I never used driftwood but I found stuff off the beach," he remembered when he began in the early '60s. "I'd get old chairs that were no good anymore and would start loading them with big pails of rusty wire and dolls and things cast off in the lanes in the West End. Rusty bed frames."

He just followed his interests, ill-focused, perhaps, but authentic.

"Look at it this way, I had lots of time on my hands," he explains. "You can't play the piano 12 hours a day and all the people I hung out with were artists and writers and would-be novelists and so on."

Might he have had more renown if he'd stuck to one thing?

"I never had the ambition to do anything other than I did, so that kind of thought if it occurred to anybody it wasn't me," he says, bursting into loud, warm laughter.

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For information about the Al Neil Project contact the Grunt Gallery at 604-875-9516 or go to www.coastal-jazz.ca and follow the links.