

Sui generis statesman

PERFORMANCE

Jeff MacIntyre

Judging by comments from his peers, Al Neil is the embodiment of avant-garde art. But can a man in the midst of a month-long homage still lay claim to the title King of the Underground?

In a performing career spanning five decades and artistic endeavours ranging from visual collage to poetry to jazz, it would seem that 81-year-old Al Neil has grown from scenerist alchemist to elder rascal. Beginning this week as part of the Live Biennale of Performance Art, a series of concerts, readings and installations dubbed the Al Neil Project honours Vancouver's pre-eminent interdisciplinary artist.

The fuss is partly a product of Neil's musical prescience. "Here's a guy who introduces Vancouver to hard bop in the 1950s," explains Glenn Alteen, curator at the Grunt Gallery, "then starts playing music that sounded like Mothers of Invention, before they even existed."

Musician and artist Gregg Simpson, who played with Neil from the age of 19, drumming and — long before hip-hop — scratching records on a turntable, says Neil's nearest peers in jazz are pianists Elmo Hope and Bud Powell.

Neil is not just "the consummate improvisational artist," though,

guitarist-composer Ron Samworth says. Both his visual art and music draw from an impossibly wide array of influences, from the Dadaists to the psychedelics, John Cage to Marcel Duchamp. Neil also held court — either socially or in performance — with legends including Janis Joplin, Art Pepper, Kenneth Patchen and the Grateful Dead.

"He brought a fusion to performance art that is not seen any more," Alteen says. "He was such an anomaly, in terms of where he was coming from and where he was going. He did not fit in. He belongs to all these communities and yet none, so nothing will give you a true sense of his total output."

Unfortunately, but for a recently reissued double CD *Retrospective: Al Neil Trio, 1965-1968*, the documentary record of Neil's work is scant. "Al's important — a conscience — but a ghost to most," says author Michael Turner, who will present a night of readings as part of the upcoming events.

The absence of recordings and traces from his career is something the Al Neil Project aims to reverse, reintroducing Neil to the artistic scene he did so much to invigorate over the years.

"If there was no Al Neil we would have had to invent him," says Brian Nation, a local jazz aficionado. "He's that original."

As for the man himself, he says: "Long ago, I learned that nobody would stop me from doing whatever I wanted to do."

Special to The Globe and Mail

The Al Neil Project

Oct. 15. A tribute including vocalizations of Neil's texts by Kate Hammett-Vaughan, a screening of David Rimmer's film *Al Neil: A Portrait* and a reading from Neil's work by Michael Turner. 8 p.m. \$10. The Western Front, 303 East 8th Ave., 604-875-9516.

Oct. 21. A series of readings, including pieces by Neil himself, curated by Michael Turner. 8 p.m. Free. Vancouver Public Library, 350 W. Georgia St.

Nov. 10. A tribute concert presented by the Coastal Jazz and Blues Society. 8 p.m. \$12. Roundhouse Community Centre, 181 Roundhouse Mews.

Nov. 25. Visuals and imagery from Neil's performance art are mounted at the Vancouver Art Gallery. 9 p.m. \$10. 750 Hornby St.

For detailed information on The Al Neil Project contact Grunt Gallery 604-875-9516 or visit www.livevancouver.bc.ca.



JIM JARDINE

Al Neil's work in mediums from music to collage continues to influence fellow artists and creators.

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Saturday, October 22, 12 pm
Brigantine Room

Kostova reads from her blockbuster *The Historian*. Mosse reads from *Labyrinth*, a new novel which spans eight hundred years of history in the south of France. Welsh reads from *Tamburlaine Must Die*, a thrilling historical murder mystery.

Will Ferguson

Sunday, October 23, 3 pm
Studio Theatre

Ferguson's debut novel *Happiness* won the Leacock Medal for Humour. He presents *Hitching Rides With Buddha*, a comedic travelogue of his experiences with cherry blossoms and automobiles in Japan. He will be interviewed by Antanas Sileika.

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