

Praise for *Live at the Cellar*

“In *Live at the Cellar*, Marian Jago deftly explores the phenomenon of co-operative jazz clubs, a neglected area in the study of jazz. While her book focuses on the fertile scene surrounding Vancouver’s Cellar Club and, to a lesser degree, parallel clubs in Edmonton, Calgary and Halifax, her methodology, insights, and conclusions provide an excellent basis for comparative work on co-operatives in the United States and Europe. A pioneering work, this book makes a substantial contribution to jazz scholarship.”

– ROB BOWMAN, Grammy Award-winning musicologist and professor of ethnomusicology, York University

“I grew up in Vancouver during the formative years of ‘the new jazz,’ and I was fortunate enough to be at the ‘right place and time’ to watch jazz history being made. These clubs were our jazz ‘school,’ where we learned all about this North American art form. Our music was formed in a ‘crucible’ of jazz, where all of the elements fused together to form something new. In *Live at the Cellar*, Marian Jago perfectly chronicles this chapter in Canadian jazz, something that few have revealed in such detail. Her amazing book captures the spirit and essence of that time and that experience.”

– TERRY CLARKE, C.M., drummer and Canadian jazz icon

“The Cellar on Watson Street was a huge part Vancouver’s jazz history and had an obvious influence on my own club, The Cellar on Broadway. I would’ve given anything to be around during the heyday of Vancouver’s jazz co-ops – this book helps me close my eyes and imagine what it was like to be there!”

– CORY WEEDS, jazz musician and owner of The Cellar on Broadway

MARIAN JAGO

live at the
CELLAR

vancouver's iconic jazz club
and the canadian co-operative
jazz scene in the 1950s and '60s



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For all the players.

And particularly for Lance,
who got this all rolling so many years ago.

And also for Mark Miller,
whose work on Canadian jazz lit the way.

It's been an honour.

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Introduction

*We started from nothing. We just had this record store.
We met there. It didn't have that many customers, either,
come to think of it.*

– Al Neil

In the mid-1950s, something new was happening on the Canadian musical landscape. In smaller urban centres far from the hub-bub of Toronto and Montreal, musicians interested in “modern jazz” – the sort of jazz that had developed in the wake of bebop and the Second World War – were coming together to create places in which the music could be celebrated, practised, listened to, and performed. “Do-it-yourself” affairs of the highest order, the clubs these musicians formed were borne of shared interest, and mutual support. Against a social backdrop that offered few other options, these players and enthusiasts rented rooms, built stages and tables, formed alliances, leveraged connections, practised hard, and brought forth an exceptional burst of musical activity that still reverberates today.

This book looks at a unique ten-year period (roughly 1955–65) that saw the inception of artist-run, co-operative jazz clubs in four Canadian cities: Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, and Halifax. Though these clubs developed in regions of Canada marginal to the jazz activity of Montreal and Toronto, they had a profound influence on the development of jazz in Canada. By providing performance

spaces for jazz where none existed previously, these clubs made it possible for Canadian musicians to stay home, at least regionally speaking, while actively pursuing an interest in jazz and developing themselves as performers. The creation of these strong regional nodes for jazz performance in many ways laid the groundwork for the pan-Canadian jazz scene we now take for granted, with its attendant festivals, societies, and various college and university jazz programs.

In these clubs, young musicians worked on their music free from the commercial constraints of the hotel dance band, free from the generic restrictions of traditional (Dixieland) and big (dance) band jazz, and, for the most part, free from the professional pressures and obligations of the studio orchestra musician. At the same time, these co-operative spaces provided a nexus for the development of postwar countercultural expression in other arts such as poetry, literature, theatre, and film, all of which were similarly marginalized outside Canada's major urban centres. Nowhere was the importance and cultural influence of these spaces more evident than in Vancouver, where the Cellar provided a welcoming and collaborative home for experimental arts practice during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

This book was initially conceived as an examination of five jazz co-operatives across four Canadian cities from the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s. They were the Cellar and Black Spot/Flat Five in Vancouver,¹ the Yardbird Suite in Edmonton, Foggy Manor in Calgary, and 777 Barrington Street in Halifax – all important regional hubs for jazz development during the period and home to important jazz festivals, societies, and educational programs since the 1980s. This goal quickly proved unfeasible due to the dearth of scholarship and scanty surviving evidence about the majority of these clubs. Regrettably, therefore, while the Foggy Manor, Yardbird Suite, and 777 Barrington Street were doubtlessly significant spaces for their local jazz communities, they play a less prominent role in this book, and much about their structure and operation must be inferred from what we know about the better-documented clubs in Vancouver: the Cellar and the Black Spot/Flat Five.

Of all the co-operative clubs discussed in this book, Vancouver's Cellar has simply left behind the most evidence. A majority of the

founding members of the Cellar were still alive and were willing to be interviewed;² the club advertised regularly in local newspapers; several club members were enthusiastic photographers; and promotional material for the club, including concert posters, has survived. As a result, a considerable amount of archival material is available, including several photographs of the club's interior taken by CBC photographer Franz Linder in 1961. In addition, a 1964 National Film Board documentary on Vancouver's arts scene titled *In Search of Innocence* contains film footage of the Cellar, which includes a short performance by the Al Neil Trio with Don Thompson (bass) and Glenn McDonald (saxophone).³ This short sequence offers a valuable glimpse into the atmosphere of the Cellar, its audience, and contemporary attempts to merge jazz and poetry (see Chapter 4).

Significantly, the Cellar also provided me with the only opportunity to *hear* contemporary performances by the musicians involved in one of these co-operative ventures. The surviving recordings were not made at the Cellar itself, nor are they contemporary commercial releases, but privately held copies of three live CBC radio broadcasts from 1956 and 1957 did offer a rare opportunity to hear key members of the Vancouver co-operative playing jazz (standards and original compositions) at the same time they were active at the Cellar. Additionally, three recordings featuring American guest artists at the Cellar exist. The first one is a rare bootleg recording of saxophonist Harold Land's otherwise unrecorded quartet featuring Elmo Hope (piano), a young Scott LaFaro (bass), and Lennie McBrowne (drums), released by Spanish label Fresh Sound in 2007 as *Harold Land: Jazz at the Cellar 1958*. The second, *Kenneth Patchen Reads with Jazz in Canada* (Folkways, 1959), features pianist Al Neil with a group of Cellar-based musicians backing American poet Kenneth Patchen (see Chapter 4). And the third is *The Montgomery Brothers in Canada* (Fantasy 3323, 1961), which was recorded after hours at the Cellar specifically for commercial release.

As a result of a conscious attempt by the Cellar's membership to connect to the jazz scene beyond the confines of Vancouver, the club hosted touring American artists with remarkable frequency. Many, like Harold Land and Art Pepper, were notable stars of the day, and

others, such as Scott LaFaro, Don Cherry, and Ornette Coleman, were significant emerging artists. More than simply stopping by for a jam session or a single evening's performance, these visitors were often booked for lengthy engagements at the Cellar. Their extended stays in Vancouver led to the formation of personal relationships with local musicians, and to an organic interaction with the Cellar membership, which would often include rehearsals, jam sessions, formal performances, pedagogy, and informal discussions or "hangs."

Before proceeding further, it would be best to consider exactly what a "jazz co-operative" is and how it differs from commercial jazz clubs and other venues, such as cafés and restaurants, that also provide a welcoming space for jazz performance but operate as for-profit businesses. For the purposes of this book, a jazz co-operative is defined as a club that is conceived, operated, and managed by the musicians themselves with only nominal outside help. The rent and other operating expenses are borne as a shared risk by members of the co-operative without significant outside help, government funding, or private or commercial sponsorship. In addition, major decisions pertaining to booking, advertising, and the like are reached via consensus through an official board of directors, designated club manager, or some less formal means of group decision making. The clubs function as not-for-profit organizations, whether or not formally incorporated as such (several were formally registered). Though some key individuals may receive compensation for taking on particularly time-consuming roles in the operation of the club (manager, cleaner, etc.), the emphasis is on a volunteer-based, shared distribution of the workload.

Because the central role of the musicians themselves in the venue's establishment and operation is the main feature of jazz co-operatives, some important early Canadian jazz venues that were operated primarily by jazz enthusiasts rather than jazz musicians are excluded here. These include venues such as Victoria's Scene Club, Vancouver's Espresso Coffee House and Inquisition Coffee House, Winnipeg's Rando Manor and Stage Door, and most of Toronto's well-known jazz clubs.

This book is also largely unconcerned with club activities in such major urban areas as Toronto and Montreal, in part because jazz in

these cities has been fairly well documented,⁴ but mainly because these cities provided enough commercial opportunities for jazz and jazz-related music that self-organizing, co-operative performance spaces were unnecessary. In other words, both cities enjoyed populations and urban density sufficient to support nightclubs, coffee houses, and other performance venues, and jazz, to a large extent, was an economically viable pursuit. This is not to suggest that jazz performance in Montreal and Toronto was necessarily a lucrative venture, or even that numerous dedicated jazz venues existed at all times in these cities, but simply that there were enough performance spaces available to forestall the need for the establishment of artist-run co-operative jazz spaces.

One notable exception may be Toronto's MINC (Musicians Incorporated Club), which opened in 1959. This club existed largely to provide a performance venue for those musicians excluded from the local Toronto branch of the American Federation of Musicians Union, and thus from much paid work in the city. The majority of these musicians were American, others were newly arrived from other Canadian cities, and almost all were waiting to clear the union's six-month waiting period before they could join the Toronto local.⁵ For many of Toronto's black musicians, the MINC also served as a venue in which they could practise and perform jazz, rather than the R&B, blues, and dance band music that formed much of their staple employment. Some, such as guitarist Sonny Greenwich, used the creative freedom offered by the MINC to evolve an interest in more avant-garde forms of jazz, the sounds of which were often absent from Toronto's major jazz venues.⁶ The MINC therefore served a decidedly different purpose from the co-operative clubs, such as the Cellar, that are the focus of this book and which often represented the only performance opportunities for jazz in the cities where they operated.⁷ As something of a unique case, Toronto's MINC is discussed in some detail in Chapter 7.

Unlike many music scenes that have recently been the focus of musicological enquiry,⁸ the jazz scenes described in this book existed outside the concerns of the contemporary commercial recording industry, and were largely unaffected by the desires and ambitions of musicians trying to establish "professional" recording careers. Musicians interested in jazz understood that this genre of music

occupied a decidedly marginal place within Canadian popular culture, and the Canadian recording industry. Local record stores did not generally stock jazz recordings, and albums of even the “big” American jazz artists often had to be specially ordered. And while American recordings may have had limited availability in Canada, domestically produced Canadian jazz recordings essentially did not exist.⁹ Oscar Peterson was recording commercially as of 1945 (largely in the United States), but few domestically based Canadian jazz artists were commercially recorded before the mid-1960s. Significant exceptions were clarinettist Phil Nimmons who recorded out of Toronto for Verve and RCA in the late 1950s and 1960s, multi-instrumentalist Lance Harrison who recorded for RCA in 1965, and, later, saxophonist Fraser MacPherson in 1973 and again in 1976 when he released *Live at the Planetarium*, notable for its release three years later on American jazz label Concord Records.¹⁰ Despite their popularity, CBC Vancouver stalwarts such as Chris Gage, Ray Norris, and Eleanor Collins did not record commercially at all.

While the domestic recording industry in Canada as a whole was admittedly rather limited during this period, it had flourished during the 1920s, particularly in Montreal. Several companies were active in the classical, folk and popular music fields, their catalogues including the novelty rags of pianists Willie Eckstein, Vera Guilaroff, and Harry Thomas, and the efforts of such jazz (or, more accurately, “hot dance”) bands as the local Melody Kings and the Toronto band of pianist Gilbert Watson. The Apex subsidiary of Toronto’s Compo records, for example, was recording Canadian artists as early as 1920, and released some three hundred Canadian recordings between 1921 and 1925. The extent to which these recordings were distributed outside Toronto and Montreal, however, remains unclear, and none of my interview subjects recalled any Canadian recordings as having been significant to their early musical exposure and development. It is worth pointing out that while Jack Litchfield’s excellent *Canadian Jazz Discography, 1916–1980* lists numerous recordings made by Canadian jazz groups and orchestras,¹¹ the vast majority of these were commissioned for broadcast use only, and were never commercially available. Similarly, many jazz musicians (based primarily in Montreal and

Toronto) recorded from 1962 to 1966 for the not-for-profit Canadian Talent Library, but once again these were intended only for radio broadcast and were not distributed commercially.¹²

As a result, any professional ambitions that were harboured by the young jazz musicians involved with these co-operative clubs were focused more on securing musical jobs within the lucrative studio scene centred at or around the CBC (television and radio), or with the remaining dance bands that worked the hotels, ballrooms, and supper clubs in most Canadian cities.¹³ In Vancouver, a well-recognized split developed between those musicians who inhabited the world of studio employment offered by the CBC and those who focused their musical energies around the jazz scene based out of the Cellar (initially) and the Black Spot and Flat Five clubs (later on).

The music presented on CBC television also rarely ventured into the realm of postwar small group jazz (bebop) as performed by the members of the Cellar and other co-ops. When the CBC did air such programming, it was generally with a well-known American star headlining. The local CBC radio station in Vancouver was a slightly different story, due in large part to the sheer amount of content required to fill the airwaves, and several of the Cellar-based groups did receive airplay as early as the late 1950s on programs such as *Jazz Workshop*,¹⁴ or on other programs as guests performing opposite American artists booked to play the Cellar.

As a result, performance practice at the Cellar (and at other Canadian jazz co-ops) was for the most part free from pressure to conform to a particular definition of jazz, or to seek a middle ground between jazz and more popular programming in the hopes of finding wider popular and commercial success. Rather, the construction and performance of musical identity at these co-ops was self-regulating; it depended upon the internal consensus of the scene itself rather than on external, economically driven pressures. Indeed, the one major organizational breakdown at the Cellar occurred over one faction's desire to broaden the appeal of the club and "go commercial" against the wishes of the majority of the membership. This is not to say that the Cellar or the other jazz co-ops operated completely free of the jazz marketplace, but only that market pressures were largely secondary concerns connected to the American recording industry and its influence on the shaping and

making of taste and performance repertoire.

Before considering the activities of the Cellar and the other co-operative jazz scenes specifically, Chapter 1 of this book explores the concept of “scene” in general, along with its relationship to a methodological tool known as the “scenes perspective.” We all understand the use of the word “scene” in everyday language, but when considered more critically, examinations of “scene” and the community-based (and community-building) activity it engenders can be a powerful tool for understanding the emergence of varied, localized musical practices against notions of musical homogeneity. This introductory consideration of the scenes perspective is followed in Chapter 2 by a brief look at the socio-cultural climate in postwar Canada that contributed to the development of co-operative jazz clubs, including improvements in regional and national transportation systems and radio broadcasting, as well as an examination of the state of the Canadian jazz scene more generally. Given the book’s focus on the Cellar, particular attention is paid to the early history of jazz in Vancouver and to the convoluted history of liquor regulation in British Columbia, which had a significant impact on live music venues in the city.

The bulk of the book is concerned with Vancouver’s Cellar club (Chapters 3–6), and its evolution from the day it opened its doors in 1956 to its eventual closure in the mid-1960s. In charting the Cellar’s roughly ten-year lifespan, this book considers the various ways in which the Cellar and the actions of its members created and enacted a jazz scene; its expansion of activities to include regular appearances by well-known American jazz artists; its role as a multi-disciplinary arts space that combined jazz with poetry, visual art, and theatre; and the ways in which this egalitarian co-operative venture remained very much a largely white, largely male-dominated space.

The success of the Cellar had a profound impact on the musical landscape of Vancouver, which by the early 1960s had expanded to include such clubs as the Inquisition Coffee House and the Espresso Coffee House, as well as the Black Spot/Flat Five, a co-operative jazz venture modelled expressly upon the Cellar. The rise of these new venues, along with the Cellar’s slow decline as the key jazz space in Vancouver, are explored at length in Chapter 6. Chapter

7 then looks at the parallel establishment in the late 1950s of Edmonton's Yardbird Suite, Calgary's Foggy Manor, and Halifax's 777 Barrington Street, as well as briefly considering the contemporary jazz landscapes of Toronto and Montreal.

In detailing the ways in which musicians came to create performative communities, this book offers evidence of musical lifeways that have become increasingly rare. It also provides a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of jazz centred in America, and on American jazz practices. Taken together, the actions and activities of these early jazz co-operatives created a new and infectious energy for jazz in Canada, one which I argue had a lasting impact through the 1990s and early 2000s, a period that Mark Miller has called a "golden era" for jazz in Canada. These unique co-operative ventures and the grassroots processes at the heart of regional jazz practices in Canada are a vital and previously unexamined part of the history of jazz in this country.

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