Twenty-Five in B&W: An Improviser’s Gallery

Barry Thomson

Abstract

The Toronto-based photographer and jazz aficionado Barry Thomson has been shooting photos documenting the Toronto jazz and improvising scene for years. CSI/ECI is pleased to be able to publish a small selection from his vast archives, including short comments and recollections associated with each photo. At the 2011 Guelph Jazz Festival, Thomson and CSI Co-Editor Daniel Fischlin discussed making at least a small portion of the archive available to the general public. The following gallery hints at the rich stream of superb improvising musicians that have passed through Toronto in the last twenty-seven years or so—the earliest photos in this gallery date back to 1985.
Dewey Redman: 1998 @ East 85th St. Club, Toronto
Dewey was always a quiet, smiling, easy-going individual.
Hamiet Bluiett: 1998 @ Toronto Jazz Festival
One of the best baritone saxophonists still playing today, Hamiet is a wonderfully strong and soulful player. He always takes his time and plays out of a deep, spiritual place. A man of few words, he lets his music do the talking.
Evan Parker: 1995 @ The Rivoli Club, Toronto
Another quiet man whose playing is as explosive as Coltrane—a true force of nature.
Kenny Wheeler: 1993 @ The Senator Club, Toronto
Kenny is a beautiful lyrical player on trumpet, flugelhorn, and cornet. I showed him the photo that I took of him and just like a silent film star he sat down and showed the photo this way back to me. I didn’t do a thing but take another photo—naturally.
Roscoe Mitchell: 1997 @ The Music Gallery, Toronto
Roscoe is a great, understated player. I really appreciate artists like him: they allow you to get in really close, not just for detail, but to catch their music and their character.
Warren Harding “Sonny” Sharrock: 1991 @ The Bermuda Onion Club, Toronto

Sonny played with such atonal force—he was everyone’s favourite ‘inside’ guitarist. Why else would Miles Davis have had him appear on Live Evil and Jack Johnson with John McLaughlin? Remember, on the seminal Herbie Mann recording Memphis Underground with Larry Coryell, producer Tom Dowd wanted to cut all three minutes of Sonny’s atonal blast on “Chain of Fools” because it sounded to him like a mass of monstrous noise.
Jackie McLean: 1997 @ Toronto Jazz Festival
A great player with unique musical instincts. Some of my last memories of him are watching him playing with his son and fellow saxophonist René McLean, the hard bop saxophonist and flutist. What beautiful, unforced music they made together.
Lester Bowie: 1990 @ The Bamboo Club, Toronto
I loved the way Lester Bowie played trumpet, especially with the Art Ensemble of Chicago. He always made music in a joyful, celebratory manner: playing, dancing, and leading.
Ed Blackwell was and is the “Rock of Gibraltar”: so solid, so strong, so eternal! This is the reason he was Ornette Coleman’s first and greatest drummer.
Mal Waldron: 1988 @ Manta Sound Studio, Toronto
Mal Waldron was a great solo pianist and a great accompanist to Billie Holiday and Charles Mingus. I will always remember his wide, subtle smile—his cigarillo in hand and his cool, patent leather boots.
David Murray: 1993 @ The Jazz Junction Club, Toronto
David Murray is a nice guy with a quick, intense temper—and he plays that way too. Here he is in hot leather pants behind a Frank Stella-type wall painting—just warming up.
Joe McPhee: 1985 @ York Hotel, Toronto

Joe McPhee is a deliberate, thoughtful player no matter what his instrument, whether pocket trumpet, sax, or clarinet. He is the “quiet” in the storm. I attended a sound check where everyone in the band was uptight and nervous and only Joe kept his head. He played cool, acted cool—a real person in control of his faculties. I respect him for his self-control and his irrepressibly positive outlook.
Susie Ibarra: 1999 @ The Music Gallery, Toronto
A young drummer who played with William Parker, Matthew Shipp, and David Douglas, among many others. She is a study in calm, reasoned, yet volatile playing.
Don Pullen was the pure Dionysus of piano, in spite of being the most calm, in-control person. Yet his playing could reach beyond the percussive extremes of the post-Cecil Taylor style of attack. I recall that the CBC lent one of Glenn Gould’s Steinway pianos to the Café des Copains for Don Pullen to play. When they came to pick up the piano, they found that the piano was not just knocked out of key, but covered in dried blood the whole length and breadth of the keyboard. That is the last time they ever loaned the piano out. In this photo, Don was playing and Charlie Haden came over and said, “Man! That’s the note we’re looking for!”

Don Pullen (piano) and Charlie Haden (bass): 1991 @ The Jane Millet Theatre, Toronto
Freddie Stone was a great Canadian player, especially on the flugelhorn. He played with Duke Ellington in the 1960s and was the main reason Ellington introduced the rock orchestra Lighthouse (he also played trumpet in this band) at their big Toronto debut in 1968 at the Rockpile (The Masonic Temple) Theatre.
Domenic Duval: 1999 @ Lofton Spadina St. near Queen St., Toronto

Domenic Duval is the dean of free jazz bassists. He has worked with, among others, Cecil Taylor, Joe McPhee, and Polish improvising legend Adam Makowicz (piano). He is a big man who plays with great humour and agility.
Satoko Fujii: 1997 @ The Montreal Bistro Club, Toronto
Satoko is a lady of tremendous skill and emotion: her strong, yet quiet intensity shone through to the negative—and to me.
John Taylor: 2001 @ The Senator Club, Toronto

A player with Kenny Wheeler and Norma Winstone in the band Azimuth, John Taylor also worked with the Michael Gibbs band. Taylor is a forthright gentleman and a skilful, beautiful piano player. I love the way he gets into and down with the keyboard, just like Cecil Taylor and Thelonious Monk.
Steve Lacy played the soprano saxophone better than almost anyone I have ever heard. John Coltrane is reputed to have said that Lacy’s playing inspired him to take up the soprano sax.
Andrew Cyrille is a truly great percussionist who has played with everyone from Cecil Taylor to Sam Rivers (sax). He has a charming, piercing smile and a percussive style to match.
Andrew Hill was a twenty-first century master composer and pianist. It was my privilege and honour to photograph a two-and-a-half hour sound check of Beethoven, Chopin, and Brahms and to experience a truly spiritual performance.
Sonny Greenwich: 1985 @ The East of 85th St. Club, Toronto
This great Montreal guitarist played many times in Toronto with his musical friends, especially Don Thompson (piano/bass/vibes) and Kenny Wheeler (trumpet). His guitar style is orchestral—a contemporary to John McLaughlin in style and similar to Sonny Sharrock in intensity. When Sonny was in New York in the 1950s, Miles Davis heard him in a number of clubs and repeatedly asked him to join his band.
Gerry Hemingway: 1998 @ The Rivoli Club, Toronto
Gerry Hemingway is a subtle, audacious percussionist, open to all percussive drum traditions from around the world. He always has an expressive, playful aspect to his playing that makes him a great subject for photos.