

JAZZ REVIEWS / *When Montreal guitarist Sonny Greenwich started out, his approach put him in the jazz avant-garde. But one of the problems with originality is that it's hard to sustain*

On the left bank of the mainstream

BY MARK MILLER
Special to The Globe and Mail
TORONTO — Sonny Greenwich is original. That's not the easiest of things to take on in the Canadian jazz

scene, where musicians are measured against U.S. models and generally judged to be wanting when they fail to size up. Never mind that they might just be working from a differ-

ent pattern altogether.

For the Montreal-based guitarist, 56, originality now poses another challenge: it's hard to sustain. The music Greenwich was playing in Wednesday night's short first set at Toronto's Top O' The Senator bore strong resemblance to the music he was playing in 1970 — just to pick the year in which he made his first album.

There was a roughness, an imprecision, to his performance this week that wasn't particularly apparent 22 years before — it might simply be a function of the infrequency of Greenwich's public appearances these days — but the basic precepts of the guitarist's style remain the same. The bright, horn-like tone. The hard, chiselled notes. The unyielding yet lyrical phrasing.

Back in 1970, indeed back in 1960 when he turned from R & B to jazz, there was only the distant precedent of Charlie Christian to account for Greenwich's approach to the instrument — Charlie Christian filtered through John Coltrane, perhaps. At the time, it put Greenwich in the jazz avant-garde. But not now — not even in Canada. Now he's simply on the left bank of the mainstream.

His band in 1992 looks more than a little like his band around 1970. Toronto's Don Thompson is again at the piano, returning after a hiatus of several years in the 1980s and bringing a certain equilibrium to Greenwich's still far-reaching solos. Mike Allen has the role of 'Trane-like tenorman taken back when by Ron Park and later by Michael Stuart. Bassist Brian Hurley and drummer Jim Hillman, like Allen from Montreal, complete the quintet.

Greenwich has never shied away from a strong rhythm section. This one, however, riding on Hillman's choppy, surging style of drumming, does not build as smoothly as some of the others to the sort of emotional crescendo that has characterized Greenwich's music at its most compelling. The quintet fell short of that inspired height early Wednesday; instead, the really striking aspect of the set was supplied by Allen, who draws on the Coltrane tradition in a way that purposely avoids the obvious. Allen's evasive timing and melodic unpredictability are the marks of yet another original in the making.

The Sonny Greenwich Quintet continues nightly at the Top O' The Senator until Sunday.

