

# SLOW JAZZ

**M**ontreal's jazz community lost a landmark this fall. After four years of jazz bookings, Claudio's in Old Montreal closed at the end of October. One of the most significant jazz clubs in the city, Claudio's provided work for local musicians, hosted the Alcan Jazz Competition semi-finals this past spring and was an important venue for visiting Canadian and American "name" acts like Peter Leitch, Bobby Watson, and Henry Threadgill. It was also an important location, with its excellent acoustics, for recordings by the CBC and others. But, as Elda Guglielmann observes, "the capacity of the room was greater than the number of regular fans." One of the local musicians who played at Claudio's is tenor saxophonist Mike Allen.

**T**he 26-year-old Kingston native moved to Montreal in 1985 for two reasons—Allen was impressed with the calibre of Montreal musicians, and McGill had the only degree programme in jazz at that time. While still at McGill, Allen formed the Urban Turbans with fellow Kingstonian Peter Hum, a pianist now turned journalist. The six-piece band won the Löwenbrau Jazz Search in 1986 and was a finalist in the 1987 Alcan Jazz Competition, representing the eastern region.

After graduating from McGill in 1987, Allen, thanks to a Canada Council grant, spent a year in New York studying with saxophonist Dave Liebman from whom he learned a lot, he says, about technique and sound production.

Along the way, Allen has man-

aged to do a fair bit of recording, including an unreleased session with trumpeter Kenny Wheeler, led by pianist-composer Jan Jarczyk, and a self-produced unreleased recording of his own compositions with a group that includes former Montreal resident Jon Ballantyne on piano.

Luckily, there are two recordings that are generally available that feature Mike Allen's creative sax playing. One is the 1987 recording with the one-off group Vikrama, a project conceived by leader Knut Haugsoen, a Winnipeg-based pianist and composer. That album, by the way, was engineered by ECM sound-meister Jan Erik Kongshaug. The most recent recording is the Pete Magadini Quintet's *Night Dreamers*, which features two of Allen's compositions, including the beautiful *Exchanging Love*, and features some of his Liebman-inspired soprano playing. Allen's association with drummer Pete Magadini dates back to 1989 and is an excellent vehicle for Allen's melodic explorations on his main horn, the tenor.

Recently, Allen had the chance to do a CBC recording with Montreal guitar legend Sonny Greenwich, along with Charles Ellison on trumpet, Fred Henke on piano, Brian Hurley on bass, and Jim Hillman on drums. That session will air on CBC's *Jazz Beat* early in the new year. Allen has also landed a record deal with Montreal's Amplitude Records, a label that has captured on disc many of the city's top players including saxophonist Yannick Rieu and guitarist Nelson Symonds with drummer Bernard Primeau. Allen goes into the studio in February to record this, his debut as a leader. The record will feature mostly original material, plus a couple of standards. Beyond that, he's not ready to talk about the project, except that it will revolve around a sax-bass-drum trio, with a couple of tunes adding guitar or trumpet.

Yet, despite Allen's rising star in the Montreal jazz scene, all the breaks he's had and the promise he shows, he admits to not having had a club gig since August. He's both philo-

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sophical and practical about this.

"I've been spending most of my time composing as a way of being productive during the times when I'm not playing," he says. "When you're playing in clubs, you really don't have the time to think about what you're trying to get from music. You just put in your hours like you have a job, and you're working Monday to Friday. You're occupied—consumed—with just getting through that process. That's the same at a club. It's gruelling playing until 3h."

Allen is fortunate in still being able to pursue his craft. A lot of other musicians would be frustrated and bitter about a city that provides more gigs for the jazz musician in the subway system than in nightclubs or concert halls, outside of the 10-day summer jazz season.

Allen sees the scene becoming increasingly localized and insular. He regrets that there are few international acts passing through during the year because, as he sees it, "you have to have outside influences for the scene to grow." While many put this down to economic factors, Allen also sees political forces at work, which lead to the channelling of money to promote Quebec music and culture. "I don't think you define a culture by eliminating other cultures. You always have to have that influence. You always have to have people going in and people going out to see what you really are as a city, as a culture."