

Don Thompson

Interviewed by **Cory Weeds**

The following interview took place during Don Thompson's visit to Vancouver to perform with VEJI at The Cellar in September 2002.



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You've just come off three night playing at The Cellar. The first two with The Hugh Fraser Quintet and then the third night with a much larger ensemble, Hugh Fraser's VEJI. Both ensembles were playing all of your music for the first time. How did it go?

It actually went really well. There were two things that were actually being premiered at The Cellar. *April Snow* was a new chart and *Ask Me Later* was a new chart. Its not a new tune but it's a new chart and that's actually the first time I heard either one of them. I was happy with both of them. I was amazed how well

the band played with next to no rehearsal at all.

You have a long history with Hugh Fraser. Can you talk a bit about it?

Well I went to Banff in December in 1981 and Hugh Fraser had his original VEJI band up there. Campbell (Ryga) was there, Perry (White) was there and Joe Bjornson and a bunch of guys and they had been there for about a three month residency. I got there for the last week of it. So I spent a week with them and we ended up doing a concert which was great. I was supposed to go up there and help them with something. I don't know what, because they were playing all this fantastic music. It was just a great hang

You are originally from Powell River (BC) and spent some of your formative years here in Vancouver before moving around and ending up in Toronto. Talk a bit about what was happening around that time on the Vancouver jazz scene.

There was a lot going on, I tell ya, because when I came here it was 1960 and I had a friend that played trumpet and used to come to Powell River. I talked about coming to Vancouver. He worked for CBC and ended up getting me a job at the CBC in the mail room. I was supposed to deliver mail from one office to the next but of course I'd always be taking it to the wrong place and they'd have to phone over get it sent to the right one and I was really messing everything up. I finally got tired of it and I gave them two weeks notice and they said well you can go now. I lasted about four weeks at the CBC and then I just started playing, going out and playing.

There were some really good musicians, I mean *amazing* musicians. Jerry Fuller was here, Dale Hillary, P.J. Perry, Arnie Chycoski, Ray Sikora - these were sort of the jazz guys - Al Neil, who is still around. Al was a huge power at that time. John Dawe who doesn't play anymore but was a fantastic trumpet player and I mean amazingly good.

Jimmy Johnson was a tenor player - so I sort of got involved with those guys - Bill Barber a tremendous drummer - so those were the guys that I started hanging out with and playing with. At the same time there was another group that were playing the night clubs. There was The Cave and Isy's and that would be like Dave Robbins, Fraser MacPherson, Chris Gage, Stew Barnett, and Wally Snider, and a bunch of those guys.

There were two different kind of groups. I was more involved in the jazz end of it but then I got a call from Dave Robbins because I was playing vibes. So he called and I got a gig with his band on the radio which was amazing because he just kind of knew about me and literally gave me my first gig in the studio. Then he started calling me for other things. Doug Parker was the same thing, he started calling me for gigs, too. So I sort of crossed over so I was involved with both ends. I was sort of part of the studio / downtown guys as PJ Perry used to call them; "the down town guys" because the old Cellar was up at Main and Broadway and the other clubs were downtown like The Cave an Isy's which were the main clubs. So Chris and Fraser were the downtown guys and we were the uptown guys. All of us were friends but it was funny , there were little jokes like we were the jazz guys and the other guys weren't really jazz guys which was weird for me as an outsider. I thought, "what are these guys talking about " because I'd never actually heard the other guys play, so I figured we played jazz and they played something else. Until I got a gig with those other cats and they...nailed us, I mean they could really play.

You mean the downtown guys?

Oh man, are you kidding me? Fraser MacPherson and Chris Gage? Yeah, I mean they were ridiculous, they were so good. You know it was different thing because they were making really good money and we weren't. There was a funny kind of little thing there. There was PJ who was so respected. He's another cat. He could play anything. He could play with them, he could play with us, he could play with anybody. He



Don Thompson at the Cellar, September 27, 2002.
- Brian Nation photo

was so doggone good. There were a few of the guys who were like that, Jerry Fuller was the same, I mean Jerry could play with anybody. So it was really a lot of fun, there were a lot of clubs, really a lot of clubs and a heck of a lot of gigs. There were a lot of clubs that would do like piano duos or piano trios.

You have been around and witnessed the glory years of jazz as well as the decline of the great jazz scene in Vancouver that you just talked about. Do you have any theories as to what happened here in Vancouver?

Something happened in Vancouver for sure and what it was was Chris Gage died. It was just such a black crowd and everything. Everybody was so sad and depressed and everybody just stop doing anything. Everything stopped being fun because Chris Gage was just such a fantastic person and such a fantastic musician - I mean he was everybody's best friend and the best doggone piano player you'd ever hope to hear. All of a sudden he goes and commits suicide. Well, it just messed up a lot of cats and like a lot of guys just sort of left town and the scene really collapsed and I think that really had a lot to do with it. It was an awful thing. Some people actually stopped doing stuff.

I think the scene came back, I'm pretty sure it came back on kind of Hugh Fraser. I'm convinced when Hugh Fraser came along and got the original VEJI band together that's when things really started to pick because I think before him there wasn't a whole lot going on there. You never heard of anything going in Vancouver. I mean in Toronto we were all working. But out here there was nothing and then all of a sudden there's Hugh Fraser. Then there was Perry (White), Phil (Dwyer) all these cats that were really playing. Campbell (Ryga), really great musicians, but I think it was really Hugh that came along and put them all together in his band and really created a thing, and ever since Hugh things have been happening. I really think Hugh has a lot to do with it. It only takes one guy. You get a guy like that and he just creates stuff.

To be continued . . .

Cory Weeds is a Vancouver jazz musician, radio host, and owner of Vancouver's premier live jazz venue, [The Cellar](#).