

## **The Paul Bley fonds at the Music Division of the Library and Archives of Canada**

**By David Fraser**

**Music Division, Library and Archives of Canada**

**I**n March 2001, the Music Division of the National Library of Canada (now the Library and Archives of Canada (LAC)) acquired the fonds of the Montreal-born jazz pianist Paul Bley. Bley has had an extraordinary career in jazz, performing over the years with such diverse artists as Charlie Parker, Lester Young, Ornette Coleman, and Sun Ra. With its transfer to the LAC, the Paul Bley fonds has joined that of another major Canadian jazz artist, Oscar Peterson (whom, incidentally, Bley replaced at the Alberta Lounge when Peterson left Montreal in 1949 to join "Jazz at the Philharmonic"). Peterson and Bley, born respectively in 1925 and 1932, are among the few Canadian jazz artists of their generation to have achieved international recognition and stature; contemporaries of similar renown would include the trumpeters Maynard Ferguson (also a Montrealer) and Kenny Wheeler. Of this foursome, it is probably fair to say that Bley is the one who has most pushed the boundaries of jazz and improvised music into new areas such as free jazz and fusion.

The Bley fonds is now being sorted, arranged, and described, and for this reason details such as the total extent or outside (earliest and latest) dates cannot yet be given precisely. This first transfer includes documents dating back as far as the 1940s (and even a few items from the 1930s), and continues well into the 1990s. Well over 1,000 audio tapes of performances by Bley and other artists were acquired with the fonds. Also

included are significant bodies of textual records (including business files, scrapbooks, sheet music, promotional material such as posters and programmes, and personal correspondence), photographs, videos, and an extensive collection of Bley's issued recordings. The latter has been separated from the fonds, and is catalogued as part of the Music Division's issued sound collections, although its provenance in the Bley fonds has been noted in the catalogue records.

A good case can be made that the most important record in the fonds of a jazz musician is the archival sound recording of a performance, since that is the most original record of the performance and of the creative and improvisational process that occurs between artists in a jazz group. The Bley fonds is exceptionally strong in this regard, with a comprehensive collection of his live and studio performances, including the historic sessions in Montreal with Charlie Parker in 1953, his 1958 quintet that included Ornette Coleman, the Paul Bley Synthesizer Show of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and his many other acoustic and electric group and solo projects. It is clear that Bley has been meticulous and thorough in collecting and preserving an audio record of his career as a performing and recording artist; prior to its transfer to the LAC in 2001, the audio tapes and other parts of the fonds were maintained in a building near Bley's home in Cherry Valley, New York.

The audio tapes in the Bley fonds document the various stages of the recording and publishing process. For many studio and live sessions, there are tapes from several stages, including unmixed masters (sometimes edited), unmixed copies, assemblies of unmixed masters or of copies, and mixed masters. Bley's detailed notes on the audio tape boxes often provide his assessments of the performance, the instruments, or the technical quality of the recording. They also provide a wealth of information on subsequent artistic decisions such as editing, mixing, and the selection of performances for issue; and sometimes they document the evolution of composition titles and the assignment of composer credits. While much of the music on these tapes has been published, the great majority is unissued.

One set of recordings of exceptional historical interest pertains to an edition of the Paul Bley quintet in Los Angeles that included the free-jazz pioneers Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry. Having left Montreal for New York in the early 1950s, Bley arrived in Los Angeles in 1957 as a successful and much-in-demand jazz pianist playing in the predominant bop idiom. Bley was nevertheless one of the first influential musicians to recognize the importance of the free-jazz innovations of Ornette Coleman (John Lewis of the Modern Jazz Quartet being another). During a lengthy engagement at the Hillcrest Club in Los Angeles, Bley led a quintet that included Ornette Coleman (alto saxophone), Don Cherry (trumpet), Billy Higgins (drums), and Charlie Haden (bass), and the surviving tapes are among the earliest known recordings of Ornette. Naturally enough, it has been remarked that the classic Ornette Coleman quartet actually began its existence as four-fifths of the Paul Bley quintet. Bley's

willingness to jump from the mainstream (such as bop, or playing straight time) into uncharted waters (such as harmonically free jazz, or playing free time) is indicative of the restlessness and the openness to innovation that have characterized his career.

In addition to Bird, Lester Young, Ornette, and Sun Ra, Bley has performed and recorded with hundreds, if not thousands, of other musicians over the years. A few names stand out for the duration and frequency of their collaborations. These would include the bassists Gary Peacock and Steve Swallow, the drummers Barry Altschul and Paul Motian, and the reed player/flautist Jimmy Giuffre. The following list of other major artists with whom Bley has shared the bandstand or the recording studio demonstrates the range and diversity of his career, encompassing (stylistically) swing, bop, free jazz, fusion, and beyond, and (geographically) North America and Europe: Chet Baker, Eric Dolphy, Bill Evans, John Gilmore, Coleman Hawkins, Dave Holland, Lee Konitz, Steve Lacy, Pat Metheny, Charles Mingus, Evan Parker, Niels-Henning Orsted Pedersen, Jaco Pastorius, Sam Rivers, Sonny Rollins, and Lester Young. Many, but not all, of these artists are documented in the sound recordings in the Bley fonds. In recent years, Bley has recorded with notable Canadian musicians including Jon Ballantyne, Jane Bunnett, Sonny Greenwich, Geordie McDonald, Yannick Rieu, the late Herbie Spanier, Kenny Wheeler, and Stich Wynston. Bley's concert tours have taken him to Europe, Japan, North and South America, the Caribbean, and elsewhere.

The fonds also documents Improvising Artists Inc. (IAI), a company established in 1974 by Paul Bley and his wife, the video artist Carol Goss. IAI has produced and distributed

an impressive catalogue of recordings by Bley and other jazz artists, and in the 1970s IAI also organized a roster of live performing artists that was a remarkable who's who of creative jazz musicians working in that decade. Groups from the performing roster often toured under the collective name "IAI Festival." In addition to Bley himself, some of the musicians who recorded or toured with IAI were Barry Altschul, Lester Bowie, Marion Brown, John Gilmore, Jimmy Giuffre, Dave Holland, Lee Konitz, Steve Lacy, Oliver Lake, Pat Metheny, Jaco Pastorius, Gary Peacock, Sam Rivers, Perry Robinson, and Sun Ra.

An interesting aspect of Bley's life and career is his close artistic collaboration with all three of his spouses. His first wife, Carla Bley, is a celebrated jazz composer. In the mid-1960s, she and Paul Bley were members of the Jazz Composers Guild, an artist-controlled group that presented concerts of avant-garde and free jazz in New York, including one billed as "The October Revolution." Some of the Bleys' associates in the Guild were Bill Dixon, Roswell Rudd, Archie Shepp, Sun Ra, and Cecil Taylor. Bley's second wife, Annette Peacock, is a noted composer, lyricist, and vocalist; she and Bley performed together frequently from the mid-1960s until the early 1970s, and they were among the first major artists to adopt the Moog synthesizer and to use this new instrument in live performance. Compositions by both women (such as Carla Bley's "Ida Lupino" and "Olhos de Gato", and Annette Peacock's "Blood" and "Mister Joy") have constituted a major part of Paul Bley's repertoire. Paul Bley and Carol Goss became partners around 1973 (they later married).

Goss is a video artist, and has created videos (both documentaries and more abstract interpretations) of performances by Bley and other IAI recording artists, and these videos are distributed as part of the IAI catalogue. It is noteworthy that *Billboard* magazine once credited IAI with creating the music video genre. Goss and Bley are also partners in the running of IAI as a business.

While the arrangement and description of the Paul Bley fonds are still ongoing, the LAC anticipates that the Bley finding aid will be made available as a link from *Music Archives at the National Library of Canada: A Guide*, published on the National Library section of the LAC joint Web site ([www.nlc-bnc.ca](http://www.nlc-bnc.ca)). More information on the life and career of Paul Bley is available in his autobiography, co-written with David Lee, *Stopping Time: Paul Bley and the Transformation of Jazz* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1999). A comprehensive discography covering the period 1952-94 is Henk Kluck's *Bley Play: The Paul Bley Recordings* (Emmen, The Netherlands: H. Kluck, 1996). Another book, *Time Will Tell: Conversations with Paul Bley*, written by Paul Bley and Norman Meehan, is scheduled for publication in September 2003 by Berkeley Hills Books of Albany, California.

*This paper is based on a presentation made at the CAML/CUMS Conference at Dalhousie University on May 29, 2003, for the session on Canadian Archival Jazz Collections.*