

THE RENAISSANCE OF A RENAISSANCE MAN: GLEN HALL

By Philip Ehrensaft

Gil Evans, the premier jazz arranger of the post-war era, began three months of commuting from New York to Toronto in late 1984 in order to collaborate with an outstanding young Canadian reed player and composer named Glen Hall. Although Evans had an emotional attachment to the city of his birth, this would not have motivated him to make such a major commitment of time and energy. In fact, he turned down a lucrative contract from Sting—one of the few rock stars with a sustained and genuine interest in jazz—because it would have disrupted his collaboration with Hall.

Recognition of a unique mind at work, backed by determined craftsmanship, is what motivated Evans to make the treks to Toronto. Part and parcel of this uniqueness was Hall's training and passion for literature, psychology and communications. His other intellectual hats have a direct bearing on his music, and vice versa. Hall is a late twentieth-century jazz version of the Renaissance man.

The Evans/Hall collaboration resulted in one of the last and best recordings in the arranger's illustrious career, *The Mother of the Book*. This was Evans' powerful endorsement indeed for a new kid on the block.

After that endorsement, the natural trajectory for Hall would have been to join the inflow of talented young musicians from all across North America to the centre of the 1980s jazz universe, New York City. Hall's first recording, *The Book of the Heart*, had already been named as one of the ten best of the year by *Cadence* magazine, a magazine of reference for serious jazz reviews. That alone would have been a good calling card for entry into the Darwinian New York scene.

But Hall had another precious asset. Evans offered the young Canadian a place of honour in the arranger's ensemble. Their collaboration, however, began on the very same day as the birth of Hall's first daughter. It is a measure of Glen Hall's character that he turned down this dream offer because his family responsibilities came first.

Retrospectively, Hall sees this conjuncture as a blessing in disguise. Had he gone to the Big Apple, there would have been pressure to fit into the parameters of the New York scene, both mainstream and avant-garde. By staying in what was then the jazz hinterland of Toronto, rather than heading to the Big Apple, Hall had greater latitude to work out his unique music. He can be counted among the key creative spirits who bucked the trend towards increased centralisation of jazz activity in New York. The net result is that some of the most interesting improvised music on the continent is being created in cities like Chicago, San Francisco, and now Toronto.

In order to put the greater latitude of a hinterland musical scene to good use, Hall had to play a leadership and mentoring role in creating a community of musicians who could tackle his experimental jazz. It required great self-discipline and energy to stay the course. Hall has both in abundance.

Now, after a decade and a half of quietly defining and redefining his musical vision, this jazz renaissance man is very much back on a larger stage. Leo Records in London has just released his latest CD, *The Roswell Incident*. The likes of trombonist Ray Anderson, drummer Gerry Hemingway and the Sonic Youth guitarist Lee Ranaldo joined forces with Hall in a standing room only concert at the 2001 Guelph Jazz Festival. Ranaldo and Hall then joined the Knitting Factory's "house drummer," William Hooker, at the Hallwalls Arts Center, a beehive of avant-garde music, theatre and visual arts that has been carved out of recycled industrial space in Buffalo.

A Portrait of the Artist as Pan-Genre Integrator, Mentor and Organiser

Glen Hall's music calls upon multiple genres, both musical and literary, but it is definitively not post-modern pastiche. This is "inside/outside" music that continuously leaps from conventional to experimental forms, or stays tantalisingly on the border. The way Hall constructs these leaps is directly related to the way he has earned most of his living since turning down Evans' offer to join the arranger in New York. He teaches communications, psychology and mystic literature at two technical institutes in Toronto—Humber and Sheridan Colleges. Thanks to an exceptionally high energy level, Hall has been able to pursue a career as a full-time musician and as a teacher in his original fields of formal training.

Somebody who teaches people how to think clearly—and then get other people to pay attention to what they have to say—is going to carry this perspective into avant-garde music. Hall provides enough structure and familiar elements so that people don't feel lost. But they are also presented with the unexpected as Hall expands his own horizons. Seeming chaos alternates with order. Clarity is peppered with enough ambiguity and allusions to keep the audience interested.

Avant-garde music must, Hall argues, tell a story—an interesting story that people can follow, and want to follow. Musical conservatives, especially neo-romantic classical composers, typically advance the proposition that music should include a

narrative strand. It is not what one would expect from a radical musician/composer whose ambition is to help take free jazz to a new level. Hall's music is redolent with surprises and unusual combinations. That is what makes it so interesting.

One has to be a very quick study in order to acquire the real competence in multiple fields that is requisite to telling the innovative musical stories that flow from Hall's pen and horns. I did not have to spend much time with Hall before perceiving that he is an exceptionally quick study. When Hall decided to leave graduate school in literature for Boston's Berklee School of Music in 1973, there were big holes in his musical training. After one year at Berklee, his professors advised him that he had little more to learn in terms of formal training. It was time to move into the professional world. Hall packed up his tenor sax, bass clarinet and flutes, and took his professors' advice.

A musician whose mind and mind-body coordination permit such fast learning is also a person who can improvise at a pace way beyond the ordinary. A most indicative element of what Hall is all about is that his main musical model is not an avant-garde musician. It is the ultimate bebop improviser, Sonny Rollins. Rollins is one of the only people capable of genuine real-time composition at the furious rate with which bebop is played. Barry Kernfield, editor of the *New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, puts it this way: "Imagine trying to imitate his [Beethoven's] achievements not at leisure but in a matter of seconds, with the chords changing every measure or half-measure and the measures moving at over 200 beats per minute."

Hall does not, however, want to play like Sonny Rollins, an improbable pursuit in any event. He wants to understand how Rollins thinks and then apply the process to creating his own kind of free jazz.

This rapid-fire capacity to improvise is joined to enthusiasm and grounding in the avant-garde composers who propelled "classical" music in entirely new directions. His interest in Edgar Varese, John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen dates back to undergraduate years. I don't know of many other musicians who have played free jazz variations on Stockhausen's daunting compositions.

Hall has strong views on the modern composers who he does or does not like, views that have a great deal to do with the way he plays jazz. Kagel, for example, is somebody he sees as exemplifying overly cerebral strands in post-war composition, music that uses only the left, logical side of the brain. Hall looks for, and aims to create, music that calls upon both sides of the brain, and the heart as well. (I cannot resist a respectful disagreement here with Hall's harsh evaluation of Mr. Kagel's music, which is permeated with a playfulness that comes straight from the heart. Hall's general point, however, is well taken; the dryness in a sizeable chunk of post-war composition is about as enjoyable as doing 200 sit-ups.) The net result is Hall's rare capacity to employ advanced compositional techniques in jazz improvisations that simultaneously emit a whole lot of punch and bite. The punch and the bite are inseparable from the starting point of his musical journey—African-American gospel music.

In 1958, when Hall was eight years old, he chanced upon a radio program featuring Mahalia Jackson. It was love at first hearing. He took up the guitar and harmonica at the age of thirteen. Then it was not too long before he was leading a busy life as a teenage blues, rock and country musician in his native Winnipeg. Hall has never lost contact with this starting point, nor his experiences and joy in connecting to the audience's hearts, tapping feet and occasionally flowing tear ducts.

A very important consequence of Hall's early musical biography is the creation of experimental music that is profoundly attached to the whole history of jazz and the blues. One of his recent compositions/improvisations is rooted in a blues song written in 1927 by Blind Willie Johnson. I treasure the opportunity I had to hear a respectful introduction of the Johnson theme by Toronto's free jazz guitar virtuoso, Nilan Perera, hauntingly played on an acoustic instrument. Hall and Perera then gradually moved into thoroughly "out" improvisations that, however, always stayed connected to the starting point. And that is an accurate metaphor for Hall's music in general.

Another dimension of Hall's performance that evening is that he is as much a mentor on the bandstand as he is when teaching communications or literature. Until recently, the improv scene in Toronto was mainly the domain of greying baby-boomers. Hall is clearly an inspiration for the burgeoning network of twenty-something improvisers who are renewing the Toronto scene. His new ensemble, redShift, joins senior avant-gardists like himself and Eugene Martinec, Toronto's pioneer in improvised electronic music, with the new generation. Also, I have been impressed by the way that Hall sits in with ensembles of younger musicians and takes care not to dominate them.

The deep wells of energy that Hall draws upon are equally applied towards building a community for avant-garde improvisation in Canada's economic and cultural capital. The most current instance is his role in organising an avant-garde concert series, "HearTOgo," which ran parallel to the Toronto Downtown and JVC Jazz Festivals during June of this year.

Where To Next?

Integration of spoken word and musical improvisation has been a prominent component of Hall's artistic landscape. *Hallucinations*, produced at Toronto's Music Gallery in 1997, upped the ante even more.

Hallucinations combined film, video, electronic sound projection, spoken word, visual art (statues, found objects) and a ten-piece musical ensemble. The central elements in the mix were works by the *Beat* writer, William S. Burroughs. The aural component of this very ambitious project has been preserved in the form of a CD issued by Leo. The appropriate medium, of course, would have been a video, and maybe a 3-D video at that.

Upping what is already an unusually deep ante is precisely what we can expect from Glen Hall. It is going to be a very interesting ride.

DISCOGRAPHY

The Book of the Heart (InRespect IRJ 009301 H; Koch Jazz KOCH, 1979)

Hall's first recording, at age 29, featured four of the strongest players on the New York scene: JoAnne Brackeen (piano), Billy Hart (drums), Cecil McBee (bass), Joshua Breakstone (guitar). Very strong and impressive for a debut recording.

The Mother of the Book (InRespect 39302; Koch Jazz KOCH 3-7816-2, 1985)

One of Gil Evans' last recordings. Germany's *Jazz Forum* termed this CD "an absolute masterpiece." It is. Compositions are by Hall and arrangements by Evans. Hall on reeds and Evans on electric piano are accompanied by Toronto's NEXUS percussion ensemble and a mix of some of the city's best jazz and classical musicians.

Hallucinations: Music and Words for William S. Burroughs (Leo LR273, 1997)

The fact that Leo, Great Britain's premier avant-garde recording company, chose to issue this CD is a statement in itself. It was recorded live at the Music Gallery in Toronto, with Hall and the pioneer avant-garde trombonist Roswell Rudd spearheading a ten-piece orchestra.

The Roswell Incident (Leo LR313, recorded 1998, issued 2001)

A year after the Burroughs show, Rudd called Hall to inform him that he was to perform in Buffalo and would love to do another recording. Hall gladly drove down to Buffalo to take in the concert and bring Rudd back to Toronto. They went into the studio with Hall's impressive OutSource band: Allan Molnar (vibes), Michael Morse (bass), Michael Occhipinti (guitar/banjo), Barry Romberg (drums). It is gratifying to see a trend-setting European label pick up on the quality of Toronto's improv scene. Hall and Rudd are in top form, and that is very fine form indeed.

For Performances, the best way to keep abreast is via Hall's own Web Site (<http://www.glenhall.com/events.html>). In particular, watch for redShift, a new ensemble that includes two guitars, two basses, two percussionists, two turntablists, a MidiAxe, a vocalist, and Hall on woodwinds. That's a lot of music.