

free music in Calgary

reflections on
Bug Incision
at 10 years

by Chris Dadge

Beginnings: The Bent Spoon Ensemble

Bug Incision began as a record label between March and June of 2005 as a means to publish recordings by the trio of myself, David Laing, and Scott Munro. We'd been playing freely improvised music together - on, sax, upright bass, and percussion respectively - under the Bent Spoon moniker since 2003, originally alongside guitarist Kevin Lee. That group was called the Bent Spoon Ensemble, and as members departed or shifted their focus, it morphed into a Trio and various Duos.

The four of us met through a heady combination of different social environs, including the high school concert band, all-ages community centre shows, and happenstance meetings in the professional jazz world. We played together frequently in various configurations, and eventually got together in the same room as a quartet for the first time in January of 2003. The next day we played our first show, and that one was followed by many more. But, as is often the case when four semi-strangers with omnivorous musical tastes and energy to spare start playing together with no material or preconceived ideas, our music wasn't a clearly defined proposal. So, rather than plugging in to an existing network of appropriate venues, we booked ourselves at any venue that would have us.

The types of spaces we played encompassed music-friendly, genre-neutral coffee shops around Calgary like the Domain (aka Soma) in Altadore, the great Weeds Cafe in the northwest, and Prairie Ink, a restaurant on the second floor of the long-defunct McNally Robinson bookstore on Stephen Ave. We dipped into spots like Broken City, the old Annie's Books on 16th Ave, and Beatniq Jazz and Social Club (another disappeared venue, then the hub of Calgary's jazz scene). And Calgary's arts community was very supportive, which allowed us to frequent the Alberta College of Art and Design (ACAD), The Sugar Estate, Paul Kuhn Gallery, and The New Gallery. It was in these venues that we slowly zeroed in on some of our primary musical concerns.

At the beginning of 2004, the Bent Spoon Ensemble released an album called *None, Nothing Sometimes*, which documented our youthfully ambitious attempts to reconcile our nascent interests in free jazz, Chicago-style post-rock, improvisation, and kraut-rock. The album was recorded by Lorrie

Matheson and, in fact, was one of his first recording projects. He released it as a handsome, Kevin Lee-designed compact disc on his Western Famine imprint, and its emergence into the world of commercially available music was celebrated with a big show¹ at the Big Secret Theatre during that year's High Performance Rodeo.

Over the course of the year that followed we tried incorporating semi-composed, repeatable structures into our music, and found some success, but Kevin's eventual departure to Montreal at the end of the year led to the end of such experimentation. The Bent Spoon Ensemble morphed into a trio and the new lineup played our debut concert at ACAD in January of 2005.

An Ensemble Becomes a Trio

The years leading up to this important moment of restructuring found the three remaining Bent Spoon practitioners becoming increasingly adventurous in our listening pursuits.² Our initial explorations of late Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Miles Davis sent us further out towards Albert Ayler, Dewey Redman, Sonny Sharrock, John Zorn, William Parker, Tim Berne, and the AACM.

The universe of Mike Patton (he of Faith No More, Fantomas, Mr. Bungle) provided endless inspiration and an easy connection to the world of Zorn. Everyone had their faces ripped off by *Trout Mask Replica*; Can's *Ege Bamyasi* and *Tago Mago* seeped into things; Monty and I had a mind-altering experience with a splendid disc of ultra-hushed music called *Futuro* by the trio of Masafumi Ezaki, Tetuzi Akiyama, and Tim Barnes, and then we started checking out European free improvisation, slurping up as much Incus, Emanem, FMP, ICP, ECM, and SAJ as possible, John Corbett and Atavistic Records' incredible Unheard Music Series, and finding lots to love in contemporary labels like Thirsty Ear (those collaborative Spring Heel Jack releases on their "Blue Series" were particularly potent), Eremite, Tzadik, Thrill Jockey's jazzier end, and AUM Fidelity. All this discovery was bolstered by my

1. Rodney "Bartok Guitarsplat" Brent opened for us, and Matheson made a surprise appearance during one of Kevin's spoken word passages.

2. Prior to his departure, Kevin Lee's highly advanced listening habits had significantly inspired us as well; in one breath during an interview on CBC Radio in 2003 or 2004, he mentioned Can, Faust, and Amon Duul, sending the rest of us on a curiosity-fueled quest to scope these strange-sounding new bands. He also led us to Neu!, the *No New York* compilation, and much more.

acquisition of a tall stack of *The Wire* magazine back issues, an invaluable gift from Hot Wax Records proprietor/musician Bob Dawkins, which answered all sorts of questions and instigated just as many.

With all these new strands entering our trio's DNA, combined with our pronounced ambivalence surrounding the results of the previous year's quasi-compositional experiments, the music we were making took a drastic turn. It became immeasurably freer and we quickly abandoned completely any notions of metric pulse, eschewing it in favour of more oblique readings of time, or even purely textural interactions. We were digging deep, throwing whatever we could into the music, and—indeed—onto the instruments, as Monty and I became fond of using junk and found objects as sound sources or tonal-textural extensions of our respective percussion and upright bass setups.

Bug Incision Records: 2005

Using some recently acquired recording gear, we recorded what would become the Bent Spoon Trio's debut album, *March 3, 2005*. Our recording setup was a far cry from the studio environs of our first album, but it was sufficient for capturing an acoustic group live off the floor. We recorded it at home, and it sounded really good. Once we began thinking about how to release it, we didn't even really consider repeating the experience of printing another 500 CDs of our admittedly marginal music, as we had with the Ensemble record. Granted, it was amazing to have a high-end CD pressing of our recording, but it was an incongruously lavish format in which to present our music, music that we were finding to be increasingly a) at odds with any sort of large-scale consumption styles, both in terms of the types of venues we wanted to play and the manner in which we wanted to release our records, and b) prone to drastic developmental changes due to the rapid rate at which we were moving through ideas and fixations, meaning that even our latest album available for sale after a show, which one might be inclined to regard as our current "calling card," might bear little to no resemblance to what was happening on stage that night.

This is the point at which all the albums and music we'd been ingesting over the last few years started to spill back out. In addition to providing deeply inspiring and personalized examples of how to make improvised music, these



Mark Fleischhaker performing as part of "I Can't It's Hailin'"
Emmedia Screening Room
September 14, 2015 | photo by Cody Oliver

records also exposed us to a huge variety of labels and distributors, all of whom similarly demonstrated alternative ways of operating when it came to the act of releasing music. And as far as packaging was concerned, the single most inspirational release that pointed out our particular way was the aforementioned *Futuro* album.

Released on Tim Barnes' Quakebasket Records label in 2004, the disc came in a handmade card-stock cover, adorned with a page torn from a French language novel and embellished with small drawings. I'd read about the album in an article on Barnes in *The Wire* and subsequently ordered a copy from Squidco, the redoubtable US-based mail-order company that has been wonderfully serving the world's community of weird-music buyers for many years.

The world of CD-R culture had been slowly permeating my consciousness through the weekly *Volcanic Tongue*³ email newsletter, which contained (mostly) shop co-owner and *The Wire* contributor David Keenan's beautiful, detailed, and evocative descriptions of the week's new arrivals. Many of the discussed albums that were of particular interest to us happened to be issued in small editions of 100-200 copies of CD-Rs, and they were made by musicians we considered to be among the vanguard of contemporary improvisers. Examples include the peerless output of Ben Hall's Editions Brokenresearch label (which later changed their focus to LPs, but early on was all CD-R), John Olson (of Wolf Eyes, Dead Machines, Spykes, and, most importantly, Graveyards) and his American Tapes label, the myriad of releases and different labels surrounding C. Spencer Yeh's Burning Star Core project (and specifically his Drone Disco imprint), and of course Jack Wright (with Spring Garden Music) and Eugene Chadbourne (with House of Chadula), two major American maverick improvisers⁴ who have been keeping their discographies in print for years, the latter humorously "bootlegging" his own albums, usually in crude cardboard sleeves covered in felt-pen drawings and garish, inkjet-printed artwork.

3. Volcanic Tongue was a very small physical record store located in Glasgow during most of its existence, but also functioned simultaneously as an internationally-renowned 90s-era-modeled mail-order company, and subsequently as a talisman for locating elusive physical copies of releases from underground music's leading lights.

4. In a few very pleasing turns of event, these two master improvising gurus have been involved with Bug Incision activities numerous times over the years. Visit www.bugincision.com and view the *Past Events* and *Releases* sections for further information.

Up until this point, we'd always been under the impression that the CD-R format was used expressly for non-official/non-commercial purposes such as demos, live bootleg recordings, rough mixes, mp3 "mixtapes", and the like. So when we witnessed the level of seriousness these releases were attracting from both the music buyers we hoped to attract and the critics, blogs, and magazines who were discussing our kind of music, we decided that the CD-R was the way to go. I have also always felt that there was something fitting about a recording of a singular, unrepeatabe music event—captured simply and in the time it takes to play the disc—being released in a format that is quickly and easily delivered (and also has a finite lifespan) in an edition size that ensures its eventual non-availability. Perhaps a 45-minute burst of improvised music making, as vital and listenable as it may be, doesn't need to be preserved forever and made available so readily for so long⁵. The decision to be somewhat more cavalier about the availability of these recordings also removed the possibility of fixating on any one album as "the one" and potentially building unintentional aesthetic borders; instead it places a premium on the work itself and on trying to develop that work.

Aside from these ideological considerations, the other side of the coin was that we had no budget to generate releases any other way. The CD-R was the most feasible option available to us if we wanted to continue documenting our music for public consumption, and we went with it. Eventually we invested in our own standalone CD-R burner⁶, but the first release was an outsourced, professionally-duplicated CD-R, manufactured by a local outfit called Precision Disc. The covers were plain white 5"x5" sleeves almost fully covered in cut-out sections of old maps and glued down with a glossy acrylic medium. The back featured a typewritten info sticker⁷ and Brooker Buckingham⁸ was enlisted to write liner notes, which were included on a photocopied sheet included inside and featured a freedom-espousing quoted interview snippet from the mind of Elisa Ambrogio of Magik Markers, the liners' author smartly forging

5. Or maybe it is. there are many examples to support arguments to the contrary, but we were already living in an age where nothing seemed impossible to get. The proliferation of mp3 blogs and the ascension of download-only archival sites (such as the AMAZING *Destination: OUT* Bandcamp page) in the years to follow assuaged any lingering anxieties one may have felt in this area.

6. If one is curious as to how many discs passed through the still-functioning Bug Incision CD burner, look no further than the sum of all the edition amounts at www.bugincision.com/releases.html

7. For those keeping score at home, it is indeed true that later releases in this initial series style also included a more conventional front cover Artist/Title sticker.

8. A fellow far-out music enthusiast, friend, and my then-bandmate in Lorrie Matheson's band Rocketsmog (or Lorrie Matheson and The Brass Tacks), and eventual duo partner in the loud-improv group Malleagle.

overarching aesthetic connections that extended the group members' frames of reference into unexplored areas. The packages were finished off with a fluorescent orange sticky dot sealing the open edge of the sleeve, ensuring the disc and liner didn't slip out.

Beyond our natural inclination to simply produce recorded music documents and engage as best we could in that arena, the driving consideration was that our trio had a show at that year's long-gone Calgary International Jazz Festival. During its lifespan, the festival was extremely diverse, well-attended, and a real highlight of the city's summer festival scene in a time when there wasn't a festival happening seemingly every single weekend of the summer months. That year we were scheduled to play with Vancouver-based jazz-leaning post-rock quartet The Inhabitants. Despite the fact that the Bent Spoon Trio sounded nothing like this clean, thoughtful, wonderfully streamlined outfit, both groups had developed their own unique voices through extensions of the traditional jazz language. Our voice tapped into an older, previously-established-yet-obscure mode of strict improvisation, encompassing some of the more abstract elements of the jazz language, while The Inhabitants added a jazz-informed elasticity and improvising sensibility to a contemporary post-rock/pop foundation. So we were both independent Canadian acts exploring left-of-centre jazz leanings, and even this very vague criteria, within our country's relatively small national scope, made us contemporaries. This excited us deeply, and led directly to a string of west coast excursions in the years that followed. So, naturally, we wanted to have a suave new document of our new sound that reflected our concerns.

The Calgary International Jazz Festival concert was a success, and the reception from the community to our new music and its new method of delivery was better than we anticipated: *March 3, 2005* received a glowing review in *The Wire* and the label and its future releases found an ideal home at the Squidco online shop. But, we were still struggling to figure out how and where to best present our music and the music of our ever-widening group of peers⁹. The initial venue experiments during our time as the Bent Spoon Ensemble from 2003 to 2004 amounted to an equal split of terrible and great experiences,

9. These peers included not only our contemporaries from Mount Royal and the local rock/pop scenes – Jay Crocker, Aaron Leaney, Eric Hamelin – but also the people who had been doing this music well before us, such as Dan Meichel, Mark Dicey, Lyle Pisiso, Janet Turner, Bob Dawkins, Cody Oliver, and Peter Moller.



Chris Dadge, Hot Wax Records basement
January 22, 2013 | photo by Cody Oliver

so it pleased us to no end that during the first year of the Trio in 2005, we finally began to zero in on some of the right spaces¹⁰. We hadn't, however, hit upon the notion of creating an umbrella signifier for the type of unbridled experimentation that we were hopefully going to be offering at these shows. Eventually a trifecta of experiences spelled the end of our attempts to shoehorn ourselves into existing niches/spaces, and ultimately illuminated the path that we would follow for the next decade.

The Final Push

The first of these experiences was the multiple Bent Spoon Ensemble shows at Prairie Ink, the restaurant/coffee shop on the second floor of the long-gone McNally Robinson bookstore on Stephen Ave. As is often the case with eateries located inside retail spaces, it was a casual place that lent itself well to various sorts of live musical dressing, usually in the form of an acoustic guitar-wielding folk singer or a small jazz combo, and we figured that we could probably lean on our more ear-pleasing stylistic tendencies, saving some of the skronk for another night. But it was exactly this sort of predisposed strategizing that the Bent Spoon Trio, with our newly liberated, uncompromising group state of mind blazing, were looking to avoid. And while it's true that, on the other hand, myself and Munro relished the opportunity to put our training and musical flexibility to good use, we were quite certain that Bent Spoon, now freer than ever, was not the proper unit from which to exude this kind of workmanlike eclecticism.

The second experience which clearly pointed our way was the firing of the Chris Dadge Quartet from the Beatniq Jazz and Social Club in May of 2006. Until its closure in late 2009, Beatniq was a truly important hub for the up and coming young jazz musician in Calgary, mostly via its Thursday night open jam sessions and their consistent Friday and Saturday night programming. At the jam sessions, young jazz students involved in either the Mount Royal College Jazz Performance program (at the time this included John Hyde, Sheldon Zandboer, and Ralf Buschmeyer) or in private instruction (with teachers such as John De Waal and Andy Ericson) could sit in with local pros, most of whom were their teachers. The weekend programming was largely comprised of touring jazz frontmen (such as Phil Nimmons, Campbell Ryga,

¹⁰. One of the most important of these spaces was the Bird and Stone theatre space in the basement of a Unitarian Church just off of Centre Street on 16th Avenue: more on this below.

PJ Perry, and Brad Turner,) backed by a group of established Calgary jazz players. These nights could largely be labelled as contemporary hard bop, with some exceptions, including an eclectic, pan-genre octet led by bassist Chris Tarry and the MRC Trio, comprised of the electric violin stylings of Hugh Marsh, Rufus Cappadocia on electrified cello, and Barry Romberg on drums and electronic percussion, playing an amazing night of high wire improv-oriented music.

And Beatniq had been booking projects of mine for the last year so, including Abdalemu, a questing, '60s-Miles Davis style quartet with Simeon Abbott, Aaron Leaney, and Scott Munro, and a Bent Spoon Ensemble show that added five additional horn players, among them Leaney, Oliver Miguel, and Curtis MacDonald, to our wild second set.

I mention all of these happenings in order to illustrate the reasonably good surrounding conditions of that fateful night in May of 2006, when my eponymous quartet, featuring Dan Meichel on reeds, Jay Crocker on banjo, percussion, and weird electronic junk, and Mark Limacher on piano, played our one-and-a-half nights of music at Beatniq. To make a long and detailed story short¹¹, the club ended up booking an octogenarian's birthday party on the second night of our engagement, and after about 25 minutes of our usual playing, we took a break and it was suggested that we take the rest of the night off and keep our guarantee. It could have been worse, but this was certainly not proving to be a fruitful locale for the music we wanted be making. It is worth noting that, thanks to the vast archives at Bug Incision headquarters, I discovered that this was in fact an official *Bug Incision Presents* concert.

Bug Incision Presents

It wasn't until early 2006 that the idea of expanding Bug Incision into *Bug Incision Records* and *Bug Incision Presents* came into being. As we saw it, if a potential audience member saw "Bug Incision Presents" on a poster or MySpace listing (the key Internet networking hub for musicians at that particular moment in time), they would know to expect to not know what to fully expect. It also helped lend some presentational cohesion to a style of music whose concert billings more often closely resemble a listing of law firms than musical "acts,"

¹¹ For the whole tale, look out for the upcoming Bug Incision Records release of a two-volume set of recordings from this engagement, which will include detail-laden liner notes.



top: Nomoreshapes (l-r Jay Crocker, JC Jones, Eric Hamelin), April 25, 2008
bottom: Bent Spoon Trio (l-r, Scott Munro, Chris Dodge, David Laing), January 11, 2008
Theatre Junction Rehearsal Studio | photo by unknown



what with the proliferation of trios named after the musicians within them in the “Surname/Surname/Surname” format popping up every month. The first two official *Bug Incision Presents* shows – the one at Beatniq and another at Cafe Koi¹² – were not quite fully formed; while we’d found the way to “brand” our shows using the name from our record label, we’d yet to apply the more stringent guidelines for the types of venues we would deem appropriate. And, more importantly, we also hadn’t quite found a space that would let us book a string of monthly events, which was the ideal scenario¹³. As far as venues were concerned, Bug Incision was playing the field.

The third contributing factor in the birth of the monthly concert series and enduring Bug Incision ethos was the performance of “Colours Without Names” at the Epcor Centre’s MOTEL Stage, curated by Eric Moschopedis for his Mutton Busting festival, a sub-festival within the annual High Performance Rodeo performing arts marathon. I had been working on a composition called “Colours Without Names” during the final months of 2005. The composition was inspired by Moschopedis’ suggestion to come up with something for his Mutton Busting festival. I first encountered Moschopedis and his Bubonic Tourist Performance Creation Society¹⁴ through his involvement with the Bird and Stone theatre space, located in the basement of the Unitarian church on 16th Avenue northwest, just off of Centre Street. I had been involved in a few events there over the course of 2005, including a tribute to Ornette Coleman’s *Free Jazz* album by Darren Williams’ Yalta Big Band¹⁵ and a holiday-themed night in December called *White Noise*, which was organized by Paula Fayerman, tireless promoter of the avant-garde and host of the stellar, long-running CJSW radio show *Noise*.

12. Featuring a bill of myself/Bob Dawkins/Scott Munro and Jay Crocker/Lyle Pizio/Eric Hamelin.

13. We were beginning to derive inspiration from other established improv-centric concert series around the world such as the hugely important, John Russell-helmed series Mopomoso in London (UK), which could be viewed as the epicentre for a certain type of improvised music, and then we also began to catch wind of Canadian actions like the 1067 space in Vancouver, Somewhere There and Leftover Daylight in Toronto, L’Envers and Mardi Spaghetti in Montreal, and the amazing work of Thom Golub, Ron De Jong, David Hoyle, James Carson, and their TIN (The Improvisors Network) in Edmonton.

14. Lots of interesting ink has been spilled by Moschopedis on the subject of this organization, to wit: <https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0052253>

15. This was also one of the very last of the shows from the Nach Hause series, which was, in many ways, Bug Incision’s direct predecessor, run by the amazing saxophonist Darren Williams. Nach Hause and Williams’ work in Calgary needs its own celebratory zine, but suffice it say that he, assisted intermittently by Cody Oliver and the late Kenny Doren, was the go-to for the left-leaning music fan for a good stretch of time, presenting acts such as the Ig Henneman Quartet, Queen Mab Trio, Ab Baars Trio, and more.

Ironically, it was the Yalta Big Band performance¹⁶ (as well as a few other large-group improvising experiments, such as the Bent Spoon Ensemble plus horns show at Beatniq, described above) that prompted my writing of “Colours Without Names.” I rarely enjoy the experience of six, seven, eight, or more musicians playing together freely. Granted, there is a certain level of pure excitement to be found in the sound of a bunch of musicians openly going at it, but usually, it is far from an ideal space to eke out nuanced, sensitive musical conversations, which is closer to where my own interests lay.¹⁷ But I wanted to see if I could make the large group work on my terms, and I did discover some instances where it really seemed to gel. And I found that these successes were often tied to some form of reigning-in, to varying degrees, of “absolute freedom”; examples include the simple instructions John Stevens gave to the musicians in his Spontaneous Music Ensemble (their *Quintessence* albums are essential listening) or the more organized frameworks of the Globe Unity Orchestra¹⁸, ostensibly led by Alexander Von Schlippenbach.

I began putting together a score for my own double quartet, eventually dubbed The Whistleburn Ensemble (poaching a name Simeon Abbott and I planned to use for our duo activities back when he was still a Calgarian), which was organized around a 35-minute stopwatch visible only to the musicians. Each player had his own chart with a set of written instructions that corresponded to different periods of time on the stopwatch, and no one knew what anyone else had on their charts. The individual instructions drew upon the specialities of each member of this ensemble, and indeed it was the members themselves and this particular combination of them that made this group special.

16. As mentioned earlier, the performance was billed and intended as a “cover” of Ornette Coleman’s seminal *Free Jazz* album, and there was indeed sheet music with the themes written out, and the proper double (but not mirrored) quartet instrumentation (Ron De Jong and I at the drums, Jonathon Wilcke and Darren Williams on saxes, Dan Meichel on reeds, a trumpeter whose name escapes me, and Scott Munro and Thom Golub on bass), but the set itself was far less structured and was mostly an unhinged octet improvisation.

17. I’m certainly not attempting to suggest that all players entering into this format have cast aside all considerations of taste, sensitivity, or thoughtfulness, but it is indeed rare, even among the top improvisers, to deliver something of consequence from a fully-improvised large group outing. (For instances of both successes and failures, look no further than the Evan Parker Octet *Crossing The River* (Psi Records, 2005) and Evan Parker Trio and Peter Brotzmann Trio *The Bishop’s Move* (Victo Records, 2004), respectively.) And really, this makes perfect sense; with additional musicians come additional variables to send a group sound into chaos. I’ve often likened the difference between duo or trio free improvising and larger group free improvising to the difference between chatting with a friend one-on-one and standing in a group of strangers trying to get a word in edgewise. This, of course, speaks volumes to the type of individual I happen to be, and this, of course, is one of the many reasons improvisation feels so vital to its practitioners.

18. I’d recently been floored by their *Hamburg ’74* album (thanks again, Unheard Music Series), which combined top European improvisors and a choir, to stunning effect.



top: Land of Marigold (Josh Zubot & Ellwood Epps); bottom: Eric Hamelin & Scott Munro
Hot Wax Records basement, January 22, 2013 | photos by Cody Oliver



The Whistleburn Ensemble was comprised of myself and Eric Hamelin on drums and percussion, Scott Munro and Thom Golub on double basses, Lyle Pisiso and Dan Meichel on saxes, and Bob Dawkins and Jay Crocker on guitars. The group drew from my pool of direct contemporaries such as Munro, Hamelin, and Crocker and also the previous generation of avant-garde musicians who had been instigating far-out sounds long before *Bug Incision* was a glimmer in my eye.

The amorphous, long-running improvising collective Street of Crocodiles functions to this day as an intermittently active hub for Calgary's left-field sound thinkers, but throughout the 90s the group was in its heyday. Key members included the late, amazing multi-reedist Dan Meichel, multi-reedist/trumpeter/bassist Lyle Pisiso, percussionist Mark Dicey¹⁹, vocalist Janet Turner, multi-instrumentalist Bob Dawkins, tubist Peter Stinson, and many more (myself included) have passed through the ranks. And further afield from this core group were others such as guitarist Cody Oliver, a brilliant improviser and solo artist and drummer Peter Moller²⁰, who scores points for being one of the earliest published free improvisers from Calgary, with his fantastic *Ringside Maisie* (Onari Records, 1980) album with guitarist Randy Hutton. And, generally speaking, it is a natural move to want to connect with one's local predecessors, so this ensemble was the first time many of the participants had met and played together, and this intermingling of generations provided the inspiration for the first six months of the *Bug Incision Presents* concert series.

Six Months At Soda

Soda appeared on my radar in spring 2006. Located in between the Drum and Monkey (R.I.P.) and the Hop In Brew on 12th avenue in downtown Calgary, Soda remains one of the strangest venues I've encountered. I was attracted to it because of its ridiculously eclectic programming; it was a place where

19. These three also comprised tokyosexwhale, the single-most visible improvising entity in Calgary from the 90s into the early 2000s. The group morphed into Scum De Terre with the addition of Janet Turner, and they were infrequently active right up until Meichel's sudden passing in 2010. Mark Dicey's son is Shawn Dicey (aka Dice Parks), who is a wonderful musician, artist, and has been one of my closest collaborators since we met in high school. tokyosexwhale was also the first local group I'd ever heard doing anything remotely resembling free jazz/improv, and remain, beyond their vital role in the city's cultural fabric, an important personal touchstone.

20. Moller was heavily involved in various artistic pursuits in the late 70s/early 80s, including booking Evan Parker and Derek Bailey at the Off Centre Centre, an early artist-run centre with ties to the scene that would launch the New Gallery in later years.

you could catch a goth/industrial DJ night on Tuesday, an open-mic night on Wednesday, a house music party on Thursday, and then mysteriously be closed on Friday. Clearly this was not a place with a built-in audience of regulars; it had no room booking fees and the staff seemed entirely unmoved by our presence, making it a perfect spot for our first six month string of bookings. The idea behind these first six shows was to invite 10-15 musicians to each night, then group them together at the start of the concert, into increasingly large groupings as the months progressed, based largely on whether or not they had played together previously. So I don't think I ever shared the stage with David Laing, Jay Crocker, or Scott Munro during these months, but I did play right away with Dan Meichel and Cody Oliver, both people whom I'd admired previously and with whom, following this night, I would go on to form important musical and personal connections²¹. And many other connections were forged during this time, including the roots of Nomoreshapes (a fantastic left-of-centre jazz trio originally comprised of Eric Hamelin on drums, Jay Crocker on guitar, and JC Jones on trombone), the Musk Cup (see footnote 21), and the MOP Trio.

The Soda nights were the first time that *Bug Incision Presents* felt right on all fronts. After this initial, intermingling-oriented run played out, the series moved around to different venues and we tried different ways to spread the word about the series beyond our immediate peer group. The now defunct *FFWD Weekly* was always supportive, as was *CJSW*, with whom we initiated a monthly series²² where musicians who had found favourable groupings during that initial run performed and discussed their music on Paula Fayerman's *Noise* program.

Bug Incision was off and running; the series was picking up steam and the label was putting out solid chunks of local action, at this point still mostly my own projects (with Bent Spoon Trio, Jay Crocker, and later on Aaron Leaney and Rachael Wadham). Later, Bug Incision would issue records by American and European artists, and the label's reputation began to spread. Everything is

21. Myself and Meichel played together with Munro as the Musk Cup, one of the most satisfying and confusing musical units I've ever been involved with, and we also did lots of (mostly private) playing as a duo. Oliver retired briefly from music sometime around 2007 or so (this is when his photography started to flourish), but upon his return to the game, we formed the Midnighties, another touchstone of my musical livelihood.

22. Recordings from this series were bundled together on the *Best of Bug Radio on CJSW* (Bug Incision Records, bir-six).



top to bottom: Bent Spoon Duo (Chris Dodge, Scott Munro) with Chad Van Gaalen
Cantos Music Foundation, May 7, 2009 | photo by Cody Oliver



top to bottom: Justin Haynes, Ryan Driver, Jean Martin
Cantos Music Foundation, May 7, 2009 | photo by Cady Oliver

churning along to this very day, and the following pages will outline but a few of the memorable shows that have happened during other significant stretches of Bug Incision's history.

Four Highlights

1. Peter Evans and the Tunnel Shows

In the early days of New York-based trumpeter Peter Evans' career, he found himself at the Banff Centre and caught wind of a nearby city called Calgary. Through some scrupulous MySpace research, he found the Bent Spoon Trio and Bug Incision pages and reached out in early 2007.

It wasn't until David Laing and I, as the Bent Spoon Duo, toured Britain in June of 2007 that we actually met Peter, who was playing on the same bill as us in London. We played at the legendary Red Rose pub's back room, and the other acts on the bill included Mick Beck solo and the quartet of Evan Parker, John Russell, John Edwards, and Evans.

I ended up booking a late summer tour for Evans and two duos: Dadge/Rachael Wadham (piano/junk) in Seattle and Vancouver, and Raw Kites aka Dadge/Shane Krause (reeds) in Edmonton and Calgary. He played some of the most amazing and inspiring solo music I've ever heard (including Evans a ripping set at the Emmedia screening room), and we had a great time on the road.

With the assistance of Peter Moller and the Cantos Music Foundation (now the old 11th avenue location of the National Music Centre), Evans returned the next year for two sets at said venue: one a duo with me, and the other with the Dadge/Munro version of the Bent Spoon Duo.

Peter also performed in the tunnel in Confederation Park that runs underneath 10th Street. Over the span of a few years, primarily David Laing, Scott Munro, and I would host secret shows²³ in this tunnel, announced via email to a select handful of responsible, non-rowdy friends earlier in the day (asked always to "please be discreet"). I believe this was the only time the cops showed up, but the situation was quickly defused by (at the time very much to our horror) a local weed dealer who happened to be in attendance.

²³ The Bent Spoon Trio's album with Dan Meichel, *Lost In A Chinese Attic* (bim-04), was recorded at the only show down there where no one showed up, and it is an excellent demonstration of the pleasing acoustic properties of such a space..

2. Weeds Cafe

This spot, located a short pitch Northwest of the downtown core, was the most consistent Bug Incision venue for the longest period of time. I'd been aware of the venue for some time, as it was close to the neighbourhood in which I grew up and was one of the first all-ages spaces I encountered during my teen years. After touring out east and playing the Mardi Spaghetti series at Le Cagibi in Montreal in 2009 or so, I remembered the excellent back room that Weeds had and, thanks to Stew Elton, booked many a fine show in there.

Eugene Chadbourne once played an unamplified solo set of banjo and singing to a packed room, directly following one of the few live performances of Jean-Sebastian Aude's Zouk Fuck project, his semi-ironic, expletive-laden hip-hop guise. One of the more excellently strange pairings that took place in that space.

Allison Cameron delivered a confusing, sweaty set of her compositions using toy instruments, tiny Honeytone amps, and snippets of pre-recorded music. Mark Flesichhaker also played that night, as did the Bent Spoon Duo, alone and with Allison.

Eric Hamelin, Darren Williams, Scott Munro, Aaron Leaney, Larry McDowell, Nilan Perera, Eric Normand, and Aaron Sereda all performed, at least once, very memorable solo sets.

3. National Music Centre and the Haynes/Driver/Martin trio

In our second round of venue-sitting, Peter Moller lined up eight shows split between Theatre Junction's second-floor rehearsal studio (he was their resident composer at the time) and the main room at the Cantos Music Foundation (now known as the National Music Centre, in its own new building).

Justin Haynes, Ryan Driver, and Jean Martin are some of the premier members of the Toronto scene, the latter running the excellent Barnyard Records and Driver once a major part of the Rat-Drifting label and scene.

The three of them comprised a trio of, respectively, ukulele, street-sweeper bristle bass (look it up), and a suitcase played with brushes. They played

Ota and Cody Oliver during *Jelly Roll Morton Feldman* performance
Emmedia Screening Room, March 27, 2014 | photo by unknown



the compositions of Myk Freedman, a New York-based Torontonion with an amazing songbook of Monk/Nichols-style jazz tunes under his belt.

The show featured the first public collaboration of Chad Van Gaalen (on electronics) with the Dodge/Munro version of the Bent Spoon Duo (on a barrage of strings, horns, samplers, and percussion). This grouping was later rechristened Blanket and played quite a few shows during the summer of 2010.

This was the most well-attended Bug Incision show in history, I think.

4. Calgary 2012, Jack Wright, and Chris Riggs

In 2012, Calgary was named one of Canada's "cultural ambassadors", which led to a lot of support for various artistic pursuits. Some of this support came in the form of project grants for artists or groups throughout the city, and Bug Incision was fortunate enough to receive a big one. The grant covered a year of bi-monthly programming of artists from outside Calgary, and in some cases, the country. These acts included Fossils (aka David Payne of Hamilton, Ontario), Not The Wind Not The Flag (Colin Fisher and Brandon Valdivia from Toronto), Shane Krause (Victoria), Land of Marigold (Ellwood Eppps and Josh Zubot from Montreal), Chris Riggs (from Chicago), and Jack Wright (from Easton, Pennsylvania).

Riggs' and Bug Incision's relationship date back to the first non-Calgary releases by the label, his group Traum with percussionist Ben Hall and (sometimes) cellist Hans Buetow. We went on to release a fair bit of each others' music on our own labels (Riggs operated the mighty Holy Cheever Church imprint during this period), and this long-awaited meeting was fruitful indeed; shows in Edmonton and Calgary were terrific, and the live and studio recordings amassed during his stay are still slowly trickling out.

Jack Wright is a name most people stumble across fairly quickly when digging around the history of American improvisation, especially of the staunchly individualistic variety. I'd known of Wright for some time when his name appeared on the aforementioned first batch of non-Calgary recordings from Ben Hall, again in trio with him and Buetow. I went on to release a few other

fantastic recordings featuring Wright, so he was a no-brainer choice for the 2012 series. He spent almost week in town, playing both an official show at National Music Centre (both a stunning solo set and quartet with Ellwood Epps, Scott Munro, which was christened The Unrepeatable Quartet and issued two albums) and a raucous meet-and-play-with-locals show at Weeds. He also hosted an amazing workshop in the basement of Hot Wax Records, played a second Unrepeatable Quartet show in an Edmonton living room.

Dodge and Laing performing in the tunnel
under 10th street in Confederation Park
date and photographer unknown



Thanks:

To Monty and David for starting the ride with me and making lots of good racket; Jonathon Wilcke for his stellar musicality, generous amounts of help running BI, and lending a hand with this piece; Cody Oliver for his amazing photos, for being a reliable sounding board, helping with shows these past years, and for his total disregard for conventional guitar handling; Brad Hawkins for recording a ridiculous number of shows; Paula Fayerman, Whitney Ota, and the CJSW team; Vicki Chau and the crew at Emmedia; Peter Moller; Mark Lawes, Raphaelae Thiriet, and the Theatre Junction crew; Stew Elton and the old Weeds folks; Candace Elder for all the Cantos-era support; Adam Kamis for all the 11th ave-era National Music Centre support; Bob Dawkins of Hot Wax Records; D from the Soda, wherever you are; Patti Dawkins for her amazing video documentation of early BI events; all the other venues and helping hands; all the beautiful musicians from near and far that played for peanuts time and time again; and of course our beloved audience: if they weren't there to not know what they're about to see, there wouldn't be much to go on.

Bug Incision

first edition printed August 2016
second edition printed March 2019