

The Jazz Program : they're only in it for the music

Photos and text
By TED MUMFORD

On a dirty January afternoon a jazz student pauses from his class to gaze out the window at the aspiring lawyers and linguists outside, scurrying to their respective classes, there to sit and listen to the learned. Inside the jazz class, however, the situation is reversed, and professor John Gittins is doing the listening.

Gittins leans on the piano, listening intently to the sextet "workshop" wing it through "Angel Eyes". Each of the players - vibraphonist Michael Kater, bassist Henry Ross, pianist Jack Gelbloom, drummer Bob Leonard and guitarist Mark Crawford - swing the tune as if they were born with jazz in their blood.

Nevertheless, Gittins has had jazz in his blood a little longer than his students (with the possible exception of gray-haired Kater, who is a York history professor) and his mind is filing away the flaws in the performance that would be indiscernable to other ears.

When the tune is finished, Gittins grins and applauds. A consummate teacher, he knows that his critical dissection of their playing will be best preceded by deserved praise: "Great! You're knocking me out. I'd never know you'd been off during the holidays. But..." Drummer Leonard is relying too much on his hi-hat cymbals, he says. Vibraphonist Kater must distance himself from his solos, pianist Gelbloom shouldn't have played with the rhythm when nobody else was holding it down.

Gittins irons out the wrinkles with demonstrations on the blackboard or the piano, and by running the band through instant replays of a troublesome bridge. Soon things are running smoothly, and Gittins, seeing this, leaves for another workshop.

The atmosphere of the jazz programme is informal; Gittins dropped into this workshop - which will go on for hours - for only 30 minutes. He knows his students will play on and learn without him because they share the feeling that makes jazz studies a dynamic and close-knit program. That feeling is an undying love

of jazz. The 50 students who have found their musical niche in jazz studies also share an enthusiasm towards the programme, especially in regards to Gittins, who is its co-director. Tenor saxophonist Jody Golick says, "I consider myself lucky to be here. The jazz programme could be the best thing the university has going for it, and it's all because of Gittins."

Pianist Mark Eisenham feels, "Gittins can explain jazz pedagogically; he makes it seem rational. He has no ulterior motives, he just wants you to play better." Guitarist Marty Loomer adds, "I have to admit he's kind of an inspiration to me."

All of this bubbling - over of praise for Gittins is ironic, since he came to York to teach social science, the discipline which still occupies two thirds of his teaching time. In fact, the jazz programme itself - the only one of its kind in the country - happened more or less by chance.

SINGLE COURSE

In the school year of 1970-71 the music department offered a single course in jazz, taught by electronic music wizard David Roseboom. The response was enthusiastic, but no one would have dared to think that it would blossom into something larger.

John Gittins arrived in Toronto the following year with a handful of social science degrees and a jazz background which included arranging, show conducting and gigs with Eddie Harris, the King Sisters and his own trio, which had been the house band at the Chicago Playboy Club. Although York hired him in social science, (he is currently director of the undergraduate programme in social and political thought) a fellow faculty member and jazz musician made Gittins' expertise known to the music department and he found himself teaching the jazz course as well.

"During the course of the next year," says Gittins, "the music department realized it was in the market for an ethnomusicologist. They were also apparently pleased that the jazz course was well received, and they thought of taking the whole idea somewhat more seriously. So it came to the point that they needed an ethnomusicologist who was also knowledgeable in jazz, and that turned out to be Bob Witmer."

SERIOUS FOOTING

Bob Witmer and Gittins had met in the sixties when they were both freelancing in Vancouver. Witmer was more of an academic musician: a critic, ethnomusicologist and bassist with the Vancouver Symphony, but also a jazzier, having worked with Don Thompson, Terry Clarke and John Handy III. His full-time appointment to the music department gained the jazz program a "more serious footing", in Gittins' estimation. "Bob became director of the program and its entire development and expansion became his task. What you see today is what he's done."

What's to be seen today are four levels of jazz workshops, jazz theory lectures, noon hour concerts featuring Toronto jazz acts, and guest workshops with the likes of McCoy Tyner, Bill Evans, Dizzy Gillespie and Sun Ra. In addition to Witmer (who devotes most of his teaching time to non-jazz courses) and Gittins, there are four teaching assistants and an archivist involved in the program.

There are bands galore; for every one that is assembled for workshop purposes, another will spring up unofficially. But none save one has jumped the hurdle from "small ensemble" to "big band". The band in mention has played only three times this year, yet it has still made a big name for itself: The Star Smashers of the Galaxy Rangers Laboratory Big Band.

"We needed a name quick," said Star Smashers founder Marty Loomer, "The Star Smashers of the Galaxy Rangers was the name of a science fiction satire by Perry Harrison. We added 'Laboratory' so that anything that goes wrong is just an experiment!"

Since its inception a year ago, the band has been a melange of York and Humber College talent, reflecting in its makeup the different approach to teaching jazz used at each school. The York program,

not being aimed at any style of playing, prefers the flexibility of small bands for teaching. Students are not tutored by instrument; they are taught jazz, which they apply to their instrument. Humber works exclusively within the boundaries of a big band, teaching each student to play his or her instrument in that idiom. For this reason (and perhaps because all of the York teachers are bassists, pianists and guitarists), York can easily supply a rhythm section, but most of the horn players are recruited from Humber.

Some of the York jazzers feel that the music department and the university as a whole could stand to put more money into the jazz program, so, among other things, the program could have more to offer to horn players. In the meantime, according to Loomer, "No trumpet player would come to York."

There are also York jazzers who feel that there should be no arbitrary limit on the percentage of time they can devote to jazz. As Bob Witmer says, "Some of the students find they want to be more involved with jazz and the university says otherwise. It's not like doing a medical

degree. Jazz is considered to be one part of music at large," John Gittins adds, "This is not a conservatory or a school like Berkely, which is devoted entirely to training people in jazz and popular music. Since this is an integrated music program, that doesn't happen, and it certainly isn't going to happen, and inevitably there are some jazz students who are unhappy about it."

The occasional ideological difference between students and faculty aside, something significant has been achieved during the short history of jazz at York: in one university curriculum, jazz has been elevated to its rightful place alongside classical and other "serious" musics. But as Gittins recalls, it wasn't planned that way: "I didn't get the impression when I first came here that the music department thought of developing a formal program in jazz studies as serious component of the general program. This was explained to me at the time. This was conceived as something somewhat incidental because some students had expressed an interest in it."

A number of factors convinced the

music department otherwise, however. Gittins continues, "Bob's being here as a full-time member of the department helped change thinking somewhat. The number of students interested increased substantially. The type of theoretical work I was involved in was of a fairly serious type, and I think began to be regarded as such. All these factors plus the fact that this is an unusual music school - in principle it's directed primarily to modern, contemporary and unusual musics - I think led to a gradual feeling that this was a legitimate enterprise. Certainly at the beginning there was some sense that it was not really something that belonged in a university."

A flexible music department was only one pre-requisite for a jazz program's creation. In the ongoing age of rock 'n' roll, there had to be students who would rather play "Take the A-Train" than "Honky Tonk Women". Not surprisingly, many of the jazz students are ex-rock 'n' rollers. For guitarist Lorne Lofsky, one of the program's teaching assistants, the metamorphosis was rather sudden: "I was playing rock 'n' roll. Then one day, I heard a Miles Davis record." So long rock 'n' roll.

Star Smasher Loomer recalls, "In grade nine I wanted to play organ like Ray Manzarek of the Doors. I couldn't afford an organ, so I became a rock guitarist." With a laugh, he adds, "Some people say I still am." (Loomer suffered a relapse and played in a "high distortion" blues band last year.)

Alto player Mike Segal never found much joy in rock. Before making big band sounds with the Star Smashers, he played

in a high school stage band and an army marching band. "My last gig was at the royal winter fair. I got sick of that."

When young musicians get the jazz virus, it can be one of many strains, but Gittins has found that some are more contagious than others: "In all the years we've been here we've had maybe two students interested in dixieland. As for other idioms, we get a lot of students now who want to play in something like a bebop idiom whereas two or three years ago, we had many students who wanted to work at a much more experimental level."

If jazz is many musics - dixie and bebop to name two - which one is taught at York? Gittins answers, "The strategy we've always worked on is that we try to attack jazz in the middle and then work to the ends. When you're teaching jazz history, then I suppose, like Alice, you begin at the beginning. But when you're teaching it as a form of performance, and when you're teaching it as a body of theory, it's not helpful to begin at the beginning, because you have to keep changing everything as you go. So what we've tried to convey to the students is that there is a jazz tradition which is more or less unified. We try to teach theoretically and practically the essential strategies of the tradition. This tends to centre on the music that comes from about ten years before the rise of bebop right through to the transformation of bebop in players like Miles Davis and John Coltrane."

"The more advanced students, those who seem to have a pretty good sense of the tradition, are encouraged to experiment in other idioms. That usually



The program that plays together, stays together. Sharon Smith polishes off a tune with Jazz Program directors John Gittins (at the piano) and Bob Witmer.

means more contemporary idioms, but not invariably. For instance, we have some sax players who are getting involved with Coleman Hawkins."

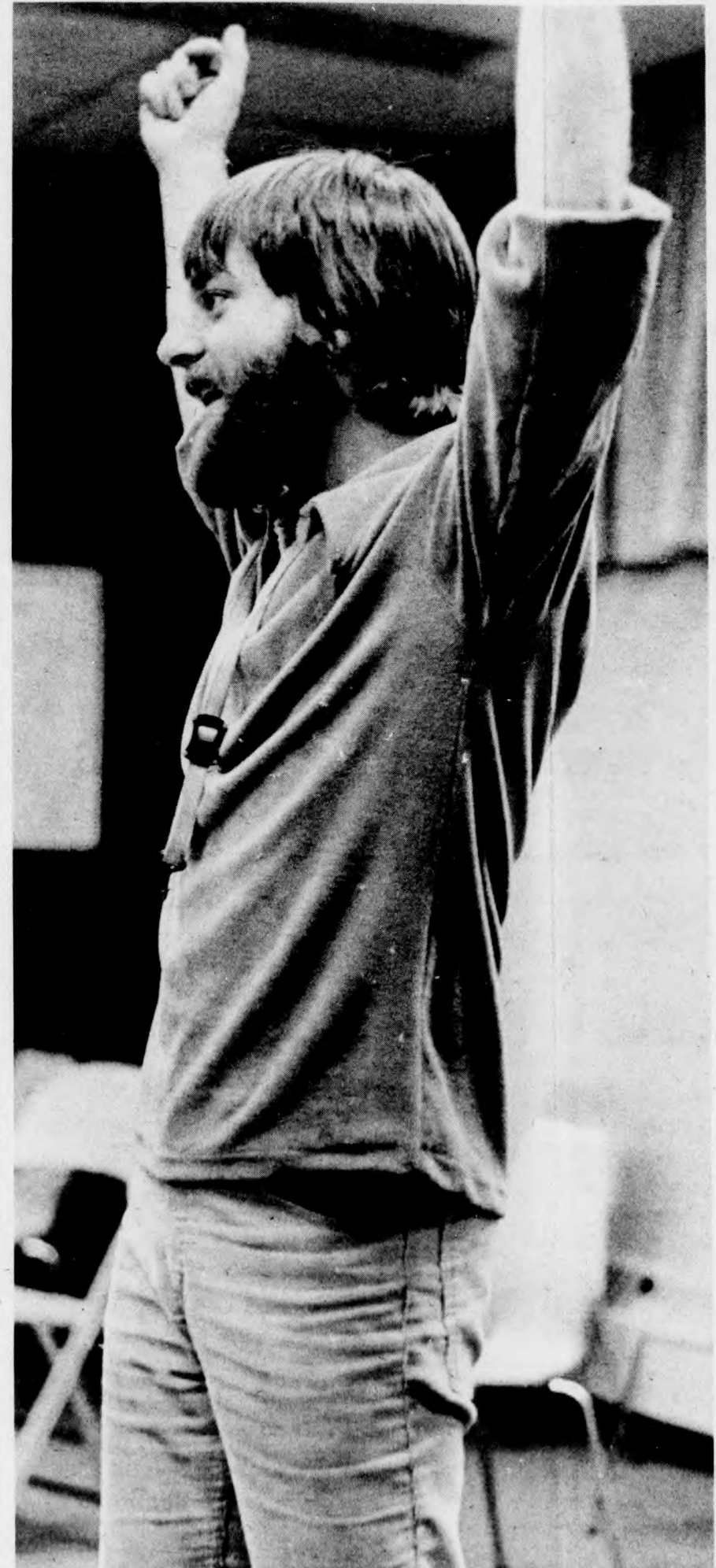
The jazz program is only beginning to turn out graduates, and many of them are already working their way into the local freelance circuit. "We figure we have a lot of success stories," says Witmer, "but we can't say that last year's drummer is now with Miles Davis." Despite the recent touting of Toronto as "Canada's jazz city", Gittins points out that, "Very few people make a living here playing jazz.

They have to play commercial music to get the bread and butter on the table."

If there is a dearth of jazz enthusiasts in Toronto, it's nowhere more evident than at York. The average turnout on Tuesday nights at Sylvester's, Stong College's aspiring jazz joint, is one listener for every player. The LLBO declaration above the bar was altered by one jazzer to read, "More than 75 persons in this licensed room is unbelievable". The seeming lack of interest is a shame, but the jazzers don't care - they're only in it for the music.



Alto saxophonist Mike Segal blows a solo with the York-Humber conglomerate, the Star Smashers of the Galaxy Rangers Laboratory Big Band. They're playing today from noon to two in Founders Dining Hall.



Humber student Alex Dean leads the Star Smashers in rehearsal. Dean, who plays sax in the band, was accepted by York's music department this year, but not by the university. He'll try again next year.

Gov't. sits on new marijuana legislation

By PETER BIRT

OTTAWA (CUP) — On February 4, 1977 it will have been two years since discussion in committee began on the government's bill to amend the marijuana laws in Canada.

In that time the bill has gone through the Senate's legal and constitutional affairs committee, suffered amendments, was returned to the Senate and passed. It went to the House of Commons on June 18, 1975. It hasn't been heard of since.

That bill, S-19 was "an act to amend the food and drugs act, the narcotic control act, and the criminal code."

"The intent of this legislation," according to Marc Lalonde, minister of health and welfare in his testimony before the committee, "is to provide Canadian courts with needed flexibility in dealing with offences involving cannabis so that the penalties levied will be suited to the circumstances and significance of the offences."

A spokesperson for the minister said on January 19, 1977 there had been "recent discussion of the whole matter" but Loraine Andras said she could not say what was going to happen to the bill. She also said there was a possibility of some action in the matter at the end of January.

Interest in the legislation hasn't declined. According to Janet Ross of the Addiction Research Foundation of Ontario, studies show increased use of cannabis, especially among 18-29 year old men with university education and earning \$15,000 a year.

The Canadian Medical Association (CMA) continues to "nag away" too, according to the CMA's director of scientific councils. Dr. J. S. Bennett blames "political expediency" on the lack of government action.

Even the chairperson of the original Senate committee that studied the bill, Senator Carl Goldenberg doesn't know why no action has been taken by the government.

He said that he knew the bill was "very controversial" but he said, "I thought I would have been told" if the amendments the Senate committee made were unacceptable to the government. He said he has heard "nothing whatsoever" about the bill

since it passed the Senate two years ago.

The government has now at least three options.

It can put the amended Senate version of its bill on the House of Commons order paper and see that it soon comes up to debate.

It can introduce a new version of the bill and take it to the House of Commons for discussion.

Or it can simply drop the whole matter.

Debate on Bill S-19 began in Senate December 5, 1974. In those debates the purpose and limits of the bill were made clear.

Senator Neiman: "Honourable senators, on Tuesday of last week the government introduced Bill S-19 in this chamber, by which it proposes to transfer the legislative provisions

relating to cannabis from the narcotic control act to the food and drugs act and, in order to regulate those provisions more appropriately, to make amendments to the Criminal Code. I cannot stress too strongly that this bill does not make possession of the substance cannabis sativa legal, nor will it, I am sure, when the implications of these proposals are studied and fully understood, tend to encourage in any way the use of the substance in any of its forms."

In that speech the government makes its plans clear. During the course of witness testimony before the committee and in the debates in the Senate, proponents of the bill repeatedly stated what the government had been saying all along. This bill will change the category of offence that

smoking marijuana is but it will not make an act which is illegal now, legal.

As Dr. Bennett of the CMA said during the hearing, "Surely in this day and age it is practical to make something an offence without necessarily making it a criminal offence."

One of the key amendments made by the Senators to the original bill referred to importation of marijuana for personal use. The RCMP had objected to this clause and before the bill went back to the Commons the section was simply removed.

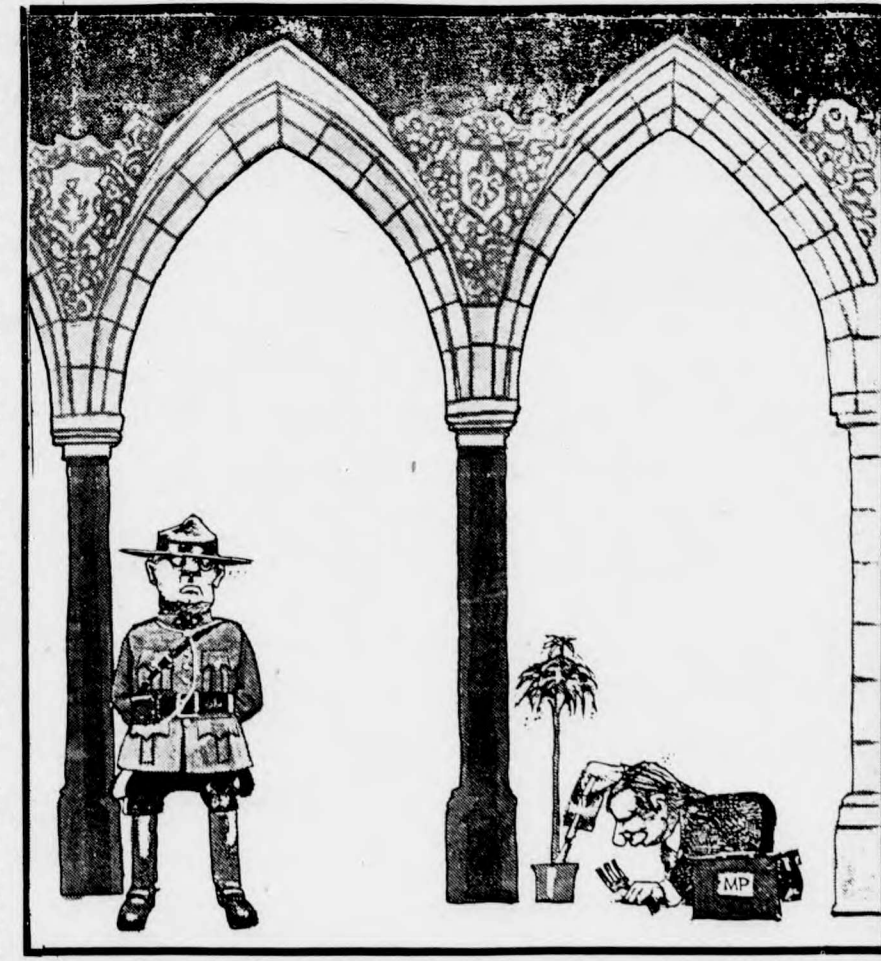
That section stated, "(51) except as authorized by this part of the regulations, no person shall import into Canada or export from Canada any cannabis," and later "except that subparagraph (b) (ii) (regarding penalties) does not apply were that person, after having been found guilty of the offence, establishes that he imported or exported the cannabis for his own consumption only."

The committee also recommended that first offenders would be given an absolute or conditional discharge after conviction for possession of marijuana.

Maximum penalties for importing or exporting would be reduced to 14 years less a day from the existing 14 years. The law now states that absolute or conditional discharges can only be granted in offences that carry a penalty of less than 14 years.

One senator, Sullivan made his position on the whole matter very clear. "The use of soft drugs leads almost inevitably to the use of hard drugs. There is no such thing as 'simple possession of marijuana', I would remind Senator Neiman. They are all passing it on, or proselytizing. Furthermore, I am in favour of the death penalty for heroin traffickers. You now know exactly where I stand," he said.

Another, Senator Lorne Bonnell said "Marijuana has no medical use, and its effect on our young people between 14 and 20 cost our society dearly. These youngsters lose their initiative, drive, sense of purpose and their ambition to succeed." It was in this atmosphere that the Senate passed the amended Bill S-19.



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