

Kenny Wheeler - Gnu man in town

Steven Hacker and
Howard Goldstein

Looking at him, you'd think he'd be more at home as a librarian or a small town mail clerk, but in fact, Kenny Wheeler's most comfortable working with some of contemporary music's most innovative musicians and composers. And now at age 50 he is finally achieving the recognition he deserves as one of the foremost trumpet players in the world. Recognition did not come easy.

Wheeler's involvement in music began as a youngster of 12 in his hometown of St. Catharines when he was given a cornet. With his father a semi-professional musician, Wheeler was exposed to many of that era's great trumpet players.

Later, after having studied at Toronto's Royal Conservatory of Music, Wheeler attempted to break into the Toronto scene, but with little success. "I may have sat in once or twice around Toronto but mostly I just listened," he recalls. "I played some Polish weddings on weekends but as far

as the big leagues of Toronto, I never made that."

Unable to find work he moved on to Montreal to study music education at McGill. "I didn't really want to do it. I was just conforming to society. I thought I'd better do something sensible pretty soon. At 22, I felt an awful pressure to get a job like everybody else."

On the advice of a friend he moved to London, England with the expectation of finding steady work. During the next few years, Wheeler worked in various settings, the most notable being the John Dankworth Big Band in which he became a major soloist.

Already established as a studio musician, the frustrated Wheeler began to crave for something more artistically satisfying. "They're (studio sessions) quite horrifying. You come out of these things feeling like a musical prostitute," he explains.

Searching for new directions, Wheeler dropped by London's Little Theatre Club where free music was being explored. "I just couldn't find anyplace to play and I heard about this club where

this crazy music was being played. I went up there and I hated it for a while but then after a few days, John Stevens (drummer, 'the father figure of free music in London') said 'why don't you come up and play.' I found that when I played, I enjoyed it more than when I was listening."

This proved to be a major turning point in Wheeler's career. No longer restricted by the boundaries of traditional jazz, Wheeler could now experiment to his heart's content. He soon joined the Globe Unity Orchestra, an ensemble featuring some of the finest free jazz players in Europe. Touring with the Orchestra, he quickly made a name for himself.

In 1971, while doing a workshop for German Radio in Hamburg, Wheeler met Anthony Braxton. Braxton, now widely regarded as one of this era's most important musical figures, was then performing with the quartet Circle including Dave Holland, Chick Corea and Barry Altschul. Braxton was impressed with Wheeler's playing, and when



KENNY WHEELER
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Corea left the band, Braxton asked Wheeler to become the new member of the group.

The unit became known as the Anthony Braxton Quartet, producing several albums on Arista which remain classic recordings of free jazz improvisation. Wheeler recalls this period as the most enjoyable of his career.

During this time with Braxton, Wheeler's career branched out again when he was introduced to

producer Manfred Eicher. An album, **Gnu High**, his first for the then fledgling ECM label and his third as a leader was the result. (Wheeler had previously recorded **Windmill Tilter**, a musical interpretation of Cervantes' Don Quixote, and a big band date, **Song For Someone**, which was later awarded *Melody Maker* Album of the Year.

See Big, page 15.

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