

Paul Bley - Paradise of Music ~ The other side of Canada

As we enter November, the temperature has dropped considerably. It's below freezing in Ottawa, with temperatures feeling as low as -10 degrees Celsius. I went on a business trip to Tokyo and Osaka for about a week, and even in November, it was like a summer's day with temperatures exceeding 25 degrees Celsius, so I was sweating. When I landed at the Ottawa airport via Toronto, I felt a huge difference in the climate. The season has finally arrived where the true characteristics of the northern land are evident.

This month, I will talk about someone very well known to jazz lovers, Paul Bley. Born in Montreal, he left a huge mark on contemporary jazz, and passed away in January of 2016 at the age of 83. Though he does not have any so-called hit songs, were it not for Paul Bley, there is no doubt the fabric of the jazz world would be completely different.

In the beginning

It was in the summer of 1949 that Paul Bley's name first became known to local music lovers in his hometown of Montreal. Let me give you some background.

In 1949, a major jazz troupe from the United States called JATP (Jazz At The Philharmonic) visited Montreal. The performance, in which Verve Records founder Norman Granz led prominent jazz musicians such as Ella Fitzgerald and Charlie Parker, ended with great success. The next day, Norman Granz took a taxi to the airport, satisfied with his work. Inside the car, jazz piano music was playing on the radio. Granz's ears perked up. He couldn't help but to ask, "Who is this?" By chance, this driver was a fan of jazz. The driver answered, "Oscar Peterson, sir. He's the best pianist in Montreal, I think, maybe even the best pianist in Canada."

"Huh. Is this a recording?"

"No, it's a live broadcast, sir."

"Where are they doing this?"

"At a jazz club downtown called the Alberta Lounge."

"Then please go there now."

"Sir, weren't you going to the airport?"

"It's fine. Forget about the airport. Just hurry to this 'Alberta Lounge' or whatever."

"You got it"

It was under these circumstances that Granz went to the Alberta Lounge, a jazz club located on the corner of Rue de la Gauchetière and Rue Peel in downtown Montreal. Although Oscar Peterson was totally unknown at the time, Granz was completely enchanted

when he heard Peterson's performance live before his eyes. After the performance, Granz spoke to Peterson. "You are truly amazing. Would you like to sign a contract with me and perform at a concert I'm putting on in New York?"

Peterson then went to New York and put on a spectacular debut at Carnegie Hall on September 18, 1949. This is one of the most important chapters in jazz history - the origin story of Oscar Peterson.

Now, we return to Paul Bley. As previously mentioned, Oscar Peterson was the main performer at the Alberta Lounge, which was also the stage for a radio program. Now that he was going to New York, the question was who could fill the void left by Peterson. Peterson who was later given the nickname "King of the Keyboard". As mentioned in the taxi driver's comments above, he was amazing even when he was unknown. To follow his act, they needed someone of great skill. So, the 24-year-old Peterson, leaving for New York, directly nominated Paul Bley. At the time, Bley was just 16 years old. A genius who had attended the prestigious the McGill Conservatory of Music in his hometown, he was performing with a jazz combo group he formed himself. Peterson must have been able to see his immense talent. Incidentally, as introduced in the second installment of "Paradise of Music," Peterson was the one who discovered Toshiko Akiyoshi, a figure of Japanese pride.

A Child Prodigy

Paul Bley was born in Montreal on November 10, 1932. His name at birth was Hyman Bley. Both of his parents were Jews who immigrated to Canada from Romania. Reminiscent of "Fiddler on the Roof," it is said that he started learning the violin at the age of five. At the age of seven, his parents divorced. Around that time, Paul switched from violin to piano of his own volition and started taking lessons in earnest. The piano became his lifelong instrument. His musical talent was obvious, and he entered the McGill Conservatory of Music at the age of 11. At the age of 13, he was precocious enough to start earning money by leading a band at the summer resort of Sainte-Agathe-des-Monts in Quebec. Around this time, he changed his first name from Hyman to Paul. His reasoning was that he thought it would be more popular with girls. However, he may also have had a distorted sense of his own identity.

And so, after being recognized by Oscar Peterson, he began working at Alberta Lounge as his successor.

New York

In the summer of 1950, Paul Bley depart for New York. He began attending the Juilliard School of Music. At this time, he was 17.

New York in the 1950s was a time of rapid growth in new, free, and diverse music. Paul Bley channeled the city's energy and excitement into his music. On Monday, November 30, 1953, three weeks after turning 21, he recorded his debut album, "Introducing Paul Bley". With Charles Mingus on bass and Art Blakey on drums, they completed six songs in one day. Listening to it now, it doesn't feel revolutionary, but it's a youthful, vibrant performance based on solid technique, with a beautiful, cool touch. Two of the songs are original compositions, and Bley's sense as a composer shines through. Although it was not commercially successful, it showed off the potential of a young Canadian pianist in the jazz capital, where veteran musicians from all over the world gathered.

Free Jazz Genesis

Paul Bley steadily brushed up his skills and increased his presence in the American jazz world. His interview in the July 13, 1955 issue of the jazz magazine *DownBeat* even foretold the future. Contemporary jazz was now on the eve of a new revolution. This new revolution was the jazz trend that would later be called "free jazz." The following year, in 1956, he moved to Los Angeles and started a new quintet. The members were Ornette Coleman on saxophone, Don Cherry on trumpet, Charlie Haden on bass, and Billy Higgins on drums. If you are a jazz lover, you will know that these were great musicians who have carved their names in the history of jazz. Just as Oscar Peterson gave the young and unknown Paul Bley the opportunity to make his breakthrough, Paul Bley founded in 1956 a group of young, unknown but passionate people who were determined to create new music. Then, in October 1958, he recorded a live performance called "Live at the Hilcrest Club 1958" under the name of The Fabulous Paul Bley Quintet. Their true abilities were exposed thanks to it being live. It conveys an overwhelming amount of passion to this day.

Sturm und Drang

Paul Bley was one of the greatest geniuses in the jazz world and was active in all directions. From 1962 to 1963, he recorded his masterpiece "Footloose!" Although Paul himself was never a political person, I feel that this record reflects the atmosphere of the era of American prosperity, the Cold War, and the civil rights movement. It was a masterpiece that greatly expanded the expressing realm of the piano trio and left a huge impact. Keith Jarrett says he's "listened to it thousands of times." Here is the original scenery of Chick Corea's 1971 album "A.R.C."

The 1960s was a time of great upheaval in both art and society. Jazz, a new and free music, also underwent major changes in two ways. One way was the rise of "free jazz,"

which transcended existing musical frameworks and the concept of chords. Exactly as Paul Bley had predicted. Moreover, Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry, whom he discovered, led this era.

The other way was the emergence of electronic musical instruments such as synthesizers. British rockers such as the Beatles, Pink Floyd, and Emerson, Lake & Palmer introduced it experimentally. Paul Bley, on the other hand, was at the forefront of the jazz world, making full use of synthesizers. Paul Bley was the first musician in history to play a synthesizer in front of an audience. "The Paul Bley Synthesizer Show," released in 1971, was a masterpiece that blended past, present, and future. Paul Bley's clear intention to be a pioneer feels refreshing.

Jaco and Pat

Lastly, I would like to touch on Paul Bley's achievements as a discoverer of unknown talent. It was Paul Bley who gave the opportunity to record for the first time to electric bass giant Jaco Pastorius and guitar maestro Pat Metheny, who are both remembered in jazz history as founders of contemporary jazz.

The date is Sunday, June 16, 1974, and the location is 29 Greene Street, SoHo, Manhattan, New York. A recording was done for IAI (Improvising Artists Inc.) records, founded by Paul Bley. The title is "Jaco." Produced by Paul himself, he also participated on electric piano. Paul's trusted Bruce Ditmas plays drums. For the first time, 23-year-old Jaco and 19-year-old Pat put their immense talent on a record. Paul's electric piano playing that inspired and stimulated Jaco and Pat is exciting and youthful (though he was actually 41 years old at this time). They recorded a total of 9 songs, for 36 minutes and 37 seconds of high-quality improvisation. It can be said to have been a historic moment in contemporary jazz. It's a masterpiece that brings new discoveries every time you listen to it. However, in reality, this record was not commercially available at all at first and was shelved.

Even so, in 1976, Jaco joined the super group Weather Report, and his revolutionary and amazing bass attracted the world's attention. At the same time, Pat joined Gary Burton Quartet, released his solo debut album, and gained recognition as a new guitar hero. Then, it became a hot topic among those involved that, when these two were completely unknown, they had recorded with the genius Paul Bley's quartet, and the album "Jaco", which had been shelved, was released. It was vacuum-packed with the essence of modern jazz, stripped of its pretense.

Conclusion

Paul's primary base of activity has always been the United States. However, even

after establishing himself as a jazz musician in New York, whenever he found an opportunity, he would return to Canada and teach the young musicians. In 1953, he helped organize the Montreal Jazz Workshop. He invited to Montreal alto saxophone genius Charlie Parker, who is etched into jazz history as the founder of bebop, and he himself participated on the piano.

Paul Bley, who created jazz history based in the United States. His homes were New York and Los Angeles, as well as Florida, where he passed away at the age of 83. However, he continued to hold Canadian citizenship. He is a musician that Canada can be proud of.