



[Live at the Cellar: Vancouver's Iconic Jazz Club and the Canadian Co-operative Jazz Scene in the 1950s and '60s](#) by Marian Jago. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018. 364 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7748-3769-9 (paperback).

**Reviewed by Joe Sorbara**

In the fall of 2017, my family and I packed up our Toronto home to spend two years living in Vancouver. There were many happy coincidences that came with the East Van home we found ourselves living in, one of them being that the bus that stopped less than a minute from our front door was ... well, it was kind of magical. When I learned that it would take me right to the front door of Merge or, if I continued on, drop me within spitting distance of the China Cloud, and then 8EAST, and then the Gold Saucer Studios where Sawdust Collector events went down, I began thinking of it as the “jazz bus.” In addition to Presentation

House in North Van and, of course, the iconic Western Front in Mt Pleasant (neither of which the jazz bus passed on its route, unfortunately), it was primarily in these artist-run spaces that the profoundly welcoming community of people interested in adventurous, creative, experimental music-making gathered and sounded. So, as it happened, my Vancouver came ready-made with a magical jazz bus that picked me up right where I lived and took me directly to where the improvisers were making “the scene.”

Halfway through my time on the west coast, late in 2018, Marian Jago's *Live at the Cellar: Vancouver's Iconic Jazz Club and the Canadian Co-operative Jazz Scene in the 1950s and '60s* was released and, for many reasons, I wish that I had read it then. For one, the book has helped me to see the histories of artist-run venues as being interwoven with histories of experimental forms of music-making that draw, more or less, from the deep well of the Black American Music tradition. Jago's tracing of these histories from the Wailhouse and the Cellar through the Black Hole and Flat Five—all by young musicians inspired by the experiments of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, et al.—would have provided a deepened perspective as I was hearing stories about the Glass Slipper and 1067 and frequenting the spots mentioned above. This is what histories do: they change the present for us. This book has me seeing and hearing Vancouver's diverse Creative Music scene differently, with an expanded sense of time, and it has me inspired to learn more about the



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trajectories of these histories throughout the rest of Canada. It has also taught me that if I had been in Vancouver in the late 1950s and early '60s I would have been catching whatever bus was headed toward the Cellar, the artist-run space at Broadway and Kingsway whose story is at the heart of Marian Jago's excellent book.

*Live at the Cellar* begins with a thoughtful exploration of “scene”-ness, as both a sociological model and as a way of life, that will be interesting to anyone compelled to think about the interrelationships among art, identity, and community. We are then treated to a whirlwind tour through more interwoven histories beginning nationally with stories from the first half of the twentieth century about the state of transportation and population, early public radio and its dependence upon the Canadian National Railway, early Canadian jazz and its relationship with the CBC, and how the limitations of rail and road travel isolated the west coast from the rest of the country. Focusing our attention then on Vancouver and setting the scene for the opening of the Cellar, the well-paced history lesson continues with a brief look at early jazz in the city before closing in on the East End, home to the majority of Vancouver's working- and lower-class citizens and the scene for stories of abject poverty, intensified policing, crime, violence, alcohol prohibition, and racialization. The East End was made up of China Town, Japan Town, and Hogan's Alley which, despite being home to many minoritized groups of people, is remembered primarily as a Black community. Jago pauses admirably here to discuss the complexities of the anti-Black racism faced by the very small number of African Canadians in Vancouver at the time. These are stories deserving of volumes on their own, and especially as connected to histories of jazz and the Black American Music tradition more generally.

These stories culminate in a group of young musicians who came together as friends through a hip record store and a community big band, friends—much like those I met when I arrived in Vancouver some sixty-ish years later—who found that they needed a place to play their music and who weren't interested in waiting around for someone else to provide it. Enthralled with the language of bebop and frustrated by an establishment that was less-than-welcoming to them as musicians and either uninterested in the kinds of experiments that were inherent in the new music or discouraged by the lack of commercial potential they imagined for it, the founders of the Cellar took matters into their own hands: they opened the Wailhouse.

A musical clubhouse in Richmond overlooking the Fraser River, and apparently inundated with the intoxicating scent of dogfood from a neighbouring factory, the Wailhouse only lasted about six months, but it is where things started for Ken Hole, Al Neil, Dave Quarin, Jim Carney, Tony Clitheroe, Jim Johnson, Jim Kilburn, and Walley Lightbody as far as running a space as a collective. The demise of the Wailhouse leads to the opening of the Cellar and is also one of my favourite moments in the book because it tells a great story about the author. Marian Jago's sincere passion for jazz in Vancouver and across Canada—the music, the people, the histories—is made abundantly clear through the remarkable care and extensive research that have gone into this book, including some deep archival digging and more than a hundred interviews with sixty-one people over more

than a decade. Her voice remains accessible and engaging throughout even as it maintains an academic remove that can be frustrating at times for this reader, but also, at times, laugh-out-loud funny. Far from downtown and inaccessible by transit, susceptible to the noise of large trucks on the nearby bridge and *crushed by a tree that was toppled in a windstorm*, the Wailhouse is coolly described as having been “outgrown” by our heroes in an account that crushes all competition in the art of understatement. (pp. 63–66) On to the cellar ...

The book’s third section touches briefly on venues whose stories begin in the mid-to-late 1950s: the Yardbird Suite in Edmonton, the Foggy Manor in Calgary, and 777 Barrington Street in Halifax, with nods to Montréal’s Jazz Workshop and the MINC (Musicians Incorporated Club) in Toronto. Most of its pages are dedicated to the scene in Vancouver and the story of the Cellar. Especially in light of these other spaces having left significantly less evidence behind for even the most invested researcher to explore, this is quite effective. The detailed picture that Jago paints of the book’s central example of cooperative artist-run jazz venues in Canada at this time inspires a wealth of questions about these other scenes and all that have developed since: Knowing something about the personalities at play among the folks who opened the Cellar, for example, opens up questions about the interests and priorities of the people who came together to make things happen elsewhere: How did those personalities interact? Were their disagreements that made organisers part ways so that new and different scenes emerged nearby as there were here? And further, where did musical communities blend with writers and poets, painters, and actors, and where did they keep to themselves? How were things organized and why, and how effective were the policies put in place to make things run smoothly? How did alcohol play a role in the spaces and how did organisers and audiences relate to liquor laws? Was there food, like the saran-wrapped sandwiches and purportedly awful pizza at the Cellar, and what was it like?

I have a lot of appreciation for the space that Jago holds for racialized musicians and communities in an overwhelmingly white field and for women musicians and community members in an overwhelmingly masculine one. How have systems of oppression and politics of identity come to bear on other scenes and why? Because Jago has taken the time, for example, to speak with family members of the “founding fathers” of the Cellar, we have stories about the women who did much of the feminized work that arguably makes or breaks so-called “artist-run” venues, such as taking tickets at the door, preparing food, keeping the place clean, organizing childcare, and so on. These are important parts of our histories as Canadian musicians, organizers, and music fans. Who are the unsung labourers of other scenes and what are their stories?

That there are significant gaps in the evidence left behind by the Vancouver scene in the ’50s and ’60s is also a part of this story. The threads that Jago is able to weave together consist of what was more likely to leave a mark: shows more likely to have been advertised, written about in *Coda* magazine, or documented by the CBC. They are also the community’s most beloved stories, more likely to be well remembered and certainly more likely to come up in interviews with an engaged and curious jazz musician and writer so many years on. As such, complicating the case made about

the underrepresentation of Canadian jazz made in the appendix, this history of the Cellar spends a great deal of time recounting tales about the string of American jazz musicians who travelled north to play at the club. There were a lot of them, and the joys of thinking through who they were and when they visited—and especially of imagining what knowledge and influence they were likely to have left behind—are among the many gifts this book provides. But while it would certainly be an exaggeration to say that this is *their* story in any way, I do pine for more stories of what happened on the typical Friday night when the club was half full of the usual suspects.

More than anything, though, I am left wondering what the music *sounded* like. How did these early exponents of Canadian jazz *play*? How did they interpret, and misinterpret, what they heard on their records and on the radio? Whose aesthetic priorities held sway over others? What were the artistic tensions and how did they sound? In some of the most engaging interview passages, we learn something about the playing styles of bassist Tony Clitheroe and drummer Bill Boyle, but these kinds of stories about how the local musicians approached the music are largely missing here. It's a shame that these aren't the kinds of things that the people who were there were likely to talk about in interviews years later.

Histories of jazz in Canada are woefully underexplored. *Live at the Cellar* does important work helping to tell the story of the music in Vancouver at this foundational moment in the city's history as well as drawing connections with other major Canadian scenes during the same period. It has also stoked my own curiosity about artist-run venues that have come, and mostly gone, in the intervening years. Because of its unique reach, it would serve as a great introduction for anyone curious about the history of this music in Canada: listeners, musicians, scholars, and historians alike. To that end, in fact, a section of the appendix dedicated to Canadian Jazz Sources offers a survey of other writing on the subject, including the important work of Mark Miller, John Gilmore, and others, that provides readers with a list of books to add to the piles on their bedside tables while also driving home the point that there really are so many more to research and write.

I am thankful for this book, grateful for the stories it tells and for those it makes me long to hear. And I am hopeful that, in the coming years, a treasure trove of stashed-away boxes filled with journals and photos—and tapes!—are discovered in attics across the country and that excellent story weavers like Marian Jago can explore their contents and continue the work of telling the stories of jazz in Canada with some more of the gaps filled in. In the meantime, I am inspired to attend to the stories that I am told in a new way, to spend some time seeking out and listening to older recordings of Canadian jazz and creative music, and to get back to the work of making the scene as soon as it is safe to gather and play.