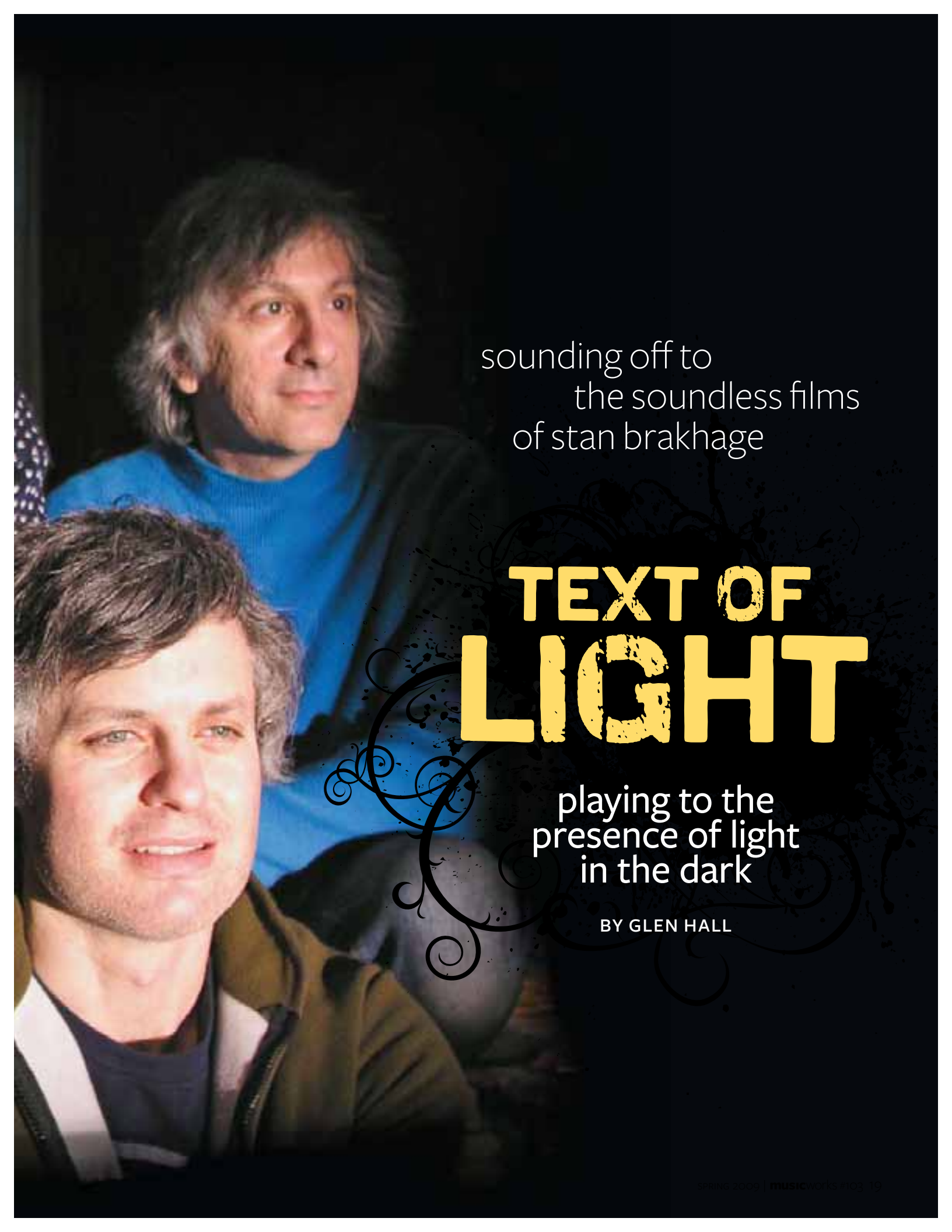




PHOTO BY STEF



sounding off to
the soundless films
of stan brakhage

TEXT OF LIGHT

playing to the
presence of light
in the dark

BY GLEN HALL

IN THE DARK, THE SILVER SCREEN PULSES.



Nests of effects pedals are arrayed, their red LEDs glowing. A raking thrash across guitar strings, a reverberant tap-tap-tap, a short upward motif on saxophone. Now the screen erupts with a torrent of unnameable coloured shards and shapes, a visual assault that decimates any attempt to verbalize what is being seen. But the musicians hardly react.

Instead, they proceed to weave an audible tapestry of resonant drones, arrhythmic looped noises, and throbbing palpitations. Strange recorded vinyl non sequiturs materialize, then just as suddenly disappear. And amid the visual vibrations that fill the screen of audience attention, the music doesn't lead, doesn't follow. Its vibrations join with the twenty-four-frames-per-second flicker of the projector beaming the film's giant images across space to create a unified, one-time-only experience, son et lumière like no other.

What do you do if you're a filmmaker and you come to the realization that *this*, what we all call reality, or what we think is reality, isn't all there is—or at least, that somehow our perceptions of what's going on around us are distorted and incomplete? Well, the late Stan Brakhage, arguably the most influential experimental filmmaker of the twentieth century, tried to find ways to break through the veils that impede perception of what is there. He experimented with ways to produce a state simulating human perception *before* it was affected by the accretions of words and habitual patterns of thinking that filter out more of experience than they include: a “fetal perception,” as Brakhage called this pre-verbal state of awareness.

ON THE CD: 020103 RAW 1, 020103 RAW 2, 020103 RAW 3

What do you do if you're a rock musician and you start to feel that what was liberating and anarchic about your favourite music has started to become a bit of a jail cell: the same chords and progressions, the same tonal melodies, the SOS (same old shit)? Well, getting an ear cleaning from innovative composer Glenn Branca is a good start. You stop tuning your guitar the same way everyone else does. And you do what they won't do—either because they're addicted to their genre's clichés or because they're just afraid—you play noise. You break on through.

And what connects Brakhage and the members of the band Text of Light is a quality without which neither could take the radical steps necessary for their adventure into the uncharted realms outside the accepted consensus view of *what is*: fearlessness.

Guitarists Alan Licht and Lee Ranaldo shared the kind of epiphany that can validate years spent in college or university. While attending art school, both were exposed to the groundbreaking films of cinematic visionary Stan Brakhage. Ranaldo was in Binghamton, New York, where he was studying painting. While there he fell in with a group of students who were ardent cinephiles. This led to his taking a film course with renowned filmmaker Ken



Jacobs, a friend to this day, who turned him on to Brakhage's work. With Licht, too, college filmic experience left an indelible mark. He saw, among other experimental films, the acclaimed *Mothlight*, made by gluing to film the wings of moths that had died fluttering around a light bulb that lit Brakhage's porch. It was the filmmaker's inventiveness that spoke to Licht. He is direct in his assessment of Brakhage's impact on him: "Finding a seemingly infinite variety of latent possibilities from a very simple setup is a big part of what my own aesthetic has become."

In 2001 that formative imprint would return to energize the creativity of a group of musical radicals assembled to perform with the seventy-minute Brakhage opus, *Text of Light*, a time lapse tour de force of books, paintings, and reflections shot entirely through a heavy ashtray. And so, *Text of Light*, the band, was born.

Other members of the group had had their own encounters with Brakhage's films. Saxophonist Ulrich Krieger recalls going to Babylon, an aptly named small theatre in Berlin, where he first saw the artist's films, along with those of other filmmaker outlaws Kenneth Anger, Tony Conrad, and Alejandro Jodorowski. One of the two players holding down *Text of Light*'s alternating drum chair, Tim Barnes, says that where he first saw some of the films that were later to be joined in cre-

ative partnership with the band was at New York's much prized resource, Jonas Mekas' brainchild, the Anthology Film Archive. But turntablist DJ Olive's first encounters with the Brakhage canon were less reputable: "They were used as visual wallpaper at raves," he recounts. Yet, regardless of the circumstances in which the musicians first saw any of the films, it would be Ranaldo's and Licht's use of the films that would be the catalyst for some remarkable, adventurous, and, perhaps not surprisingly, educational, performances.

It might seem inconceivable these days that at the turn of the millennium, playing improvised music to experimental films would cause a stir. But what *Text of Light* does—performing with the totemic Stan Brakhage's films—was seen in the rarified circles of film aficionados as nothing short of blasphemous. After all, the filmmaker—a deeply philosophical man with a near-religious reverence for the role experimental cinema could play in extending human perception and, as a consequence, consciousness—was quite clear about the marriage of film and music. He stated specifically, many times, that his movies were to be seen in *silence*. The artist did not want viewers' apprehension of what was on the screen

to be "cued" by music—which, in popular movies, foreshadows or underscores the dramatic narrative.

For one thing, Brakhage's films aren't narrative. Emotion, particularly in his hand-painted films, is either incidental or non-existent. So it was not without trepidation that, when ToL was embarking on its ambitious multimedia manoeuvres, Ranaldo sent a letter through Brakhage associate Phil Solomon, essentially asking Brakhage's permission to use his films during their performances. The response was silence.

In hindsight, Ranaldo realized that at the time Brakhage would have received the letter he would have been preoccupied, as he was terminally ill with cancer, a disease the filmmaker believed was probably caused by the chemicals he used while making his hand-painted films. Later, though, there were extensive discussions with his widow, Marilyn. But at the time, Brakhage himself was aware of ToL's performances and its intent. Licht notes, "He wasn't crazy about people using his films outside of their normal context but recognized that it was going to happen, and it wasn't something he actively opposed."

Ranaldo adds, "The film community is relatively small and when we started doing this it really caused quite a lot of discussion, and not in the music community, as no one in that community could care less one way or the



Clockwise from top left: Lee Ranaldo, DJ Olive, Alan Licht, William Hooker, Uli Krieger

other that we were showing Brakhage films.” Although the initial controversy about ToL’s use of the films has faded, when contacted for this article, Brakhage scholar Fred Camp-er, who has never attended one of the group’s performances, was firm in his response to the question about watching Brakhage’s films with music: *don’t*.

It is to the group’s karmic credit, however, that in its travels throughout North America and Europe, its performances have seeded its audience’s minds. Consequently, the shoots of a new audience for the maestro’s films are gradually growing in unlikely soil. Acolytes of Sonic Youth, the rock band Lee Ranaldo is in, and heavy-metal headbangers coming out to see *Text of Light* simply because of the presence of their hero, Ranaldo; improv geeks drawn by the cool cachet of Alan Licht; free jazz fans with a hunger for the powerhouse percussion of William Hooker; all these and more are getting what they came for, *plus* a healthy dose of experimental film as an added bonus. And Ranaldo, for one, is adamant that it is the group’s sincere intention that its audiences seek out Brakhage’s films apart from ToL performances, and, yes, watch them as their maker intended, in silence.

When asked about why they think Brakhage made the films he did, ToL members readily shared their perceptive opinions. Alan Licht says it was “to make a very direct expression, unconcerned with formulas, mass appeal, or mainstream distribution.” Lee Ranaldo adds that “[Brakhage] was kind of improvising

film as excitement for the eye in a purely poetic sense.”

Uli Krieger had deep feelings and thoughts on this subject: “Probably the same reason Kandinsky started to paint abstract, Schoenberg wrote twelve-tone, or Einstein did work on relativity ... It is a way to explore and show more of reality than a pure reproduction of the reality we see around us can give you, and the old rules of art making do not allow you to go there.”

What it comes down to is that by performing with Brakhage’s films, these musicians have consciously reassessed what they ask themselves to do as improvisers and have come through the experience with a deeper understanding of their art and who they are themselves.

So how do the members of *Text of Light* play to films whose creator, someone for whom they avow deep respect, says should be viewed in silence? The simple answer is ... they don’t. Well, they don’t play *to* the films. Despite what fans and opponents alike might think, ToL have no wish to create real-time soundtracks to Brakhage films. On the contrary, what the group does in performance is to spontaneously create music that exists side-by-side with whatever film is being projected, but music that does not draw either its overall trajectory or its moment-to-moment gestures from that film. Each musician has quite a bit to say on this subject.

Uli Krieger expounds. “We actually don’t make music to them, but more alongside of them. Music and film are independent. They meet at the same time in the same room, but they are not directly linked ... It creates a space and an experience that is different for each audience member and musician,

because it is not based on preconceived notions on how the two mediums should interact, but on your individual experience of this interaction only.” He adds, “I don’t have to watch the screen to be in the energy field the film creates and to interact with it.”

Alan Licht continues, “We never try to ‘play to’ the films by looking at them and trying to match their rhythms, or even to respond directly to something that’s happening onscreen. The idea is: improvise and let correspondences occur in the moment.”

When asked about whether he consciously joins with the energy levels put out by Brakhage’s films in ToL performances, turntablist and formidable artist in his own right Christian Marclay is unequivocal, and further extends Krieger’s comments: “Absolutely not. We don’t even look at the films. I’m just focusing on the music.” As to what guides his choice of records to use during a performance, it isn’t the films. “That’s the magic of overlapping unrelated things (films and music). They come together only during the performance. Like John Cage and Merce Cunningham, where music and dance are developed separately and only come together during the performance. The brain is so conditioned to try to make sense of it ... finding connections, synthesizing different elements that are brought together.” For Marclay, the non-causative juxtaposition of image and sound can be richly rewarding.

Further on the theme of Brakhage’s films’ energy level affecting what and how he plays, William Hooker remarks, “I don’t approach [playing with the films] from the level of energy. I use another mindset. I go into the ponderous, meditative direction (opposite to the films) because we’ve got a long time span to deal with. It’s not a matter of saying it all really quickly.”

Tim Barnes expands on his colleague’s thoughts: “I’d be lying if I said that I wasn’t inspired by what’s on the screen to do something faster or louder. Not a mirror image reaction, but a reaction. As a musician, you can easily relate colours, textures, camera movements and other motions to what you feel. And I can go opposite or go with.”

As to on-screen images eliciting specific responses, DJ Olive quips, “Well, if there’s a dog in the film, I don’t have to dig out a record of a dog barking. I don’t interact with it, but I’m affected by it.”

ToL has no pre-performance discussions about what to play. Licht says, “The only

thing we might discuss is what order to put the films in if we're using more than one." DJ Olive continues, "In improvising, if you did something that worked really well at sound check, you're not 'allowed' to do it on the gig; it's illegal somehow."

What sets ToL apart from much of *musicianhood* is its insistence on not repeating itself, ever.

To not repeat oneself is one thing, but musicians by necessity must develop a vocabulary of musical gestures with which to express themselves. After all, we all use the same words again and again every day to say what we want to say. Similarly, improvisers of all stripes—jazz, blues, country, and rock players—spend countless hours learning licks and melodic and rhythmic patterns, usually ones they've heard their musical heroes use. Not Text of Light.

Instead they have evolved their own personalized sonic actions that come out of a selective rejection of precisely those licks that are other musicians' meat. The art of putting together phrase and lick sequences in a solo requires that they cohere into a narrative arc, particularly one with an eloquently logical conclusion. But since ToL began by working with Brakhage's non-sequential, non-semantic, non-narrative films, films with no expository dramatic arc, no traditional dénouement, they have had to develop a musical vocabulary that, while not mirroring what's on the screen verbatim, does speak an aesthetically similar, appropriate language.

Krieger explains. "Many of Brakhage's films are very ambient, and so is much of our music. This might go from very soft and often dark ambient textures to very noisy and loud ambient sonic assaults. But again, abstract sounds and music work best—music that doesn't try to tell you a story, or has a linear timeline, that doesn't drag the audience along with them, but gets them indulged in sound as they get indulged in the visuals."

Licht also notes that static nonlinear sounds work, too. "Actually, drones work quite well, since those can serve as a kind of base for the films' own rhythms to dance on top of."

At times ToL favours dense masses of sound. When working with Brakhage's hand-painted films, they are keenly aware of the velocity of the images that change extremely rapidly, a kaleidoscopic cascade of swathes, scratches, and unidentifiable shapes; but there is no linear development or narrative.



But ToL members know that while the quick transformations are active on micro or mezzo scales, the films themselves don't transform on a macro scale. Their overall effect is a precarious static cloud of images with an enthralling, ever-changing inner life. And ToL's music matches those filmic realities by creating layers of sound that reflect the multi-dimensional films' effects.

Many, perhaps most, musicians are happy to work within the limits built into their chosen genres. Text of Light, from the outset, found themselves *without* an established tradition. How many improvising bands perform with films that inspire awed reverence? How many groups have chosen to work with films that deconstruct audiences' perceptions and whose creator would prefer his films be viewed in silence? Basically, ToL had to build their performances from the ground up, musically speaking, because of the absence of existing precedents.

The process was and is challenging, but in the course of playing alongside Brakhage's films there has been indisputable growth in the musicians' playing and musical thinking. When asked about how each musician has changed as the result of working in the group, the responses were thoughtful and articulate.

Drummer Barnes is grateful for the opportunities afforded him by playing with ToL and the resulting evolution in his musicianship. What he learned was how consciously to pull away the assumed context in performance. "Stripping away, as much as possible, what you're ultimately choosing to play, where you let your mind go, to carry as little baggage as



PHOTOS BY, FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: DAŠA BARTEKOVÁ; STEF; MIRO MYSKA; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



But for those who seek out the group's live performances, they may want to remember this comment from one of the group's musicians and hold it their mind when watching *Text of Light* in action: "I'm just playing to the presence of the light."

Glen Hall is a Toronto-based composer, improviser, multi-instrumentalist, and sound artist. He's studied with Gyorgy Ligeti and Mauricio Kagel and recorded with Gil Evans, Roswell Rudd, and Lee Ranaldo. Recently, he collaborated on an installation project in Brazil with composer and video artist Leo Alves Vieira and Austrian sound artist Bernhard Gál. His sound-art group EAR-CAM played at Victoriaville's FIMAV, and his free jazz trio with NYC drummer William Hooker and bassist Dominic Duval opened the Suoni per il Popolo Festival in Montreal.

FYI: *Despite creating films with no sound, Brakhage wrote a long-standing column called "Time ... on dit" for Musicworks from issues 45 to 73. Glen Hall previously wrote about the Toronto Feldman-meets-Slayer improv group I Have Eaten the City in Musicworks issue 102.*

THE BEST OF BRAKHAGE

For those interested in getting a taste of Stan Brakhage's films, Lee Ranaldo recommends the 2-DVD Criterion set. It features a booklet with useful notes by Brakhage scholar Fred Camper and the DVDs contain comments on some of the twenty-six films from Brakhage himself. As for recordings by Text of Light, Ranaldo suggests the 3-CD Metal Box set on Dirter, UK, as all of the members of the band, past and present, are represented either in live or studio settings.

possible, to start each performance naked, to keep your mind uncluttered, being open to chance."

When dealing with the auteur's work in performance, even the group's widely experienced elder William Hooker admits to having to learn and adapt. "When you're dealing with silent film, you're not as anxious to say everything, because you don't have to. We live in a visual society. So you could play the hell out of your instrument, but you'd still be looking to the visual for a cue as to what happens next."

The lack of narrative visual cues in Brakhage filmography has prompted ToL members to eschew the cymbal-crash-with-slipping-on-a-banana-peel, literal, cause-and-effect thinking that has been part of the marriage of movies and music since even before the advent of sound in the cinema. And speaking of movies before sound, as part of his growth as an artist, Hooker has extended his playing with films to include solo performances with the 1920 silent classic "Symbol of the Unconquered" by African-American director Oscar Micheaux.

DJ Olive has learned an encompassing acceptance that informs his playing. "It's not about tricks or licks that you've learned. It's about letting go of all that. And the breakdowns and mistakes are a part of the music, and the audience becomes part of the process, too. It's the process that loses itself and finds itself again."

venues with limited resources, their stature has afforded them opportunities to perform in situations that provided high-quality prints and large-scale projections that allow both the audience and musicians to immerse themselves in the analogue twenty-four-frames-per-second cinematic splendour of fully saturated projected colours on the silver screen.

The Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville, much respected for the quality of its presentations, provided just such an expansive experience for both the musicians and the audience, with a huge screen and impeccable copies of the films. The experience prompted William Hooker to say that the first time he really saw a Brakhage film was at the festival. Lee Ranaldo points to the Kill Your Timid Notion Festival in Dundee, Scotland, where ToL performed in the round, surrounded by four screens, with two projectionists on stage who even changed reels as the musicians played.

Lee Ranaldo sums up *Text of Light*'s involvement with the art of Stan Brakhage: "We try to make it clear that if you really want to get into the films, you don't watch them with a rock band or a band playing improv music, you watch them in silence. If it steers anyone in that direction, great—and [Brakhage is] an American master that many people know nothing about."

RÉSUMÉ FRANÇAIS

Formé en 2001 par les guitaristes Alan Licht et Lee Ranaldo, le groupe Text of Light emprunte son nom à l'un des 400 films du maître du cinéma expérimental Stan Brakhage. Le groupe joue pendant la projection de films de Brakhage et d'autres cinéastes, mais les musiciens affirment qu'ils ne créent pas pour autant de trames sonores destinées à accompagner les films, dont la plupart sont muets et conçus pour être visionnés en silence. En réalité, les musiciens regardent rarement les films durant les performances; ils créent des masses sonores multidimensionnelles et changeantes, dont les liens avec les films sont établis par le public. Text of Light crée une musique non séquentielle, non sémantique et non narrative qui s'allie à des films ayant le même type de structures et d'orientations esthétiques. Ces musiciens espèrent avant tout que leur public s'intéresse aux films de Brakhage et cherche à les voir tels que le cinéaste les a créés.

Although *Text of Light* began performing with specifically selected films from Stan Brakhage's considerable output, they are no longer restrictive, sometimes choosing films they've never seen. Moreover, they now include other experimental movies, such as some by the American renegade musical anthologist and hand-painted filmmaker Harry Smith and *Looking for Mushrooms* by avant-gardist Bruce Connor. And even though they have performed in small