

## **Rant and Dawdle: The Fictional Memoir of Colston Willmott**

**William E. (Bill) Smith**

Charivari Press

**Bill Smith was born in Bristol, England, 1938,** his first career in aeronautical design. Today he is retired and living on Hornby Island, off the coast of British Columbia. In between, Smith played just about every role in the musical world: composer and performer on saxophone, clarinet and drums in a variety of free jazz ensembles; co-publisher, art director, photographer, writer and editor of CODA magazine; co-founder of Sackville Records, a Canadian jazz label whose roster included Anthony Braxton and Roscoe Mitchell; and film producer, documenting the 1964 October Revolution in Jazz in his film, *Imagine the Sound*.

Despite these activities, *Rant and Dawdle* is the memoir of someone who happened to be involved in music, rather than a musical autobiography per se. Initially self-published in a run of 200 copies and distributed to friends, emphasis is on growing up in post-WWII England and the aches and pains of old age. The book has an unusual structure, interleaving first and third person narratives and alternating time periods, beginning at the extremes of life and simultaneously moving forwards and backwards towards mid-life. Thus, one chapter brilliantly evokes the moods of a young Smith, while the next

illustrates how the old man thinks with refreshing candor, leading readers to draw connections between childhood and later habits.

Smith cannot resist telling you everything he knows. When he visits a zoo, he provides a list of every animal he saw. When he sees a film, you learn about all the actors in it. He tells you the games he played as a kid, then gives all of their rules. While the reader at first misses the selective eye of a savvy editor, one eventually appreciates the discursions as indispensable evocations of the times: nostalgic memories for those with similar experiences, and oral history for those without. This style works best when musical anecdotes are triggered by travels or memories of shows seen. For example, the death of Paul Rutherford brings reminiscences about London's Little Theater Club, and a trip to New York City provides opportunity to describe the Greenwich Village club scene.

Using stylistic devices borrowed from the tradition of gonzo journalism, one is made aware of the writing of the book, for example when Smith's work is interrupted by daily chores. There are abundant references to the story being fiction, including the title, but it is never made clear if this is just to protect the innocent (or guilty), or if portions of the story are truly fabricated. "Fictional" names are thinly disguised and part of the fun is figuring out who the characters are, such as *Signal to Noise* writer Stuart Broomer disguised as Art Sweep (get it?). Leftist politics is a constant, and a high point is a letter written to Smith's father from Canada, dated August 1970, which anticipates much of what activists are proposing 40 years later.

While first-hand accounts of historical events like the birth of CODA are fascinating and often humorous, the book's real strength is the honest and intimate account of a life. Its appeal thus extends well beyond music fanatics or those who knew Smith. **Lawrence Joseph**