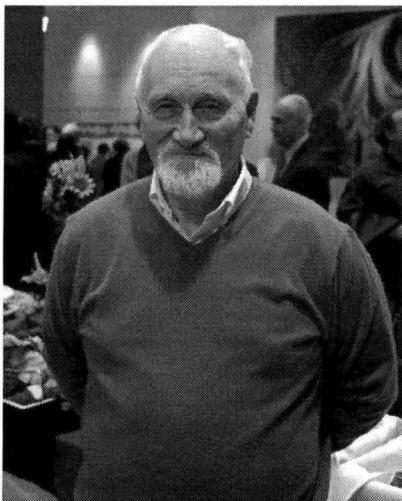


# CELEBRATING JIM RIMMER'S MAGIC

*Friends and fans of Vancouver's master of all things letterpress gathered for an evening to celebrate his 50 years of magic.*

**M**ORE THAN 160 people gathered at Simon Fraser University's downtown campus last November to celebrate the career and work of Jim Rimmer, the master of all things letterpress, whose reputation extends—according to one of the evening's speakers—all the way to Italy. Dubbed Rimmerfest, the evening followed the recent publication of Rimmer's new book *Leaves from the Pie Tree*.

Scores of printers, both new and established, have come to Rimmer's door over the years asking for help, whether it be casting type or figuring out a way to fix some piece of archaic machinery. His career began as an apprentice typesetter at a Vancouver print shop in the 1950s. A childhood artistic bent eventually allowed him to expand into graphic design, but always with a passion for type. In the 1970s he was type director at the Lanston



*Photo Credit: Jason Yanderhill*

Monotype Corporation during its brief incarnation in Vancouver. Over the years he has created 190 digital and seven metal typefaces, the latter engraved and cast in his own studio. Although his book output has been limited—*Leaves* is just the third book from his Pie Tree Press & Type Foundry imprint—his broadsides are widely seen, and he printed a number of pamphlets and books for Colophon Books in the 1980s.

The evening was organized as the annual Yosef Wosk—Friends of Special Collections—Alcuin Society Lecture. Eric Swanick, Simon Fraser University Library's head of special collections, spearheaded the evening, inviting four speakers with unique connections to Rimmer's career. (SFU, which has assembled a large archive of Rimmer's work and personal papers, is interested in adding any ephemeral pieces Alcuin Society members might care to donate.) Swanick also successfully solicited celebratory broadsides from 19 presses and artists from across North America, and even one in England, all of which were on display.

The first speaker was typography guru Robert Bringhurst, who began by admitting he had been “in a tragic frame of mind recently.” He used the opportunity to speak about the natures of institutions and individuals, using the Monotype Corporation and Rimmer as his exemplars. The early Monotype faces—produced beginning in 1900—were “like the names of churches,” he said, a record of “generations of artistic achievement.” But with metal composition now a technology two generations past, the remaining machines are cared for by “a few people shouldering the responsibility, people like Jim Rimmer.”

Dick Kouwenhoven, owner of a large commercial printing business, spoke of his own apprenticeship in typography and printing in Delft, a Dutch town with “a history of brewing beer and printing Bibles.” (His Hemlock Printers printed the photographic section in Rimmer's *Leaves from the Pie Tree*.) As Kouwenhoven's business has followed the industry's

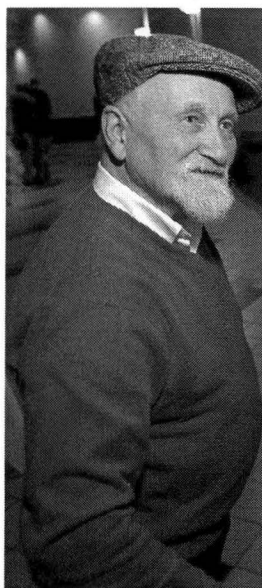


Photo: Ryan Mab

advances into photo offset and, more recently, digital printing, he commented on how Jim's work has helped him remain connected to the trade's origins.

Having grown up in Vancouver, renowned artist Charles van Sandwyk shared early memories of meeting Rimmer at an annual craft fair in the '70s. The budding artist showed Rimmer some of his early attempts at etching and bemoaned his efforts to improvise a press by using his father's woodworking vise. "Presses are for pressing. Why don't you drive the car over it?" was Rimmer's suggestion, which van Sandwyk did. (The technique worked better on linocuts than etchings, the artist commented as an aside from the stage.) Their paths crossed again when Jim taught the first-year typography course at Capilano College. Van Sandwyk called Rimmer a "fabulous teacher" and a "generous man, where everybody got an A." Charles concluded his talk by observing that "he takes his cues from no one, Jim is Jim, and that's why we love him."

### *Leaves from the Pie Tree*

*Rimmer's new book is a tour de force of bookmaking, all at the hands of a single person. It is set in a type he designed, engraved and cast himself; printed on his newly refurbished Colts press, along with a number of typographic and illustrated specimens; and sewn and bound in quarter leather. The edition was just 40 copies, plus 10 issued exclusively through P22, the digital foundry that carries all of Rimmer's types. (Six copies of the P22 issue were made available, along with the full library of his types, for US\$1,400. The P22 copies bear the typecut of their logo by Rimmer on the title page and colophon.) Amphora asked a few private collectors who secured copies of Leaves for comments on the work...*

The book arrived, wrapped carefully and lovingly, like a new baby coming home, probably very appropriate. The book was a proud statement that said to me: *If you want to know who Jim Rimmer is, and what Jim Rimmer does, you are holding a major part of the answer in your hands.* I am struck by the powerful forces that took an interest in a kid—Jim's grandfather (feisty old fellow) and Mr. Wilson the math teacher stand out as formative influences. There is a feeling of intimacy in opening a book so lovingly constructed and knowing that I am getting to know someone even slightly (Jim and I have only exchanged e-mails) through the leaves of a life. There is a quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi (I keep it close to my workbench and little Kelsey press): "He who works with his hands is

a labourer. He who works with his hands, and his head, is a craftsman. He who works with his hands, and his head and his heart, is an artist." So Jim Rimmer is an artist!

*Ross Roxburgh, Toronto, Ont.*

Rimmer has an informal, down-to-earth style mixed with a good sense of humour and much knowledge. And printers' biographies are needed, especially ones presented as this volume is, with excellences in printing, illustration and text. I had thought there would have been more material on his years as a graphic artist but perhaps (hopefully) that will be in a second volume. Many congratulations!

*Eric Swanick, Vancouver, B.C.*

What strikes me most is how truly blessed Jim was with a family circle to shape his life. Mother a bookbinder. Father who inspired a love of drawing and fixing things, and steered him to trade school and an opportunity to become a typesetter. When Jim wavered between more school and becoming an apprentice compositor, his grandfather, boss of J W Boyd Printers & Publishers, offered Jim \$15 a week. Jim accepted on the spot, beginning, in his words, "my fated collision with printing, which has been quite plainly one of the greatest blessings in a charmed life." The book is a personal, intimate, passionate story of Jim's life in an ancient craft.

*Jim Rainer, Vancouver, B.C.*



*Jim Rimmer and his former student Charles van Sandwyk admire the many broadsides created for Rimmerfest. (Photo Credit: Ryan Mab)*

This set the tone for Denise Carson Wilde to take the stage. Now the owner of Paper-Ya, she was introduced to letterpress by Jim in the late '70s, when he was with Cobblestone Press, and later shared space in his East Vancouver storefront studio, where they “displayed broadsheets in a window for all

the local winos to enjoy.” While everyone had been speaking of Jim’s kindness and generosity, Denise also wanted people to know about his mischievous side: one day she arrived at the studio to be told by Jim that Workmen’s Compensation Board inspectors had come by and threatened to shut down her business if she did not start wearing a “personal protective device.” The device was a modified hard hat liner, and only after she put it on (wondering what possible protection it could afford) did she look at Jim and realize she’d been had. In an emotional conclusion, Wilde said that Jim had had a “huge impact” on her, the prank notwithstanding.

At this point, the microphones were opened to the floor, and a number of equally im-

*Vancouver jazz musician Alan Matheson remembers an early encounter with Jim Rimmer’s other passion*



I met Jim in 1973, when he was playing cornet with a Dixieland jazz group called the Delta Flats. Back then, the Hot Jazz Society would rent a hall for an evening (once a month, I believe) and put on an all-night event that featured a variety of bands, including the Delta Flats, the Lions Gate Jazz Band (led by Dave Todd), St. Valentine’s Day Massacre (led by Lloyd Arntzen) and the Hot Club (with the great clarinetist Brian Ogilvie). At the end of the evening, the 1:00 to 2:00 a.m. set was given over to a jam session, and those who wanted to could sit in. I was 14 years old at the time, and I persuaded my dad to take me to Peretz Hall so that I could listen to and possibly sit in with the musicians.

I waited around till the last set and summoned up my courage to sit in on cornet. I remember that we played “I’m Comin’ Virginia” and “Struttin’ with Some Barbecue.” Jim was onstage with me and very encouraging. I remember that he played the Bix Beiderbecke solo on “I’m Comin’ Virginia” and I knew it well enough to play a second, harmony part with him. He was very kind and supportive to me onstage and afterwards said to my father, “Watch out for this guy—he’s going to be great by the time he’s nineteen!” To me he said, “Keep it up—you’ve got it!”

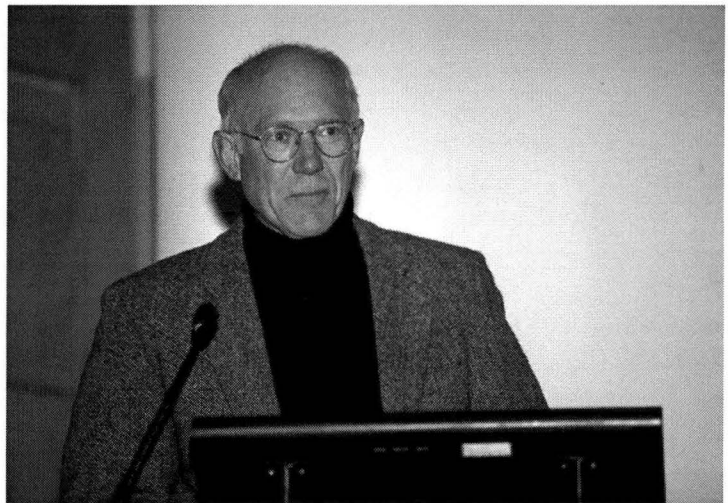
This was very high praise and it helped convince my father that my becoming a jazz musician wasn’t so bad after all! I was deeply grateful to Jim for this alone, and the chance to sit in with him way back then remains a powerful and fond memory.

*Alan Matheson leads his own big band and nonet, has performed with jazz legends Clark Terry, Bud Shank and Phil Woods, and is often heard on CBC Radio’s Hot Air, DiscDrive and Jazz Beat. The Alan Matheson Nonet released its first CD, Intrada, in 2004.*

passioned speakers gave Jim their thanks. Peter Haas of Mother Tongue Press was first up, giving heartfelt thanks to Jim for getting him started in letterpress. Next were two colleagues from Capilano College, one the current typography teacher, who shared some comments from students after a recent visit to Jim's studio. The impact Jim has had on many people over a long period of time, particularly students, was reinforced by one of the students himself. Ryan Mah, a current student at Emily Carr, told a story about his first visit to Jim's studio, how Jim joked about sticking a finger in a pot of molten lead to impress the ladies, and watching Jim shield himself with a wood plank while advancing on a caster shooting streams of hot lead. The result of this visit was that Mah started his own printing shop, Unison Printing, and contributed one of the most dramatic broadsides to Rimmerfest.



*Drawing attention to Jim's mischievous side, Denise Carson Wilde displayed the "personal protection device" he crafted for her (above). Robert Bringhurst (below) commented that Jim is one of the few remaining people shouldering the responsibility of sustaining metal composition technology. (Photo Credit: Ryan Mah)*



Crispin Elsted of Barbarian Press was invited to present Jim with a portfolio of all the broadsides created for the evening. Taking the opportunity to say a few words, Elsted mentioned having been in Venice last fall and meeting a local printer. Struggling with their mutually limited English and Italian, the local struck on Crispin's mention of Vancouver, which he knew as the home of that "magic man," Giovanni Rimmer.

To conclude the evening, the stage was handed over to Jim, whose comments were characteristically brief and self-effacing. He humbly thanked his parents and simply said, "I don't know what I've done to deserve this."

A boisterous reception was held in the foyer, surrounded by the broadsides on display. An excellent table of food and drink was laid out, and the buzz of conversation rose as old friends reunited, acquaintances were refreshed and new friends made. Jim had published a free keepsake for Rimmerfest featuring an impressive typographic display sheet, and the stacks quickly disappeared.