

The arcade veteran that's survived the video revolution

PASSIONATE ABOUT PINBALL: John Robertson, serviceman, and some of his charges.



—Rob Draper photo

POWER OF THE PINBALL

By CHARLES CAMPBELL

YOU got trouble. You got one, two, three balls and a gutter. The gutter marks the difference between a gentleman and a Bum. With a capital B, and that rhymes with P, and that stands for Pinball.

The Music Man, of course, was about pool, not pinball — but they're often thought to be in the same league, these games that start with P.

Coexisting in smoky parlors filled with swarthy men and pimply youths in the grey, grubby parts of town, both pool and pinball are said to be capable of corrupting innocent children.

Until the 1950s pinball machines were often used for gambling. They dispensed tickets or tokens that could be redeemed in cash. Because of this they were technically illegal in Canada until the early 1970s.

Many municipalities are still concerned that children will steal to feed the voracious machines and that arcades are a breeding ground of criminals. West Vancouver bylaws, in effect, prohibit arcades. Vancouver's page of complex rules heavily restricts machine locations and player ages — for example, no one under 15 can play during school hours.

Pinball, however, has survived its image and even the onslaught of the video game. Ralph Winfield, owner of Ralph's Automatic Coin Machine, says machine placements in the Lower Mainland have risen 20 per cent this past year and claims they are more consistent money earners than their TV-age counterparts.

"There's something about pinball, a love affair that's formed between the machine and the player," Winfield says. "Some machines are legends. Bally Eight Ball Deluxe is one."

There's nothing down at John's Jukes to conjure up a bad image of pinball. It's a cavernous place on Main Street near Broadway that sells and services vintage pinball machines, just the place to be on a rainy day. Everybody knows each other — the servicemen, the customers, the hangers on — and they all have time to stop for a friendly game.

The place may be called John's Jukes, jukeboxes are where the money is, but the real reasons for the shop are lined up against the left-hand wall as you enter. Flash, Lizard, Flip-A-Card, Playboy, Lady Luck and a dozen more over-painted faces invite you to come and see them sometime with a spontaneous whirr and a flash of lights.

The machines, priced from a few hundred to over a thousand dollars, are all freshly waxed. The rubbers on the pins and bumpers are new. The balls are highly polished steel bearings, specially obtained to replace the flawed standard issue.

In the back, the workshop is cluttered with broken pinballs and dusty walnut jukebox shells. A sign advises that "Profane Language, Shouting and Whistling is Quite Unnecessary."

The coffee is bad.

John Robertson, 34, stops to talk about a passion that began 10 years ago with unemployment. He needed work and there was a job for a serviceman. "I had never seen a pinball machine before."

Robertson, a lanky guy with hunched shoulders and a jutting beard, says pinball is coming back after the onslaught of video games. Pinballs, with their air of nostalgia, have staying

power that the simple, predictably programmed video games do not, he says. "A five-year-old pinball machine will make twice as much as a five-year-old video game."

Robertson, an obvious tinkerer, squeezes between stacks of broken machines and points out some classics. There's Gypsy Queen. And Gottlieb's 1954 Dragonette, painted by pinball legend Roy Parker. The illustration on the illuminated backglass that indicates the score is a ribald cartoon, full of corny visual and verbal puns, and complete with the trademark Parker woman. Parker had an eye for suggestive curves.

In the dusty loft there's a 1933 game called Jigsaw, a game that illustrates pinball's roots in bagatelle. Once a game of nobility, bagatelle was originally a large, flat table game somewhat like pool with pins and numbered holes. Jigsaw is a small cabinet game with the familiar plunger and slanted playfield. When a ball falls into one of the holes, a piece of a jigsaw puzzle swings into place.

Early pinballs were flipperless. Like Jigsaw, they were games of chance. Two companies, pioneers that still survive today, lined up against each other on the issue of gambling. Bally made nothing but payout machines in the 1930s and still makes gambling machines called bingo pinballs for the few parts of the U.S. where they're allowed.

Gottlieb opposed them. "They were a very conservative family and didn't believe in gambling," says Robertson. Gottlieb, always looking for ways to add an element of skill to the game, introduced the flipper in 1947.

Now pinball is, as the backglass on old Gott-

lieb machines always declares, a game of skill for amusement only.

"But there's still the stigma of gambling and the stigma against hanging out and wasting time," says Toronto broadcaster Edward Trapunski, author of the pinball history *Special When Lit*.

He mentions the 1975 exhibit *Tilt*, a collection of vintage pinball machines that showed at several major Canadian art galleries, including Vancouver's. "It was controversial because it was supported by Canada Council funds."

Trapunski, 38, thinks the pinball story is revealing social history.

"It's folk art. The themes reflect the aspirations of the working class." Those themes run from subduing B-grade movie monsters to winning at cards. And there's almost always a voluptuous woman worked into the motif of pinball machines. Bally's Fathom promises a battle with busty mermaids and the threat of cave traps. "Sea nymphs await," the talking machine declares when the first ball comes into play.

Robertson says nobody takes the themes too seriously. "It's as safe and innocent as darts, and you can't get hit."

Pinball may cause indolence and a little palsy in the wrist, but there will always be people with a passion for the game. You can find them in the arcades on Granville Mall or out at UBC and in the dark corners of billiard rooms all over town. They'll be shaking the machines, nudging the balls into the right orbit as they practise their peculiar form of isometrics.

And there will always be people who view pinball as a mere bagatelle.