

Interview with FIMAV's new artistic director Scott Thomson.

Plus a few highlights from the announcement of this year's programming

Eric Hill | February 8, 2024



Any shake up in the artistic structure of a music festival can create stress upon its integrity and consistency. But consider the case of FIMAV, a festival that, [since its inception more than forty years ago](#), has had the same general and artistic director in the form of its founder, Michel Levasseur. At the time of the 2023 edition, one already feeling the stresses of a post-COVID renewal and unexpected changes in venue availability, it was announced that Levasseur would be retiring and there would be an open call for candidates to take over the artistic director's chair. Some close to the inner workings of the organization had doubts whether that process would yield results in time to present the [festival's 40th edition in 2024](#), but a press release in August of 2023 happily announced that Scott Thomson had been hired for the position.

Thomson is a trombonist and composer who, in addition to many artistic endeavours, has co-led the **Association of Improvising Musicians** in Toronto, and the **Montreal-Toronto Art Orchestra**. He has made site-specific compositions for mobile musicians and audiences in unconventional contexts including, notably, the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Ontario. He

was Artistic and General Director of the **Guelph Jazz Festival** from 2017 to 2023. I spoke with him back in December about the challenges he faced with his new role.

When the position came open is it something you applied for immediately?

Yes, I had immediately considered applying. I had been working for the [Guelph Jazz Festival](#) for seven years, but I'm based in Montreal, so just the geography alone made it an interesting opportunity. I also thought about service to stewardship of the field. I was thinking of people who would be qualified to do the job, and also would be willing to uproot and live in Victoriaville for a good chunk of the time, and finally be fluent enough in French. And I could think of few people who would genuinely meet those criteria.

What was your background and overall knowledge of the festival prior to applying for the job?

I think I'd played there eight times, going back to 2008. So during that time I've seen a transition take place in Victoriaville. The loss of certain venues and transition to certain venues; the sound installation circuit which is now a core component of the programming; and of course the pandemic and the impact that had not only on FIMAV but the entire milieu. I'd also been invited by Michel, not only as a performer, but also as a fellow programmer for the festival in Guelph. So I'd say it's been a good ten to twelve times I'd attended over the years. So that's given me a good sense of not only the structure, the shape, and the flavour and the artistic signature of the event, but it's given me a lot of contact and developed friendships with other regulars, including journalists, other musicians, other presenters who attend regularly.

Has a move to living in Victoriaville in the lead up to the festival been a good experience?

I've already got a place there and have been spending four of five days a week in Victo. I just moved there in October so I'm still getting my "sea legs" as it were. But I'm starting to make connections with local arts groups and friendships, so for me it feels familiar because I'd already been living four or five months of the year living in Guelph, Ontario, which is a different kind of city, but also a different city from living in Montreal in a really extreme way. So, I follow the work and I'm always happy to integrate myself in another environment.

Has the recent loss of the Colisée Desjardins and the shake up of venue availability created an extra challenge in taking over the festival at this time?

Venues are always a problem. Doesn't matter if it's Victoriaville or Montreal or wherever. My first year, while aiming to put on an excellent festival for everyone's benefit, is also one that amounts to research and a period of evaluation. So I'm following the model, essentially, of last year in terms of venues and performance values, but evaluating how well they're working and see if changes need to be made in the short to medium term.

There was some indication in the press releases about the transition that Michel would still be on hand this year in some capacity, at least in an advisory capacity. Is that so?

Michel is still in the office full time. There's been a three month overlap between my entrance and his departure from the office. That's been his strategy for the transfer of information. He answers my questions about operating policy and best practices. He offers advice when solicited. He also will continue to sit on the board of directors, at least in the short term, so he's still very much a part of the organization. To what degree he is going to be an active advisor for me in my role remains to be seen. That will depend on what I need. Seeing as he is leaving the office in the new year I will be 100% in the directorial chair and it's up to me to guide the ship as it were.

From a programming standpoint is your process going to follow the loose template that the festival has maintained over the years, meaning a blend of regulars and new discoveries, or are you planning to put your own stamp on it?

Well I've got twenty years experience as a programmer and I'm got my own strategies for sourcing and engaging artists, so I'm counting primarily on my own resources there. But also paying attention and respect to the kind of artistic signature that Michel has established in terms of different kinds of musical practice. Now Michel and I have different tastes and different priorities as programmers, so inevitably long time attendees of the festival will detect changes, maybe even right away in the first edition but certainly over the long term. But at the same time I'm not looking to change the festival radically. I'd like for any changes to be responses to the needs of the event, to developments in the field, to the work of my peers and my colleagues, regionally, nationally, and internationally. To continue to provoke and engage people in compelling ways through new musical practices.

Having attended the festival since 1999 I've noted an element of loyalty and consistency, both in terms of a number of attendees and also artists have become friends and regular guests of the event. Balanced against that seems to be an aspect of programming certain marquee acts that might attract curious and more casual first time attendees, perhaps for single concerts rather than the whole festival. Are these challenges you're finding yourself faced with?


I want to think about artistic quality foremost. If I'm ever making decisions that compromise artist quality I feel like I'm doing a disservice to the festival to its audience and to the field in general. That said I know the value of booking an artist like, William Parker for example, for his well founded reputation of making excellent music, but one that is perhaps outsize compared to some of his peers that might draw more audience members. There is a budgetary target, and I need to meet that with a certain amount of box office sales, so I'm trying to book a festival that is attentive to primarily artistic goals without compromising bottom line goals. I've long held that a festival isn't the shining of a light on a single flower, it's a bouquet. The thing that's going to draw an engaged audience is going to be consistently good programming across the board and not just the highlighting of a couple of star acts. That said, some quote unquote star acts are also making fantastic music, so why the heck not book them if I can afford it?

Given the festival's reputation and your budget do you have a wish list of artists you'd like to book for the event, or even artists you'd like to see perform that you think the festival could host?

Somebody's going to come along that nobody's ever heard of in the next couple of years, and they're going to be making the most amazing music of their time, and I can't wait to discover and book that person.

The first line up announcement was made on February 7th. Below is a spotlight on three of the acts that promise to provoke and engage. [FIMAV](#) runs from the 13th to the 19th of May this year.

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