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INDIE LIFE

VICTO

In Touch with the Artists

By Josef Woodard / Photo by Martin Morissette

It began in 1983, with founder-director Michel Levasseur's brave notion to launch a new "outside" music festival—with an ear for music of the more adventuresome, experimental, improvisational, noisey, electronic and art rock-ish kind—in his semi-rural Quebecois hometown of Victoriaville, a two-hour drive from Montreal. Enter Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville, which became one of the most significant forums for avant-garde music and generally left- or experimental-leaning work in North America.

Four years after the birth of FIMAV, the adventure expanded to include Victo, a record label that continues on its trajectory, if in a much-limited way due to the music industry's current challenges. Now celebrating its 30th anniversary, Victo has built up a catalogue of 160 titles, including many recordings that serve to document the festival's past programming.

Victo also has valiantly championed the specialized domain of experimental music, from its inaugural release by guitarists Fred Frith and Quebecois hero René Lussier, *Nous Autres*, right up through its most recent release, a live recording of Anthony Braxton's striking solo alto saxophone performance at the festival in 2017.

At the outset, Levasseur was inspired by role models like avant-guitarist Derek Bailey and his Incus label, linked to the annual Company Week festival, and the German Free Music Productions label, a limb of the Berlin-based Total Music Meeting festival. The Moers festival/label duality in Germany was another inspiration.

"That's really what influenced us to start a label," Levasseur explained, "to continue to promote that music, really; to promote the artists and the music coming to the festival, and also to make the festival better known. It was a way to promote the festival all over the world, and most of the albums were recorded at Victoriaville. It grew up like this, into a label that has always been very connected to the festival, but also has its own life."

Guitarist Lussier asserted that "the idea of holding onto a record label is very courageous for Michel. It's great that he brings out another Braxton record."

A maverick in Canadian music, Lussier has played the festival many times, including a memorable quintet set in 2017. He has also released three titles on Victo that count a project with the Vancouver-based Now Orchestra and a wily duet with elastic-eclectic guitarist Eugene Chadbourne among them. Lussier, who worked to edit Victo albums during its early vinyl days, also knows about the struggles of running a label, having founded the *Ambiance Magnetiques* imprint, which he started in 1984 and pulled away from in 2000.

He plans to record his current quintet—which melds the avant-rock, Quebec folk music and abstract elements making up Lussier's aesthetic—early in 2018, despite not having a record label lined up to release it. "I decided not to wait for a label to do something," he said. "I'm not waiting for a grant to make a project. It's a 'project du coeur.'"

"It's a matter of being alive; it's a passion thing. It's the same for Michel, doing record after record with a bunch of people all over the planet. He's passionate; he listens to so many records, just to do the festival. He is receiving so much demand to play and he's listening to everything. That's very courageous."

Levasseur noted, "Someone might ask me, 'Which CD do you think is your favorite, which is the most important?' Each one is important



René Lussier

and involves an individual relationship with the musician. You present the concert, but when you make a product that will last, it's a step further in the relationship with the artist. ... It's kind of like having a big family. It's a very personal, intimate thing to have a label and be in touch with the artists—and not the agents."

Victo started auspiciously with *Nous Autres*—still the label's best-seller—and other strong titles. As with most labels, though, the realities of dwindling sales in the digital era has taken its toll. "The recession and the changeover to downloads and all the problems of promoting this music—or music in general—is really affecting small labels," Levasseur said. "Streaming is really killing the labels and the stores at the moment."

In response, the Victo label has pared down to one or two releases per year, compared to five or six in the past. The label head said, "We go very carefully on the one or two releases that we put out each year. I'm glad there are labels like Intakt and Clean Feed that can do it. How they do it, I don't know. You should ask them," he added, with a laugh.

With a catalogue spanning three decades, Victo is home to many notable releases, including an early Bailey/Braxton duet record, solo albums by Barre Phillips and Marilyn Crispell and, more recently, Evan Parker's *ElectroAcoustic Septet* and the veteran *Musica Elettronica Viva*.

Victo, Levasseur stressed, "has always been a very important project. We've been putting out things for important reasons, sometimes for the music itself or for the artists. We were really making a point about putting out their music. There is a strong historical aspect to this label that makes it distinctive."

"There is a legacy there. Other generations can go back to those recordings, to those artists, and get influenced by them. That's the idea behind the whole business, to keep at it; also, to keep the back catalogue going. I've got so many CDs. My house is full of them," he laughed, citing his current inventory of 35,000 items.

Projects such as the FIMAV/Victo venture and other similar entities in the international avant-garde community, Levasseur said, require "energy from one or two people—craziness and energy—to keep going, presenting this music, helping out the musicians to present it to an audience." **DB**