

# The Free Jazz Collective

Reviews of Free Jazz and Improvised Music

By David Cristol

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INTERNATIONAL  
FESTIVAL  
MUSIQUE  
ACTUELLE  
VICTORIAVILLE

## Festival International Musique Actuelle Victoriaville - May 2024, Victoriaville, Canada

All photos by Martin Morissette

The 40<sup>th</sup> edition of **FIMAV** (“**Festival International Musique Actuelle Victoriaville**”) took place from May 16 to 19, under the guidance of new artistic director **Scott Thomson**, a trombone player and previously programmer of the Guelph festival, after four decades under founder **Michel Levasseur**, the latter still involved on this edition on technical duties, with some of his relatives also on deck giving a hand. Launching a festival in the small town of Victoriaville and keeping it alive is nothing short of heroic. The endeavor was initially inspired by festivals such as Moers in Germany. FIMAV quickly became a reference in terms of improvised and avant-garde music. The associated label Les disques Victo, also a family business, is nearing 140 releases to this day (the latest are a Void Patrol live recording by Elliott Sharp and *Fatrasies* by the François Houle/Kate Gentile/Alexander Hawkins trio). This year marked a handover of the steering wheel, with both a sense of continuation and the kick-off of new threads. Frequent performers at the festival such as Roscoe Mitchell and Nate Wooley shared the schedule with bands getting a first chance to present their work in Quebec or even North America. Early afternoon solo concerts were located at the Church Saint-Christophe d’Arthabaska, and the remainder of the days saw the *new music* enthusiasts commuting from the Carré 150 downtown (salle F. Lemaire and Cabaret Guy-Aubert) to the Centre des Congrès for the 5 p.m. and midnight concerts. For the first time, the Free Jazz Collective was in the audience.



A long day’s travel from the old Continent and through Quebec led to missing the first show (and regretting it later, after hearing enthusiastic echoes about it), an oratorio in four acts by Pascal Germain-Berardi, “Basileus”. The homegrown mammoth work featured 50 musicians including an ominous-sounding “growlers choir”. The follow-up act couldn’t have been more different. **Quatuor Bozzini** (two violins, plus viola and cello) played **Jürg Frey’s “String Quartet n°4”**, exposing listeners to very low decibel-level music, a constant brush with silence, involving deep listening from all. Props to the audience for holding their breath for the set’s duration and immersing in this fragile yet

intense piece, which goes firmly against the fabric of the dominant noisy and hurried way of life that plagues our daily lives. A delight to hear on stage, a courageous leap of faith from the new artistic director, rewarded by a mindful audience, with no applause between movements, which would have broken the spell. The sound of the instruments has a raw quality to it, closer to the dusky gut strings of baroque than the shiny metallic hues of new music. It takes extraordinary performers to keep their cool and stay in unison, with such delicate attack on the strings that notes appear out of the ether. The opposite of the no less talented Jack Quartet playing Zorn’s music. The cohesion and tonal precision are out of this world, with long notes played at the same exact underlying tempo and identical volume. It’s contemplative, almost static, or so it seems, for it in fact ever evolves, however slightly.



The following morning starts at the church of Arthabaska where **Sakina Abdou** makes her first live appearance in Canada. On record, her solo saxophone work is featured on the 2022 Relative Pitch release *Goodbye Ground*. She is a key element of Eve Risser’s Red Desert Orchestra, which got a lot of exposure in recent years, a favorite act of European festivals. She begins from behind the audience, hidden from sight. The sound is bold, life-affirming. Another saxophone is placed at the center of the “stage”, like an iconic artefact. Abdou favors long notes, interspersed with light growls and occasional vibrato. The artist paces about the upper floor, close to the large organs. The full-bodied sound eventually comes

closer to the audience. Abdou walks slowly from the back of the aisles and proceeds to the spot where a priest usually talks to believers. She switches to tenor, resorts to circular breathing, produces harmonics over repeated or changing patterns, explores the lower register for a while and makes use of the resonant space. Plaster angels surround her, and a sculpted Jesus in preaching position seemingly gives her his blessing or maybe lectures her.

Whether it is God's or the devil's music, there is a devout and ritualistic aspect to the proceedings – and we're part of it. Abdou delves into the low notes, without a break or words being spoken. For the finale she deploys a technique involving vocalization and aspiration, with noises reminiscent of bird chirps, sending us on the day's journey on a light and uplifting note.

For her piece « **Concussssion** », San Francisco composer **Amma Ateria** resorts to electronics only, offering a sound translation of the consequences of a head trauma and its recovery process. We're privy to a trip under sedation back to consciousness, equally nightmarish and soothing, hopeful and claustrophobic, involving wall-shaking sub-bass, muffled voices, uneasy sound perspectives evoking growing and recessing waves of pain, and progressive neuronal reconnection, enhanced by rather suffocating abstract black and white video images. The serious-minded artist seems to have studied the subject in-depth, unless it stems from a personal experience.



The mostly local and ¼ Italian (the undemonstrative drummer **Carlo Costa**, living in New York and the soul behind the lowercase Neither/Nor label) quartet **Splendide Alysse** is led by composer and clarinet player **Philippe Lauzier**. A yet-unheard language is deployed, supported by a tight unit of performers (in addition to those mentioned, **Belinda Campbell** on prepared piano and synthesizer and **Frédérique Roy** on accordion and vocals). The name of the project and some lyrics in the latter part of the set suggests an underwater universe crawling with sea creatures, but the

source of inspiration was not necessary to enjoy the music on its own. Presented as a suite, its successive movements are not distinctly separated from each other, rather flowing from one part to the next. These songs with or without words have a ghostly quality to them, and no flashiness whatsoever. The tones are both precise (in execution) and uncertain (for the ear), with a piano either detuned on purpose or in just intonation. The nuance and complexity make this project one to listen to at home or on headphones, but it hasn't been recorded yet. Given the work and care put into it, and the sheer originality, it would certainly be worth it.

This incarnation of **Joshua Abrams' Natural Information Society** is subtitled « **Community Ensemble with Ari Brown** ». One of the key elements here is Chicago tenor man **Ari Brown**, who brings stellar playing to the table, albeit too low in the mix (every N.I.S. show I witnessed had similar problems, the harmonium either inaudible or drowning the other players, which is regrettable given the talent on hand). The band's aesthetics remain unchanged, its feverish grooves organized around the leader's focused guembri playing, a trancey music with, in this case, a wealth of trumpets and saxes providing stimulating solos throughout, although the formula is not exactly innovative at this point, and the magic only works intermittently.



On the eve of her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, pianist **Sophie Agnel** is in great creative form, from the six-piano band **Pianoise**, the tremendous trio with **John Edwards** and **Steve Noble**, and a fun duet with **Joke Lanz** on turntables. The association with **John Butcher** on tenor and soprano sax is a dream one. Top shelf improvisation, by two major practitioners of the genre, if it can be called that. Through the diversity of sounds and textures these two get from their instruments, the approach is orchestral. Agnel could be credited as a percussionist, given the energy she puts into playing on the wooden body and the inside of the grand, preparing it on the spot, moving about frantically,

while her partner stands still for the duration of the mind-blowing set, spurring several good ideas a minute and bringing them to fruition. This is strictly improv, cut out from any jazz influence.



The only electric guitar quartet I heard live prior to this was Dither, performing John Zorn's game pieces. On record, Fred Frith Guitar Quartet. But it's not a format one encounters every day. The **Bill Orcutt Guitar Quartet** was put together after Orcutt had played, recorded and released the repertoire by himself. Taking it on tour, he brought a stellar team of fellow string hitters (**Wendy Eisenberg, Ava Mendoza, Shane Parish**), who share a common sensitivity with the composer. That is, leaning towards blues and other American roots music, with a biting mindset, not without nuance though. The short pieces are based on purposefully simple riffs. The group is all smiles, each

member bringing their characteristic musical persona and sound to the picture. The album from which the tunes are lifted lasts 30 minutes, so what follows is improvised and makes room for a delightful "string" of solos, duos and trios. Then the quartet returns with a new riff, hotter than sands of the desert at noon, with gnarly playing from all.



Sitting next to **Roscoe Mitchell** in a shuttle, I [dare] ask him about the current reissues on the French BYG-Actuel label, which he's aware of and associated with. When I mention particular album titles, instead of commenting on them he remembers and hums the tunes, stressing that the music is "not free." Seven small colorful paintings by the hand of the composer are arranged on the stage of the Cabaret. The A.A.C.M. founding member appears in a dapper purple suit and pink hat, the large bass saxophone already in place. Mitchell sits on the stool and puts his lips to the embouchure. From his small groups to his large ensemble(s) recordings, and multi-tasking in the Art ensemble of Chicago, we have learned to expect the unexpected. Tonight, it feels like studies, orderly and unhurried, one note at a time. No trace of extended techniques, except for the spectacular circular breathing. The slowly unfolding notes and melodic patterns are unrelated to Great Black Music. This is more akin to a systematic research. Serious and no-nonsense. He moves to the less cumbersome soprano, on which he favors hissing and dissonant emissions. Sakina Abdou gets as close as she can to check the master at work. On the records stand later on, we spot and grab a book collection of Mitchell's visual art, published by Chicago's gallery/label Corbett vs. Dempsey.

**Roaring Tree** is **Joëlle Léandre** on bass, **Mat Maneri** on viola and **Craig Taborn** on piano. They released the *hEARoes* album on Rogue Art and will be next heard on *Lifetime Rebel*, a 4-CD + DVD set recorded at Vision festival for Léandre's lifetime achievement celebration in 2023. All have history together, with Maneri duetting with Léandre on "A woman's work" as well as being both members of the Stone Quartet and Judson trio. Taborn appeared on Maneri and Joe McPhee's *Sustain* album in 2002 and both joined Ches Smith on the wonderful album *The Bell* on ECM in 2016. These master musicians, improvisers united by friendship don't need to plan anything ahead of going up onstage. It's hard to tell why it works so well, but it does. Maybe it's because their tempers are markedly different and complementary: melancholy and calm for Maneri, restless and militant for Léandre, lighting up with joy in the case of Taborn, these moods translated in their playing. What joins them is complete availability to the moment, and a sense of lyricism in the abstract. The collective interactions are remarkable – one could think miraculous if it was not the result of decades of hard work – and each one's approach to their instrument is subjugating to observe as well as to hear. Taborn's hands are constantly hovering over the keyboard, like in starting-blocks, ready to engage in bursts of expression, whether fleeting or declarative. Maneri's manner is more inward, eyes closed and looking into his soul to find the appropriate microtonal notes and textures to contribute, while Léandre seems in a state of tension, torn between an impulse to let rip and the necessary moderation for the trio to keep its balance. She transcends that tension in her solo spot, a few memorable minutes of both the set and the festival. *Tour-de-force* aside, it's the waves of ideas coalescing or circling around each other in real-time that makes the value of this incomparable trio.





At midnight, the concerts have a fun, danceable and sometimes delirious dimension to them. I was thrilled to hear these musicians onstage, with only Egyptian keyboardist and electronics wizard **Maurice Louca** unknown to me. All three are based in Cairo and live in the same building. Longtime Montréal resident **Sam Shalabi** is an impressive guitar player while bass and saxophone player, comedian and vocalist **Alan Bishop**, of Sun City Girls fame, is also the brain behind the global music label Sublime Frequencies. **The Dwarfs** (yes, right spelling, while the program changed it to Dwarves) of **East Agouza**'s brew of North African psychedelia relies on the best dub bass

playing since Bill Laswell and Jah Wobble, astoundingly bent guitar tones, over a base of electronics-generated beats and oriental synth motifs. The axe molesters face each other, showing their profiles to the audience. Ava Mendoza sits in the front rows and films snippets of the show with a big smile on her face. Bishop wails like a baby with a sax mouthpiece before convincingly playing the instrument. He dances, engages in camp vocalizations and whimsical speeches. Then the sax becomes a flute in his hands. Funky, unpredictable, surrealist and a highlight of the festival.



After the devastatingly emotional Seven Storey Mountain ensemble concert at Lisbon's Gulbenkian two years ago, **Nate Wooley** comes back with another stunning live offering, this time with **Columbia Icefield**. All four members were part of the aforementioned Seven Storey Mountain performance. The compositions are new, different from the released album, which also had slightly different personnel. It's the last concert of the tour. Wooley presents the project and the band (**Ava Mendoza** on electric guitar, **Susan Alcorn** on pedal steel guitar and **Ryan Sawyer** on drums) in his introductory speech, explaining that we are

about to hear a tribute to one of his mentors, the man who made him quit a meaningless job in Oregon in order to focus on playing the trumpet, the late Ron Miles, who passed in 2022. It resulted in young Nate leaving his previous life behind, and to this day we benefit from this career decision and 30-year old friendship. The compositions are arranged into a single big piece, without breaks. Most of the set consists of a rock and rhythm-heavy style, after a solo trumpet overture and before a solo conclusion also from Wooley, tapping his feet and chanting an incantatory march or hymn. Between incipit and explicit, the music proves both elegiac and dissonant – a rare combination – on a slow piece from a trio then the quartet. The drumming is profuse, with assembled sticks. Sawyer moves to maracas only for a lengthy solo. Mendoza joins with metallic lava flows. This is music brimming with love and anger. Ron Miles-style melodies are recognizable, but in a wild environment, in contrast to the gentle recordings of the late trumpeter. Scores are followed closely, and there are generous spaces for expression from all. The compositions harbor multiple shapes, with changing rhythms and playing modes: straight ahead, improv, noise, melody, abstraction, the listener never quite knowing what the next minute's going to sound like. The quartet goes full-out for a while, the usually peaceful Alcorn unleashing her inner Jimi Hendrix. Not forgetting Wooley's virtuosity, whether on the quieter pieces or with the band at full steam.



Next is an odd one. **Kavain Wayne Space / XT Trio** consists of **Kavain Wayne Space** (CD DJ), **Seymour Wright** (alto sax, real and potential) and **Paul Abbott** (drums, real and imagined). Disjointed beats, barely recognizable and recontextualized 70s soul & funk samples and (a)rhythmical sax playing, as per usual from Wright ([Ahmed]). His style is all hiccups and jerks, fragments, single brief notes separated by silences; the sound equivalent of flickering lights, and not unlike John Oswald's Plunderphonics in the disorienting results (Oswald gets mentioned

because he is in attendance, as a friend and neighbor). Wright is also a terrific writer in the "We Jazz" magazine. Hard to tell which sounds come from the drummer or the deejay. The whole thing is noisy and dense, with messed up hip-hop rhythms and the alto sounding like an accordion when Wright puts a pedal to use. At the back of the venue, a volunteer dances her ass off. Very unusual and interesting, but the set never seems to end, and indeed could go on forever, as the continuum had no definable beginning either. A confrontational attitude, playing until there's no one left to play for? A test of the listener's endurance? While everybody has to leave in order to make it to the next show, the XT trio is still playing...



I had heard **Sélébéyone** in Berlin, when the band was a septet (with Drew Gress on bass, Carlos Homs on keyboards and Jacob Richard on drums). Seven years later, it is now a quintet with **Steve Lehman** (alto sax, sequencing), **Maciek Lasserre** (soprano sax, sequencing), and spoken word artists **Hprizm** (aka High Priest) and **Gaston Bandimic** remaining, while **Damion Reid** more than fills up the drum chair. The rappers' lyrics are in English for the US citizen, who simply has one of the best voices in hip-hop, and in French and Senegalese dialect (wolof) for Lyon-based Bandimic. The vocal samples are in French and English. The longevity of the project is

notable. The human and aesthetic relationships between members have enabled it to keep on touring, even if some jazz heads would like to hear more of Lehman in acoustic trio format for example (well, he already did that, check Clean Feed's double LP of Lehman with Mark Dresser and Pheeroan akLaff). The sound is too loud to make out the lyrics – when the Berlin set allowed for a better perception of every element in this busy, richly layered musical and linguistic offering, a work of intricate structures, with brief and dazzling solos that avoid standing out too much from the whole. It is possible to grasp that some of the words at least are politically conscious. The absence of a bass is compensated by low grumbles courtesy of Lehman's electronic gear, which also propels pre-programmed beats. Jazz, electro and hip-hop are one here, without one “school” taking precedence over another. As such, it's an ambitious and ideal unit.



A lightweight ending to a heavyweight edition, the octet **Kim Myhr Sympathetic Magic** promotes a laidback, atmospheric and groovy imaginary folk-pop rich with guitars and percussion, and a finicky vintage keyboard (courtesy of Eve Risser who subs for a missing regular band member) that initially refuses to work. Risser has a lot of fun in this context, distinct from her own projects. It's alluring, velvety even at full power, and maybe the most popular set with the audience. To my ears, however, the concert suffers from the inescapable programmatic nature of the music, which

unfolds as planned, with nary a surprise or unsettling of expectations in sight. The second part proves more stimulating, although never projecting a sense of urgency or something of significance to say. “It's a mood”, they say, and maybe I just wasn't attuned to it.



In a relaxed and friendly atmosphere allowing for artists, audiences and writers to meet and chat, the 40<sup>th</sup> edition of FIMAV was highly enjoyable. We're told that people have come in smaller numbers than the previous year, which can be explained by several factors: John Zorn was a big attraction on Michel Levasseur's last hurrah, and the new artistic impulse by Scott Thomson, with more *new classical* acts on display may take some getting used to from the usual crowd. For this listener, it was a consistent and mostly satisfying listening experience, with a fine balance between peak acts and discoveries, all worth hearing. A solid statement of intent and prelude to brilliant future editions.

Thanks to Jordie, Normand, Daniel, Doc...

<https://www.freejazzblog.org/2024/06/festival-international-musique-actuelle.html?m=1>

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