

PARTY TIME IN MONTREAL, IN THE FEET, HEAD AND STREETS BY JOSEF WOODARD

Now in the onramp to next summer's milestone 40th anniversary year, the Montreal Jazz Festival has established its sturdy reputation as one of the world's handful of great mainstream jazz fests--artistically, organizationally and atmospherically. And its program is dense and diverse enough by now to make generalizing a dangerous endeavor. Even so, in my latest annual visit to the great event this year, for a four-day stretch over the first weekend of its ten-day duration, the thought kept stubbornly bubbling up: there's a party going on here this year.

There is always a strong contingent of more groove, fusion-y, world music-lubed or otherwise festive music to go around at the festival, but the tempo and the resistance to calmer, more cerebral enticements seemed more amped-up this time around. Two of the independently-operated and fueled artists on the jazz scene at the moment, indie heroes Snarky Puppy and Kamasi Washington, let their funky, Brazilian and otherwise rhythmically-charged sounds fly before packed, happy and bouncing audiences in the large nightclub space now called Mtellis (formerly Metropolis).

Terrence Blanchard, who has teetered on the divide between electro and acoustic for years, plugged in and grooved more boldly in his show at the Monument-National, with his group, The E-Collective. So, for that matter, did up-and-coming trumpeter-bandleader Keyon Harrold, evoking electric Miles in a gentler way (one of his claims to fame was playing Miles' horn parts in the abhorrently bad but musically enriched film *Miles*).

Even the first of the "Invitation" artist this year (a laudable series in which select artists are given three or more dates to explore different facets of their work) went to organist-keyboardist John Medeski, whose work with Medeski, Martin and Wood and countless other projects have established him as a "thinking person's jazz party king." On the first night, he was joined by rough-and-ready guitarist Marc Ribot, on a set list including Grant Green's "Suki, Suki" and Horace Silver's "Strollin,'" and with Ribot sounding best when he follows his instincts into the nattering, atonal landscapes vs. his attempts at mainstream soul-jazz turf.

Medeski, a master of B-3 sweeps and surging energy modulations, was more in his personal element the next night, with his aptly-named band Mad Skillet, a mash-up roadhouse jazz-jam outfit with winks of erudition in the party mix. Festive festivities come naturally to Montreal during the festival, especially on the several outdoor stages supplying a steady flow of more crowd-pleasing and not-necessarily-jazz offerings. This model festival that Andre Menard built nearly four decades ago promises the populace a good time, in a large downtown zone closed to through traffic for ten days. (Menard, incidentally, enacts a major change when he retires after next year's 40th B-day blowout).

Meanwhile, what happens in the paid indoor venues can be a more sensitive artistic expressive domain, generally speaking, which appeals to more serious jazz listeners. Not so much this year. But the Montreal experience is partly distinctive because of the forced and blithe interface of even the sternest jazz-seekers and what's happening on the streets between venues. Not everything runs according to plan. Controversy and protest—with results—greeted a new production of Montreal theatrical figure Robert LePage's *SLAV*, featuring African-American roles and songs but with a largely white cast, was roundly criticized and picketed in front of the Theatre Nouveau du Monde. The angered voices were heard: the production was shuttered after a few performances. The Montreal festival has largely steered away from the left end of the jazz spectrum and avant-garde inklings in recent years—leaving that stylistic region to the fringe festival at the Montreal's renowned Casa del Popolo, the nearby Victoriaville festival in rural Quebec each May, the more adventure-prone Vancouver Jazz Festival and other Canadian chance-taking outlets.

Even so, one of the thrilling and sometimes “outside”-venturing shows this year was by Quebec's own veteran maverick guitarist René Lussier and his potent new Quintette, settling into the official nightclub space L'Astral (on the ground floor of the Jazz Festival HQ building). The sixty-something guitarist (and sometime player of the odd, animal-esque, bowed Daxophone) has covered many genres in his time, including free improvisation and Quebecois folk music, bent to his own taste. The Quintette, including two drummers, accordion, tuba, cooks up a strange brew of a sound, alternately rustic, swampy, abstract, crackpot-ish, and identifiably Lussier-ian.

One of the most musical events I caught during my Montreal sojourn came courtesy of the great and still fledgling young vocalist Cécile McLorin Salvant, who continues her slow, steady upward trajectory in and around jazz circles. Her show at the Theatre Magonneuve was an unpretentious marvel, all the more impressive for her refusal to let her vocal gymnastics and natural theatricality get in the way of the musical agenda at hand. Her fresh takes on “I Got Rhythm,” “I Didn't Know What Time it Was” (with clever time-fragmented phrasing) and her signature channeling of Bessie Smith added up to another reason why she clings to the top of the jazz voice game of the day.

From another vocalizing angle or two, the advance buzz was warranted in the case of young singer-songwriter Emma Frank—who launched her musical life in Montreal but now based in Brooklyn. As heard at the Gesu (always the site of some of the festival's more rewarding and “discovery” status music in a given year), Frank's enticing blend of folk, jazz, soft-edged R&B and personal touches inevitably draws the Joni Mitchell comparison, but also places her in the current field of inventive new singer-songwriters with jazz in the recipe, as in the work of Becca Stevens. drummer Jim Black, who always seems to know the right thing to do, the right tack to take, added taste, percussive poetry and

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jazz flavorings to Frank's impressive set.

A personal festival favorite, Marius Neset, serves as a prime new example of energized, electrified (though mostly acoustic) progressive jazz, a must-hear phenomenon. Neset's robust dynamism as a player is cause enough to warrant attention, but his compositional voice has developed into a fascinating blending of influences, from Coltrane and Michael Brecker to progressive rock, and his own Norwegian folk-tinged way with a tune. Neset's innate melodicism combines with a taste for quick-change metric shifts, unison flurries and other strategies for his flexible band, translating to a live show of uncommon real time excitement.

The virtuosic tenor saxophonist (who also has been dipping into soprano more of late) hails from Norway, but "came of age" while studying with--and gleanng aesthetics from--Django Bates at Copenhagen's Royal Music Conservatory. At the moment, Neset—whose skill has recently been tapped by uncanny talent-scout Chick Corea—is one of the most promising and thrilling sounds in contemporary jazz, a status which his rousing late night set at the Gesu venue, drawing heavily from the new album *Circle of Chimes*, more than validated. It was the set of the fest, in my experience this year.

Here was my idea of a jazz party, with the brain fully engaged alongside other senses and sensibilities. And if it goes down in an enlightened setting such as the Montreal Jazz Fest, all the better.



Marius Neset, Montreal Jazz Festival, 2018

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Mark Ribot, Montreal Jazz Festival, 2018