

FIMAV, VICTORIAVILLE, QUEBEC, MAY 16-19, 2019**CHASING THE SUBLIME, GOING SOLO**

Density and intensity are expected when visiting the annual Quebecois phenom known as the Victoriaville festival—aka FIMAV (aka Festival International Musique Actuelle Victoriaville). The festival, launched by the intrepid and new music/avant-garde-fixated founder Michel Lévesseur, packs 20 consecutive shows into three-and-a-half-days in May, in a modest city nestled in dairy farm terrain. One always has to wonder about the local response to the decidedly avant-garde-ian and experimental leanings of this festival which brings outsiders (and fans of “outside” music) to their town one weekend a year.

This year’s 35th annual FIMAV foray (the festival took a sabbatical year off after number 25) embodied the ongoing premise of this unique festival, whose sense of adventure and celebration of adventure is said to have been a strong influence on the potent upstart, the Big Ears Festival in Knoxville. In Victoriaville, the delicate balance and raucous sonic salad involves bringing together free jazz/improvisation, electronic/computer music notions, noise, art-folk and “worldly” hybrids, art- and avant-rockers, and other from the far side of mainstream. Oh, and regular appearances by John Zorn, who cites this as one of his favorite festival haunts.

Stars coming out this year, for the 35th birthday, included old guard jazz icons Peter Brötzmann, Roscoe Mitchell (in a thrilling set with poetic, outspoken spoken word artist Moor Mother), Barre Phillips, and noise-shaman Keiji Haino. We heard a FIMAV debut (hopefully, the start of a new habit) for new music stalwarts Bang on the Can All-Stars, and powerful sets by jazz world vanguard-keepers Vijay Iyer—with his Sextet, probably the finest group in jazz of the moment, cerebral and visceral by turns—and Tyshawn Sorey, with his utterly unique, “chamber” flavored trio.

In other alternative large ensemble news... the meditative-minimalist balm award of the festival goes to Norwegian guitarist Kim Myhr, whose multiple guitar-and-percussion work “You TK Me” is pure undulant, post-Reich-meets-post-rock bliss.

Even so, all things considered and consumed, the standout hour of the entire festival broke down to some math: a musician (well, a master), his double bass, and a world of music summoned via head, hands and spiritual x factor. The great bassist Barre Phillips has performed in Victoriaville many times over the years and is in a public spotlight presently thanks to End to End, his luminous solo album for ECM Records last year.

Quite simply, his hour-long set on a Friday night held the large crowd in the festival’s largest venue, the Colisée (a hockey arena) in thrall.

More good news: the show was officially recorded for possible release on the festival's in-house label, Victo, which would make it the second Phillips solo album for the label, after 1990's *Camouflage*.

In Victoriaville, each of Phillips' ten discrete pieces, adding up to an impromptu suite, had its own character, direction and aesthetic dimension, sometimes exploring specific dynamics or technical attributes—arco, percussive uses of the bow, angular double-stopping—but always affixed to an over-arching musical logic. He capped off the challenging sweep/suite of ideas with a sweetly melodic encore, a graceful exit.

Phillips, now 84, appeared in a press conference along with Brötzmann that morning in the festival's central Hotel Victorin, and explained that "our special music needs time to develop. It's a lifetime story." True that, and his solo concert felt like a glimpse into a well-lived musical lifetime, still in progress.

Coincidentally, another festival highlight this year also exemplified the rare art of the spontaneously combusted solo performance, when British reed player John Butcher settled into the ornate sacred space of the 19th century church Église St-Christophe D'Arthabaska, a wonderful new venue for the festival in recent years. Butcher, a Victoriaville veteran in assorted projects, proved his acknowledged mastery in the free/solo mode on tenor and soprano saxophones, carefully balancing control and abandon, a wide palette of textures, and—this is important—a highly-attuned sensitivity to the reverberant properties and deified ambience of the "room."

Personally, the jury is still out about this year's contribution from Brötzmann, a trio affair with pedal steel player Heather Leigh and Japanese madman Haino. Brötzmann, who leaves a trail of memorable FIMAV shows—including a spirited solo set back in 2011, recorded for Victo—was in alternately volcanic and tender form in the 75-minute set, while Leigh mostly provided an uncommonly mellow bed of often two-chord vamps. Haino, moving anxiously from percussion to manipulated voice to his spiky, spasmodic guitar approach on his Gibson SG, was the roving, unpredictable shamanistic force of nature. More than once, he kept the party rolling after what would have been a logical finale. He still had more to say, it seemed, when sudden clapping forced closure (applause interruptus?). Somehow, in this trio meeting, the parts and the whole had trouble getting along, despite some flashes of insight.

Bang on a Can's presence was an inspiring touch, and a ripe example of how even a token dose of "contemporary classical," score-based new music can make for a complementary pact with the strongly improvisational agenda making up the lion's share of the FIMAV stages. Last year, the festival opened, powerfully, with Montreal composer Walter Baudreau's heavily-scored, complex and sometimes



Julien Desprez_Abacaxi (photo, Josef Woodard)



Moor Mother-Roscoe Mitchell (photo, Josef Woodard)

post-serial music as a festival-opener. May the trend continue. BOAC presented pieces from its expansive “Field Recordings” project, with works based on some brand of found source—audio or visual. The usual NYC suspects were accounted for—Carolyn Shaw, BOAC co-founder David Lang, Christian Marclay—but the freshest musical meat was locally sourced, via Quebec’s enlightened and sometimes hare-brained musician/guitarist Rene Lussier. His “field recording” score took on literal dimensions, folding the rhythmic sound of a snoring bull with taut, unison note bursts from the All-Stars. We got eloquent large ensemble projects from Canada: Vancouverite cellist Peggy Lee’s evocatively lovely and elastic “Echo Painting,” opening the festival; and, from Montreal, composer-leader Rainer Wiens’ “conduction-“guided birdsong canvas “Birds of a Feather” and the dada-tinged vocalistic art-circus feats of Joane Héту Joker choir. France also weighed in this year on the program, with three impressive and distinctly different projects. Klimpereï and Madame Patate treats the deceptively child-like miniature songs by Christophe Petchanat with a myriad of sonic tools and toys. Quite by contrast, the retro-electronic nature of the duo with Xavier Garcia and Lionel Marchitti. They conjure up a fascinating blend of Garcia’s digital tweaking on computer and keyboard with the fiercely analog sound-mangling poetry of Marchitti, whose primary “instrument” of choice is an antique Revox tape recorder, and a pile of sundry objects, rendered sonic. From the rock spectrum--and one of this program’s great “discovery” moments--wizardly French guitarist Julien Desprez made his North American debut as a leader, with his trio Abacaxi, seizing sensory attentions with his virtuosic integration of electric guitar voltage and bedazzling effects pedal-dancing. Pedals also control the tautly synched staccato lighting blitz of the show, a corollary to the aural ratatat. Despite what might seem a novelty-driven sound-sight manipulation, on paper, the “being there” aspect was almost literally stunning, and the sound world he creates in real time adds up to one of the more inventive and personalized electric guitar “action painting” styles on the “out” scene. Or any scene. As a grand finale-blowout for the fest’s 35th birthday, Haino returned to make some cathartic joyful noise with the blissfully uncategorizable Indonesian duo Senyawa, before an ecstatic set from the sneakily progressive and still-relevant Dutch avant-punk band The Ex. The Ex are presently celebrating life @ 40, while Victoriaville this year celebrated FIMAV @ 35. Midlife becomes them both.



Peggy Lee (photo, Josef Woodard)

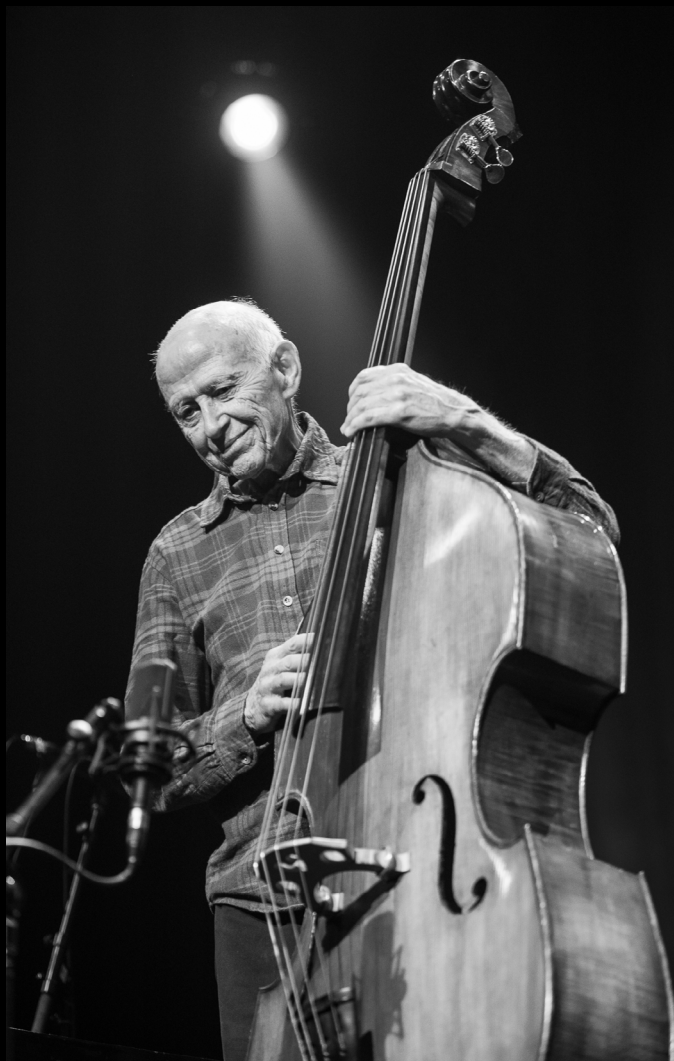


Vijay Iyer_Sextet- (photo, Josef Woodard)



Photo: Martin Morissette FIMAV 2019

JohnButcherl (photo, Josef Woodard)



Barre Phillips | (photo, Josef Woodard)