

# François Carrier

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**Taken & Transcribed by Ludwig Van Trikt**

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**CADENCE:** Let's start off with the basics. Where and when were you born?

**FRANÇOIS CARRIER:** I was born in a small city called Chicoutimi which is 500 kilometers north of Montreal on June 5th, 1961. I am the third boy of a family of five boys which means I have four brothers, no sisters. I am the only devoted musician of the family. My mother is still alive and well at 72 years old. Chicoutimi is an ancient native word meaning "There, where the water is deep." They say that in Chicoutimi the Saguenay River is about three kilometers deep.

I discovered music at the age of seven. It was at primary school that I took my first music lesson. I played the cello for a couple of months. Then my mother would always ask me to bring the violin home. She thought I was learning violin as she registered me as a violin student but the fact is that the school didn't have any more violins so here I am playing—big—cello. That was fun but after six months I heard this magnificent instrument—the saxophone—with all its flexibility. This sound was coming from the corridor of the school. I asked the man with the beard, who was going to be my first sax teacher, if he could show me how use it properly. I remember how good it felt tasting the reed of the alto sax for the first time, touching the pearl keys and handling the instrument for the first time. Then the first breath and the first note. Wow! So, during the first five years of primary school I played the alto saxophone. I would always be intrigued by all the possibilities I could discover, day after day, on my alto. I had to stop playing for one year because my parents were moving all the time at this period. But as soon as they settled for good, in Quebec City, I took the music course at high school. The second day at high school, a new friend of mine, a flute player a little older than me gave me my first two Jazz records ever, Charlie Parker and Phil Woods. Wow again! I fell deeply in love with Jazz right away. I stopped everything I was learning at high school to concentrate only on playing like Charlie Parker and Phil Woods. At fifteen years old I had already accumulated more than five hundred Jazz LPs. I listened to them all, over and over, all the time. Then I went to the Conservatoire de Musique de Quebec for a couple of years where they tried to condition me the classical way, but I found it too boring so I didn't really care about playing what was written on the paper. I was already improvising during my exams so they kicked me out of the conservatory after three years of being an undisciplined student. Hee, hee, hee! Even if I attended many different music schools after, we could say that I am a self taught musician. The real schools, the real learning is on the stage where I started playing professionally at fifteen years old.

**CAD:** What were your early gigs?

**F.C.:** The first ever gig I had was with a group we formed in high school called "Ook Pik" ("owl bird" in Amerindian). Ook Pik was a seven piece band and we were playing covers and a few originals. I played for two years with this group and we toured

the province of Quebec over and over. Then, at 16 or 17 years old I got my first Jazz gig in this club called Le Foyer in Quebec City. That was lots of fun to play all these standards. I moved to British Columbia in Esquimalt on the Island of Vancouver where I stayed for about two years. I was in the Navy then and I would go out to play in Jazz clubs in Victoria and Vancouver. I started to get acquainted with the Jazz community there. It was also the time of my first experiences of playing and gathering with more known Jazz players. One night I was going to a small restaurant on Broad Street in Victoria to play as usual and there was Dexter Gordon for a one night gig. As soon as I got in the club I heard him scream from the little stage on the right side of the door entrance, "Hey, young man, come on and play your horn with us," and there I am playing with Dexter Gordon. Wow! That was fun. I kept doing this whenever I would hear

great Jazz players.

**CAD:** So did you hold your own with Dexter Gordon? What other American Be-bop cats have you hit with?

**F.C.:** I was 20 years old when I had this experience with Dexter Gordon and it was only for a couple of songs. Yes, I stayed myself with the so little I knew then. I still remember his long hands taking his bottle of some alcohol on the stage. He was playing sitting on a wooden chair, I think he was already drunk at the first set. The thing I remember the most, though, is his huge sound. Wow! I have never heard such a tone after.

The first time I did a sit-in like that was with pianist Oscar Peterson. I was about 16 years old then and could play just a few standards like "Scrapple from the Apple," "Au Privave," and "Round Midnight." As I was studying at the conservatory I heard that Oscar was having a concert at Le Grand Theatre de Quebec. The Theatre was in the same building of the conservatory so I went to the concert. During the intermission I was able to reach the back stage and ask Oscar's agent if I could play a song with him. His agent was his son then, a very tall man also. Can you imagine a 16 year old asking Oscar Peterson to play with him in the town's largest theater? I had guts and I was crazy. Hee, hee, hee! His son agent said no of course but he told me to go to this hotel the day after and meet Oscar in the lobby. So here I am with my saxophone in the lobby of the hotel. Oscar wasn't there, of course, but he had left me a note under my name. "Dear François, I will be back for lunch and we will play a song on the piano at the club's lobby of the hotel." I waited, he came back but his son changed his mind and I had to sit there while Oscar was playing a couple of standards. Two standards after, I was next to the piano with my alto sax and I said to Oscar, "I am ready." He didn't have any choice, so he asked me what song I wanted to play. I answered, "Any you like." I was very lucky, the fake book was on the piano. He opened it and said, "Let's play that song" and it was one of the few songs I knew, "Au Privave." We played, we had fun, and he told me to stay for another song, "Scrapple from the Apple." Of course I couldn't really play, but it was fun anyway. After, Oscar told me something that stayed in my mind for the rest of my life. He said, "Way to go, man. If you want to be a real

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Jazz player, that's exactly the attitude you have to keep. Never be scared and ask great musicians to play with them, they are as human as you are." So here I am today, doing the same thing.

**CAD:** Would you say that you are well versed in playing Bebop?

**F.C.:** Well, Bebop has certainly been a great school for me. I listened a lot to the music of Lester Young, Sonny Rollins, Miles Davis, Monk, Bill Evans, Cannonball Adderley, Lee Morgan, Max Roach, Art Blakey, and all the great Bebop players. As I said earlier, I really enjoy uniqueness in a player, in a musician, in an artist. So I soon discovered my own identity. I tried for many years playing Bebop, but I guess I related more to the music of the moment. Why keep on imitating when one can be himself? From time to time I still listen to Bebop but I am more into avant-garde and new sounds of purely improvised acoustic music.

**CAD:** What led you to more progressive type music?

**F.C.:** Freedom. The freedom of being who you really are, creative, spontaneous, unique, herenow. You see, I am a free thinker, a free being in a world surrounded by conditionings. Years ago I felt music was the only way I could express myself freely. I had to stop playing standards and develop my own sound, articulation, etc. Also, I love to take the time to listen, to listen to nature, to urban sounds, to human voices, to different languages, to life in general. So, all I have been doing for the last ten to fifteen years is listening to the Universe, the music of the Universe. Everything is there. Everything is beautifully there. We are just antennas. Some say that all the music has been played. I say all the music is to be discovered. I see no other alternative than creating. We should actually all develop our "Positive" creativity, fearless with joy and spirit.

You have to understand that I've always been in touch with my intuitions, my feelings and emotions. From the very beginning, in high school, I used to relate to these intuitions, unconsciously of course. Most of the time my music teacher would tell me to play like everyone else. I simply couldn't, I had to be myself. I was more interested in creating than imitating. The more I developed my sensitiveness the more I felt like playing free form. Then, when I got 17 or 18 years of age, I discovered the music of Coltrane, Elvin, Tony

Williams, and Miles. Wow! I felt a call. It took me 15 years to really understand this call and start focusing on my own identity. You see, I am not a rational person, so I never took the time to analyze any of what I have done so far. The only thing I know is that I know nothing. I am conditioned a certain way and I have to un-condition myself for the rest of my life. As a sage man said, it takes two years for a child to learn how to talk and the rest of his life to stop talking. Hee, hee, hee! To me, improvising is the best way I have discovered in order to really connect with the Universe, with other musicians.

**CAD:** Please talk about your recording debut (*Poursuite*, Feb. 1994) and the formation of your trio?

**F.C.:** One of my dreams has always been to do a record (LP) when I was a kid. For some reason I never had the chance to do a real LP because of the transfer of technology to CD. Around 1989 I stopped playing in public for about two years. When I came back to playing Jazz my mind and soul were much clearer than ever. I decided in 1990 to make a change in my way of playing and in the music I was playing. Before then I would do all kinds of

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gigs although Jazz was always my choice of predilection. So, I formed my first Trio ever. I felt the need to be more open and more interactive and by playing with drums and bass that was the ideal choice for me. Every musician gets the freedom they need if there are not too many rules. It became obvious that I had to do a recording at some point. As I said it has always been a dream of mine. So bassist Pierre Côté, drummer Yves Jacques and I composed a few themes and got to the studio. The recording was paid by a sponsor who died not long after the recording. I had to find other sponsors to release this first CD. After six months I found all the money and I presented the project to a Montreal label (Boff Amplitude) and they said yes. *Poursuite* was launched both in Quebec City and Montreal in 1994. Since then I was never able to get as many people for a CD launch. Two hundred fifty people came to the Quebec City launch and a hundred fifty in Montreal. Anyway, the most important thing was to record the music so the music can be heard to a wider audience. This first recording was also a great human experience. You get to know the real essence of each individual in a studio environment. You spend more time together, you find ways of breaking egos, you also find peace. Then you get all the right elements and you play and improvise, you interact and life is beautiful. I had other recording experiences in the past but doing your own project is “molto” different. It is pure creation and intuition. I never made a CD in order to make money. Maybe I should have. Hee, hee, hee! With this Trio we played for seven years together. In 1997 I heard drummer François Côté and I knew I had to do something with him. We did several concerts together and we recorded *Intuition* (1997), my second album, on a different label (Lost Chart).

We played together until Michel Lambert joined in 1999 for this series of concerts with guest Dewey Redman which were also recorded. I find it very important to record as much music as possible. You learn a lot just by listening to what you have done together and since everything is improvised, you will never do the same thing twice. Keeping track of what you've done is interesting. Sometimes you can even decide to release a recording you have done many years before. Now that I think of it, one of the first reasons I decided to form the trio with drums and bass is because

I wanted to hear more the bass. Before I had problems hearing the bass clearly so playing with this trio taught me a lot about the bass playing. I love the sound of an acoustic bass and the multiple sounds of a real (Jazz) drum.

**CAD:** American Jazz has recently come under some degree of criticism for its lack of creativity.

How do you view much of what is going on with American Jazz from up North?

**F.C.:** Jazz is certainly one of the few, if not the only real “American” (USA) form of art.

Over the years, like many other form of arts, it became universal so I feel it doesn't make sense anymore to label it as American Jazz. Music is music. Of course, all kinds of music have origins but to me it doesn't matter where it comes from. What I am searching in music, in Jazz, is authenticity, uniqueness, and singularity. When Jazz was created, musicians were playing and singing it with their hearts and souls, with joy, creativity and originality. Nowadays it has become a question of performance, of dexterity, of imitation, a thing from the past. We have to remember that among all form of arts, music is the one that evolves the slowest. To give you an example, this year we are celebrating the 250th anniversary of Mozart. Can you imagine? The guy has been dead for more than 200 years and we are still freaking out. Lots of money involved. I think human kind should celebrate the fact that we are alive and that there are so much diversity in the world. We should celebrate creativity instead of promoting war and economy. The very fact why we are so attached to the music of the past is because we, as a society, we fear the unknown, and above all, we are not interested in real creativity, generally speaking of course. But what is creativity? What is a creative person? Musician? Artist? A creative person is one who has insight, who can see things nobody else has ever seen before, who hears things that nobody has heard before—then there is creativity. Very few people own the right to be called *creative*. When a person is entirely present, really healthy and whole, the urge to create arises. To really create, “One” has to get rid of all conditionings, otherwise creativity becomes nothing else than copying, period. “One” can create only if he or she is *unique* and *authentic*. Many Jazz musicians will say, “Sure, but I am creative. I improvise. I play Jazz so I am a creative artist

even though I play patterns others have played before me. After all, that's what I've learned at school!"

That is not the point. Jimi Hendrix didn't care about that, he was simply Jimi Hendrix. So was Bach, Beethoven, Rachmaninov... So was Coltrane, Billie Holiday, Charlie Mingus, Charlie Parker... So was Picasso, Matisse, Riopelle... So were so many *real* creative artists. And so are most very young children on our beautiful sick Planet. It seems that we have lost the sense of realness and trueness, of being a child. I am sure Ornette Coleman never stops one second to think, "Ho! Am I the only person who plays like me?" No. He is simply himself, without compromising. The whole idea of *being* an artist, a creator is simply to be oneself.

Of course it would be great if we could pay our bills with being an *artist* but it seems "the" biggest challenge here. So people start compromising and imitating. Not only does it take courage to be really creative but it takes also a mix of lucidity and craziness. Someone doesn't have to struggle to be unique, original or authentic. Everyone on Earth was born like that. But we become corrupted by getting older, by getting conditioned, by fearing. We miss the point of being alive which is *being alive*. We certainly don't listen to our intuitions like all the *greats* did. No time for that. Simply no guidance for that anyway. The only way to get creative is by disappearing, when the brain stops calculating and being rational, when you lose your mind as they say. Have you lost your mind? Yes, I did. So, is there such a thing as being an American Jazz musician, a Canadian Jazz musician? Hmm! In theory, yes, there is, but I feel sorry for those who live their lives with that belief. The World will *be alive* when all our beliefs disappear, when we all reach for the *light*, for the *heart* instead of believing any of our beliefs. Like it or not, we human beings from everywhere are all interconnected to one another, at all levels. So let's celebrate life as all living things in nature do already. Let's "Play" music the way it should be played, everywhere on Earth, in the Universe with heart and spirit and stop being geographical or rational about it.

**CAD:** Are there any working American Jazz players that you particularly enjoy hearing?

**F.C.:** Of course there are many American Jazz players I love hearing. Most recordings from Coltrane, Ornette, Miles, Jackie McLean,

Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Eric Dolphy, Lee Morgan, Dominic Duval, Elvin Jones, Jimmy Garrison, Charles Lloyd, Keith Jarrett, Steve Lacy, Andrew Hill, Joe Henderson, Gary Peacock, Roland Kirk, Gary Bartz, Joe Maneri, Bill Frisell, Paul Motian, Fred Anderson, Sam Rivers and so on. I also love lots of the younger guys like Brad Mehldau, David Binney, Thomas Chapin (who died too young), Dave Douglas, Ellery Eskelin, Ned Rothenberg, Mat Maneri, Chris Potter, Jason Moran, and so many more. I love also many European Jazz players like Bobo Stenson, Tony Oxley, Tomasz Stanko, Daniel Humair, Evan Parker, Barre Phillips, Anders Jormin, etc. There are so many players out there. It becomes impossible to listen to everything. I know I always prefer listening to a live concert and I will never judge a musician on a single performance.

**CAD:** Your recording *Play* (482 Music) documents the trio playing all over Canada in 2000. Would you say that this is a fair example of your touring life?

**F.C.:** From January to June 2000 I organized this tour for my Trio with Michel Lambert, Pierre Côté, and I. In October and November 2000 we toured about 24 cities, from West to East, in Canada and played about 30 concerts. I recorded all these concerts which means I had about 60 hours of music to listen to when we finished the tour. It is important to mention that Canada is a huge country. We took the plane many many times. During each of these concerts we would play some of the new themes I had previously composed for the album *Compassion* on Naxos Jazz which came out in early 2000, and each night we would play one or two entirely improvised pieces without rules of any kind. So, after listening to the music I decided to put together enough of these collective improvisations to do a CD. I could probably release one or two other CDs out of these concerts. Then I left the master on the shelves for a couple of years. I knew that this master was going to be out soon. I proposed the *Play* master to a couple of labels and Mike Lintner from 482 Music in the Chicago area decided to release the CD. I had other tours after which were different in their musical contents.

**CAD:** *Play* also seems to reflect your deep love of the acoustic bass in your allowing Pierre Côté such generous soloing space.

**F.C.:** To me, the most important thing in all aspects of my life is to leave space to others.

It is a great pleasure to my ears and soul to be "in" the music and listen to musicians you play with. You get inspired by listening, by being "present" with them. The only way to have real improvisations and conversations is by listening and being "present" in the here and now. In concert I can go out of the stage for fifteen, twenty minutes and just listen to Pierre's solos or Michel's solos which are pure beauty. One other thing which is also as important is silences. I love to listen and leave silences within the music. Space and silences. Yes! Listen to Paul Bley to hear how he masters silences. Pierre is among my favorite bass players. He is so unique and singular. You can actually recognize him among all other players. Wow! So is Michel Lambert. Wow! That I love in a musician, in an artist.

**CAD:** The recording *Happening* (Leo Records) from 2005 would seem to be a highlight of your career. You incorporate some other elements besides the usual trio format?

**F.C.:** Actually, it all started around 1999. I had some kind of a vision then, to play and gather with other great musicians so I proposed a series of concerts to the Jazz festival with special guests. The first was a three night concerts with tenor sax player Dewey Redman. Then I felt the need to evolve harmonically and ask a few pianists to join the Trio. For the last couple of years my curiosity and my love of singular and unique sounds inspired me to invite different musicians who have unique approaches. So in 2004 I organized this first "Happening Musical" with very interesting musicians, video artist, and

dancers. The idea was to celebrate creativity by reuniting improved music and other art forms. The first half of this first series of concerts were in October and November 2004 and the second half of this "Happening Musical" was on April 2005. I made sure I filmed and recorded all five concerts of last year. Having Mat Maneri and Uwe Neumann with the Trio was an intuition, a vision. I didn't know much of the music of Mat Maneri. As a matter of fact, before the concert, I had never listened to Mat Maneri's music in my life. I knew his father Joe from an ECM recording. I also knew I wanted two different and unique approaches. I made a couple of phone calls in New York and I found Mat through Joe Maneri. When I finally reached Mat he said yes and he came to the concert with all the others. We didn't rehearse. We got together in the afternoon for a brief sound check which you can actually hear on the recording. The evening was a real "Happening" with five wonderful musicians, one video artist, and three improv dancers. Wow! Of course everything was purely and simply improvised. No rules, no melodies, no harmonies, no discussions, no preconceived ideas. Nothing. Just pure spontaneity. And the beauty of it all is that it was really "Happening." Two hours of total connection, of total absence of thinking and beliefs. Mat went back to New York the day after. I don't calculate much about what I am going to do next. So this year I did organize another *Happening*.

**CAD:** Where do you see your music going five years from now?

**F.C.:** I live mostly in the Present, the here and now. I am not even sure of what I am going to do tomorrow, imagine in the next five years. I feel the world will have changed a lot in five years from now. Hopefully, human kind will get wiser. I certainly hope I am still healthy and lucid when I am in 2011. One thing I know is I intend to play and improvise for as long as I am alive. I also intend to tour more overseas. Maybe you'll be able to hear me and my group in the USA for 2006 or 2007. May all of us be more open to difference, uniqueness, and singularity.

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