

GRAND STAIRS

Portrait of
creative alto
saxophonist
François
Carrier in
mid-career

By KEN WAXMAN

RIVEN, LIKE MUCH OF THE REST OF Quebec, by long-standing divisions among its population, Montreal's jazz scene includes a variety of cliques and factions that rarely mix. Standing slightly apart from this set of circumstances is saxophonist François Carrier, 46, whose focus is decidedly inward, spiritual and universalistic.

Although *un vrai québécois*, the Chicoutimi-born, Quebec City-raised, Montreal resident decidedly goes his own way, only playing his own music. Leading his own bands since the early 1990s, Carrier's singular vision has led him to recorded and live collaborations with such non-*Québécois* as Swedish pianist Bobo Stenson, American violist Mat Maneri and French bassist Jaean-Jacques Avenel—to name only three of many.

Carrier's own music is more "outside" than that played by many other Montreal jazz musicians. This fact limits his local gigging. "For many reasons, the more

you're unique, singular and creative the less you play locally," he begins. "Most people working in the music industry do so for one unique reason, to make money. The music industry creates competition. Competition creates division. Division creates envy, jealousy and war. So let's be creative and free. The only collective I am interested in is the living collective, with love heart and spirit."

Although he has played the Montreal Jazz Festival and done Montreal club dates, overall local indifference has, over the past decade, led him to develop unique strategies to bring his music before the public.

For example, in 1998, he founded NoEMI (Nouvel Ensemble de Musique Improvisée), a non-profit organization which allows him to organize several musical events (called "Happenings Musical") in Montreal featuring him in concert with local and international musicians.

Carrier has also played in Europe, including at the North Sea Jazz Festival, has toured Italy and completed three cross-Canada tours with different sidemen. Winner of the Jazz Juno in 2001, a 2002 award from the *Conseil des Arts et des Lettres du Québec* enabled him to spend six months in Rome composing and exploring the

Italian musical milieu. During that time, a trip to the Borgani Saxophone warehouse in Macerata resulted in the company giving him a brand-new soprano saxophone to add new sounds to his profound improvisations on the alto saxophone—an instrument he describes as "my voice." In 2006, he and his closest musical associate, drummer Michel Lambert, visited Nepal to play at a jazz festival in Katmandu.

Activities are multiplying again in 2008. Besides a new series of "Happenings Musical" scheduled for later in the year, plans for a North American tour with a specially constituted Canadian-European

group are in the works. Meanwhile, London-based Leo Records will soon release a live date recorded at last year's Calgary Jazz Festival with Carrier, Lambert and French bassist Jean-Jacques Avenel. Later in the year, the Stockholm-based Ayler Records will make available for downloading a multi-CD digital box set featuring a variety of collected Carrier performances.

"Since I released my first CD I decided to record as much music as I can," the animated, bespectacled saxophonist explains. "That's the only way for the music to reach a wider audience. With all this music out there, soon we will play more."

Expressing himself musically has been part of Carrier's make-up ever since he took his first cello lesson at the age of seven—he switched to alto saxophone six months later—and self-assurance has never been a problem. For instance, at 16, while still a student at *Conservatoire de Musique de Québec*, he was nervy enough to ask if he could sit in with Oscar Peterson.

I had to follow the rules which don't fit in with who I really am. So I faked a nervous breakdown to come back home.

who was playing a concert in a nearby auditorium. Rebuffed, he ended up jamming with the Canadian icon on a couple of bop standards at Peterson's hotel the next day. "My jazz background started only two years earlier to that event so as you can imagine I could play just a few standards then," he recalls ruefully. "I never asked myself if I was good enough. I just felt like playing and I went, period. Of course I couldn't really play, but it was fun anyway."

Afterwards Peterson gave him some advice which he's followed to this day: "If you want to be a real jazz player", the veteran pianist opined, "never be afraid to ask great musicians to play with you; they're as human as you are."

Carrier has proved the truth of that statement by working or recording with established musicians such as Americans, pianists Jason Moran and Uri Caine, tenor saxophonist Dewey Redman and bassist Gary Peacock; Canadians, guitarist Sonny Greenwich, pianist Paul Bley and bassist



Michel Lambert and Carrier. PHOTON FRANÇOIS LE GUARANT DE TROMELIN

Michel Donato; Polish trumpeter Tomasz Stanko; as well as Avenel, Stenson and Maneri. How did these connections come about? "I called them, I invited them, they

ing and experimenting as his style changed from bebop ("all I initially cared about was playing jazz, like Charlie Parker and Phil Woods," he remembers) to freer music.

Carrier admits that it took him 15 years to develop an individualistic musical identity. "As long as I've been playing I've had a very distinctive tone and voice but all my teachers told me to play a certain way—their way." Someone who in his teens owned and listened obsessively to 500 jazz recordings, Carrier did eventually find his own voice under the influence of the music of John Coltrane's band with Elvin Jones and Miles Davis's group with Tony Williams. He also took a year-long sabbatical at the end of the 1980s to refocus his thinking, which helped him come up with his own stylistic synthesis. "I had a drug problem and to put an end to the struggling, I had to get rid of old habits and friends.

"All you have to be is totally yourself," he affirms today, sitting comfortably in his sparsely furnished apartment in downtown Montreal, not far from McGill University in one direction and polyglot *Boulevard St. Laurent* and the semi-bohemian *Plateau* district in the other.

"The inspiration comes from the inside; the influences come from the whole universe," he continues. "I have never intended to be this or this, or to chose a certain style of music. To me music is music, no matter how you label it. No label, no conditioning, no concept. To achieve this, one has to get rid of all fears. Freedom comes from within; being creative means to be in

the here and now, with no reference to the past and no projection into the future."

In fact, he and Lambert have played nothing but free-form, improvised music on their gigs and recordings since 2002. "That means that in all occasions, we show up and start playing," the drummer notes. "When we have guests, they do the same thing."

Another Quebec City native, also domiciled in Montreal, Lambert was first contacted by Carrier in 1998 when the saxophonist was planning to organize a new trio. Lambert had played for extended periods with bassist Pierre Côté and drummer François Côté. Both subsequently became members of Carrier's trio, so the drummer had heard of the saxophonist before he telephoned. Since 1998, as the drummer recalls, "was a time of change for both of us. I was happy to check out his ideas. I knew that François was working on the creative side of music, and he had a nice and strong alto sound."

Nearly 10 years later, when Lambert isn't involved with his own projects, which often feature his own orchestral works, he continues to work with Carrier for both practical and inspirational reasons. "Together we generate ideas for musical situations and partnerships and ways to

realize them. Then we try to overcome many of the practical obstacles," he states. "We also allow each other total freedom when it comes to playing."

Confirming the saxophonist's statement that Carrier's insightful, heartfelt improvising was almost fully developed by the 1990s, the drummer says: "To my ears, over the years if his sound has changed, it's that it has become even more direct than before and much freer."

Carrier's strategy for grand encounters with international musicians usually involves both live dates and a recording session, planned or unplanned and he says he often learns as much from them off the bandstand as on. Putting nationalism aside, he says he tries to play with veteran jazzmen like Redman because "there are so few Great Jazz Masters in Canada." Most so-called "Jazz Masters" are modest and supportive to other musicians as well, he reports, to perpetuate a tradition they themselves experienced.

In 1999, for instance, he and Lambert participated in "an elevated learning experience" on a Quebec City gig with the late Texas tenor saxophonist Dewey Redman, best known for his work with Ornette Coleman's band. That gig was released as

Open Spaces on the Spool label. Rather than pulling rank, the older saxophonist told Carrier he was aiming to be like John Coltrane, the most "egoless" person Redman ever met.

"Dewey went to Mr. Coltrane's place in New York for a lesson when he was a teenager," recalls Carrier. "He would turn around the block for hours and then knock at Mr. Coltrane's door. 'What can I do for you young man' says Mr. Coltrane. 'I would like to learn to play the saxophone like you Mr. Coltrane', he replied. 'I can't teach you how to play like me because I don't know how to play,' Mr. Coltrane told Redman. 'All you can do is find different things to do with the 12 notes you have.'"

Montreal-born, but long-time American resident Paul Bley was also encouraging to the alto saxophonist, but in "a subtly humorous way." In 2003, the pianist and legendary bassist Peacock came to Montreal for the concert and recording that became *Travelling Lights* on Justin Time records. As Carrier recalls, "After the studio session he told me: 'Listen François, yesterday the concert was so good, that I asked myself how in the world will we be able to be better during today's studio session? And we did it. Now



Michel Lambert and Carrier. PHOTON FRANÇOIS LE GUARANT DE TROMELIN

FRANÇOIS CARRIER DISCOGRAPHY

1994 François Carrier Trio, *Poursuite* (Boff Amplitude BJACD-4030) with François Carrier (alto saxophone); Pierre Côté (bass) and Yves Jacques (drums)

1997 François Carrier Trio, *Intuition* (Lost Chart Records LC-1015) François Carrier (alto saxophone); Pierre Côté (bass) and François Côté (drums)

1999 François Carrier/Dewey Redman/Michel Donato/Ron Séguin/Michel Lambert, *Open Spaces* (Spool LINE 27) with François Carrier (alto saxophone); Dewey Redman (tenor saxophone); Ron Séguin or Michel Donato (bass) and Michel Lambert (drums)

2000 François Carrier Trio + 1, *Compassion* (Naxos Jazz 86062-2) with François Carrier (alto saxophone); Steve Amirault (piano); Pierre Côté (bass); and Michel Lambert (drums)

2002 François Carrier Trio with Uri Caine, *All'Alba* (Justin Time JUST 203-2) with François Carrier (alto saxophone); Pierre Côté (bass); Michel Lambert (drums) and Uri Caine (piano)

2004 François Carrier, Michel Lambert Paul Bley, Gary Peacock, *Travelling Lights* (Justin Time JUST 203-2) with François Carrier (soprano and alto saxophones); Paul Bley (piano); Gary Peacock (bass) and Michel Lambert (drums)

2004 François Carrier Trio, *Play*, (482 Music 482-1033) with François Carrier (alto saxophone); Pierre Côté (bass) and Michel Lambert (drums)

2006 François Carrier, *Happening*, (Leo Records LR 451/452) with François Carrier (soprano and alto saxophones); Mat Maneri (viola); Uwe Neumann (sitar, sanza, ektara and anandolohori); Pierre Côté (bass); Michel Lambert (drums); and Lin Snelling, Brad Denys and Chantal Lamirande (voices/dance)

2007 François Carrier Quartet, *Noh* (Ayler Records aylDL-027) with François Carrier (soprano and alto saxophones); Reg Schwager (guitar); John Heward and Michel Lambert (drums)

2007 François Carrier/Michel Lambert, *Kathmandu* (FMR Records FMR CD236-0607) with François Carrier (alto saxophone) and Michel Lambert (drums)

Carrier duets, which the alto saxophonist recorded with portable equipment is available as *Kathmandu* on FMR Records. Reflecting on his experiences, Carrier confirms that the 12 short tracks are "in that spirit of joyfulness and playfulness," that the two experienced in the country. "All my life I have never reached a level of connection as deep as with the Nepali people."

The one connection that so far hasn't materialized, however, is for gigs in the United States. But all in good time, as the philosophical saxophonist might say. Connections are being made.

Carrier's habit of recording his gigs means that he has the equivalent of several CDs on hand waiting to be released. Since he's always open to new concepts, the idea of releasing a multi-volume downloadable (DL), digital box set on Ayler, the innovative Swedish label which made *Noh* available late year, is an experiment he welcomes.

Carrier "has been very active," reports Jan Ström, Ayler's executive producer. "He's very organized and the promo CDs he sends me are very nicely presented." Although Carrier's music is different from the hard-core Energy Music in which the label specializes—"how could it not be, he has a different background," contends Ström, "but it's still live music with spirit, so it fits."

The DL set will likely include tracks from the Montreal Jazz Festival and Happening Musical concerts by Carrier's trio; the duo with Lambert; and with the two featured with special guests such as Donato, Redman and Greenwich. Buyers will be able to either download the CDs individually or download the entire box—both options include downloadable cover art and booklet notes. This creative solution to the challenge of distributing non-mainstream jazz fits in with Carrier's musical philosophy of constantly creating new opportunities.

"What is Creativity exactly?" he asks. "Creativity comes from the moment, the instant, the here and now. All that comes from the known, from the past or any projections in the future is not creativity. There's no creativity in the mental and the memory or in something predictable. Creativity comes from intuition and total attention to life, with spontaneity. I have good news for those who think that everything has been said. 'It's not true.' Everything is still to be discovered. What we know is nothing compared to all there is in the universe or in the multi-verse." c

you can tell everyone that Paul Bley is the only piano player in the world to have played with Charlie Parker, Ornette Coleman ... and François Carrier'."

With his spiritual bent, Carrier confirms that his duo gig with Lambert at the 2006 Jazzmandu Festival in Nepal affected him deeply. Invited by jazz drummer Navin Chettri, the international trip was almost unfunded until, as with 2002's experience in Rome, a grant from the *Conseil des Arts et des Lettres du Québec* came through almost literally at the very last minute.

Flying from Montreal to Kathmandu took more than 30 hours, and just after they arrived, Lambert came down with a sudden case of food poisoning. He recovered in time for the duo's concert the next night, though. Later in the week the two

played individually with both local and Western musicians.

"It's very inspiring experience to play in these open sky situations," reports Carrier. "The energy of this country is so powerful. No wonder it's Buddha's homeland. People look right into your eyes with love and spirit. No needs of words. Just feeling, pure feeling. I knew such energy existed because at all times I'm filled with that kind of energy that we westerners refuse to connect with. But in Nepal all you have to do is surrender and be joyful and playful."

Additionally, although the duo's uncompromising improvisations were probably the most "outside" music heard at the festival and quite different from anything else there, "the Nepali people appreciated it a great deal," Carrier confirms. The Lambert-