

MONTREAL JAZZ FESTIVAL

BY TOM GREENLAND



Marcus Miller @Montreal Jazz Festival

CARAMOOR JAZZ FESTIVAL

BY TRISTAN GEARY



Rachel Therrien @Caramoor Jazz Festival

MONHEIM TRIENNALE

BY KURT GOTTSCHALK



Brighde Chaimbeul @Monheim Triennale

Since 1980, Alain Simard's Festival International de Jazz de Montréal has attracted a mélange of local fans and tourists—jazz aficionados and dilettantes alike. Largest of its kind, touting a global, stylistically eclectic roster of name stars alongside lesser-known, home-grown acts, it nevertheless evokes small-town charm: families picnicking on grass swards, children wading in shallow pools, amateur pianists young and old taking turns at a grand piano set up in Rue Ste-Catherine, as promenading bands squeeze through the throng. This review covers three days (Jun. 29-Jul. 1) of the ten-day summer spectacular.

By the festival's third day (Sat., Jun. 29), the festival was in full swing across the three-square-block area comprising three large concert halls on the raised Place des Arts next to an outdoor staging area. Therein were oversize screens, speakers and lighting cranes dwarfed by chic high-rise architecture, plus numerous smaller stages and venues. Outdoor (and some indoor) concerts were free, music typically starting around noon, ending by or around midnight. Trad-jazzers Montréal Dixie and Swing Tonique and soulful vocalists Madison Ryann Ward and Dominique Fils-Aimé were four of many outdoor acts keeping pedestrians' spirits up in the drizzly weather. Indoors, Icelandic multi-instrumentalist Laufey impressed the capacity crowd at Maison Symphonique de Montréal with warm expressive singing, well-crafted confessional songwriting and versatile musicianship. At Gesù, a mid-size hall bordering the main area, **Django Festival Allstars**, impelled by guitarist Samson Schmitt and accordionist Ludovic Beier's fiery solos, kept the jazz *manouche* flame burning. Guitarist **Al Di Meola**, recently recovered from an onstage heart attack, was equally fiery at Théâtre Maisonneuve where, after local guitarist Frank O'Sullivan's slow-simmering quartet warmed the coals, he launched a fusillade of fretboard fireworks on tunes including Chick Corea's "Beyond the Seventh Galaxy", prodded by conguero Gumbi Ortiz. Later at Gesù, trumpeter **Keyon Harold** played songs from his *Foreverland* album, yielding an organic fusion of hip-hop and jazz catalyzed by his antiphonal exchanges with agile vocalists Stout and Malaya over drummer Charles Haynes' drunk-funk.

By Sunday (Jun. 30) the rain was gone, but the heatwave was back. Early afternoon,

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The audience at Caramoor's grounds, in Katonah, NY, were relaxed, stretched out on the grass and letting the music of the day-long (Jul. 27) Caramoor Jazz Festival swirl around them. The concerts were spread across four stages: the Venetian Theater, replete with faux-columns looking like the set of a Shakespeare play; the Friends Field, a classic festival stage where audiences splay out in a maze of lawn chairs; the Spanish Courtyard, a more intimate closed-in space, reminiscent of a parlor music setting; and the picturesque Sunken Garden, canopied by bowing trees. You'd never guess you were a stone's throw from NYC (approximately an hour's drive or Metro-North train ride from Grand Central Station), except for the regular swell of planes coming in for landing at the city's airports and the closer Westchester County Airport.

Drummer **Willie Jones III**'s quartet inaugurated the offerings (in the Spanish Courtyard) with a maturity of dynamics, not afraid of either softness or silence; the group held the audience in their proverbial palm as they drifted through an achingly gentle version of "Embraceable You". Confessional solos from alto saxophonist Justin Robinson pulled sighs of approval, much of the audience audibly reacting with expressive reverence and emotion. Cameroonian-American singer **Ekep Nkwelle** (at the Friends Field) channeled the spirited energy of Betty Carter, but equally favored laid back grooves, as well. She dipped low into guttural phrases with deftness, before launching them back into the sky again. While she confidently hit the notes, somehow they didn't hit the *spot*, at times feeling strained. Trepidatious solos from pianist Sequoia Snyder added to the feeling of lackluster. Guitarist **Lolivone De La Rosa** was joined by saxophonist Ned Goold (at the Sunken Garden), a pleasantly unvarnished setup that allowed for up-close listening, with performers at eye level with the audience. The set, however, was a tad meandering, struggling to settle into any groove and creating a creeping notion of unsteadiness.

Harpist **Charles Overton**'s quartet (at the Spanish Courtyard) was a festival standout set. The group offered stunningly arranged standards, from "Nardis" (Miles Davis, or Bill Evans, depending on your source) and "Recordame" (Joe Henderson) to "How High the Moon" (Morgan Lewis, Nancy Hamilton), playing each of them as if they were

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The Prequel to the Monheim Triennale comes midway through its three-year cycle, only one of the ways in which the festival—in its second thousand-day run this summer—makes its own rules. The year before The Prequel comes a program of sound installations around the small but thriving city of Monheim am Rhein, Germany (15 miles south of Dusseldorf). With the third year of the cycle comes the festival proper with the artists at The Prequel returning to present final works—of a sort. It's all charmingly overcomplicated. As such, this year's weekend of encounters (Jul. 4-6) came with a built-in suggestion that everything was... becoming. The present was prologue. Performances by Ganavya Doraiswamy, Peter Evans, Heiner Goebbels, Darius Jones, yuniya edi kwon and others in various groupings were short, spirited and spontaneous. This dynamic, of course, is on-brand for improvised music, where codas are often new beginnings. But at Monheim it was *modus operandi*. It's an ambitious and truly international festival where the biggest thing was the boat upon which most of the concerts were held.

The Prequel 2024 presented 16 musicians who found ensembles on the fly, mostly from within their own ranks, but sometimes drawing on the town's talent. **Peter Evans**, in the opening set, went with the latter for his Workshop Ensemble. They played a perfect, uninterrupted 40 minutes without misstep. Their set was immediately followed by a sort of preamble to The Prequel, a mission statement put into practice in the form of a round-robin of the invited musicians in a constantly-shifting sequence of duos and trios, with Evans—a workhorse of the weekend—kicking it off. An odd consequence of the open schedule was that some artists ended up with far more stage time than others, Evans topping the list. Along with the various groupings he participated in, he gave a 35-minute solo performance in the Marienkapelle, a small stone chapel dating from 1514. He bounced loud, broken pocket-trumpet phrases around the packed room, soon quickening the pace to a gallop, slowing then with the full-bodied trumpet and something more heart than muscle, which developed into a jet stream of overtones. His pure instrumental technique and his structural sensibilities, when running in tandem, can be shockingly good.

Julia Ulehla also tapped local talent, enlisting a girls chorus accompanied by a small ensemble for a set

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Lucky Chemistry, an ambulant sextet tailed by a pushcart carrying four stacked amps to boost their instruments, wended their way through the crowds along Rue Ste-Catherine, creating a peculiar juxtaposition of distance/proximity: even from a vantage point several stories up, half a block away (your correspondent tried it), you could still hear and see each touch of the musicians' fingers. Other outdoor bands included locals such as trumpeter **Lex French's** post-bop quartet on the big stage at one end of the quad and, at the other, Dusty Brass Band at Le Cabaret, a gazebo. Following French was U.S. rapper Freddie Gibbs, his image blown up on megascreeens so festivalgoers located anywhere in the vast sea of spectators could track his actions. **André 3000** appeared at Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier, playing music from his 2023 solo debut *New Blue Sun*, eschewing the surrealistic rap he's known for to explore equally surrealistic soundscapes, his ethereal flute wading through electronic washes, stage lights faded so low performers appeared as dim shadows occasionally dappled by pinpoint points of laser-light. At Molson's outdoor biergarten, tenor saxophonist **Melissa Aldana** played songs from her latest album, *Echoes of the Inner Prophet*, weaving long, tangled, delicately-shaded narratives punctuated with pregnant pauses. Drummer Kush Abadey added apt but unexpected commentary, and pianist Glenn Zaleski, a delicate but decisive player, proved a perfect foil for the leader's storylines. The final set, at Gesù, by Dutch composer **Joep Beving**, was a welcome aperitif after a day-long, full-course meal of energetic music. Sitting alone before an open-top upright piano, he asked for (and received) silence throughout his set, then commenced a series of meditative tonal compositions reminiscent of George Winston, Keith Jarrett and Erik Satie, leaving listeners fully sated, ready for a deep night's sleep.

Monday (Jul. 1), still hot, was Canada Day, meaning crowds were even bigger and livelier. Outside, Dusty Brass Band was back on their beat at the gazebo, even as Streetnix, a trad jazz band covering songs such as Ary Barroso's "Brazil", worked the other end of the quad—the two simultaneous performances created an overlapping effect something akin to Charles Ives' "Three Places in New England". Close by on a grassy knoll, the **Early Jazz Band** revisited New Orleans repertoire (plus a John Zorn cover), clarinetist Jean-Sébastien Leblanc and banjoist Dominic Desjardins captivating the small standing crowd encircling them with superb craft and showmanship. Inside, at Gesù, pianist **Jason Moran** delivered a masterful solo set of Duke Ellington's music. Although he confessed that "to confront Ellington is to confront a mountain," he nonetheless did a commendable job channeling the maestro's artistic ethos on lush ballads "Melancholia", "The Single Petal of a Rose" and Billy Strayhorn's "Lotus Blossom", and adding electronic loops to "Black and Tan Fantasy", bebopping over "Wig Wise" and even attempting James P. Johnson's notoriously tricky "Carolina Shout" (which Ellington memorized from watching a player piano roll) for the encore. On the quad mainstage, **Chief Xian aTunde Adjuah** (formerly Christian Scott) began his set on an electronic kora-like instrument, singing over a shuffling 6/8 groove. At Théâtre Maisonneuve, just after receiving the festival's prestigious Miles Davis Award, ex-Miles electric bassist **Marcus Miller** immediately changed his program to include three tunes associated with Davis: "Tutu" (Miller's slap/pop bass sounding like a conga), Charlie Parker's "Au Privave" and "So What", over which trumpeter Russell Gunn quoted Davis' original recorded solo at length. The band paid tribute to David Sanborn on the late saxophonist's "Maputo", refocusing on Davis with Miller's "Mr. Pastorius" and the encore,

an up-dated, up-tempo "Tutu 2.0". Last set of the night was alto saxophonist **Lakecia Benjamin** at the biergarten. Decked out in a gold lamé wing-shouldered bodysuit recalling David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust, the acknowledged fashionista stalked the stage with barely containable energy, even breaking her eyeglasses in her enthusiasm, none of which distracted from her canny, emotive improvisations on Patrice Rushen's "Jubilation" and a hyped-up cover of "My Favorite Things".

Not surprisingly, Montréal seems to be a favorite for both audiences and artists, since the performers get as much from fans as fans do from them.

For more info visit montrealjazzfest.com/en

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specifically written for harp. Overton plucked the instrument with vigor, but pulled back at other times, emitting lush pads and deft chordal maneuvering. Each tune had delicious reharmonizations, with "How High The Moon" taking on a vampish character, reminiscent of Radiohead's "Everything in Its Right Place". Happening simultaneously was a set led by drummer **Herlin Riley**, who brought his familiar joyous spirit and unyielding intensity. He was, as he always seems to be, having a whale of a time on stage, at times letting drum sticks fly across the stage and pulling another seemingly out of thin air. Inner-mounting vamps broke into ferocious swing. A rendition of "You Don't Know What Love Is" featured a hefty backbeat, brooding and bluesy, while retaining the yearning identity of the composition. The group went over their allotted time, but a loving audience demanded even more, leading to an encore that took listeners on a quick trip to New Orleans, injecting the spirit of Mardi Gras into the festival, with everyone up on their feet.

Accordionist **Vitor Gonçalves'** duo with drummer Rogerio Boccato was up next (at the Sunken Garden). Even in this pared-down format, the accordion's capacity for dexterous bass lines, intricate melodies and bellowing midrange harmonies gave the music the fullness of an ensemble. Highly syncopated, the twosome skewered satisfying Latin rhythms with a delicate buoyancy. Canadian trumpeter **Rachel Therrien's** Latin Jazz Project (at the Friends Field) was the last performance before the evening headliner, and she offered fierce playing and relentless Afro-Cuban beats, building up the layers of rhythm and harmony with transparency and allowing a window into the music's construction.

Festival headliner **Matthew Whitaker's** concert (at the Venetian Theater) was a sold-out affair. A pass-the-mic series of spoken introductions were made, featuring members of Jazz at Lincoln Center, who helped curate the day's lineup. Then Whitaker's band emerged: guitar, bass, drums, congas and Whitaker center stage with piano and organ at his fingertips. What followed, though, was a Sisyphean struggle for the bandleader. The first red flag came when the drummer enclosed himself inside a plastic booth and donned headphones. Overall the mix was egregiously off. The leader's piano and organ often could not be heard through the set's first three songs; noticeably he repeatedly pled with the engineers to give him more sound, which he did so less and less politely as he, the band and audience members' patience grew thin. On top of this problem, the bass was feeding back, unadjusted for almost the entire set, getting in the way of Liany Mateo's tasteful upright playing. Eventually sound problems were largely adjusted and, in an arrangement of "Blue Rondo à la Turk", the audience finally got to hear what they had paid for and came to hear. Still, there

was a mismatch between Whitaker's jazz fluidity and drummer Johnny Steele's wooden playing, bereft of any subtlety or lightness of touch. The builds felt jerky and the endings sometimes petered out. The set continued with various instrumental configurations, from an organ trio with guitar and drums, to piano trio with bass and drums, but most notable was Whitaker's solo piano, during which listeners could comfortably get inside his musical mind. The pianist played a moving version of "What a Wonderful World" where his youthful pianistic ideas were unencumbered, even though the music felt stunted by an effort to make it (even) more commercial. It was on his powerful tune, "Stop Fighting", that Whitaker produced moments of magic, allowing himself to stretch out. And attendees got a good dose of the young player's voice and stage personality, which was, as expected and as usual, vivacious and playful.

For festival goers who attended the whole sun-soaked day, any eyebrow-raising about the headline performance was most probably overshadowed by the day's overall talent and music accompanying midsummer relaxation.

For more info visit caramoor.org

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each other and, over time, are showing this is some of the cutting-edge music that's happening today in Brooklyn by people who were born in the '90s. That gives every release a bit of a head start."

For the upcoming two-night Endectomorph Music Festival (Sep. 6-7), the first night presents the groups of three pianists: Golub, Steve Long and Hyoung Lyou (the latter two release albums in November). The second night features drummer Jake Richter and saxophonist Shulman along with Mute, a cooperative group of Asian-American jazz musicians that includes Sun on C-melody saxophone and clarinet. The label showcase will provide another forum that doesn't come easily to up-and-coming players: the chance to play at an established space like The Jazz Gallery. Sun, who will be returning from a trip to Spain just hours before Mute's set, says the festival is something he's wanted to do for a couple years. "Obviously, recording is great. Being able to document your art—it's a luxury. It's a privilege," he says. "But at the end of the day, we want to play for people, and let people experience the music."

For more info visit endectomorph.com. Endectomorph Music Festival is at The Jazz Gallery Sep. 6-7. Kevin Sun is also at Lowlands Sep. 17. See Calendar.

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