

By Josef Woodard | April 10, 2024



For decades, the radar of important avant-garde musical culture, especially in North America, has steered artists and observers to the seemingly unlikely small town of Victoriaville, Quebec, in Canada. In 1982, intrepid festival founder and torch-keeper Michel Levasseur humbly launched Festival International Musique Actuelle Victoriaville, aka FIMAV or Victo — as a showcase for expanding worlds of experimental jazz and other related musics. In its annual mid-May slot, FIMAV has long been synonymous with the passionate nurturing of its specialized-yet-malleable artistic domain.

With this year's milestone 40th edition, May 13–19, the enterprise is experiencing a dramatic transitional moment. The director role has passed from Levasseur to Scott Thomson, moving over from his guiding position at the similarly adventurous Guelph Jazz Festival. Levasseur went out on a strong note last May, with a lineup including frequenters Fred Frith and John Zorn, who closed the program with three groups and paid respects onstage to the retiring director.

“The last festival was very emotional,” Levasseur affirms. “And you could feel that some people came because they thought, ‘Well, maybe it’s the last one.’ But the milieu woke up, and lots of people wanted the festival to keep going, which is great. It was a good feeling.”

Although the director's hat has officially been passed, Levasseur continues to be involved on the festival's board and in other capacities, and a family connection continues through his wife Joane Vézina's administrative work and daughter Jordie's marketing role. The long-standing Victo record label arm is still active, if more modestly than in years past: Two live albums from last year's festival are soon to drop, by Francois Houle/Alexander Hawkins/Kate Gentile and Void Patrol (led by Elliot Sharp and Colin Stetson).

Things are changing but remaining the same, if Thomson's first program is an indication. This year's headlining shows include a solo concert by legend Roscoe Mitchell, as well as Steve Lehman's *Sélébéyone*, Nate Wooley, Joelle Leandre/Mat Maneri/Crag Taborn and the Natural Information Society.

Thomson, also a trombonist who has performed on several occasions at Victoriaville, describes his artistic agenda helming FIMAV in correlation with his taking the reins of Guelph from that festival's founder, Ajay Heble. “I have inherited an event from a charismatic founding director,” he says, “and my job is not to transform it radically, but to gently introduce the combination of my particular programming priorities and my skills and style as a

manager — where I believe the real creativity lies — to maintain the event's and the organization's resilience and relevance. If I do my work well, this will be achieved, not with a fight, but with finesse.”

In terms of this year's roster, Thomson comments, “Seeing as it's the 40th edition of the festival, it was important to me to invite a few artists who have long been associated with the event. Roscoe is certainly one of them. John Butcher is another. Beyond that, I sought a balance of more familiar and less familiar names of artists doing amazing work through many approaches and methods. There are few festivals where you can hear the music of both Wandelweiser composer Jürg Frey and footwork DJ pioneer Kavain Wayne Space (RP Boo), for example.

“It's also important to me to feature Quebecois and Canadian artists, of which there are so many excellent ones.”

Levasseur himself approves of Thomson's message as conveyed through the 40th program. “This program is very strong, very interesting, and with lots of musicians people don't know,” Levasseur asserts. “And it's been like this in Victoriaville for years — from the beginning. People may not know half of the program, and that's true with many musicians and even the writers. We all discover people, and this is the same effect now. I think this is a special thing about Victo, and it's still there.”

Thomson adds, “Part of my job is to find excellent and relatively little-known artists and groups and give them the high-profile stages they deserve. In this year's program, any name that is heretofore unknown holds the capacity to be a discovery.”

One possible semi-discovery at the festival may be catching Mitchell — of AACM, Art Ensemble of Chicago and countless other projects in jazz and new music circles — going solo, equipped with only a bass saxophone.

Mitchell fell in with, and in love with, the bass saxophone after an encounter with saxophonist Darius Jones at the 25th annual Other Minds Festival in San Francisco, where Jones essentially paid heartfelt tribute to Mitchell. “From that day on,” Mitchell explains, “I started to take up the bass saxophone in earnest. I've been mostly playing it because it's so interesting, as a solo instrument. At my solo concerts, I'm most successful when I stay in the moment. Every second is different, and if I can hook into what's in the air, I fare better.”

Mitchell's numerous FIMAV appearances include a duet with Moor Mother in 2019 and a stellar concert with The Trio (with AACM allies George Lewis and the late Muhal Richard Abrams) in 2012. “Every time I go there,” Mitchell comments, “I always enjoy myself. People always welcome me there.”

By creating a potent forum for the avant-garde cause and community, Levasseur has performed an extended, noble service. Does he feel a sense of pride about his achievements?

“Being my last year organizing the 40th anniversary,” he relates, “I've been looking at programs. The music is unbelievable. I must have presented over 800 concerts. We have all the archives, concerts from all those years. Through the archives, I sometimes feel — well, not pride. My first thought is, ‘How did we do this?’” he laughs.

“It was worthwhile doing — the festival and also the label. The label is somehow historical, and part of the history of the festival. It is amazing, for example, to have a concert CD of Bill Dixon doing his last concert, his last recording. I'm very happy to have participated in that construction of the music, in that evolution of the music. Victoriaville is part of a big community, a big genre of music, of arts and participating in a very positive way.” **DB**

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