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# CHASING DJANGO

By Phillip Lutz | Photo by Jimmy & Dena Katz

On a temperate night in April 2017, JAMES CARTER was veering dangerously close to the intemperate. Jamming with other saxophone stars onstage at the State University of New York at Purchase, he seemed a man possessed—his tenor saxophone by turns wailing and whimpering, bleating and braying with a musicality so muscular it threatened to consume him.

It never did. Carter, a big man with a big heart, is by nature a maximalist. And the vehicle at hand—Sonny Rollins' aptly titled "Tenor Madness"—seemed attuned to his more-is-more aesthetic. Among such distinguished players operating at full tilt—Jimmy Heath, Joe Lovano and Ravi Coltrane were part of the mix—Carter's search for new sounds fit the moment, even as its urgency set him apart.

"I think it's going to be a perpetual search," he said between bites of quiche at a Manhattan pâtisserie this June.

At 50, Carter remains relentless. A child of Detroit and builder of the modern jazz scene in that city—where he still lives when not holed up in a pad on New York's Upper West Side—he retains a reputation as an iconoclastic seeker of truth for whom each rush of air through his horn both aspires to rebellion and respects tradition.

"There are certain people God puts something extra in their pot; he's one of them," said violinist Regina Carter, his cousin and sometime collaborator. "But he definitely worked for it."

In a career that's encompassed symphonic collaborations, solo concerts and nearly everything in between, Carter's expansive art has never quite settled into a comfort zone. Nor has the restless saxophonist sought one. But he has returned to a few subjects repeatedly—none, perhaps, more productively than Django Reinhardt (1910–'53).

Playing with European guitarists indebted to Django Reinhardt stuck with saxophonist James Carter.

First turned on to the iconic gypsy guitarist as a teenager by the programming of Detroit radio host Jim Gallert, Carter today is reimagining Reinhardt's work for the second time. The project is one in which he and his bandmates—Gerard Gibbs on Hammond B-3 organ and Alex White on drums—incorporate rhythms and riffs from contemporary culture into songs associated with Reinhardt. The resulting sounds, in Carter's words, give Reinhardt "a 'hood pass." Fresh even by Carter's high standards, those sounds hold the promise of wide appeal.

"This particular hybrid could be made available and relevant to new listeners," he said.

The project has been gathering steam, generating excitement at both the 2017 Monterey Jazz Festival and last year's Newport Jazz Festival. The upshot, Carter said, is that Blue Note Records, which had been weighing an in-studio Reinhardt album, decided instead to release *James Carter Organ Trio: Live From Newport Jazz* (produced by label head Don Was). The program includes five tunes by Reinhardt—including 11-minute renditions of both "Le Manoir De Mes Rêves" and "Mélodie Au Crépuscule"—and one by his contemporary Auguste "Gusti" Mahla, all recorded at the 2018 festival.

The new album, on which Carter plays soprano, alto and tenor saxophones, has its roots in an earlier encounter with Reinhardt, documented on Carter's sixth album, 2000's *Chasin' The Gypsy* (Atlantic). For that project, he employed some of the more obscure horns in his considerable arsenal. Among them: the F-mezzo soprano saxophone and the bass saxophone, on which he rendered gems like "Nuages" and "I'll Never Be The Same" with a lyricism that offers striking evidence of his ability to coax the most unlikely sounds out of the most unwieldy instruments.

That album's debt to Reinhardt is clear in the way its two acoustic guitars, accordion and violin evoke the deep and sometimes dark colors of wartime Paris. Yet Carter's imprint is unmistakable in the twists and turns the treatments take as he shapes his sonic world within Reinhardt's universe. In a series of structured colloquies, for example, James and his cousin Regina recall the heat of Reinhardt's interplay with violinist Stéphane Grappelli—while also molding the melodic contours in a manner that reflects a risk-it-all, Motor City sensibility.

"When you're playing with James, you have to lose any preconceived expectations of what you think the music is and be willing to trust and hear James' vision and put yourself out there," Regina explained. "It can be uncomfortable because it's so different."

If *Chasin' The Gypsy* proved the start of James' reckoning with Reinhardt's oeuvre, he achieved an intimacy with it as an indirect result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He was in Paris on the day of the attacks, waiting for the *Chasin' The Gypsy* band to arrive from the United States for a gig that week at the Jazz en Touraine festival in Montlouis-sur-Loire. When planes were grounded, festival organizers replaced Carter's band members with a group that included the celebrated European guitarists Stochelo Rosenberg and Romane (aka Patrick Leguidecoq), both of whom are steeped in the gypsy tradition. Carter later jammed with other similarly oriented musicians, the experience staying with him when he returned to playing the Reinhardt book with his old bandmates.

"For me, it made it a bit more legit because it wasn't just about playing the music without having the true experience of playing with gypsies who were keepers of this music," he said.

But for all the insight, knowledge and appreciation Carter gained by playing with authentic practitioners, the experience didn't weaken his resolve to treat Reinhardt's music as he wished; if anything, it encouraged him to unleash his subversive side. Around 2002, during a tour with the *Chasin' The Gypsy* band, he and the musicians came up with the approach that, more than a decade later, would take form in the current Reinhardt project.

"We had a sound-check one day, and jokingly played around with 'Nuages,' and funked it up,

basically," Carter said. "That was the first inkling of it. But as far as making it a formal objective, it was late 2013, '14. We said, 'Let's get two different ways of playing these tunes, to beef up the repertoire.'"

Intent on devising tactics for transforming Reinhardt's tunes, Carter and Gibbs began holding brainstorming sessions in the driveway of the saxophonist's Detroit home. One tactic they came up with was simply to draw themes from the raw material of common existence.

"We like to introduce a lot of what occurs in our everyday lives into the music: what may be happening in our families or news events we encounter traveling around the world," Gibbs explained. "That's one of the big things I've learned with James: 'Keep your ears open.'"

Their ears were wide open when they heard a story about a local judge who, brought up on corruption charges involving a mistress, claimed that she "used me." The turn of phrase called to mind the signature riff from Bill Withers' 1972 hit "Use Me," and, in short order, the musicians had fused it with Reinhardt's "Mélodie Au Crépuscule"—along the way adding an element of social commentary.

"Joking," Carter recalled, "we took that phrase and popped it in Bill Withers mode and just took it from there. So 'Melody Of Crepuscule' unofficially became 'Melody Of [The Judge's Name],' and that's how we would list it on our song list, so we'd know what groove to play. We'd also play 'Melody Of Crepuscule' as a Cuban bolero—that was our second way of doing it."

Similarly, they created alternate versions of other Reinhardt-associated tunes. Onto the ballad "Anouman" they grafted material from Johnny "Guitar" Watson's boudoir-funk tune "I Want To Ta-Ta You Baby," providing a sweet bed for Carter's tart alto. Into "La Valse Des Niglos," they injected elements of the John Coltrane Quartet's take on "My Favorite Things," with Carter's soprano summoning a physicality that might have turned Coltrane's head. And "Pour Que Ma Vie Demeure," rendered in almost tender fashion on Carter's 2008 album, *Present Tense* (EmArcy), received repeated jolts of his mind-bending multiphonics atop fragments of Philly soul singer Teddy Pendergrass' "Turn Off The Lights."

But the most salient treatment might be on the album's dazzling closing number, "Fleche d'Or." On it, the band is set thrumming, sparked by Carter's flashes of brilliance, his alto nodding at once to a riff from r&b group New Edition and Reinhardt's prescient original. "This is one of Django's later tunes where he started showing more of an electrical influence," Carter said. "There's a bit more dissonance and an electrical implication as a result, looking forward to individuals such as [Jimi] Hendrix and the blues guitarists."

**"We played around with 'Nuages,' and FUNKED it up, basically."**

Carter said that he takes cues from electric guitarists—no great shock, given his supercharged performances. Onstage, he can be a kinetic presence; offstage, as well. During the June interview, he punctuated his comments with the gesticulations of an air-guitarist.

"One of the individuals I really started thinking about was George Freeman," he said, referring to the Chicago guitarist and brother of saxophone legend Von Freeman. His "long sustained tones and little distortions" functioned as gestures saxophonists could adapt and play off of, Carter said, citing the interaction between Freeman and Charlie Parker on a 1950 live date, *One Night In Chicago*.

Carter said he was moved by artists "who have lifted the guitar from an accompanying instrument"—among them Eddie Durham, Charlie Christian, T-Bone Walker and Muddy Waters, as well as Hendrix and the Hendrix-inspired Eddie Hazel, a luminary in the Detroit-based Parliament/Funkadelic orbit. "With electricity being involved, there's a certain freedom given to those instrumentalists. I try to share in that same sort of freedom, to strive for it as much as possible."

Carter put his penchant for electricity into action with the release in 2000 of the free-funk outing *Layin' In The Cut* (Atlantic). The album—featuring Jef Lee Johnson and Marc Ribot on electric guitars, Jamaaladeen Tacuma on electric bass and G. Calvin Weston on drums—owes much to Ornette Coleman's Prime Time, which counted both Tacuma and Weston as members. That *Layin' In The Cut* was released the same year as the all-acoustic *Chasin' The Gypsy* emphasizes the breadth of Carter's artistic vision.

But *Layin' In The Cut* didn't spur the creation of a band. Carter only took up electrification as an ongoing pursuit with the establishment of his quartet, Elektric Outlet, which remains active. In the band, Carter uses effects pedals, while Gibbs switches to electronic keyboards and Ralphe Armstrong fills the bottom on electric bass. White still sits behind the drums, his sticks getting a workout.

The group grew out of an encounter Carter had with saxophonist Keith Anderson's DigiTech effects pedal when both musicians were playing on a cruise ship in 2007. Intrigued by its sonic possibilities, Carter began collecting his own pedals. "I'm still learning how to work them," he said. "But it caters to that aforementioned frustrated guitarist thing and that electric freedom aspect of it."

Carter's search for new sounds has few limits. But one might be an aversion to the electronic wind instrument, which he avoids in favor of the standard horn with attachments: "I think it's a lot more personal than having the EWI and various things at your disposal that are all digital, because the electronic apparatuses basically have sensors that anticipate what your breath envelope is and shape and all that stuff, and it's based on numbers, as opposed to what you can put into an instrument."

For early exemplars of saxophonists who enhanced their freedom of expression by using attachments, he reached backed to the work of Eddie Harris and Sonny Stitt in the 1960s. "It's a combination of exploring that freedom and paying homage to those guys for opening that sonic passageway," he said.

Carter's search for new sounds has extended to the classical realm, too. That move, Regina said, reflected his preternatural inquisitiveness: "We were all exposed so much to different styles of music. But one thing about James—he's extremely curious. His listening range—you can't pin him down. He's influenced by everything. He always wants to try new things. A lot of times that's what you hear in his playing—he doesn't shut himself off from any good musical experience."

This year, he's revisited two classical pieces written for him by the Puerto Rican composer Roberto Sierra. The first, "Caribbean Rhapsody," a composition for string quartet and solo violin and saxophone, originally featured Regina and James. The title track of a 2011 album on EmArcy, it was expanded for chamber orchestra and performed with Symphony Tacoma in April. The second piece, *Concerto For Saxophones And Orchestra*, which had its premiere with the Detroit Symphony in 2002 and also appeared on *Caribbean Rhapsody*, was adapted for and performed by Carter and the Eastman Wind Ensemble in February.

Carter's role in developing and performing


Gerard Gibbs (left), Carter and Alex White perform at the Twin Cities Jazz Festival in St. Paul, Minnesota, on June 22.

ANDREA CANTER

these pieces, which arguably integrates notation and improvisation on a level more profound than most so-called jazz-classical hybrids, provides ample evidence of a musical gift that appeared in his earliest years. Family lore has it that his spot-on imitation of a birdsong both amazed and disrupted his elementary-school class, marking him as a precocious conjurer of sound.

That pattern has, to one degree or another, persisted. His extraordinary facility—and fearlessness about using it—have sometimes been misunderstood. "Some people tend to think my goal is the virtuosic thing," he said. "That's not my primary thing. But everybody's going to have a certain amount of virtuosity to get their ideas across."

He said that one person's idea of virtuosity might center on fleetness of fingers; another's on the ability to sit on one note and shape it. But he isn't interested in defining—or being defined by—anyone's take. He's about "having that kind of freedom at your disposal," Carter said. "I guess I owe a lot of that to Kevin." The reference is to his older brother Kevin Carter, another guitarist to whom he looked for guidance.

Carter's teenage years were a whirlwind of jamming, often at drummer Leonard King's Detroit home, where James, Regina and their cohort all joined in regular basement sessions. When James formed his organ trio, he recruited King—for his skills, to be sure, but also out of a sense of community, Regina said: "James has a tendency to keep his ties to folks in Detroit and try to include them in some way."

King helped hold on to Gibbs when the organist was, in the first year or two of his tenure with Carter, feeling the pressure. "I was going to quit," said Gibbs, who now has been with the trio for 18 years. "I just didn't think what I brought to the group was going to be enough. But Leonard said, 'I'm going to come to your house and go through some stuff.' He helped me get an understanding of what James was looking for."

Carter said that, at the time, Gibbs needed to expand his thinking beyond the Jimmy Smith/"Groove" Holmes organ-trio paradigm to include concepts put forth by groups like the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. "He needed to grow," Carter said. "But he's been able to grow and hear other things." Gibbs has contributed tunes to the trio's book, notably "J.C. Off The Set," a harmonically inventive counter to Carter's "J.C. On The Set," the title track of his first album, released on the Japanese label DIW in 1993.

White also felt the heat from Carter. He recalled the day in January 2014—before he was in the band—when the saxophonist, an imposing figure apparently on a scouting expedition, sat in at his gig at Bert's Market Place, a jazz club in Detroit. "He wanted to see if I'd back down at his musical pressure," said White, who was 23 at the time. "Apparently, I did well. He called me a couple weeks later for a gig."

In addition to providing a generational perspective, useful in the execution of the Reinhardt project, White's joining the group has boosted its already high adrenalin level. "Alex not only rises to the occasion but presents other possibilities," Carter said. "That was one of the biggest differences. Being young and thinking young keeps the eternal spring going in us as well."

Carter's own prospects were in doubt early on. "There were times," he said, "I would go out with my fellow classmates or neighborhood kids, we'd be getting into trouble or just hanging out." He even considered giving up music. But in 1981, he met Donald Washington, a saxophonist and teacher. "It was through him that everything basically fell into place."

Washington helped build his technique and confidence. In 1982, he enlisted Carter in the well-regarded young-adult band Bird-Trane-Sco-Now! With the band, Carter logged his first professional credit, a concert at Detroit's Jefferson Avenue United Methodist Church, and opened for Jackie McLean and Donald Byrd at the Detroit Institute of Arts. There, he first heard the World Saxophone Quartet, with Julius Hemphill, David Murray, Oliver Lake and Hamiet Bluiett.

"I was just floored," he recalled, "because I saw four men on the saxophone who didn't need a rhythm section and took the viability of the instrument I was playing to a whole other level." He would go on to play with the quartet.

Meanwhile, the young Carter was scouring the media for jazz. He found Oscar Brown Jr.'s PBS TV show *From Jumpstreet: The Story of Black Music*, on which artists like McLean appeared. And he taped Gallert's WDET radio show *Jazz Yesterday*, where, in addition to Reinhardt, he first heard Don Byas, whose tenor saxophone, a 1950 custom Dolnet, he later would own and play in a fierce and loving tribute at the 2015 Newport festival.

A Byas tribute album might be in the future, he said.

Through it all, the basics about Carter have changed little. "Everyone always saw James as really special, a hard worker, always had his horn, always playing," Regina Carter said. "When he put the horn in his mouth, it was fire. Without seeing him you could hear, 'It's James.' He's still the same way." DB