

## Number 9 : François Bourassa Quartet

On *Number 9*, François Bourassa's ninth album of original music for his own band, the Montreal-born pianist and empathic colleagues allude to formative influences, serendipitous encounters and places from his past. That might suggest a highly reflective program, and the seven performances here certainly convey thoughtfulness. But the true focus of composer-improviser Bourassa and his ensemble, from beginning to end of the record, is in the moment, *now*.

Sensuous imagination supported by sterling technique, François here empowers reeds player André Leroux, bassist Guy Boisvert, drummer Greg Ritchie -- a cast he first assembled in 2002 -- to embark on an adventure-strewn, winding road that tours vistas and waysides of a collective mindscape, strikingly different at every go 'round, each listen. The music of *Number 9* cycles from melodic lyricism to pure sonics, from a swinging basis to open space, from probing inquiry to fervent self-expression to satisfying resolutions, sometimes conclusive. There is finesse and passion, flintiness and warmth, formal structures and free association. Some of *Number 9* is simply dreamy. Bourassa and company make these diversities all of one piece, aspects of an ensemble sensibility.

Given the album's title, we of a certain age must wonder if it's a nod to another four-man band that celebrated variety while maintaining its singular identity. Does *Number 9* refer to the haunting *musique concrète* collage on the Beatles' *White Album*?

"I love 'Revolution 9' by John Lennon," acknowledges Bourassa, who is of that age (b. 1959). "It was influenced by Stockhausen's electronic music."

Then are the other names of "Carla and Karlheinz" respectively Bley and Stockhausen?

"I love Carla Bley's music of the early '60s like 'Ictus' and 'Barrage,' played by Paul Bley," he says. "I also love 'Mantra for two pianos and electronics' by Karlheinz, among many of his early pieces."

So yes, the first track's jaunty yet oblique line (try humming it! As improbable yet inevitable as Eric Dolphy's angular melodies, or Ornette Coleman's) achieves its affect purposefully, linking two 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> Century innovators, never mind the gulfs between their worlds or "styles." They may even conflict – the parts of "Carla and Karlheinz" fit together unpredictably yet organically, not employing Stockhausian aleatory operations). Bourassa's deft, initially dry touch may imply that of Paul Bley (another Montrealer), but he claims many other piano modernists, bluesmen and prog rockers, too, as inspirations, and clearly is steeped in Western European classicism. Consequently, the composer-pianist's position is not bound or limited, and this quartet does something beyond genre: Collaborate as only its four members can. No justification necessary for such an approach – we listen, accept, enjoy and are deepened.

The pleasures provided by this group make it easy. Applying himself to Bourassa's themes and concepts, Leroux wields his tenor saxophone distinctively and masterfully; he's especially sensitive to attack and dynamics, floating the theme of "5 and less" (in 5/4, explains Bourassa, "with bars of 3/4 and 2/4") gently, but builds to blasting on the darkly epic "Frozen" (which Bourassa says was titled by "a six-year-old little girl who was playing with my son when she heard me run through it; maybe for her it had something to do with the Disney animated movie, but if so I don't know").

On "C & K," Leroux's flute has the urgency of a jungle bird, and he uses the clarinet on "11 beignes" (in 11/4 time) as an instrument of deliberation. He isn't troubled by the odd time signatures, nor need you be, because Boisvert phrases firmly and gracefully on his bass, and in flowing concert with drummer Ritchie, who never lets on there's anything to count, merely rhythms to discern and enhance. He's a talented, restrained colorist, barely touching his cymbals on the languid "Past ich" ("an old melody which I've never used before," Bourassa mentions), offsetting the subdued piano vamp and Leroux on soprano sax.

"Lostage" is a word Bourassa invented, as he says, "half-English, half-French, meaning loss of control," a state the quartet depicts but doesn't venture -- the lines connecting the four are too strong. "18 rue de l'Hotel de Ville" is the address of the Studio du Quebec in Paris where Bourassa resided for six months in 2015. In this perhaps most ruminative episode of *Number 9*, we are privy to the strongest, most personal emotions -- the music evokes doubts, regrets, disappointments, fears, sadness, and also puts them to rest. After that, "11 beignes" is like a cat-and-mouse hide-and-seek game set in a maze. Bass clarinet and piano tag each other, slip off, return, while bass and drums keep them from straying far off track.

Are Bourassa's remarks about his compositions simple, sketchy? The songs on *Number 9* speak for themselves. The quartet covers a lot of ground from a complex of perspectives, new details unveiled with each turn of the ear. *Number 9* at first contact, like the Beatles' "Revolution 9," is mysterious, but proves much more compelling. Hear Bourassa, Leroux, Boisvert and Ritchie commune. Return, repeat, replay, dig in, lay back. A world of music comes clear.

**Howard Mandel**