

Hot sax pyrotechnics at Yoshi's

James Carter trio, plus David Murray, means the joint will jump

Dan Ouellette, Special to The Chronicle

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(02-17) 04:00 PDT New York -- James Carter is in a cheerful mood. The sometimes-surlly jazz saxophonist has just finished a bowl of miso soup at Tomo's on Broadway in Morningside Heights and is ready to sink his teeth into a plate of salmon sashimi with salmon sushi on the side. "I come here whenever I'm home," says the 34-year-old New Yorker. "And when I'm on the road, my band and I are always looking for good Japanese food."

So, yes, he nods, he is looking forward to playing his weeklong stint at Yoshi's, both for the club's intimate atmosphere and the food. Carter

sets up volcanic saxophone shop there beginning Tuesday and continuing through Sunday. Joining him will be his trio, Hammond B3 organist Gerard Gibbs and drummer Leonard King, both from Detroit, Carter's hometown.

Sitting in for the week will be another reeds powerhouse, David Murray. Count on saxophone pyrotechnics.

Expressing an expansive shriek-to-puff horn vocabulary, Carter has been wowing audiences with his riveting performances since his 1993 DIW/Columbia debut, "JC on the Set." He likes being dubbed the "Motor City Madman" and enjoys indulging in a high-velocity trad-meets-avant style of propulsion. But he also romances on the horn, evidenced by his 1994 ballads CD, "The Real Quietstorm."

In 1995, Rolling Stone hailed the charismatic Carter as an up-and-comer to watch, and the magazine gave him high scores for the two CDs he simultaneously released in 2000: the funky-vibed "Layin' in the Cut" (his first album with an all-electric band, featuring among others guitarist Marc Ribot) and the Django Reinhardt-inspired "Chasin' the Gypsy" (which included his cousin Regina Carter on violin and Romero Lubambo on guitar). The double-header was well-received in both pop and jazz circles. However, the follow-up album -- "Live at Baker's," recorded in 2001 in a Detroit club with an all-star cast of locals, including Aretha Franklin -- has been MIA.

Album in limbo

"When the jazz division of Atlantic Records went belly up, the album was limited to limbo," says Carter, who's particularly passionate about the project because it draws attention to the wealth of music in Detroit. "It's now with Warner Bros., so we'll see what happens."

He notes that neither he nor Franklin were particularly excited by her impromptu performance, which included the standard "How High the Moon."

Carter says, "It was great for public consumption right then and there, but for it to be documented, well, we both agree that we need to get into the studio." So far, over a year and a half after the original session, that has yet to work its way into their schedules.

Carter shrugs. In the meantime, he says, he's been plenty busy. He jumped ship and signed with his former producer Yves Beauvais who moved from Atlantic to Columbia. The saxophonist is currently working on a new album of ballads with strings, tentatively titled "Gardenias for Lady Day." And last fall Carter garnered rave reviews for his appearance with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in the "Concerto for Saxophones and Orchestra" written specifically for him by composer Roberto Sierra.

"It was a bonus and a half hearing from season-ticket patrons that they had never seen the orchestra smile so much during a performance," says Carter, who impressed Sierra when he toured as guest saxophonist with Kathleen Battle. "There was a cross section of my life in the audience. But for those of my old friends who didn't want to go to the symphony, my organ trio played afterward at Baker's."

At Yoshi's, Carter's organ trio rendezvous with Murray -- one of the most successful jazz artists to emerge from the Berkeley public school music program -- will be special. They shared a date at the Blue Note in New York last May.

"It was an amazing week," recalls Murray, dressed from head to foot in white, at the recent annual conference of the International Association for Jazz Educators in Toronto. "It's easy to play with James."

Murray, who also appears on the Detroit project, met Carter in Detroit at a World Saxophone Quartet show when he was kid. "James is a born mimic. I remember him. He could hear a fart and play the exact same sound back on his horn."

Sax fun at yoshi's

As for what to expect at Yoshi's, Murray laughs. "It's gonna be cool. We're going to get up and try to blow each other's heads off. What else can you do for just clean fun?"

Carter's reply? "There won't be a dull moment." He laughs and recalls exactly when he saw Murray perform for the first time. "It was November 1982 at the Detroit Institute of Arts. I went with a teacher who had lots of World Saxophone Quartet albums. I was wondering if the group would be able to do live what they did on record. Whoa! It was a total freak-on. It's the first time I saw four saxes holding it down sans rhythm section." In a high-pitched cartoon voice, Carter channels the enthusiasm of his youth: "Whoa, whoa, look at those cats go, yeah, yeah."

Murray and Carter first shared a stage seven years later, both as subs in the Mingus Big Band's weekly gig at the Fez in New York. "That was one of those little treats you sometimes get. Since then, David has been like a big bro' to me. I always give guys like him thanks because they paved the way for me."

The saxophone siblings -- both powerful, furious and funny in their honkings and long-winded torrents of melody -- have fun, Carter says. "I love going through the changes with him in a piece. We go esoteric one minute, then turn, flip everyone the bird, and hit." He barks like a dog. "It's especially cool when people in the audience are trying to breathe with us. We've actually had people pass out in front of us as they tried to hold the notes vicariously. "

Carter keeps a cool demeanor throughout the conversation yet also gets animated easily, in a way similar to how he zestfully commands the stage. In concert, his reed voices -- on soprano, tenor, baritone and bass saxophones and bass clarinet -- exhilarate. He blows train-speeding roars, whistle-stop yelps, foghorn blasts. He fractures melodies into snippets, alludes to well-known tunes amid a torrential downpour of notes, then muses into a dreamy lyricism. He's in your face, grabbing you by the lapels and challenging you to listen. He even surprises

himself, wincing when he unexpectedly hits a high note.

Brash youngster

When Carter arrived on the jazz scene in the '90s, he was viewed as a brash youngster champing at the bit to burst out of the gate with his saxophones. Having just turned 34, has life as a soloist and band leader changed since he was in his 20s?

"Well, I still feel the same way, but I'm able to use all the different shapes and forms in my playing better," he says as he sips a cup of tea while his cleaned plate is carried away. He explains with a melange of metaphors: "I can Ping-Pong with someone just as well as throw the shot put. And I can do everything else in between. There are more than just a couple of events in a decathlon. I want to play a piece different every time. That's a hell of a tightrope walk. But when you have different attacks in your arsenal, it's a much easier balancing act."

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