



**James Carter**  
**March 2012**

James Carter Organ Trio At the Crossroads

The organ combo reigned for several decades as jazz's meat-and-potatoes mainstay, a populist vehicle for blues drenched blowing. In the hands of James Carter, one of jazz's most sophisticated improvisers, the organ trio is no less meaty and satisfying. But his virtuosic saxophone chops elevate the organ combo to a rarefied realm defined by delectable soul, a gourmet repertoire, and consistently inspired group interplay.

Featuring the lithe and muscular keyboard work of Detroit's rising B3 star Gerard Gibbs and the propulsive drum support of veteran Motor City trap master Leonard King Jr., *At the Crossroads* marks the 10th anniversary of the multigenerational James Carter Organ Trio. A sensational follow up to the saxophonist's acclaimed Emarcy release *Caribbean Rhapsody*, Carter's 15th album documents his trio's combustible chemistry, with a Detroit-centric cast of special guests adding fuel to the celebratory fire.

"There's a reason the trio is my longest running and most cohesive band," says Carter, 42, noting that both players contribute tunes and arrangements to the trio's book. "Gerard and Leonard are consummate musicians who have shaped the music at every level. That's why I never really thought of leaving. We all have our own projects, so we go out into the world and deal with whatever musical merriment we have, and when we come back as this particular group, we bring our musical experiences back with us."

A restlessly curious artist, Carter is always on the lookout for interesting material, and *Crossroads* abounds with gems he's collected on his far-flung musical explorations. The album opens with "Oh Gee," a pungent blowing vehicle by veteran trombonist Matthew Gee that Carter picked up from a tenor sax dueling session by Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis and Johnny Griffin.

A serious student of the music, Carter tips his hat to several B3 legends, digging into Brother Jack McDuff's lowdown shuffle "Walking the Dog," while shining a welcome

**TEDKURLANDASSOCIATES**

173 Brighton Avenue, Boston, MA 02134  
phone: 617-254-0007 fax: 617-782-3577  
agents@tedkurland.com www.tedkurland.com

light on organ pioneer Sarah McLawler with a sensuous version of her torchy ballad "My Whole Life Through." It's typical and telling that Carter discovered the song on a compilation of McLawler's early-'50s recordings, and that after tracking down the octogenarian organist and vocalist they became good friends.

"I was just struck by her music," he says. "She's been a continued source of inspiration. And she's still working, playing three sets every Saturday at Chez Josephine in midtown Manhattan."

He spotlights another undersung master with three tunes featuring the great Detroit actress and vocalist Miche (pronounced Mickey) Braden, who adds a bracing jolt of energy to the party with her rousing version of "The Walking Blues," a famously risqué tune by the obscure Los Angeles belter Fluffy Hunter. Arranged by King and Gibbs, the piece features an expanded horn section and guitarist Brandon Ross's stinging lines. Trumpeter Keyon Harrold and trombonist Vincent Chandler contribute pungent solos on "Ramblin' Blues," a tune originally designed as a feature for Big Maybelle that Braden makes her own.

She first gained attention in jazz circles as a member of the all-female combo Straight Ahead, which also featured violinist Regina Carter. Braden contributed memorably to James Carter's ravishing 2003 album Gardenias for Lady Day, but she's best known for her extensive stage work at major theaters around the country, including an award-winning turn on Broadway. "She's a dominant force on the scene, somebody who neatly and majestically embodies the tradition, the sass, in one person," Carter says. "Vocally she isn't afraid to go anywhere. She's always right there alongside of us."

Carter originally conceived of Crossroads as a concept album exploring blues and gospel, but by the time the album was finished the blues predominated. Saturday night, however, always turns into Sunday morning, and the mood takes a sudden reverent turn with the stirring arrangement of Ellington's classic "Come Sunday" featuring powerful vocals by King, who arranged the song with Gibbs. Braden returns for a holy-roller rendition of the spiritual "Tis the Old Ship of Zion," a roof-raising performance powered by Eli Fountain's jangling tambourine.

Carter closes the album by returning to the secular world with a searing version of Julius Hemphill's "The Hard Blues," a tune that he played frequently in Hemphill's band for the Bill T. Jones dance theater production "Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin." Much like Crossroads, it was a setting that emphasizes the inseparable ties that bind sacred and secular African-American sounds.

**TEDKURLANDASSOCIATES**

173 Brighton Avenue, Boston, MA 02134  
phone: 617-254-0007 fax: 617-782-3577  
agents@tedkurland.com www.tedkurland.com

"I don't think there's that big of a split between blues and gospel, feel-wise," Carter says. "It's one degree away and hopefully the pieces represent that. I'm always trying to dig into the material, to take tunes out of their usual format, sprinkle water on the flowers and watch them bloom."

What makes the trio such a rewarding and enduring ensemble is the deep creative ties that bind the musicians. Carter first encountered Gibbs in the late 1980s at Detroit jam sessions and was immediately impressed by his rhythmic feel and command of the hard-bop idiom. Strongly influenced by soul-jazz B3 master Richard "Groove" Holmes, Gibbs has steadily developed a highly personal voice on the organ.

"He's grown leaps and bounds over the past 10 years, and he continues to surprise and startle as far as the potential of what the organ can really do," Carter says. "I really feel he's the person to assume the mantle because so many greats have passed on."

His relationship with King is particularly deep, as Carter describes the drummer as a formative influence. They've worked together since Carter was a teenage member of King's combo Strata Nova, an important proving ground for young Detroit players. Always willing to share his encyclopedic knowledge of music, he helped direct Carter's attention to seminal recordings. Just as importantly, King knows there's more to life than music.

"He's been able to hip me to various artists, providing stacks of albums and cassettes over the years, saying deal with this," Carter recalls. "One of the key things with Leonard is that he had open hits at his house, usually Sundays. Even if there wasn't a hit, he'd have people over and helped foster a good social vibe which I think really manifested itself in this group."

An artist long intrigued by contrasts and hybrids, Carter resists comfortable categorization. Born and raised in Detroit, he grew up surrounded by music, soaking up everything from funk and fusion to rock, soul, and various strains of acoustic jazz. He studied with his musical father, Donald Washington, and had developed enough technique by his early teens to win a scholarship to the prestigious Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp (in 1985 he became the youngest faculty member at 16) and Interlochen Center for the Arts summer program. He performed sporadic orchestral and club dates with Wynton Marsalis from December 1985 to July 1987. But it was the late trumpeter

**TEDKURLANDASSOCIATES**

173 Brighton Avenue, Boston, MA 02134  
phone: 617-254-0007 fax: 617-782-3577  
agents@tedkurland.com www.tedkurland.com

Lester Bowie who first brought Carter to New York, inviting him to perform with his New York Organ Combo.

Bowie dropped Carter's name to a number of his associates, opening some important doors. Most significantly, Carter hooked up with the great altoist and groundbreaking composer Julius Hemphill, playing an essential role on his last two saxophone sextet albums, *Fat Man and the Hard Blues* and *Five Chord Stud* (both on Black Saint). It also led to playing and recording with one of his musical heroes, the late Frank Lowe and his group the Saxemble. The Bowie connection also led to Carter's debut recording, the 1993 DWI/Columbia album *JC on the Set*, a quartet tour de force that announced the arrival of a superlative new talent equally expressive on alto, tenor, and baritone sax (though he's added several other horns over the years, most importantly soprano sax).

It might seem odd that Carter has been associated with both Marsalis and Bowie, considering that the two musicians clashed frequently over their diametrically opposed views of the jazz tradition. But Carter always finds a way into whatever musical situation he finds himself in, whether he's working with an opera diva, an iconoclastic Chicago trumpeter, or a visionary classical composer.

"You have to be totally comfortable wherever," Carter says. "I feel that music equals life, that's the way my teacher always taught me. You just can't go through life and experience it fully with a set of blinders on. I think there's tremendous beauty in cross-pollinations of music and influences."

In many ways, weaving together divergent impulses is at the heart of Carter's music. Like the late tenor sax titan Ben Webster, he's given to furious, high-velocity solos, but is just as likely to wax sentimental, using his big, bruising tone to tenderly caress a comely melody. In 2000, he released two albums simultaneously that amounted to an anti-manifesto, a proclamation that everything is fair game.

On *Chasin' the Gypsy*, a voluptuous, lyrical session partly inspired by the timeless collaboration between Django Reinhardt and Stephane Grappelli, he assembled a thrilling group with violinist Regina Carter and Brazilian guitarist Romero Lubambo, a project born out of some sound check jamming with Lubambo and Brazilian percussionist Cyro Baptista during a tour with Kathleen Battle. The groove-laden *Layin' in the Cut*, featuring James Blood Ulmer's former rhythm section with electric bassist Jamaaladeen Tacuma and drummer Grant Calvin Weston, combines harmolodic freedom with a deep reservoir

**TEDKURLANDASSOCIATES**

173 Brighton Avenue, Boston, MA 02134  
phone: 617-254-0007 fax: 617-782-3577  
agents@tedkurland.com www.tedkurland.com

of funk, and developed out of a project inspired by another legendary guitarist, Jimi Hendrix.

He's reinvented the organ combo (with 2005's *Out of Nowhere* and again in 2009 with John Medeski on *Heaven and Earth*), explored the music of alt-rock band Pavement (on 2005's *Gold Sounds*), and paid loving tribute to Billie Holiday (on 2003's *Gardenias for Lady Day*). Most recently, he applied his saxophone prowess to Puerto Rican composer Roberto Sierra's *Concerto for Saxophones and Orchestra*, the groundbreaking synthesis of European classical forms, jazz improvisation, and Afro-Caribbean rhythms on the album *Caribbean Rhapsody*. With *At the Crossroads* Carter is getting back to his musical roots, and meat and potatoes have rarely tasted so flavorful. \*

**TEDKURLANDASSOCIATES**

173 Brighton Avenue, Boston, MA 02134  
phone: 617-254-0007 fax: 617-782-3577  
agents@tedkurland.com www.tedkurland.com