

Signature Series

The James Carter Organ Trio

JAMES CARTER, Saxophone

GERARD GIBBS, Hammond B3

ALEX WHITE, Drums



Photo credit: Vincent Soyez

Thursday, January 31, 2019 at 8 pm

Dr. Bobbie Bailey & Family Performance Center, Morgan Hall

Forty-seventh Concert of the 2018-19 Concert Season



The James Carter Organ Trio

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Gerard Gibbs, Hammond B3

Alex White, Drums

Selections to be announced from the stage.

The James Carter Organ Trio

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 Motor City trap master Alex White, the multigenerational James Carter Organ Trio is now in its seventeenth year.

"There's a reason the trio is my longest running and most cohesive band," says Carter, 48, noting that both players contribute tunes and arrangements to the trio's book. "Gerard and Alex 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 the trio's performances abound with gems he's collected on his far-flung musical explorations. Whether he's digging into Brother Jack McDuff's lowdown shuffle *Walking the Dog*, or Sarah McLawler's *My Whole Life Through*, Carter is always tipping his hat and shining a light on the legends of jazz.

"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."

Deep creative ties that bind the musicians is what makes the trio such a rewarding and enduring ensemble. Carter first encountered Gerard 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 17 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 Alex White is newer since he replaced Leonard King, Jr. as the Trio’s drummer in 2012. Alex is the youngest member of the trio and it is his never-flagging propulsive energy that keeps Carter and Gibbs blazing on stage.

An artist long intrigued by contrasts and hybrids, James 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 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 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*). His 2008 *Present Tense*, for Emarcy, offered “a portrait of Carter as an exciting traditionalist. . . at his most disciplined and ambitious” (*All Music Guide*).

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.

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Stephen W. Plate, *Director, KSU School of Music*

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