

Composed

A professional musician thrives as a student in UCSC's graduate program in composition

By Scott Rappaport

This past January, the *San Francisco Chronicle* identified Sylvain Carton as the “powerhouse alto saxophone player” in one of the Bay Area’s “most provocative jazz ensembles.” It was richly deserved praise for the up-and-coming co-leader of the Mitch Marcus Quintet.

Carton, who earned a master of arts degree in music composition from UC Santa Cruz five months after the newspaper tribute, has artistic breadth that demands attention. His musical tastes run from Stravinsky and Bartok, to Mingus and Ellington... to Middle-Eastern surf-metal music. “I draw my influences from around the globe—Eastern European, African, Latin

American—a lot of traditional music,” Carton says. “I really like mixing it up.”

As if to prove the point, Carton plays, tours, and records with a mind-boggling array of bands, incorporating a wild range of musical instruments, styles, and personnel.

He is the primary composer for the Japonize Elephants, an eclectic circus-gypsy-bluegrass-klezmer-jazz ensemble

of musicians who play vibes, violin, bass, guitar, banjo, accordion, junk percussion, trumpet, flute, and saxophone. Carton also composes and arranges for Amaldecor, an Eastern European/French swing band; for Mega-Mouse, a “cinematic-rawkus-horn-driven spaghetti western” band; and for Aphrodesia, a 10-piece Afrobeat orchestra.

Born 40 miles southwest

of Paris in the town of Chartres, Carton lived in France for just 24 days before moving with his parents to Salt Lake City. Over the next 18 years, his family also called Los Angeles and Statesboro, Georgia, home. Carton earned a bachelor of music degree at the Indiana University School of Music in jazz performance, studying classical saxophone and

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switching to jazz studies along the way. After spending several years playing and touring as a professional musician, he decided to return to school and enrolled in UCSC's graduate music program in 2005.

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At UCSC, Carton stretched his already extensive musical palette, learning, for example, to play the *gayageum*, an ancient 12-string Korean instrument, in order to have the ability to compose in that medium. He noted that his adviser, music professor David Evan Jones, was a critical voice in helping him develop his original work.

“Because David was also heavily involved with world music in his own writing, I felt he was better able to understand some of the concepts in my pieces,” Carton says. “He was someone I could bounce ideas off of because he understood what I was trying to go for in my compositions.”

“It was nice to return to an academic setting and to have

my ideas and work questioned by different faculty,” Carton adds. “UCSC exposed me to many new ideas and outlooks and offered me a fresh view of my work. Analyzing other people's music also helped me to better express my own ideas about music.”

Before earning his master's this past June, Carton had already been commissioned to create music for a PBS documentary, an independent film, and Oakland's Counterpointe dance company.

Since then, he's released a new album, *The Special*, with the Mitch Marcus Quintet, and he continues to play and compose for his half dozen other bands—including an extended 18-piece version of the jazz quintet called the MMQ + 13 Big Band. He also recently completed work on string arrangements for a new documentary film produced by *National Geographic*.

“I'd like to do more composing for films,” Carton says. “I want to use the skills I've gained at UCSC to continue to broaden my horizons with composition. One of the things I enjoyed most about UC Santa Cruz was meeting fellow students and professors with a multitude of interests, who combined to form a great community that inspires creativity.”

Sylvain Carton's music can be found at: sylvaincarton.com



Sylvain Carton learned to play the *gayageum*, an ancient Korean instrument, so that he could compose music for it.

PHOTOS BY JIM MACKENZIE