

## **MICHEL PORTAL** biography

Clarinet  
Bass Clarinet  
Sax  
Bandoneon

Born in 1935, the composer Michel Portal also plays the clarinet, the saxophone and the small accordion or bandonion.

A musician whom it is difficult to classify because he offers so much across a range of categories, Michel Portal is one of those extraordinary characters who is just as at home with classical works – Mozart, Brahms, Schumann, Berg – as he is with contemporary music where he has performed for Boulez, Stockhausen, Berio, Kagel and Globokar among others.

When the « Free » movement in France began, Portal became a founder member of the « New Phonic Art » group, along with the trombone player Bernard Vitet, pianist François Tusques and the drummer Sunny Murray, which based its ideas on collective improvisation, the quest for particular sounds and instant output.

He still, however continued to play the dance tunes which inspired him from his youth, popular airs (Benny Bennet, Perez Prado), music from his native Basque country and jazz from his adopted home.

In 1971 Portal set up a loose structure called the « Michel Portal Unit », which was a forum for European and American musicians to come together for free improvisation.

Since 1975 he has composed many scores for cinema and television films. He has been awarded 3 Césars (french Oscars) and one Sept d'Or (french television awards).

In the field of European jazz, Portal has a profound influence. Whether he is playing as a duet with Bernard Lubat or Martial Solal ; invited to accompany groups (Humair-Jeanneau-TeXier; Kühn-Humair-Jenny Clark) or playing as temporary partner with Jack deJohnette, Dave Liebman, Howard Johnson, John Surman, or Mino Cinelu for instance, his effect is notable. The setting can be structured or spontaneous but Portal manages to be both an activist and a reactionary.

He has a critical outlook on liberty, which is revealed less by expression than a form of acute sensitivity that has pushed Portal to break rules and clichés and set the music free. An attitude that has meant constant self-appraisal of his reputation as a classic soloist and his experiments with the contemporary music. He sees this not as something to sit back on but instead as something on which he can draw. It is this attitude that places Portal in the somewhat uncomfortable position of remaining an apprentice, always in search of emotion, of that communal link between musicians and the raw brilliance of musical act.

Francis Marmande

From A (french) Dictionary of Jazz and Jazz

Les Incontournables (Jazz, Essential Musicians)

Michel Portal holds a particular and singular place in European jazz. His reputation as a classical soloist appears to have removed any need to re-affirm his technical skill. The direct recipient of the work of great contemporary composers, Portal is not prompted by any need to be recognised. Regularly acclaimed by the musical profession of whichever genre (three French Oscars – Césars- for his work on film scores complement numerous awards in other fields), he is able to appreciate the position he holds. It is this that affords him the opportunity to embark with renewed vigour on further improvisation, which disturbs hitherto fixed ideas. An improvisation, which does not rule out either uncertainty or vehemence. On long musical journeys, strident lyricism, capricious invention, feelings of fantasy as well as cheerful melody create tension.

By a stubborn search for that inner soul or the explosion of rhythm, Portal seems to live each musical mile as if bringing the accent back into play. It seems as if he has to push his own musical soul to its very limits, as well as the rules of contribution by other players. In doing so he can achieve exceptional high points, not only in moments of passion but also when tragic cries sound forth.

The stage setting is nevertheless his favourite place. It is only for the records (notable Déjarne Solo and Turbulence) that he reserves his tableaux, his solo arrangements of carefully positioned figures and fixed commentaries that relate to his off stage agitation. Jazz is not for him a style among many. It is an overwhelming way of feeling music, reflecting on other musical experiences, to spring surprises on them and finally to re-invent them.

Translated from Francis Marmande

Dictionary of Jazz (Pub. Robert Laffont)

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