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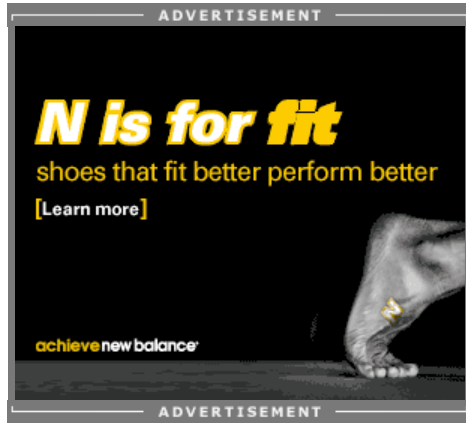
CLASSICAL MUSIC  
**Squeezed fresh music**

■ No polka king, Rüdiger Carl experiments expressively with the humble accordion.

By Josef Woodard, Special to The Times

Although it may not register high on most cultural calendars, one Los Angeles debut next weekend will have an offbeat distinction: In a small but fervent corner of the musical cosmos — European free improvisation — Germany's Rüdiger Carl qualifies as a bona fide celebrity because of his prowess on the accordion.

Yes, the accordion. The instrument that for some evokes folklore, polkas, wedding music and, occasionally, jazz and classical tunes has a much richer tradition than stereotypes allow. Carl also plays clarinet and was known as a tenor saxophonist earlier in his career, but his most notable contribution to the music world is his work as one of its most literate and liberated squeeze-boxers. He brings to the job painterly anarchy, melodic sweetness, humor and an almost ascetic belief in spontaneous musical impulse.



Born in 1944 in what was then East Prussia and based in Frankfurt for many years, Carl spoke by phone recently from his in-laws' house in the Black Forest. When asked if he is essentially a subversive accordionist, the confident yet self-effacing Carl laughed and replied, "Yeah, maybe this is my excuse for this thing I have on my knees."

Despite his reputation as one of the hipper accordionists around, his relationship with the instrument has been circuitous. He has denied it, rediscovered it and finally made peace with the instrument that, he said, "I've had around me all my life, more or less. I started very early, but I just fooled around on it. I never really played it 100% properly."

Properly? Perhaps not. Expressively, and experimentally? His champions would answer resoundingly in the affirmative. As part of the Schindler House's summertime experimental art-music series known as "sound.," Carl will give a solo accordion concert Friday. The following night, he'll play clarinet in collaboration with L.A. artist Raymond Pettibon on voice and megaphone.

Part of what makes Carl so important is the difficulty of pinpointing his place on the musical map. He is an established fixture in the circle of European musicians for whom improvisation has been a central concern and in vocabularies distinct from American-style jazz. He has also collaborated with many significant figures in that world, including tenor saxist Peter Brotzmann, Hans Reichl (inventor of the peculiar, bowed "daxophone"), pianist Irene Schweitzer and bassist Joelle Leandre, with whom Carl and Portuguese violinist Carlos Zingaro formed the engaging Canvas Trio in the early '90s.

Although such players' recordings tend to wind up in jazz bins, their music really belongs to neither the jazz nor contemporary classical scenes but to some self-defined, ambiguous other world. And that's the way they like it. Carl has recorded several albums for the improv-oriented German label Free Music Production (FMP), including his dazzling 1997 "Solo" (on accordion and clarinet) and the three-CD set "Book, Virtual COWWS" from 1998. That project presents a kind of twofold self-portrait of a restless artist. The two discs of "Book" cull countless bits from his personal history over the decades, literally pieced together from tapes he found while cleaning his studio. The "Virtual COWWS" disc is a swan song for his 10-year project the COWWS quintet, which improvised not freely but according to various schemes of Carl's. In this case, each musician recorded his part on a separate track without hearing the other musicians. The combined effect is one of detachment and abstraction. But on an emotional level, it is also surprisingly engaging.

That's Carl's characteristic touch: mixing up intellectual cool and fleeting sentimental moods. It's not unusual to hear him swerving from purely dissonant abstraction to snippets of German folk tunes or jazz standards, without blinking or apology. Reviewing "Solo" in Down Beat magazine, critic Paul de Barros called Carl "an investigative and tenacious player who also manages to sound warm."

A sentimental connection is at the core of his musical being. A concertina was Carl's first "free reed" instrument (the general family of accordions). He took it up when he was 4.

"I got it from my grandma," he recalled, "who could play some stuff to make people dance in the kitchen. She showed me how to play on the instrument. When I was 7 or 8, I got my first [real] accordion, with 36 bass buttons on the left side."

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But, he said, "When I was 15 and rock 'n' roll times marched in, I really didn't feel like staying in the shadows."

Adolescence has a sure way of stirring awareness of what's cool and what isn't. Accordion wasn't. So Carl, inspired by the unorthodox jazz horn player Rahsaan Roland Kirk, began exploring other instruments, including the traverse flute. Later, he landed on the saxophone.

It was as a tenor saxophonist that the young Carl mainly performed with a venturesome improvisational ensemble known as the Globe Unity Orchestra, led by its founder, pianist Alexander Schlippenbach. Then, at a party in the early '70s, he happened on a concertina and found his old technique undiminished. Shortly afterward, he was asked to write an accordion tune for a municipal festival in Germany, in honor of the town's strong history with bandoneon orchestras (bandoneon being a German button accordion that migrated to Argentina and became the instrument of choice in tango), and once he'd recorded on the concertina for a Globe Unity Orchestra album, his career as an accordionist was reborn.

"From that time on," he said, "I just took [the concertina] with me when I had to play a gig somewhere. I would just pull it out and try to do something. It took me 12 years or more before I thought, 'Why fool around with an instrument that I know quite well? I should check out some better machines.' That was it. Now, I'm on the big machine, exploring the possibilities."

He shrugs off any suggestion that he's trying to push the envelope of the accordion's vocabulary.

"I try to find new potential for my own satisfaction," he said, "by using whatever I am playing. It's not like I'm thinking about the accordion world and feeling that I have to put something on top of that. That is not my perspective."

As an accordionist, he said, "I'm not working every day to find things out. Rather, the accordion stays untouched until I go to have a gig, and then I play it for one or two days. That's how I use it. I work on the clarinet every day. I have to. Otherwise, nothing comes out. But the accordion just stays put."

Ever on the lookout for musicians and cohorts who can adapt well to improvisational settings — both within and outside the traditional musical world — Carl has worked with visual artists before, including Mayo Thompson, who also plays in the group the Red Krayola. The Pettibon connection came about after Carl approached Pettibon when the artist was the recipient of a prize presented by the Freunde des Museum in Cologne, Germany. A subsequent performance in Cologne featuring Carl's Frankfurter trio, Blank, was recorded for a short CD called "Blank Meets Pettibon." Last spring, the men performed at the Podewil, an arts center in the former East Berlin, and the Schindler House pairing will be their third collaboration. Pettibon, Carl said, "has such a good instinct to know, precisely, where to drop his things where they should be."

When it comes to improvisation, Carl has his own ideas about the evolution of the art form — along with concerns about the threat of "laziness" on the part of musicians who proudly forgo any planning.

"Just improvising is not enough," he said. At some point, "I started to think that there really is work which you have to do. You can't just sit there and change partners and say that improvisation is a rich thing."

He has been known to devise strategies and scores to organize improvisations, creating modules that will steer a piece's structure but always striving to maintain a free spirit. A fragment of "Singin' in the Rain," "I Feel Pretty" or a tune by jazz legend Thelonious Monk may also turn up unannounced.

Thirty-five years into his professional musical life, Carl likes the idea of reconciling the abstract and the kitschy with his own musical past, present and future.

"I have no problems in picking up things from very long ago," he said.

"They will not beat each other up. As far as I can see, I can live in peace with all the different corners that I was in. I have no problems if they show up in some unexpected contexts."

The unexpected context is part of what Carl lives for. Next up: Rüdiger Carl goes West Hollywood.

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