

INNERVIEWS: MUSIC WITHOUT BORDERS

EXTRAORDINARY CONVERSATIONS WITH EXTRAORDINARY MUSICIANS

Anil Prasad

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For Grace, Devin and Mimi

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Barry Cleveland at *Guitar Player* and Paul Hartman at *Dirty Linen* gave me tremendous opportunities to cover world-class musicians for their magazines, helping create a network of connections that sustains to this day. A few of those key relationships include Rob Ayling, Lori Hehr, Tina Pelikan, and Mike Wilpizeski—wonderful publicists and label people who saw *Innerviews'* potential since the early days and continue to offer access to remarkable artists.

Several musicians, including Bill Laswell, David Sylvian, David Torn, McCoy Tyner, and Victor Wooten, have provided significant words of wisdom and support that mean a lot to me. I'm also honored that Victor took time out from his busy schedule to contribute the foreword to this book. In addition, I wish to thank Andy Rinehart for his visual design expertise reflected in the book cover and the site's look and feel, as well as Arkadyuti Basu, who is responsible for the superb layout of the interior pages.

Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to all of the extraordinary artists who have spoken to me for being so generous with their time and thoughts.

FOREWORD

As a professional musician, I am asked to do many interviews. Speaking for myself, as well as other public figures, we are often reluctant to grant interviews because we know our words may not be printed as we said them. Publicity is a must, which means interviews are a must, but when our words are misrepresented, it leaves the reader with a misguided impression of the artist, and leaves the artist upset and disappointed. This is a drag for all involved.

Back in 1996, I was contacted by a guy with an unusual name asking to interview me for an online magazine—one I'd never heard of. Because I was releasing my first solo CD, I needed all the help I could get. So I reluctantly agreed to be interviewed by Anil Prasad for *Innerviews*.

When I spoke with Anil, I was prepared to answer all of the usual questions like “Who are your influences?” “When did you start playing?” and “What’s in your CD player right now?” But to my surprise, the first question I was asked was about a movie soundtrack I had worked on. It was the first soundtrack I’d ever done and I still don’t know how Anil knew about it—no-one else did. The guy with the funny name had done his homework. I was immediately impressed.

The interview got better and better as it went along. Anil asked insightful questions that allowed me to speak about music and life as I see them. He listened intently to my answers and seemed to really care about

what I was saying. That made me feel comfortable and allowed me to open up and feel free with my replies.

When I was sent the article, I was amazed that such care had been taken to write my answers as I expressed them, not as he wanted them to be. He wanted to make sure the reader completely understood me. The interview was titled “If people were more like music...” I liked that. “This is not your typical interviewer,” I thought. I was happy about that too.

I liked this guy, but I thought that it was possibly a fluke. Maybe it was luck and he’d only done one good interview. I went to his website and read more of his work. I was stunned. I quickly found out that Anil is at the top of his field. He is an artist who interviews other artists.

To me, Anil is like a great musician. The way he expresses himself through his own art—his writing—causes readers to feel inspired, as if we’ve learned about ourselves, as well as the subject of the interview. After reading Anil’s work, we readers find ourselves better off than when we started. Anil executes beautifully what we musicians are continually trying to do.

I could go on telling you about Mr. Prasad—telling you why the first interview I did with him is still my favorite to date, why other interviewers should take note of the guy with the strange name, and why you should definitely read his work. But I don’t have to do that. I know you will find out for yourself as you thumb through the pages of this book.

Enjoy,
Victor L. Wooten

INTRODUCTION

When the *Innerviews* website first launched in 1994, it was purely an experimental endeavor. I was writing for various print newspapers and magazines for five years and decided to teach myself how to create a simple webpage by coding a few of my interviews into HTML. For the hell of it, I uploaded them to a personal web account and advertised their existence on several music newsgroups. I thought perhaps a few dozen people might be interested in reading some of the pieces on this new frontier.

Little did I know what would unfold soon after. Hundreds of people flocked to the interviews in the first few days, and that turned into thousands in the weeks that followed. Soon my inbox was filled with messages from people worldwide radiating positivity about the work and asking when I'd post more.

It didn't take long to realize I was onto something. I started coding like crazy and posted several dozen of my articles and packaged them together as *Innerviews*. A large and devoted following for the pieces emerged, and soon, what was once an outpost for my print interviews turned into a magnet for artists, labels and publicists seeking coverage exclusive to the site.

Innerviews' focus on artists with expansive creative mindsets was clearly speaking to an underserved demographic in the world of music journalism: the thinking listener for whom music isn't just aural wallpaper or a lifestyle accompaniment, but rather a living, breathing, essential part

of everyday existence. After receiving thousands of pieces of feedback over the years, I'm thrilled to conclude that *Innerviews'* readers are just like me.

If you're holding this book in your hands, chances are you accept that while music is a self-standing statement, you also have a desire to gain some insight into the thoughts, processes and perceptions that drive an artist's work. You also share my belief that those capable of making such profound music are probably people who have worthy ideas to offer in myriad other areas as well. People like us are not obsessed with celebrity. Rather, we see relationships between what the musicians do and what we do, regardless of our occupation and other interests. Their art, and therefore their thinking, have influenced us deeply and we have a thirst for knowledge on how their principles and perspectives can be applied to other areas of our lives.

This viewpoint means we're rarely going to find what we want in typical music magazines. With a handful of exceptions, depth has all but disappeared from mainstream music journalism. Further, a preoccupation with meaningless trivia, soulless sales data and writing that's more about the writer than the artists seems to dominate. The art of getting musicians to delve deep into their souls to discuss topics that really matter to them is infrequently practiced these days.

Most artists who agree to an *Innerviews* conversation understand what they're getting into. They know we're going to talk for an extended period of time, that we'll broach substantial topics, and that they'll be given as much space as they need to articulate their thoughts. They're also aware that I won't edit what they say into one- or two-line pre-digested, out-of-context sound bites. As a result, it takes a certain type of person to take part in the process. While the artists covered in *Innerviews* may make very different music, they possess a common desire to provide their observations and analyses in a context free of filters and distorted lenses.

There is a certain irony in publishing a book devoted to music journalism instincts that originated on the Web. However, it is a response to many readers who have asked for a version of *Innerviews* they can reach for and hold in their hands. It's a permanent snapshot of a moment in time

and captures many of my favorite interviews to date. And I admit, it was a highly satisfying process to make such a significant leap into the print universe while retaining the breadth and depth of the online articles.

By far the most important thing to emerge from *Innerviews* is the network of friendships that has evolved and endured since it debuted. The site truly changed my life. Its readership and the artists covered span the globe and represent a multitude of languages, cultures, generations, and genres. No matter where I go in the world, there are always *Innerviews* enthusiasts interested in hanging out, talking music, showing me around their cities, and introducing my ears to fresh, new sounds.

I consider each and every *Innerviews* reader a kindred spirit. Thanks for investing your time, energy and enthusiasm in the site and this book. I welcome your feedback and thoughts. You know where you can always find me.

Anil Prasad
innerviews.org



JON ANDERSON

HARMONIC ENGAGEMENT

UNQUESTIONABLY, JON ANDERSON is one of the most unique and instantly recognizable artists in rock history. His soaring alto-tenor vocals and lyrics steeped in mysticism and myriad spiritual traditions are defining elements of his work with progressive rock goliaths Yes and his storied solo career. Yes' dynamic, extended-length pieces marked by symphonic- and classical music-influenced works on albums such as 1971's *Fragile* and 1972's *Close to the Edge* are considered pillars of the '70s musical pantheon. Adored by millions of fans and reviled by critics, Yes is a band that largely defined its own musical terms, earning massive success despite a career marked by uncompromising sonic stances.

Having said that, Yes has also ventured into hit-making territory, characterized by the worldwide 1983 smash album *90125*, as well as 1987's *Big Generator* and 1997's *Open Your Eyes*. While Anderson enjoyed the wave of visibility and larger-than-life rock star presence he had during those periods, he also endured his share of angst. With Yes pursuing pop-focused arrangements that went against his musically adventurous instincts, Anderson found his interest in the band wax and wane. It's a key reason why Anderson has jumped in and out of Yes' many line-ups on several occasions.

At his best, Anderson is capable of scaling monumental musical heights in both collaborative and solo contexts. As part of Yes, he's worked with combinations of guitarists Steve Howe, Trevor Rabin and Peter Banks; keyboardists Rick Wakeman and Patrick Moraz; and drummers Bill

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Bruford and Alan White to create timeless compositions. On his own, albums such as 1976's *Olias of Sunhollow*, 1982's *Animation* and 1996's *Toltec*, also showcased ambitious, artful songcraft situated within expansive instrumental, pop and world music contexts. Those leanings also extended into his other partnerships with the likes of Vangelis, Kitaro, Tangerine Dream, and Mike Oldfield.

Since 2004, Anderson has been criss-crossing the globe performing Yes and solo works as a one-man show. With a MIDI-equipped guitar hooked up to various guitar synthesizers and keyboards in tow, he's able to create impressive renderings and recastings of his oeuvre, and connect with audiences as a storyteller in more intimate settings than Yes' arena outings. Anderson is enjoying the freedom and flexibility of the format so much that it is now a core component of his career for the long term.

Provide some insight into your creative process.

I'll often pick up a guitar and just start jamming away on it while I'm singing. I'll record everything on a cassette and then put it to one side and look back at it later. When I'm putting together a song, I'll typically go back to four or five of those cassettes and pick out maybe 10 ideas and bring them to fruition. The cassettes I use could be from yesterday or five or 10 years ago. Writing lyrics is always a fascinating game to play. I'm always asking myself questions including "What are you going to write about and why are you going to write it? What does it really mean to you? And what will it convey to an audience?" I'm always dancing through those concerns when I put words together.

Song ideas can come from anywhere. One of my recent songs called "The Buddha Song" came about in response to driving around and hearing songs on Christian radio that say "Jesus is great, Jesus is love, Jesus is this, and Jesus is that." I wondered if there's a guy in China driving around hearing "Buddha is great, Buddha is God" and if there was a guy in India

hearing “Krishna is God.” So, I wrote “The Buddha Song” which talks about thanking Buddha, Mohammed, Krishna, as well as Jesus for all they’ve contributed. They were the risen masters and I feel people should embrace the idea that these different religions are related to the same God. The message is the same as songs I wrote for the first Yes album: People should embrace the idea that we are all one, and embracing that idea would help us all in our daily struggles. That’s a continual thread in my work.

What can you tell me about how you channel those philosophical and spiritual perspectives when you write?

I’m still fine-tuning the first song I wrote 35 years ago, which was probably “Time and a Word.” All of the songs are the same song in a way. They’re about the search for compatibility with life’s adventures, disciplines, and ups and downs. Sometimes my songs reflect what’s specifically happening around us too. “The Buddha Song” has a line that goes “The balance of the Earth is in the sand” which refers to oil and those who are trying to convert people of the world into incredibly unrealistic positions of global control and forgetting the spirituality of human consciousness. These people say “We need oil and energy, and love and peace will come later.” That has never worked and never will. I’m on the opposite end of the spectrum and I try to communicate ideas that are positive and focused on spiritual growth. I think we’ve forgotten a lot about who we are. At our core, we are tribal people and we should all relate to one another.

Describe your take on spirituality for me.

It came out of the hippie world of peace, love and enlightenment. Everyone felt there was going to be a Golden Age to come and I was really entrenched in that idea. The Golden Age represented a sense of awareness and the raising of consciousness around the world, which I feel

is slowly happening, unbeknownst to most of us. You see it represented in the harmonic convergence that took place in 1987, which was related to Mayan beliefs. Things like the Solidarity movement of 1988 and the Berlin Wall coming down in 1989 followed from it. However, successive events like these also created the ideology that CNN is reporting exactly what's going on, when in fact it only represents a minute understanding of the world. The media is just a tiny part of life that thinks it's in total control of the world, but isn't. There are millions of people worldwide who don't think about the media perspective and instead honor the gods of the trees, the ocean, the clouds, and the flowers. They're honoring the Devis world as a normal part of life, especially in places like Thailand and Malaysia.

I got into these ideas when I was very fortunate to become successful with Yes in the late '60s and the beginning of the '70s. I would read more about these aspects of life and the other worlds that surround us. I decided that if I was going to have some success and make connections with other people, I should know what other people think about the universe. So, I was able to write songs which were more about the search, the path and the seeker, instead of the pop song about love won and love lost. I wasn't singing the blues because I didn't have them. I was influenced by Herman Hesse's writings about the search for spirituality beyond the borders of society. As a result, I was singing about very specific quests related to finding the path that was close to the edge of realization.

Do you read music?

No, I wish I did. That would be fun. I'm studying music all the time. I'm studying "The Rite of Spring" at the moment. I got into both Stravinsky and Sibelius in the late '60s. They took my mind apart. How did they do that? What were they thinking? How did they consider all of these elements? It's very interesting to contemplate. Stravinsky in particular was an incredibly technical and visual musician who really inspired me.

Despite the fact that you don't read music, you've been responsible for writing some very complex compositions. How do you go about translating and communicating your ideas to the virtuoso musicians in Yes?

Typically, I sing my ideas and they play them back on their instruments. There's a lot of vocalization and the other guys will sing stuff back to me as well. With Yes, I'm always listening carefully to everyone all the time during soundchecks for ideas that can create a setting for a song I'm working on. It's as though I always feel a little bit ahead of the game initially. I'll come up with an idea and feel it should be really crazy in the middle, but I know we'll get there later, so I try to work with the guys on the initial part first. The best approach is when there's no ego around and no-one is saying "You can't do that because it's my song." At our best, it was about what was happening in the moment.

The way it works is I might hear Steve Howe playing something and I'll go up to him and say "Can you play that in this key? I've got this song I want to sing and you're playing a line that works exactly with it, so let's go there." He'll then play some chords and I'll say "Yeah, that's perfect." Suddenly, we'll have three chords to build on. I was able to work with Rick Wakeman in a similarly open way too. Meanwhile, Chris Squire and Alan White might be there and I'll say "This is where we're at with the song" and they'll start playing along and building up the piece. Chris' basslines are remarkable because he doesn't just plod on. He has an incredible musical ear that helped move the songs along. The same held true for Bill Bruford and Alan White. Together, Yes' band members offered an incredible spectrum of sound to choose from at any given moment.

The classic 1971-1974 era represented a creative peak for Yes. Describe the group dynamics that enabled such remarkable music to emerge.

During its history, the members of Yes grew up, grew into their own

families, grew into different people, and became crazier, wilder, quieter, and more somber depending on the person, and at various periods, grew apart as a band. But during that period when we were in our mid- to late-twenties, we were so clear and innocent. The world wasn't weighing down on our shoulders. So when we did *Fragile* and *Close to the Edge*, we were still innocents and it's what allowed us to create the great pieces of music on those albums. The structure of *Close to the Edge* as an album is right on the money and it's so well-recorded. It's because we found harmony as a band.

I had such a strong belief in the quality and meaning of our music. With *Tales from Topographic Oceans*, I said "We have to go on tour and play the whole album, plus 'Close to the Edge.'" We did five 20-minute pieces of music for a whole tour and that was either total madness or sticking to our principles. The idea was "This is who we are. Dig it for what it is." A quarter century later, we're still able to play this music and it still works. It's because the music wasn't a commercial thing. Throughout that period, I thought of myself as someone who was out there learning stuff. I was immersed in the idea that touring was designed for us to learn about where we're going next and to get a better understanding of why we make music. It was a great experience and very special to be part of Yes at that stage.

Yes is also famous for disputes and politics, yet that friction has yielded some timeless music. Does tension serve as a creative catalyst for the group?

Chris Squire has always said that's important. He believes you need friction to create the diverse music of Yes. I agree to a certain extent, but I believe there also has to be collective harmony, fun and a genuine appreciation of each other to make the best Yes music. The media always looks at Yes and says "Why do you keep changing musicians? There's always so much friction and bad vibes." Well, I don't believe there's any point in going on with a line-up and making music if two or three of the guys are just jiving away. Everyone has to be in top form, touching the same metal and feeling that spark. I think the best balance is 80 percent having a good time and 20

percent creative friction in which you're bouncing ideas off each other.

Friction has also led to comical periods in Yes. In the '80s, we had the experience of being number one with "Owner of a Lonely Heart" around the world. It was a very funny place to be. During that tour, I remember seeing the film *Spinal Tap* and realized that Yes had actually become Spinal Tap at that point. I thought some of the situations and personality stuff mirrored what we were going through. We were superstars, yet all I could think about was "How can I get everyone back to doing real Yes music?" But they were all into being this big band. I understood where they were coming from and went through that experience before I departed from that situation and pursued other avenues.

Describe your philosophy as a bandleader.

A good bandleader empowers the musicians and lets everybody get on with it. However, if there is a blank page, I'll fill it in. If there is a lot of creative energy, I'll help mold it together by listening to everyone—not just one person. In a way, I'm helping to put a jigsaw puzzle together, but I have to have all the pieces. I need the right people to help construct something valuable. I admit there have been times where I've been over-dominant and megalomaniacal. I'd say "It's gotta be done this way and this way only." Sometimes that worked and sometimes it didn't. Someone once asked Steve Martin what he thought of his body of work. He said "Fifty percent of what I've done was really good and 50 percent wasn't." The same holds true for me. In the earlier days, maybe I didn't understand that, but now I recognize it and I function more harmoniously as a singer-songwriter-creator in Yes and other situations.

You've worked with three extraordinary guitarists and writers in Yes: Peter Banks, Steve Howe and Trevor Rabin. Contrast your experiences with them.

Peter was our first guitarist when we formed in 1968. He came out

of the Pete Townsend school and was very free-form. He would never play the same thing twice and was very radical at times. Most of the time it worked, but when the band started to get more structurally-minded, it seemed like we needed someone who could play something the same way two nights in a row. Steve Howe walked right in at that point in 1970. He was very much into composition and would remember things we did the day before and play them exactly the same way the next day. He'd also bring in several different guitars, resulting in many new colors and textures. Steve and I wrote a lot together in the '70s and came up with some great pieces for *Fragile* and *Close to the Edge*. I left Yes after a period of disharmony in 1979 and rejoined in 1983 with Trevor Rabin in the group. Directing Trevor was an impossibility because when I returned, all the music had already been written for the big hit album *90125*. So I walked in, provided some input into the tunes and sang over these really great structures. Trevor was a remarkable and soulful technician of the guitar. He was the big rock star and very much the opposite of Steve, who has a more gentle approach overall.

How would you compare the experience of performing your one-man shows versus playing with Yes?

Being onstage with Yes is like being part of an enormous machine. Everybody knows exactly what everybody is supposed to play. We all hear when a note is wrong and give each other that quick look when it happens. With Yes, everything has to be right on. You can't let go of your position in the band. You're one of the poles holding up the tent. Once you've rehearsed the show and you go on tour, it's like riding a wonderful wave of incredible music. The musicianship of Steve Howe, Chris Squire, Alan White, and Rick Wakeman is incredible. I feel like I'm in the middle of this rolling energy and it gets better and better as each gig goes along and we eventually hit a point within about 10 days in which it stays like that for the rest of the tour. It really is an electric feeling that's very highly charged.

Being onstage by yourself is much more meditative in contrast. I know exactly what I'm going to play and I know how I'm going to do it, but if I screw up, I screw up. I'll forget a word or verse here and there, but the situation is so relaxed and the audience is totally with me, so when I make a mistake, it's fun. Sometimes I try to experiment with musical ideas and pursue extended instrumental passages as a solo artist, but it's a delicate thing to know when it's time to return to the song. Often, I can sense what the audience is thinking at times because we've all grown up together over the years and realize "Okay, it's time to get back to the song." [laughs]

I understand you feel your best work is ahead of you as you enter your sixties and seventies. Tell me about that philosophy.

These days, I say to myself "I must get this done. I must get started on that. I must get moving on this." I'm really digging into my backlog to get a lot of projects finished. I really feel like there's always more to be done. It's still all about exploration for me. I think the important lesson for musicians to understand is that if they keep making music, something, somewhere will happen. Someone along the line will help you. Even for someone like me, the days of ringing up a record company and saying "I want an advance. I want this number of points in the deal" are over. That only holds true for the Madonnas and Elton Johns of the world. The rest of us out here have to simply focus on creativity and making music.

I've been very fortunate to realize that everything is transitional and that meditation is part of the transition into being in harmony with the higher self—the higher register of who you're becoming in your next life. Who knows what will happen? It's not for us to know. You just experiment and jump into it. That holds for music too. As a musician, you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. You could be just one hit song away from a world tour doing big shows. But is it something you would want to do again if it was presented? I don't know. All I know is I'm enjoying where I am and where I'm going.

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What are some of the most significant musical moments in your life that have influenced your journey as an artist?

I think the first one was when I heard Elgar's "Nimrod" from *The Enigma Variations* at age five. It's as if the music went right through my whole body. I remember leaning up against the speaker and having it take me on this incredibly uplifting journey. Another was when I saw Rahsaan Roland Kirk and Jimi Hendrix playing together at a London jazz club in 1968. The spontaneous combustion of energy and the heights of free-form exploration they hit were just so inspiring. Another key moment was when Yes was halfway through recording *Close to the Edge* and I realized how creative and special the music was. We had worked into the wee hours. I was exhausted, but I decided to walk home from the studio. I saw the sun come up and at that moment I said to myself "I think I can officially call myself a musician now. I'm not just the singer in the band." By the time I got home, I was in tears. I opened up my passport and wrote "musician" on the page where you were supposed to describe your occupation. I had left it blank up until that point.

December 2005



BJÖRK

CHANNELING THUNDERSTORMS

FOR BJÖRK, POP MUSIC'S BOUNDARIES are infinitely elastic. Even as one of the music world's most popular and iconic figures, the Icelandic singer-songwriter and aural provocateur remains unafraid of challenging the status quo. Her 2004 album *Medulla* provided ample evidence of her resolve to continue nurturing her creative impulses.

Medulla, built almost exclusively from human voices without resorting to a cappella clichés, is among the more intriguing albums to emerge from the pop sphere. But it proved a difficult record to birth. While certain of her desire to abandon conventional instrumentation for it, Björk wasn't entirely sure how that idea would manifest itself until the album was in its final stages. She searched for inspiration across 18 different recording locations, including New York, Iceland, Venice, and the Canary Islands. During each stop, Björk explored a multitude of moods and voices via contributors such as Faith No More frontman Mike Patton, veteran U.K. singer-songwriter Robert Wyatt, Inuit throat singer Tanya Tagaq Gillis, human beatbox Rahzel, and the Icelandic and London Choirs. Epic production and sonic manipulation followed, resulting in an atmospheric, minimalist and fascinating effort.

Loosely speaking, the word "medulla" refers to the inner part of an animal or plant structure. It's a word Björk uses to portray the idea that the album represents her creative essence in its purest form. That essence first revealed itself when she sang and studied classical piano during her elementary school years in Reykjavik. One of her teachers was so impressed

with her prodigious talent that she submitted a cassette of her crooning Tina Charles' "I Love to Love" to Iceland's Radio One. After hearing the track, a local label came calling and Björk went on to record and release her 1977 self-titled first album at the age of 11. The record included covers of pop songs by artists such as The Beatles and Stevie Wonder. It became a major hit in Iceland and helped cement Björk's desire to pursue music as a full-time endeavor.

During the late '70s to mid-'80s, Björk delved into punk and post-punk territory with a variety of Icelandic bands before hitting the international stage in 1987 as one of the lead vocalists of The Sugarcubes. The appealingly eccentric avant-pop act remains the biggest group to ever emerge from Iceland. Internal band tensions contributed to The Sugarcubes' demise in 1992, but its international profile helped propel Björk's solo career when she released *Debut*, her edgy, playful dance-oriented effort in 1993.

Instead of following trends for her next records, Björk chose to follow her muse. Her 1995 album *Post* refined *Debut's* sound with a more adventurous electronica approach that also incorporated orchestral arrangements. *Homogenic*, released in 1997, was a wildly experimental disc that offered a swirling mix of dark, electronic textures and string quartet arrangements. Taking a step back from *Homogenic's* confrontational sound, Björk situated her eclectic songs within more lush, intimate and introspective arrangements for 2001's *Vespertine*. Clearly, predictability and linearity are not Björk's strong suits. Her fans wouldn't have it any other way.

How did knowing you were going to attempt an all-vocal album affect how you wrote material for it?

I used different methods for every song. A few years ago, I started getting really obsessed with anything vocal and began losing interest in instruments. I started hoping I could do a vocals-only album, but I wasn't sure that was even possible until right at the very end of making the album when it all came together. Pretty early on, I realized that if I was going

to do a whole album of vocals, the songs would have to be very different from each other in order for the album not to be flat. There were some songs where I wrote the structure and everything else on keyboards and then replaced those parts with vocals. A lot of the songs were written with just my vocals or with the voice of a particular singer in mind. The idea was to use different textures so you could feel that each song was living in a different place. I didn't want it to sound like a computer program was sort of lulling throughout the whole album. I really went out of my way to pursue a different work ethic for each song.

You threw out a lot of your lyric-writing conventions when putting Medulla together. Tell me how you went about crafting lyrics for it.

This album in a lot of ways goes back to a place I was in when I was 18 or 19 years old. I was in a band and was being quite intuitive and singing along with things without analyzing what I was doing. I was maybe saying a lot of words that didn't naturally make sense to me, but represented a sort of flow of consciousness that was just kind of improvised. For my last album, *Vespertine*, I took things as far as I could in that the lyric-writing was almost scientific. I wanted that album to be about being introverted and anti-social and capturing that feeling of being underneath your duvet in your bed and creating a magical world under your pillow. I was asking myself "How can I write songs about that?" back then. I was really excited to not be that scientific when it came to *Medulla*. I just wanted to sing, sing, sing and be quite physical. I just let whatever came out come out and then afterwards I sat down with my librarian hat on and kind of analyzed things.

The record includes some commentary about lack of hope in the world and post-9/11 angst.

There's a little bit of that in the album. I would say about five or 10

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percent of the album is about that and the other 90 percent is about other stuff. That's almost the point of the album. The album is about celebrating all of the other stuff that isn't politics. I think life is pretty much about the other things. One moment you're driving a car. The next moment, your friend tells you that a family member has died and you're crying. Then you've missed your bus and got caught in the rain. Then you go dancing in a discotheque and are euphoric. People are out there starving, losing their jobs and winning the lotto. Life is just quite a thing, you know? [laughs] There are a lot of things going on and I think politics is maybe really not that important. I hope so.

Early in your career, you said "writing a song is like organizing an accident." Does that still hold true?

I think so. I still feel that way especially when it comes to recording music, especially on this album where there were mostly just singers. What's so great about the human voice is that you can't hide anything. If a singer is feeling shy, cold, distant or not in the mood to sing, it's better to wait and just find the right moment. Sometimes we would spend time doing other stuff that wasn't about singing at all. We'd just get drunk, go for a walk or tell a joke or do whatever stupid stuff that came to mind. Then, all of a sudden, you're ready to press the record button and do it. In that sense it's still like organizing an accident by trying to find the right moments. That's the luxury of making albums. You can't do those sorts of things when you're performing live.

How do you know when a song you've written is complete?

Usually, you can totally feel it while you're doing it. There's a really thin line between being self-indulgent and being generous. You can catch yourself singing old stuff you've sung before which can feel like repetition or not fresh. For me, the music has to have a little speck of intrigue or the

unknown. I guess I'm also probably an old school romantic in the sense that even though sometimes you write songs about dark stuff that may start at the bottom, the root of the song should be about going through the tunnel and coming out on the other side with a happy ending. I'm not too into songs that are just about self-pity or self-indulgence. I usually look at songs as little trips that show you going on your way to some other place or towards the next step.

Tell me how you go about channeling inspiration into songwriting.

It's like a thunderstorm building up inside me. Songwriting is a natural function for me. It's almost like a survival mechanism. I'm the sort of person that if I don't write a song, I get all bottled up. Say for example that tomorrow I said I'm just not going to write any more songs for some reason. Even though I said that, I would still have to write songs because if I don't, I just don't feel good. I'm not sure if I really go consciously looking for that inspiration, but believe me, I have gone out of my way over the years to try and figure out how to get that thunderstorm out of my head in a reasonably pleasant manner, if you know what I mean. [laughs]

Is there a spiritual element to that creative thunderstorm for you?

I would say so. I think there's a spiritual element in everything really. Walking down the street can be spiritual or it can be silly. It's up to the person. I don't think music is a religious thing. I think it's generalizing too much to say that. But I can definitely say that I feel making and listening to music are spiritual experiences for me. There are a lot of other things in music for me too. It's fun. It's sad. It's silly. I like music because it has such a real, direct connection to the whole emotional spectrum.

What does spirituality mean to you?

Overall, I disagree a lot with any organized religion. I think religion can suffocate one's own voice. I would like to think that each person has his or her own spirituality. I think we all have our own little corner where I think it's important to discover your own methods for exploring that, whether it's waking up in the middle of the night and staring out the window, mountain climbing, being silent, getting drunk, or having crazy sex. [laughs] I think spirituality should be something people define for themselves through whatever suits them.

How have you evolved as a songwriter over the course of your career?

Songwriting was never my first thought as a musician. I always knew I would do something in music, but I didn't know if that meant running a radio station or a music school or playing the drums—which was my first real idea of what I thought I would do. What ended up happening is that my sense of self-sufficiency took hold. It became the idea of "Well, if somebody else isn't doing it, I'll do it." That idea has had quite a strong impact in my job, I guess you could call it. [laughs] I was in a punk band and nobody would sing, so I ended up doing it. I was in another band where we were all writing songs together, but then nobody would come up with ideas for individual sections, so I would come up with those sections. Then the band ran out of ideas and I ended up doing my own album using my own ideas. So, overall, it was all done out of necessity. I guess it isn't that hard to write songs. You just have to roll up your sleeves and do it. We all have songs inside us. The hard part is figuring out how to get it out of yourself and document it.

As I get older, maybe my songwriting has become more mature. I'm not as restless as I used to be. Now, I can really sit down in a chair for a few hours and songwriting can be more like I'm doing embroidery with the same attention span required. But I don't think getting older necessarily means you become a better musician or songwriter, but you become better at documenting your work. I'd like to think I've become better at it. You

can more easily figure out what the best part of the next two months will be for you to document your work, what situation will make you sing the best, what sort of equipment you need and what sort of arrangements will have to be made to make it happen. Experience helps you as the one who documents what you do. I think that's very important.

Tell me about the first bursts of creativity you experienced.

They took place when I was walking to school as a child. I had to walk a half-hour to school through nature in all sorts of weather. It could be snowy, windy or sunny. Singing became my way of getting from point A to point B. I would write songs on the way and I think those have been my sharpest peaks. I probably didn't realize until 20 years later what I was actually doing. I was just a kid, but there were a lot of musical peaks there. I would sing at the top of my lungs. As a vocalist, I would start up with really quiet stuff and slowly build up to a chorus which would strain my voice. Then I'd go back to the second verse which would be a lot more calm. Then the second chorus would be like a double-peak. Melodies naturally warm up the voice. In a way, I was working with my voice without knowing what I was doing. So, when I started the song from the top and got to the end, I had really warm vocal chords. It felt very natural. The songs I was singing were about people I didn't understand, like grown-ups. I thought they were quite awkward creatures. "Human Behaviour," my first single in 1993, was probably one of those melodies I was singing in which I was wondering about humans and thinking about how peculiar they are. But I would also sing silly songs like "The Happy Song" or "The Angry Song."

Given the diversity of your output, it's clear you have an innate need to keep learning and evolving as a musician.

I think that's mostly true. I just get easily bored. [laughs] I've got a short

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attention span. It's terrible. I'll have a favorite record and play it every day and then one morning I'll wake up and I'm over it. I'm not particularly proud of this. It's really the teenager in me coming out. It's also because I was in bands for 10 years where no matter what sort of song we wrote, it was always arranged for drums, guitar and bass. That got really boring. So, maybe now I'm making up for that and trying everything else I can. In another sense, I can defend my approach because I'm a vocalist. That means I will always have the same vocal chords. They are not going to change. It will also always be me writing the songs and the lyrics. So many things are already a given in that they won't be different. Because of that, half of me is pretty conservative in that way and half of me is like a kid in a toy store. I'm easily excited about new stuff. I just want to keep going to new places.

September 2004



BILL BRUFORD

STORYTELLING IN REAL TIME

DRUMMER BILL BRUFORD has an instantly identifiable sound. In fact, many listeners can recognize his signature deft touch with a single snare hit. The British musician's career path is equally unique. He's considered one of rock's great percussionists, having served as the rhythmic anchor for progressive rock luminaries King Crimson, Genesis, Yes, and the Yes offshoot band Anderson Bruford Wakeman Howe. He's also collaborated with the likes of singer-songwriter Roy Harper, keyboardist Patrick Moraz, and guitarists Al Di Meola and David Torn. But it's his work as a bandleader that's provided the most dynamic and diverse contexts for his talents.

The drummer's first solo foray took place between 1978 and 1980 with Bruford, a self-named fusion ensemble featuring guitarist Allan Holdsworth, bassist Jeff Berlin and keyboardist Dave Stewart. The group showcased Bruford's mastery of expansive structures full of complex time signatures that still left room for plenty of improvised passages.

Bruford's second stint at the helm occurred when he formed Earthworks in 1986. The group was loosely categorized as a fusion act, but he sought to steer as clear as possible of the genre's clichés. To that end, he recruited two of Britain's finest avant-jazz musicians and composers: multi-instrumentalist Django Bates and saxophonist Iain Ballamy. The band forged a modern hybrid of jazz, rock, world music, and folk traditions. At that point in his career, Bruford was focused on electronic percussion, using it to trigger sampled instruments and chordal elements that were seldom the domain of drummers.

Earthworks went on hiatus in 1993 while Bruford joined a revamped King Crimson line-up. In 1997, he decided to leave King Crimson permanently and make jazz his primary focus. The initial fruits of that decision emerged the next year on *If Summer Had Its Ghosts*, an atmospheric chamber-jazz trio album that featured guitarist Ralph Towner and bassist Eddie Gomez. The record provided Bruford with an opportunity to reveal his delicate and introspective side in the company of two of the world's most outstanding instrumentalists.

Earthworks reemerged in 1997, but with some notable differences. Bruford gave up his electronic drums, realizing there was still a more satisfying world of exploration available through his acoustic kit. The group's roster also became more fluid, as it constantly shifted between several prominent young British players. In 2002, Bruford introduced saxophonist and composer Tim Garland to the fold. An acclaimed bandleader in his own right, Garland proved an ideal long-term creative foil for the drummer by infusing Earthworks with new compositional ideas and directions.

In January 2009, Bruford announced his retirement from public performance. He discussed the motivation for the decision at the end of these conversations.

Describe your approach to collaborating with Ralph Towner and Eddie Gomez during the making of If Summer Had Its Ghosts.

I approached them and said "I'd like to lead the record and use it as a vehicle for some of my writing. Of course, we'll probably have a composition by each of you as well." Primarily, I like focused records that are about something or someone, and if your name is at the top, it should be about you and the way you see and do things. Both said that sounded fine. Ralph is not known as an interpreter of other people's music because he's such a good writer and composer himself. He doesn't really do other people's stuff a lot, so I was a little hesitant about that and he was too. But

he really gave it his best shot and spent a lot of time on the music. I wrote a lot of charts, did some cheesy demos with a laughable fake 12-string guitar sound and said "I'd like it to go a little like this, Ralph. What do you think?" And they were both very good because with drummers and composing, there's that phrase that says "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing." [laughs] For a drummer to write on a melody instrument is another ballgame. The piano is that thing on the other side of the room that you've got to get up and walk to and figure out what you're going to play and how the chords and harmony go. I think if you spend your life on piano or guitar, composition just becomes a side function of practicing. Your fingers fall upon interesting things and ideas that you like, and you say "Oh, that would make a nice tune" and you continue. But for a drummer, you've got to break from the kit and move to this melody instrument, so it's kind of tough. I think I probably produced one or two harmonic howlers along the way, but they were very sweet and didn't make me feel too shitty. [laughs]

There was a high professional standard because the players write and read very well. But it took a little while to find the tempo all three of us moved at and we were fairly slow on the first day. We were trying to find the thing that made us all swing at once. It's funny, you don't talk about it much. You just do another take and then eventually it clicks. In this case, it did by the end of the first day. And really, you only have three or four days, so you're looking for that spark. When you have three guys who have never worked together play for the first time, something will happen and that's the thing to record. If it's going to run much longer than those few days, you're going to run out of money or you're not going to finish on time or it's going to turn into a rock record or something. [laughs] So, the album is the spontaneous recording of three guys who sat down and started playing. It's a very simple, yet very sophisticated mechanism that goes on without a lot of talking. There was a lot of playing, then people listening, then people saying "Let's do another."

The album is probably the most subtle and intimate recording you've made.

I quite agree. And it's a reflective record for me too. It may have had something to do with the fact that I had reached 30 years in the industry and was looking back to the thing that made me tingle in the first place—the thing that made me want to set up a drum kit and practice when I was 16 years old. In my case, that happened to be jazz and acoustic music, and that viewed from today is a very simple form of music in the sense that there was no outboard processing or huge industry or armament of sound tacked onto the original acoustic sound as there is now. There was no digital processing. There was none of the hollandaise sauce—the gunk, the makeup that goes on a record now wasn't present in those days and you can hear that when you listen to the Cannonball Adderley group or something. I loved it then and I love it even more now, 30 years further in the future. There's something about the intimacy of an acoustic trio or quartet on tape that's really lovely.

The record is also kind of anti-testosterone. Drumming, particularly in America, is really an athletic, Olympic sport now with furious power and technical ability, all of which are breathtaking, but I found myself wondering if there was a more poetic and lyrical side to this. And there is, of course. If you look at Paul Motian, for example, there is a delicate side to drumming too and I wanted to touch on that. None of the drumming on the record is terribly loud. None of the notes are hit terribly hard. That even holds true for the drum solo on there. In my mind, the record is effortless, intricate and subtle. I really wanted to get that side of my musical personality on the record. And with Ralph and Eddie inside that 12-string guitar and bass, there's nowhere to hide. It's completely scary—you just touch something, and that's that. It's there on the track. I really like this musical watercolor painting thing with these guys.

Joe Zawinul said there's a dearth of genuine storytellers in modern music because the entertainment industry no longer looks at music-making as an art form. What's your take on that?

I find his choice of the word “storyteller” a very interesting one. That’s a very ancient and very lovely idea, and it’s a totally correct idea. Modern technology has streaked ahead and led us to believe we don’t need storytellers. But the fact is, we’re very simple souls and very underdeveloped in some ways. So I immediately agree with him. I understand and empathize with that view. What a lovely idea and a terrifying one, isn’t it? The more you get to learn about the business of music, the more terrifying it is. I particularly came across this with Arista Records during the time both Whitney Houston and Anderson Bruford Wakeman Howe were signed to it in the late '80s. I was near the top of things and somebody made a fantastic thesis about how shareholders and stock market analysts are the chief captains of the music industry. Once your record company is publicly quoted on the stock exchange, it has to deliver the goods at a furious speed. There’s not a lot of time for development or storytelling of any nature. The whole thing turns into a horse race with millions of dollars. You back 10 horses and nine of them will lose, but the one that wins will pay enough for the nine losses. Anderson Bruford Wakeman Howe lost badly, but it didn’t matter, because Whitney Houston was huge. And when you’re talking at that level, the idea of any cultural dream as a nation, society or collective with stories that need to be passed down to children goes out the window. It’s brutal, isn’t it?

Your mind dwells on this last thing at night because it’s so bizarre. I think any musician has to agree with what Joe said and I have no solution to that. But obviously, people like me feel comfortable in the company of people like Joe. It’s a huge question: What do you want your musicians to do in society? Right now, we’re paid to sell Levi’s jeans. It’s just advertising. Well, I’m afraid some of us feel we can do more than that. Obviously Joe thinks we should be telling stories, not advertising. And there’s a lot of truth in the idea that musicians are just advertising agents. It’s a drag.

Since Earthworks' original line-up dissolved, the group has taken a shifting line-up approach that spotlights emerging talent from London's jazz scene.

Earthworks changed because a couple of guys became pretty famous. Django Bates' career is really flourishing. He's commissioned to write for symphonies and stuff. He's in great shape and doing very well as I intuitively thought he would. But he's no longer the kind of guy you can call for a week's worth of gigs in Germany. You need to book him out way in advance and it doesn't work that way. So Django quite reasonably moved on, as did Iain Ballamy, and the group has been reconfigured with yet more of the people from where they came from—the fantastic, young London scene which is in really good shape. I suppose Earthworks is sort of turning into the Art Blakey Jazz Messengers of the London scene with this grand, old grandfather—me—playing the drums. [laughs] What listeners get to hear is me, which is okay, but you also get the guarantee that you'll have the best young guys in town in the band. I like that a lot and Earthworks is getting to be seen in that way in London. For young musicians, it's "We'll play in Earthworks for awhile because it has the reach to get to Japan and America and it has global record releases." Neither is always the case for British musicians.*

Describe the criteria for being a member of Earthworks.

First of all, you've got to be punctual. That's really important. Also, you shouldn't want too much money. [laughs] You should be easy to reach and hopefully be close to me because I find rehearsing with a transatlantic group that has some American guys and some British guys gives me a bit of a headache, logistically speaking. So I like to keep the thing British if I can. I also like that because we share a sense of humor and a vocabulary, both literally and musically, that I think makes us sound different from an American group. That goes particularly for our newest composer, Tim Garland. He writes tunes that don't sound to me like an American is writing

them. It's something in the water, in the air and in the humor—particularly the humor. I think the British are probably too self-deprecating and that tends to come out in the music. Django Bates certainly has a British way of composing—a slightly humorous, quirky view on life that comes out in his compositions.

Earthworks' compositional duties are now shouldered by you and Garland in equal measure. Tell me about that transition.

I had a good time as a composer when Earthworks started up again in 1997 and I felt the area it could work in was a grey area that was acoustic but came at you with a velocity more associated with fusion. A couple of Joshua Redman's earlier records turned me onto that idea. Those records were burning affairs with some odd meter stuff and I thought that was a natural home for me. At that point, I fairly quickly wrote much of the next two albums. When I say quickly, I mean by my speed, which is fairly slow compared to Tim's speed. I felt I knew and had a good handle on what the group should do up to that point, but after that, I confess, I think the band needed a broader palette and some further input. I was somewhat tired of hearing my own stuff. Part of the reason Tim's in the band is to bring his tunes in. That's one of the pleasures of having him in it. It's great to share the burden. I think I'd created a kind of style for the group and once that's reasonably well-established and you understand you're roughly going to play within that style, then Tim knows what to write for.

I find composing difficult. I don't think Tim does. I'm not a trained musician. People like Tim have degrees in composition. It doesn't prove anything necessarily, but it can be helpful. I think Tim composes fairly quickly before breakfast. He has that skill at his fingertips. For me, it's too laborious a process of choices. Since the arrival of computers and consequently, the administrative burden that brings, I have no time for composing. Essentially, the computer in my house has turned me into an administrator and I'm doing less and less music. A computer gives you the

idea that you can do it all yourself. You used to have people who you spent 20 percent of your earnings on to do the administration for you. Indeed, you can now do it all yourself, but at a cost because of the time it takes. These days, it's not even possible to find a 20 percent-style manager to do it, so I tend to end up doing all that work. That means I'm now an expert travel agent and an expert at writing emails answering questions about the sizes of drumsticks. On the whole, I do less and less music in order to keep the band afloat. So when Tim arrived, he was heaven sent. Now, I can offload some of the compositional responsibilities, survive and not worry about drowning.

Your current focus seems to be more on economy of expression, both in terms of playing and composition.

Yes, I like to say things in as few words as possible and as effectively as possible. I think it's very much like speech. I think I play a little like how I speak, which might not be terribly erudite, but I try to give some thought to what I say and I think that's an attractive thing in a musician. I hope the band also adopts some of that and it catches like a rash.

What are some of your key bandleading philosophies?

In a way, the less leadership the better. They often say the best bandleaders are those who just make five phone calls and get five interesting people in a room and then step out of the way. Miles Davis did that. Robert Fripp did that with King Crimson. Robert would only ever come in with an idea and a tune-and-a-half to define the ballpark a bit, and that would be about it. That was the same with Miles. He'd put some guys in a room, stand back and let them fight it out or find their own common ground and that's quite a good approach.

It's all about people management and creating an environment in which the musicians can function well and get on well with each other. Everybody

has strengths, weaknesses and limitations and the best musicians by far are the ones who can live with their limitations and strengths. Some people get very nervous about the fact that they're obviously not very good at something and that's the wrong approach. As a bandleader, you need to be able to say to somebody "That was really crap, wasn't it?" and have the musician say "Yeah, it probably was." If I have a fault as a bandleader, it's that the band sounds a little too much like me.

Ralph Towner said "I don't think Bill's a real jazz player, but that can work to his advantage." What do you make of that perspective?

I think he's probably right. We're all the sum of our components. I don't think I'm a real rock player either, hence why I named an Earthworks album *A Part and Yet Apart*. And hence working with Ralph who's neither a classical, jazz or rock player. He's in between the cracks. I think all the colorful guys are. I'm not sure what a real jazz player is. I can think of jazz players who do everything really well in a very proficient manner with the highest level of technical execution, but perhaps they're a little colorless. I find Ralph very colorful as a musician. I'd like to be as colorful as that. I'm not a full-time jazz musician, but there's so much of jazz in Earthworks that we'd have to describe it as a jazz group.

The thing that intrigues me is not the division between rock and jazz, but the difference between live performance in real time versus computer-based music. That's where my interest is. I have an interest in a place where the lights go down at 8 p.m. and there are 300 people in the room that are expecting something, and we march on and try to do something in real time. It's one pass. What you see is what you get. It won't be the same the following night and it wasn't the same the previous night. That's one type of music demanding a specific mentality of the musician. Now, there's another type, which the vast majority do, which usually involves a computer or a combination of a computer and sound modules that's probably done in a studio somewhere. Individual musicians may be

conceivably added to the mix, but in general, it's something manicured over a period of time and it's sort of virtual time. I think those are the big differences and I'm no good with the latter. I haven't heard much music that I like that's tailor-made that way. I'm a huge fan of the former, be it rock or jazz. King Crimson was like a jazz group. *Thrak*, the last proper album I did with King Crimson in 1995, was done as a jazz group. You sat all the musicians in the studio and everyone played at once. Extraordinary, really.

Can it be frustrating to play jazz for audiences who know you primarily for your work in the rock realm?

There's certainly some truth in that. Fans enter the room under one pretext, namely that there's some sort of rock god performing who once had lunch with Phil Collins and then the band is required to play jazz for them—a genre some of those fans may be unfamiliar with. Yeah, it can be very difficult. The other option is nobody plays anything. You can always stay at home. That's very easy. [laughs] To a degree, the problem still exists with the band, but now, we have people who dismiss us as a straightahead group instead. That's probably a good sign in that I think people are realizing that Earthworks is jazz and it isn't about being the fastest drummer in the West.

I like connecting with an audience, certainly, but mostly on a live basis and preferably with strangers. I think it's lovely when the checkout girl at the supermarket comes to your show who has never heard any jazz before and says "If that's jazz, then I think it's great" or "I didn't know I liked jazz until now." Fans often have too much grinding of axes as they get older. They get grumpy about what the artist has or has not done in terms of living up to their expectations. Once you establish yourself—particularly in North America—as being something or somebody, it can be difficult to move on. For instance, it would be very hard for a rock star like Mick Jagger to turn into John Coltrane, even if he wanted to. He will always be

Mick Jagger and I've had a lot of that. But I think there is a large number of people who don't know much about us that come in off the street to get an evening of what I think is top-flight music. They're not interested in the fact that the drummer once had lunch with Phil Collins.

A highly-organized global subculture of tapers has emerged that is documenting practically every concert performed by famous musicians on the planet. Is that a positive or negative thing in your opinion?

It's entirely negative. It's awful. This started in King Crimson and it became really obnoxious that every show was being recorded. That became very tedious. I can't stand the idea of recorders going on all the time. It boxes you in and suddenly you feel you ought to be doing something important or earth-shaking. There's too much stuff anyway. The entire place has become constipated. I think musicians should only be able to release one CD every three years and have a ceiling on their income of one million pounds a year. If I was in charge, I might say that. I think we need to redistribute some of the royalties from Phil Collins and Mariah Carey into other forms of music. You will have to subsidize that music if you don't want it to die. Also, all musicians should be limited in terms of the number of CDs they're allowed to make in a career. Maybe you get 20 CDs from the day you're born to the day you die and you better think very carefully about what you're going to put on them. That might limit things a bit.

Many jazz musicians you admire, like Elvin Jones and Max Roach, were still drumming up a storm well into their seventies. Do you aspire to that sort of longevity?

No, I don't think so. I simply won't make that. My longevity is the result of my lucky break in the '70s, but those guys are national treasures. I was interested in how Elvin works and asked a promoter about it and

discovered that it's not a way I can operate. I'm not that good. I can't attract that many people. I can't get enough money to make it a lifestyle that's tolerable or anything other than brutal. I find music-making exhausting. Personally, I don't find hotel rooms, baggage claim and email much fun at all. The bit that is fun is playing with Tim Garland when the band's all roaring away on stage. I've done 35 years now. I think you will find that I will probably do a very honorable 40 years and then be very happy to never play a drum again in my life. Artie Shaw, the famous clarinetist who was a hugely successful pop icon and bandleader, put his clarinet back in its case at the age of 44 and never touched it again. Cold turkey. I think how you get out of this should be as interesting as how you got into it. My plan is to be as creative as I have been to date for about the next five years or so, still enjoy music, reach retirement in good health, and then stop dead.

What will you do when you retire?

The feeling is after 35 years, I've done a lot and I know there won't be another 35 years, that's for sure. So I'll do all sorts of wonderful things. I'll teach a little. Teaching kids could be quite good fun. I'll collect all the royalties I've not been paid. I'll mow the lawn. I'll make friends. I'll have a life. It'll be fantastic.**

**January 1998 and **May 2003*



MARTIN CARTHY

TRADITIONAL VALUES

BRITAIN'S FOLK SCENE would likely be a far different place without the tremendous influence of guitarist and vocalist Martin Carthy. His singular ability to take traditional songs from the British Isles and infuse them with new tunes, additional lyrics and virtuoso acoustic guitar work played a major role in propelling the British '60s folk revival forward. He's remained a pillar of the movement ever since and has inspired several generations to keep traditional music alive and thriving.

Carthy is as well-known for his solo recordings and performances as he is for his many collaborations. He spent the late '60s working with fiddler Dave Swarbrick on a series of groundbreaking duo albums. He shifted gears in 1970 and took part in an early line-up of Steeleye Span, the pioneering folk-rock group in which he briefly took up electric guitar. In 1972, he married vocalist Norma Waterson. Having departed Steeleye Span by that point, he joined The Watsons, his wife's renowned family folk singing ensemble.

In addition to his vibrant solo and family output, the '70s saw Carthy work with The Albion Band, as well as Brass Monkey, an inventive group that explores traditional music with trumpets, trombones, squeezeboxes, percussion, and guitar. Brass Monkey is still active, as is his partnership with Swarbrick, which he rekindled in the late '80s.

During the '90s, The Watsons begat Waterson:Carthy, a trio comprised of Carthy, Waterson and their fiddler/vocalist daughter Eliza Carthy. The group continues The Watsons' long history of exploring traditional music

within the unique chemistry only a family outfit can provide.

These days, Carthy mainly splits his time between Waterson:Carthy and his solo career. His efforts in both arenas have garnered a great deal of interest and acclaim in recent years. He's been the subject of tribute concerts, documentaries and boxed sets, and the recipient of several awards. He was also named a Member of the Order of the British Empire for his services to English folk music. In a rare example of justice in the music industry, it's possible Carthy's profile has never been higher.

Tell me how you initially encountered traditional music.

I first came across it as an afterthought through skiffle, American railroad songs and work songs. It dawned on me that some of those songs had British Isles antecedents. So, I investigated that and became involved in folk music. The only folk songbooks available at that time were things like the Burl Ives songbooks. I found those interesting. I also heard some recordings and found them intriguing and odd. Then I saw a singer called Sam Lerner at a pub in 1958 when I was 17. He was a fisherman from Great Yarmouth on the East Coast of England. I'd never heard music like that in my life. Some of it made no sense at all, but it had to be right because the bloke would keep hitting the same note at the end of the tunes. He was a wonderful performer and I walked away from that experience with my head spinning.

We were coming out of austerity at the time, so there's a social aspect to this as well. After World War II, it took a hell of a long time before everything was off ration. All my life, food had been on ration. Gradually, things like clothes, vegetables and meat came off ration. In those days, people wore either grey or black. Your shoes were either brown or black. When I first heard "Blue Suede Shoes," I thought "Come on. There's no such thing." It was from a fantasy world like *Alice in Wonderland*. What happened after skiffle is that tens of thousands of kids in England started making music at home by themselves. These people went into different

disciplines. Some became jazz or blues players, rock and rollers, folkies, and classical musicians. I have good friends who went into all these disciplines, but we all started with skiffle. The whole thing was opening up culturally. It was a whopping flower just blooming. For me, this 17-year-old, traditional music was wildly different from anything I had heard before. It took me a long time to absorb it, but it ensured I would be looking to that area of music for the rest of my life.

The perception is that the folk club era of early '60s Britain was a time of wide-eyed innocence.

A lot of it was, with the traditional stuff. We didn't know what we were doing. We were inventing things and going and looking for stuff and realizing how much there was to be found. There was a lot of innocence indeed. People did get taken though. When it became commercially interesting, the big managers started moving in. But they didn't stay around long because folk music isn't exploitable.

Why isn't folk music exploitable?

It's too weird. It's also too straightforward in the subjects it deals with. You can go on singing the anti-war songs, but there's a whole lot of other stuff which deals with relationships and people which are far too frank for the Top 40. They're far too blunt. They deal with all sorts of subjects. For instance, they'll deal with incest in half a dozen different ways. There'll be a story about a really brutish form of incest and then a love story about it and how people deal with or don't deal with it. That sort of thing is unacceptable to the Top 40. It's unacceptable to some people in concert too because I've sung them and been attacked verbally afterwards. The rude songs are too rude. Everything has to be cleaned up one way or another to be acceptable for the Top 40.

Dave Swarbrick's musical philosophies relating to traditional music greatly influenced you. What are the more important ideas you gleaned from him?

When we first started working together, I had never played dance tunes. Of course, my first reaction to playing them is "I've got to learn them exactly right." So, on a couple of occasions I'd find a tune and teach it to him and the first thing he'd do is change it. I would protest and say "You can't do that. That's not how the tune goes." His reaction in 1966 would be "What you've got to understand is that a tune is like a coat hanger on which you hang your variations." I never understood that until much later. I finally understood that a song isn't gospel. You have the right and sometimes the duty to mess with it.

The very first time we worked together, I had to play better, technically-speaking, than I ever played before. And I did. I became a much better guitar player. Then we split up and I stayed a pretty good player, but I moved much more slowly. When we worked together again in 1988, the first thing that happened is my playing started to improve and then it began improving by leaps and bounds. My horizons began to broaden because Dave passed on the attitude he learned from working for years with Fairport Convention. Fairport would arrange a song loosely and leave room to stand there and blow and that's what Dave became adept at between 1969 and 1988. So I began taking the sort of chances I wouldn't have dreamed of taking before. That's what Dave does. One of the things he said to me, which I'll say to anyone who'll listen, is "You can do anything to music. It really doesn't mind."

You've sometimes extended that philosophy into rearranging the same song in several different ways.

It's one of the great things about doing this music. I think you can always go back to old material and rework it. There are songs in my repertoire I've been doing for well over 40 years. With some of the bigger songs, the

longer you know them, the better you understand them and the better you're going to perform them. My voice is not anywhere nearly as well-equipped as it was 30 years ago, but I think I'm a better singer now. That comes from understanding the songs and letting them reveal themselves to you over the years, which they do. These songs don't give up all their secrets at once.

Fairport Convention tried to recruit you twice during the '60s. Why did you turn them down?

When Dave was asked to join, as an afterthought, they asked me if I wanted to join as well. So it would have been the two of us joining Fairport. I thought "No, it would be a waste of time." Then they asked me again after Sandy Denny and Ashley Hutchings left at the end of '69. At the time, I was really enjoying being a soloist and I just wasn't interested. I think I would have been walking on old ground to a certain extent if I had joined Fairport with Dave. We hadn't been apart long enough. I was thinking in a completely different way and wasn't ready for something like that. It really wasn't the direction I felt I was going in. But five months later, Tim Hart rang and asked me to join Steeleye Span and I said yes. I put the phone down, went up to London and rehearsed as a three-piece, and then Ashley came in and we rehearsed as a four-piece for seven weeks. Then Ashley said "I think we need to expand" and asked Peter Knight if he'd join. He was delighted and very, very good. As they say, the secret of comedy is timing and the timing then was exactly right. Also, with Steeleye Span, it was working with two people I had never worked with before. I was an admirer of Maddy Prior and I knew Tim. Ashley was an interesting guy too, so the whole idea was intriguing and it was new. The idea of doing something from scratch was exciting.

In addition to traditional British music, Indian classical music held an early fascination for you.

It's interesting that the first two strange musics I came into contact with were English music through Sam Lerner and Indian music through Ravi Shankar. I saw Shankar's first concert in England. I was 16 at the time. The reason I went is because of a teacher called Mr. Morgan. He had been a colonel in a Sikh regiment of the Indian Army. Mr. Morgan would sit marking papers and tap on his desk and I would get bored doing what I was doing and tried to count what he was tapping. One afternoon, I went up and said "Excuse me, sir, can you tell me what rhythm that is you're tapping?" He laughed and said it was a particular dance he used to do with some of the ranks when he was a colonel. I was absolutely thunderstruck. He began to talk to me about English music and then about Ustad Ali Akbar Khan and Ravi Shankar.

Three weeks later, I looked in the morning paper and saw that Ravi Shankar was doing a concert on a Sunday afternoon at the Royal Festival Hall. Every Sunday morning, I would go to the chapel and sing as a chorister. I let my parents know I'd be back by 5 p.m. that day, went to the chapel and then rode across Waterloo Bridge and waited outside the Festival Hall until the concert started and then I went in. There were about 50 people there, along with me sitting in my school uniform. Ravi Shankar and Alla Rakha were just wonderful and they talked about the music and explained everything to the audience. I was absolutely stunned by what I heard. I didn't understand it. I felt able to identify with parts of what was going on in Indian music, but there's a sophistication there that was beyond me.

Did that experience influence your musical path?

Oh God, yeah. It was the first time I really understood that there were these wildly different musics. I never dreamed of that before. I had heard a little bit of American folk music, people playing banjos and some of Alan Lomax's and Peter Kennedy's recordings, but nothing prepared me for the experience of seeing Ravi Shankar and Sam Lerner. The Indian music was incredibly evolved and the English music was totally riveting

and intriguing. I don't know what the Indian music spoke to, but it made a difference to me. By the time the early '60s came along, my mates and I were telling ourselves what we were doing was very close in spirit to that, which is pretty grotesque because Indian music is a furiously sophisticated music and what we were doing was Stone Age stuff. But it was important nonetheless. It helped me and my mates on our way.

Describe the benefits of working within a family musical ensemble.

Working with family is an awful lot about intuition. It's a brand new experience for me. Norma could never understand why I made such a fuss about how exciting it was working with a blood relative because she's done it all her life. The first group she was ever in was The Watersons. Now, she's working with another family group. Working with a family is very easy. It's also the most long-term because you're probably going to be at it until the day you drop down dead. It's unlike anything else. Playing with Eliza and playing with Swarb is about as different as it could possibly be. Swarb and I have learned to read each other's thoughts, but with Eliza, it's a connection. She just knows where I'm gonna go and I know where she's gonna go. You just concentrate on the thing and she telegraphs what she wants. Norma's the same. Watching Norma and Eliza sing together is extraordinary because they just understand one another. The music can be challenging. Eliza has stretched me as a musician. When we first started playing together, I never had to concede to her in any way, but it wasn't long before I was having to run like mad to catch up.

Is there a spiritual element to what you do?

Of course. In my case, I believe that if there's a God, that God exists in the creation of music. I just accept it and don't particularly explore it. For other people, it's acting or any other creative thing. Something happens when you step on stage in front of an audience. You can call it

communication, but there's more to it than that. Some little miracle will occur when you're performing. I suppose my religious experiences are all little ones that have to do with people and are instant.

Do I follow any particular religion? No. I was born Church of England and I'm now a fairly firm "don't know." I'm not an atheist. Lal Waterson was a convinced atheist. We used to have the most intriguing arguments about Jesus sometimes, because she liked him. I thought the whole business was a fraud. She'd get very angry as the atheist. It was very funny. My feeling was that, as the son of God, the crucifixion was a fraud. It didn't make him a bad man. I'm very interested in some of the things he said, but the story never made sense to me, except as a more intense version of *The Little Mermaid*. I definitely see a parallel. I really do. But it doesn't affect my own spirituality.

You recorded the ANC (African National Congress) song "Azikatali" in 1965, two decades before the mainstream Anti-Apartheid movement took hold. Tell me how you got involved in Anti-Apartheid activities so early on.

My family was always involved. One of my earliest memories was the dismay in my mother's voice when it was announced on the radio that Dr. Malan had been elected to the office of Prime Minister in South Africa in 1948. I was seven years old at the time and that's when the boycott started in our house. My father was a politician. It's silly, but he used to get marmalade from South Africa and he had to stop doing it. He didn't want to do it anymore. So, I remember there being none of that marmalade on the table anymore and that's what it all meant to me when I was seven. The folk scene in the early '60s was very much centered on CND [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament] and the Anti-Apartheid movement. We would all do these concerts and be very active. ANC songs like "Azikatali" were currency for us. We learned a lot of them from American singers like Pete Seeger and The Weavers.

Why was the issue of racism so important to you back then?

There was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing with all that had been going on in the USA with desegregation. People were very aware of what was going on. I remember being with Dave Swarbrick in Little Rock, Arkansas. We did our gig and stayed in our hotel and then went across the road to a diner for breakfast. We sat in there and some black and white kids came in and sat down. I remember looking at Dave and saying “My God, that’s a change, isn’t it?” And he looked at me and said “What do you mean?” I said “Come on! This is Little Rock.” He said “Tell me. I’ve been sitting here thinking ‘Why is Little Rock important?’” I said “Does the name Orville Faubus mean anything to you?” He suddenly remembered that Faubus was the Governor of Arkansas who prevented black children from going to white schools. Faubus blocked the desegregation of schools. Eisenhower sent in the National Guard to forcibly desegregate the schools. All of that had been going on at the time. There had also been trouble in England with the riots in Notting Hill, but we deceived ourselves into believing we weren’t a racist nation, which was, unfortunately, not true. It took us a long time to wake up to it. There was to be a rude awakening indeed.

You once said “The English don’t really know who they are. They were sold an idea of Britain”—one devoid of real meaning. Some believe the same can be said for the United States.

I do not like the idea of “My country, good or bad.” I can understand the idea of “My country, warts and all” though. Taking a punch on the nose because you say something truthful about something that’s bad about the place is terrible. What America does or does not do really affects the rest of the world in 24 hours. In light of that, I cannot understand why any criticism of the United States is taken to be blasphemous. I’m at a loss because we all share the same planet and need each other. The fact that the

USA will not sign the Kyoto Protocol, feeble though it is, is extraordinary to me. The fact that there are people who are taken seriously who say that “The North Pole is ice-free, but it has nothing to do with global warming” amazes me. The fact that those people shape policy in the United States is bewildering and terrifying. I won’t be around to see the effects of it. I’ll be long dead, but my children and grandchildren will have to live with it and that’s appalling to me.

You believe musicians have a responsibility to tell compelling stories and get the truth out there. How good a job do you think the current generation of songwriters is doing?

It depends on the songwriter, but I think there are a lot of “me” generation people around who I don’t find very interesting. I don’t think that’s necessarily a phenomenon of the last five years, but it’s something that’s happened steadily over the past 30 years. Writing songs has become the thing to do for people, but there aren’t that many good songwriters around. There never have been in all honesty. There’s been a lot of good journeymen workers, but when it comes to good songwriting, that’s a real rarity. The trouble with the “me, me, me” songwriters—some of whom are extremely good musicians—is that they have fairly limited horizons when it comes to writing and crafting something interesting. I think it’s something that takes time. For instance, Richard Thompson was interesting when he was 20, but fascinating by the time he was 35. The same goes for Ralph McTell. It’s a craft.

These days, it seems many younger musicians are determined to jump out of the gates as consummate songwriters, arrangers and singers.

Good luck to them. I think they’re gonna find out that’s not the way it works. It may be a shock when they hit the floor with a bump. When I was 20, I thought people who were 30 were far too old and ought to be

getting out of it. When I was 30, I thought the people who were 60 ought to maybe have taken a proper job. But as I got older, I began to understand the music a little more and realize that music is a thing for life. The more I came to understand music, the more there was to learn. It's incredibly sustaining and very exciting.

You've recorded only a few of your own songs over the years. Why haven't we seen more of those from you?

I find it really hard to write songs. I'm full of admiration for those who can just knock a song off. The first song I wrote was about the Falklands War and that took five years to finally get out. I also wrote another one about South Africa and that took two years. It's infuriating. I'm very, very fussy. I tell myself it's because I'm working with some of the best songwriters that have ever lived and they're all called "Anon." I think traditional songs represent some of the finest songs ever written by anybody. And most of them aren't written by a single person. I find great satisfaction working in that medium. It deals with all of the things I want to deal with.

There's been a renaissance of interest in your work in recent times. What do you make of the increased attention you're receiving?

There's been an interest in English music because of the interest in world music. People are saying "Hang on a minute. We're part of the world. Maybe we've got some music too." So, there's a lot of young people taking an interest and taking it up and doing it. That makes life exciting and interesting. It makes me really glad. But I don't feel particularly adored. I'm just an old git and people are very nice to old gits. I still enjoy playing and I do a good gig, but there's a kind of respect you get anyway, if you know what I mean. It's very nice.

How have you evolved as a guitarist across the last 40 years?

I couldn't be more grateful to the folk club scene in England for indulging me for over 40 years while I found a way of playing the guitar which I love. They've indulged me while I've walked up blind alleys, fallen flat on my face, and made dreadful noises, and then watched me come back, try to unpick the knots and start again. I gradually learned an effective way of playing this music when I finally found the C-G-C-D-G-A tuning I started to use in 1978. I've had a great time playing that tuning. For awhile, I began to think "What a clever bloke! Aren't you brilliant to find this tuning? How'd you happen on that? You just worked very hard." Then it dawned on me that the tuning is very close to the cello. If it works, it's because someone figured out how to tune a cello a long time before I was around.

I'm grateful for all sorts of serendipitous things that happened to me, like encountering Sam Larner when I did and when I walked into a guitar shop in 1963 with exactly the right money for exactly the guitar I was looking for. It was hanging up there in the shop waiting for me to come along and buy it. I've played that same 1959 Martin 000-18 for 39 years at just about every gig I've done until Martin made me a signature model. It's a beautiful guitar. I still have it. She and I grew up together.

I think my guitar playing has improved enormously. I've begun to find a good way of accompanying these songs. I love what you can do with them. Some of the tunes are completely crazy, but they're just beautiful. I'm just in awe that these ordinary people made up this fabulous music and body of songs out of thin air and that I've learned over the years how to get the guitar to accommodate some of it. It's a source of some satisfaction. It's really been a journey of discovery and it's not over yet.

July 2004



STANLEY CLARKE

BACK TO BASICS

STANLEY CLARKE'S SHADOW looms large on the electric bass world. He's one of a handful of musicians that made the music scene acknowledge the instrument as a versatile and vital force capable of a kaleidoscope of colors, textures and percussive elements previously ascribed to more conventional lead instruments.

Clarke's groundbreaking work on albums such as his eponymous 1974 effort and 1976's *School Days* played a paramount role in establishing slapping, popping and strumming in the bass guitar lexicon. And while thousands of bassists followed in his footsteps, Clarke's gift for bridging melody and rhythm in a single motion remains unparalleled.

Chick Corea took notice of Clarke's talents early on when he recruited the bassist for Return to Forever in 1971. During its decade-long existence, the seminal fusion act scaled the heights of creative and commercial success. Along with contemporaries Weather Report and Mahavishnu Orchestra, the group helped ignite the public's interest in jazz-rock and saw the genre through to its denouement in the late '70s.

Clarke still carries the fusion torch in his solo work, though it's tempered by more pop and R&B elements. Many of his albums and collaborations from the '80s onward are a testament to his love of simple and direct song forms. However, Clarke still engages the jazz universe on projects with the likes of Al Di Meola, Herbie Hancock, Jean-Luc Ponty, and McCoy Tyner. He's also participated in a couple of Return to Forever reunion tours.

Today, Clarke spends a lot of time focusing on his career as a soundtrack composer. He's scored several high-profile films including *Boyz n the Hood*, *Passenger 57*, *Higher Learning*, and *The Transporter*. The lessons learned from his experiences in the cinema realm have significantly influenced the directions of his other work—something he expanded on during this conversation.

Your post-'70s solo albums take a sparser, more R&B-influenced approach than your classic fusion records. Tell me about that shift.

I think a lot of that has to do with my affinity for melodies. When I started writing music for film, I found it tended to draw out whatever ability you have in the area of melody. When you're doing film music—if you plan to become any good at it—you have to go with the basics in your musical psyche. There needs to be a very strong melodic concept or it's going to be difficult for you to write. Aside from rhythm, melody is what can drive a great score and bring life to a picture. In doing that, it kind of opened me up as a composer and a lot of my stuff in later years became much more melodic—even smoother I would say. My own personal playing as a bass player has reflected that too.

As for the fusion thing, that was a direct result of all of the music I was listening to, especially as a kid growing up. I was pretty much affected by music in the '60s and very early '70s. That stuff was jazz—as we knew it then—and rock and roll, R&B, Motown, and all the other stuff that was on the radio. I wasn't much of a puritan in those days and I'm still not. I turned on the radio and if something felt or sounded good, I liked it. When I was young, it affected me in a certain way that would make me want to make music like that. I don't want to sound like I'm defending what I did because I'm not at all. I'm just comparing that to some of the younger jazz musicians today who have figured out how to be real purists—especially the guys following in the footsteps of Wynton Marsalis. I mean, it's amazing! I see some of those guys and they have these suits and ties on. I

actually sometimes have my own little interviews with those guys and say “Don’t you get hot playing in those things? A suit and a tie? Imagine if you had some jeans on!” [laughs] Anyway, as far as I’m concerned, I liked a lot of different things and it came out in the music.

Your early solo work helped establish the concept of lead bass guitar. Do you feel the instrument has officially transcended second-class status?

I think the work has pretty much been done on the bass in terms of bringing it to the fore. I hope there are gonna be other bass players who make records and become bass gods or whatever the hell they’re called. I think there will be other guys who can stand on the edge of the stage and front a band like I do. I remember speaking to Charlie Mingus before he died. I hung out with him a bit. We were going to do a concert together at Carnegie Hall called “Father and Son.” Charlie really liked me. We would get together at this restaurant and man, watching him eat—that was an experience. They used to bring platters to him—a platter of rice, a platter of meat. [laughs] He was amazing and I really liked him. I didn’t study him as a bass player or a composer, but he was an icon for me—a jazz bass revolutionary. He stood in front of his band and demanded that the guys listen to him. He used to get quite violent sometimes. I saw him punch out a saxophone player at the Village Vanguard once. Charlie was a serious guy and he used to talk about the role of the bass and how some of the guys that were soloists didn’t have as much intelligence about music as he did in his little fingernail. He said it was ironic that just because of the instrument those idiots played, he had to assume a certain role to get certain gigs. He really instilled that into my thinking when I was very young. I haven’t got rid of that. He was really something.

Guys like Jaco Pastorius also came through, and other players like Jack Bruce, Paul McCartney and Larry Graham as well. Whether or not we were making a conscious effort, the bass is now a major thing. That’s evident in how many records have been made by bass players. I can’t say

all of them are good and I can't say all of the guys deserve to be standing in the forefront. Then again, I could say that about a lot of guitar players and saxophone players. The most important thing is that it can be done and it's not looked at as strange. "Wow, you're a bass player?" is what I used to get a lot. I remember playing for a promoter in Indiana one time after my *Journey to Love* album came out. The applause was big. People were really into it and it was exhilarating. This promoter couldn't believe it. He said "Something is weird. You're a bass player. I'm gonna have to see you again." I almost felt the guy thought we had done something to the audience—gave 'em drugs or something, like it was a big fake thing. It was really, really interesting. But anyway, the groundwork is now done in terms of making the bass like one of the other instruments.

You're focusing more and more on acoustic bass. Why is that instrument speaking more loudly to you these days?

I really have a tremendous affinity for music from various parts of Africa, but I could never really figure out how to put it in the electric arena because it comes out sounding like those rock and roll guys who say "Oh, now I'm into African music." The only instrument I feel good about trying to do something with that on is the acoustic bass. I'm really trying to develop some different things on it. We acoustic bass players pretty much play it within its European tradition as far as how we technically approach it. We use pizzicato, but I'm trying to figure out how to get more rhythmic without losing the melody concept I have for the instrument.

You worked with Art Blakey early in your career. How do you look back at your tenure in his group?

I played with Art for just under a year during my last year of college. We toured a lot between the end of '71 and '72. We made a record called *Child's Dance* and I had a lot of fun playing with him. I felt connected

to a time period that was much earlier—the '40s and '50s. He was the swinging-est drummer I had ever played with in my life. He didn't know anything else but that. He was raw and a true jazz musician in every way—the way he talked and the way he was. I'm really glad I had that experience because there are things that I still use to this day that I got from him. He was a very proud individual. He was proud of the contributions that black people made to music and the American art form that is jazz. He always talked about that and really taught us. He made me feel that I should respect myself as a musician, and more so, as a jazz musician—a black jazz musician. I'm not saying he was racist or anything, but he did make that distinction. He hit on something you can't just pass up—Charlie Parker didn't fly in from another planet and just happen to be great. Art was really serious. He saw this as a definite thing and said "You're part of it and you have a major responsibility to keep that going." It was a great, great feeling.

You once turned down Miles Davis when he asked you to join his group. Why?

Yeah. I made a record with Chick Corea called *Light as a Feather* and right after that I got tons of calls from many different bands including rock acts. I got a call from whatever was left of The Doors. The piano player Ray Manzarek rang me at 4 a.m. and that was a weird, weird call. I said "No, I don't think so." [laughs] Anyway, Miles used to come see Return to Forever at the Village Vanguard. In those days, it was still done the way they did it in the '50s. They would just come to the gig and say "Man, I want you to play in my band." I'll never forget it. Miles came to the Vanguard in this weird, red leather outfit. It almost looked pre-Michael Jackson. Miles looked like a spaceman coming through there and he said in his Miles voice "You don't want to play with Chick. Fuck Chick. You don't need to play with him. Come and play with me." But I was very loyal to Chick and the movement we were trying to create.

I looked at Miles and I looked at Chick and the bigger picture. I felt I could do more with Chick than Miles, although it would have been nice

for the resume to play with Miles and experience that. So instead, I'd hang out with Miles and go see him a lot because we used to live near one another. The other offer that really sticks out is Bill Evans. He wanted me to play with him and that was the only thing I actually regret. It's a regret because for the kind of acoustic bass player I am, the jazz trio format with someone like Bill Evans doesn't get any better. I knew all the tunes and I listened to all the records. Scott LaFaro is a big influence in my life. Musically, it would have been just great. But again, with Chick, we were talking about bigger things than just music. We were really thinking about changing attitudes about jazz, instrumental music and saying that everything doesn't have to be so pure and follow these rules. So I decided to stay with Chick, but that was a hard one.

How do you look back at your experience with Return to Forever in the '70s?

I think one of the things that made that band work was its chemistry, or if I could say in a strange way, its lack of chemistry. There was an edge in that band that was naturally there with the personalities. Chick was this personality that put the band together with me. I was there in all of its different configurations. Chick's 10 years older than me and all the guys were compatible in a lot of ways but not in basic life stuff. Me and Lenny White were close, and me and Chick were close. Al Di Meola was a different kind of guy. It's amazing it lasted as long as it did. The music we did was really something. It was a very strong band live. It was very difficult to come see that band and walk away saying "I hated it." It was hard even for guys like Leonard Feather. It was so funny when they would write bad reviews about us. They would comment about the mission and say things like "Oh, they are playing these instruments at this volume, but do they have to wear those clothes? Why is Chick talking like that? Who the hell is Stanley Clarke? But he's a fine bass player. And there's Chick's great piano playing." They would never put our playing down. It was very interesting. It had a classic break-up with the money, business, egos, and ingredients

that are in all break-ups. It's probably best that it took a rest. The whole Return to Forever thing I look back at as a university. We all learned a lot from each other.

Jeff Beck was a fixture on several of your early solo albums. How did you two hook up?

We met when I was living in Long Island in the early '70s. My attorney called me and said "This guy Jeff Beck is playing one of your songs in his live show and wants to meet you." At that point, I had put out a solo album called *Stanley Clarke* and he was playing "Power" from it. I remember a big, long limousine pulling up in front of the house I was living in and this guy gets out with one of these rooster haircuts and it was Jeff. He's a very English guy and it was one of those uncomfortable meetings. I didn't know him, he didn't know me, but the music sort of brought us together. He played me an album he was putting together or had finished—I think it might have been the *Blow by Blow* record. It was really good. Once we started talking about music, we became friends, did some tours in Europe and Japan and then recorded together. He played on some of my records and it was fun. He's a great guy and a true stylist. It's very rare for me to meet a musician that really has his own distinctive style.

Some critics have accused you of resting on your '70s laurels when reviewing your later work. What's your reaction?

It's very difficult for a writer who really isn't in any close proximity to an artist to really know what is happening to that artist. If you're a critic and if you don't really know what the artist is expanding into and what he's getting better at, you have to go for the superficial. They see a concert and that's it—that's Stanley Clarke to them. He also may hear one concert in which an artist maybe didn't sound that good. Maybe it wasn't a good night for him. The writer maybe hasn't seen or checked out my

film composing. That's something that's taken me a long time to master and I'm very serious about it. I'm proud of what I've done. It's not easy to write for an orchestra. Standing in front of an orchestra, understanding the nomenclature and thousands and thousands of details it takes to write a score and implementing it and breaking it down for 80 musicians is a challenge. It takes a serious amount of ability to do that. I wish I was the musician I am now back in the '70s. I'm a much better bass player now than I was then. I'm also a better person. I read more now and I take care of my family better than I did when I was younger.

It's so funny. I read these things and say "That guy is talking about me?" But I understand what the critic's job is and that he's looking at one little piece of information and writing about it. He has to make a living. The phrase that still rings in my head from Miles Davis was "Man, that motherfucker's gotta say something." And Miles was really right. Miles told me these writers used to piss him off. He used the word ignorant when describing them. Miles really took a lot of flack. When he made the later records he did, he had some major writers and musicians saying negative things about him. They should be ashamed of themselves.

If these guys only knew what the musicians thought about them. I remember one time when me and Chick were laughing at a review a prominent jazz critic wrote about us. It was so funny, I almost fell down and broke my ass, man. See, the thing with a lot of these writers is that they have a pretty good grip on the English language. They can write something and sound intelligent. But these kinds of scathing, really ridiculous things come off much better if they're written like normal guys talk. I actually respect that stuff better—someone who says "That shit from this motherfucker? He's a sad son of a bitch!" [laughs] I'd get into that more and take it more seriously.

On the flip side of the coin, you're still regularly referred to as a living legend.

It's the weirdest thing. I absolutely don't feel it. I have no visceral

attachment to it. I don't know what that is. I understand what it means—what the words mean and the concept, but I have no feeling for it. When I wake up in the morning, I don't necessarily feel like a legend. I feel like I've made contributions. I know exactly what I've done for the bass and jazz music and what have you, but a living legend? I dunno. Maybe that is what a living legend is supposed to experience. [laughs] It's something you can't go to school to learn how to be. Nobody in their right mind picks up an instrument and goes "I want to be a living legend." I'm sure there are guys out there though who are crazy and fucked-up enough to try and do that.

Jaco Pastorius pretty much had that idea in his head, didn't he?

Probably. Look what happened to him, you know? Jaco and I were close friends. He was truly a crazy man I tell ya. But I really loved him. Jaco was very respectful of me and my family. He used to come to my house every September for my son's birthday. For some reason, we always celebrated it together. My son has Jaco's baseball gloves and one of his bats. That's what he used to give my son for birthday presents—his childhood articles. Jaco was a funny guy. He just drank too much, did too many drugs and wasn't ready, in my opinion, for fame and having that much energy thrown at him. Fame is a very interesting thing. You can actually feel the energy particles coming at you and you have to be ready for that. I don't think Jaco was ready and it's a shame.

To this day, you still play "School Days" during your concerts. Describe your relationship with the piece after all this time.

One of the things that used to bother me more than anything—but I've learned to live with it—is that damn song. It was just a song to me—not any big deal at all. It's just some song about when I went to school and how it felt. I came up with a bass line and I recorded it and that was that. Now, it's a kind of bass anthem or something. Everywhere I go, every city

I play, there is someone out there yelling “School Days.” I tried one year not to play it and that was not a good idea. I finally realized I better play the song at a gig in Detroit. I was playing this place called the Masonic Temple. We’re getting ready to play the last number and people are yelling out “School Days, School Days!” I picked up the acoustic bass and when I got to a quiet part, this dude got up and said “Man, you gonna play ‘School Days’ before you leave this motherfucker!” He was from deep in the ghetto and continued “You don’t even think you gonna get outta here without playing it.” [laughs] That’s one of the few times I’ve ever played “School Days” on the acoustic bass. It’s hard as hell, but I played it man and people loved it. They just wanna hear the bass line. I’ve played the song so many times and it’s probably the most difficult thing that I do. It hurts me to play it because it’s not fresh. I would say out of every 10 to 15 times I play it, maybe four to five times I just won’t like it because I can’t find a new twist. I had a talk with Larry Carlton about this. He said “You’re lucky. Not everyone can say they have a career song.” So, I view it that way—a career song that I’ve done. It’s something I have to play because the people wanna hear it. It actually causes more harm not to play it. [laughs]

April 1998



CHUCK D

AGAINST THE GRAIN

CONTROVERSY AND CONFRONTATION are synonymous with Public Enemy's incendiary brand of hip-hop. Devoid of gangsta rap clichés and pop-rap treacle, the group's full-frontal lyrical and aural assault is designed to challenge social and sonic complacency. Public Enemy's core line-up, comprised of iconic vocalist, writer and producer Chuck D, and partners in rhyme Flavor Flav and Professor Griff, always infuses its music with charged messages about demolishing inequity, racism and corruption. Most importantly, the group encourages African-Americans to empower themselves, as Malcolm X once said, "by any means necessary."

Musically speaking, Public Enemy represents the hip-hop world's equivalent of Phil Spector's wall of sound, with layer upon layer of samples and pounding rhythms, as well as rock instrumentation. The approach is best exemplified on the group's classic albums including 1988's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* and 1990's *Fear of a Black Planet*, and hit singles such as "Fight the Power" and "Don't Believe the Hype."

The last decade saw Public Enemy go beyond the genre's "two turntables and a microphone" performance standards by incorporating a more organic and live approach into its music. Since 2002, the act has worked with a core group of musicians known as The Banned that includes guitarist Khari Wynn, bassist Brian Hardgroove, drummer Mike Faulkner, and turntablist DJ Lord.

Public Enemy celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2006. The group commemorated the occasion with a trilogy of CDs comprised of *New Whirl*

Odor, Rebirth of a Nation and *How You Sell Soul to a Soulless People Who Sold Their Soul?*, released between late 2005 and early 2007. In addition to an increased focus on live musicianship, the albums share thematic linkages that reflect the era of their creation.

“*New Whirl Odor* states that the world is in a ball of confusion, so try to recognize how to walk within it,” says Chuck D. “*Rebirth of a Nation* says that if the world is in a ball of confusion, you gotta keep your head held high anyway and try to look at the positive side of life. And *How You Sell Soul’s* main point is you have to look deep inside yourself to hold onto your spirit.”

What made you want to have Public Enemy expand into live instrumentation?

We did it so we could have a lot more flexibility. It was Professor Griff’s idea. He said we need the ability to do our classic songs, but not be locked into the recorded versions when we perform. You can only make accompanying a record go into so many places. With a band, you can take the live performance into a lot of new territory. It adds a fuller sound that you can’t get from just playing back a recording. With a recording, you only get what you’ve got. It also allows us to improvise like you wouldn’t believe. We have commanding vocalists between myself and Flavor Flav, and everyone else is a musician. Even Flavor can play bass, guitar and drums, and Griff is also a drummer. Public Enemy now represents the best rap situation ever because of our band’s musicianship, knowledge and ability to add to the aura of noise. When people see us, they say “Oh my God, that’s the greatest thing on Earth.” I think the addition of the band makes it so. The show is no longer entirely dependent on me or Flavor just doing all of the classics. We’re now able to do a two-and-a-half-hour, enjoyable show with a lot of variation and interesting elements. I think live performance is the final convincing stroke that tells you if people like your records or not. I think the music business has gotten far away from

that aspect. In fact, I think 95 percent of rap and hip-hop performances are terrible.

Why are they terrible?

First, look back at the standards adhered to in the beginnings of rap music and hip-hop. For instance, Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash and Run-DMC all had a high performance standard. Artists also need to pay attention to the standards of the great rock, funk and soul singers. These acts all got their training from getting down as live as possible. Initially, when rappers started to play big arenas alongside these other types of groups, they had to raise their performance standards. So they came up with dance steps, outfits and stage shows that were more captivating, because just rapping over the records could only hold people's attention for a certain amount of time.

The standards started disappearing around 15 years ago. The rap industry figured out the DNA of selling a record is getting the video on BET or MTV and not worrying about tour support or getting the artist out there performing. The labels stopped developing artists and starting saying "Whatever sticks, we keep. Whatever doesn't stick, we lop off and move on to the next one." We've had 15 years of that and every five years, we've had another drop-off in talent and another diminishing return. Today, when you look at the most popular rap artists, ask yourself if they can really outdo a rock or funk group onstage. I was at the 2006 Grammys and Kanye West was up there giving his all as a rapper holding a mic, but the artists that blew people away were Bono and Paul McCartney, as well as Stevie Wonder, just for stepping onto the stage. Today, you have R&B and rock groups that will blow a rap act away, however, the rap act will say "But we're selling more records." That's only because they're the best part of the machinery.

You have to present a lot of energy and activity onstage to leave a crowd

INNERVIEWS: MUSIC WITHOUT BORDERS

awestruck. I don't think audiences are awestruck very often anymore in the rap world, which makes it different than sports. Sports leaves people awestruck because most audience members realize they can't do what those guys do, so you have to submit to that. But the average person at a rap show looks at the stage and seriously thinks they are just as good and probably are just as good. The thing that separates the artist from the audience member isn't what's inside the artist, but what's on the outside. People are more awestruck about what the artist is wearing as opposed to what the artist is doing.

How do you go about directing Public Enemy's live musicians?

Brian Hardgroove is the leader of the band and was able to get into the psyche and dynamics of the Public Enemy songs. He brought them to the surface in order to determine how they should be accompanied by live musicians. Brian and Khari have a real telepathy going on which is really nice and unique. When I'm onstage, I take an almost James Brown-like role. I signal to people when to lay out, when to come in, when to go crazy and when a musician should be given more room. I'm pretty good at navigating the stage. A lot of my time is spent running my SlamJamz label these days and going against the politics of radio and television, but there's still no better enjoyment for me than being on the stage.

Electric guitar has always been a prominent element of Public Enemy's sound. Describe its significance for the group.

Public Enemy has always included guitar in its music because we've always stayed true to the original spirit of hip-hop, which means we respect the records. We know the musicians, sessions and labels involved with making the great records of the past. In order to best take advantage of the realm of samples, you need to know exactly what to look for, how to look for it and where those sonic elements are sitting in the mix. This

extends to our appreciation of guitarists too. Public Enemy's music has always consisted of three different layers. You have the base, bottom layer with drums, percussion and bass rhythms. Next, you have the vocal layer. Then you have the topping, which is basically always guitar-driven in our music, whether it's rhythm guitar or psychedelic fuzz noise, as we call it. When that topping doesn't consist of guitar, we applied other noise to that music in a guitar kind of way. What we do ended up impacting guitarists as well. For instance, Tom Morello of Rage Against the Machine really took notice of us and applied the guitar in an almost turntable-like way to his band's music.

We got involved with electric guitar because we were educated with a sense of what good music was. When I grew up in the '70s, I would listen to AM radio and hear stuff like Steely Dan's "Reelin' in the Years," the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction" and James Brown's "Doing It to Death" which all start off with some great guitar shit. We've always had the belief that guitar was something hip-hop shouldn't try to exist without. Unfortunately, if you look at Black music as a whole, the guitar went through a period of being practically non-existent. People in the community would often unfairly point to the hair and metal bands of the '80s and '90s and say "Hey, those long-haired white boys are the furthest thing from Black music." And because of their miseducation, they wouldn't realize that those white boys were in fact playing riffs that started 70 years prior by black artists. But Public Enemy members were always educated about that history. We've always known where things came from. We've used live guitarists since our first record *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* in 1987 which had Vernon Reid on it. Every record is a mixture with some of the guitar elements played and others sampled.

Who were your favorite guitarists to sample in the early days before copyright laws clamped down on artists' ability to do so freely?

You could never go wrong with Albert King, because he brought some

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really funky guitar to the table on those classic Stax records. We also liked to use James Brown's guitarists like Jimmy Nolan because of their great rhythms and freedom of expression. We'd also use '70s guitar riffs from people like Leslie West and Billy Squier, because they also had a big beat happening and the guitar was never that far away from it. Most hip-hop cats turn off the record as soon as the guitars came in, but that's pretty much where Public Enemy always started.

What's your perspective on the prominence of electric guitar in African-American music today?

It troubles me that Black music is now practically devoid of guitar because the business attached it to white boys' music. That made Black music very limited in that the emphasis has been on beats for so long. A lot of the musicians don't acknowledge that you can combine that with a great guitar lick. So, we have this situation where we have great black guitarists like Vernon Reid, Eric Gales and Ernie Isley getting ignored by both the rock world and the Black urban music world. For them to turn their backs on those guitarists is just stupid. It's like turning your back on Hendrix.

Why do you think people like Reid, Gales and Isley don't get wider acknowledgement for their contributions?

Black people don't acknowledge them because they aren't getting played on their radio and television stations. Therefore, black people have been disenfranchised from the guitar for most of the last 40 years. As for the rock guys, they've always been in their own little racist bubble most of the time. That particularly holds true for the older guys. These bubbles are a big problem with a lot of musicians. They create a bubble, thrive in it, but don't hear anything outside of it. A lot of this can be traced back to the early days of MTV. When MTV first came on, it would have Poison, Ratt

and bands of that ilk and their image would make black people run from MTV. It resulted in Black music being devoid of all guitar—even rhythm guitar. The rhythm guitar that did exist would be tucked so far back in the mix that it was irrelevant. It's such a crime because now you can't find the guitar—or the saxophone for that matter—in most Black music anymore.

It's related to education during elementary and high school. People inherently love music, but if you don't give people knowledge at an early age when they're first drawn to music, you're putting their musical interests in the attaché cases of business. The worst situation is having businesspeople tell you what to like. Educators try to tell you something, as opposed to businesspeople who try to sell you something.

Describe your creative process for me.

When I get an idea, I write it down and then I attach it to a great title. The title is paramount for me. Next, I try to find a musical situation that looks like it might fit with the idea. Sometimes I'll think of something that looks like it will be a disastrous fit, and that usually makes me even more attracted to it. Putting the musical side together is like being in a media storm. You can't tell how or when you're going to be hit on the head with what rock. It might start by hearing some music in your head and asking the musicians what they can add to it. There's a lot of freedom after the initial structure is determined. I sometimes pick musical ideas that might be really off-the-wall and the difficulty becomes trying to make that off-the-wall idea come back home a little bit. I'm not saying I'm Sun Ra, but I do have a weird approach to production and musicianship. Part of the key is taking what I like and transforming it into something other people will like.

What are the key challenges you face during your creative process?

Sometimes it's easy to fall into the structure of making a song

conventional. That can also extend to the length of the song. I'm attracted to the idea of 60-second and 16-minute records that contain a lot of peaks and valleys that only a musician can add to them. I'm not interested in the idea of just having words over a beat. I also believe that even if songs are different in texture and sound across a record, if they're all the same length, you can still burn out the listener. In general, I'm trying to fit something into what I do that I haven't done before. But I'm not trying to compete against our back catalog. I'm not trying to outdo what we've done in the past. I'm trying to create a total catalog that's as diverse as possible. If you start making the same music and saying the same thing over and over again, what good does it bring?

Another important part of the creative process for me is understanding the history and mindset of musicians of the past and being able to discuss that with musicians of the present. That's how I've been able to evolve creatively. I think a lot of musicians and artists who are just coming up often think what they're doing is brilliant, as if it's being done for the first time. Yeah, they're making something, but it may not be the first time it's been done. So, sometimes the perspective I bring to the table is knowledge from the past they can apply to their current and future work.

Despite the U.S. being in a constant state of political turmoil, the hip-hop world has rarely used its immense platform for significant social change. Why are there so few resilient political voices in hip-hop today?

It's because record companies have dictated to artists and everyone around them how they should think and act. An artist that wants to stand on his or her own two feet can't go looking for industry results. Sometimes you have to do what you gotta do and not worry about the results. I think people are afraid to be outspoken because they're afraid of poor sales. But making music looking for results is such a contrived and shortsighted way of working. Artists need to learn the history of music. You don't have to go

far back. You just have to go back to 1877 for the first recording. You really gotta know what you're talking about to push things forward.

Why do you think hip-hop doesn't respect its elders in the same way that rock, jazz and R&B audiences do?

It's because most hip-hop artists become popular when they're starting out and most of those acts aren't taught anything about their craft and its history. Understand this: The elements of hip-hop, which include graffiti, breakdancing and turntablism—the musicianship of it all—have been extracted from hip-hop to leave only rap. If the DNA has been extracted out of it and rap with shock value is the only thing you've got left, then what you've done is strip hip-hop down to the point where it can't lift itself out of the gutter.

There are some real genre problems out there. They aren't Public Enemy's problems because Flavor and I work hard to transcend the genre. For instance, Flavor has had number one television shows and I regularly speak at colleges and universities and am able to do pretty much anything I want on multiple levels compared to most rappers. We want hip-hop to be healthy, but the fact is rock music is healthier. Rap may sell more, but that's the result of machinery, not of artistry and musicianship. Rap sells more than jazz too, but I'd rather have all my people on my label get jazz results where they only sell 5,000 units and then enjoy a career where they can go play 200 gigs a year. That would be a dream.

March 2006



ANI DIFRANCO

DYNAMIC CONTRASTS

ANI DIFRANCO IS A CREATIVE FORCE unto herself. Since first hitting the folk circuit in the late '80s, the Buffalo, New York-based singer-songwriter and guitarist has forged a singular path that's inspired and challenged listeners worldwide. Musically, she's stretched the folk genre to its limits by infusing it with a variety of funk, pop, rock, electronica, and world music influences. Lyrically, her songs are often unapologetically political, typically drawing from her deep social conscience that seeks to explore and expose injustices and inequities wherever she sees them.

DiFranco's business acumen is also legendary. Since the beginning of her career, she's released all of her albums—at least one a year—through her own Righteous Babe record label. During its two-decade existence, Righteous Babe has evolved into a highly successful business that's developed a significant artist roster. With millions of DiFranco records sold, it has also inspired many other musicians to forego traditional music industry trappings and blaze their own trails.

Without question, DiFranco puts her money where her mouth is by using her influence to benefit grassroots political and cultural organizations throughout America. Her Righteous Babe Foundation has provided funding to groups working to protect women's reproductive rights, gay and lesbian organizations, and the movement to abolish the death penalty. And her concerts are typically bustling with teams of volunteers ready to provide information on her favorite causes to attendees.

In 2004, DiFranco's political voice was heard louder than ever. That

July, she traveled to Thailand and Myanmar with Irish singer-songwriter Damien Rice. Together, the duo visited refugee camps and met with dissidents determined to advance freedom and democracy in Myanmar—a nation ruled by one of the world’s most brutal military dictatorships. Upon her return, DiFranco felt inspired to help launch the 2004 *Vote Dammit!* tour. The roadshow saw DiFranco journey through America’s swing states to help spur apathetic voters to exercise their democratic muscles, as well as champion progressive causes and candidates. Though DiFranco was anything but pleased that George W. Bush seized the presidency again that year, she took solace in the fact that the tour motivated thousands of newly energized voters to go to the polls.

DiFranco’s songwriting often incorporates meanings and messages gleaned from the numerous movements she takes part in, but it’s usually just as steeped in personal storytelling. For instance, 2005’s *Knuckle Down* found her heartfelt vocals and intricate, percussive fingerpicking situated within one of her most reflective collections to date. Splintered relationships, familial drama and moving on to higher ground take center stage on the album. Like the songs themselves, DiFranco’s creative process also straddles several realms.

Describe how you go about putting songs together.

For me, songs are born with a guitar and my journal at my side. My various guitars have different voices and they function as my singing and writing partners. The unique qualities of a guitar’s voice have a real effect on what comes out. I also just follow my muse and her pace and bidding. I’m on the prolific side of writers. My muse is always there, whispering in my ear. So I just have to pay attention to her in very intentional ways. The songs are created as uniquely as they come out. They tend to have different natures. I’m not one with a really specific sound or formula that I rely on each time. The songwriting process is either really visceral, emotional and immediate, where I sit down and write something from start to finish,

or it's an ongoing meditation that gets sculpted and re-sculpted. The latter process has more of the intellect involved. For instance, on *Knuckle Down*, "Parameters" was a real vomiting of words, whereas a song like "Lag Time" was more of a process. It was something I worked on for months. It represented the "Oh! I finally got the bridge" kind of writing.

I'm always touring and performing, so throwing things out at an audience is also often part of the writing process for me. It's certainly part of my song development. I'll write a song and the words and chords will be there, the melody will mostly be there, but performing it is where the song grows up and really becomes itself. A lot of that has to do with audience interaction. For instance, I'll write a lyric and won't realize it will be misunderstood until I sing it at people and see that they're taking it the wrong way. Or I'll write lyrics that I didn't realize were funny. It's very enlightening to be a public, performing writer.

In terms of documenting and recording the songs, that can happen at different periods in the song's lifespan, depending on the song. Some songs I've only just written when I'm going to record them and others have been alive and moving through the world for awhile. So, some songs I've documented in a more infant stage and they might develop and change afterwards. Others are more mature by the time they hit tape.

How have you evolved as a songwriter across your career?

It's a constant evolution with me. I feel like a new person every month or so. [laughs] But songwriting itself is definitely a muscle you work on and develop over time. Having said that, some of the old songs still hold up. I'm still playing them and they're as good as anything I'm writing now. I guess I've always had my sensibility, but I have been working on the craft for 15 years now. That really came into play with the writing of *Knuckle Down* in that I basically wrote all of these songs in the space of a few months. It was because I invited Joe Henry, who's also a great singer-songwriter, to co-produce the project and we set a date to make the record. So I sort

of wrote to a deadline which represented really exercising the craft of songwriting. It felt good. It made me feel sort of powerful in my work, like “Okay, I’m going to make an album in May. I better write 10 songs and just set to it.”

What responsibility do you feel as a songwriter to reflect the truth as you see it around you?

That’s at the epicenter of what I understand songwriting to be. Even if you’re inventing a story or messing with the facts, it’s still all about telling the truth. A song really needs to ring true in order to connect with people. Even a fictionalized truth still needs to really be based in showing oneself or a sort of bravery in terms of openness and honesty.

Is it sometimes a challenge to balance personal perspectives and proselytizing?

I’ve been struggling a lot with that lately. Since the songs I wrote for *Knuckle Down*, I’ve been veering towards the external and political with a big “P” and that’s harder to do. Love songs are easy compared to communicating very specific and deliberate political ideas. It’s difficult to avoid sounding pedantic, heavy-handed or preachy. You have to be very careful with how you use language. A word like “love” will just flow right by in a song, but if you try to use a word like “patriarchy,” suddenly the world around you is slamming on the brakes and running for cover. It’s amazing to me that it’s almost impossible to use certain words and language that are just as essential and basic to our ever-present realities as love. There’s love all around us, but there’s also patriarchy around us worldwide, every day at every moment in every society. Yet it’s very hard to sing a word like “patriarchy,” much less “multinational corporation” in a ditty and get away with it. I regularly discuss this with my political writing comrades. There are some friends I have like Hamell On Trial and Dan Bern who also endeavor to write political material. We’re always asking ourselves “How do we do

this?" To speak politically lends itself to prose or academic writing. But to make it flow within a musical context is something I find very challenging.

How do you manage to remain so prolific and also find time to run your own record label?

The truth is, I'm not there running the joint. Having a great staff and Scot Fisher, a really powerful, brilliant best friend who is the label president, factors in heavily. He's the one that built the office from the ground up. He started working with my other best friend at the time way back in the day and has slowly and organically built the ongoing concern that is Righteous Babe. My involvement with the label is much more on the conceptual, direction, inspiration, and political levels. Scot and I have an ongoing dialogue that manifests itself in my work out on the road performing and writing, and his work at home trying to keep the label going. So it's mostly his business sense and prowess that factors in there. I'm certainly not there every day working. I just get the credit. [laughs]

Even with *Knuckle Down* just coming out as we speak, I'm already working on my next record. I already have 10 songs and am spending my holiday vacation in New Orleans trying to record them. I get up every morning, start patching in stuff and try to subject myself to the sound of my own voice again. I have to try and make records happen in my downtime because I tend to go on tour for months at a time. So I'm really good at setting imaginary deadlines for myself and chasing them. It's part of being your own boss. You really have to be self-motivated and that's something I've kind of got down.

Why did you ask Joe Henry to co-produce Knuckle Down after producing all of your previous records yourself?

My last record, *Educated Guess*, was a totally solitary endeavor. I've always been one for contrasts in life, so after going through that process

of making a record alone at home and being alone a lot in my life, I felt it was time to get out of my own little head and world and collaborate again. In the past, I've worked with my own band on records, but the way *Knuckle Down* was made was very different. With my band, we would tour and come off the road and just go into the studio. We'd be totally rehearsed, tight and just perform the songs to tape. With *Knuckle Down*, it was more of "Hi, my name is Ani! Okay, this tune is in D." [laughs] So it was different working with session musicians. The other big difference was that I've always had a close hand in the recording and mixing of my records. This time, it was Husky Hoskulds the engineer who mixed, so *Knuckle Down* has a very different sound to it.

How did Henry's approach affect how the album came together?

The way this record was made was a first for me. In a nutshell, Joe was a producer in an old-fashioned sense in that he brought along his team that he often works with on records, including an engineer, drummer and keyboard player. All of those people that worked on *Knuckle Down* have also made a bunch of other records together at The Sound Factory studio in West Hollywood. So, I sort of plugged into Joe's scene there in Los Angeles and brought in my tunes, my fabulous bass player Todd Sickafoose and the special guests on the record. So it was a meeting of two crews. Joe was really involved in the pre-production and the assembling of the cast, and then we got in the studio and I just went to work with the band. We tracked two tunes a day which included teaching the songs to the band. We laid down the record live in six days.

Describe your relationship with the guitar.

The acoustic guitar taught me everything I know about music in terms of the relationship between melody and rhythm. It also taught me about

dynamics. If there's one thing I love the most about my instrument, it's the dynamic range. You can just touch it and get a particular tone or sound or you can spank it. You can also pull a string six inches off the fretboard and slap it back down. Really exploring the extent of possible dynamics on the guitar has been a lot of fun for me.

I think of my guitar as my best friend. It's always been there. Since I was nine years old, I've turned to my guitar for company, for release and for solace. I had a pretty fucked-up family when I was young and I started writing songs when I was 14 or so. It felt good to express my pain and let it out. There's a reason it's such a universal instrument. It's a perfect accompaniment for singing. It's also a perfect tool for making music in solitude. I think I've led a pretty solitary life along the way and the guitar is the one friend that's always been there to console me.

Tell me how your approach to percussive fingerpicking initially developed.

When I was very young, I took a few guitar lessons and learned some basics. I actually learned how to read music when I was around nine or 10, but I can't do that anymore. I also learned some folk fingerpicking patterns. Then I kind of put down the guitar for a few years around age 11 or 12. I was doing other kinds of art and expressing myself in other ways. When I picked the guitar back up at age 14, that's when my self-teaching started and I personalized my approach. In terms of that really percussive fingerpicking thing I arrived upon, it had a lot to do with the fact that I had already started playing solo in bars as a teenager in Buffalo. They weren't the easiest gigs, especially when people were just there to drink and pick up the person next to them. They typically couldn't give a fuck about the chick with the acoustic guitar in the corner pouring her little teenage heart out. [laughs] So I was developing ways of making people shut up, turn around and get interested. So, becoming more vehement with my playing was just inherent to my energy and necessary for the job at hand, which

was survival in bars.

How do you look back at 2004's Vote Dammit! tour and what you were able to accomplish?

I'm endeavoring to look back positively although I keep encountering friends all over the place who are right back to a place of disillusionment veering towards that kind of "throw your hands up" resignation. I know a lot of people who voted for the first time in November 2004, and since then, I've had a lot of conversations with those same people who say "See? It doesn't work. Fuck it. It doesn't help at all. Boy, that was an ill-fated mission you were on, huh?" I'm trying to be the person in that conversation who points out that the record number of voters who turned out in November was around 62 percent. Okay, a bunch of us finally turned out for the first time to vote, but we are still not voting in the numbers we need to be voting in. We need the rest of us to vote in order to make a democracy. During the *Vote Dammit!* tour, I heard a lot of people just saying "November, November, November—get out there and vote in November." And I was quite clear about the fact that it wasn't about November—it's about from now on. It's about changing our lifestyles to become citizens again so we can once again have a democracy, which we don't have when we don't participate. I've been trying to stay positive and help people feel like we've only just begun to fight and that you can't give up after just one trip to the voting booth. That's not what democracy is. We did make incredible strides in 2004. Even on my little tour, we registered so many people and so many became interested in politics for the first time. We need to continue building on that and not just resigning ourselves again. We need unity, strategy and energy.

You visited Thailand and Myanmar in 2004. How did that trip impact you?

Speaking of democracy, it was incredible to see people risking their

lives every day for the idea of democracy and fighting for democracy in a violent, oppressive military dictatorship. It's amazing when you consider the sort of complacent apathy of privileged American citizens. It was inspiring to see people who really believe in the concept of democracy that's been so defiled in America, and hold it up so high. It sort of renewed my faith in the idea. On a musical level, we were traveling to refugee camps, orphanages, medical clinics, and displaced communities of very poor, beleaguered people hiding in the jungles, banished from their villages because of violence. Damien Rice and I were the musicians on this particular journey. The first thing that would happen is the children would all stand and sing us a song or two. Then the beater, bad-ass, backwards-strung guitar would be pulled out and we'd all sing. It was amazing how we would show up so very white and other and privileged, and they would look at us sideways and we'd look at them wide-eyed. Then as soon as the music happened and we opened up our faces and sang back, it was like suddenly we were family. Instantly, we were connected in the way that only music can make happen. On a daily basis, that really put me in touch with what music is and why we make it.

Does spirituality play a role in your music?

Sure, but being an atheist, I don't think in terms of God or higher beings. Music is my church. It's my way of uplifting myself and giving love to others. The act of performance, like after you've been jumping around, sweating, screaming, and wailing away on a guitar for an hour puts you in an altered state of consciousness. It's also my transcendental meditation. [laughs] There are moments when I'm playing when I'm physically transported out of my body in the way other people achieve through meditation and other spiritual practices. So music is definitely my path to God as it were.

How did you arrive at the atheist conclusion?

When I look around the world, I see that human beings are animals. We are temporary and simply parts of a big whole. We have our animate phase that's very tiny and brief, and then we return to the oneness of it all. So I don't know that my animal eye recognizes death as the end. I look at religions and mythologies about afterlife and gods, and the poet in me recognizes that these are metaphors and stories we tell to explain things like good and bad. For example, some religions state that you should be good because otherwise you go to Hell. The way I see it is religions are full of essential truths as told through these metaphors and stories. I think if you lead a bad life and spread negativity, you end up in a very negative place. Negativity is what the world will give back to you and the world will be Hell. So I see religions as just being contexts in which people speak about morality and responsibility, but I don't take the stories literally.

January 2005



BÉLA FLECK

NOMADIC INSTINCTS

SEEKING FRESH HORIZONS FOR THE BANJO is a hallmark of Béla Fleck's storied career. From his 1980s tenure with bluegrass innovators New Grass Revival, to inventive solo output that's seen him integrate the banjo into classical, pop, country, and countless global musics, to the everything-*and-the-kitchen sink* experimentation of Béla Fleck & The Flecktones, he has helped to reestablish the banjo as a cool, contemporary and cutting-edge instrument.

After several Flecktones albums, including 2003's ambitious triple CD *Little Worlds* that found the act collaborating with all-star guests including Derek Trucks, Branford Marsalis and Bobby McFerrin, the group chose a back-to-basics approach for its 2006 release, *The Hidden Land*. The disc solely features the Flecktones quartet, also comprised of bassist Victor Wooten, percussionist Roy "Future Man" Wooten and saxophonist Jeff Coffin. Together, the band expertly hones its trademark combination of bluegrass, jazz, funk, and rock influences within a more spacious and stripped-down environment.

The Hidden Land was recorded just prior to a year-long Flecktones hiatus after 17 years of intense activity since first forming in 1988. But the Nashville-based Fleck was hardly dormant during his sabbatical. He kept himself busy performing in a trio with bassist Stanley Clarke and violinist Jean-Luc Ponty, as well as working on a concerto with cellist Edgar Meyer and tabla master Zakir Hussain.

During 2005, he also traveled to Africa to trace the roots of the banjo

in that continent and make a record and documentary titled *Throw Down Your Heart*, released in 2009. Both showcase Fleck's dynamic and diverse interaction with musicians as he travels through Uganda, Tanzania, The Gambia, and Mali. Fleck considers the music that resulted among the most ambitious he's ever been involved with. It also represents the most significant example to date of how he's reinvigorating the roots of his instrument while simultaneously taking it into previously uncharted territory.

Why did you choose to keep things in the family for The Hidden Land?

The band has been together for 17 years and we're always trying to find the right next thing to do and not repeat ourselves. Having a lot of guests playing with us was an incredible amount of fun, but if we were to continue along that path, we would become very predictable. Having other people play with you takes the heat off you to really dig deep and be creative. With guest musicians, there's an automatic inspiration that happens and it's not necessarily the same challenge.

Provide some insight into the group's collective music-making approach.

These days, a lot of it happens at soundchecks. It's very rare that we schedule a rehearsal off the road. That's because we're on the road so much anyway and everyone has lots of commitments outside of the band. When you tour, most of the time is typically spent just sitting around, so if we can make soundchecks into a creative endeavor, it lets us get an incredible amount of stuff done. Our engineer prefers we do this stuff after the soundcheck, but the truth is when you first walk on stage and pick up your instruments, that's when the creativity often strikes.

The way it might work is Victor starts screwing around before anyone else gets to soundcheck and he'll fall into something really special in an interesting, odd time signature. And then when I get there, I'll hear him

and say “That sounds really cool. Let’s keep playing that.” If things evolve, I might say “Let’s try to make that into a Flecktones tune.” While we’re working on it, we might think of a piece Jeff Coffin wrote that we never recorded, and realize there was a piece of it that would work well with Victor’s tune. Suddenly, boom, you start getting this compound thing going on. Then I think “Wow, where can this still go? Let’s write some more” and we might do that on the spot, and soon we have a whole band tune written.

Is the process a democratic one?

I’m typically the last word, because I think somebody needs to be. So, I’m the funnel it all goes through, but it’s as democratic as I think it can be.

How does your personal creative process differ?

Sometimes it starts with me searching around the banjo for cool stuff and sometimes it’s stuff that pops into my head. There’s usually a spark of inspiration and I just run with it and everything happens really fast. A big chunk of it has to be there from the beginning. Typically, most of a verse or a chorus has to pop into my head to begin. Although most of what I do is instrumental, I do think of the pieces in songwriting terms. Also, I find that when I haven’t played the banjo all day or for a couple of days, the first thing that comes out is a new tune when I pick it up. I’ve started recording everything I do when I pick up my banjo on a multi-track recorder. When I’m done, I dump everything into Pro Tools and edit the material into a core of ideas that are strong enough to build songs from. Ideas can also happen anywhere, like when I’m driving or running. I’ll start humming a melody or singing an improvisation. The good thing about those ideas is that they aren’t necessarily banjo-istic. If I sing them first, they can sound more melodic or like a vocal.

I understand you tend to be very self-critical when it comes to writing.

When I compose, I write a lot of stuff I'm unsatisfied with. I might think it's kind of nice, but not good enough, so I have to keep pushing and pushing until I come up with something that is really special as a composition. And in the studio, I'll do take after take after take until I think I really have something good happening. I tend to hone in on sections and keep playing them and troubleshoot until everything falls in place perfectly and it feels like a great weave. I might record 100 solos to get into an area I haven't been in before or to complete a thought in a way I haven't done before. The solo might be just a minute-and-a-half long, but I'll go back and listen to those 100 takes to figure out what was good, what wasn't good, what I like and what I don't like about my playing. Sometimes it won't be until takes 91 through 94 before I find something I think is decent. There's a critical element in putting it all together too. I also like to edit takes together to ensure all the best live moments that happened in the studio are captured in a song.

In other words, you have a serious perfectionist streak.

It's a working style that developed along the way. Maybe it's a justification for being a picky little creep over the years. [laughs] People used to say to me "Hey, that's fine. That's good enough. Stop." And I'd go "I don't want to stop because I'm not done." That approach made me very resentful in the early days because I felt a lot of pressure to accept whatever happened on the live track or to accept one of the first overdubs I did just to not bore the other people in the room or put them through the hell I was going through because I wasn't satisfied. I think musicians who do a lot of recording have gone through periods where they just weren't happy with what they do and everybody tells them what they did is fine. Then the record comes out and you listen to it and go "I should never have let them make me keep that solo. It's just not good enough."

Other times, you think “That was fine. What was my problem?” There is a lot of psychological stuff that goes into this. You have to manage yourself in order to accurately assess if you’re doing something positive or negative.

How else have you evolved as a musician and composer since the beginning of The Flecktones?

I’m not sure I’m a better one, but I make different choices today. Edgar Meyer and I were talking about how most of the brilliant work done by brilliant people is done in their twenties. That’s frustrating for people in their forties to consider. So, I’m trying to think of stuff all the time that I haven’t done before. Certain things I came up with earlier had a simplicity or directness that’s harder for me to get to now. I continue to look for those elements and they’re represented on *The Hidden Land*. For instance, “The Whistle Tune” that ends the record has a good bit of stuff going on, but at its core is a simple, straightforward melody that’s pretty hummable. When I wrote it, it had a certain depth to it and felt like a real song, instead of another complicated banjo thing. I’ve been looking for things on the banjo for 30 years now, so it’s sometimes harder to find something I haven’t done before, so the choices are more subtly different than they used to be. I am rejecting more things that seem overly complicated or sappy for no reason. I’m always trying to get into a direct, focused, pure kind of writing. That’s what I’m always hoping for.

What’s your philosophy as a bandleader?

My philosophy is to let everyone figure out what they want to do first and try not to interfere if possible. If you’ve got really good people, you should give them a lot of space. As a composer and leader, I find if I leave them alone, they’ll come up with things that are more natural for them than if I tell them exactly what to do. So I start with that approach, but always keep in mind the vision for the song. If it’s not working, I feel

comfortable making suggestions. I want to maintain a critical element in the group to ensure we use the best ideas and keep looking for more. If things aren't working, I try to ask a lot of questions like "Why isn't it working?" and "Does everyone agree or is it just me?" Ultimately, I'm the leader, so I get to make the call, but I find I'm at my best when I lay back and I'm not too critical early on. Then as we get deeper, I try to refine things and identify areas to improve. I try to be as open and relaxed as possible.

Have you always been this way?

No. In fact I think I made some mistakes early on, before The Flecktones, on some of my solo records. I would push people really hard. I remember someone saying to me "Hey, if you don't like the way I'm playing, why did you ask me to play?" My response was "I do like the way you play, but I want you to do something different than I've ever heard you do before." That didn't feel very good to some people. So it made me want to find a different way to get that point across without hurting anyone's feelings. It's been a real challenge. The way for me to do it now is to get great people, record a lot of stuff, and then I choose what to use after they leave. I always make sure I have more than I need and different options. Generally, there will be something they did that I'm going to really love and I'll have the ability to choose it. That's worked out pretty well. It balances my controlling, intense characteristics with an approach that allows people to contribute their best work.

How do you address the issue of sustain on the banjo?

One solution is to create the illusion of sustain by playing a lot of notes that overlap and ring on top of each other. I try to keep my lines really flowing and use open strings when I can. I also try not to get off the notes too quickly, even when I'm playing fast. If I'm playing closed position

scales or lines, I don't rush so the notes become staccato. A psychological technique I use is to imagine the note being longer than it really is, so I don't rush to try and fill it in. Another interesting thing I do when playing single-note lines is to use vibrato on the note to draw out every nuance possible. I got that from watching acoustic guitarists milk notes. Having said all of that, a lot of the time, the starkness of the banjo's notes dying out can be a very attractive sound and one that creates room for other instruments.

You traveled to Africa to trace the roots of the banjo. Give me a snapshot of the journey the instrument has made.

The banjo originated in Africa. It's an instrument the slaves brought across from West Africa to America. Gradually, the more they played it in the United States, the more it moved into the mainstream. It got to the point where all kinds of people played the banjo. In the late 1800s, women were playing the instrument in the parlor, people were playing it in blackface doing imitations of plantation music, others wrote Broadway shows on it, and it was used in ragtime music. Then it branched out into early jazz. If you think of Jelly Roll Morton or Louis Armstrong, the banjo played a big role as the rhythm instrument in their music. Gradually, it fell out of favor as the guitar emerged and then all the banjo players lost their jobs and had to become guitarists if they wanted to work. The banjo moved out of jazz completely, except for groups that played the old music.

During the period when the banjo was being played in folk traditions, starting with black musicians and then picked up by white players, it blended all of the different musics around, from African music to Irish and English music. America is a melting pot and it melted onto the banjo. Gradually, from that stew, old time music and bluegrass emerged. And here I am years later working in realms that remain connected to those universes. My interest is bringing the banjo back into jazz and reigniting interest in it as an instrument that's played in all kinds of music, be it rock,

classical, bluegrass, or jazz. There's a role for banjo in all of these genres. I really enjoy finding ways for the banjo to fit. Going to Africa and bringing back the modern banjo to interact with musicians playing old banjos, singers, percussionists, guitarists, and thumb piano and marimba players, was amazing. *Throw Down Your Heart* is only partly about revisiting the origins of the instrument because I'm not a historian. I was more interested in this as a musical safari in which I went to these places and found incredible musicians, and having the experience of capturing it on film and audio. The goal was to represent how deep the instrument is, particularly for people who can't go to Africa and hear these guys live.

What made 2005 an ideal period to pursue this exploration?

It was related to The Flecktones taking a year off. I was looking for a big project that I always wanted to do that I never had enough time for because The Flecktones is usually a full-time job. After we made the decision to take a break, I went for it. I felt like I wanted to do it while I was relatively young and brave, still had a lot of energy, and wasn't too used to my comforts. It seemed like a dangerous and complicated trip, so I didn't want to wait too long to do it. I worked with my brother, Sascha Paladino, to research and put it together. It was hard work to make it happen, and difficult to find people in those countries that could shepherd us and make sure we were safe and lead us to the people we were trying to find. It was a huge endeavor, but incredibly successful. I'm thrilled with the music I got to play with these people on *Thrown Down Your Heart*. It represents the biggest adventure of my life.

Tell me about some of the broader musical perspectives you brought back with you from Africa.

The most important thing I witnessed is how music fits into the lives of Africans. Everyone plays music. It's part of what happens in a day in a

village. They have songs for different things that happen—songs for the morning, for birth, and to teach kids what to watch out for when they grow up. We have some similar ideas in our folk songs, but they come from that African root. The trip also helped me move into a place of letting go of control. As you can tell from our conversation, I'm very much for fighting for control to make things as good as I can make them. I am usually very well-rehearsed when I approach a musical situation, but this was a case where I couldn't always do that. I had to trust in the moment, which I really enjoyed doing. The truth is I sometimes get too prepared and rehearsed, and it doesn't actually help the music. So, part of this was about letting things go and allowing music to happen. I invested hundreds of thousands of dollars of my own money into this project and I could have just shown up somewhere and it could have been a disaster. I had to let go and trust that really great things would happen and they did almost every time we recorded and filmed.

Describe your perspective on integrating so many different world musics into your approach.

Much of my interest relates to State Department trips I did with New Grass Revival to different countries, as well as trips to India, Africa and the Far East with The Flecktones. Wherever we went, I walked around with a recorder and just recorded music on the streets. These were whole other worlds of music I didn't know about and I thought most of it was playable on a banjo if I had a lifetime to spend on it. Some musics are easier to fall into and others are all work, requiring an amazing amount of preparation. Indian classical music falls into the latter category. If you're going to play that music on a high level, your counting skills have to be incredibly honed, as well as your ability to play raags the way they're supposed to be played. I've dabbled with it enough to understand a fraction of what's going on. I realized if that's all I wanted to do, that music would sound good on the banjo, but it would take a lifetime. So, I explore these musics in

a shallower fashion. I'm inspired by Indian classical music and I've learned enough to push myself into some different directions for my own music. I've introduced elements of the raag and rhythmic concepts into my music, but I would never presume to say I'm an Indian musician. That would be as presumptuous as me saying I'm a classical musician because I made a classical album called *Perpetual Motion*, even though I won a couple of Grammys for it. I learned an album's worth of pieces and played them, but I couldn't go out and tour the classical world. I don't have the time to do that and continue with everything else I'm doing. My method is to take a project-by-project approach and put a lot of attention into an area for a limited time—like practicing African music for a year. Now, I'm kind of done with African music. Once the record is out, I'm going to find another mountain to try and climb.

I understand Return to Forever played a major role in propelling your interest to stretch out on your instrument.

That's true. When I was in high school playing banjo for a couple of years, Return to Forever came to my town and played the Beacon Theater in New York City. I got to hear them and it was a revelatory experience. It changed my whole world to hear Chick Corea, Stanley Clarke, Al Di Meola, and Lenny White doing something so creative and exciting. The audience was going crazy checking out all of this wild stuff. I remember watching them and thinking "All of the notes they play are on the banjo. How come I don't know where any of them are?" They knew their instruments from top to bottom and I literally went home after that concert, got out my banjo and started learning scales and modes. I was up really late. [laughs] That became my new thing—to learn how to play all over the neck. I wanted to go beyond the basic positions banjo players played in. I wanted to understand the entire instrument and be able to play in any scale, mode or key. In other words, I wanted to do what the Return to Forever guys could do.

When I got a call from Stanley to ask if I'd come out on tour with him and Jean-Luc Ponty in 2005, there was no way I could say no, even though I was hoping to have a quiet year. It was an incredible compliment and it went right to the heart of who I am. To get to play with someone who is such a hero of mine and changed the way I play was too good to pass up. I was also a big fan of Jean-Luc Ponty, who plays such beautiful lines and has a wonderful concept on the violin. Both of them transcended their instruments and nobody else plays like them. What they did and continue to do is what I'm trying to do on the banjo. They're both full of inspiration, unusual genius and were a lot of fun to work with.

You've said you consider music something that "helps you create a path to yourself." Tell me about that philosophy.

When I said that, I was trying to get to the point of what music was about for me and it's a heavy question to ponder. For some of us, music has a spiritual element to it. It's definitely that way for me. If I treat it that way, then the goal of music is to express who I am on the Earth in one way or another. It's a lofty goal and it doesn't always work out that way. When you listen to someone's music, you hear a whole lot of who they are in it. You can also hear if someone is insecure when they play too much or if they're too busy on their instrument. You can also hear where they've evolved to in a lot of ways. Some people are naturally deep souls and it comes out in the music. Some people are enjoyable to listen to and it's not that deep, it's just faster. I'm talking about music that people are playing, not stuff that's happened in a computer, though we might manipulate a recording afterwards.

Do you feel any pressure to constantly break new ground?

Definitely. It's almost like I made a deal with the banjo when I started playing it and I really owe it. Music is almost a religious experience for

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me. Part of it is to simply please myself and part of it is because I have more opportunities to interact with musicians who are on a very high level because of my abilities and the place I've arrived at in the business. They will return my phone calls and want to get together and I get to learn from all of them. That makes so many things possible that could not have happened 10 years ago. I love knowing there is always something new to look forward to.

January 2006



MICHAEL HEDGES

FINDING FLOW

ORDERLY LINES OF APPLES, carrots, pea pods, and other organic produce fill the tables. Gleaming bottles of spring water reflect the dim yellow lights as the enticing aroma of fresh-squeezed juices fills the air. “Fresh enzymes, man, gotta have ‘em!” declares guitarist Michael Hedges, the proprietor of the traveling health food stand.

The backstage area of Toronto’s Danforth Music Hall is the stand’s home for the evening. Hedges is decked out in swirling, psychedelic sweatpants and a bright yellow tank top. His frizzy mane of shoulder-length hair is tied back in a ponytail. He’s in the middle of whipping up an apple-and-greens cocktail on his portable juicer. He quaffs down the beverage and quietly begins closing down shop, for he’s due on stage in mere minutes to serve up a different kind of refreshment. Its ingredients include quirky, witty songs and eclectic acoustic guitar stylings seasoned with flute and keyboards—his recipe for audience enthrallment.

Slapping and tapping, strumming and snapping, Hedges hits the stage and engages the crowd with his one-of-a-kind fingerstyle guitar techniques. It’s an astonishingly original approach that incorporates alternate tunings, harmonics and striking the guitar’s body and strings with his fingers, palms and knuckles. That Hedges often manages to play such intricate, avant-folk pieces while singing, dancing and spinning around barefoot makes his performances even more remarkable.

It’s memories like these that linger in the minds of friends and fans that knew Hedges, who died in an automobile accident in 1997 at age

43. Though he was revered for his solo guitar work, Hedges chose to pursue a new direction for 1994's *Road to Return*. The singer-songwriter record found the Oklahoma-born musician merging his guitar playing and bright, airy vocals with a more produced, pop-oriented sound. Its full slate of percussion and synthesizer accompaniment was a radical departure from previous albums comprised largely of solo guitar and vocals, with occasional additional instrumentation.

Hedges remains best known for 1984's *Aerial Boundaries*. The groundbreaking instrumental album showcased his revolutionary technique which finds his left hand tapping notes while the right hand picks the remaining strings. Initially, many musicians and listeners alike believed they were hearing guitar duets. They were often stunned when they realized it was Hedges performing solo with no overdubs.

At the time of this interview, conducted backstage prior to the Toronto gig, the guitar remained a core element of Hedges' existence, but his musical outlook was now integrated into a spiritual philosophy based on the principles of Chi Kung. The influence of those teachings was evident in most of *Road to Return's* lyrics and his choice of words during this discussion.

Many feel Road to Return represents a departure for you, but I understand you see it differently.

Let's look at the difference between my first album *Breakfast in the Field* and *Aerial Boundaries*. *Breakfast in the Field* was me trying to be as nice to my label Windham Hill as I could be. I wanted to be exactly what they had to offer, which was acoustic guitar. So I used two microphones and did it straight. *Aerial Boundaries* was my record. The compositions were more developed and I did some ensemble work and electronic stuff on it. By the time that was purged out of me, I had a bunch of songs left, so I did them with just guitar and vocals on *Watching My Life Go By*. Then I had been touring so much that I developed a lot of cover tunes. So, I put

out a live record. After that, I became interested in different textures, so I started on *Taproot*. It was very textural with flute, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, some synthesizers, and a little percussion. It expanded texturally with not so much solo guitar. *Road to Return* is an extension of that. There are more textures and of course, it's all vocals. So to me, it's a line of things. It doesn't seem like anything is departing. It seems like things are evolving.

I wanted to do some arranging for my songs instead of just doing them with guitar and vocals or keyboard and vocals. I wanted to further develop them to include more instrumentation that suited them well. And now the stuff I'm writing is even more textural. Stepping back from the guitar endears me to it. I like it more than ever. But I was getting a little tired of playing acoustic guitar all the time. I've always played keyboards and flute. Now, I'm finding my voice—literally. I'm finding my singing voice, my keyboard expression and my flute expression. So, *Road to Return* is everything I can play. Plus I engineered it. So it all seems very solo, although the textures are very varied.

What did you learn about yourself when making Road to Return?

I learned I have my attachments. When you start talking to people on a spiritual path, pretty soon you start coming to attachments. What are you attached to? What dogma is it that's blocking your energy? To me, total freedom is being free of attachments. Am I attached to solo guitar? Am I attached to tonalities? Am I attached to a style? What is it that's got a girdle on my spirit? And I think part of it was having another engineer in the studio. There was something about having another presence there that was blocking me. It doesn't mean that's not right. I feel I should be able to work with an engineer. But I wanted to experiment a lot in the studio. That's the reason I did it myself. I wanted to goof off. I wanted to try fun things and do it all on my own. And I didn't want to become attached to that either, you see? So, it can work all around you and you can fool yourself into thinking you are free, but what is total freedom? That's

the question.

What were the seeds of your spiritual awakening?

I think it has to do with turning 40, having my father pass on, and watching my children grow up. You go around that magic year 40 and you see that your life really is becoming a beginning. You can see forward, but you can see backward quite a ways. I think when that happens, you find out that you are a spirit. It can happen anytime, of course. People get it whenever. But for me, it just happened. I don't know what it is. It's a new energy coming through. This seems to be what's guiding me—my spiritual path, rather than a guitar path. In other words, when I'm thinking about expression now, I think I'm free of the guitar and being free of the guitar will enable me to play the guitar better. So I'm just as concerned with making my body more flexible because that will improve my sense of rhythm. I'm more interested in yoga now than writing fingerpicking guitar solos. The other thing is that I've already written a lot of fingerpicking guitar solos. I'd like to try other things. It doesn't mean I'm putting it away permanently. Lucky for me, I was able to put it away before I got sick of it. Now, I can look at it in a much more complete way.

This has been going on ever since I started music—all my life. To me, it seems like a seamless thing. And now it's worked its way into my meaning. For awhile, it was guitar. It was just guitar. And I became known as a guitarist. My agent still thinks I'm a guitarist because that's what people come to see: "Michael Hedges the guitarist." Well, when you get pigeonholed for so long, you start to think "Gee, I really can do this thing." I won the *Guitar Player* magazine "Best Steel-String Acoustic Guitar Player" award five years in a row. So, they put me in the "Gallery of the Greats." Pretty soon, you think "Yeah! I can do this." And then you look at other things and you think "Hey! This looks like fun. I think I'll learn how to scuba dive." [laughs] And then when you scuba dive, you see the same things start to fall into place like when you learned how to play guitar. Or

when you learn how to sew and then everything is like sewing. And then everything is like everything else. So, to the best of my knowledge, learning how to appreciate modern art is having an effect on my guitar playing. Even though the guitar isn't in my hands, I'm learning how to play better guitar by going to the art gallery—by not being attached to the guitar all the time. It's enriching my soul and the soul can flow into the guitar. That's the way I think about it.

Describe the elements of your spiritual path.

It involves no dogma, you see. To me, it is freedom. What is freedom? To me, freedom is what will allow your spirit to expand and grow or gain consciousness. It's a consciousness expansion. It involves no set pattern. It's not Christian or Buddhist or anything that can be labeled. It's the same problem as when you try to categorize music. How can you classify a person's spiritual path? You can say what influenced it, but you can't define it as it's happening. The definition comes after it's happened. I'm not a member of any organization. I have teachers and this is important to me. I started studying with a Chinese master who taught me Chi Kung. "Chi" is energy. "Kung" is exercise. That's how simple it is—energy and exercise. You study Chi Kung and you're presented with ways to enable your energy to flow throughout your body.

There's some other forms. You could study Aikido or Kung Fu or Ju Jitsu or Tae Kwon Do or any of these dances that go on in these fighting forms. But that's like saying "I play Country and Western or New Age." What my teacher does is explain the compositional journey and then you go and are free to do whatever you want to. So I apply Chi Kung to my guitar playing and musicianship. It doesn't mean that I'm following any particular kind of exercise. It's an awareness that my teacher has given me for energy and he does that with direct transmission. When you're in a room with this guy, you just get it. [laughs] It's really beyond words. It's just an awareness you get throughout your body. Some people would call

this feeling “the spirit of the Lord.” They’d say Jesus Christ gave this to them. And if I was into the Christian form of Chi Kung, I would say that. You feel something in yourself and call it that. But to me, it’s more sacred and personal.

You’re practically beaming when you talk about this stuff.

[laughs] Well, that’s the real telling thing, isn’t it? How peaceful have you become? Lucky for me, I knew I was fucked up. People would look at me and say “There’s Michael. He’s going through something.” I was lucky enough to find out that I wasn’t the big man I thought I was. It’s nothing specific. Let’s say it was a release of the ego. You look at yourself and you’re not necessarily happy with maybe the way you manipulate people or the way you cling to attachments such as power or money. I think I saw myself attached to things and not knowing how to get out of those attachments. My marriage breaking up happened simultaneously, so I found I needed to change. If that’s what fucked up is, that’s what I was. Then you start to do things about it and this is mirrored in the music. To me, the concept of *Road to Return* was returning to your true self or personal self. That’s what all religions talk about too—finding that God self or finding God within you. That’s what the *Road to Return* means. You see, I don’t like to preach. I like to work in symbols. That’s my way. That’s why I am just as much an instrumentalist as I am a vocalist. I like to say things without words. My songs on *Road to Return*, of course, have words and are descriptive, but they’re kind of symbolic too in that the symbols form that meaning which I can’t really express. So, the *Road to Return* is a symbol for inner expansion. The lyrics in the song “Road to Return” say “The more reflection, the more I see.” So, *Road to Return* could also mean looking back, not in a nostalgic way, but perhaps in a reflective way.

You’ve said “Opening my hips is directly related to what’s going on in my compositions.” Can you elaborate on that?

A direct example of what was happening to me comes from when I was a kid in the second grade. I wasn't real athletic. I was a little bit timid, but I still tried out for Little League and the 100-yard dash. And my coach motioned me over, pointed to my feet and said I had a slight pronation. I didn't know what a pronation was! It's like the opposite of a pigeon-toe—you have a little bit of a turn-out. This guy told me as a second grader that I would never be a runner. What does that do to a little guy? My coach probably didn't know any better. He didn't realize he was instilling an idea in a little kid. Okay, so 30 years later, I start taking yoga and I'm stretching out and I feel this incredible tightness in my legs. I realize that all my life I felt my feet were a little big and not quite right. I had a thing about my feet. So I was at my yoga lesson and my teacher said I had wonderful feet and I swear to God man, I thought I was gonna start bawling right there—you know, like something was released. Some blockage went away and that fear was gone.

The energy started happening through my feet and I could connect up with the Earth better. Different massage therapy people talk about muscle memory. You stretch in yoga and you get to that place in your hips where you can actually feel all that old stuff starting to flow. And you get the instrument in your hands and that flow translates through the music. That's what soul is in music. It's your soul coming into the music. And if your hips, shoulders, neck, or whatever start to open up, you have that much more of a flow that you can charge up into the music. So working on my body is the best thing I can do for my music. If I have to put off writing for six months, big deal. I don't care. I'm working on writing as I'm running down the road or working out.

We're surrounded by some interesting items here in your room backstage.

You see it all around right now. There's the juicer. There's a portable inversion swing over there. I've got my library of videotapes of my yoga teacher that I watch on a little personal VCR. They have all my lessons. I'm

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studying with dancers. I'm taking belly dance lessons. I'm studying a little bit of ballet. We had a dancer on the road with us for several gigs. So that's my current thing. Once my body gets flexible enough to start working it, I'll go on to something else. But at this point, it's given me a new burst.

You recently became a motorcycling enthusiast.

I love motorcycles. It's about focus. You gotta focus on the road. I have a new motorcycle song called "Sapphire." Sapphire drives a pink sportster. She's got red hair.

How would you respond to a devil's advocate who suggests the spiritual trip and the motorcycles are part of a midlife crisis?

Could be. I don't care. But I don't think so because I've always wanted to ride a motorcycle and now I feel I can. My dad wouldn't let me have a motorcycle. If I had a midlife crisis, I'm sure getting out of it. I think that a midlife crisis is good because it gives you an opportunity to deal with things that have held you back from becoming self-actualized. If that's what I'm having, I'm gonna embrace it, rather than freak out.

Describe the average day in your life when you're not recording or on tour.

I just try to get through the day without getting bored. The trick is finding something that will allow my growth to happen. It's mostly a search for higher consciousness. I try not to take that responsibility too lightly. If I'm not on tour, I don't have anything to do. I could make a record, but it took me four years to get this one together. So what was I doing, you know? I was just looking for something. *Road to Return* is a sketch of what I was looking for. I've been thinking "What does this mean? Why am I here?" I think that's how a lot of music gets written. Some people sit around and can think "How am I going to pick up women?" Look at MTV with all

these guys lookin' good. Look at all this country stuff. I saw this country video and the whole thing was close-ups of this guy's face. He's thinkin' "I look so good." [laughs] How much fun is that gonna be for that guy when he gets older? What's going to happen to him when he has his midlife crisis? What's invested that he can grab hold of? That's when nostalgia comes in and you live in the past.

"Sister Soul" from Road to Return explores the idea of getting in touch with one's feminine side. What inspired it?

For awhile, I didn't know what I was doing. Around '87-'88, I was wearing all these funny clothes. I'd go shopping in women's stores and all my wardrobe seemed to be pink. I'd wear a pink jacket or really tight pants. I couldn't figure out why. What is this? Why do I want to wear makeup? It was a funny thing I went through. Maybe I wanted to be a rock star or something like all of those guys who were getting dolled up. Then I thought "Well, this is just my natural femininity coming out." When I was writing "Sister Soul," I came to terms with it. I thought "This is who I am. I don't need to dress funny or look funny. I'm just going to be my feminine side." People talk about this all the time. It's a current fad. All these men are trying to get in touch with their feminine side. But I tried to make it a little more symbolic in "Sister Soul."

There was a time when I would even dress up in drag just to figure out who I would look like if I was a woman. I was dating this woman who was an actress and we had a really good time together. She showed up at one of my gigs dressed up as someone else and completely fooled me. So I thought I'd dress up as a woman once when I was going to pick her up at the airport. She recognized me immediately. [laughs] I thought I did a pretty good job. I fooled my brother. She taught me about makeup and we worked on walking. But it didn't have so much to do with dressing up as a woman. It had to do with learning how to act—learning how to let go of your personality. I think people tend to play up the sexual thing

because that raises eyebrows. But to me, it was just about being somebody else—letting go of the attachment to your personality and mannerisms. It's what actors do when they're acting. So "Sister Soul" just grew out of that somewhere.

"Communicate" has another positive message that seems particularly appropriate given the political turmoil in the world.

I'm blissfully ignorant in the political arena, but I hope anything I come up with that's peaceful in my heart will be transmitted. Let's learn to communicate. If we learn to communicate, we won't have this. Let's attack the problem right at the source, rather than what's going on now in order to figure out why these people can't get together. If you learn to communicate with yourself and not fool yourself, you won't have as many problems communicating what you really feel with other people. If you start this germ on that level, it will mushroom into some kind of world awareness or peacefulness.

With "Communicate," I also wanted to try a song that was more rock and roll. I've always liked rock and roll so much, but I've always been kinda shy and never had a band. I would tell a lot of people I was going to make a rock record and hope that I would. [laughs] I'd tell everybody. And then *Road to Return* turned out to get kind of a life of its own. There are some things on it that are headed towards rock. "Communicate" is more like '60s rock. "Follow Through" is a little more rhythm and blues. "India" was more like Peter Gabriel, but a little bit heavier.

The audience reaction to your keyboard-based tunes is more subdued than the applause that greets your solo guitar pieces. What do you make of that?

I'm not interested in any fan who puts technique over content. To me, my new keyboard tunes have a deeper meaning and they don't demand applause. Applause isn't what I'm after. Communication is what I'm

after. So I'll lose some of my fans, but I would rather lose them than keep away the ones that are after the deeper meaning. It's not that my guitar solos don't have deeper meaning. It's not that I can't write things that are technically flourishing and have meaning. In fact, I do have some new guitar solos, but they're different. They're played with a pick. One is called "Jitterboogie" and the other is called "Dirge."

Why is using a pick attractive to you at this point in your career?

Because I can do long, loud strums. I played that way on "Silent Anticipations" and "Ritual Dance," but I had never written a ballad with a pick, so I thought I'd write one. I had never written a boogie, so I wrote a boogie. The trick is to find something new. If it's something I can have flourish as a technical thing, that's okay, but I don't need to wow anybody anymore. I would rather make love to them.

November 1994



JONAS HELLBORG

ICONOCLASTIC EXPRESSIONS

JONAS HELLBORG'S MUSIC is as unique as his personal philosophies. The Swedish bass virtuoso and composer refuses to be bound by rules of convention. He even rejects typical notions of creativity and improvisation. Instead, he sees himself as one who simply reflects the earthly forces and realities that surround him. The many innovative musical journeys he's embarked on serve as a testament to that outlook.

Hellborg first hit the jazz scene in the early '80s. He quickly made a name for himself with his inventive bass playing that incorporates chordal, percussive and melodic approaches. After releasing a couple of solo albums, he was recruited to take part in Mahavishnu, an updated version of John McLaughlin's pioneering '70s fusion band Mahavishnu Orchestra. During Mahavishnu's existence from 1983 to 1988, Hellborg also worked with McLaughlin in a variety of duo and trio formats featuring percussionists Billy Cobham and Trilok Gurtu.

In the early '90s, Hellborg collaborated with Bill Laswell on several recordings, including *The Word*, a solo effort featuring drummer Tony Williams and a string quartet. The pair also worked together on Material's boundary-breaking *Hallucination Engine*, Ginger Baker's thunderous *Middle Passage*, and two experimental funk releases by Deadline titled *Dissident* and *Down by Law*.

But it's Hellborg's recordings for his own Bardo and Day Eight labels that best showcase his talents. The labels represent the bulk of his solo output and find him immersed in a multitude of acoustic and electric

environments. Solo bass releases, duo efforts with frame drummer Glen Velez, and trios featuring the likes of drummers Michael Shrieve and Apt. Q-258, and guitarists Buckethead and Shawn Lane, are just a few of the labels' highlights. Lane, who died in 2003 at age 40 of lung disease, served as one of Hellborg's longest-standing collaborators and was a highly influential player and composer in his own right.

Since the late '90s, one of Hellborg's key interests has been exploring a unique hybrid of jazz and South Indian classical music. Most of that work featured Lane, who shared Hellborg's desire to investigate Eastern sounds. Their first Indian music-influenced disc, 1999's *Zenhouse*, was a beautiful, largely serene effort that offered their personal take on the raga form.

Hellborg's next project, 2000's *Good People in Times of Evil*, represented a significant leap forward in his approach to Indian music. Along with Lane, the record featured celebrated Indian percussion master V. Selvaganesh, the son of Vikku Vinayakram, an original member of Shakti. The album's exhilarating musical dialogues were stunning. It also laid the groundwork for the equally impressive follow-up *Icon*, released in 2003. For that project, Hellborg also invited Selvaganesh's brothers, vocalist V. Umamahesh and percussionist V. Umashankar, to take part. The quintet showcased an even more seamless integration between Western and Indian influences. With its dazzling group interplay, moments of spontaneous drama, and graceful, ethereal passages, *Icon* represents the best of what's possible within Indian fusion. Hellborg has continued integrating Indian music into his work since *Icon*, including his 2005 *Kali's Son* and 2007 *Art Metal* releases.

How did the line-up for Icon come together?

When we initially toured as a trio with Selvaganesh and Shawn, Selvaganesh realized that a second percussionist would really enhance the line-up. I asked Selvaganesh if his brother Umashankar would be interested

and he said “That’s a good idea. We can do that.” At that point, we were going to perform with the two brothers. Just before we played our first gig, Selvaganesh’s dad Vikku Vinayakram called me up to tell me he has another son named Umamahesh who’s a great up-and coming singer. He said “Why don’t you try to play with him as well? I will even pay for the plane ticket from India so he can perform with you.” [laughs] I said “No problem, I’ll take care of the plane ticket and we’ll try him out.” Umamahesh brought the Indian melodic element to the group and opened up a lot of things for Shawn and I. Shawn in particular got most of his knowledge of Indian music directly from recordings. To actually have people in his presence that could explain all of the intricacies, ornamentation and elements of the raag was a real learning experience for both of us. Umamahesh also had to deal with Western aspects of music within the raag. We were putting Indian melodies and Western chords together. We ended up finding a deeper integration between what we were all doing.

Why did you name the record Icon?

We use icons in pretty much every school of life, including religion and philosophy, to substitute our own identities. We use them to tide us over during difficult times, to organize our knowledge and to deal with the good and bad elements of life. The reason I put a picture of Jesus on the cover is because that’s a very interesting icon. In a way, that icon exists in so many cultures of the world. It exists in Christian culture, but it’s also the face of Che Guevara, the holy man in India and the Zen Buddhist monk in Japan. It’s a universal symbol. The idea of icons is also captured in the album’s song titles. “Mirror” refers to the idea that when we look at an icon, what we’re really doing is looking in the mirror to see ourselves. “Vehicle” relates to icons serving as a vehicle for wherever we’re going. We transport ourselves spiritually in this icon in order to reach something. Finally, there is “Escape.” We also use icons to escape from this existence

when we pass on.

Did those ideas play a part during the music-making process or did you apply them after the fact?

They were a part of me when I made the record. Shawn and I were also talking about these things at the time as well. These discussions didn't create a set of directions for the record though. It's not like we made music according to the thoughts behind the titles. However, if you look at life at a certain point in time and the music as being part of what we were at that time—in the same way that intellectual life and spiritual life manifested themselves in the moment—then one could say that it was part of the process.

How does spirituality inform your music?

I don't think spirituality is separate from life. It's something that is very hard to consider while it's happening. Life is a mish-mash of experiences. I don't even know what spirituality is to be honest. It's a word that can be applied to so many things that aren't the same. Life is something that happens to you. You don't make life. To me, music is the same way. If you try to influence music too much, it dies. It needs to be part of the natural flow of everything else you do. There is something else beyond you making the music. I am not making anything. I am just the channel or reflector for the music. If I tried to actually see myself as a creative being who was thinking specifically about making music in the moment, then it wouldn't come out very well. But if you stop being conscious of what you're doing and stop trying to make music and rather let all the forces in the room influence you, then things will happen. Everybody who is in a situation when music is happening influences it, be it the audience, technicians, engineers, and even the people who originally built the room you're playing in. It's not just about the musician or the composer.

So it's better not to force things and just yield to the moment and let things happen.

In Indian music, spirituality is fundamental to its very nature. Do those underpinnings affect your approach to working within that realm?

Those underpinnings simply cannot mean the same thing to me as they do to Selvaganesh and his brothers. When we play together, we are not playing the same music as when they play with their dad's groups and when they are really tied into their religious beliefs. When they play with me, they do not play through that spirituality. They superimpose their musical language onto what I'm saying musically and we find a common ground on which we can co-exist. Westerners are not necessarily bound by the confines of very old religions anymore. We have so much other information that makes us understand the nature of reality—things like modern science, physics, medicine, biology, and astronomy. There's so much that we know which helps explain how and why we exist. So, we don't have to subscribe to myths of how a certain god created this bit and that bit. It's about so much more now. I'm not a judge of if that's good or bad, but when we know all of these things, we can't be totally in tune with that old sort of spirituality.

I am now able to say that I am definitely not religious anymore. A long time ago, I actually dabbled with spiritual ideas and tried to figure things out, but at this point in my life, I am 100 percent sure that God is dead. He doesn't exist. You can't defend the idea of a conscious entity you can equate with the name God after you know everything that has been discovered over the last 100 years. It makes no sense anymore. God is often a name you use when you don't understand something, yet you have to explain a phenomenon. You say "Alright, God made this." But now we're starting to know everything about everything. There's very little we don't know about the existence of life, matter and the forces of energy. So now the mystery is on a whole other level. It no longer deals with the creator

or redeemer.

How do you account for the existence of creativity within this framework?

I don't believe in creativity. I don't believe we create anything at all. We are merely discoverers and we reuse ideas. Nobody has ever created anything. Everything is just a recycling of something else. We can see things, discover them, frame them, and show them to other people and say "This is how I look at this." But in reality, music is the same 12 notes everybody has used for the longest of times. There are a certain number of combinations for those notes that we can use within a certain time space and that's it—that's music. The bottom line is we don't create, we copy. We all do. This is a very interesting idea when we begin to consider intellectual property and copyright. I don't believe in intellectual property at all. I think it's an absurd idea. I don't think people really put enough thought into intellectual property and why it exists. It certainly doesn't exist for the benefit of people who make music or write books. It exists for the benefit of people who want to take advantage of those people. Originally, copyright was for music and literary publishers, because they can buy a copyright and make money on it. But for some reason, people believe that it exists to defend the rights of people who make pieces of art. Personally, I believe all great books should be published for free on the Internet. I think everyone should be able to read everything. That would be really good for the whole world. The same should apply to music. It should just be available.

How would you make a living if you gave away all your music?

That's the practical problem. I don't know how that would work, but in principle, I think all music should be free. In principle, I also think everyone should have food to eat. If you contribute to the world, you should also have the benefit of that world. If you look at things closely,

you soon realize that the people who have contributed the most to music are not the people who have benefited materially the most from it. So, the system is flawed and bad. Bach didn't make any money and he's the most-played composer in the history of the world. The same holds true for Mozart. He was poor as dirt. Charlie Parker didn't make much money either. But other people have made tons of money on them because of intellectual property. Record publishers are still taking Charlie Parker's legacy and making millions on it, but he didn't get anything. So, where's the defense of intellectual property there?

Compare the nature of improvisation in Indian classical music to that of jazz.

I have also decided that I do not believe in the term "improvisation" anymore. [laughs] I don't believe in it because it is such an overused word. Basically, we do not know what improvisation means anymore. Improvisation is usually very predictable. With a bebop player, if you throw him a chart of chords, you'll pretty much know what to expect in terms of the sonic colors that are going to come out of his instrument. There are rules for what is right or wrong that he will follow. This also holds true for Indian music. It's just a different set of rules.

I believe much more in the idea of reflecting the stuff that has happened to you over a certain period of time than I do in improvisation. You are sort of forced by the nature of your life to play a certain way. On some kind of deep level, you do invent certain combinations of predefined musical constructions, but it's also tied to who you are and who you've played with. Certain people are going to make you play in different ways and thus influence you. It's just another way of relating to certain agreed-upon structures and rules of interaction. It's sort of like a football game in a sense. With football, you don't really improvise, rather, you are forced by the other players on the field to run in a certain direction or kick the ball a certain way. Actions are generated by the combined effort of forces that are both conscious and unconscious.

Improvisation is also something wrapped up in the perception of the listener. Somebody who knows jazz may talk about the purist forms of genres like bebop. They might be interested in how you tunnel through chord changes and find new melodic twists and turns, but that might be the extent of improvisation they are willing to accept. Indian classical music lovers will admire the new development in the raag forms or the complexity of rhythmical composition and calculations. They'll say "Wow, he managed to do this and that in that period of time." So for them, improvisation actually becomes very close to problem solving and mathematics in a sense. For me, in both realms, things are really interesting when we don't try to intellectually solve anything and it becomes like throwing a ball forward towards a target. If you think about it too hard, in terms of how you move your arm, there won't be any way to hit it. Ultimately, it's about having vision, intuition and an innate sense of how to move forward.

Describe the origins of your interest in Indian music.

It goes back to my teenage years of being a hippie. In the late '60s and early '70s, everyone was into Indian music such as The Beatles, Ravi Shankar and Mahavishnu Orchestra. When I started playing seriously, I was into John McLaughlin. Then I started playing with him and meeting all these great Indian people. So it's been an ongoing thing for me during my whole career. The first thing that's obvious for a Westerner is the rhythmic complexity of the music. That was my initial attraction and fascination—the method, teaching, composing, and understanding of rhythms. What also really struck me was the melodic aspect of the music, as well as the fine details, ornamentation and variations.

I understand you consider yourself a tourist when it comes to Indian music.

Yes. I think that when you come from somewhere, you have a

background through which you learn most of your basic knowledge at a very early age. That's who you are culturally. It's very hard to move away from that and become something different. So whenever I approach anything, I understand it with my Western European mind and values. That's the only language I can use to grasp things. Even though I may know more about Indian rhythms and music than the average person, I can still never be Selvaganesh. I can never learn the music at that level—even if I studied another 50 years. It's because music is everything. It's a reflection of who you are. Real music comes out of the ground. It's not something that can be defined in regular terms. It's about pitch, dynamics, harmony and it's in everything, from your body posture to the food you eat to the smells in your backyard. Music is life in its totality. The true definition of a genius is somebody who is most like himself. If you're being dead honest about everything and behave, act and sound like yourself, then you are saying something. It's different if you say "Oh, I want to be Indian." You have to be born into it and live it. So I can go to India, have an interest and enjoy the culture. All of that will reflect in my music, but to jump from that to even thinking about calling what I do "Indian music" is a huge step and one I don't believe in.

In addition to India, you've traveled to China, Syria and Turkey to collaborate with musicians. What motivates you to stretch your boundaries so far?

I've been making the effort because I wanted to know. I've heard things that were mysterious to me—things I didn't understand. These sounds affected me and made me feel something. So I wanted to find out what those things were. I wanted to go to those places and see what made people make music in these ways. I also wanted to learn about the social environments these musics spring out of. It goes back to the time when I was a kid and felt a need to learn and incorporate different musics into what I was doing. It was part of my colonial instinct. [laughs] I wanted to create my own British Museum and steal their stuff so I could have it to

look at in my apartment. But I've passed a milestone where that sort of thing is no longer important anymore. It's similar to being a fetishist about books. Whenever I used to read a book, I'd put it on a shelf and be very happy that I had the book as evidence that I had read it—even if it was just for me. But now, if I read a good book, I'd rather just give it to someone else who would benefit from reading it. Or if it's a bad book, I'd rather just throw it away. I don't want to impose anymore on other people's cultures, legacies or anything else. Today, I feel when I want to play with people from all over the world, it's more about wanting to work with people who intrigue me purely from a musical perspective. I no longer care if someone is Indian or Chinese anymore. I only care about whether or not their music moves me and inspires me to want to work with them.

One of your career's great collaborations was with Shawn Lane. Reflect on your time together.

Shawn and I had so many common references. He was probably the first and only musician who was into all of the different musics I listened to, including Indian, classical, jazz, and rock. He had a wide scope of interest. If I would bring some type of music up, he'd know what it was. He could quote Bartók, Stravinsky or Chinese folk music in his playing without it being strange or contrived in any way. That sort of appetite for life and music is really rare and wonderful. He was a source of so much inspiration. He knew a lot of stuff I didn't know and turned me on to things I hadn't found myself. We're talking about music, art, literature, science, geography, and food—you name it. It made working with Shawn really interesting all of the time.

I think it's a great treasure that Shawn was here for the 40 years he had and that we got to do as much as we did together. His clock was ticking. He had medical problems that would not let him live much longer than he did. It was not really a possibility for anything else to happen, so that's how it went down. I'd rather look at Shawn's life from the positive side and

just be really grateful for the opportunities that arose through our time together, including our collaborations and the great people we got to play with. Despite his sickness, we were able to do all of that stuff. He could always pull himself together enough to do all those records and tours we did. I've never had a collaboration that produced so much music before. His passing is a tragedy in so many ways. It's terrible that somebody has to perish so young. But he lived an intense, full life and did a lot in the short time he had. His personal experience of the world and the results he achieved, including his level of playing, were truly great.

Let's discuss the decision to start your own label back in the early '80s. At the time, there was no blueprint to make that happen. What spurred you to go that route?

It was the result of a coincidence. I was trying to get a record deal. I had made my first recording and sent it to a Swedish jazz label and they responded by saying "We really like your stuff and would like to put it out, but we can't afford to because there are huge costs in producing LPs and we don't know if we're going to make our money back. So we propose that you manufacture the LPs and sell them to us. We'll sell them for you and it will be under our label. It will look as if you've released it on our label and you'll get the financial benefits." So I did that and it worked and I chose to continue under my own label names after that.

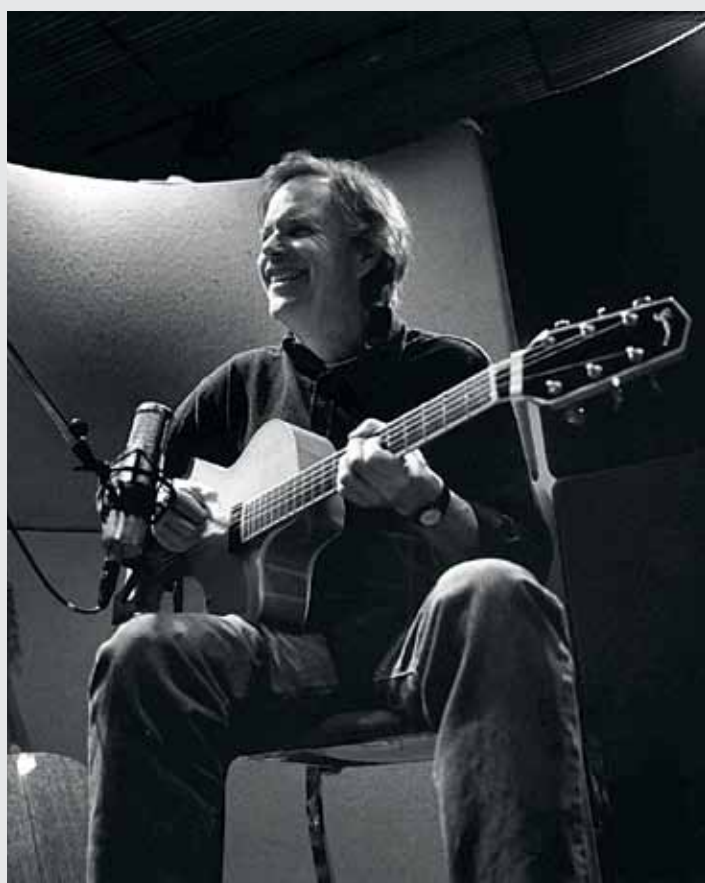
There have been many advantages to doing this, but there are also disadvantages. It creates too many distractions from what one should really be doing, which is making music. But on the other hand, perhaps you wouldn't have had the chance to make that music at all if you had to convince someone else to pay for it and put it out. I also have to admit that sometimes it is better if someone gives you a little advice on whether or not you should do something. But I've made my own mistakes and learned from them. Self-releasing your own music in this day and age has got to the point where it's liberating for people who make music. Anyone

can make a CD now. The negative aspect is we're now drowning in music. It's really hard to distinguish between all the stuff that's coming out these days. It's difficult to have the same impact as during the days before there was no recorded music. In those times, you could only hear music live and it was a really valuable experience. That doesn't tend to be the case for most people anymore.

Describe how you've evolved as a bassist since the beginning of your career.

There are so many different people within you that can respond to that. One might say "There's been a great development" and another might say "I'm doing exactly the same thing as when I first started." I've developed a lot on the technical level and can do things more cleanly and neatly with more finesse and structure than before, but basically, the same identity is there. The same characteristics manifest themselves. On the other hand, I've lived an intense life and it's been wonderful. I've learned a lot about music over the years and played with many great people. All of that rubs off on you. You automatically evolve through these experiences. It's like when you visit a new city for the first time. You walk around for awhile and all of a sudden you know how it works and where all the squares, streets and shops are. Music works in the same way. If you've been around the city of music for a long time, you learn how to get around. You could also make the analogy with language and arrive at a different conclusion. As you get older, you build up your vocabulary and speak with many other people. You find new ways of turning phrases that are kind of slick and impressive. But do you have more to say or not? That's the question each of us has to answer.

August 2004



LEO KOTTKE

CHOICE REFLECTIONS

GUITARIST LEO KOTTKE is a master storyteller on multiple fronts. His virtuoso, acoustic steel-string, fingerstyle guitar pieces communicate a broad range of emotions via a singular blend of tonal colors, percussive elements and infectious rhythms. Kottke's singer-songwriter output, delivered with his trademark rumbling, baritone voice, has also yielded dozens of idiosyncratic and endearing songs. In addition, his hilarious between-song concert banter is legendary, holding audiences spellbound with intricate and illuminating tales.

Kottke's career took flight during the late '60s when he signed to John Fahey's Takoma Records label and went on to make *6 and 12 String Guitar*, possibly the single most influential solo acoustic guitar album ever released. With hundreds of thousands of copies sold, the 1969 disc propelled Kottke into the spotlight. He went on to record for Capitol and Chrysalis during the '70s and early '80s—stints that found him showing up in the *Billboard* charts and mainstream media outlets worldwide. Kottke refused to let fame betray his muse and ensured his rootsy approach that explores the intersections between folk, jazz and classical music remained intact.

Even with more than 30 albums to his name, Kottke continues to blaze his own trail. Though still predominantly known as a solo live performer, the '80s and '90s saw him focus mostly on collaborative releases such as 1994's *Peculiaroso*. Produced by Rickie Lee Jones, the disc features electric guitarist Dean Parks, accordionist Van Dyke Parks, bassist John Leftwich,

drummer Bill Berg, and Jones and Syd Straw on vocals. His band-related records find his rollicking instrumentals, meditative tunes and engaging songs situated in contexts as diverse as chamber music, pop, funk, and occasionally even hip-hop. In 1999, he went back to his roots with the release of the straightforwardly-titled *One Guitar, No Vocals*.

Kottke's artistic and commercial success has inspired generations of players to pick up the steel-string guitar and follow in his footsteps. Perhaps the most important musician he spurred to action was fellow guitar visionary Michael Hedges. While many compared and contrasted the two, the fact is they were great friends and collaborators.

"Leo is a true example of a composer writing on the guitar," said Hedges, who passed away in a 1997 car accident. "He's got so much soul, but he's also got so much rhythmic drive. He's a real groovemaster. You just can't beat him and you'd never want to. You just want to listen. He's got so much integrity and depth, and he's truly a sweet man."

Tell me what the album title Peculiaroso means to you.

As my first manager would say about all my titles, "It doesn't mean anything." On the other hand, it does have a lot of resonance for me. I think it's true as a one-word description of what we see when we open our eyes. Things are pretty peculiar out there. No matter how wise we think we are, things are always contrary to expectations. What's really peculiar is the fact that we're continually surprised by the way things are. I go around saying "Huh?" and "Wow!" and "I think I'll go hang myself in the closet." That feeling doesn't happen very often, but that surprise comes along too. It's just a bad day when it's all a mess and you'd rather be dead. I've met people who claim to have never had that thought or got that down and they worry me. If you never feel that way, you're going to sooner or later. If you've had no experience with it, you might think that's what you should actually do as opposed to something you might want to do. During his early twenties, the pianist Arthur Rubinstein was having a hard

time getting gigs and during the gigs he could get at that time, he'd forget his repertoire. He hit a real low point and went into his closet and hung himself with his necktie. The necktie broke and he hit the floor and started to laugh and that guy didn't stop laughing. But he knew it wasn't a joke. He was happy to be alive. You can hear it when he plays.

"World Made to Order" from Peculiaroso reflects on your Navy stint in 1964 serving on a submarine with an engineman whose nickname was "Evil." Tell me about those days.

Evil's nickname wasn't so much for being a bad guy, although I did see him stab a guy in the neck with a fork once. It was for the way he looked. He just looked evil. Engine rooms were pretty dark and they smell like diesel oil and Evil looked like he'd been born there. He was a grim sight. He drank torpedo fuel. It wasn't an uncommon practice. There's a lot of things that have more alcohol content than booze. Torpedo fuel didn't have more content, but it wasn't illegal to have on the submarine. So, Evil would smuggle a few loaves of French bread to use as filters and have a cocktail now and then. For those people who did drink it—I was not one of them—they called it a "Pink Lady." It was horrible. No-one ever accused the Navy of having a gift for metaphor.

My Navy days were short. I was only in it for seven months. I went to sub school in New London and then was put on a boat called the USS Halfbeak. We mainly cruised up and down the Northeast, around Newfoundland. I hated the Navy. I didn't function well in that environment. I put our sub out of control once on a dive. I nearly killed us all. I was on the stern planes and I didn't know what I was doing and I put the boat into a 20-degree angle on the dive—10 degrees is out of control. We were plummeting below crush depth. They did something called "blowing the saddle tank" which is a last-minute, desperate measure, because lots of times when you blow the saddle tank, the boat flips upside down and you sink like a stone anyhow. But we lucked out. On the mental stability questionnaire you fill

out to see if you're fit for service, they didn't ask "Have you ever wanted to hang yourself in the closet with a necktie?" If they did, maybe they wouldn't have let me in.

How do you go about channeling tales like those into instrumental pieces?

Ninety percent of the time, the tune just comes along as you're writing it. An idea or a memory will pop into your head and they don't come from nowhere. They really are introduced by the piece you're working on. That's what the tune is. It's something that has an analog in whatever it is that crossed your mind, like these little sketches that my brain registers. You just kind of segment your timestream and there it is. I think our brains do it automatically. People have different triggers for that. For me, it's guitar tunes. For others, it's things like scotch or friendship.

Does that hold true for when you're writing lyrics too?

The same thing happens. Your brain is off, but you're paying attention. You don't get to direct how it happens. In that sense, it is stream-of-consciousness, but it's not just about transcribing the noise in your head. I'm pretty deliberate about it. Every now and then, something comes along that has a beginning to it and you can feel it kind of coming up the back of your neck. If you're quick enough, you can keep it going just by paying attention to it. After you've got as much of that as it's going to give you, you maybe refine it. I think stories are just putting a front end and a back end on what's going on all the time in your head. So there is a narrative structure to it for me. It's not just a string of images or words.

How successful have you been at translating those thoughts and ideas into studio recordings?

A record is a picture of what you're writing at the time. I don't have a

plan. I don't decide what sort of record I'll make in advance. I'll find out how I feel about it when I'm done with it. It takes me a very long time—sometimes, several years—to begin to qualify it and say what kind of record it is. With some of them, I never really know. You have an impression of it that's good or bad, melancholic or vivid and that's about as specific as I can get. The short answer is I really don't know. The short answer subtext is it's always the same old shit because I'm the one doing it. Whatever it is, it's mainly made up of my limitations which are just as important as my abilities. I hesitate to say that because you'd like people to go out and buy your record. If you go out there and say "Would you like to buy the same old shit?" you might be turning off a couple of potential buyers. [laughs]

Having said all of that, some records you really like when you're done with them. They're in the minority. You really hate more of them when you're done. I can speak in plurals because I've made too many records. The majority I have mixed feelings about. A mistake I've made consistently is that I record too often. My first contract with Capitol required a record every six months. It's pretty tough to make records with those kinds of deadlines since I write most of the stuff and don't play with the same rhythm section all the time—and never play with one onstage. But I got into the habit of it. The industry likes it if you churn a lot of them out. I'm definitely trying to slow that down.

What first attracted you to the acoustic guitar?

It was and still is about the tone and the nature of the instrument in that a chord on a guitar is a real chord. It's something people can get around. You can't say that about a chord on a piano. I think you internalize the sound of a guitar as a listener and a player. With the piano, you don't internalize it. It internalizes you. I will always be a tone player. I think most of us are, but some of us really zero in on tone as the heart of the matter.

For a long time, the guitar has been my primary interest. I see everything through the guitar. My day is almost always built around it. The guitar is

almost always beside me, wherever I am. Playing the guitar is generally the first thing I do in the morning. Before I'm out of bed, I'll reach out and grab it and play it for a few minutes. That happens on and off all day long, not for any great length of time, although sometimes I get an idea and want to work on something. Then I might spend a couple of hours on it in a stretch. It's really the guitar and what I can write on it that I spend all my time doing.

Have you ever become bored with your instrument?

I did, but it wasn't the instrument that made it happen. It was me. It was in the early '80s. It didn't last long, maybe a year or so. It wasn't that I lost interest in the guitar, but I couldn't find my connection with it. I'd sit down to play and literally played the same stuff every time. I wasn't getting any ideas and it scared me to death because I depend on the guitar. It really is my life. I couldn't understand it. I thought it was me or the job, but I was dead wrong. I was taking everything too seriously. I was wearing myself out and not getting any sleep. I was screwed up most of the time and you just can't be that way. The reason you start getting more sleep and stop getting screwed up is so you don't lose the playing. Dizzy Gillespie once wrote a great biography called *To Be or Not to Bop* and he made it really clear that sooner or later you have to focus on staying intact or you're not gonna be able to play. When I met Dizzy in Italy once, we talked about how you'll give up a lot of stuff—mainly bad habits you don't mind losing—so you can keep playing. Well, you do mind, but maybe they're worth losing.

You once said "I've developed some respect for my own blindness." Tell me what you meant.

If you play guitar and you're crazy about it, it'll reflect everything. It takes you awhile to put that together. The guitar reflected that I wasn't together and after awhile I realized that. It wasn't that I had lost it for the

guitar. The guitar is great that way. It's like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It's always just fine and always will be. The painting was always functioning, alive, working, and doing its job and the guitar is like that. The guitar shows you who you are and that picture got uglier and uglier.

One of the ways you screw yourself up is by trying to see everything straight and clear, attempting to answer all the questions before you, and knowing everything about what you're doing. You can't. The way to get a little bit of self-knowledge is to accept that and know that some nights every now and then, you're gonna go out there and just stink. You're gonna be horrible and that's the night it's time to be horrible. There's nothing wrong with that. But if you hope that will never happen, you're way out of line. If you can accept it, that'll really help you get happy. It'll especially help you write. You'll find out everything is fine. Once I accepted that, there was more of me.

Do you believe artists must suffer to make great art?

I think if you really examine it, it doesn't apply, period. All a starving artist does is starve. You can use misery and unpleasantness in whatever you do, music or otherwise, because it can sometimes inform why you're doing something. It can keep things dimensional instead of flat. We all have the same problems. It's what we really have in common. But there are lots of really miserable people that have really been hit hard by something. That doesn't make them artists. It doesn't work that way. There's nothing about being happy or having peace of mind that will kill imagination. I think it really helps. You do have to leave room for despair now and then. I really do think it's inevitable, necessary and human. It will always come to the party sooner or later. But all in all, I'm basically a happy guy.*

After a string of ensemble albums, you returned to the solo guitar format for One Guitar, No Vocals. Tell me about that decision.

The main reason is the head of A&R at the label wanted it. They told me to do it. But I've asked every record label "Can I just do a solo guitar record?" because it's really how I first showed up in the marketplace. What I'm always trying to do is write a guitar tune. It's my big thrill. So the chance to do the record was really welcome to me. Fortunately, I had a fair amount of material, so away we went.

What input do record labels typically provide when you're making an album?

What has tended to be the story almost every time is "Do what you want, but talk to us about who the producer is, where you're gonna do it and how we can get ahold of you while you're doing it." The other things I've run into are "You've gotta have other instruments" and "We'd really like you to have a 'chick' singer." I've managed to avoid that. The fact that people like Rickie Lee Jones and Emmylou Harris have sung on some of my stuff has nothing to do with them being "chicks." Another theme of my career is the idea that I should make a Christmas album. I used to suspect it, but because I've kind of canvassed audiences, I know that one of the reasons they keep coming to hear me is because I haven't made a Christmas album or done a record with a "chick singer." I mentioned that in Boulder, Colorado once and Michael Murphey came backstage and said "You know, Leo, I made a Christmas record with a 'chick' singer." [laughs] He made millions off it. So, that's it. They've never said "You've got to do this tune or make a record this way." They've always left me pretty free to do stuff.

Compare the collaborative approach you've taken in recent years to working solo.

The kick you get when you hear something you like when you're in the audience is what it's like to bring other people in to play with you in the studio. I've had people in the studio because I like hanging out with

them more than I've given any thought to how they play. Ideally, both happen and that's great fun. After all the years of playing and performing by myself, it's a huge thrill to hear this other stuff. I think it can also be a problem sometimes because you'll fall in love with everything you hear because you've got no experience with it. You might not exercise a lot of judgment. It's nice to have a good producer in that case. When you play solo, you have to know how to relax and get in and out as quickly as you can and not try to get it exactly right. I'm getting better at that. It applies to anything but it seems to be more true of solo stuff, because with solo stuff, you can't fudge the pocket. It has to be there on its own. It's a matter of relaxing into it, no matter what kind of tune it is, and as Chet Atkins once told me, "waiting for the beat."

"Chamber of Commerce" from One Guitar, No Vocals was originally titled "Goddammit!" and served as a tribute to Michael Hedges. But onstage, you introduce it with a story about reacting to a fellow motel resident complaining about you making too much noise. Why did you revise the track's name and the story behind it?

I decided that the people who know me would know that I wrote it with Michael in mind. It seemed a little presumptuous of me to title a tune as a memorial to a friend.

Was the original title designed to suggest the idea of "Goddammit, he's gone?"

Yeah, and "Goddammit God!" There's this Jewish tradition, a prayer for the dead called the Kaddish. I used to think the prayer involved walking out on a storm-swept hill in the middle of the night and shaking your fist at God while saying "What the hell do you think you're doing to us? Quit it!" According to one of my manager's daughters, the Kaddish is just a prayer for the dead. You don't go out and yell at God. But I've never reacted that way to the death of someone before. It was everything you would expect.

He was a good friend of mine and I was just very, very angry about it. It really just pissed me off. So sometimes you take out those moods on the guitar.

A long time ago, I had written and recorded a song on *Burnt Lips* called “Low Thud.” It was on a 12-string and the low E was tuned to a low A. Hedges and I were doing a tour somewhere and he said “Remember ‘Low Thud’ and you had that E tuned down?” I said “Yeah.” And he said “I do that now” and he did. He had some tunes that way. So I went in that direction because it was a familiar place to both of us and just started fooling around. I was in a motel room in Pawling, New York. I got the call about Michael a couple of days before that. I had been trying to play through that kind of feeling I had and I remembered he liked that bit on “Low Thud.” Then I got a call telling me to be quiet. It’s the wrong thing to say to a guy who’s already pissed off. So it’s a part of the experience of that thing and it gave me another way to introduce the tune without having to go through Michael’s intimate story.

What goes through your mind when you reflect on your own mortality?

I don’t think of it in terms of being dead, but I think about it in terms of “You have a curve as an organism—if not a soul—and what do you do with it?” I think early on, you just figure out that it’ll come to you. But at a certain point, I started feeling you have to choose it. It doesn’t come to you.

So, you have to choose what happens to your soul?

Yeah. If you do nothing at all, that’s a choice. That tends to be my favorite choice and I now know it’s one of the worst choices you can make. The choice not to choose—that’s a bad choice.

What choice do you make now?

That it's better to act it than to think it. I'm trying to do that more. That means you should make your mistakes out front, rather than premeditate them. You're gonna tend to get to the same place given a certain degree of participation in your own life. You might as well get there by choosing, period. Doesn't really matter what you choose. But by choosing, rather than by not choosing, you'll find that it's better to act than to be acted upon or that it's better to act than it is to react. I didn't know that earlier. It takes a little bit of the other kind of mortality thoughts like "I'll be dead in awhile" before you get that—before I did.

Is your outlook based on any spiritual beliefs?

The guitar has probably been my spiritual connection. I know when I started playing, it definitely was. It got me out of bed. I was in bed for two months once and it cured me. I've been playing since I was five, but it was the guitar when I was 12 that took me apart and gave me a life. I knew instantly that I'd be playing for the rest of my life and that it was all I wanted to do. I didn't have to think about a job. I could just go with it. It was a spiritual experience and remains one.**

**March 1994 and **June 1999*



BILL LASWELL

ENDLESS INFINITY

PRODUCER, BASSIST AND COMPOSER Bill Laswell is responsible for some of the most interesting and important recordings of the last quarter century. He's a unique sonic architect who doesn't rely on blueprints. Rather, Laswell works largely from instinct. And if that instinct calls for fusing rock with turntablism, tabla with reggae, ambient sounds with free jazz, spoken word with Moroccan trance music, or all of the above, so be it.

Laswell's early musical forays in the late '70s and early '80s set him on the eclectic trail he travels to this day. That period found him working with the likes of Daavid Allen in New York Gong, Brian Eno and David Byrne. It also saw him establish Material, a musical collective with a chameleon-like propensity for shifting between genres and styles including jazz, hip-hop and world music on any given album.

The New York City-based musician's first major splash came after working with Herbie Hancock on the seminal hip-hop classic "Rockit" from the keyboardist's 1983 album *Future Shock*. "Rockit" was one of the earliest and most popular examples of scratch DJ culture infiltrating the mainstream. Laswell's success with the track helped pave the way for him to work with some of music's most vital voices. Laurie Anderson, Peter Gabriel, Mick Jagger, John Lydon, Iggy Pop, Pharoah Sanders, and John Zorn represent just a few of the legends he's collaborated with. Even more important is the lesser-known talent he has helped bring to public attention such as Buckethead, The Last Poets, Sonny Sharrock, and Nicky Skopelitis.

Many of Laswell's most noteworthy projects have been released through Axiom Records, his boundary-breaking label responsible for a variety of impressive world fusion projects from acts including Ginger Baker, Umar Bin Hassan, Jonas Hellborg, The Master Musicians of Jajouka, and Tony Williams. The label is also home to Material's *Hallucination Engine*, a landmark record from 1994 that continues to have a massive influence in global fusion and electronica circles. The album featured a remarkably seamless merging of world music, dub, jazz, and ambient elements. The line-up of musicians was equally notable with Zakir Hussain, Wayne Shorter, Bootsy Collins, Bernie Worrell, and L. Shankar all making contributions.

Countless artists have since released works inspired by *Hallucination Engine*. But instead of doing the obvious and creating a sequel, Laswell took the record's basic precepts of cross-cultural, multi-generational collaboration and applied them to other projects. The most prominent example is Tabla Beat Science, featuring South Asian tabla players/percussionists Zakir Hussain, Trilok Gurtu, Karsh Kale, and Talvin Singh; sarangi master Ustad Sultan Khan; turntablist DJ Disk; and Ethiopian vocalist Gigi. Merging Indian classical music with techno, drum and bass, and dub, the group's albums and tours have enlarged the spotlight on South Asian musical traditions, while positioning them in a modern context.

Laswell's production interests go beyond creating new music from scratch. He's helmed several album-length remix projects involving the works of Bob Marley, Carlos Santana and Miles Davis. For instance, his 1998 *Panthalassa* release saw him reconstructing and recontextualizing early-'70s Davis jazz-rock tracks. Specific examples of his "mix translation" efforts included moving the music's proto-hip-hop percussion and funk basslines to the fore, and excavating previously buried and unheard passages.

He's also found time to record several solo albums that further traverse the intersections between ambient, world music, jazz, and drum and bass. The always-intriguing releases are typically anchored by his dub-infused basslines and influenced by musics he's encountered during his extensive

travels throughout Africa, Asia and South America.

Where did your initial interest in mixing world musics stem from?

I was really lucky to hear music from different cultures early on. When I was 14 or 15, I saw Ravi Shankar and Alla Rakha and it stuck with me. It probably didn't hurt that someone had spiked me with LSD when I saw them. [laughs] So, the memory was the most psychedelic music I had ever heard. And 80 percent of that was because of the music. It was really impressive. At the same time, I started to hear African and Middle Eastern music. I never had the opportunity to be conditioned by a school situation where they would have broken these musics down and said "These are the boxes you put all this stuff in. Don't mix them up because it's really bad to do that." I wasn't covered with fingerprints or mishandled when I got started, so I was always just open and connected. I was also lucky to grow up in a very interesting time. I could see the end of the '60s and the beginning of fusion and heard what worked and what didn't. I listened to a lot of Pharoah Sanders, John Coltrane and Don Cherry. They call Coltrane a jazz musician, but his interest in the music of India and Africa was pretty immense too. I paid close attention to that. So, I didn't go from Coltrane back to Charlie Parker. Rather, I took the opportunity to explore Indian and African music.

It seemed like a natural thing to do. I didn't think it was natural for people to separate cultures and sounds—especially people in world music territory. Those people sometimes seem incredibly stiff, paranoid, rigid, and protective of something they have absolutely nothing to do with anyway. The greatest musicians will always want to mix what they're doing with something else. They know it's inevitable that it has to blend together with something else in order to evolve. Those musicians are very open to all backgrounds and cultures. The one common thread is that they can really play. I've never been in a situation with someone who could really play from a non-Western background that was opposed to the idea

of juxtaposing what they do with something else or trying something different. I want to emphasize that this is based on musicians with very high standards and not frustrated, bitter or competitive musicians who would rather be perfectly aligned with the way the music business, music magazines and music promotion are run, which is very much done in blocks and categories. It's almost worse than pop music in some ways.

What would you point to as the earliest recorded document of your approach?

To be honest, I remember more about the people, the experiences and the traveling than I do the documented receipts, which are the recordings. Those are more about business than anything else. The records are such a fraction of what was really going on. I know a lot of people know the work from the records, but to me, it's just an ocean of experience. And like Jimi Hendrix said, "You can't go into the ocean and pull out a piece of it." The records aren't that impressive to me compared to what I experienced during the making of them. I'm glad the records are there and things are documented. I'm also glad that a lot of it isn't completely constructed and that some of it is real. But I don't know if there was a specific point where it all came together. It was more like every day and every week some sort of new connection was made in which I could say "I can go from here." It's like improvising where you go from point to point. Someone will initiate something and you travel with them for a minute. Then you initiate something else and you go another way. It should always be like that.

I'm surprised to hear you refer to your records as mere business receipts.

It's because the records involve other people that have nothing to do with music. It has to do with their approval, objectivity and taste. It's wrapped up in their negative and positive reactions. In some cases you work very closely with people like Chris Blackwell or Alan Douglas, who

was Jimi Hendrix's last producer. Working with those people is a pleasure because they have a lot of knowledge and actually like music. That's very rare in this business. There are a few people that make it real and personal, but for the most part, you are at the mercy of people who know absolutely nothing about what you're doing, but are telling you what to do. It's not all grim, but it's largely a really absurd process. The more you experience it, the more you realize that to be true.

Having said that, you've made some landmark records that have stood the test of time.

I've had some landmark opportunities that I wouldn't have been able to get on my own. If you trace those landmark records, they always go back to the business in that those are records I did with people who wanted to help me instead of try to control the situation. The records wouldn't exist without the business side. The music would have been there, but I couldn't have made the records by myself. They have to be approved, nurtured and supported on some level, because I've never been very good at the business part.

Describe the beginnings of Material and what you sought to achieve with it.

From the beginning, Material was never really a group, but sort of like a production company that would occasionally play live. There was never any extensive touring or promotion related to it. It always changed all the time. If there was ever an idea, it was that it should constantly change. The 2004 line-up is the closest I've ever had to a consistent line-up. I was consolidating three or four different directions that existed on record. There was a repertoire that evolved over the years and we thought the more we played it, the more it would evolve into one sound. Currently, there's a whole section of Ethiopian songs that we do in different arrangements and different ways live. There's also a whole other area of rhythm that's sort of based on drum and bass, and dub. Then there are pieces that are taken

from various records over a long period of time which are kind of signature riffs and themes. Then that's mixed with the fact that there's always been a great deal of improvisation. The idea is to create a unique dynamic. The more we do it, the more it can become one experience that doesn't feel like it's being broken down into different cells. Rather, it should flow as one continuous idea. Also, a lot of things are just intuitive, spontaneous, vague, and mysterious. I think music has to have those things in order for it to be of interest.

How do you look back at Material's 1994 album Hallucination Engine?

I think it's very important. It wasn't the standard thing where a record is made by musicians who go into a studio and work very diligently on a musical direction that's very well-planned. It's a very good example of how music will be done in the future. *Hallucination Engine* was done over a long period of time and was based on the energy and contributions of the people that passed through it. I didn't always know who was going to appear on a track. Then, a year later, someone appears that's on tour and they happen to be in the proximity of a tape machine and you have the opportunity to include them. It was very interesting to make a record this way. Some pieces just happened and some would start with an idea that served as the blueprint of where things might go. A musician's contribution could completely alter the whole mood and change the shape, dynamics and arrangements. Sometimes, suddenly there would be a mistake that shouldn't be there and that turned out to be a theme that became the focus. I think that's a hopeful, futuristic idea. Music doesn't need to be a fixed, programmed and formatted idea that goes back to someone sitting down at a keyboard and writing a song. That approach isn't necessarily an honest one because if the writer is playing a genre-specific style or direction, they're already doing someone else's music. What was achieved on *Hallucination Engine* is a natural fusion as opposed to a decorative idea. It's something that came together spontaneously and

musically as one sound. We didn't take a beat and decorate it with some ethnic or electronic idea. It all feels supportive of one particular sound. It's a real natural flow of things juxtaposed that worked rhythmically and harmonically. Overall, it feels like music that's kind of rare. It has the time stamps of the cast of people that came in and out of it. It established a kind of open-ended music that can go backwards and forwards and never get stuck in one place.

Hallucination Engine *sounded like a natural evolution from the previous Material album, 1989's Seven Souls.*

Everything during that period is related. There were a few records where certain combinations of instruments and rhythms that were looking to India, Africa and the Middle East all became one tonality. We mixed percussive sounds from many cultures at once to create a pulse and then used low-end ideas that relate more to Jamaican or African music. On top of that, we invoked harmonic ideas that were more related to modal jazz. Through all of it, we didn't sacrifice the possibility of improvisation.

Seven Souls came together under weird conditions. Originally, I had recorded three tracks I was going to use for a PiL (Public Image Limited) record for John Lydon. They were tracks I put together with L. Shankar, Sly Dunbar, Nicky Skopelitis, and Aiyb Dieng. I created the tracks based on discussions with Lydon, who was interested in Turkish music at that time. I thought the tracks would fit into a softer take on the PiL sound. They brought another type of chordal and melodic thing into the project. We ended up having a falling out and I didn't feel comfortable with the band he had. Lydon was doing very well at that time and wasn't the easiest person to deal with. I probably wasn't either. So I said "I'll take my tracks and do something else." I took the three tracks on a cassette and went to Turkey. While I was there, I was reading *The Western Lands* by William S. Burroughs and realized that would be a great background for his narrative. I thought it might be a good idea to use his words as opposed to having

a singer. It was interesting to have a story and information on top of the music. I made a decision in Turkey to do that and came back and had some people record Burroughs reading from that book. The record came together quickly after that.

Tabla Beat Science also seems inextricably linked to Hallucination Engine.

Absolutely. It goes back to the same kind of juxtaposition of different rhythmic ideas. The focus, as I see it, is Zakir Hussain. Everything is based on his virtuosity, presence and experience. And everyone else contributes and supports that. With a lot of world music, you have sort of Xerox musicians where someone plays a rhythm and the musician feels inclined to learn about it in a kind of musicologist sense. I think learning about music can be dangerous if all you want to do is get close to copying someone's originality. In contrast, I think *Tabla Beat Science* is an interesting set-up. You have DJ Disk, who plays what he learned from his culture; Gigi, an Ethiopian singer who's dealing with melodies from her culture; electronic music and drum and bass; and a bass style that can go anywhere. I don't want to use categories, but it's all very supportive. At the same time, the group can bring in more of a rock or dub element at any moment. It makes it a viable entity. It's exactly like the nucleus of *Hallucination Engine*. There's also a direct connection to Zakir who performed on that record too.

Tell me about the seeds of Tabla Beat Science and how the group has evolved since its 2000 debut album Tala Matrix.

The idea began with me listening to a lot of drum and bass and techno, which are very fast musics that have double time with basslines at half time. I realized that tempo and those rhythms are no different from the kinds of tempos and areas the tabla has always explored. Tabla playing always had double time and half time going in the acoustic realm. I

thought it might be interesting to develop it electronically with people who were moving in that direction at the same time. I initially contacted Zakir Hussain and we agreed to start the project. Then I played in London with Talvin Singh and Karsh Kale, both of whom are tabla players and involved in developing the electronic side of things. We also brought in Trilok Gurtu who has more of a background in fusion, but was still a tabla player. I also brought in other people I met like Sultan Khan. We ended up playing folk melodies and Rajasthani themes over beats and I thought that was a nice kind of vibe. The first record evolved from that and there ended up being a very big interest in the group. Our first show was for 13,000 people in San Francisco and we've played in places as far away as Dubai, Mumbai and Beirut.

You're very skilled at coaxing amazing performances out of people. What are the keys to being such an effective producer?

I think it's really knowing the person's limitations and the highest points of distinction they can sustain. Everyone is different. Some people play incredibly well and then say "It's terrible. Let's do it again." At that point, you have to shut them down and say "No, you're wrong. We're keeping that." And then it can become confrontational. With other people, you have to push and push to get them to play something worth listening to. But the really great musicians that have natural ability and come from a place of artistic honesty usually do their best the first time they sit down to play. Electronic and computer-based musicians seem to be more picky. That process is less magical. But everyone is totally different. You can't take the same approach to any two people. You develop an intuition about what feels right and what doesn't for each musician.

Describe your demeanor as a producer.

I was told throughout the '80s that my reputation was one of someone

who was really difficult to work with. I think that comes more from record companies. I was very difficult with record companies. I don't think I'm always that difficult with bands, particularly if I'm working with people I've dealt with previously or someone I'm trying to help evolve. But to me, the music has always been the most important thing. I've been guilty of actually breaking up bands. I would tell a member of a long-term band "It's not working. We're gonna try someone else." That can be heartbreaking, but this isn't the Boy Scouts. I'm trying to actually make music. An example is PiL in which John Lydon would grab some kids, come to New York and say "This is my band." I'd say "Your band's not happening, so I'm going to use another drummer and guitarist." Then the drummer would come up to me and say "Who's replacing me?" I'd say "You're fortunate to be replaced by Ginger Baker. I suggest you go home and cry." [laughs] Then the guitarist would ask "Who's playing guitar?" I'd say "Well, Steve Vai is playing guitar. I think he can handle it. So, let us do the album and then you can all go on tour." Then you have bands that are just dumb. Spinal Tap was not an exaggeration by any stretch. Working with Motorhead and the Ramones went way beyond Spinal Tap. They were interesting experiences, but nothing I'd want to repeat.

How do you determine what projects you want to take on?

You have to know you can bring something to the project. You have to have some understanding of where it comes from, how it works and what its potential is. On the day you're considering it, you also need to know if you need money. For instance, if I needed money and got a call from someone whose music I wasn't crazy about, but thought I could do a good job with, I would say "Listen, I'm definitely into that. I want to do it." But if they called a week later and I just got a lot of money from elsewhere to do my own thing, I'd probably say "Sorry, I'm too busy, guys." So it's not always strictly the creative side that dictates what happens. A lot of it is out

of necessity. Sometimes it's work. Also, I get a lot of calls from people who say "Have you got any work?" Sometimes records are made and situations are put together just to help someone with money. That's something a lot of critics and audiences don't understand when they're judging a record. Sometimes I'm helping people who are in trouble. It can be a situation in which someone needs a record deal so they can take care of their family and have a life. That's all part of it.

The money, people, time, and schedules are all connected to the music. In a way, the budget can really dictate who's gonna be on an album. You may want to have someone on a record, but you won't use them because you know you need a round-trip business class ticket from somewhere for them. Or you might need a hotel for three days and you won't have that in the budget. That's why records like *Hallucination Engine* took a long time. I really didn't want to finish that record with the budget I had. That record's budget is probably five times larger than the actual budget, but the rest came from me. I didn't go back to Chris Blackwell and say "We're over budget." I make it my responsibility and I'll get the money from other projects if necessary.

How do you look back at your days at the helm of the Axiom label?

I thought we made the greatest progressive fusion in the history of time. I have no problem comparing Axiom's output with anything else. The real test is the music, so take the records, play them and play someone else's stuff. That's all you have to do. I stand behind the Axiom records 100 percent. There are other world music labels where you get the feeling that for someone to get a record deal, they have to have a name, be very easy to deal with and have a manager with an office in London and maybe in Los Angeles too. You get the feeling nobody's on drugs or fighting or stealing. Unfortunately, some of the greatest musicians are on drugs, they do steal and they cause trouble. Trouble is very much a part of music. With Axiom,

I went for the heaviest stuff and the heaviest people. I wanted it to be real. I wanted those records to be about true collaboration, not about somebody who's decorating. We went into very different areas that labels typically wouldn't risk going into.

Describe the philosophies at work in your album-length remix projects.

I think of remixing in the same way a composer would interpret another composer's composition. But it can mutate significantly. I usually start with some kind of map and then I proceed to deconstruct the map. There's definitely a method, as well as a lot of spontaneity and intuition at work. I try to create a shape and dynamic that's similar to a written composition. A lot of thought will go into that. Sometimes I'll stick to the plan and sometimes I'll throw it away in five minutes. What I tell record labels is "It's not a remix. It's like a reincarnation. It's a new life. It's a new record. You can't put it out as a reissue or as any sort of re-anything." I think a lot of the electronic music we did in the past came from the future and it's still coming. So in certain cases, I think you can consider a remix album a new achievement or contribution.

Your remix projects have drawn praise and ire in equal measures. What's your response to those in the latter category?

It's important to understand that a mix is just a version. This comes from dub and the original b-sides that were created because you had no more studio time. So instead, you took a track, mutated it and it became a new version that served as your b-side—your second song. In reality, it's just the first song done differently. So the number of versions you can create is endless. A mix is just a stereo master that happened to happen one day. One person will say it's the greatest thing they've ever heard and another will say it's the worst thing they've ever heard. So when purists

say “This is blasphemy. He’s changed the original,” I say “The original never existed. It was just a version that was for sale that you happened to buy. It’s not the only one you can listen to.” I think the word “remix” is an old word that should be left in the disco age. What we’re talking about now are endless versions that can go on into infinity.

Tell me about your relationship with Miles Davis.

After I did Herbie Hancock’s *Future Shock* in 1983, Miles called Herbie and said “What you did is all I ever wanted to do—make a street record. How do I do that?” Herbie said “Honestly, you should call Bill because he’s the one who did it all.” So Miles called and we met in Paris in winter 1983. We talked about lots of things. I had many African musicians in the studio at the time, including Manu Dibango, Mory Kanté and Youssou N’Dour. Miles was blown away by the environment and said “Put a track together and let’s do something.” When we got back to the States, we met again at his place and talked on the phone a lot. I put a couple of tracks together, but a guy named Tommy LiPuma was handling Miles’ career at the time and I wasn’t into him. Miles and LiPuma came to the studio when I was working with George Clinton and said “We want you to do half of the new album and Marcus Miller is gonna do the other half.” I said “How about you and Marcus do the whole record because I have better things to do. Go away.” I didn’t talk to Miles for awhile after that. I met Miles again in Japan after *Tutu* came out in 1986 and told him I could still do stuff. But time went on and I was in Hong Kong one day watching TV and it said Miles had just died. At that time, I was just getting ready to say to him “Let’s get Tommy LiPuma out of the way and do this thing right.”

Do you have any regrets about not getting to work with Davis?

Yeah. I should have pushed a little harder. I was working a lot during

that time and the way I dealt with LiPuma was with the attitude of “We’re making stuff that represents the past, present and future of music. It’s heavy and relevant. And we’re selling records to kids and you’re just old.” That was the vibe he got from me. We didn’t connect. I didn’t need a record company person telling me what to do. I talked to Miles after that and explained to him why I wouldn’t do it and he was cool. He still wanted to do something in the future. My idea for Miles, as I explained to him in Paris, was to do a kind of endless music conceptually similar to how Trouble Funk and Parliament-Funkadelic would start a rhythm and then decorate it with different tunes and themes. With Miles, you could have had an acoustic quintet playing inside of an electric band and you could have had the electric band decorating the quintet. You could have had Wayne Shorter and Miles doing themes that also included classical, African and industrial references. Miles was buggin’ when I told him about my idea. He thought it was great, but I couldn’t take that idea and reduce it to half a record. I had an epic idea and all they wanted to do was just make another Miles record.

Did your discussions with Davis play a role in shaping your approach on the Panthalassa remix album?

I certainly remembered the conversation in Paris during which we talked about making music that would overlap and connect. *Panthalassa* includes tracks that are actually two pieces playing at once. In addition, there are a few places on the record where a theme from one piece that was previously unheard goes into a rhythm from another tape that was never heard. But the record wasn’t meant to serve as a deconstruction of Miles Davis. Rather, it was meant to bring out new elements in the music. I knew Miles’ music from that era well. I was there when it came out and it was very important to me. It made me, so I tried to remake it in my own way.

You've worked with a lot of spiritual and devotional music. What's your philosophy in terms of respecting the originating traditions while extending their contexts?

I think it all comes down to capturing a feeling. I'd like to think what I'm playing is devotional music. And I respect anything that resounds with a truthfulness and has a kind of soul to it. You feel that right away if it exists in something you're listening to. A lot of music doesn't connect anything or give anything to people. In some cases, certain music even takes things away. I don't respect something just because someone says it's spiritual. I don't believe in the idea of "Oh, we have to bow down to this because it's heavy stuff." Rather, I respect it when it's respectable. I think there's spirituality inherent in all truthful approaches to sound and music combinations. I've dealt with a lot of music and people. I've worked with spiritual people who are criminals. And there are people who have found a kind of inner peace and you feel it right away when you meet them. They're giving something back instead of taking something away. A lot of people listen to music and say "that was a very spiritual thing." I think that's because there was a serious devotion, focus and intent when creating a distinct artistic impression. That's what good music is about. You could be the most technically gifted musician in the world and not leave an impression no matter how loud your music is turned up. People will never really hear it.

How did the post-9/11 political climate affect what you do?

After 9/11, we were all really affected, particularly when it came to traveling. I lost gigs in Turkey, Israel, Qatar, and places in the Gulf. I would have been perfectly happy to play in Baghdad and Saudi Arabia, but that's not going to happen now because of this stupid situation that really hurts artists. My only interest is what things mean to artists. The rest of it is all

lies. I don't know how 9/11 affects the rest of the world because it's the rest of the world that created the situation. The artists didn't. But they're being affected because everyone is losing money, experiences, friendships, and travel opportunities. Recordings are not being made. Things are not being documented. Art is getting lost and destroyed and that's a crime. The U.S. government as it stands is not conscious about destroying creativity and the arts because it doesn't have any idea what those things are. It's all about greed and money.

Do you feel the work you do in bringing musicians together from across the world can play a role in reducing that ignorance?

The fact is, you have people who are so stupid and ignorant in America that they believe if you're connected with Islam in any way that you're responsible for something negative. The media certainly isn't helping fix that perception either. So when you bring together artists from all over the world, those who are ignorant might realize that people from different places share similarities and can create art together. It can create understanding and respect for people of different cultures and religions. So that's certainly a positive thing when it happens.

Can music create real change in the world?

Yeah, I believe so. If you put on Norah Jones, you go from being awake to being asleep. So you've been affected. There's been a change. [laughs] Seriously speaking, I think I was changed by music for the better. I've also had people come up to me—although you never know what drugs they might be on—and say “The things you've done have changed my life.” That's probably the best thing you can say to someone. But creating serious change goes beyond music. I think people in general should be on fire trying to find the truth in order to achieve a better quality of life. Everyone needs to look at the situation we're in as a whole and use the

tools available to help redefine the world around them. If more people tried harder, they could change the situation the world is in. Unfortunately, most people are afraid and asleep. That's a really bad combination, because it means you're going to have nightmares instead of dreams.

July 2004



JOHN McLAUGHLIN & ZAKIR HUSSAIN

REMEMBERING SHAKTI

WITHOUT A DOUBT, Shakti's East-meets-West explorations that bridged jazz and Indian classical music played a pivotal role in establishing world music as a viable, potent force. Formed in 1974, the groundbreaking group initially consisted of British guitarist John McLaughlin, North Indian tabla master Zakir Hussain, and violinist L. Shankar and ghatam player T.H. "Vikku" Vinayakram, both of whom hail from South India. The band, whose Hindi name translates as "creative intelligence, beauty and power," fashioned an organic, fluid sound that combined what were then perceived as disparate traditions into a seamless whole. McLaughlin's enormous fan base from his years fronting the wildly popular early '70s fusion group Mahavishnu Orchestra ensured Shakti had a large audience from the outset. As a result, it opened the ears of listeners worldwide to the immense possibilities cross-cultural musical collaborations can yield.

After a five-year, three-album run, Shakti disbanded in 1978. In 1997, the Arts Council of England contacted Hussain with the suggestion of reforming the band. It spurred him and McLaughlin to launch a reunion tour under the name Remember Shakti. The two remained friends and collaborators after the original group's demise and even engaged in a brief Shakti tour of India in 1984. But the emergence of Remember Shakti marked the first significant activity invoking the band's name in 20 years.

At the time, McLaughlin and Hussain were unable to locate Shankar and opted to recruit other co-conspirators. The 1997 concerts featured Vinayakram and North Indian bansuri player Hariprasad Chaurasia. The

resulting 1999 CD, simply titled *Remember Shakti*, featured a complete gig from the tour. It was a very different effort from *Shakti*, *Handful of Beauty* and *Natural Elements*, the albums that comprise the group's '70s output. Those recordings offered a fiery blend of acoustic pyrotechnics that showcased a youthful quartet determined to prove its mettle, as well as champion what was ostensibly a new musical genre. But for the *Remember Shakti* album, McLaughlin and Hussain preferred to let the music ebb and flow in a more restrained, meditative and traditional Indian manner.

Since the first Remember Shakti tours, Vinayakram's son V. Selvaganesh has performed in place of his father on ghatam, kanjira and mridangam. Karnatic mandolin player U. Srinivas and vocalist Shankar Mahadevan have also joined, rounding out a revised quintet line-up. Still intact to this day, Remember Shakti has now been together longer than the original group.

Apart from Remember Shakti, McLaughlin maintains a thriving solo career that includes recording Western jazz-fusion with next-generation Indian musicians such as keyboardist Louiz Banks, percussionist Sivamani and drummer Ranjit Barot. The collaboration yielded 2007's *Floating Point* and an accompanying "making of" DVD. The same year, McLaughlin launched another new group called 4th Dimension, a quartet featuring bassist Hadrien Feraud, keyboardist/drummer Gary Husband and drummer Mark Mondesir. Recent times have also seen McLaughlin work with the Five Peace Band, a formidable jazz supergroup with keyboardist Chick Corea, saxophonist Kenny Garrett, bassist Christian McBride, and drummer Vinnie Colaiuta.

Similarly, Hussain's fruitful solo endeavors continue with frequent Indian classical recordings, as well as relentless global touring. He also participates in the Indian electronica outfit Tabla Beat Science along with bassist/producer Bill Laswell, and the Global Drum Project, a percussion group that includes Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart, talking drum player Sikiru Adepoju and conguero Giovanni Hidalgo. On top of all that, Hussain runs Moment Records, an independent label devoted to the creation, distribution and promotion of traditional Indian music.

JOHN McLAUGHLIN

What role do you believe Shakti played in the establishment and acceptance of world music?

It must have played some role. When I formed Shakti, it was dimly viewed, I should say! After coming out of Mahavishnu—a very powerful electric band—here I was sitting on a carpet with Indian musicians. Everyone thought I flipped out. It was not well-received at all by the record company or my agent and manager. Artistically, I thought it was wonderful, but they all thought I was a little loopy. It was not good news to them.

I'm extremely proud of Shakti because prior to it, there was very little collaboration between North and South Indian musicians. Shakti played a role in the reunification of the North and South in the musical sense. Since Shakti, the collaborations between North and South have grown a thousand times. We now have very regular North-South meetings. As far as Shakti's influence on the Western ear, it's difficult for me to estimate how and what kind of influence we had. We were very timely as far as we were concerned. And subsequently in the '80s, ethnic music and world music became much more popular. People began to seek out a new sound. The globalization of the world is part of the same process. The shrinking of the planet and increased intercommunication between countries and cultures has played a role too.

How did the current Remember Shakti line-up come together?

For the first Remember Shakti tour, I said "Why don't we try to get Shankar?" We tried with no success. We left messages and tried to get through by fax and any way possible. So, we said "Let's go another way" and we invited Vikku's son Selvaganesh and now Shakti begins to have some history. Twenty years ago, Zakir and I were sitting across the stage

from Vikku and now we look across and see his son. And when you hear Selvaganesh and Zakir play, it's very different from Vikku and Zakir. Selvaganesh's principal instrument is kanjira, but he also plays ghatam. Srinivas is a monster too. I first saw him as a young mandolin player on a video 16 years ago. He would have been 14 years old. He was phenomenal then and he is even more so now. This group is amazing. We have electric mandolin and guitar which is a nice combination of contrasts and harmony with two different kinds of percussion. It's about vitality and creating a joyful experience that doesn't happen at the expense of soul. One always hopes for this. This group is like the original Shakti in some ways, but quite different also. The spirit, joy and happiness is still there. I mean, Zakir and I go back to '69. We've known each other for decades. He's really a brother to me whom I love very deeply and have tremendous admiration for. He's a wonderful musician and without equal on tabla. The people are reacting to this group in an amazing way. The reaction was great before, but we were a little more obscure then. There was no such thing as world music in those days. This kind of East-West fusion was virtually unknown. But I couldn't ask for more than the wonderful reactions we're getting.

The Remember Shakti album is much more steeped in Indian classical traditions than it is in any Western forms.

Yes, things went the natural Indian way. This, of course, included the introduction of the raga, the various ways of collective playing and the principal improvisations from the soloists. As musicians, we are playing notes, music and rhythms, and we hope to play the right melody in the correct way, but this is only part of the process. The other side that is important is the communication of the musicians and the playing and playfulness that comes from that interaction. You can put a piece of music in front of somebody and he may play it perfectly. So what? Interplay and interaction are the integral parts of music. They're as important as the notes. Without them, I don't think I'd be here. You can't just play

over someone. There are many examples in jazz-fusion in which you have a soloist playing over a steady drumbeat and I find that terribly boring, because I want to hear the interaction between two people. I want to know what kind of imagination and spontaneity they have. Only in spontaneity can we be who we truly are.

There are some pyrotechnics on the recording, but because of the soulful sound of Hariprasad's bansuri flute, everybody adapted themselves automatically without thinking "Should I do this? Should I do that?" It's a natural process. The moment you start to talk about playing music, you destroy music. It cannot be talked about. It can only be played, enjoyed and listened to.

The record was an afterthought. I spoke about the idea of taping the shows with Zakir during rehearsals—which was actually only three hours for the group. I told Zakir "We may never play in this formation again, so wouldn't it be nice to have a souvenir for ourselves?" He thought it was a great idea too. It's a nice idea to have memories because as time goes by, you don't know if things will come together in this way again. So, we rented a recorder and taped the shows. Upon listening to the playback, we thought that this was really amazing music. We also thought "Wouldn't it be wonderful if it was available as a recording?"

How do you situate Remember Shakti amongst your other projects to date?

They're all important to me. Every group is just part of my life. Every recording is a painting in a sense. It's something frozen in time and it bears testimony to my musical talent and spiritual state at that moment. It's difficult for me to make any kind of judgmental view on a comparative basis. To me, Shakti was something that some people were disappointed with and it was only subsequently that people came up to me and said "This is a really good group. It's very good that you did it." I am in the middle of all of this, so I can't be objective about it. Maybe after I've died, people can say "This was good" and "That was not so good." We did a television

interview the other day in Paris and the first question was “What’s the use of reforming Shakti?” I thought “What a stupid question!” And I said “What’s the use of you interviewing us right now?” It was so silly. I actually said that on television. [laughs] I don’t think they’ll invite me back. But what to do? What a stupid question! What’s the use of getting up in the morning? You might as well stay in bed! What a wally!

Describe how you initially became fascinated with Indian culture.

I became very interested in comparative religion around 1962 when I was 20. I was raised without any religious education whatsoever. I became a member of the Theosophical Society because they had a wonderful library. On discovery of the wonder and profundity of Indian thought and philosophy, my appetite was really whetted. I became aware of Ramana Maharshi, a man who had a strong impact and continues to exert quite an influence on me. I went on to become aware of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Premananda, and Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj. My discovery of Indian music was also quite a revelation. I was first struck by the beauty of it and the mastery of the improvisation that exists in both the North and South. The relevance of this to my music, which is jazz music, was great in terms of the necessity of mastering this kind of discipline for improvisation.

How do you balance the mathematic equations of Indian rhythmic development with the jazz universe?

There is really a great deal of common ground. The mathematics of rhythm are universal. They don’t belong to any particular culture. It’s true that the sensuality of rhythm is coupled with the mathematical mind in India. It’s not for nothing that India has produced some of the greatest atomic engineers, mathematicians and astronomers. India even has an observatory that goes back many hundreds of years in which the orbits of planets were calculated. So you can say it’s been developed to a more

sophisticated level there than in jazz music. But whether it's from Africa, China, Brazil, or India, rhythm is rhythm. If you try to improvise in jazz without some degree of rhythmical mathematical proficiency, you'll be lost by the drummer and flounder.

Describe the importance of konokol to your understanding and knowledge of Indian classical music.

Essentially, konokol is a marvelous system of Indian rhythm that is done without an instrument. You use your voice and your hands so you don't have to learn a percussion instrument in order to fully understand the simplicity and sophistication of Indian rhythmical traditions. It's a system I highly recommend to all my students, although I don't claim in any way to be a master of konokol. But as I said, rhythm is really universal and if you can understand konokol—the most superior system of learning rhythm in the world—you can understand any rhythm from any country on the planet. For example, if I have to communicate something to one of the percussion players in Remember Shakti, I can sing it to him in a rhythmical sense and vice-versa. It could be "Ta-ka ta-ka ta ta-ka tin day ta." You then immediately see the mathematics of it. And if you can sing a rhythm, it means you understand what it is and then it's a question of applying it to your instrument.

Your 1995 album The Promise contained jungle elements. How closely do you follow the electronica scene?

I listen to a lot of things from the English underground be it jungle, weird trance or techno things. There's a lot of it that's garbage, but there's some very nice things in there such as D*Note, Lemon D and Grooverider. I really enjoy them. I've also got a record by Colonial Cousins with Hariharan and Lezz. They're singing pop in Hindi, but it's different from when Hariharan sings ghazals. They're both great voices and they're

working in a pop environment with sequences, but I like it. I was listening to Sheila Chandra the other day too. I have a great faith in every generation's ability to come up with its own music. What's really amazing to me is that some of these young, English underground people don't really know too much about music. Their musical knowledge is very limited, but it's what they do with that knowledge that is very interesting and really attracts me. They've got great imagination. You know, you can have the greatest player in terms of mastering an instrument and you could be yawning your head off when you hear him. So it's not what you do, but the way you're doing it and in the end that's all that we have.

Some believe electronica represents an extension of the fusion movement you played a role in pioneering during the '70s.

Yes, they've taken some things. A basic jungle beat is a '70s beat, but double speed. So it's true. When I first heard jungle, I felt I knew where it was coming from and that's a part of my history. So of course I liked it. I really loved Mahavishnu. In a sense, we broke some ground to the chagrin of some and to the pleasure of others. But how are you going to please everyone? Look at the way they advertised *The Promise* and *The Heart of Things* albums. In America they said "John McLaughlin: The man who's not afraid to use the F-word." As opposed to "fuck," the word was "fusion." Can you imagine this? It gives you some indication of the state of mind of the critics. They've really slagged me off because I'm a fusion musician. But I'm proud of it. I don't care what they think. I never read critics anyway because they love you one week and hate you for the next two months, then they like you again, and then they don't care. They're so capricious. I'm too old for that now. [laughs]

What did you make of Panthalassa, Bill Laswell's Miles Davis remix album that included material from your late '60s Davis stint?

He's doing a very interesting job on those remix albums. Some of the recording quality of those times was really terrible. Bill is a great producer and he's a musician as well. I think more power to him if he can do something to them and make a remix and enhance the poor recording quality in some way. I think it's a good thing. If only I had a remix of Tony Williams' Lifetime's *Emergency!* That was one of the most awful-sounding recordings I've ever had the misfortune to make. It was a great shame. I remember the first playback. I was in the control room and I had been recording for a number of years, so I was able to say "I hate to tell you guys, but there's something wrong with the board." And in fact, there was distortion on eight tracks of that recording. Anyway, it was put out as it was and it was a shame because that was a wonderful, wonderful trio with Tony and Larry Young. It was my debut in the United States after Tony invited me to come play with him in late '68.

You once said "music is the face of God." Can you elaborate on that?

I am convinced, as many people are, that we all have divine origins and that essentially everything is divine. We all come from the One, we all are in the One, and we can never be apart from each other and the One. This is the personal conviction. It all comes down to an intellectual game in the end if you start to consider truth, goodness and beauty which are probably the essential attributes of what we consider to be God. If something is really true, it has to be beautiful. And music is beautiful, so it has to be true. God is the most beautiful of all the beautiful and the source of all beauty, so music has to be intimately acquainted with God in some way. Let me put it another way: truth without beauty is the atom bomb.

ZAKIR HUSSAIN

Why do you think there's been such an enduring interest in Shakti's music?

Why is there still an interest in The Beatles or Rolling Stones? There's something magical about certain people coming together and linking on whole levels of communication, whether that's through music, mind, heart, or emotions. Shakti was such a group that made that connection. You could see it when you watched the band play—the musicians were totally connected. They were operating as one. They were not four people, but one person. That brings incredible amounts of positive feelings and vibrations into one's music and is something that lasts.

McLaughlin said the group was very dimly viewed upon its debut.

What happens is sometimes you have a vision and an urge to go forward and do something unique at a time when people are still tied to what is, as opposed to what should be or what can be. One must also realize that John had just disconnected himself from Mahavishnu Orchestra, a very, very commercially popular group. In many ways, John made the big sacrifice because he lost a lot of fans who were into his electric experience and they faded away. Another reason John probably said that is because the record companies and promotional outfits had no idea what to call Shakti, which category of music it fit into, or which bin in the record shop to put it in. So they looked at it with a great amount of hesitancy. But they've been proven wrong because Shakti has endured.

How much easier is it for Remember Shakti to operate now compared to the original group's circumstances in 1974?

I think concert-goers have a much greater awareness of traditional

music from all over the planet. It is more evident than ever before. The tastes of music listeners are so varied these days. They listen to everything from techno to rock to jazz to Indian to world to all kinds of stuff. It's amazing to see people being so open-minded and panoramic in their vision these days. Therefore, a group like Shakti is just the ticket for a lot of people. The *Remember Shakti* record is doing well and the concerts are selling out wherever we play. The response has been so incredible. There's great love and affection from the people to us. It's incredible and amazing, even though this group does not resemble the old Shakti. It's a different sort of group and in some ways a step forward to hopefully a next level of musical coordination and composition.

What impact do you believe Shakti had on other Indian musicians?

After Shakti, Indian musicians became much more open to the idea of trying things not only within the realms of Indian music, but by stepping out of Indian music and into any traditions they felt comfortable with. Shakti was one of the first combinations of musicians trying to do something that crossed all musical boundaries. We didn't approach each other thinking "Okay, you play South Indian, I play North Indian and he'll play jazz, then see what happens." We just jumped into the wagon and took a ride together. It was four people as one. We were very young at that time and had no qualms about trying different things. We just sat down and played and did whatever was necessary to make it work musically and be fun. It was something unique at that time. Previously, when people from different cultures made music, one or the other music was crossing over and never meeting somewhere in between. For instance, if Yehudi Menuhin played with Ravi Shankar, Menuhin had to cross over into the Indian territory to play Indian classical music written for him by Shankar. It was never a combination of classical music and Indian classical music together. There were reasons for that. They were great traditionalists who believed they

had to maintain their traditions.

Your father, tabla great Ustad Alla Rakha, wasn't thrilled about your decision to join Shakti.

In the beginning, he did have problems with it. He felt I had to make my name as an Indian musician before anything else was to happen. As a teacher, he was worried that I would drift to the other side of the world and sever my connection with India. I convinced him that will not be and then proved that through my actions and it was fine. My deal with him was "Okay, I am going to play Indian classical music and I will travel to India regularly and play concerts there and have the audience accept me as an Indian classical musician. On my own time, I am going to do what I enjoy doing apart from Indian music." Even now, 80 percent of the time I am performing Indian classical music. It is rare that I get involved in playing anything else.

Was his initial response surprising given that he had worked with Elvin Jones and Buddy Rich?

He had already proven himself as an Indian classical musician. He had been playing for 50-odd years and had already been accepted as one of the greats. So for him to interact with somebody posed no danger to him as far as losing his identity. For me, as a young musician of 19 or 20, there was more of a danger of that, but from the very beginning, my relationship with music other than Indian music has been adventurous. There was enough of a connection to my roots that there was little chance of me being overwhelmed by what I saw in the world. Therefore, I felt I could bend and work myself into any kind of music and play with any kind of people. For instance, when I work with Mickey Hart, he will try anything including throwing metal onto the ground and recording that or building a fire on a farm and putting a microphone there to record the crackling

sound. He'll also record a drum playing at one end of a tube with a mic at the other end 500 meters away to see what kind of a sound projection it has. It's only by being open to all kinds of things and sometimes taking risks that you can really discover what is out there.

How has the chemistry between you and McLaughlin evolved over the years?

When I play with John, it's not like playing with a Western musician. It's like playing with an Indian musician, believe it or not. John has taken the time to study Indian classical music and figure out how we work, how we think and what our improvising techniques are. Myself, I have had the good fortune to study and understand the Western ways of musical thinking, be it jazz, pop or rock. In terms of musical interaction with John, it's a bit more detailed now than before, but the same love and affection for one another is there. The fabulous thing is that connection hasn't changed. I never feel like I'm working with someone strange from a different tradition and he doesn't feel that way either.

Tabla is no longer the fringe instrument it once was. Today, it's all over the place, including hit pop songs, television commercials and even hip-hop.

I'm elated. I'm happy that's happened. Now I don't have to explain to people what tabla is. That makes my job easier as a performer. People used to relate to India through the sound of the sitar. Now it's not that. Now, it's the sound of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's voice or tabla. People know there is more to the sounds of India than just the sitar and that makes me feel really good. Somehow, it has reached the point where the sound is not only recognizable, but also in demand. There are some very, very fine tabla players now and a lot of well-known percussionists who play and really relate to this instrument. People like Trilok Gurtu, a fabulous jazz percussionist, have a lot to do with it. So has Talvin Singh lately. In my own way, I've contributed. It's just an instrument that has caught on. It's tabla's

turn at the moment.

Describe the motivation for creating your label Moment Records.

Moment Records wasn't founded to do my music, but Indian music in general. When you do a record for any record company, you go to a studio, do the recording, deliver the tape, and then you see it in the store. Between the delivery of the tape and getting it in the store, musicians really have no say in what happens with the album cover, what's in the liner notes or how the master mixdown sounds. I felt there needed to be a company that can provide a platform to Indian musicians so they can have control over what their product is like and have it appear simultaneously in all major record stores all over the world. However, it's difficult to convince distributors and sales representatives to go out and sell our products in the shops and make them understand that they are worth putting in the bins. To a certain extent, my name helps sell them and makes it possible, but it is hard work and hard going. Today's focus on world music and therefore on Indian music, means it is becoming a little easier.

What keeps your interest in Indian classical music alive given all of the musics you're exposed to?

Adventure, learning and finding out more. I'm still learning about Indian classical music. And every time I play with a new Indian classical musician, there's more to learn. There are as many expressions as there are musicians, so it's learning time no matter what. So, that is what I am—a student driven to make more and more discoveries.

June 1999



NOA

UNIVERSAL INSIGHTS

BUILDING MUSICAL BRIDGES that connect cultures and people is something that comes naturally to singer-songwriter Noa. She was born in Israel, raised in the Bronx, New York, and returned to her homeland at age 17. Her music and lyrics often reflect the transitional experiences and thoughts that accompanied those geographical shifts.

Known by her full name Achinoam Nini in Israel, where she's the country's leading international concert and recording artist, Noa has developed an enormous and devoted worldwide following. Propelled by her rich, soaring vocals, Noa's infectious music straddles pop, rock, folk, and Middle Eastern influences. Although she's best known for her English albums, she also releases Hebrew records for the Israeli market. In addition, she's sung and recorded in several other languages including French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

Much of Noa's music has been created in collaboration with Gil Dor, a renowned Israeli guitarist, arranger and producer. Dor discovered Noa while teaching at Tel Aviv's Rimon School of Contemporary Music, where she was a student. Prior to his tenure at Rimon, Dor studied at Boston's Berklee School of Music where he befriended jazz icon Pat Metheny, who taught there in the '70s. When Metheny performed in Israel in 1987, he presented a master class at Rimon, further solidifying the relationship between the two guitarists. Dor soon introduced Noa and her music to Metheny, who responded enthusiastically. During a subsequent visit to New York, Noa played her latest songs for Metheny. Suitably impressed

and determined to get Noa's international career rolling, Metheny chose to co-produce and finance her 1994 self-titled debut album. The disc went on to create major waves across the world and she was well on her way to stardom.

The following year, another pivotal moment took place in Noa's life. On November 4, 1995, she sang at a peace rally in Tel Aviv's Kings Square. Minutes after Noa finished her performance, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin took the stage to speak and was assassinated by a member of a right-wing extremist group. The event spurred Noa to political action in which she used her considerable influence to promote peace between Israelis and Palestinians. She also incorporated her perspectives into 1996's *Calling*, a lyrically and musically intense album that stands as a career highlight. The records that followed, including 2000's *Blue Touches Blue* and 2002's *Now*, also feature songs that promote a united vision of humanity.

Noa's activism has garnered great respect and admiration, but her actions have had detractors as well who believe entertainers should simply entertain. Fortunately, those voices are in the minority. The United Nations was so pleased with her humanitarian contributions that in 2003 it appointed her an ambassador of its Food and Agriculture Organization which is dedicated to alleviating poverty and hunger. The late Pope John Paul II also considered Noa a kindred spirit and often asked her to perform at his galas. This conversation took place just a few days after she returned to her home near Tel Aviv following a Christmas concert at the Vatican.

What does it mean for you to be asked to sing for the Pope?

I've performed for the Pope many times. My first performance was in 1995 when I did a big concert in St. Peter's Square in Rome. It was a non-religious event celebrating the idea of family within humanity. There were a few other artists there and a children's choir, and it was attended by Mother Teresa. I sang "Ave Maria" from my first English album *Noa* which has original lyrics I wrote and an arrangement by Gil Dor. It's like

a song version of the classical piece. It made a huge amount of waves and catapulted me to superstar status in Italy. Basically, anything to do with the Pope there makes people freak out. So “Ave Maria” ended up becoming one of my most well-known songs. Since that show, I’ve been invited to the Vatican endless times and I haven’t been able to accept all the invitations because then I’d become the Vatican house singer. [laughs] But I’ve done a few very interesting performances, including a very big show in 2000 attended by 300,000 people called “The Great Jubilee Concert for a Debt-Free World” with a symphony orchestra and the Pope onstage.

Although I’m Jewish, I do these shows because I’m very much in favor of the opinions Pope John Paul II has expressed concerning the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. He believes in reconciliation and has established representation for Israel within the Vatican, which is very interesting. I genuinely respect him. His influence over so many millions of people in the world is staggering. I really do believe an important way to make progress in solving our human dilemmas and planetary crises is to get more religious leaders involved who make very clear statements against war and violence in the name of God, and this man is doing that in an outspoken way. I felt it was my conscious duty to support him and that’s what I do.

What role can music play in healing the complex rifts of the world?

I think music has one great quality in that it enables us to take a step outside of the system and look at everything from above. It allows us to leap out of the loop we’re in. It’s a great thing because it appeals to our most basic instincts including love, happiness, sadness, the joy of life, the fear of death, the heartbeat, and heartbreak. These are things that are absolutely universal and unite every human being on the face of the planet. Music totally breaks barriers. When you listen to music, you dance, you cry and your soul goes flying out of your body. It happens regardless of where you come from or what language you speak. It’s a very beautiful thing.

Having said that, it's absolutely impossible for artists to make a difference alone. Artists can be the harbingers of an idea or emotion, but they definitely need the assistance of other factors within the political, social and diplomatic realms. Everybody needs to pitch in, including regular citizens who believe they can make no difference because they're nobodies. If people don't go out and vote or speak out and stop putting up with things they know are destructive for themselves, their families and society, nothing will happen. That's how I look at it. I've been given the talent, charisma and ability to influence people and I use that shamelessly for causes I believe in. I feel it's my duty. That's what my heart tells me. By the same token, if I was a bus driver, I would contribute just by being nice to the people who come on my bus and helping little old ladies who get on. I think it's like a pebble thrown into water that makes little circles, then bigger and bigger circles. Finally, all the circles meet up and become waves. So every little pebble makes a difference. I'm a pebble and I'm making my little circles and hoping they meet other circles. But others have to make circles too, otherwise I'm just going to drop to the bottom of the lake and that will be it.

How does spirituality inform what you do as a musician?

I'm not religious. I'm not an observant Jew and I don't subscribe to any religion in a fanatical or totalitarian manner. I have a problem with uniform-wearing people, religious or otherwise. In an ideal world, I'd like to see people finding their own way through spirituality and not necessarily going with the uniforms and dogmas. My spirituality consists of the belief that love is the number one most important emotion of our existence. If you do everything from a place of love, kindness, compassion, and open-mindedness, then there is a chance for humanity. So, in my music I include those positive messages and try to live my life that way. It's why I fight for the causes I fight for, write the lyrics I write, and say the things I say.

How have you evolved as a singer and songwriter since your career began?

I have a song on the album *Now* called “We.” I remember playing it for a friend of mine named Walter Veltroni who is the mayor of Rome. He showed me a book he compiled called *Me We*. He said it was something Muhammad Ali once said. “Me” and “we” are mirror images. If you put “me” on a mirror, “we” comes out. I think that summarizes where I’ve gone as a songwriter. I’ve gone from me to we and from we to me. I’m always dealing with the place between those two words. They’re so close to each other, yet so far. When I was very young, I would write very truthfully about myself and my personal experiences. As I grew older, I opened my heart and mind to a lot of different pictures that weren’t necessarily taken from my own life, but from everything I see around me. I think my songwriting has become more and more universal as time goes by. I’ve become more interested in the human condition, not just my own personal condition as I was when I was 17. Beyond that, I’ve also deepened my collaboration with Gil Dor. Originally, I wrote all by myself and today we basically write together. It’s a hard thing for a songwriter to give up part of yourself and let go of your ego to truly let somebody into your secret place where the inner workings of the heart and the creative process reside. But Gil and I have been working together for 15 years and we’ve truly become songwriting partners, and that’s a wonderful thing.

I’ve also become a much better singer than I used to be. I feel like I’m just now getting really good. I was born with this voice, but I’m only now discovering its depth and breadth. Also, as time passes, you become more mature and see more and everything reflects in your voice. There are things a voice teacher can teach you, but what’s important is what life teaches you. Voice teachers taught me how to breathe and how to deal with all kinds of glitches, but what’s really taught me to sing is just living, and in particular, having my children. Having my children in recent years has made me a human being. Before that, I was an ambitious young lady

with some talent and intelligence and that was about it. Being a mother is truly living. I really feel alive as a mother—much more so than I've ever felt before.

How does being a mother influence your music?

It influences my singing and songwriting endlessly. It's influenced the way I perceive life. Everything has become more acute with my children. I see daily life through them and next to them. Dealing with the problems of motherhood is so incredibly challenging. I learn more and more about myself every day. Something is always becoming settled and unsettled. And some very old stuff that I've hidden under layers and layers of protection comes out everyday. I'll pull out another emotion, experience or image from my soul and put it out there, give it some air and hang it out to dry. I'm totally cleansing myself on the inside through my experience of motherhood. You just get rid of a lot of bullshit when you become a parent. You get rid of a lot of silly obsessions and stop wasting time on totally idiotic things. You get to the heart of matters a lot more—at least I do.

Like a lot of things, when you stop trying to do things, you do them a lot better. This is the sad thing about the music business as I see it. What's left of the record companies is trying to sign young artists as young as they can get them for obvious reasons. Then the moment something is not as successful as it was a minute ago, they're thrown out on the street. These very young, ambitious people are put up on pedestals and propped up to be whatever, but aren't given the opportunity to mature within the element of music. They end up missing so much. I think before the age of 30 you don't even know what you're talking about at all. You're doing stuff, but then you hit 30 and you suddenly dive into totally different depths. It's a totally different league of getting into life, emotion and putting your heart out there in the most beautiful way. That was the case for me. I feel so fortunate to be doing what I'm doing at my age. It's a shame that in a lot

of world music, you'll see artists of all ages, but you won't in the popular music culture of almost any country.

Your 2002 album Now had a very declarative title. Provide some insight into its meaning.

"Now" is a simple declaration and maybe a title every album could have. "Now" is what an album is. An album is who you are at a given time if you're an artist who thinks that way. I think most creative artists and singer-songwriters consider who they are at a certain point in time in their lives and take a Polaroid and put it out as a CD. I think *Now* is our best album by far. Musically, the production is gorgeous. It's the first album Gil produced himself. The songs represent all the knowledge and experience we've accumulated. To elaborate on the title, it was made after the birth of my son, Ayehli. Children connect you 100 percent to the present, given moment. For children, it's always "What now?" That's because for children, there is no past and there is no future. There's no past because they haven't managed to gather one yet. There's no future because they're not built to see things that way. They just deal with the here and now from the moment they get up to when they go to sleep. It forces you to do the same. If you're walking down the street, you stop because they want to see the ant going into its hole or it's "Let's now be miserable because I want an M&M." These are the kinds of things we lose touch with when we get older. So for me, the focus is on the here and now and I feel that very strongly as a mother.

Tell me about your experiences dealing with the American music industry.

I've been exposed to the pop music side of things in Los Angeles where my record company resides and I've found it to be extremely superficial, commercially oriented and subservient to the almighty God of money, success and fame. It's just not for me. I've sat there with songwriters in

Los Angeles whose one goal in life is to write a song that gets played on radio and probably sounds like 3,000 other songs. They'd pick up hooks and lyrics from here and there and try to guess, double guess and triple guess what a certain artist would like in order to have that artist pick up the song. What has this got to do with art, the soul or the inner workings of the heart? Nothing. I became so depressed after awhile. I tried to get out of there really, really quickly. And I did.

I feel so much better working in Europe. Even though America influences Europe and the rest of the world in many positive ways, it also has a negative influence. It's largely responsible for the incredible drive for the brand, the fame, the glitz, the now, the in, and quickly moving on to whatever is next, next, next. I like things that go deep and last for years. I like Joni Mitchell, Paul Simon, The Beatles, and Leonard Cohen. Those people move me. I don't communicate with things that come and go. Fashion and the everlasting race to catch its tail are just not for me. I think one of the reasons the music industry has collapsed is because it forgot that its primary job is to create beautiful music and ensure that music gets out there to people to listen to for posterity, rather than making a quick buck. They can make money while they're making incredible music. They need to support music because it's good and not just because it sells to 15-year-old girls. They forgot about that and the substance disappeared. What they were left with is cotton candy. And cotton candy melts. And it did. It just melted.

You're a major star in most of the world except America. You're even signed to a U.S. label that's reluctant to release your English records there. What do you believe is the issue for them?

They just don't think the music is appropriate for American audiences. Why? God only knows, my friend. I've stopped trying to understand. I've stopped trying to bend over backwards to please anybody. I did that when I was younger and I don't do that anymore. I don't need to please some

A&R person at a record company that doesn't know his elbow from his asshole about music. The other day, I did a show in New York and Pat Metheny came to see it. He's one of the artists I respect most in the world. He totally flipped over the show. He and his wife told me how wonderful they thought it was. Having a true artist tell me he loves what I do is all I need. But it took me years to feel that way. I'm a much better person and artist as a result. As you're busy perfecting your art and trying to be as true to yourself as you can by not producing any bullshit, you realize there are other people that resonate with you. If you're lucky, there will be a lot. If you're less lucky, there will be a few. So that's how I work. I start with me and find resonance where I can. As for the United States, I'm sad that I haven't been able to perform there more, not because I have any interest in being famous per se, but just because I'd like to perform more frequently for an English-speaking audience that can understand what I'm writing about and saying. European audiences have been very loving and embraced me, but I can't say they really communicate with my lyrics. There's something else that's enticing or enchanting for them. But I love it when people are really listening to what I'm saying.

I think at the base, I'm an eclectic artist and can't be pigeonholed. That's a tough thing for the American music industry to deal with. They just don't understand who I am and what I'm doing. I'm a Yemenite Israeli and I'm not the bimbo type. I'm not selling sex. I'm not 25. I think what goes through the heads of American music industry people are things like "Okay, so we have a Yemenite Israeli. Oh, it must be world music. It's an ethnic thing, right? But wait. It's in English. So it's rock and roll, but it sounds like pop too? Sometimes it sounds like folk. What is it for God's sake? How the hell are we supposed to sell this?" So they don't try. They have no idea what to do with it. If you look at American pop culture, it has to be clear cut. The thought process goes something like this: "What is it? Sell it to me in a second. Do I understand in five seconds what it is? If I don't, too complicated. Next!" On the contrary, in Europe, it's fascinating to people. They go "She's Israeli, American, Yemenite, English, Hebrew

with Middle Eastern influences, ideas about the world, a political opinion, and deep black eyes. We like it!" [laughs] It's the exact opposite.

Tell me how you go about incorporating Middle Eastern elements into Western pop forms.

I haven't done it consciously as a stylistic decision. That's never been the case for me. I write songs as they come. I'll have an idea for lyrics and then I'll think of a musical context that's most appropriate for those lyrics. I don't say "I'm an Israeli and I better make it sound Israeli or a little Middle Eastern because that's what's expected of me." The sort of Middle Eastern fusion things that I've done have always been lyrically sustainable. For instance, there's a song on *Calling* called "Manhattan-Tel Aviv" that has a very strong Middle Eastern riff in it. My songs in Hebrew, because of their linguistic context, also have Middle Eastern elements. In addition, I've chosen to perform songs in the original Yemenite language with the original Yemenite music and do them without any instrumental accompaniment because that's how they were first sung. So I'll go the whole range. I sometimes do things to preserve the original roots or I'll mix different things if it's appropriate lyrically. There's one song I have called "Pines" with lyrics that go "My roots are on both sides of the sea." It was originally a poem in Hebrew and I translated some of it into English. I think it's one of the loveliest songs we've performed. You can't put your finger on where the music comes from. It comes somewhere from the Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen era and the old Israeli songs of the '60s that have a modal feel to them. So bridging these worlds is not a problem. It comes very naturally for me and I only do it when the idea of the song calls for it.

What was it like for you as a 17-year-old, having lived most of your life in the Bronx, to return to Israel?

I had gone to Israel during my summer vacations, so I knew what Israel was about, but it was still pretty shocking. It's just such a huge leap from the Bronx. I went to Yeshiva religious Jewish school in the United States and I came from a very free, secular Israeli context. However, everything about Israel is different, including the way people communicate and interact, the way things look, the food, the weather, and the overall vibe. Maybe the most dramatic thing is that people are very direct in Israel. They say what they think and are very clear, personal and familiar immediately. There is much more political correctness involved in being an American, no matter who you are. So, that's something I had to get used to. Language was a problem too because even though I looked totally Israeli, my Hebrew was very poor. When I moved to Israel, I had to really catch up on the language, music and literature. I was literally coming at it from another place. I was between two places. The reason I moved is because I was in love with the man who is now my husband. So, I had someone I loved a lot that I could rely on. But it took a long time to adjust. And then I went into the army for two years of mandatory service which was another total culture shock. It was very, very hard for me to be in the army. I was in a singing troupe, which was the best possible post I could have got, but I hated it and couldn't wait for it to be over. But it taught me a lot and gave me perspective about Israeli society, its politics, the meaning of life, and the importance of that.

Tell me how the song "Manhattan-Tel Aviv" relates to your perspectives on life in both places.

The song looks at the similarities between the two places I come from, good and bad. They are two places that are the subjects of so many people's dreams. For many, Israel is considered the Holy Land, the promised land, the golden land, and the land of milk and honey. America is considered the land of endless opportunity and where dreams come true. So a lot of

people direct their dreams towards Jerusalem in Israel and Manhattan. Yet there is a lot of violence in both places. There's a lot of sacrifice to be made if you want to live here or there. The song also relates to a lot of the more painful elements of being in either place, including people giving their lives, whether it's out on the streets or in the army.

How did the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin at the peace rally you performed affect you?

It was definitely a life-changing moment. Before it happened, it was one of the happiest moments of my life. You wouldn't believe how many people turned out to support the peace process. It was amazing. Then after he got killed, everything changed and it has not gone back to normal. It will never be the same. Everything has gone downhill from there. I'm hopeful that maybe something good is going to happen though. But since that moment, Israeli society and history have taken a turn for the worse. I was shattered. It was like I lost a family member—a close uncle or something. I think that's the way a lot of Israelis felt.

Describe the sense of resolve and urgency the event created for you.

I was on fire. I could not relax at all. All I wanted to do was speak out against the violence and reiterate everything that he said that I believed in very strongly. I spoke about my support for the peace process and the establishment of the Palestinian state alongside Israel. I spoke of the mutual respect Israelis and Palestinians should have for each other. I spoke out against the settlers in the occupied territories and how I felt it was wrong of Israel to do that. I said both nations have the right to peace and independence. I also spoke for democracy in Israeli society and discussed how repulsive I thought the dominance of orthodox political parties over our society was. We have a coalition system in Israel that enables relatively small parties to wield a great deal of power. They really have a lot of

leverage to suck the blood out of the system and get a lot of money. I said what so many people think but nobody says. I was very vocal and got into a lot of trouble for some of the things I said. I made a lot of people angry. It caused many to distance themselves from me and my music because I was so clear with my political opinions. That isn't a very popular thing for artists to do here in Israel. It almost killed my career but I managed to survive it.

How did it impact your career?

I was supposed to give a very big concert in Tel Aviv during that period and they cancelled it. Half the people returned their tickets. I also had threats to my life. It was pretty bad at the time. It took me a few years to bounce back from that. This only occurred in Israel. Outside of Israel, my political views have been extremely well respected by the non-Israeli community. But in Israel, it's a much bigger problem. There are many people who think differently and are very sensitive to the issues. They want to have their artists above all that. But the political opinions I express are humanistic opinions. They're about morals and values, not about this or that politician. So, of course they should be spoken about and expressed. For me, it's just like art.

How did you rebuild your career after that point?

It took time and a lot of integrity on my part. I just kept saying things over and over again. Also, I learned to say them in a much more diplomatic and mature way. Initially, I was just so driven after Rabin was killed. I was so angry, but I was young and had no experience, so I was very easy prey for the journalists. They took everything I said and exaggerated it 16 times. They made what I said sound very sensational. I didn't let them do that later on. I said what I believed and acted on it by going to the peace rallies and meetings and just expressing myself in many different contexts. That

approach proved much more effective.

You once said living in Israel is like playing Russian Roulette.

Yeah. You don't go around thinking about it all the time, but the statistics say your chances of getting killed in a traffic accident are higher here than any place else in the world. And then there's the whole terrorism thing. Sometimes you think "When will the terrorists hit? Where? Will it be in our town? Will someone in my family be affected?" You try to go through the motions and live your daily life as if nothing is happening, but it can't be totally normal. The concerns are always under the surface all the time.

With your international profile, you could probably live anywhere you want. What keeps you in Israel?

Simply put, it's my home and nobody ever wants to leave their home. I feel very connected to this place. I also believe there are a lot of bad things happening in a lot of countries around the world. Whenever you visit a place from the outside, you usually see the nice things about it. When you scratch beneath the surface, you realize that problems are everywhere. So I'm not going to live with the illusion that a perfect place exists on the planet when it doesn't. Ultimately, I believe Israel could be a wonderful place to live under different circumstances that are within our reach. If we can get the peace process activated and moving, I believe Israel will transform itself into a paradise and I'd really like to be there when it happens.

December 2004



DAVID SYLVIAN

LEAPING INTO THE UNKNOWN

DAVID SYLVIAN'S MUSICAL JOURNEY is characterized by soul-searching and constant change. The British singer-songwriter's career began in 1974 with the group Japan. Comprised of Sylvian, his brother Steve Jansen on drums, keyboardist Richard Barbieri, and bassist Mick Karn, the band's sound was initially inspired by glam-rock icons such as David Bowie and the New York Dolls. The band eventually took on iconic status itself with 1981's *Tin Drum*, its fifth and final studio album. The record marked the completion of the group's transformation into a synth-based, adventurous pop act full of world music influences and vivid textures. But just as the group achieved its full potential, it collapsed under the weight of increasing animosity and ego clashes.

Sylvian wasted no time establishing a solo career after Japan's demise in 1982. The next year saw the release of his debut album, *Brilliant Trees*. The disc occupied a middle ground between pop sensibilities and a desire to head into more cerebral territory. It also showcased the larger-than-life vocals of his Japan years evolving into the deep, aural charcoal that is his natural range. Several impressive records followed, including 1985's *Gone to Earth* and 1987's *Secrets of the Beehive*. It proved to be a fruitful era with the albums offering a delicate combination of flickering atmospheres, subtle orchestration and intricate imagery. Sylvian's choice of extraordinary sidemen, including trumpeter Jon Hassell, guitarists Bill Nelson and David Torn, keyboardist Ryuichi Sakamoto, and bassist Danny Thompson, also helped ensure each record possessed a distinct identity.

In 1989, Sylvian found himself again working alongside Jansen, Barbieri and Karn under the band name Rain Tree Crow. The group believed the passage of time, the emergence of individual musical personas and deepened maturity could lend itself to new and innovative musical possibilities. It was an accurate thesis, as its self-titled album full of dark and desolate soundscapes hardly bore any resemblance to Japan. But the reunion was short-lived as many of the same forces that conspired to dissolve Japan resurfaced. Once again, the four went their separate ways.

Several collaborative projects followed with the likes of composer Holger Czukay, guitarist Robert Fripp and visual artist Russell Mills. But Sylvian's next solo album wouldn't emerge until 1999's *Dead Bees on a Cake*. Sylvian favored simplicity in its arrangements that found him exploring soothing pop and R&B-influenced territory. Five years in the making, the album offered a glimpse into Sylvian's spiritual pilgrimage into the worlds of Hinduism and Buddhism. It also continued Sylvian's tradition of calling upon upper-echelon musicians for input, such as guitarists Bill Frisell and Marc Ribot, tabla player Talvin Singh, and trumpeter Kenny Wheeler.

Released in 2003, his next studio album, *Blemish*, was without question his most challenging. The improvisation-based, D.I.Y. effort was recorded at his home studio in New Hampshire and released on his own independent label Samadhi Sound. Half of the record features entirely solo performances, with Sylvian taking on all of the vocals, guitar work and electronic treatments. Experimental guitarists Derek Bailey and Christian Fennesz contribute to the disc's other tracks. The album's sound lives up to its title. Its songs are as evocative and fragile as any of Sylvian's prior work, but housed in fractured structures that include disquieting buzzes, hums and clicks designed to provoke the audience to go beyond complacent listening. *Blemish* also features Sylvian's most stark, intense and emotionally distressed songs to date. Its lyrics hint at the personal turmoil that shaped the album's bent, but as with all his material, Sylvian prefers listeners to draw their own conclusions.

How important is it for you to have listeners grasp the context within which your music is created?

I'm not interested in the listener coming to the work and viewing it as a snippet of autobiography. What's important to me is that people open up to it so it can become relevant to their lives in some way. There's a substance to the work, but people needn't know the background of the work in terms of my motivation and the main themes running throughout. They can work those out for themselves in whatever way they choose to approach it. To describe the work or pin it down in any way is only to take a stab at it. Ultimately, the essence of the work goes beyond my understanding of it. A piece of work has an inner life and that goes beyond the creator's experience of the work in that I'm very much aware that the music comes through me and not from me. I give the work form and maybe dress it up in something of an autobiographical nature because that's how I respond to the emotional content of the work. That's how I approach things, but nevertheless, there's something much greater than that at the essence of the work should you desire to delve into it that far.

Tell me about your spiritual background and how you progressed towards your current path.

There wasn't a heavy religious influence in my upbringing. I was brought up in a Christian environment and I mean that in the loosest terms possible. In England, during the period I was brought up in, we'd be singing Christian hymns in the schools. We'd be doing our scripture lessons in which we'd study the Bible. It wasn't a Christian school per se. It was part of the national curriculum. It was thrown out of the curriculum some years later after I left school. So, I was brought up with that kind of imagery and we're all indoctrinated with that to some degree. It was something we had to go through regardless of our own religious space and beliefs.

There came a point relatively late in life between '81 and '83 in which I began to question just about every aspect of my life. My beliefs, such as they were, came in for closer scrutiny. I had a great sense of doubt in the kind of religious upbringing I had been given and the sort of childlike faith I had. The pull of Buddhism appealed to me because of the clarity of it—particularly Zen Buddhism. What ultimately appealed to me is that it is a discipline where belief isn't necessary. You follow a systematic set of rules in a sense. It had a clarity that allowed me to embrace a discipline without necessarily embracing a doctrine per se. Later on in life, I was able to come to Hinduism and embrace aspects of that culture because I had been through a period of Buddhist studies that freed me up from the dogma of Christianity that I had grown up with. I was able to come back to a more devotional approach to my spiritual disciplines that didn't have that implied dogma. That was liberating because it wasn't in my background.

Why are you still sometimes drawn to Christian imagery such as Heaven and Hell in some of your lyrics?

It's entirely to do with upbringing. And often I haven't been aware of it until after the composition is complete. I know there were greater references to Heaven and Hell and devils and angels on *Secrets of the Beehive* than on later work. I found that quite peculiar, but I think it's to do with my background and it surfaced in the work quite naturally. I think it is less apparent now than it was. But they are metaphors that can be used and aren't redundant in any way, regardless of the disciplines that inform my life currently.

During your solo career, you've worked with many renowned musicians. Describe the mindset with which you typically enter into those collaborations.

With the majority of people I collaborate with, there is a mutual respect of some kind established. There is very rarely a problem involved

with the creating of music. When I'm arranging a piece of music, it's the composition or arrangement itself that is crying out for a certain voice. So, it's a matter of inviting a musician in to see if they can make that link. More often than not, there is a need for a dialogue of some kind to establish the common ground. The common ground already exists in my mind and I'm hoping that the musician coming in to work with me can recognize that. I have to say that nine times out of 10 it works extremely well.

I tend to have more problems with contributions that aren't as significant as the major collaborations I've had that people often point to. It tends to be on a much smaller level—dealing with performance on one level or another such as the timing of a drummer's performance, the pattern played on a bass guitar and other very minor details. That's why I tend to butt heads with some of the musicians I work with, but never to the degree that there is a major difficulty. If I recognize that I'm pushing a musician into working in a way he feels uncomfortable with, I just call an end to the session and there is no animosity in that. Sometimes, there's a certain amount of discomfort when they recognize that I'm unhappy with the work. Ultimately, it's better that it ends that way, rather than taking it a step further and pushing them into performing a piece in a way that they feel is uncomfortable and unnatural to them, and where I'm not really getting the performance I need.*

After Japan dissolved, how did you try to instill similar levels of commitment from the musicians you brought to your solo work?

There was frustration in moving from working within a band to becoming a solo artist. When you're working in a group, you have 100 percent commitment if you're lucky from all the musicians involved to produce the best quality work. It's because everybody's integrity rides on the work. Everybody's interest, love and passion is involved from the word go. When I moved away from the security of that environment, I was worried I wouldn't get the same degree of commitment from the

musicians I was working with. I had heard stories about certain session musicians who come in and really give you what you're looking for, but in a superficial way that lacks the emotional intensity that would give the work some kind of justification or profundity. The way I overcame that was to recognize the connections between a given composition and a body of music by a particular artist. For instance, I was hearing the sound of Jon Hassell's trumpet as I was arranging *Brilliant Trees*. It was like a light going on inside my head and I thought "Wow, that would be incredible." Then I'd ask the musician to become part and parcel of the work. I'd wonder if he would make the same connection I've made with his body of work and the particular composition I asked him to perform on. That was a bit of a leap of faith for me, but it's worked out incredibly well. The musician typically offers an intuitive response to my own work and often if he is willing to participate in the recording session, he does find the link and ultimately gives something of himself to the work. He commits to it on a level that you possibly wouldn't get from a session musician when that same consideration wasn't applied. So, that's where my approach grew from and it's been my guiding principle since.

Tell me about the creative approach you adopted when making Blemish.

It was about being open to the act of improvisation in the studio and going with it. The whole musical element had to reflect the emotional element, which was pretty raw and on edge. It's a very vulnerable position to take as a writer and vocalist. I wanted the musical support to mirror and reflect the same intensity and upfront honesty. It seemed detrimental to the work to go back and correct or remove the sonic blemishes to try and give the work a polish it really didn't need, particularly given the context in which it was created. Each track was borne out of guitar improvisation from either myself or Derek Bailey. Once I set up a sound on guitar, I just started attacking it and that was it. The performance was the first take. There would be no second take. The performance would serve as the basis

for the vocal response. I sat down immediately with the guitar recording and responded lyrically to it. I jotted down words and phrases and culled ideas from notebooks. I then immediately responded melodically to the track with a set of lyrics. So it was all done very quickly. I didn't allow time for reflection. I didn't say "Is that phrase correct? Why should it be there? Is it the strongest idea I can come up with in the context?" Rather, I just went with whatever surfaced. That was the discipline. I found the process very liberating.

The other thing I should mention is that I had been working on several retrospective projects for Virgin. At the time, I went into the studio to write new material and really felt somewhat creatively dead. I had been stifled for so long while working on these projects and while building my home studio that I didn't know what was inside or what needed to be expressed. I had been carrying the general outline for *Blemish* around for almost a year, but I never knew what would happen when I sat down to write the material. When it surfaced in the immediate way that it did, I felt there was an integrity, honesty, truthfulness, and vulnerability in the work. I hadn't heard anything quite like it before. In a sense, that justified the work for me.

That sounds worlds apart from your typical process that relies heavily on questioning and reflection.

That's true. With this outing, I was more interested in the intensity of the emotional commitment to the work. If I had paused to think about what I was writing about, maybe I wouldn't have felt comfortable. Perhaps I would have had second thoughts about this approach. Maybe that degree of vulnerability would have been too out there for me. There's a vulnerability in my work generally, but *Blemish* was taking it a step further than that. Also, I was experiencing a rush of creativity. So, although I'm dealing with rather negative and profoundly moving emotions of loss and disillusionment, there was also an excitement there. I was allowing myself

to delve very, very deeply into personal feelings that were almost impossible for me to tap into in the day-to-day living of my real life. So, I closed the studio door and allowed myself in the safety of that environment to really penetrate deeply into these emotions and see where they would take me. I'm not sure why it felt safe to do that, but it did. It certainly was cathartic and liberating. By the time I'd finished the album, I felt like I'd risen above much of what the album was dealing with. It helped me through the experience by opening up to it 100 percent and allowing myself to feel the depth of those feelings.

Did you seek to work with Derek Bailey as a way of challenging your previous music-making conventions?

Absolutely. That was definitely a part of the fascination of working with somebody like Derek. I previously tried to enter into the free jazz arena once in my life around 1990. I did a session with the pianist Keith Tippett and I failed to find the foothold. I failed to find a way into the work as a vocalist and lyricist. I had to put it aside, but it was an area of music that fascinated me. It was difficult to enter into the spirit of the work on the same footing as those performers because as a vocalist, I have limitations. I also like to work with lyrics, so there needs to be time for reflection in order to be able to pull satisfying words together and respond to someone else's work.

When I heard Derek's album *Ballads*, I could suddenly see that there was a place I could get a foothold—that there was a possibility there that would allow me to work with this type of material vocally. During the year I carried the vague idea around of what was to become *Blemish*, I listened to a lot of Derek's work. I felt there was a sense of dislocation in the way he played that would help reflect the feeling the album was going to contain. I wanted to face the immense challenge of responding to that kind of performance as a vocalist and lyricist. In fact, when I spoke to Derek just before he went ahead and did the session, I said "I'm really looking for a challenge here

as a vocalist.” He said “Don’t worry, David, you’ll certainly be challenged.” [laughs] It was a wonderful experience to work with that material.

You once said you sometimes “have nothing to lose” when you’re working on new material.

As a writer and lyricist, you sometimes want to take a leap into the unknown and find a new vocabulary. You don’t want to speak with the same tongue. So, there’s nothing to lose because I’m not going to repeat myself. I’d rather stop making music than do that. If there’s nothing there, it’s time to move on. You have to dive in the deep end and see what surfaces. Hopefully, a sense of freedom, liberation and open-mindedness occurs towards the new work. It’s only happened a few times in my life. I felt that to some degree when I started writing *Tin Drum*. I certainly felt it when I was creating *Brilliant Trees*. It’s about a pivotal moment when you feel an unlocking of potential that’s intangible and a broader view can be applied to the direction of your work. You also get a broader view of yourself as an artist. It’s all to do with intuition. It’s not an intellectual understanding. It’s a sense that anything can happen. It’s a feeling in the air prior to even starting the work. I had a sense of that going into creating *Blemish*.

How would you compare that approach to the one you took for Dead Bees on a Cake?

In a sense, it’s the antithesis of what I did with *Blemish*. *Dead Bees on a Cake* was very considered. The original writing stages were very spontaneous and very quick, generally. I didn’t labor over the material during the writing process, but the recording process was slow and drawn out. I didn’t intend it to be that way, but I couldn’t get the performances I was looking for. There were also a lot of technical problems in creating that record. It was also drawn out over a long period of time because it was a very eventful period in my life and I was getting sidetracked away from

the work very often. I returned to it again and again to fine-tune it and look for the spark that I felt was missing in the original performances through editing and through my own interpretation of what was needed from the musicians. It was far more considered and in tune with the work I created prior to it in the sense that it was very controlled work.

Dead Bees on a Cake has some gorgeous pieces of music on it—some of the best I've ever created. I felt that I was at my most eloquent as a writer on pieces such as "I Surrender" and "Wanderlust." There are a couple of pieces that were a struggle in that I felt I didn't get what I needed from some of the musicians involved. So, some of those pieces didn't evolve as much as I would have liked them to. Outside of that, it's still a record that documents an important period in my life and in that sense will always be valuable to me. I also learned so much during the process of making it as a producer and engineer. Also, it's far more celebratory than any of the other albums I've created. It's one of great optimism and is fueled by love on so many levels. I don't think my personal impression of it will ever dim.

You and your brother Steve Jansen are a creative unit again. Describe the process of reconciliation that enabled that to happen.

No matter what you go through with family, you tend to resolve it at one point or another. I always felt that would be the case with Steve. We hadn't seen one another for quite some time. I think we both changed a lot during that period. There ended up being a great degree of forgiveness. It was that simple. What happened after that was he made a small contribution to *Dead Bees on a Cake*. At that point, the creative door was open again. He became part of the tours I did for that release. During touring, a strong bonding of love resurfaced, as well as a true appreciation of his talents and abilities. Though we failed to really achieve what we set out to do with Rain Tree Crow in that we couldn't sustain that relationship, I wondered if it was possible to pick up the pieces as a duo and bring other musicians into the project on occasion and see how it develops. That was the initial idea.

At this point, we're working as a team, writing, learning new technology and trying to incorporate more electronics into the work. We're taking our time and trying to ensure this first step we're taking in this venture is a true step that we'll want to build on in coming years. I value the solo work and it will always be a priority in my life, but I always missed working within the context of a group and the idea that one evolves from project to project with it. I'm hoping the work with Steve will evolve into an engine that can carry me forward into different areas than my solo work might go.

You've joined the ranks of prominent musicians who have chosen to go independent after years spent with major labels. Tell me about that decision.

Usually you can work with someone whether he likes or dislikes the work, but when there's a wall of indifference as there was at Virgin, it's really, really hard. There was no way around that wall of indifference and I just wanted out. I wanted my freedom again. I got so tired of walking the hallways of Virgin with a begging bowl forever saying "Please, may I? Please, may I?" and not getting any kind of response. I had an enormous desire to break away from all of that. The feeling was mutual, so I was finally able to leave the company. Having been signed to a major label my entire adult life, there was a sense of euphoria. I am absolutely free to move in any direction I choose without having to justify it to anybody. I didn't feel the desire to get back into any situation where after completing a work, I would have to persuade someone else that it was interesting work, a good direction to take and a viable investment for the company. I was tired of being a businessman. I felt far more of a businessman dealing with a major label than I did actually creating my own label and working with sympathetic people with a similar outlook. It's a challenge, but also a very pleasurable process of education.

You're less than pleased with the direction America has taken lately. What keeps you there given the state of things?

It's difficult to leave, having set up a base in America. My children were born here and are very happy where they are. Do I uproot everything and just follow my intuition which is to move back to Europe or do I sit it out and try and make a contribution? I have friends who left the country after Bush came to power and since his administration went on its war mongering conquering of the oil states. There's a temptation to leave because you feel there's nothing in the administration that represents you. I don't think I've ever had such negative feelings about an administration, be it in the U.K. or here, as I do for the Bush regime because of the level of greed, environmental impact and waste of human life. The motivation is so obvious. You don't have to be very sensitive or intuitive to have a grasp of what's going on. To be represented by such a power and to be told these things are being done in your name is something that makes you want to back away from it. But there are reasons for me to stay beyond what the government is doing, so I try to be as vocal as I can about what it's up to. I've avoided doing that in the past because I didn't want the work to take on any kind of political overtones. The work doesn't require that and I don't think it strengthens it. But as of late, I've felt a need to speak about these topics.

For many, your music possesses a healing quality that offers an escape from the madness.

That's the goal. It's also healing for me to create this work. It's always a cathartic experience creating the work and a wonderful release because of the way that I work. I tend to have these images, emotions and landscapes in my mind that mirror the emotional states I'm in when creating the work. That gives me a key to where the work is heading. Having created the work, it reflects that landscape back to me. I'm of the belief that if I'm able to perceive that in my own work, someone else has to be able to perceive the same tendency of emotions from it. I think music can potentially give a listener a safe haven to open up to themselves. Music can be a healing

place. It's not a physical space, but music can sometimes envelop listeners and allow them to delve into emotions they don't feel safe to explore elsewhere. In the embrace of music, they can open up, breathe deeply into these emotions, be they celebratory, sad or melancholy, and just ride with them. I think music has such a potent, healing capacity. Maybe all the arts do, but music particularly does. Absolutely the best response you can get from somebody to your work is that they found a capacity for healing themselves. I think that's beautiful. That's what it's all about.**

**April 1999 and **July 2003*



TANGERINE DREAM

SCULPTING SOUND

TANGERINE DREAM'S PIONEERING ELECTRONIC SOUNDSCAPES have inspired generations of musicians to abandon conventional musical precepts in favor of new and original modes of expression. Founded in 1967 by keyboardist, guitarist and composer Edgar Froese, the German group has served as a key innovator in both the compositional and technological realms. The band was one of the first to incorporate synthesizers and sequencers into its work that often focuses on lengthy, expansive and adventurous pieces. Whether its compositions are ambient or brimming with pulsing and propulsive rhythms, the group's sonic signatures are instantly identifiable.

The band has wielded tremendous influence on multiple fronts. Its '70s output played a paramount role in spurring countless rock, pop and avant-garde groups to use synthesizers and electronics in their music. During the late '70s and throughout the '80s, Tangerine Dream also became a potent force in the soundtrack world, having created scores for high-profile films including *Risky Business*, *Legend*, *Firestarter*, and *Sorcerer*. The critical and commercial success of its scores is largely responsible for the acceptance of film soundtracks created entirely in the electronic domain. The '90s and beyond saw the group taking on an additional role as elder statesmen of electronica. It's rare to find an artist from the techno, trip-hop or rave scene that doesn't owe the act a debt of gratitude for laying the groundwork those movements were built upon.

There's been some cross-pollination too. Modern electronica elements have found their way into recent Tangerine Dream releases, mostly due to

the input of Froese's son Jerome, who was part of the group from 1990 to 2006. The band even saw fit to issue a series of CDs called *Dream Mixes* helmed by the younger Froese, featuring club-oriented interpretations of Tangerine Dream classics. Prior to the group's 16-year run with a father-son focus, the elder Froese worked with more than a dozen collaborators in previous incarnations, including Christopher Franke, Paul Haslinger, Johannes Schmoelling, and Klaus Schulze, all of whom went on to forge successful solo careers.

Even with dozens of albums and hundreds of compositions behind him, Edgar Froese is not content to rest on his laurels. Between 2000 and 2006, Tangerine Dream created an ambitious three-part musical suite based on *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri. Written just prior to Dante's death in 1321, the trilogy remains one of the great classics of European literature. It explores the progress of the individual soul toward God, as well as the political and social machinations human beings engage in as they attempt to foster peace on Earth. Froese's fascination with the work stems from his long-standing interest in spiritual traditions and the belief that like Dante's writing, Tangerine Dream's music can play a role in helping people come to terms with what lies beyond this sphere of existence.

Tangerine Dream also entered deep conceptual territory when exploring the 1945 World War II atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in its *Five Atomic Seasons* series, released between 2007 and 2009. Comprised of five distinct compositions, the recordings chronicle the tragic events as seen through the eyes of a survivor who lived through the ordeal. Inspired by a true story, the group sought to capture the emotions involved in the lead-up to the bombings, the moment of impact, as well as the aftermath.

Froese offered his perspectives on the Dante trilogy and *Five Atomic Seasons*, and the core philosophies that continue to inform the group's prolific output.

Tell me about your interest in The Divine Comedy and why it inspired you to create a three-part musical epic.

Every human being during his or her lifetime asks himself or herself “Where do we come from? Where do we go?” and “What is life all about?” The answers have nothing to do with stupid esoteric behaviors or fashionable movements within esoteric scenes. Rather, it’s a very deep thing. We’ve learned that Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe all touched an area in which you can find some answers to those sorts of questions. Specifically, Dante inspired us very much. If you look at *Inferno*, the first part of the trilogy, you can see that it is about the situation humankind is in right now. The planet Earth itself is *Inferno*. *Purgatorio*, the second part, is the movement out of that struggle. *Paradiso*, the third part, is about a level of consciousness human beings can reach after certain levels of development.

To get close to what Dante was talking about, we had to consider quite carefully what we did and how we did it. There were two ways to approach it. The first is the way composers like Franz Liszt did. He composed pieces about *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* that were very dramatic and orchestrated as everyone expected. His *Inferno* definitely sounded like what you’d typically associate Hell with in terms of crashing sounds and dissonance. We decided to go in the opposite direction. If human beings are trapped in the most unimaginable pain and face a disastrous situation in life, at a subconscious level, those people need some sort of support. Therefore, our music generally doesn’t reflect a horrifying situation. The exception is *Purgatorio* in which we’ve chosen some really up-tempo pieces with a lot of sequencer stuff. It depicts how you have to step through different levels, circuits and cycles to enter into your own development of consciousness. So the music reflects that. The aim is to move people and go beyond it being just another piece of entertainment.

You use vocalists with a level of sophistication on The Divine Comedy releases that we haven't heard from Tangerine Dream previously.

That’s true. It wasn’t easy to integrate the vocals into the work because

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we don't have a great deal of experience working with voices like most other bands do. It was quite a new area for us. We wanted to integrate the pure element of the voice into the music. We used the voice as an instrument and the lyrics as a way of transporting a deeper meaning to the listener. We used different languages in order to point out that humankind has to understand that the goal of life is universal and cosmopolitan. Using all of those languages was a way of pointing in that direction. Also, we only used female voices because women are much closer to the subconscious and spiritual levels we wanted to reach. Female consciousness is completely different from male consciousness. A male tends to be more direct and always knows what to do—at least he thinks he does. [laughs] A female works from a much deeper level of consciousness. When we spoke to the women participating in the project about the lyrical structure and the deeper meaning of the entire book, they all came up with a lot of ideas that fit perfectly into what we wanted to say.

Madcap's Flaming Duty, Tangerine Dream's 2007 tribute to Syd Barrett, also saw you working within the vocal realm.

Tangerine Dream loves to engage in surprise activities. So we stepped off the instrumental bandwagon and engaged a singer again because we felt like it was another excellent opportunity to combine words and music. For this album, we found some very old and timeless poems by people such as William Blake, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman that we used as lyrics. The criteria was that they should feel as wise and surreal as the music of Tangerine Dream and Pink Floyd. I confess that The Floyd and Syd Barrett were major influences on Tangerine Dream's work. I feel that both bands came more or less from the same background.

Describe how the opportunity to create the Five Atomic Seasons came about.

Tangerine Dream got the offer from an 82-year-old Japanese business

manager named Mr. H.T. in November 2006. He wanted us to compose and record the so-called *Five Atomic Seasons* series. It was clear that this was a really serious assignment. Tangerine Dream was told the person who ordered the compositions studied during his youth in the two cities that were destroyed by atomic bombardments back in 1945: Nagasaki and Hiroshima. The first two parts, *Springtime in Nagasaki* and *Summer in Nagasaki*, reflect the normal atmosphere of a Japanese city, along with some of the rising premonitions of what would happen on August 9, 1945. *Autumn in Hiroshima* and *Winter in Hiroshima* musically mirror what happened after August 6, 1945, when he survived one of the most lunatic and barbaric war crimes ever committed by mankind. *The Fifth Season* recording captures the time after these events took place and the lasting effects on Mr. H.T. and others—the so-called “endless season.”

How did the subject matter affect you personally and creatively when you explored it so deeply?

Violence against human beings on such a low and immoral level of consciousness affects everybody. Of course, it was the story Mr. H.T. came up with that gave the project a very personal meaning. As far as musical and emotional impact is concerned, this series represents some of the most important work Tangerine Dream has ever done.

Describe your process for composing music.

It's so simple that I laugh when I think about it. The way I do it is to forget myself. I always fail when I step into a working process with my ego in which I say “Here I am. I know myself. I'm the one who is doing whatever needs to be done.” It works perfectly the other way around when I get lost in sounds and musical structures. For instance, when a composition is 60 percent finished, it takes you over and gets a life of its own. It's as if another individual is asking questions like “Hey, is it better this way or

that way?" It's a very, very private and intimate process. Sometimes, it gets to the point where you as a conscious person, sitting in front of your computer, say "Hey, that's it. The piece is ready." Then you listen to it again and all of a sudden realize "Wow, it's not ready. The piece is asking for something better and different." It can be painful when a piece of music takes over and forces you to go in another direction you never would have thought of previously. Suddenly, you're in a process of getting deeper and deeper into it. And sometimes you'll need a sound for a piece of music which is 80 or 90 percent finished and you won't find the bloody sound. You'll run through all your software and sound banks and nothing fits. If you have that situation three or four times a day, it really hurts. It's very time consuming, aggravating and hell sometimes.

The most enjoyable moments happen when a piece of music is really finished and that's it. It's the most relaxing feeling I can think of. You just flip back into your chair, relax and listen to the music as if it wasn't you that composed it. It's an interesting situation because it's so removed from your ego. The piece exists and even as its composer, you can participate in the music as just a listener. The music takes on a life of its own.

Early Tangerine Dream concerts were entirely based on improvisation. What role does improvisation play for you today?

The composition process usually begins with some improvisation. You start playing around with rhythmic structures, chords or melodies in a search for the right sound. No composer on the planet is as good as Mozart was though. He just wrote down what he heard. That took incredible genius on the part of the great composers. But that time is over. I can't think of anyone who is able to just translate what's in their head in that way anymore. You can hear melodies and entire structures of a piece in your imagination, but the way of transforming that into a listenable audio signal has changed, particularly because of technology.

As far as improvisation during concerts is concerned, there isn't that

much improvisation during our shows anymore because the working tools are completely different. The equipment today allows you to do things you couldn't even dream of 20 years ago. But now there is a need to control various devices. You can't just sit there, switch on a sequence and start playing some lines over it or add chords or drumming to it. Today, you have to structure things in advance and go much deeper into things. We're not in 1973 anymore.

Tell me how you take advantage of today's electronic music technology.

Working and composing is much easier now with all of the modern tools. These days, I work purely from a software-driven, sequencer-based computer system using plug-ins and all the sounds that are currently available. Some are specifically designed for our needs, but it's mostly the same stuff most composers use these days. The most significant change for me in recent times is that I got rid of all the outboard equipment we had through the years—tons and tons of analog and digital gear.

To me, the instruments are just a materialization of your thoughts and consciousness. They reflect what you feel and the way you explore what's inside you. My view is that maybe five percent or less of music, sounds and audio signals that are possible to produce are produced. There's so much more and the future will explain what I mean. What matters is how you step across the border from fingerwork to mental work. That's the time we're entering now. It's a very adventurous era. We're leaving the field of strings, keys and knobs and moving deeply into an abstract form of creating sounds. It's something absolutely new which hasn't been on the scene before. You start becoming more of a sound sculptor instead of a soloist who is showing how well you are trained and how many hours you have spent learning your instrument.

Electronic music-making software is now ubiquitous—even on cell phones. How is the widespread availability of these tools affecting the art of composition?

Creativity, fantasy and musical abilities have nothing to do with new technology. Technology is like a new toy shop. You have to sort out what is necessary for your own aims in music and forget about the rest. Before all of this technology, composers only had the piano to save their musical thoughts using the four basic parameters. Yet look at how many great compositions were created by the masters, compared with today when so much rubbish has been left for posterity.

You once said "Politics, religion and science filed their bankruptcy claims long ago. Art can at least attempt to convey the truth." How do you define the truth?

The 6.7 billion people on this planet have 6.7 billion truths. It's said that truth can be related to your perceptions, lifestyle, philosophies, and religion. I don't think those kinds of dialectics work. For me, truth is beyond all of that. Everyone who wants to tell you the truth fails. They fail before they even start talking about it. I don't believe in churches anymore, so that is not the truth. I don't believe in politics. That is definitely not the truth. It's the opposite. So, what's left? I believe everybody has to look deeply into his or her own psyche. If there is a place where truth resides, you will find it within you.

How does your music communicate your truth?

I always try to be as honest as possible. You won't find any gimmicks in our music or anything that tries to guide people in the wrong direction through tricky types of business. I hate all of that. I just tell people a story—my story. It's about communication with other people I work with. That's about it as far as my knowledge of it goes. If listeners feel the same way, they'll listen to the music again and again. They're on the same level—whatever level that is. I don't want to give it a name, but it's a level that offers the most honesty possible.

You've spent a lot of time studying comparative religions. Has that work provided you with a particular spiritual perspective?

I can tell you that I don't believe in death. It's something that's told to people by churches and some leaders with a certain aim in mind. Nothing dies, even if it disappears from our visual perception and even if we can't reach it with our other senses. My personal studies, which have been going on for 45 years since the age of 15, tell me there is a completely different system and world beyond everything we are experiencing and the system we are jailed in. From here, it goes up. You could call it an elevator. Your understanding depends on if you can open yourself up to completely new and different ideas. I hate old-fashioned thinking on this. To me, the idea that you can get into paradise after dying and live forever with angels and nice people is bullshit. Real spirituality is much more sophisticated and requires a much more open-minded consciousness. Having said that, I don't want to say I'm right and others are wrong. This is just my way.

In 1998, you chose to completely break free from record companies and founded your own label. Tell me about that decision.

Over the years, I've signed up with most of the existing record labels in Europe, America, Japan, and Australia. I was frustrated because none of them ever understood what we were trying to do. It's a story that's familiar to a lot of artists. You want your music available on the entire planet so anyone can get it in a local record shop and listen to it. But those huge companies have no interest at all in the music itself. It's something we've experienced many, many times. They're just looking at the stock exchange and your sales figures and figuring out how they can prostitute you. So we founded our own label to get away from that. It wasn't easy to do. We struggled quite a bit initially, but it turned out to be very successful. It's a very cool and relaxed situation. You can release what you

want, when you want. There is nobody who can interfere with what you want to say.

Recent years have seen you completely re-record several earlier Tangerine Dream and solo albums. What makes you want to pursue that path given all the new music you have in your head?

The main reason is that long ago we signed contracts with those big labels that did not allow us to use the original master recordings for our own releases. We've had huge trouble with companies like Virgin who have kept all of our earlier releases under the carpet. They didn't reissue them very well and haven't brought them up to the latest technical standards. After years of complaining, writing and talking, we decided to re-record some of the stuff in order to make sure the compositions are available on the market in the highest quality possible.

We are composers and in it for the music. All I want to do is express my philosophy of life in music. The businessmen never understood that. So there was no other way to keep the music and its spirit alive without re-recording it. For instance, the people at Virgin have enough money and they're not going to be buried with it. I wrote the president of EMI a letter saying "Hey man, you've got no problems money-wise, so let me out of my obligations." All he said was "Look at your contract." I have to say that making the re-recordings is frustrating because you have to step back in time to an earlier part of your life. You are very close to the original spirit because you did it yourself originally with other colleagues, but you don't necessarily want to feel the same things again. However, you have to try, otherwise you can't re-record the stuff.

Did you and Jerome have an equal relationship when he was a part of Tangerine Dream?

Sometimes yes, if it was working fine. If not, then no. Not at all. [laughs]

Our working relationship shifted from being very harmonic and cool to very, very furious with horrifying fights about things we don't like. For instance, he was moving very strongly in the DJ direction. He is also very influenced by new things like drum and bass, hip-hop, trip-hop, and breakbeats. All of that is okay, but not my piece of cake. Someone who is working in that area a lot that collaborates with someone else is going to bring in those influences. Some of those things are great and fit in perfectly, but he sometimes wanted to integrate a very deep bass sound that made subwoofers collapse. I'd say it should be limited and he'd say "No! It should go on. It should blast out." [laughs] Another example is when we were going into the world of Dante, I could not imagine in any way putting some breakbeats in there. The whole aim was to create something different from that which exists in the modern music scene. So, we had some musical arguments in which we couldn't meet one another.

What I liked most about Jerome's contribution is the way he very often turned things upside down. He was chosen to become part of the band simply because of his musical talent. He is not a trained musician like most of the other colleagues were. I didn't train him myself. He was trained a bit by others. He has a great sense for sounds and can put things together in a very unique way. He showed me some unusual ways of using sounds and rhythms. We had a real exchange of ideas and strategies. That also holds true for when we were stepping into the old scenery of Tangerine Dream and talking about remastering and re-recording. It was quite interesting to hear his opinions because he wasn't part of those times. He was hearing and experiencing as would someone reading very old books.

Jerome departed because he wanted to start his solo career, which is more than understandable after spending 16 years with the band. It's a very normal process. I wish him all the best and a lot of creative power to realize all his future projects.

What's your perspective on the influence Tangerine Dream has had on the electronica movement?

I think it's much greater than a lot of people are willing to tell the public. [laughs] I know a lot of very famous musicians who know a lot of Tangerine Dream's work—some of them know all of it. For whatever reason, it's not interesting enough for the press to write about. However, the influence is really immense. The fact is that in 1970, we started a kind of music with sequencers and electronics that was completely unknown to people. Now, it's common to use those things. In the late '70s, I said "One day everybody will use a synthesizer" and people laughed their heads off. One journalist called me an idiot and said I didn't understand the music scene and that the guitar and piano will never fade away. I never said those things will fade away. But I did say there will be a development in sound and music creation using recording techniques that have their roots in what was accomplished in the early '70s. That's the truth and it can be verified by anyone that goes into most studios or looks at a typical stage set-up today.

Tell me about Tangerine Dream's founding principles.

I've never really talked about it before, but the whole Tangerine Dream thing always had one idea that's run across its history. It's the idea of starting with unorganized chaos and moving on to reach the highest possible point of organized music. We're always trying to organize sounds, but not in a way that classical music is organized or in the way that a band playing together perfectly can sound. It's more about a subconscious music feel and working with the pool of given sound available. Humans can create sounds out of things that are very abstract. It's about getting through the mental barriers to create music that is very personal, subjective and organized.

Tangerine Dream is in fact a concept. The concept can have people who are guiding it and developing it by being good colleagues and creators. It's very hard to discuss these deep philosophies behind the music because in my view, the real music can't be heard. That's maybe a paradox to some,

but not to me. For instance, when I listen to a Bach symphony, the real essence of the music begins when what you can hear is over. When the music stops, the real music starts.

How would you encapsulate Tangerine Dream's legacy?

Tangerine Dream is nothing more than us helping ourselves and others get out of jail. Everybody who feels trapped or jailed in this life should use our music to have a glimpse of an idea of what could be next.

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DAVID TORN

MERCURIAL MASTERY

DAVID TORN'S INFLUENCE as a guitarist, composer and music technologist is epic. His expansive six-string prowess captures his emotional pulse in an extraordinarily unique way. With sounds ranging from the searing and soaring to liquid, loop-drenched atmospheres to full-on virtuoso shredding, there is very little the man can't do with his instrument. He's situated his guitar work across seven multi-genre solo albums that feature combinations of edgy, world music-infused jazz-rock, minimalist ambient explorations and cutting-edge electronica.

Torn's fascination with next-generation guitar design, effects and digital workstations has also played a major role in shaping his aural aesthetics. In particular, his expertise in sampling and manipulating his own guitar output to create rhythmic and textural events that are then simultaneously merged into his real-time playing is in a league of its own. The technique has inspired and baffled countless musicians who have tried to reverse-engineer his approach.

Highlights of Torn's recording career include 1987's *Cloud About Mercury*, featuring drummer Bill Bruford, bassist Tony Levin and trumpeter Mark Isham. Its distinctive combination of improvisation, multiple time signatures and alternative scales with a melodic focus and percolating rhythms established Torn as a presence to be reckoned with. Subsequent discs, including 1995's *Tripping Over God* and 1996's *What Means Solid, Traveller?*, were equally ambitious, with their flowing, stream-of-consciousness approach that incorporated Eastern rhythms,

ambient washes, stormy power chords, and surreal, buried vocals. He also deftly took on the realm of recombinant urban electronica with 2001's *Oah*, released under the moniker Splattercell. Another high water mark is 2007's *Prezens*. Created in collaboration with saxophonist Tim Berne, drummer Tom Rainey and keyboardist Craig Taborn, the album places Torn's sample-and-morph tendencies within the context of a band capable of mirroring and extending his musical shapeshifting.

Torn has also created several widely-used sample discs containing ready-to-use loops and sounds. Innumerable film and television composers use his discs, and as a result, Torn's work can be heard across myriad scores, often in an uncredited capacity. Thankfully, Torn's dramatic contributions to this universe were eventually rewarded by his ascension in the ranks to a first-call soundtrack composer in his own right. He's helmed scores for features including *The Order*, *La Linea*, *The Wackness*, and *Lars and the Real Girl*, as well as worked on the soundtracks of *Traffic*, *The Chamber*, *The General's Daughter*, *Three Kings*, and *Reversal of Fortune*.

Several rock icons have also sought out Torn's services as a guitarist, collaborator, producer, and consultant, including Tori Amos, Laurie Anderson, Jeff Beck, David Bowie, and Sting. And while the recognition is certainly welcome, he processes it through a perspective that ensures his feet remain firmly on the ground. That viewpoint evolved significantly post-1992, the year he was diagnosed with an acoustic neuroma, a life-threatening form of brain tumor. The surgery that followed was successful, but left him deaf in his right ear. However, his skills as a composer and player remained fully intact. In fact, his expertise as a mixer and mastering engineer have continued to grow since his recovery. Understandably, charting a positive path forward wasn't easy for Torn, but the worldview that emerged is a model we can all draw inspiration from.

Tell me about your earliest creative revelation.

It was 1967 and I was 14 years old. It was the time of a remarkable

flowering of the potential of the electric guitar. Jimi Hendrix was alive and playing, and I was lucky to have seen him a couple of times in concert. Jeff Beck was busy doing his thing too. A friend of mine had these little woods in Syosset, Long Island that we would go to on the weekend or at night and a bunch of us would go hang out in a little grass hut we had built. I was already in several bands playing creative music with a lot of improvisation because it seemed like it was okay to do in that era. It was *de rigueur* to play long trio improvisations in electric rock music back then.

We were sitting around the fire one night and everyone was talking except me. I was busy looking at the embers and thinking about the sound of music and why things sound the way they do. I would also hear guitarists play and their phrases—especially Hendrix and Beck—in my head as I sat there. It became a synesthetic effect in which a guitarist would play a phrase and I would think of it almost as a sentence with verbal meaning. If someone had asked me a philosophical question about the meaning of life, I might have been able to sing it back as a Hendrix phrase instead of saying something. That was part of my mindset at the time. It suddenly occurred to me the way the flames move is exactly how I wanted my guitar playing and music to sound. It was either an epiphany or a psychotic event. [laughs] But I never forgot about it. Maybe it was the only creative revelation I ever had because it was so formative. It meant a lot to me and it's a feeling I've never lost.

At what point did you realize a typical guitar sound wasn't for you?

It was in the very early days when I experienced rapid public validation that I was doing something that didn't sound like other people, yet was appreciated. I was a young and very troubled kid and that actually led me to stop playing in public around age 16. I was also dismayed with the limitations of the club scene in which I played with people who were 10 years older than me. I dropped out of the scene and only played for myself from around age 16 to 20. I started playing live again after I engaged in a

huge effort to fix myself by studying meditation techniques very seriously. It wasn't until I went to a record store with my girlfriend's brother at age 18 that I found and heard any music that even remotely touched me in a long time.

I picked up a record because of the way the album art looked. The cover made it obvious the artist was into the same kinds of meditation techniques I was into. It was Mahavishnu Orchestra's *Inner Mounting Flame*, which had just been released. I took the record back to my girlfriend's house and put it on and freaked out a bit at first. When I finally got into it, I was amazed. I didn't think anything from the Indian subcontinent could be applied to electric music. I couldn't figure out where this music came from. When I was a kid, my dad exposed me to quite a bit of North Indian music, but I had never heard those elements in this context. The cultural associations began making a lot of sense to me, and feeling inspired, I went out and organized jam sessions. The guys I was playing with would say "Let's play this Hendrix or Cream tune." I'd respond "No. Let's just play and see what happens." It was very exciting and it was the beginning of everything I do now.

Which musicians served as key influences as your career unfolded?

I rejected an initial interest in flamenco during my earliest years with the instrument in favor of a period focusing on Wes Montgomery, Shuggie Otis, Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Beck, and Mike Bloomfield. Then came the fascination with Mahavishnu Orchestra which led to Herbie Hancock and the Headhunters, and Miles Davis. The next period was the direct influence of John Abercrombie and Pat Martino, my two main teachers. After that, I developed a great love for saxophonists who could make all kinds of crazy noise in their jazz-type music and incorporate it into more so-called normal jazz. I'm talking about the harmonic extensions of people like Eric Dolphy, John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman. Hearing Allan Holdsworth and Terje Rypdal for the first time also resulted in a huge leap

forward for me. I discovered you could make all these noises that could last indefinitely with interesting delay units and other technologies. Then I discovered that this was in fact a tradition that linked back to Terry Riley. Next, I found out Robert Fripp was already established doing this stuff. From there, it's been wide open space until now. These days, there are so many things that influence me. I'm also back to listening to flamenco music all the time. Flamenco guitarists are some of the greatest players in the world, including people like Juan and Pepé Habichuela, Vicente Amigo, Paco de Lucia, Javier Conde, and Rafael Riquen. I also think a lot of the integrationists are remarkable, such as Miroslav Tadic, Marc Ribot, Eliot Sharp, Vernon Reid, and Raoul Björkenheim.

You believe electric guitar playing is at its most conservative period now. Why?

Development in the electric guitar realm has ground to a halt. Perhaps it's inevitable that the guitar became a functional element of the rock sound rather than an expressive element. There is still a fantastic amount of music being made, but it seems the distribution and information pertaining to that music has become more and more slender. There are short periods of time when things from the underground show up and get absorbed by the overground. Then the underground starts building something new that's more culturally reflective. But it seems like the industry of popular music has focused a larger and larger percentage of its money on a smaller and smaller segment of so-called artists. That's a reflection of why an instrument as expressive and rebellious as the electric guitar has faded in importance.

The electric guitar has begun a kind of classicization phase and that really bugs me. I'm involved in a lot of Internet forums and it's remarkable how many electric guitarists out there feel the need to recreate the great sounds of a very recent past, rather than honor the intentions of the great players which were to develop a unique voice, say something musically important, and break down cultural barriers. Things have become pretty

staid and part of that is tied up to the need to sell instruments, amplifiers, effects, and even guitar magazines. Again, the focus of these universes is replicating past sounds, not the future. Very few new things have been developed that really take advantage of the possible future of the electric guitar as a living instrument. It feels like it's heading towards being the next classical piano. For some people, there's nothing wrong with that, but for me, that direction has removed the punk-assed, rebellious and almost political nature of what the electric guitar is.

Part of your personal solution is to think of yourself as a conceiver of music, rather than someone who merely plays an instrument. Elaborate on that.

Don Cherry used to say something to me over and over again when we played together near the beginning of my career, which was "Play the role of whatever sound comes into your head. If you think you should sound like a sarod player here, be a sarod player here. If you think you should be a wall of noise here, be that. Don't worry about all this 'I'm a guitar player' crap." That was good advice. Guitar still plays a pretty dear part in my creative process. I still love playing the instrument. In fact, I've been practicing on the guitar a lot in recent years. I'm still taking advantage of writing somewhat on the guitar or from the guitar. I might use it to create a series of rhythm tracks or textural events, but when someone hears them, they don't know how they were made given my affinity for sonic manipulation. So, guitar can serve as the means towards an even more creative end for me.

Sussan Deyhim called you "the most sampled man after James Brown." I understand that status has been less than a pleasurable experience for you.

The reason what she says may be the case is because I offered to the world in a commercial context several sample discs that were unique at the time of release. The sample disc manufacturers determined that the

ratio of theft to actual purchases of those discs is 10 thefts for every sale. That's not unusual in the world we live in where there is a pervasive public attitude of entitlement when it comes to copyrighted, creative ephemeral material like music. It's a misplaced view, but the more people who sample your music illegally and the wider the distribution of the end product, be it a CD or film, the more likely that copyright issue will come to a court and be decided in the copyright holder's favor.

When I discovered the depth to which my sample material was being used and how little I was being compensated in relation, I divorced myself from that world. I don't want to spend my life in court or calling people asking them to stop doing what they're doing. I used to call the musicians on a friendly basis and ask them not to use the samples illegally, which bore no fruit at all. I thought that was strange because I took a fair, musician community-minded approach. I was inevitably rebuffed, until the matters came into the hands of lawyers. I don't have the time or attention span to pick up on all of the illegal usages, unless it's a matter of something in the very broad public perspective. An example of that is my eventual co-authorship of the Madonna song "What it Feels Like for a Girl" from her album *Music* which sampled a substantial melody and ambient material from my *Cloud About Mercury* record. I think it's fine to do this stuff, but clear it in advance, and compensate the person whose work you're mining.

Reflect on Cloud About Mercury and what you achieved with it.

I look back at it with great pride. It's a product of its time and I wish the mixes sounded a little crisper and broader, particularly on the drum and bass side of things, but as a whole, it was a benchmark moment for me. It represented the first culmination of a particular sound I had in my head. It achieved an idea I conceived of without dismantling the individual players' input. The record has a sound I don't think anybody else has ever made. It features a blend of a real improvisational attitude that takes into

account slightly developed jazz-like harmonic events as a way to focus the randomness of the more ambient movement happening in the music. It also has some teeth to it. The album put me on the map. It's a small map, but it definitely placed me there. The album circulated widely amongst my musical peers and many fans too. People sat up and said "This guy's a bit different." It lit a bunch of fires for me that sustain to this day. The record is still in print and continues to sell, which is amazing. It was a tremendous success across the board.

How did dealing with the brain tumor affect your creative outlook?

I think once I could get rolling again, it created a desire to make as much music as I can before this very short period of time we have allotted to us—and that goes for everyone—goes away. It's not a small thing to recognize your mortality. When your life really flashes before your eyes, it's time to figure out what's really important to you. And what's really important to me is to respect myself as a human being and the way I interact with others. I'm deeply interested in feeling like I'm doing the right thing, being a good person, and leading a life that is respectable and humane. I want that reflected in the intent of my creative output too. The other interesting thing is that it's been discovered that the right ear and left ear are different. The right ear is more capable of understanding speech and words, whereas the left ear is more capable of perceiving music and tone. It hit me that maybe I play and hear music better than I ever did since this thing happened and I lost the hearing in my right ear. I don't know if it's an actual fact, but I look at it as an idea and think "Whoa, I wonder if that's possible?"

The feeling of being absolutely stricken down and not even being 40 was also on my mind when I began my next solo album. I had to use a concept like God to describe the thoughts I was considering. Since my youth, I've had a background interest in religion and ethics. At one point I thought I should study to become a monk. I took the Buddhist vows a long time ago, but I'm not a religious person in any classical sense. However, I

felt going through the tumor experience was like tripping on a thing in the road, and that thing was God. So the title *Tripping Over God* for the 1995 CD sounded just about right. It has a bittersweet nature to it and reflects the darkness and feeling of vulnerability I had at the time. I also felt like I no longer had to consider anyone else's commercial or musical needs, except my own instincts. It didn't matter anymore if what I did was considered cool or not. Those feelings have carried forward to this day.

How does spirituality inform your output?

Religion, ethics and philosophies are merely forms and nothing else. Music is the form I respond to most. Whether it's highly sophisticated, thought-out music or spontaneous and not thought-out, the music I'm most attracted to usually has some kind of reflection of the musicians' feelings about life and relationships, which I guess is what spirituality is. The path of being a musician is inherently spiritual because it connects people together. And when it's done with commitment, intensity and intention, it brings something out of us that we could not express in any other way in our lives. I believe there are very, very strong forces at work in the universe that we don't see everyday. And I think perhaps spirituality goes beyond the practical applications of being cognizant, giving and humane, but those are the ways I choose to acknowledge those forces. Maybe one of the great lessons of music is not trying to answer questions like "How do we make music? How complex is this thing that we do? Is music a matter of beauty versus ugliness?" Rather, music has the capability of uplifting the human spirit like no other art form does. The shaping of sound is an ephemeral process that we can't hold onto, yet we experience these indicators that guide our creativity, and for me define how I see spirituality and how I design the way I live my life.

What evolution did the electronica-influenced Oah, released under the name Splattercell, represent for you?

I see it as a direct outgrowth of everything preceding it. From 1992 onwards, I was increasingly involved with taking spontaneous musical events I had recorded and further manipulating them as part of my compositional and technical palette. Most of the material on the record is built out of things that were originally improvised by me alone or me with other people. I went through the tapes, found stuff I liked and built pieces out of them. The energy of self-referencing creativity was the first impulse of *Splattercell*. As a composer, I'm a guy with a digital audio workstation and I used it to rethink what was played. I wasn't fixing what was played, but taking the best of it that appealed to me in the same way that a guy writing a hip-hop tune bases things on samples of other people. The album built on the music I made on my previous album, *What Means Solid, Traveller?* However, I didn't want any more of my records showing up in jazz or New Age bins and having first-time listeners throw the album away because it didn't fit into their conceptions. So, I invoked the very transparent subterfuge of releasing it as *Splattercell* and hung the electronica genre on it. It would have sounded the same had I released it under the name David Torn.

You've been involved in a wide array of film projects. What makes the soundtrack universe so gratifying for you?

There's something incredibly focusing about it. You have a need to focus on your own creativity, but also to amplify something happening in the movie, or a third person's perspective that provides connecting elements or an overall flavor. You're often contributing a critical emotional element that influences what's going on and it's really fascinating to try and create it. There's also the additional focusing element of the directors. They aren't necessarily educated about the tools required to make the music happen in order to have it convey something emotionally in a specific scene or across a wide, two-hour arc that pays off in the end when the film is over. The directors usually don't have the ability to say "You need

to use a major chord here and a minor chord there.” It’s very interesting to be a conduit for what they’re trying to get out of the picture. So, the focus and concentration, and even rewriting things over and over again to achieve an aim can be satisfying. The film world also allows me to write music that’s performed by orchestral instrumentalists and singers. There’s no other opportunity for that to occur for me, except maybe for a single record every few years on a label like ECM. Ultimately, the moment of gratification is enormous when you get to the end of a film project and you’re on the recording stage with the director and film company saying they’re happy with what you’ve achieved. It’s made me want to continue pursuing this universe in a very serious way.*

Between 2002 and 2006, you mostly focused on soundtrack work and collaborations before reemerging as a solo artist and touring act with Prezens in 2007. What drew you back to those realms?

I was pushed out of the cave slowly, steadily and increasingly vocally by Tim Berne. He relentlessly invited me to play with his bands. I told him I only wanted to do gigs that were completely improvised because the other parts of my career at this point, particularly film music, are focused on composing and organizing music. It doesn’t have the danger of improvising in real time and creating music that couldn’t be made in any other way. After performing in various line-ups with Tim, he suggested I work with members of his group Science Friction that also included Craig Taborn on keyboards and Tom Rainey on drums. He said he thought this combination of musicians could really be special. So we worked together and I had such an amazing time. It didn’t take me long to tell Tim “This could be a whole new thing for me.”

Describe what’s special about the Prezens band’s chemistry.

It boils down to trust between the players. The ability to listen well is

an act of trust. Every person in the band is fully capable of going forward and making something musical happen out of nothing. There are no constraints with this band and I don't have to worry about whether I'm a jazz, rock or whatever player. Everyone is able to morph one type of music into another and not have it feel like an unnatural event. It happens without force or prefabricated conceptualizing. It's not unusual for me to be doing something polytonal and spacey and then go into something that sounds like country music. And the band doesn't see it as a sarcastic or cynical comment on country music. Rather, they see and feel the shift and do something with it. It's the transitions between styles that are so thrilling with the band. There's a constant, phenomenal feeling of "How the hell did we get here? What kind of spaceship are we on and where are we flying to?" [laughs]

There's a deconstructive element in the making of the Prezens album. Compare it to your approach on Oah.

Oah was a bunch of musical events that were improvised, reorganized and then improvised on again. *Prezens* has similarities, but comes out of a live context that found me sampling the *entire* band, treating those sounds and incorporating them back into the music in a way that doesn't break the musical flow. Previously, I mostly did that with my own guitar playing. With the Prezens band, I sensed the greatest opportunity to take that to the next level by incorporating all of the musicians into the process because of their openness and adaptability. So, when making the album, I had every musician and amplifier miced. I had their playing come through my gear so I could sample any combination of people during our improvisations, and manipulate what was happening in the room as it was happening. I also had the benefit of lots of additional technology that was too expensive to take on the road.

We played for two-and-a-half days and I took all the material home and went through the recordings on-and-off for a couple of months

before I started to work on them. There's a lot less post-production than people might suspect because of how the band itself excels at making seamless transitions between sections and genres. So, my focus was on finding contiguous pieces of music and working with those. When I located them, I would mildly reshape the music by inserting a section after an improvisation, adding a riff here and an overdub there, and that's how the record came to be. I'm very proud of it. It represents and validates my leanings in a really personal way.

One gets the feeling that even after so many diverse projects and collaborations, you still view music as something with endless possibilities.

Absolutely and without question. Every single day I get a new idea in my head that I know I have to pursue. Going with fresh ideas also fuels my film work. No matter what the sonic motif or idiom of the movie is I'm working on, I always think "I don't want to do the same thing I did last time. I'm going to be unhappy if I spit out industrial, assembly line garbage. So, what can I do differently now?" I think my dignity is somehow tied up in this. I need to be able to look back at a project, and regardless of what the money or circumstances were, or whether the final product is great or sucks, know that I can respect the process I used to put the music together. That integrity extends to the live arena too. When you play live in the way the Prezons band does, there's no tomorrow. This is it, right here, right now. You have to be present in the moment and there's no going back to fix something in the mix. The reward is totally immediate and unlike anything else. I really love it. It's as though you're refracting light from a spiritual prism.**

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RALPH TOWNER

UNFOLDING STORIES

AFTER FOUR DECADES IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY, guitarist and composer Ralph Towner still maintains a childlike fascination with the muse. It's a remarkable and admirable feat given how easy it is to adopt a jaded, irascible outlook when striving to put craft before commerce.

"I feel the same way about music as I did when I was six years old—I'm kind of stunned, drooling and lost over music without knowing what's going on," he explains. "It's a completely intuitive thing. I'm almost monkish. I can ignore my surroundings no matter where I am and just write music. I'm not thinking or calculating when I play really well, either. I'm a spectator along with the rest of the audience as it unfolds."

Towner is fortunate to be regularly surrounded by kindred musical spirits. Since 1970, he's been the principal writer, guitarist and keyboardist for Oregon, a pioneering group that weaves world music, jazz and classical elements together. He co-founded the band with reedsman Paul McCandless, bassist Glen Moore and percussionist/sitarist Collin Walcott. Since Walcott's untimely passing in 1984, Trilok Gurtu, and more recently, Mark Walker, have been responsible for Oregon's percussion duties. In 2000, the group released its 25th album, *Oregon in Moscow*, an orchestral recording that was one of its most ambitious efforts to date.

As a solo artist, Towner has been equally prolific. He's released more than 20 albums on ECM that mostly feature quartet, trio and duo formations with label mates such as John Abercrombie, Jack DeJohnette, Gary Peacock, and Eberhard Weber. For 1997's *Ana* and 2001's *Anthem*,

Towner chose to focus entirely on solo classical and 12-string guitar pieces.

Whether solo or in collaboration, Towner's music often finds him pursuing a balance between his compositional and improvisational tendencies. And even when the scale tips to the latter, his approach is rarely anything but eloquent and evocative. The same can be said for Towner in conversation.

You've engaged in a great deal of collaborative work. How does that inform your solo approach?

I think it probably affects me quite a bit compositionally. In general with collaborations, if I know in advance who I've elected to work with or use, I choose and compose pieces I feel will be flattering and work well with the other musicians in order to show them off in their best light. With a solo recording, you have to play everything yourself, of course. It can be even more difficult to compose enough material for solo guitar because it's quite intricate to play all the parts. So, preparation is more difficult than for a group. Playing with people is another thing. For instance, Gary Peacock is wonderful. It's the closest thing to playing solo. With Gary, you get the kind of freedom you have as a soloist because he's so intuitive. When we play together, it's almost as if it's one instrument. He's such a great bassist and a wonderful writer. In that collaboration, I'm the main melody instrument. It's been a wonderful testing ground that's served to improve my melodic playing. I feel I've learned a lot by playing duets and touring with Gary. I'm a lot more relaxed too. I'm not as hysterical when I play. It's a maturing process I think.

Are you still in search of new guitar techniques?

Well, there aren't that many new techniques, but there might be some new effects you can discover. Most techniques on the existing instrument have pretty much been done and are tried and true. But honing them in your music is inexhaustible. You can't really perfect that. There are

slight shadings, dynamics and touches. So, it's not that I'm looking for new techniques as much as trying to play the instrument as well as I possibly can. I've left a lot of room for improvement. [laughs]

You've said you're trying to make the guitar sound like an orchestra. How does that idea manifest itself in your approach to the instrument?

In a sense, it's vocabulary. The colors available to an orchestra are quite obvious with all the different instruments. The classical guitar has a tremendous variety of attacks and sounds built into it. My intention is to make people forget about the instrument when playing the music. If you play the instrument well enough, you draw attention away from the literal "Isn't he a very good guitar player?" thing. You're trying to transcend that kind of thinking in the audience and lure it into a sort of trip that explores the colors and beauty of the music going on, as well as the story that's unfolding. And with all these colors that are available, it really is orchestrating—assigning parts to French horns here, trumpets there, violins here. It's the same with a chordal instrument like the guitar. You're busy assigning colors, characters, shadings, and identities to different parts as you're playing. You're really telling a story, even though it's in abstract terms, of what's actually happening. It's still an unfolding of events that occur in your memory. You remember the sounds and quality of the melody, as well as when it comes back and returns. The accompaniment and the inner voices are very critical, and the harmony is essential. Even with the simplest melody, you can add the most complex harmonies and give it an entirely different sense of mystery. It can be very aggressive sounding or simple. There are infinite possibilities.

Do you feel typical perceptions of what a guitar is capable of impede the development of some younger players?

Some people sort of succumb to that and play the most obvious things

on the instrument that sound flashy. For example, speed is a very important color, but it's just that. It's also another device. It's not just about playing fast. Every symphony orchestra player can play as fast as any guitar player because they have to—the parts have been written for hundreds of years requiring them to do so. It might be easy to limit yourself to what is the most superficially attractive. But everyone, whether they are intellectually aware of it or not, has to play the way they have to in order to tell a story and relate to people's attention spans, as well as their own. It's an intuitive art when it's done at its best. The greatest of the classical musicians are very intuitive as far as their sense of how an entire piece is developing and how they're treating the weight of every phrase in their articulation.

How did the Oregon in Moscow orchestral project come about?

We had quite a bit of success with the previous Oregon record, *Northwest Passage*, and Intuition, our record company at the time, actually made the suggestion that we do an orchestral record, which is unheard of. [laughs] We had a tight budget, but managed to do it in Moscow. It was a wonderful, great experience. We spent 10 days making it. It's a really exciting record that was produced by Steve Rodby. We brought our own engineer and the equipment over there was okay, but it was in need of repair. So our engineer had to perform miracles to get everything working. It was a huge recording at a huge hall that could have housed a 300-piece orchestra.

The challenge was trying to get it all recorded in a short period of time. We had less than six recording days with musicians who hadn't seen the music. So we were working 10-hour days. They had to learn the material and it had to be sewn together as they learned it. For instance, the orchestra would learn the first 20 bars and then do that about eight times and one of those eight takes would be good. Then we'd proceed to the more difficult pieces. Some pieces were done straight through, but in general, the band worked very hard. We had a Russian conductor, so he was a stranger to the

music. There was no English spoken by the orchestra, otherwise we could have brought our own conductor. So that made it even more difficult. Communication was the main difficulty. But musically, everyone was very enthusiastic and very much into it. It was very challenging for them, but very inviting. They put in the extra effort.

Tell me about the process of putting material together for the sessions.

Some of the things I write tend to lend themselves very well towards orchestral music. An important element in my orchestral music is leaving the improvisational sections to the group and integrating them so it doesn't sound like pop—like in one of those pops concerts where it's just whole notes and everyone else sort of plays scales on top of it. This is real orchestral music.

We've been recording with orchestras since the very beginning in the '70s. We've played with the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Stuttgart Opera Orchestra, just to name a couple. The last time we did something with an orchestra was in Norway about three or four years ago. At that point, we were between drummers and did two trio records and symphony concerts without drums.

We did all our own orchestration on *Oregon in Moscow*. Paul has three pieces, Glen has one and I have nine or 10. Half of it is stuff we've been playing since 1970. And there are pieces that have been written along the way since. For instance, there's one long, complex piece I wrote in 1979 for the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and have been playing since with different orchestras. There are quite a few new ones too that were written specifically for this record.

The interesting thing about our group is it always sounded like a miniature orchestra because we have the double reeds and often the percussion isn't strictly jazz—although we have a lot of that too. So we fit in rather naturally with the orchestras. It's really quite unusual for a group to have an in-house compositional staff trained to write for orchestra.

After decades together, what keeps Oregon fresh and interesting for you?

The reason we continue is strictly because the music keeps improving. If the music wasn't good, we would have stopped quite awhile ago. In fact, the most critical junction in whether or not to continue came after the 1984 car accident we had in East Germany in which Collin Walcott was killed. The three of us who survived that spent the good part of the next year trying to regroup and decide whether or not to continue. We finally booked a really small tour for the three of us and realized we had to continue because the music was still growing and challenging. After 14 years, there was no reason to drop it. Then Trilok Gurtu came on board for seven years and things really altered with him.

How did Gurtu influence the group's sound?

He's an Indian drummer, but oddly, he was the most Western drummer we ever had. [laughs] Even more so than Collin. He was more jazz and fusion oriented in his wonderful and complex rhythms. It was a really exciting period with Trilok, but it became a little more fusion, so things changed quite a bit with him. Now, with Mark Walker, we seem to have the best of all worlds somehow. He seems to be able to do everything and plays very musically. It's a wonderful group ensemble concept he has, much like Collin did. We're very happy with the way the group is going now as a quartet. Mark is so versatile. He's a great jazz player and an absolute master at Cuban music. His whole perception of how to play with a symphony was perfect. He's just a wonderful addition to Oregon. We're on a real roll now.

Eyebrows were raised when Oregon chose to incorporate a more traditional drum kit into its sound with Walker. What made you go that route?

It depended totally on the musician really. We needed someone who

could play hand drums. And we've always been able to play jazz. In fact, I started in New York City as a piano player. It's how I supported myself. I was a good second call piano player and worked with Freddie Hubbard and different people. So, Oregon has always had the potential to play jazz, but with Collin, I think it would come out much differently. We couldn't quite play the same time feeling. That was fine, because that was never our intention anyway. But with Mark, I can write and play new tunes that have that time feeling. It's an additional thing we can do, but in general, most of the music is based on a more international kind of time feeling—some kind of combination that depends on the piece. Sometimes it's more related to South American and Indian music and more unrelated to that swing feel. But we do play quite a few things that are jazz pieces.

All the material has to do with the complex harmonies that are grown from the jazz tradition and extended beyond that with complicated scales and chords. Plus there are simpler pieces too. The nice thing about the group is we can do almost anything. This is a very thrilling group to be involved in. We can play everything from the 12-tone tradition to atonal-sounding music to polkas to tangos to anything else you've run across. We can somehow ingest it in some way and have it come out as something we've made our own. The thing about jazz is it always has that swing time feel. In a way, it's got a limited kind of association when you hear it. It's got a particular stance you have to have when you play it. When we do play jazz, I literally retool my approach to playing. I'm in a different world altogether. I just sort of retool for the rhythm feeling. It's an interesting thing to accommodate the different kinds of time feelings we use.

How did you approach rhythm during the years without a percussionist?

It was a little more on me. I tried to resist it, but I ended up playing a little too much. I became the drummer too and did a lot of percussive things on the guitar. In all the instruments, you have to be part drummer to play very well. It's important to have a percussion concept when you're

playing. You have an internal rhythm that's going on a meter, ticking away inside. You're always making reference to that. The stronger you are with that, the more cohesive your playing is. You don't need someone hitting you on the head with a drumstick to know where the time is. [laughs] Every musician basically internalizes rhythm. When you're playing with a group, you find a happy medium between everyone's internal senses of rhythm. It also depends on how well you play together and how well you can adjust to everyone's unique sense of rhythm.

How has the group evolved from a personal relationship standpoint?

It's a family. It's very highly evolved somehow. An interesting thing happened when Collin was killed. All the areas Collin occupied, with his wonderful, stable personality and all the things he would take care of almost in unspoken ways settled out like water seeking a level amongst us. We all took on some portion of whatever Collin's personality filled out in the group. That even included things like who does the accounting, who makes the call to find out if the hotel is booked and who drives the van. So, it was a very interesting sociological phenomenon about a group of people and how they relate and function as kind of a closed society with a sense of honor and without spoken rules. In a sense, my main duty is being the big composer of the group. I do most of the writing. In a funny way, I'm the musical director of the group. Without all the parts working together, the group wouldn't function. It's a kind of recipe for a small village. It's not a bad example of how to get along. We give each other a lot of room.

We don't see each other a lot when we're not touring because since 1980, we've all left New York City. We were in New York for 14 years. That's where the band really formed. It's the last time we all lived in the same place. Since 1981, we all sort of scattered. Now I live in Palermo, Italy most of the time. Paul is in Bolinas, California; Glen lives in Portland; and Mark lives in New Jersey. So we don't have a chance to hang out when we aren't playing. We all have our individual careers and that is a big plus.

No-one's tried to inhibit another's individual aspirations. There's a lot of generosity that way. The thing about it is it's very serious and involved with the music when we do play. No-one's doing it because it's just a job. It's a real, living thing and we still get very excited about it. After every concert, we talk about it. We're excited about what we do. We always feel we have to do better. It's a wonderful thing. It's like an incredible kind of brotherhood. So it's a group that's not going to disband. It would be like disbanding from your parents. [laughs] It's truly a family, but not a restrictive or suffocating one. It's a good model for relationships in that there's a lot of respect and it's very relaxed. It's very unusual in that it's really great people, not just musicians. They are wonderful people to hang out with.

Do Walcott's ideas still influence the group?

He was such an extraordinary person who was such a great friend. Even if he didn't have a musical influence—which he does—it must be there somewhere, just having known a person that closely and having lost him like that. Your life is completely changed as a result of having known him. You can still remember things he said and how he'd react in a certain situation. So, this person is still alive in your life. People don't cease to be part of your life when they die. There's still so much that's just naturally there—an inertia in someone's life that carries on and lasts throughout the lives of everyone that knew him. In this case, he was such a rare person. He's as much a part of the band as he ever was in some ways. It's an interesting thing to know someone that well and have them influence your life and continue to.

What's your take on the industry climate you're working in at the moment?

I don't pay as much attention as I should to what's going on. But it seems to me that the way the world is going with so many mergers means much fewer choices. If you went to a hardware store 20 years ago, you

could choose between six or seven brands of screwdrivers. Now, there's only one or two and they're owned by the same company. Everything has been bought up and merged. In a strange way, things have happened with music categories too. Everything's been shrunk down in a way. Also, I don't think our music has been accessible on radio the way it used to be. It doesn't get played as much. Music on radio seems almost retro as far as jazz goes. The new players are playing rehash—we call it “rebop.” [laughs] So, for really unusual, experimental groups, there's not a real commercial platform accessible to them. People have to research to find this music. All this music exists, but you have to be an archeologist to dig it up. There's a little bit of a squeeze on us. But we have an audience and we established it a long time ago. It still grows by word of mouth. It's a little slower, but that's probably the best advertising you can have anyway.

Why do you think people are trapped in the “rebop” time warp?

I think it's familiarity. I think it's less risky and more secure. Look at television for example. The sitcoms are indistinguishable from one another. I don't know if it's a chicken and egg thing. I'm not sure if the makers of these things are determining the formats or if the formats are determined by the demand. They all claim it's the demand. And the people who complain say it's television itself. So it's hard to know, really. So many people are involved and there is so much money at risk. It seems money is at the root of all evil. Quite often, when you throw money into music, you're going to have tension because people's jobs are at stake. Pretty soon it's going to take a conservative line. Less risk is taken when it comes to things like profit. That's what it'll be totally judged by. It's more of a risk to go out on a limb for something artistic or for something you like.

Why didn't Oregon continue its relationship with ECM after releasing Ecotopia in 1987?

We felt we needed a little more time. The ECM format is very intelligent, but it's very demanding in that you have two days to do a record in most cases and then you have one day for mixing. We did that with the group and we have some great records on ECM. But we wanted to go and produce ourselves again and just have more time. I still like ECM's approach though, because you have to be decisive. You can't just sort of wallow around. You have to have it together and do it. We were able to do that. So it wasn't a violent split or anything. My heart is really with that company. There's another person who's like a brother: Manfred Eicher. We're both from really small towns. We've known each other from the inception of the company. I first met Manfred in New York after Dave Holland introduced me. Dave and I were playing a concert and I heard about this record company. I eventually signed as a soloist with them, so I was one of the original guys with them in '72 or '73. The whole ideal of that company is incredible and it still maintains itself with all the pressure, nagging, weirdness, and petty jealousy of musicians, press and other companies. It's amazing and incredible.

Can you elaborate on what you mean by petty jealousy?

Things like who gets more attention, promotion, money, and stuff like that. There's also a lot of jealousy from other record companies because of Manfred's success. The success is based on taking excellent musicians who are able to do records in a minimum amount of time. And the records start with pianos—gorgeous Steinways that are in tune. Jazz musicians used to make records with pianos out of tune. Even Bill Evans' records have out-of-tune pianos. Some labels treat jazz musicians like second-class citizens. In contrast, ECM started with this incredible attention to musical detail and sound, and used the best quality vinyl when making records, all with very low production costs. But the records would recoup almost immediately because there weren't these ridiculous advances. You would

always earn your advance back and your record would be in the black in less than a year. So, all the money was put into the quality of the recording, not spread over a bunch of confusing weeks and months.

ECM also does combinations of instruments that no-one ever dared to do in jazz where you had to have a whole band. Manfred was the originator of incredible duets like saxophone duets and guitar and vibes. Manfred would also take great piano players and record them solo. Columbia and the big companies wouldn't even think of getting near Chick Corea or Keith Jarrett with a 10-foot pole to do a solo record in those days. People forget who had the vision to do that and that's how ECM started building itself. To this day, ECM records are done in a minimal amount of time. There's an awareness of the advantage of doing things very well and very quickly, but with preparation and the best quality recording techniques. It's very idealistic and it's got a real continuity in terms of the musicians.

I can speak for myself in being able to look at almost a life's work on the same label. It also means each album is an evolution and exciting and means something. I'm not just making records to hear myself, but making recordings that show some sort of development. You owe that to your audience. Making a record should be the most exciting thing you do in your life. It used to be a big deal making a record. Sometimes people make records too soon these days, but that sounds like an old man's grumbling. I'm glad I waited. I was 30 before I made a record. I had a late start. I didn't play the guitar until I was 22 and dragged myself to Vienna, Austria where I started as a classical guitarist with a great professor. I started as a beginner. So I've always been very late finding the right things I guess. But I've been developing a lot of different areas. It took awhile to be a steady composer at that time with the trumpet, piano and all the things I did. I didn't always do them at the same time, but in blocks. But when I studied guitar, it's all I did. I just locked myself in a room for two years. I condensed a whole boyhood and learned a lot in a short time.

Reflect on making Together, Oregon's 1976 collaboration with Elvin Jones.

Oh, that's hilarious! That's a great story. Elvin was signed to Vanguard Records. We were on Vanguard too. Elvin heard us play and liked it and said he could hear himself in the music. Elvin suggested he do a record with Oregon. It was his idea. So we got together and had to do it in one day. So I thought "We better keep Elvin playing! We've got to keep him playing and go all the way non-stop and run him into the ground." [laughs] We had a couple of pieces already written, so we started on those. Then I thought "Well, you guys improvise a duet. I gotta go write another piece." So I would run off to the corner and write the next piece while Collin and Elvin or Glen and Elvin were doing a duet or maybe the four of them were doing something without me. So we kept this thing rolling until the end. I was worried "What if Elvin doesn't break a sweat? Wouldn't that be awful?" [laughs] But as soon as Elvin picked up a drumstick and went "bap" he started gushing and I thought "We're okay now." It was so much fun and we just had a great time. When it was all over, we went out and got sort of potted.

Then we had a photo session arranged for the album cover. The album cover was hilarious. What happened is we had a gig in upstate New York and we drove back down to the city and went to this photographer's place. Elvin wasn't there. Then pretty soon, we hear a ring on the buzzer down from the foyer of this building we were in. We went down and there was Elvin collapsed in the foyer. He had disappeared for four days in the city and gone on one of his famous binges. He was having what appeared to be a heart attack and was in a cold sweat. So we called the ambulance and were tapping him and hoping he was okay. He went to the hospital and was okay in a couple of days. We visited him and then went back to the photographer's studio as these sourpusses and had pictures taken of the four of us. So what do they do? They put this picture of the four of us on the cover and put this big smiling picture of Elvin's face on it like a sticker glued on top with these drumsticks around it. The art director was so bad. It just looked strange and like an afterthought. So, Elvin missed the photo session, but he was fine. That's the story of that record. It was really a big

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jam session. It wasn't a great recording. It was distorted, but the spirit was there. We had a great time with him.

May 2000



McCOY TYNER

COMMUNICATING SENSITIVITY

AGE TRULY IS A STATE OF MIND. One need look no further than jazz pianist McCoy Tyner for definitive proof. Now in his seventies, Tyner still possesses an unquenchable thirst for exploration and innovation. He's released dozens of albums across a six-decade career that have expanded the boundaries of his instrument and influenced untold numbers of players and composers. What all of his diverse recordings have in common is the presence of his signature blues-influenced piano approach marked by an inventive combination of sophisticated chords and an exhilarating, percussive touch.

Born in Philadelphia in 1938, Tyner benefited from a family that encouraged him to expand an early love of music by diving deep into the world of formal training. He began playing piano at age 13 and was performing live by the time he attended high school. His first professional gig of note was a stint with Art Farmer's and Benny Golson's Jazztet in 1960, prior to joining John Coltrane's legendary quartet later that year. Also comprised of Jimmy Garrison and Elvin Jones, this line-up recorded some of the most expansive and forward-thinking albums in the history of jazz, including *A Love Supreme*, *Live at the Village Vanguard* and *Crescent*.

Tyner departed Coltrane's group in 1965 to pursue a prolific solo career. Early highlights include a series of all-star late '60s post-bop albums, including *The Real McCoy*, *Tender Moments* and *Expansions*. In 1972, he enjoyed a major commercial breakthrough with *Sahara*, a top-selling, Grammy-nominated album that incorporated African and Eastern elements. The renowned releases served as a springboard to widespread

acclaim that established him as one of his genre's greatest exponents. Since that period, Tyner has worked in a number of different formations, including solo piano, small and large groups, as well as big bands. He's also incorporated additional world musics and symphonic components into his work, and even served as an interpreter of popular songs.

His 2000 release *McCoy Tyner with Stanley Clarke and Al Foster* proved to be another critical and commercial success. Comprised largely of Tyner's own compositions, the album offers a kinetic take on the jazz lexicon infused with blues, funk and Latin influences. There's no shortage of fiery moments and impressive interplay with his accomplished rhythm section. Yet, it's also well-tempered by Tyner's proclivity for elegant and tasteful arrangements. Using a philosophical basis for discussion, Tyner explored the creation of this trio record, as well as the process of navigating the complex intersections that guide his life and music.

Describe the approach you took on the record from a conceptual perspective.

I like to go on an adventure when I play. I also like to have the freedom to do that for more than just the sake of doing something "out there" or different. I like to experiment and take people along the way and bring them back. It's like a voyage. I want them to understand what I'm doing as opposed to trying to baffle them. I want them to see that's what music is about. It's about enjoyment and going on a trip. I think the combination of people on this record was perfect at this time. We gave it some thought. We didn't randomly throw people together. We first wanted to see if we could work together and if we had a connection. That's how the decision was made. And it proved to be a great one.

Elaborate on the connection you have with Clarke and Foster.

Stanley's from Philadelphia. I'm like Bill Cosby when it comes to Philadelphia sometimes. [laughs] We have a very close-knit kind of thing.

Most musicians from the city have that. It's not that alone, though. If someone is musically compatible with you, it doesn't matter if they're from Chicago or a different country. Stanley worked on another project called *Looking Out* that I did when I was with Columbia for a very short time. And I've known Al for years—since I was signed to Milestone Records with Sonny Rollins. Occasionally, he's played with me as part of my trio. When he does, it's like we've played together on a regular basis because he's so compatible with me. The dynamic level is amazing.

What are the key philosophies you adhere to as a bandleader?

I like people to be comfortable. That's the first thing I think about. Will people playing with me be comfortable and compatible? That's very important. It's a good place to start. I also like to provide enough room so the person is comfortable to do what they do. I don't like to handcuff people. But at the same time, he's got to understand that when he's playing with me, he also has to listen. Listening and responding are very important.

What are some other qualities a good bandleader should possess?

It's about the respect you command without being demanding. There has to be something in the person that commands respect. He has to understand you enough that you feel comfortable in his presence, but at the same time gives you the props you deserve—if you justly deserve them. I haven't had much problem with my big band that has 14 guys onstage. If they don't want to be there, it's difficult to get music out of them. [laughs] That's why these ghost bands are very difficult to maintain. When Duke Ellington died and his son Mercer took over his band, he tried to do what the leader did and it's very difficult. Duke had a lot to do with bringing the music out of people in that respect. I've been very, very fortunate in that way. Giving musicians what they need to be comfortable brings out their best.

You're known as a soft-spoken, amiable individual. However, I imagine there's a more fiery side of your personality that emerges when dealing with a musician who's not up to par.

[laughs] Oh yeah! If necessary, yeah. Fortunately, I haven't been challenged that way too many times, but occasionally I have. The human element is ever-present when dealing with people. But I've had lots of people work for me and they never say "Wow, that was an experience I won't repeat." I get the opposite response. It's all about listening for me. I once watched a video on Duke Ellington about dealing with a big band. And I've talked to Woody Herman, Maynard Ferguson and others. I've learned so much about the big band situation and the same things apply in general to small groups too. You learn not only to give respect but how to have that respect come back to you. It's a reciprocal thing. It's mutual. And I think that's a very important lesson for a guy who gets up on stage. If it's all about him, that's not playing music. If he's not listening and responding and having respect for the other people on that stage, how can you make music? Just by thinking about yourself? It doesn't go that way. And if you have your own band, you've got to be able to communicate with people on a human level. That enhances the musical side.

You once said music can enhance a listener's life because it serves to educate. How does it do that?

It's sort of an automatic thing. See, I think some people forget that there's a public out there that needs to be exposed to this music that may not be familiar with it. And even if they are, the whole idea is there because they're there. Even if you are very into what you want to do, why not carry them along with you? They paid their money to come hear you play. You don't have to diminish the quality of what you do, but it's good to be aware that the public is there to receive your gift. The person doesn't have to be a musician to appreciate music. I think just exposing the person

to the music is very important. Children who are really exposed to this music at a young age and really hear it can love jazz. It makes a difference. Child or adult, they will not only be educated, but it will stimulate their intellect. It's very beneficial.

How firmly is jazz being instilled in the American public's collective mindset as a classical art form today?

It's not like it was in the past because of the fact that radio and various other media seem to focus on the very mediocre. It's not that we don't have the music or that it isn't being played on our level. But what's being played on the radio represents choices that are very, very limited. You have choices, but there is so much going on. It's an onslaught of stuff and sometimes someone might not know what jazz is. Some people will say it's this or that. Jazz is a very deep-rooted music. You can't fluff it off like it just happened yesterday. Of course, in Europe, they consider jazz an art form. A lot of people do here too, but in Europe they go out to concerts a lot. They're more TV-oriented than they used to be, but their form of entertainment is listening to live music.

The bottom line is sales. And you're competing with pop artists or you're not being marketed. Jazz has never been properly marketed because it's a classical form of music—it really is. So that limits it to a category and they don't want to pay attention. When I first started recording, you worked with ex-musicians or people that worked in show business. At Impulse, I met the head of the company and he was very involved in jazz prior to accepting that position. He said "We're very proud to have you on the label." It was about having something unique on the label compared to an Elvis or someone in the pop world. How can you compare sales for an art form like jazz to something like that? But I do think that jazz could be marketed to be bigger. It's kind of neglected in that way. And I think that affects the consciousness of people. Things are a little culturally decadent in some ways. But there are people who appreciate this music. But I'd like

to see more of the general public involved—the people who don't get the opportunity to hear this music.

What are some possible solutions?

[laughs] Well, I'm just a musician. I'm not into marketing, but I know the music needs to be accessible. I'll give you an example. My mother knew who Billie Holiday, Count Basie and Duke Ellington were. She knew who they were because they were part of the community and we were proud of these people. That kind of accessibility doesn't seem to exist at that level anymore—the level where the average housewife, plumber or carpenter is aware of this music. I remember getting on a bus in Chicago one time and the bus driver said "Oh, you're with Coltrane! You're in town? I'm coming to see you!" That was the bus driver! The music was so accessible. We had our fair share of airtime. But now it's so flooded with stuff that's not on the same quality level, yet it sells. So that gives you a general idea of the state of mind of the public. I'm not putting it down. Commercial music has its place. It was gospel, jazz, blues, rock, and pop back then. Jazz wasn't promoted like the big pop people, but there was more accessibility to the public.

It amazes me that musicians of your caliber and stature sometimes remain at the mercy of A&R people.

Not me. [laughs] I think if you step in the door and make music based on what the label likes and only what they like, it can be a mess. Maybe they make wild promises—record companies do that sometimes. Then they don't always comply with what they say. When I go in, I know what I want to do. I like artistic freedom. I don't mind taking suggestions—I'm open to that. It's not that it has to be my way only, but I think you can lose yourself in the situation if you're not really careful. It's not only about money. It's about the conditions of the contract you need in order

to allow you to do what you want to do—it's what determines how much freedom you have to create. Otherwise, you can get yourself in a mess and be unhappy. That's not the goal. The goal is to be happy and play music. When I first started playing music, I just did that—enjoyed it and wanted to keep creating. Sometimes it's not a matter of sacrifice. You can sacrifice more trying to attain more material gain and it can be a mess.

Your output is spread across several different labels these days. Is that a deliberate choice?

I've been playing the label game. I do things with this label and that label. I'm a little apprehensive about signing long-term contracts. I used to do that years ago and sign for three years with graduation clauses that make things better the next year than the year before. But I would step in there with an attorney. I had legal advice. I was advised to do that and unlike some older musicians, I was very lucky. It's a gradual learning process that happens over the years. You can also start anticipating what will happen judging from what's happened to a lot of other people.

Going back to the idea of music and education, my assumption is you are continually learning and evolving as well.

Yeah. That's because I'm not a fatalist. I haven't given up on what good music can do for people. That's why I perform—to offer what I have to the general public and to people who love music. But I can't control what's outside of my realm. All I can do is keep evolving as an artist. That's what I want to do. That's what gives me the most joy and to share that experience is great.

I think being inspired by the right people also makes a big difference. It's a reciprocal thing. And being with the right people on stage who are compatible can let you ascend to unlimited heights, and that's evolving too. Technically, I think I have what I need to do that. But I need to go on these journeys and I need someone to go with me. That enhances the

whole thing and carries you to a different place. It's lovely.

How important is the generational element when choosing sidemen for you?

I think it's important in terms of reference and maturity. But then again, younger guys like Brian Blade and Joshua Redman played with me and these guys were listening and sensitive. It doesn't necessarily have to do with coming up with the same generation. But if they do, it's nice to have the same references. That's a good thing about it. With Al, we both have references we grew up with, but at the same time, he's not afraid to expand and try different things and keep it fresh. I like Brian for that too. He's very fiery like Al. There are some similarities. They're very open to listening to others and aren't wrapped up in their own expression. They see it as a total experience as opposed to *my* experience. In other words, it's *our* experience. But we need leadership too. That's very important. With Coltrane, it was the same thing. We looked to him for leadership, but at the same time, we were given all of this freedom to do what we wanted to do. We were very fortunate that we had the right people in the band. It all came together and worked like clockwork.

As a jazz icon, do you feel obligated to fulfill a specific role for people?

The only thing I'm concerned with is the preservation of our music at a high quality level. That's my responsibility. So much has happened to qualify what we're doing—the historical references and the people that have passed on who made the sacrifices dedicating their lives to this art form. So I do feel a responsibility. When I formed my big band, many members were in Thad Jones', Mel Lewis' and Gil Evans' bands. When those friends passed on, I felt the responsibility of putting a band together. The jazz legacy is so rich, so I owe it to them and myself. I've spent a lot of my life playing this music. It's something I love to do. It's a wonderful art form embraced all over the world. It's very important.

You once faced a very low ebb in your career after you left Coltrane in the late '60s. Describe the situation you encountered.

It was a very trying period. I was considering driving a cab, but I didn't actually do it. At that time, the jazz that we played was being challenged by fusion and electronics. It was the invasion of the electronics. A lot of jazz radio stations changed their format to accommodate that sort of thing. But there are some people like Joe Zawinul and Herbie Hancock who were really able to create on synthesizers, so I don't put it down. Jazz has a broad definition and people have the right to do what they want, but when you move something aside and say "That's not important" and substitute it for something else and say "Well, okay, this is jazz," that's very dangerous.

You completely avoided the fusion movement. Was there any temptation to explore it?

I'm in love with my instrument, so I basically stayed away from fusion. I wasn't drawn to it at all. My sound and self are definitely embodied in the acoustic piano.

How did you cope during that dark period?

It was difficult. I was raising my family and I went through about four years where I had to really tighten the belt. I wasn't the only one. Dustin Hoffman was a waiter down in the Village Gate in New York back then. I think a lot of people in show business and music have to do some other things in order to sustain themselves through a certain period. I learned a lot from that experience, including that we're not here alone. There is a support system, but you have to be aware and conscious of it. We do have help even when we're deprived of a lot of things that we need. And sometimes we realize we don't need all those things. There are things we can focus on that can help us through the trials and tribulations.

A word you often use to describe your approach is "sensitivity." What does the word mean to you?

Sensitivity is being in touch with yourself and being able to internalize and go deep within to hopefully come up with something of value. It's hard to play music if you're not sensitive. It's self-defeating. If you're not sensitive, well play by yourself! [laughs]

Is there a spiritual basis that guides what you do?

I hope so. I think music should have some spiritual elements because it's not material. It's another kind of dimension and it should be there in order for you to touch people's spirits and lives. You need to give them a unique experience and if you don't, something's lacking. It's not about wanting to hoist yourself up on some sort of pedestal. I have no way to define it to tell you the truth.

When reflecting on mortality, what thoughts go through your mind?

I think we would all like to be immortal and be around as long as we can. But as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "It's not about how long you're here, but the quality of what you do while you're here that's important." And that's what I try to do. I have a lot of work to do, a lot of writing to do. There's just so much to do.

Have you paid a visit to the Saint John Coltrane African Orthodox Church in San Francisco?

I haven't, but I know what you're talking about. The thing is, if people want to do that, it's fine. Knowing John, I'm unsure he would want to be in that kind of position. If you look at his music, quite naturally there were religious elements. He was definitely a very spiritual person. His

grandfather was a minister, so he grew up a part of the church. But I think John would be kind of uncomfortable. I don't think he'd want to be a deity in that respect—even if he is in our eyesight. He was a very, very subtle, quiet and regal person. He was very nice and a very good man to work for. He was like a big brother. I was a kid when I first met and played for him. I was 17 years old. We were like family and that's how I looked at it. I didn't look at it as "I'm just working for him." I loved working with John. I loved him as a person. He'll always have an influence on me. That was my university. He was very, very generous in terms of allowing us to have an opportunity to develop. That was very important. So that influence is there. And I love the music we created a lot. But if people feel as if they have to deify him and make a saint of him or whatever, that's up to them. I don't necessarily want to be part of that because I knew him differently.

Do you feel it's a particularly American tendency to elevate artists beyond the realm of humanity?

And athletes. Yeah, we have a tendency to do that. Sometimes we're very destructive too. We take a person and build him up and then we sometimes bring him down. To say "Well, okay, yeah. If you want me to be a god, fine. I accept that" can be a little risky.

Have you ever felt the burden of that proclivity?

People have said things to me about this and that. I take them for what they are. If they think that, that's fine—as long as they appreciate what I'm doing. But I'm not looking for them to do that to me. I leave that up to the public. I'm just here to do what I'm meant to do.

February 2000



EBERHARD WEBER

FOREGROUND MUSIC

SOME MUSICIANS CHOOSE TO BUCK TRENDS AND PRECEPTS by taking a vociferous stand. Others do so simply by making music and letting listeners come to their own conclusions. Bass innovator Eberhard Weber falls firmly in the latter category. For nearly five decades, he's situated his one-of-a-kind, virtuoso electric upright bass talents within a wide variety of solo and group contexts. He maintains a low profile, only emerging as a public persona when he has something new to offer from a musical perspective.

Weber's 2001 album *Endless Days* found the bassist exploring classical sounds and structures with a quartet consisting of Paul McCandless on woodwinds, Rainer Brüninghaus on piano and keyboards, and Michael DiPasqua on drums and percussion. During the sessions, he asked the musicians to vigilantly avoid the jazz-oriented mindsets they're all well-steeped in. He wanted the players to focus on a more austere approach with compositional integrity foremost in mind. In addition to the talents of his gifted sidemen—none of whom is a stranger to classical music—Weber made tasteful use of samplers to replicate orchestral elements to further create a classical grounding for the release.

The disc offers a stark contrast to Weber's previous two albums, 1988's *Orchestra* and 1993's *Pendulum*. Both are predominantly solo bass releases, augmented by some looping and other electronic devices to color the soundscape. Feeling satisfied with the breadth of expression on those discs, Weber chose to return to a group approach for *Endless Days*. A lengthy period of serious reflection followed that decision, during which he opted

to modify his chamber jazz approach in favor of emphatically representing his classical leanings.

Weber believes *Endless Days* reflects the desires of a mature artist. Born in Stuttgart, Germany in 1940, he has long been fond of classical music, but was previously hesitant to step too deeply into that terrain for his own releases. His reticence is certainly the result of modesty, not capability. In addition to recording many diverse albums with neo-classical influences, he's worked with the likes of Jan Garbarek, Stephane Grappelli, Ralph Towner, Joe Pass, Gary Burton, Pat Metheny, Jean-Luc Ponty, and Kate Bush. To say he's well-versed in varied and complex musics is an understatement.

Tell me about the considerations that led to the direction you pursued for Endless Days.

The problem is that I don't want to add another record to the world that is not necessary to be published, except to make some business. There has to be a musical reason. If there is a good musical reason, I think it might draw more attention and sell, though it is not guaranteed. To make a record without a musical reason, you have to either be a pop star who sells automatically or just be lucky. That wasn't the only reason I waited seven years to make a record after *Pendulum*. I was very busy with the Jan Garbarek Group. We play up to 100 concerts a year. The way for me to compose is to have lots of time. So when I'm out on tour for two weeks and then get one week off before more shows, I can't write at all. I need more time and perspective. I know this is little excuse for taking so long.

There was another thought too: What to do for my next record? My last two records—*Orchestra* and *Pendulum*—were solo records just played on my bass. *Orchestra* had a little brass ensemble on two tracks as well, but the rest was me. I knew I couldn't continue in this direction, even if people liked it, because I can only duplicate myself. I asked myself "What else is there to do?" I am at an age which is not that young anymore. I am

61. I thought “I have the right to do what I always wanted to do but never dared to do.” When you are young, you have other ideas. You want to show how well you can play and how effectively you can compose. I have had the luck to get this old, so I decided to follow my classical education. I am a classical music lover—not necessarily the contemporary stuff, but the old stuff. I love these kinds of classical sounds and thought I’d like to use them at least once on an album of mine before I die.

When deciding this, I knew I could never compete with any classical composer. That’s not my goal. But I wanted to use sounds the way classical composers do. That’s why I used these kind of stringy and French horn sounds. Originally, there was the thought that I would play with a real orchestra. Then Manfred Eicher from ECM and I discussed it for a long time. He said “Why don’t you do this differently?” It wasn’t necessarily only for a financial reason, but a quality reason. Orchestras are not used to playing the kind of stuff jazz musicians like to play. It requires a lot of rehearsal and recording time, so it’s much easier to do on a synth or sampler. So we came up with that idea. I prepared myself very well, so the quartet on the album already had the background stuff. They heard the strings and classical sounds and added whatever I asked them to add. So it’s not a quartet album. I don’t know how to say what it is. It’s just a composed album with the help of four improvising, creative musicians.

You told the musicians on the new record “You can play everything as long as it doesn’t sound like jazz” to encourage a sense of freedom and openness.

[laughs] I love these provocative phrases. When I told the musicians these phrases they laughed, knowing very well what I meant. “Don’t you worry, it won’t be jazz” they said. They know that improvisation is also jazz, because improvisation doesn’t exist in classical music. So, in the end it was jazz. But I wanted to avoid the typical noodly and doodly jazzy stuff. They immediately understood. It was one of the reasons that Paul McCandless only played a jazz instrument—soprano sax—on the final

track “The Last Stage of a Long Journey.” On the other tracks, he plays classical instruments such as bass clarinet, oboe or English horn. The piano player Rainer Brüninghaus is also classically trained with a classical approach. It wasn’t a problem to get them to play less jazzy. When I think back now to the recording sessions, there is more improvisation than one hears. It’s an ideal combination of arrangements and improvisation. Only a few people are able to listen and say what is composed and what is improvised. It’s a unit.

I understand you consciously tried to play down the element of self-presentation on the new album.

It is probably very necessary to present your ego at some point. Solo playing is the most egocentric stuff you can play, but there is a limit. I couldn’t find another way to present my bass that way without copying and multiplying myself. So I had to go back to communicating with other musicians. I was afraid the other musicians might want to present themselves too much, but I think they managed to play freely within my limits. [laughs]

On my records, I always want to be the person who is responsible for what you hear. I do think it is best for the album. Whenever I release a record, it’s my record. It’s not a selfish thought. I may spend a whole year working for other people. So, finally, when I come out with my own album, it should be me with the creative help of other musicians. For instance, on my first album, *The Colours of Chloë*, there was a drum solo. I told the drummer he could play whatever he wanted, knowing that afterwards I would put a smoothening, choir chord underneath so it has a kind of clamp. So, he could not escape my arrangement or general idea.

I think I’m not a dictator, but I might be occasionally when it comes to my albums. I never give up until it’s perfect. For example, after recording the new album, we couldn’t mix it right away. There was no time. Manfred was using the studio, so mixing was postponed for six months. I couldn’t

stand waiting, so I flew out at my expense to Oslo and prepared the recording with Jan Erik Kongshaug, the engineer. We cut little things out here and there, and made some edits before final mixing. So I'm a perfectionist. It's absolutely true. Even now, I could go into the studio and say "I want to make this change or that change." It's far too late now, and nobody would hear it but me. It is a stupid idea of course. [laughs]

On the other hand, I'm very tolerant as well. I expect that everybody can play what they want. But I'm not tolerant when it comes to myself and what is presented on my album that I have to listen to for the rest of my life. An imperfect situation is what I hate and I would hate myself for letting that happen. There are a few albums I've done that I hate myself for because I kept something a musician or producer did that I right away didn't like but thought at the time "It's good enough." Even after 10 to 15 years, I still think I should have done it another way. There are always some doubts when you do a new album though. You wonder whether you succeeded or not, especially when you waited as long as I did for this one—seven years. You're never really sure if it will be a nice record or not. But even some of the albums I like less than others seem well-received and people understood what I meant.

Elaborate on your philosophy as a bandleader.

The best answer is that if there was such a thing as a second life—which I don't believe in—I believe I would become a conductor. This explains everything. I like to create the music I hear in my head. As a conductor, you have the ability to squeeze the sounds and interpretation you asked for from 50 to 80 people. On the other hand, when I give it closer thought, I realize I'm not enough of a dictator to conduct an orchestra because it requires a pretty awful person. When you read these biographies of famous conductors, they are all awful people who fail in their private relationships. Often, it seems there is a necessity to be like that. I'm afraid my second life choice wouldn't be the best one, but I long for it. [laughs]

You've said your shift to the electric upright bass enabled you to discover the role of leader—something you believe few bassists experience. How did it do that?

When I started to pick up the bass, it was purely by random chance. I played cello in my high school orchestra. There was a double bass always standing in the corner never being played. One day, the music teacher said "I wish somebody could play this bass." Since I started becoming interested in jazz—and knowing you couldn't really play jazz on cello—I volunteered. I said "I will try to play this instrument." After a little while, I could sort of play it the classical way with a bow. Then I discovered that I wanted to stay with the bass. This was back in the early '60s. At that time in Germany, there were lots of school bands trying to play jazz. I was hired by lots of bands and gave up cello in favor of bass. At the time, I didn't know that bass would not be enough for me. I'm not a bass player because bass is always a background instrument, even to this very day.

I realized pretty soon that I have to do more than just play bass in the background. So, I developed a kind of playing which only a handful of musicians accepted. I met an older German piano player named Wolfgang Dauner and he accepted my playing. We pretty quickly developed a German Bill Evans-style trio—similar to the one with Scott LaFaro and Paul Motian, without playing that well of course. [laughs] This was very different from what the other people who played in Germany were doing. After awhile, I quit that band and joined others. I continued developing myself.

In 1972, I got my first electric bass and started playing the kind of instrument I play now. I found that the majority of musicians couldn't bear that. They are not used to listening to the bass because they think the bass is in the background to support them. They expect it to be quiet whenever they ask for it. During the good old jazz club times, maybe once or twice a night the bass would play a solo, but otherwise the bass player had to do whatever he was asked to do. I never accepted that.

I can say I ruined two bands as a permanent member. [laughs] The first was the Dave Pike Quartet. The other was a band with the German

guitar player Volker Kriegel. I worked with both for about two years. I was so dominating in my playing, trying so much to squeeze in my own ideas, that we couldn't continue. As a result, I had to get my own playground which was my band Colours. This band lasted for about eight years and then the air was out of it and it was time to finish. It's better to finish at the peak or soon after it, than to wait until the audience notices a decline. So I stopped without knowing who or what else to continue with. It was at the beginning of '82 that Jan Garbarek called me and asked "I want to do another band. Do you want to join it?" I said "Fine. I'm fed up with being a bandleader." This resulted in my longest collaboration ever. I've played with him ever since.

Why were you fed up as a bandleader at that time?

You don't earn any more money than when you're a sideman. This is the German situation. We cooperate and everyone gets the same money. Of course, the records are mine, so I get the royalties. But it's a lot of work to continue keeping a band alive. You have to compose new tunes every one or two years. And when you have a band like Colours for seven or eight years, it becomes difficult to continue staying interesting. Also, don't forget that when your band works together for a long time and there are younger players, there comes a time when they want to emancipate themselves. For example, Rainer Brüninghaus was somehow fed up with me and wanted to start his own band—this is very normal. When I realized that, I said "I'd rather stop." I was fed up and wanted to lean back and not be as responsible for everything. It was just fine to join Garbarek.

Tell me about the factors in your decision to transition from double bass to the electric upright.

The regular bass doesn't have many possibilities. The reason I switched to electric bass is because music became very loud in the late '60s and the

double bass couldn't be heard anymore. I realized I could put pick-ups on my double bass, but found out that when you play at a certain volume, you suffer from feedback because of resonance from the body. So it was only logical to find an instrument which has no feedback. There was a solid body I saw in an antique shop. It was totally broken but I got it repaired. I added a pick-up and thought "From now on, this is my instrument." I discovered that it was absolutely wrong because I still played the way I played on the double bass.

Initially, I didn't change the attitude with the electric bass. It took one year before I felt comfortable on this kind of instrument. I found you are a different bass player because now you can lead. You can tell people where to go onstage which you couldn't do before. The drummer and trumpeter could always lead, but the bass player couldn't simply because of volume. But even though you can put an amplifier on double bass and it can play loud, it still cannot lead because it still has this kind of background-ish sound that is not meant to lead. But with the instrument I have, you can play background, in the middle or foreground. Whatever you do, it can be heard. So they have to deal with you. Many musicians don't like that, certainly not the conservative ones.

Frankly speaking, the bass is kind of a silly instrument. How can someone pick an instrument that is not meant to play solos or be a leader? Even Charlie Mingus—he was an excellent bass player, but he didn't lead from his bass, but from himself, from his ego. And of course, after I had discovered the kind of electric bass I use now, I noticed that I can also lead acoustically in terms of sound with the bass, in a way that even Mingus couldn't. When someone played full force in his time with the bass, you couldn't hear it. Nowadays, you can do whatever you want on the bass or any instrument. Sometimes, when I play with a German all-star group which does a sort of jazzy music, the front line complains about my volume because they're not used to hearing the bass. So I'm in between the lines or in between the seats as they say in Germany. [laughs]

When you're not recording or performing, you don't necessarily spend a lot of time with the bass.

No, not at all. I take care of my instrument, but I don't love it. My instrument is just a device to transport my ideas and feelings. I'm not the type of person who wants to touch their instrument every day. For instance, I'm home now for six days and knowing that tomorrow I have to leave again for the next part of a tour, my car is in the garage. And in the car is my bass. I didn't touch it. And I don't need to touch it knowing that it's not required for technical or musical reasons. I don't need to touch it because it doesn't interest me. I can give you another example. I'm only interested in results, not in procedures to get somewhere. In the good old days, when one had the chance to go to jazz clubs and there were jam sessions, some would go onstage, including myself. We would play some free improvisation or modal improvisation for a half-hour or so and it was really dynamic, wonderful and perfect for that moment. Then I would put the bass down and leave the stage. The musicians would look at me and say "What's going on? Why are you leaving?" I said "Because we just had a nice half-hour and it was perfect. If we continue, it's only going to be repetition." So again, I'm not interested in playing, but having results. That's the big difference between me and other musicians.

Let's explore your work with Kate Bush. You once said when working with her, "Every note had to be negotiated in advance in order to be sold later." Describe what you meant.

She called me once when I was in Hamburg. I couldn't even believe it was her. The hotel had a message from Kate Bush and I called her back. She told me she loved ECM music in general and my music in particular. She wanted me to participate in one of her albums. She sent me a tape of the two tracks she wanted me to play on and asked me to think about

countermelodies. So I did that and flew to London where she lived. I thought it would be like the jazz people I work with and that within two hours, the first tune is done and within another hour, the second tune is done. No. It's very different, which I learned in this, my first appearance in the pop world.

They checked every note—everything, everything, everything. The first tune took six to eight hours. The second one the same. It explained to me why these pop people take so long to produce their albums. They never decide right away what to do. So when I came up with some ideas they said “yes, yes, let's record it to 48 tracks.” Then I'd have another idea and again, it would be “yes, yes, yes, let's do it this way.” I recorded dozens of ideas and in the end, only one was accepted. These people have the attitude that it's only later when they mix that they decide. This is very unusual compared to the older ECM productions in the '70s when I started. Making a record only took three days: two days of recording and one day of mixing. Only later on when it became more complicated with synths and such did it take longer. But pop people take six months or even longer to make a record.

What's your overall approach when working as a sideman?

I can survive most of the jobs that are offered to me without trembling, hesitating or having too much fear. There is always a little tension when I don't know the people or the music involved, but I have a routine that lets me survive—unless someone comes up with an insanely written-out part for bass guitar they want me to play note-for-note. Then I'm frank enough to say “Why don't you call the same player who came up with this? Why do you want me to play it?” Here's an example: A composer once called me from Los Angeles who said “I have an orchestra piece. Would you participate?” I replied with something very unusual: “Do you want a bass player or do you want me?” There was a silence for a little while on the phone. He said “Of course, I want you.” And that was the last time he called me. [laughs]

Your wife Maja paints the artwork for all of your records. Tell me how you work together in an artistic capacity.

She started to paint when we got married in 1968. I always liked her artwork. She has developed a lot if you compare my first album cover to my last one. There were big steps in between. Because I like her paintings, I never saw any reason why I should ask somebody else to do my artwork. She deserves it. We have been together for 33 years now. She paints 10 to 15 pieces a year. I have a lot of choice. I tell her which ones I like, but there have been situations where I wanted a painting and she said “No, no, no, no—no way!” [laughs] Then, of course, I have no choice and I take something else, after we discuss it. She likes my music and not just because she’s my wife. If it shows through the paintings, it’s fine. I’m not enough of an expert to say if her cover art is an invocation of an album.

You intimated earlier in our discussion that you've been thinking about your mortality lately. How often do you dwell on it?

More and more. When you are 30 you think “Oh my God, when I am 40, I will be old.” Then when you are 40 you think 50 is old and so on. My first crisis was when I was 39. I thought “Youth is finally over.” Then I turned 40 and decided it wasn’t over. When I turned 50, I didn’t suffer at all. The first time I definitely felt it is when I turned 60. I thought “There are no excuses anymore. You are approaching the last section of your life.” As long as you’re 50, you can say “I’m still young.” Even at 59. But at 60, this means something. I’m not afraid, but I’m not a youngster anymore. I’m not a young talent anymore.

Are there any spiritual considerations in your reflections?

No, none at all. I have a simple explanation for why: The worst wars are always religious wars. People at war always say “The Lord says I have to do

this” and “The Lord allows me to do this.” So, I hate religion.

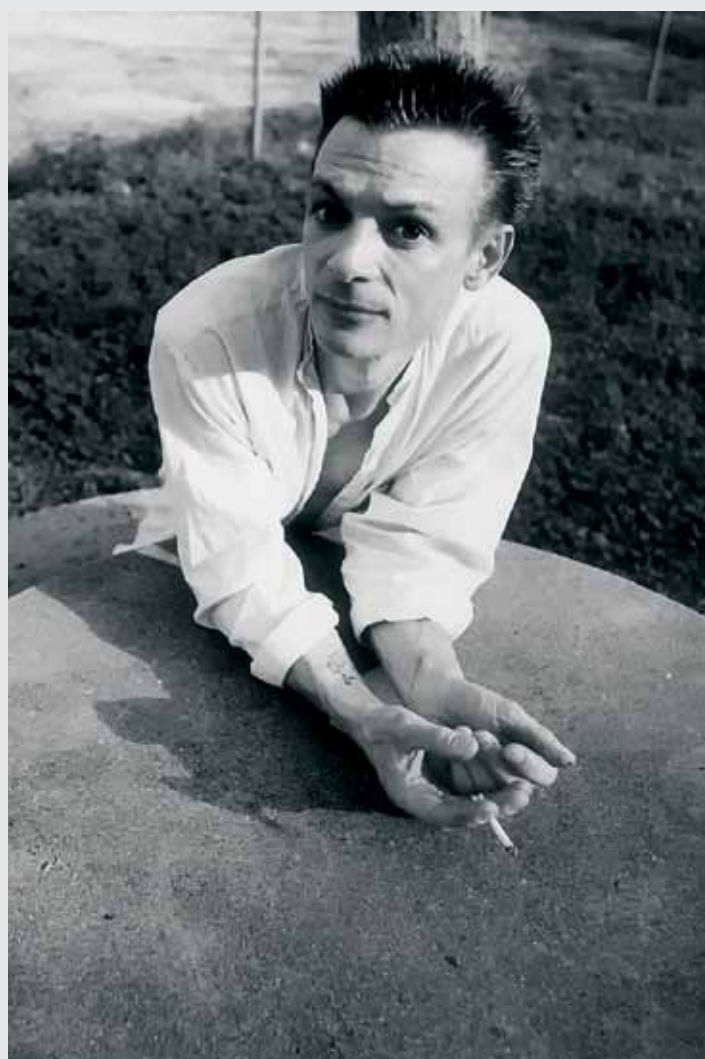
You've called the bass your “life-long occupation” as well as your “greatest adversary.” Elaborate on that.

What I mean is the bass is not my instrument. As I said, in a second life, I want to become a conductor, but I have to stick with the bass because I know that I play the bass more unusually than most other players. I'm not speaking of quality, but difference. I play differently from anybody else. But I'm never satisfied with what I'm doing. So, in a little bit of a funny way, my bass usually beats back and I don't like that of course. By “beats back,” I mean there are still things I haven't discovered yet and the bass knows it better than me.

So, your evolution as a musician continues.

Of course. It never, ever stops.

June 2001



CHRIS WHITLEY

MELANCHOLIC RESONANCE

CONVEYING EMOTIONAL INTENSITY, urgent desires and gritty reality were always at the core of singer-songwriter and guitarist Chris Whitley's edgy folk-blues output. Those elements permeated his 2004 release *War Crime Blues* even more deeply. That's not surprising given the album found Whitley, who died of lung cancer in 2005, passionately responding to the military aggression that continues to play out across much of the world. It also offered his perceptions of what it's like to be someone from America who lives in Germany, and the wartime atrocities both countries have perpetrated. Entirely comprised of his raw, seductive vocals, stunning acoustic guitar work and multi-layered lyrics, the album represented one of his most direct, poignant and powerful statements.

The anomie and sense of dislocation found in much of Whitley's music also stemmed from his personal history. Born in Houston, Texas, Whitley lived a nomadic childhood, moving frequently across the Southeastern United States. At age 11, he relocated to Mexico with his mother after his parents divorced. They moved to Vermont in 1975, where at age 15, he began playing guitar in a local band that drew inspiration from the likes of Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page and Bob Dylan. In 1977, after quitting high school a year before graduating, Whitley journeyed to New York City and performed as a street busker.

Looking for new musical avenues, he relocated to Belgium in 1981 and became part of that country's synth-pop scene. Whitley performed with regionally-acclaimed Belgian acts including Kuruki, Nacht und Nebel and

A Noh Rodeo. He wrote and performed music that straddled funk, rock and blues, and enjoyed modest success before returning to New York City in 1988. Renowned producer Daniel Lanois took an interest in his music shortly thereafter and helped him sign with Columbia Records.

Whitley's solo debut, *Living with the Law*, was released in 1991. It was an adventurous blues-rock record full of rich colors and delicate atmospheres. Though the record was a critical and commercial success, Whitley didn't feel it accurately mirrored his true leanings. For his 1995 follow-up, *Din of Ecstasy*, he chose to solely follow his muse. The eloquently dissonant record was steeped in aggressive, distorted guitar and had a darker, more brooding vibe than its predecessor.

During the late '90s, Whitley openly declared his disinterest in designing music that adheres to major label specifications. He went on to work exclusively within the independent realm where he could retain complete control of his art. Several notable efforts, including *War Crime Blues*, stemmed from that move. His first indie release, 1998's *Dirt Floor*, was a well-received, stripped-down country blues and ballads effort. His 2001 *Rocket House* album incorporated electronica elements, turntable scratching and trip-hop beats into his sound. He took a cinematic approach for 2005's *Soft Dangerous Shores*, a release infused with expansive soundscapes, ambient washes and charged rhythms. *Reiter In*, his final album, was released posthumously in 2006. The low-fi, high-energy collection brought together original material and intriguing covers of tracks by artists including Gary Numan, The Stooges and The Flaming Lips.

War Crime Blues remains one of the high water marks of Whitley's diverse output. World leaders would do well to investigate its searing and intelligent indictment of the dangers and heartbreak of empire building.

Tell me about the messages behind War Crime Blues.

I feel like all of my records have a little conceptual value. Every record I've made has a landscape, atmosphere, place, or specific melancholic feeling

I'm trying to relate. I always have a slant and on this one it's the personal as political. I started *War Crime Blues* about a year after September 11th. I actually flew into New York City on September 13th that year. I saw a negative grace develop out of the attacks that's mostly related to fear and ignorance because we had no previous reference point to someone hating us that physically. The record came out of me wanting to respond honestly to the situation, rather than having a big message. It all goes back to Albert Camus and his book *The Rebel*. There are much deeper issues at work here. War just never fucking ends. Is it something about us Americans? Well, who made America? All of those European motivations.

Living in Dresden, Germany as I do, I can tell you that war crimes are still something people don't want to admit to. They don't want to admit that with Nazism, civilians were involved in perpetrating these crimes. They don't want to admit that people were machine-gunned down while running through the streets. The Germans are completely ashamed of Nazism but don't want to remember that it was a crime. That's just my own feeling. The U.S. is also guilty of a lot of shit we never talk about, namely the wiping out of Native Americans and the extinction of thousands of their languages. That's genocide and it was only 200 years ago.

War Crime Blues also relates to my feelings of becoming aware of my own apathy and ignorance as an American. It's not that Americans have things so cushy. The fact is people are working so fucking hard in America. But it's sort of like Nazi Germany in that people let themselves be led around by whatever the fuck they're told, just because they're so tired. There's a level of ignorance and naïveté that's just so apparent. Opinions are mostly being formed by a drugged culture created by capitalism and money-driven media. How can those forces ever want to positively affect things like peace or balance in the world?

I don't hear anyone talking about love much these days. We must be in a really frustrated culture if we're only thinking about money and protecting ourselves. Some huge existential point is being completely missed. It's the sort of thing presidential candidates don't give a shit about. In our

rebellious arrogance, we want to blame someone else for what's going on, but we can't. We're so egocentric and ignorant. It's all about drawing your borders, fear, separatism, and xenophobia. But the most beautiful thing about the United States are people like the Indians and Pakistanis. If you stay in a hotel in middle America, chances are Indian women own the place. It's like that across the country. It disappoints me that people don't take that diversity more seriously. The reason it's not taken seriously is because it takes too much time to consider that—time that could be spent making shitloads of money.

What's your take on the state of the blues today?

I feel like my home is in what I call folk blues, but I don't relate to almost anyone in that genre. Maybe that's because I try to get too much into words. I can't stand guitar solos anymore or the formality of what the blues are today. The whole guitar slinger thing hasn't interested me since Jimi Hendrix. It meant a lot to me as a kid to see how rebellious that was and how liberated his spirit was. Today, the iconography of the electric guitar is gone. A guitar is no more rebellious than a golf club now. It's a formalized rebelliousness that can be bought and sold. I can't really listen to Eric Clapton or B.B. King. I grew up on Hendrix, Jimmy Page and Bob Dylan. These guys weren't worried about guitar technique at all. They were about symbolism, freedom and real rebellion. That's all folk blues is to me. Erik Satie and John Coltrane also fall in that category. To me, blues can even encompass the purest forms of Flamenco, Egyptian and Moroccan music. But latter-day blues is just a way to sell something. It's just an aesthetic dogma and it's fine for guys who like to go bowling. There's nothing wrong with that, but I don't believe that art is the same as aesthetics. Chops don't equal heart, they equal craftsmanship.

You've said you like to incorporate light and dark, and beautiful and scary into your version of the blues.

That's the key thing you find in blues that you don't find in pop. A pop song is typically more neurotic because everything's all dark or all light. It's Disney. It's pure sentimentalism. A good pop song can be beautiful because you can respond to it easily. Even if the singer is singing a dumb line, it can feel perfect. But there are very few people like Stevie Wonder who can write great pop songs that you don't feel cynical about when you hear them. It's difficult to write a pop song that's nothing but pure entertainment. To me, that's why Kurt Cobain resonated with so many people. The chords are dumb, but there's just this real feeling in his stuff that's close to the blues.

In terms of the light and the scary, musicians like Nick Drake have scared people with an earnestness that listeners aren't necessarily seeking from entertainment. They want people writing about the decorations around life, especially when they're working so hard. They need obvious expression. But to me, things aren't black and white. They're grey. I can't get away from that because I don't feel like a commodity. I feel like what I'm doing is supposed to be important. Otherwise, why am I doing it? That's not the pop culture way at all. It's probably a big reason for why I'm not more popular. I've made decisions that went against the grain. I guess I choose to be a little bit arrogant and think "They'll get it!" It's a trust thing with the audience. I just want to believe that somebody will get my records, pay attention to them and understand how strong the emotions are behind them. It's not about pop craftsmanship for me. It's simply about expression.

Tell me how you go about putting songs together.

I've found I have to pull things out in a musical way. It's hard for me to just write instrumental music or put poetry down on a page without music attached. When I write with the two things happening simultaneously, I can usually encourage myself to articulate something and find inspiration without trying too hard. The important thing for me is to not pressure

myself while I'm doing it. I try to trust my perceptions and feelings when I'm writing. There's usually more going on inside me than I directly realize. I attempt to tap into my subconscious and experiential humanity. Often, I write with a Walkman. I'll come up with a couple of chords and start mumbling into the Walkman without attaching words right away. Then I'll listen back to it and try to feel some words within my vamping. I try to let the expression reveal itself to me. It's like writing by ear. I can get images from the feeling in a chord or a sound, or from the tension that exists between two sounds. Sometimes I won't know why I'm writing the song or where it was coming from exactly until a year later. The songs can end up having so many more levels that way compared to just taking a topic and deliberately writing about that.

I think anyone can learn the techniques of songwriting, but I'm not interested in songs that are created that way anymore, like those huge things Britney Spears and Aerosmith do. I'm more interested in being honest with myself. I try not to be too self-critical, but I hold myself to certain standards because sometimes we love anything we create, mostly because we're so insecure and lack confidence. That's a dangerous approach because you can disappear up your own ass. Also, you can be surrounded by people who convince you that you're doing something great even when you're not, because they see an opportunity to make a lot of money for a moment. If money is the only thing on your mind when you're writing songs, the songs will sound like it. Unfortunately, that's the sort of cynical culture we're living in. I suppose it might be considered arrogant for me to try to make art in a form that's really based in pop, but unlike a lot of people in this business, I still believe in art.

I think one of the most important things songwriters need to do is find an identity. It's a rare thing for listeners to be able to answer questions like "Who is the person singing this?" and "Where are they coming from?" The answers are the things that make people want to listen to songwriters like Tom Waits, Neil Young, Nick Cave, and Bruce Springsteen. They're truly articulating something of themselves in their music. They've attained

something that's the result of overlooking their limitations. Earlier in my career, I overlooked my technical clumsiness as a musician. When I started to accept my weirdness, it gave me more strength as a songwriter and musician. You have to trust your individuality.

How has your approach as a guitarist evolved across your career?

I learned to play guitar by writing songs. I didn't learn to play first and then start writing songs. I kind of did it all at the same time, so my playing has evolved in the same way that my singing or writing has. I initially began by playing in the streets of New York City. I would play after work to nobody. I'd just sit there alone, though sometimes there would be people listening. It was mostly for myself. I was just practicing and writing stuff. Along the way, I got more and more technique. If you think about it though, technique is more about athletics and science. Those aren't things I'm looking for. When music becomes ruled by technique, it's lost. I come out of dumb-ass blues and gospel, so what I'm looking for is expression. In terms of meaningful evolution, I'm way closer to what I'm trying to express than I ever have been. I trust my confusions and values more than ever. For me, it's been more about trying to refine what resonates with me.

Sometimes I've seen my guitar playing as a defense of my own insecurities. I would play a lot more notes than I needed to in order to impress somebody or prove that I can play well. But that's not about music. The same goes for playing as loud as you can as a way of trying to hide from how vulnerable you really feel. Why not just whisper if you really feel like that? Why the spectacle of technique? Being a good guitar player doesn't mean you're a good musician. I've heard so many drummers that can show me their technique and fill the place up with sound. For me, it's like "When the fuck are you going to stop playing drums and start playing music?" That's a big deal for me. I'm sorry, but technique is not good enough. It's only good enough if you want to play for other musicians who only like to justify their gig with technique. But what about people who need music

that don't play? Those people are really why I started playing.

Din of Ecstasy represented a career milestone for you, but surprised many with its dramatic sonics. How do you look back at it?

From a musical vantage point, it was me going back to my roots. I felt *Living with the Law* didn't have an edge that I always felt. With *Din of Ecstasy*, I went back to my teenage thinking of louder, aggressive and visceral. It was a power trio album. I was trying to articulate some edginess I grew up with like Led Zeppelin, Hendrix, Cream, and The Doors. Also, I was breaking up with my wife of 13 years and dealing with my own morality issues. I realized that maybe a lightning bolt wouldn't strike me if I split up with her. I was also madly in love with someone else at the time. I was asking myself a lot of questions like "What is my dogma about relationships? Why do people stay together when they're not happy? Why is it called love when it's a need? Why is it called sexual fulfillment when it's just fucking?" That's where the content for the album came from. It was a social response to a personal, intimate thing. I was trying to articulate all of that stuff, but I think I lost some people with that album because it wasn't just a guy screaming out loud. The sound of the record itself resonated more with people than the impetus that motivated the writing. That might have resulted from my own musical indulgences.

You were part of the Belgian synth-pop scene during the early '80s. What attracted you to that world?

I moved to Belgium in 1981 after an era playing at clubs on Bleecker Street in New York City. I had been playing with people like Johnny Thunders and The Dead Boys. I was the long-haired guy who looked like a Southern rocker or something. At the time, I was playing dobro and slide guitar. I was finding it really boring and old-fashioned to play guitar music. Someone turned me on to Gary Numan and Peter Gabriel's second solo

album. I also had discovered David Bowie's *Heroes* and it started to feel like there was something else going on that was a little more melancholic than the music I grew up with. That's what led me into electronic stuff. The melancholic element is a very un-American thing to me in some ways. It's almost a classical element that's dictated by culture or geography. For example, it rains a lot in England and Germany is a place with a very different historical weight than America. We're adolescent in America. This gets almost political because Americans just want our leisure time and casual lifestyles. But Germans are still dealing with their history and it's uncomfortable for them. That's why California looks so beautiful over in Europe. It looks like Californians don't care about that "weight of the world" shit. But it's those ideas that give European bands a certain tone that I missed in America. You still hear some of those influences in my music. It's close to blues shit for me. The sensibility is different from my R&B-ish roots. I'm not from the 1930s. I don't need new traditional music that sounds like old music. I'd rather hear the old records. I can't just craftily engage in some nostalgic endeavor and actually be expressing myself honestly.

Was your solo acoustic cover of Kraftwerk's "The Model" on Dirt Floor a way to bridge those earlier days with your current direction?

The truth is, so much synth-pop is actually based on blues-rock chords, but because of the way the songs are produced, they give you a different feeling than if they were written on guitar or piano. I also liked the song because it's about glamour and the victimization of intimate longings by mass-mediated culture. I thought the coldness of the music was so perfectly lonely for the song. One day, it popped into my head that something like a banjo could work for the song because it's such a lonely, primitive instrument. It was my American response to that cold melancholy that's very beautiful and houses this human longing. On the other hand, you can say that Kraftwerk has a real emotional element in its music that's really

striking too. It's a cold, simple, deep thing. I wasn't trying to be ironic by doing it on a dorky instrument. It's not like I said "Hey! I'll do it on a banjo! Let's see what the world thinks about that!" It was me wanting people to get into the song. I suppose it was also a little tongue-in-cheek to say "It'll work this way too." During an interview, Kraftwerk said they were flattered that I did "The Model" on banjo. It meant something to me to know they were into my version.

Your dad was an art director and your mom was a sculptor. Tell me how that influenced your artistic bent.

My parents were married very young in Texas and my mom had me when she was 18. They grew up on race radio, so instead of being into Elvis and the Everly Brothers, they were into Ray Charles and Muddy Waters. They were young and it seemed rebellious to listen to that stuff. Then the '60s happened and suddenly all of the bands were listening to Ray Charles and Muddy Waters while they were getting stoned. At the time, my parents were hanging out with a lot of young hippie kids who would come over and play James Taylor and John Lennon records. A lot of my parents' values were derived from art and design. That sensibility came out of the era and its values. But I didn't like the art galleries, looking at art books or reading the essays. But on a certain level, I think being around all of that gave me a longing for visual expression. I think it came out in me through words, imagery and atmospheres. For instance, I had a pretty clear landscape in my head when I made *Living with the Law*. So, I think I benefited from their experiences through those sorts of visual references and also from growing up in a vital time that asked a lot of important questions in an environment supportive of that questioning.

Does spirituality play a role in your music?

It does, but spirituality is a weird word because it can come off so

superficially. I wasn't baptized. I didn't grow up with church. I didn't know anything about any religions, really, but I grew up with my own guilt trips and shit that come out of my country's culture. The desire to travel, the longing for somewhere called home, alienation, and all of those clichés are things that touch on the spiritual. They're all part of the dichotomies of human beings. Spirituality can be about the beautiful and ugly—the concordance of opposite things. It relates to what we feel and what we have to do. I do think there's a deep feeling in me but I don't know how to articulate that in an obvious, formal or narrative way. There's a kind of beauty and challenge in that. It goes back to the idea of dark and light we talked about earlier. It's a balance between the physical and instinct and intuition. I feel like a kind of Native American Taoist or something. I do think the primitive religions like what the Ancient Chinese and Native Americans practiced are related, particularly because the Native Americans initially got into this continent from Asia.

To me, spirituality really means motivation that goes beyond your thoughts, but is something that can inform your thoughts. The degree to which we push spirituality out of our lives is the degree to which we almost create cancer for ourselves. There are a lot of modern diseases that seem to represent voids that aren't being met by ritualistic spiritual expression. Spirituality doesn't have to have rules or names. People who are seriously religious would call this being ambivalent, lazy and apathetic. But I think spirituality is something more serious than anything that can be classified, especially by religions defined by men. Also, spirituality and religion aren't necessarily the same thing. Spirituality can be expressed in the way someone builds a house. In Italy, an ornate doorknob can look like something someone expressed their spirit through, because it represented a creative approach to a simple device. That's the sort of thing spirituality is about. It's not about a specialized thing you do once a week. It's how you value life. It's about keeping both feet on the ground, but your head in the sky.

September 2004



VICTOR WOOTEN

PERSISTENCE AND EQUALITY

SINCE THE DAWN OF VICTOR WOOTEN'S CAREER, the bassist and composer has made a point of infusing his work with ideas encompassing peace, equality and respect. Those leanings color his lyrics, as well as the multi-genre, multicultural influences represented in his instrumentation. His six solo albums take a hybrid approach featuring remarkably fluid combinations of jazz, funk, soul, hip-hop, and world music.

At the center of Wooten's output is his distinctive electric bass style that's made him one of the most riveting and sought-after players to ever pick up the instrument. His combination of techniques including double-thumbing, open-hammer-pluck and two-handed tapping enable him to perform solo on his bass with impressive flexibility and melodicism, as well as create jaw-dropping pyrotechnics. His first solo album, 1996's *A Show of Hands*, showcases all of those elements. The disc is almost entirely bass-focused, with vocal accompaniment. And while it features chops galore, they exist in service of a cohesive set of memorable and carefully-architected tunes. His next five CDs, leading up to 2008's *Palmystery*, built on that foundation and saw him layering additional instrumentation, heightening production standards and exploring more adventurous subject matter.

He's also well-known for his role as a founding member of Béla Fleck & The Flecktones. As with his own output, the banjo-driven group specializes in fearlessly blurring genres. The world fusion act, also comprised of Fleck on banjo, Roy "Future Man" Wooten on percussion

and Jeff Coffin on saxophone, is enormously popular worldwide. And with multiple Grammy awards and significant record sales, The Flecktones have proven that creative, largely instrumental music still has mainstream possibilities.

Wooten credits the influence of his musically accomplished brothers for establishing a direction that led him towards the major success he enjoys. His guitarist brother Regi encouraged him to begin playing bass at age three, and the youngster began performing with the Wooten Brothers Band at age five. The group, also featuring Rudy on saxophone, Joseph on keyboards and Roy on percussion, went on to release a funk and soul-infused self-titled pop album in 1985, prior to Wooten pursuing his own path in the late '80s.

His brothers also introduced him to the music of legendary artists such as Chick Corea, Stanley Clarke and Marcus Miller—people he went on to work with himself. In 2007, Wooten toured as a member of Corea's Elektric Band, and in 2008 served as one-third of S.M.V., a trio featuring Clarke and Miller. S.M.V. represented a fusion dream team with three generations of acclaimed bass virtuosos in one line-up. The group delivered a high-energy tour de force in concert and on its 2008 release *Thunder* that fulfilled the lofty expectations the collaboration inspired.

Even with all the fame, accolades and opportunities afforded him, Wooten's feet remain firmly on the ground. He captured his philosophies in 2006's *The Music Lesson: A Spiritual Search for Growth Through Music*, his first book. It crystallizes his core tenets of exploring the outer reaches of creativity by harnessing the muse in a purposeful and meaningful way. He also shares his perspectives at his Bass/Nature Camp, located at his Wooten Woods Retreat in Nashville, Tennessee. Several times a year, musicians from across the world gather together with Wooten and other bass all-stars to make the connection between inspiration, imagination and the outdoors.

Describe your evolution as a writer from A Show of Hands to Palmystery.

Writing is like most things in life. The more you do it, the better you get at it. These days, the writing is better, but the production is a lot better. I recently went back and listened to all of my earlier records and was surprised and amazed at how clever some of the writing was. The writing is just as good today but totally different. Getting exposed to so much music by playing with so many diverse artists from across the world over the years with Béla has really expanded my language. It's really given me a lot of new ideas. Working with Howard Levy, our harmonica player during the first years of The Flecktones, also really influenced me. He's the guy that introduced us to Bulgarian and Indian music, as well as odd time signatures. Jeff Coffin's deep jazz background also brought a whole different side to the band which I've learned from too. It's been an ongoing musical education and you hear it in more recent tunes like "Stay" from my 2005 album *Soul Circus*. It's funky and very reminiscent of my roots, but the song is also in 11/8 and has Indian percussion on it. I wouldn't have done that on *A Show of Hands*.

How do you look back at A Show of Hands?

That album was designed to prove that I could make a solo bass record that was listenable—one people could sit down and enjoy for 30-40 minutes. A lot of that music was written quite a few years before it came out in 1996. Some things even went back to the '80s, including "Classical Thump" and "Overjoyed." I really did that record for myself. I wanted to make an album that to my knowledge, no-one had ever done before. Believe it or not, I've never focused on the virtuosic side of the playing, even on the first CD. It's just that in order for it to be a complete solo statement with no overdubbing, I had to be virtuosic. My ideal situation is to always focus on songs and exploring ideas, not virtuoso stuff.

When I grew up and played in a band with my brothers, my role was being a supportive bass player, but my brothers also encouraged me to learn how to solo and gave me lots of chances to do so. It wasn't until The

Flecktones that I began soloing on almost every song. As a result, I became known for that technical virtuoso side of things. The way I look at it is, I have those abilities in my repertoire, but it's not my main focus. That's why since my first album, I've made a conscious effort to make each record different. I don't want people to know what's coming next. I also try to make sure there's something on each record for kids, grown-ups, musicians, and even people who don't like jazz. In addition, I include things that could be played on radio, even though I don't expect them to be. The idea is that the records are balanced. The main thing I did production-wise after the first CD is add more instruments. The first record was strictly bass with a little bit of vocals. The second, *What Did He Say?*, was mostly bass, but I added drums and a lot of overdubbed bass tracks. By the third record, *Yin-Yang*, I brought in horns, keyboards and guitars, and it grew from there.

I understand you feel the best music writes itself.

I do. Music in a sense is already written and it's up to musicians to find the place where it resides. That goes beyond music because *all* of our ideas are out there somewhere and human beings have to bring them into existence. In terms of music, there are no new notes being invented. It's about how we put 12 notes together. The good thing is the combinations are infinite.

How do you go about finding those ideas?

I pretty much always keep a recorder of some sort with me so I can sing and capture ideas that may pop into my head. New ideas usually also happen during soundcheck when I'm out with The Flecktones or my own band, because that's when I'm usually in music mode. Usually, when I'm off the road, I'm not in music mode because I like too many other things. I've got a family, so when I'm home, I'm not playing. I'm hanging out with the kids and my wife. When I do get into music mode, I've found that

I can open my mind and go to that place where I can find the ideas I need. Sometimes I just have to touch my bass or another instrument like a piano. I'm not really a piano player, but I can sit down at our piano and ideas will start flowing. But ideas can also happen anytime, like when I'm driving or at someone else's show. In fact, I get a ton of ideas when I see other people play.

When I start writing, one of the things I keep in mind is that I have to get to that "finished place" which actually exists when I first start. It was already there, but I wasn't. So writing is a journey to get to that place. We call it creation. In my mind, the song is already done. I trust that the song is already complete and that I can get there. It's the same thing as when you start talking—you trust the words are going to come out because you have the vocabulary and you keep your mind focused on the idea you're trying to express. Most of the time, my songs are doing just that—expressing an idea. I allow the notes and chords to show up the same way the words do. Most of the time it works, but every once in a while I have to stop and focus in a little more to figure out what needs to happen next.

You believe in treating music as an entity in and of itself—one you can speak to and interact with. Describe how that works for you.

I've only felt comfortable talking about this in recent times because it sounds kind of crazy. [laughs] I literally ask music questions. Say I have to come up with a bassline. Instead of me saying "Okay, I have to figure out what to play," in my head, I'll ask the music "What should I play? What do you want to hear? How do you want to be expressed?" A lot of us have spent our whole lives learning how to play music, but what if you allow the music to play you? It's just a thought and it's one that allows me to experience being in the zone as much as possible.

Think about any relationship. If you're always the one in control in that relationship and directing everything, it never works out. The same goes for music. The best relationships are the ones that are about equality. For

me, this is all about attuning myself to a certain place, opening my mind and being receptive. The ideas end up coming more easily when I do that. Another related idea is that in some other countries, they say you have to be inducted into the world of music and that music has to invite you in. Those cultures also believe not everyone that wants to be a musician is allowed in. It goes back to music as a calling. Some people say it's a calling because it sounds cool, but haven't thought deeply about what they're saying. What if those people really allowed the music to call out to them? They might be surprised where it leads them.

Another one of your key mantras is "What you don't play is as important as what you do play."

Absolutely. What I'm talking about is space, rest and not playing when you don't have to. In my book *The Music Lesson*, a character says "Music is a lot like life. You have to have some rest in there. You have to sleep. If you don't sleep enough, your body starts to break down." Music does the same thing without proper rest or space in it. Good speakers know how to use space and dynamics. They understand it's a very important tool to grab people. It's very important to understand how to manipulate notes, modes and scales, but you can do the same with space. That's something a lot of people don't do. Master musicians like Miles Davis always understood space. When you understand space, you know you don't need as many notes and that you can play slower, yet people will still listen. It's the same situation if your mind, your house or your pockets are cluttered. Things have to be emptied out and spaced out. Notes and music are exactly the same.

What are some of the first experiences in your life that made you consider the endless possibilities music could offer you?

There are a couple of things that first made me think deeply about that back in the early '70s when I was in second grade. When I started

listening to James Brown, I realized his main thing was based upon the groove. His thing was not melody. If you think about “Sex Machine” and say “Okay, sing the melody,” you’ll go “Wait a minute, there is no melody!” There’s a groove with James improvising on top of it. And I realized “Wow, you can do an endless amount of things even within just one groove.” He could carry a song for eight minutes like that and you never got tired of it. Curtis Mayfield is someone else I heard early on that really changed how I thought. He plays very soft and sings in a high falsetto. He’s not powerful in the James Brown sense, but the intensity is there. His soft intensity helped me see the endless possibility of dynamics in that softness can be very powerful. He did so much with dynamics without hitting you over the head all of the time. That was the way I did things before Curtis—I played loud and fast. I understood it doesn’t have to be that way and that was an amazing realization. I have to thank my brothers and parents for pointing these things out. They helped me understand there is so much more to consider about music than just a bunch of notes.

In many of your recordings and gigs, you work with one or more of your brothers. Describe the importance of having that connection.

Your family helps you build the foundation of your life, including your character. I like to say I had six parents—my mom and dad, and my four brothers. They taught me everything about music. We weren’t the kind of brothers that fought. We were literally a band and to be able to continue to play with them brings me back to that comfort zone. It’s really easy to play with my brother Roy in The Flecktones, no matter what instrument he’s playing. There aren’t a whole lot of bassists that would have an easy time playing with him on his Drumitar (a MIDI-based percussion instrument shaped like a guitar). You don’t know what to look for. You can’t see the big hits coming, but because he’s my brother, we can do it because we understand each other so well. When I do my own tours, I bring at least two of my brothers, including Regi on

guitar and Joseph on keyboards. I know if I have them, we barely have to rehearse. We have a long-term repertoire and relationship. It's just like sitting down to talk with people. You already know what you're going to say to each other. You don't have to practice. It's really easy and makes me feel at home.

Given all the accolades you receive, does knowing your brothers will always be straight up with you help keep you grounded?

Yeah. If I'm not playing my best, I can always get a straight answer from them. They're not going to give me what my brother Roy calls "the Elvis Treatment." Even if I have a horrible night, sometimes audience members will come up to me after the show to tell me how great I was. That's a challenge because in my own mind I know I wasn't great. But with my brothers, and close friends like Béla around, I know I'll hear the reality of the situation. I count my crew in that equation too. So, in addition to being surrounded by my actual brothers, I have these other brothers who help fulfill that role too. It's a good place to be.

You're a very spiritual person, yet you dislike the idea of framing that within any sort of religious context. What does spirituality mean to you and how does it inform your life as a musician?

Spirituality is everything to me because everything is spiritual, whether you use that word or not. A song is spiritual because it comes from an idea. Where does the idea come from? Can you see the music? Where does it live? Think about when you see a picture in your mind. Where is that picture located? That's spiritual. How does an acorn turn into a tree? Explain that. That's spiritual. I can turn on a radio and suddenly there's music coming out of a box. That's spiritual. So, to me, all things are spiritual. The spirituality part comes in when you can talk about all this sort of stuff without having to sound too religious. I don't have to

subscribe to any one religion to be able to talk about life in this way. I don't care what religion you call it or what name you give it. It's all the same thing. The safer term is to call it spirituality. For me, it's even safer to just call it music. When you do that, nobody argues or gets too upset.

"I Saw God" from Palmystery takes those ideas even further. Tell me what you wanted to say with the song.

That song expresses how I feel about life and religion. The main thing I wanted to do was portray God as a male and a female. The song was designed to have people question their beliefs, because with religion, people try to keep things the same. It's not allowed to change. It's supposed to be the way it was a thousand years ago even though everything else changes. And that's a pretty good example of what death is—when things stop changing. So, in my opinion, religion has to change with the times. We need to question, rethink and revisit our beliefs and I wanted a song that would cause people to do that. The idea of God being a man or woman isn't a new idea. It just makes sense. The song also talks about God looking like you or me. The Bible says we're made in the image of God, so why won't God appear as you or me, as well as people of different races? All of that feels right to me and the song has communicated to a lot of people. I've been invited to speak in churches, and even at a pastors' conference since it came out. I'm really happy that people have been so open to a song like this.

What did it mean to you to be part of the S.M.V. album and tour?

It was a dream come true. It was an idea I brought up with Stanley and Marcus about six years ago. Everyone was too busy, but it remained in the back of everyone's mind. We all played together at a *Bass Player* magazine event in 2006 and it was the spark that made us realize it was time to do it. Stanley was my biggest bass hero growing up as a kid. I

had others like Marcus and Larry Graham, but Stanley was the main guy. I first met him when I was nine years old backstage at a Return to Forever show. He was really friendly and encouraging even then. When The Flecktones started hitting, he came to see us play in Canada and we developed a relationship. To be part of a band with him is really amazing and everything has come full circle. I now own a couple of his basses, including the one he recorded "School Days" on. In a sense, I'm carrying on the tradition of Stanley Clarke with my own work because he's a big part of my musical upbringing.

What was the key to making this line-up work, musically speaking?

Equality. We all got to participate equally while making *Thunder*. We have great conversations and stories to tell each other in words and in music. So we made a point of making the record balanced between the three of us in terms of tunes, as well as ensuring different types of songs and ideas were represented. We didn't want to make a bass record with a bunch of flashy playing. It had to be musically good and include other instruments. We talked about that, went away to write a couple of songs each and brought them back to the group to see where we could go with them. I ensured my songs weren't totally finished too. I left the melody for Marcus and Stanley to write so the songs would sound like collaborations, rather than solo tunes. When I recorded my demos, I would try to sound like Stanley or Marcus. It was a lot of fun writing with those guys in mind.

What did you learn about yourself during the process?

The main thing I learned, and it may sound a little egotistical, but I don't mean it that way, is that I had to approach this project as their equal. They are my elder brothers, but it wouldn't have helped me to go into S.M.V. thinking "Okay, I'm just going to sit back and let them tell me what to do." The record wouldn't be as good if I had done that. I have a lot to

offer and although there were times when I sat back and listened to them, there were also times when I had to step up and say “Let’s try this here.” It was valuable for me to realize “Wow, okay, I have something to offer my heroes like Stanley and Marcus.” It was also good to know that after all these years, I can still get nervous and be awestruck. It was a wonderful feeling to know that I’m not too jaded for that to happen.

Your solo career has evolved into a significant, self-sustaining entity. Tell me how you went about building an audience outside of The Flecktones.

Through persistence. A lot of artists don’t realize they need a lot of that when they go out on their first few tours. I didn’t either because I was making a certain guarantee money-wise with The Flecktones and assumed if I had my own band that I could make close to the same thing. That wasn’t the case. If you don’t have a track record, promoters don’t want to risk their money. So, on my first solo gig with my drummer J.D. Blair in 1997, we made \$75. I was shocked. The tour ended up going well musically, but monetarily, there was hardly anything. However, the promoters saw the potential and they brought us back and more people would come out. I was also getting more popular with The Flecktones and that helped my solo thing, so every year and every tour it would keep growing just through persistence. Me and J.D. were just getting in my car and driving around. It was all I could afford, and I couldn’t really even afford to do that. Trying to convince anybody to book a bass player and a drummer was really hard, but we got to open shows for other people, and it kept evolving. The one thing about the jazz-type music we do is you have to keep doing it. You have to get out there and get people to notice, including the promoters. Also, we jazz players don’t make much money from record sales, but when we tour, the money we make is ours. That’s another reason why we’re always out there.

Tell me about your approach as a bandleader.

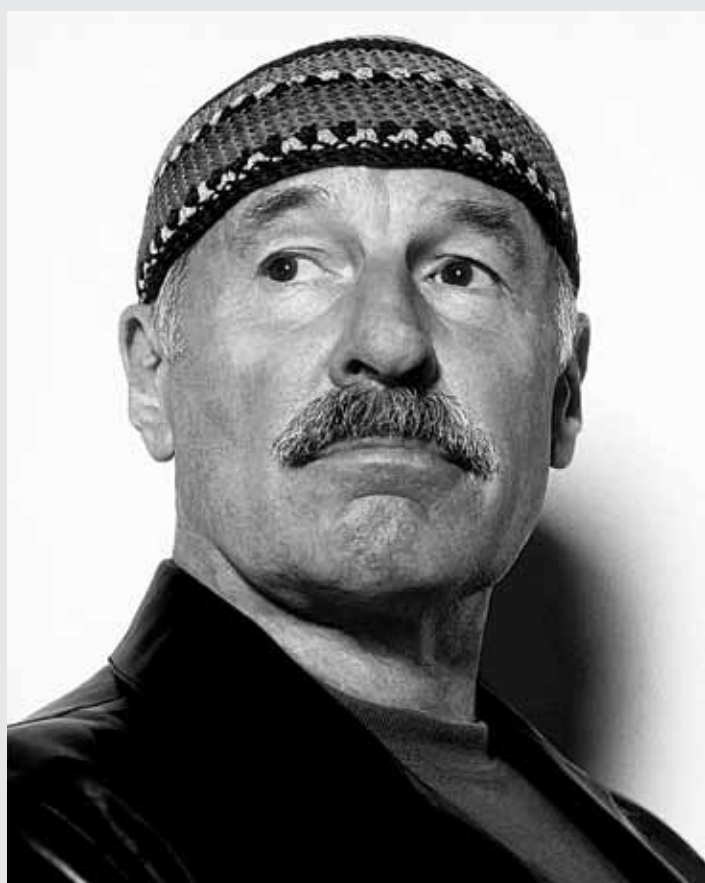
Let's use those first tours as an example. You may have to sacrifice and not make any money. Your band might make more money than you, but if you're a solo artist, your band is working to promote you. So they should make good money when your name is on the marquee. When the audience goes home, they're going to remember that marquee name. So, treat your band as equals. Make them feel good and honored for helping you out. I also don't want them to feel like they have to do what I tell them to do. In fact, they sometimes get to tell me how they think something should sound or what song we should play next. If it's not on the set list, I tell them to call it out. We'll know after we've done it if it was a good idea or not. I want to make sure there is a collective creative spirit. I want people to feel equal offstage too. I'm totally open about everything, even the books. If you want to see how much the tour is making or how we split up the money, you can. I also don't stay in a suite while the band stays elsewhere. We all stay in the same type of room. We travel together too. I don't fly first class while they fly in coach. In addition, everybody gets a big spot to do their thing in the show. I got a lot of this from Béla who's been a great role model for me as a bandleader. He really stresses equality whenever we work together as well.

You're passionate about your anti-racist perspectives. What did the election of Barack Obama in 2008 mean to you?

Man, it means a lot. I get to travel the world a lot and it was very interesting to see how everyone outside America was very happy about Barack representing hope, whereas the only place I saw hatred-type remarks was here at home. As Barack got closer to the presidency, those racist remarks were showing up in the media, but the cool thing is they didn't get in the way of him winning. It also meant a lot to me because of what my Mom went through. My dad isn't around anymore, but my mom got to see this man elected president. She never thought she would see that in her lifetime, and I didn't know that I would see it in mine either.

When she was pregnant with my oldest brother, she had to get up and give her seat up on a bus so a white man could sit down. So this presidency means lots of change, but there is still a lot of change that has to come. However, it has given hope to a lot of people of different races. Also, I have four kids between the ages of four and 11. The first election they're aware of is the one in which we elected a black president. So what my generation and the generation before them struggled for is unnatural to them. I still want them to understand what it took to get here, but they're growing up thinking "A black president? What's the big deal?" That is truly an amazing and wonderful thing.

January 2009



JOE ZAWINUL

MAN OF THE PEOPLE

TECHNOLOGY PUNDITS TELL US we live in a wired world that enables people to bridge continents with the click of a mouse or remote control. But some critics believe the world is experiencing unprecedented levels of fragmentation across social, cultural and political lines. Are the tribes of the world pulling further apart or coming closer together?

Joe Zawinul advocated the latter answer. It's a viewpoint the pioneering keyboardist—who helped establish electric piano and synthesizers in the popular music pantheon—expounded on in his 1996 release *My People*. The upbeat and spirited disc seamlessly weaves together world music, jazz and rock elements to make its point. The album features a cast of 32 musicians from across the planet, including Salif Keita, Burhan Öçal, Alex Acuña, and Trilok Gurtu.

Bridging cultures and influences is something Zawinul did throughout his career. During the '60s, he worked with jazz luminaries such as Dinah Washington, Ben Webster and Cannonball Adderley. Landmark collaborations with Miles Davis followed on the trumpeter's 1969 releases *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*. The discs helped spark the jazz-rock movement and established Zawinul as a composer and visionary to be reckoned with. From 1970 to 1986, he co-led Weather Report with saxophonist Wayne Shorter. The forward-looking fusion band incorporated world music rhythms and structures into its sound throughout its reign as one of the most celebrated jazz acts of all time.

Perhaps the greatest realization of Zawinul's global musical perspective

was via The Zawinul Syndicate, the post-Weather Report group he led from 1988 until his death in 2007 from skin cancer. The band's ever-shifting roster featured top-flight players from the four corners of the earth. Together, they forged a highly individual world fusion sound that was both complex and accessible, with the deepest grooves imaginable. The group's last line-up, featuring drummer Paco Sery, bassist Linley Marthe, vocalist Sabine Kabongo, guitarist Alegre Corrêa, and percussionist Jorge Bezerra, was among its most potent. A fiery performance was released on *75*, a posthumous album that captured the band performing on Zawinul's 75th birthday in Lugano, Switzerland, two months before he passed away.

Several Zawinul Syndicate alumni were featured on *My People*, as well as *Stories of the Danube*, a large-scale symphonic project also released in 1996. Recorded with the Czech State Philharmonic Orchestra, the album explored the Austrian-born musician's Hungarian, Czech and Sinti roots. The disc is an aural journey through the historical drama and trauma associated with the Danube River and the numerous countries it streams through. It also serves as a poignant reflection on the many struggles Zawinul faced during a childhood shadowed by World War II. It's an ambitious effort that further underscored his lifelong commitment to using music as an expansive storytelling vehicle.

Describe the message you wrote My People to convey.

It's more philosophy than music. There's a real communication within all of us and so many people deny their own thing. I always believed in the fact that the world is one thing. Even when I was a kid during wartime, I always believed in the humanity of the people of the world. I'm talking about all kinds of people. I grew up with that idea of many tribes. I believe that all people are great in every nation. I've been all over the world and I consider all of these people to be my people.

I heard an interview on CBC Radio in Canada with Duke Ellington and he talked about the idea of "my people" and I thought he made the same

statement I've been making throughout my entire life. Duke is really one of my favorites. He made a great impact on my life. So I said to myself, "that's what I want to express" and I decided one day to make a record about that. Therefore, I have many people from many tribes singing on the record. My favorite instrument is the voice when it's used right, but it can be the absolute worst when it's not. In every culture, there are a handful of really outstanding storytellers. That's what it is all about—music is nothing else. Music is not a bunch of notes and chords. Music is storytelling.

How did the pieces on My People come together?

My people are *the* people. They're everywhere on the planet. My people are not just Austrians or white people. It seems to me that when anybody talks about "my people" it's about people who are of their race or nationality. I wish most people could get away from this concept so we can look at ourselves as all being from out of one pot. It was something I wanted to say for a long time. So, the pieces were very easy to put together when I explained the concept to the other musicians. By the time I had the pieces together, I was trying to find the best people to interpret them—especially the piece called "Bimoya." I wrote that seven years ago as an instrumental and then I realized I wanted Salif Keita to sing it. Salif and I are good friends. I took the tapes to Paris and recorded Salif and then I went to Switzerland to work with Burhan Öçal. Then I went to Austria and recorded the yodelers. I used to live in Malibu before moving to New York. While I was in Malibu, I recorded friends like Alex Acuña. That's the way I got it all together.

Is it ever a challenge to make so many world musics fit together?

No. I've been doing this all my life, man. I played the accordion when I was a kid and I took a similar approach. There's no big difference. But it took a long time for people to understand what I've been responsible for.

You know hip-hop? I invented the beat of hip-hop! In 1970, I invented it and no drummer could play it. I did an album with Weather Report called *Sweetnighter* that has a track called “125th Street Congress.” It has the original hip-hop beat. I have about 50 recordings of rap and hip-hop groups using a sample of the original song. Many things I did in the ‘60s—I’m not complaining about it, but since we’re talking about it, I might as well tell you—a lot of other people got credit for, which is fine with me. But it’s a fact that I did this stuff so many years ago. What is called world music today—I started the damn thing!

African music is not world music. It’s a phenomenal music in its own right, but it is indigenous. I worked with Salif Keita on his record called *Amen* in 1991 and it’s a masterpiece. It was voted in France as best world music record of all time. I produced and I wrote all the arrangements and orchestrations and composed for it too. The arrangements are very intricate. I’m not trying to put myself in a special spot, but it was so natural for me to play with Salif. Then I found out he grew up with Weather Report’s *Black Market*. The young African musicians like Youssou N’Dour, Salif and all the West African masters, they all grew up with Weather Report music. In fact, in West Africa they didn’t have the CDs or records, they just had some pirate tapes. So, they only knew my name and thought because it was Zawinul that it was a Zulu band.

Stories of the Danube is your first orchestral recording. Why did you choose to make one at this point in your career?

It had nothing to do with me. It is tremendously expensive to make a project like this. It costs a lot of money. There are very few composers that can say they’ve been recorded with a symphony in their lifetime—that’s because of the expense. I was fortunate to meet Karl Gerbel, the man responsible for the record. He was the director of the Brucknerhaus in Linz, Austria. He’s a wonderful guy and had access to wonderful facilities. He gave me the commission to write a symphony several years

ago. I was there to play a couple of times with my band and my agent in Vienna spoke with him quite often and suggested it was a good idea to do something with the symphony. He jumped at the idea. When you get a commission, they have to have money—not only for the recording, but just to get the piece written too, because I had to lay off from other things for a few months, although I improvised the whole thing in three days and then I orchestrated it. Everything I've ever written is improvised.

There are a couple of pieces in there from a few years ago—like I said, things have to fit. What is called “Gypsy” on the album used to be called “Doctor Honoris Causa” from my 1971 album *Zawinul*. I wrote it in 1966, and I wrote the last movement suite a long time ago too—it's also on *My People* as “Orient Express.” So, I use things because I want to tell a story. It doesn't matter when I wrote it. It's all good because it's not doctored together—it's a natural thing and it lasts long. That's why Weather Report has lasted longer than anyone else from its era. Also, improvisation itself is much more lasting. Improvisation doesn't come from the brain—it's pre-brain. It's much quicker and that's one talent I must admit I do have—I can improvise a long piece and it fits together.

Compare your work with Zawinul Syndicate to Weather Report's output.

I'm still the same person and I'm a better musician now. It's a different situation, really. I didn't have a guitar player with Weather Report and now we do. I had a sax then and now we don't. There is an interpretive difference perhaps, but the music is still mine and a lot of the things you hear me do today, I wrote then. I wrote a lot of the music I play today back then. I'm making new music almost every day when I'm not on the road. Over the years, I have written perhaps 5,000 pieces of music of different lengths. I like having a concept for records so the pieces fit together. That's what I did on *My People* too—I needed something little to finish the album with and found this piece called “Many Churches.” I don't know when I wrote it. I wanted to record it with a choir first, but I

didn't have the finances and time, so I did it as an instrumental. For me, a record is a statement—a storytelling experience—and it's gotta fit together somewhat. I like there to be a line through the whole album and in that way, *My People* is very successful.

Critics, music historians and fans alike point to Weather Report as a band that truly changed the face of music. What's your assessment?

We started playing using electronic instruments in a way they had never been used. It's just fine music played with different instruments. Also, the compositional quality of Wayne Shorter and myself, frankly speaking, is unique. The way we put together quartets and quintets—there was nothing missing. Weather Report sounds as fresh today as it did then. We always had great musicians and I still do. I've always had great musicians. They're the only ones who can even approach this music. I'd never have a guy play bebop in my band—it would not fit. I don't play bebop, I play another type of music. Dizzy Gillespie once called me to say “Man, I just heard one of your records. That's music, man.” That really made me feel good because we had some funny backlash from people who said we were selling out because we were using electronic instruments. It's such idiocy. It's ridiculous that someone could place that much importance on the instrument to be that great. An instrument is not important. It is the way one plays that is important. Instruments don't play by themselves. A piano is certainly not a better instrument than a synthesizer, but if a synthesizer is played like a piano, it becomes a very bad instrument. It doesn't work. You can't play a trumpet like a violin—it doesn't go. That's the problem—the players, not the instrument. Any instrument is a wonderful thing.

Describe the circumstances that led to Weather Report disbanding in 1986.

Our contract ran out—that was number one. Also, the name Weather

Report suffocated me and Wayne. Weather Report was more well-known than we were. Weather Report toured and did a record every year and there was no time for me to do anything else. I had offers to play classical music and other things and they are experiences one has to have. When I grew up, I had very little time to play classical pieces and I had the opportunity to do so with a friend of mine from Vienna named Friedrich Gulda. He's the greatest Mozart interpreter of the century and he invited me to play with him at his concerts. It was a very good thing to try out, but I'm not a Mozart player. I don't really like Mozart. To me, it doesn't mean anything. But I do like Brahms and we decided we'd play the "Haydn Variations" for two pianos—the best piece ever written for a piano duo. It's very difficult to play and it was a challenge for me and that's what I did right after Weather Report.

If you asked Wayne, he'd tell you the load of the work was on my shoulders. During the band, he worked with Milton Nascimento and Joni Mitchell—he had that freedom more than I did. I didn't really have time to do the little projects I wanted to. It got tiresome, although the band was always a wonderful band. It was a great partnership for 16 years and Wayne did work too, but the main load was dropped in my lap and I wanted to get away from this and he also wanted to get away. There was a great opportunity to do so. You play 16 years together and what do you want in life, you know? [laughs] With a great musician like Wayne, it was fantastic and we're still great friends today, but it was time. I'm very happy that we did it.

I understand you believe America is in cultural decline because there are far fewer storytellers than there used to be.

Everything is in decline the moment you stop giving the artist freedom. That goes for everywhere, but it is happening in America right now. I think record companies are at great fault. In general, they don't want to develop talent, but rather get the most out of them in the short term. They're

steering people to do things they perhaps wouldn't do but have to do and not everyone has the integrity to say "No way." People are hungry and they have to make money and take care of their families, so it's a great pressure. Only when you can afford it from an artistic or financial point of view can you express what you want to express. Before I made *My People* for an independent label, I was with Sony for a long time and then there was interest from Verve Records over at Polygram. They told me at the first meeting I had with them—and it was the only meeting I had with them—that they wanted me to sign up but only to play acoustic piano on the first record and only Duke Ellington's music. I got up and left.

Despite you being a big Ellington fan?

I'm *the* Duke Ellington fan, but that had nothing to do with it. They were telling me what to do and not only that, it was a question of "What is in it for me to play Duke Ellington's music?" I'm a composer. I like my music and I like it as much as I like Duke Ellington's music. Duke is one of the greatest musicians who ever lived, but everybody is an individual and it has nothing to do with being better or not as good. It's about the storyline—what you have to tell. And in that respect, I like my music just as much. It sounds very different, but in principle it's still the same.

So where have the individuals—the storytellers—gone?

They are many storytellers, but they're hidden somewhere. In the old days, that's all you had. You didn't have these phenomenal music schools which are everywhere today. That was not so good because the people didn't play their instruments as well as they do today. That was the way times were. If you didn't have a sound of your own, you couldn't make it. All the guys I used to play with when I came to America—each one was a different individual. They had different sounds and different ways of playing and that's what made the business go around. But today, jazz has

become very boring. And when I talk about jazz music, I'm talking about who everyone talks about when they talk about jazz.

Wynton Marsalis is often invoked as epitomizing jazz for the mainstream these days.

To me, this is very boring music—most of it. It has nothing happening. Nothing is sticking. They're playing music perfectly with wonderful intonation and technique, but it's dangerous for jazz itself. I do wish these people all the best. I'm happy that it goes like that in a way because we used to live like rats when I didn't make any money. We used to have to play every night and drive everywhere. We didn't have the accommodations available today. It was a difficult time, believe me. We all had families to support. I very much respect Wynton as a noble guy who is doing a lot for keeping the great names alive, but the music comes up short. Those little upstarts—that age group, it's not happening. When I listen to old Cannonball, Horace Silver, Blue Mitchell, Art Blakey, and Miles stuff, it's way, way, way superior. It's in another league—the fire, the excitement. But that doesn't mean the new guys don't have it, they've just been geared to do the same stuff. I was able to afford to say no, but how many people can say no to a major league contract? Wynton has enough power to do what he wants to do, but it's just not my cup of tea.

I just don't like stuff that's warmed up. It's not bebop what these new guys are playing. Jazz music is a lifestyle. It's not notes, chords and arpeggios. Today's improvisation is too based on the knowledge of chords and the way they practice the chords. It's not a melodic thing anymore like the older days. It was much more important to play shorter and to play more variable, valid stuff. Today, a lot of solos are long and uninteresting and the influence usually comes from John Coltrane's group. He himself was a master musician, but he put so much emphasis on chord knowledge and technique, and now the kids want to show how fast they can play. This is the same with piano players and most instrumentalists—it's speed.

That's gonna change again and hopefully the kids who are now 16 and 17 years old have a little more sense and maybe some more stories to tell. The other kids from the other generation came right out of school and immediately got a record contract. Do you know how difficult it used to be to get a record contract in the olden days? It was almost impossible. And then if you did, the record distribution was so tiny and small. It was very difficult.

If I was coming up now, I don't think I'd enjoy going in their direction musically. But it's not their fault and it's not criticism because it's not just music. Everything happens like that. It's a spiral going down. In the arts, music and movies, everything is now geared to a specific audience—the young people, who in general listen to music. And it's not music anymore. Rock and roll was a great movement and very important to all of our lives. It made it possible for jazz musicians to get a piece of the rock. It was a great change and cultural movement, but the way it's developed has become more and more ugly. The way songs are being performed today compared to the old days—now, you don't understand the words and they have so many embellishments and very little substance. I hope I don't sound like I have sour grapes. I'm a very happy person. But if you ask me, I'll tell you what I think and it's just not happening for me.

Describe your transition from straight-ahead jazz to the much more expansive approach you brought to the form in the '60s.

I was tired of the standard form of jazz—you know, the A-A-B-B and the changes. I was fed up with that. Sax, trumpet, bass solo, then drums, and back to the melody—that bored the shit out of me after years of doing it. That's when I started changing my music and totally opened it up with a lot of great musicians. Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie came to my house one Saturday morning and Monk heard one of my tunes and said “Man, what are you doing? I really like that! You're the only one doing different things.” And like I mentioned earlier, one time, Dizzy called me

on Thanksgiving in Oklahoma and said “Man, this is the way music should be”—this was a few years before he died. I knew I was on the right track and Wayne Shorter and me, we understood each other since we first met in 1959. I met him not long after I arrived in the States and we decided one day that we were gonna work together and have a band. Wayne comes from a different direction, but he already had that kind of openness with no limits.

Many point to the work you did with Miles Davis in the late '60s as the music that most significantly impacted your musical evolution.

It is the other way around, frankly speaking. I think he got more from me than I got from him in that respect. The only difference is that I was much younger when I first heard him. I was very young in 1948 when I heard *Birth of the Cool*. It influenced my music, but it didn't influence my life. I knew Miles until he died in 1991. *Bitches Brew* wasn't the end of Miles and me. We spent a lot of time together talking about music following *Bitches Brew*. I did five albums with him and he was a great, wonderful guy and philosopher. We didn't pay that much attention to music itself. Music is the result of things. It's not the thing itself.

I understand you don't look back at Bitches Brew as the landmark album many believe it to be.

No, I don't. But I'm not a critic and what I like, I like, and what I don't like, I don't like. It's a good album with a nice atmosphere. I don't think there's anything earth-shaking about that record. When we got out of a session, Miles drove me home and he asked me why I didn't say anything during the ride and I said “I didn't like what we did and what is being done.” It's a good-sounding record. There's a lot of power on those sessions. Everyone had respect for each other and no-one overplayed. It could have been utter chaos, but it was pretty organized.

How do you look back at your tenure with Cannonball Adderley?

The impact he had on my life is great. I played almost 10 years with Cannonball. He's the most underrated musician of the 20th century. Hardly anybody talks about Cannonball, but he was a giant. He was his own guy. He didn't play like Charlie Parker. He played like no-one else. We had one of the longest-working, most excellent bands in the history of jazz. It's all a part of me today, but not to the point where I'm obsessed by it. But there are no bands today. The record companies are always trying to put together names and it's usually bullshit. They want everybody to be a star and it never sounds like a band—it sounds like some guys put together to make a good buck.

Do you hold Jaco Pastorius in the same esteem as you hold Davis or Adderley?

No. I think Jaco was an inventor. He created a style and had a wonderful soul as a human being. But he didn't live long enough and he didn't contribute enough to be in the same league. Longevity is something. He was a phenomenal talent in music and other things too. He could paint and draw. He was an architect and a national athlete. He was a wonderful friend and he felt like a brother or son at times. But in terms of creativity, I cannot put him on the same level as Miles or Cannonball. I think he was just as influential as they were—maybe even more than Cannonball. People are sleeping on Cannonball—people still don't get him. Cannonball was awesome—an incredible musician. He never stopped and never played the same thing twice. I never heard him make a mistake—he was a master. But with Jaco, I think there was a limitation there.

What was it?

Maybe he didn't allow himself to get there. He was once in a house in Germany with a Gypsy friend of mine and he wrote down my name with

my birthday and his name and his birthday and then the other page says “I don’t wanna be a second-hand Joe Zawinul.” He was somehow occupied with me too much. We were also true friends and I think that friendship lasted to the last day. Jaco always loved as a friend, a man and a musician and hoped he could have done better than he did. After Weather Report, he made a nice record with his big band. But he had deteriorated—he didn’t have any hold or anything, because he really wanted to be with Weather Report. We didn’t fire him or anything and he didn’t leave. What happened is, in 1980 we had all these contracts and he wanted to take off for a year and Wayne and me said “Jesus Christ, we have to go on. We can’t wait a whole year until Mr. Pastorius comes back.” And he might have thought at the time that he was not replaceable, but there is nobody in the world who is not.

What are your thoughts about your own mortality?

I’m not afraid of death. The reason could be that I grew up in an environment in which I was always exposed to death every day for years. Experiencing bomb attacks in the night and day and actual war in your country is very different than watching a war a thousand miles away from your home. We had the war right there in my house. The Russians came in and many of my friends died, so this type of life prepares you for death. When I was a kid, I used to bury people—dead soldiers and all that. At age 12, I used to steal horses from the Russian wagons and kill them for food. I ploughed fields with oxen. That was my life. The kids were the men. I was trained for the military—I was a bazooka man. But going back to mortality, I felt when the war was over, everything was easy, but I went through some very hard times in America too. I was the only white guy to play with black bands in the South during segregation. I often had to sit in the bottom of the car when we drove through certain parts of the South. Those kinds of things never fazed me. I wanted to play music with the best and I could play on that level with the best.

You're an avid boxing fan. Are there any similarities between the lives of boxers and musicians?

Boxing is the greatest sport in the world and really, it's not even a sport—it's a passion. It's funny, I know a lot of boxers and they all love music, and all the musicians I know really love boxing. There are parallels in terms of improvising music like I do. And you can't blink an eye. You've always got to be alert or you'll miss the moment. It's all related. You gotta use your limbs, hands and feet in music and you have to do that in boxing as well. But when you make a mistake in boxing, you're gonna have a problem. [laughs] If you make a mistake in music, you'll have less of a problem. You're not gonna get knocked out!

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