

Michael Formanek: Looping Back, Part One

by Troy Collins



Michael Formanek, © 1990 Christopher Drukker

Born in San Francisco, Michael Formanek has made quite a name for himself as a first-call bassist in the East Coast scene he calls home. Formanek has worked with several generations of musicians throughout his distinguished career: as a teenager in the 1970s he toured with Tony Williams and Joe Henderson; and in the '80s he played with Stan Getz, Gerry Mulligan, and Freddie Hubbard. During the '90s he played a key role in the fertile Downtown scene, leading his own ensembles while working closely with Tim Berne and his associates. Currently, Formanek is most often found working in the collective trio Thumbscrew, with Mary Halvorson and Tomas Fujiwara, and in the numerous outfits that the trio serves as a rhythm section.

A veteran bandleader, Formanek's primary working group has been his acclaimed quartet with Berne, Craig Taborn, and Gerald Cleaver, although he has spearheaded a variety of other projects as well, ranging from the massive 18-piece all-star Ensemble Kolossus to solo bass excursions, as first documented on *Am I Bothering You?* (1998, Screwgun). Additionally, Formanek has been an in-demand sideman, touring and recording with peers like Dave Ballou, Uri Caine, and Marty Ehrlich, along with doing extensive work as a session musician, appearing on albums by Jane Ira Bloom, Lee Konitz, and Jack Walrath, among many others.

A composer of works for ensembles ranging in size from duo to orchestra, Formanek has received institutional support from Chamber Music America, the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation, the Peabody Conservatory, the Maryland State Arts Council, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

Formanek was director of the Peabody Jazz Orchestra and the jazz bass instructor at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore, Maryland for 17 years, leaving teaching full-time in 2017 to concentrate on his solo career. He currently has three albums out: *Never Is Enough* (Cuneiform), the sixth album by Thumbscrew, *Imperfect Measures* (Intakt), his second solo bass recording, and *Dyads* (Out of Your Head), a duet with his son Peter. I interviewed Formanek during the spring of 2021, concurrent with the release of these albums.

Troy Collins: Some early biographical information might be of interest to readers unfamiliar with your background. How did you get your start playing music?

Michael Formanek: I was born in San Francisco and grew up in a town a little bit south along the coast, called Pacifica. I tried to play guitar, like everyone else back then, but ended up being told to just play only on the four lowest strings. There were other, more competent guitar players around, and there really weren't any bass players. I got the message and ended up getting an electric bass, and that got me moving in some direction that eventually led to becoming a musician. In high school I played in a Christmas concert with the "stage band" that featured an alto saxophone player named Bishop Norman Williams, who was a friend of a friend of the director of the jazz band there. Norman was from Kansas City and was a regular fixture in the SF jazz scene from the late 1960s until he passed away a few years ago. For some crazy reason he liked me and started calling me to play gigs with him in San Francisco while I was still in high school. That put me in contact with a lot of musicians, and I began playing around town with different groups. I made a couple of recordings with him, one of which Woody Shaw played on, and I started to meet some of the great players who were living there at the time. Before I left the West Coast in 1978 I had worked with, and even toured with, Joe Henderson, Eddie Henderson, Tony Williams, Dave Liebman, Art Lande, Baikida Carroll, and quite a few others. In those years if you were a bass player in the SF Bay Area you could work a lot but had to be really flexible and be able to deal with all kinds of music. There were times when in the same week I would play a funk gig, a Latin gig, a really straight-ahead jazz gig, a hotel lounge gig, and a free jazz gig. I got a lot of experience doing all of that, and it gave me a chance to get an early sense of what I did and did not want to do. I left California to go and play in a Brazilian band in Buffalo, New York, and never moved back to California. When the gig in Buffalo ended, I went to New York City and just ended up staying there, and in other parts of the East Coast.

TC: Wow! I have to ask, if you were already experienced playing numerous styles of music in the Bay Area, what was it about the Brazilian music gig (or Buffalo, perhaps) that influenced your decision to stay in New York, instead of going back to California? That's such a radical change in locale.

MF: Great Question! As has often been the case with me, there was a bit of planning, a bit of stumbling into things, and an innate ability to recognize potential opportunities. The period that I decided to take that summer gig with the Brazilian band was complicated. I had spent about two months in Portland, Oregon playing a five night a week gig in a club there. I went up to Seattle to meet Gary Peacock thinking that I might want to go and study with him but opted not to pursue it. I was still working some with Joe Henderson and a few others at the time but was getting impatient in the Bay Area and wanted to check out other scenes. I had gotten interested in Brazilian music, and incidentally a guy that I didn't know well who played drums and percussion, was organizing a gig for the summer in Niagara Falls, New York playing samba. He had hired another percussionist from the Bay Area, a Brazilian pianist who was living in New York, and a saxophonist who lived in Buffalo, so I decided to join them. I was genuinely interested in learning about that music, but my motives were also self-serving in other ways. I was really too intimidated then to go to New York on my own, but I figured that this would get me close enough to check it out without making any big commitments that I'd have to walk back. During the course of that gig there was something of a coup that took place in the band, where the members of the group, myself included, decided to fire the original leader from what was essentially his own band in sort of a hostile takeover of the group. He was replaced by one of the greatest Brazilian drummers of all time and really one of the great drummers, period, a guy named Edison Machado. Edison made his name in the early 1960s as one of the, if not the, originators of the bossa nova. He is often credited with having taken the sound of samba as it was played by a large percussion ensemble, or samba school, and applying it to the drum set. For a while this went really well, but eventually got kind of dark for a number of reasons. It was a fantastic learning experience for me though, and I will always be grateful for that opportunity.

During that period, I made a short trip to NYC to check things out, and I had a great time hanging out with mostly Brazilians who were friends of the guys I was working with, including the great drummer Duduka Da Fonseca. Just about the time the upstate gig was ending I called Dave Liebman, who had moved back to New York from California following a world tour he had done with Chick Corea. Dave answered the call, said hello, and almost immediately told me that another bassist had just cancelled on him for a weeklong gig at Sweet Basil in the village, and asked me if I wanted to do the gig. The band was supposed to have been Dave, Terumasa Hino on cornet, John Scofield on guitar, and Bob Moses on drums. Of course, I said yes, and Dave invited me to come and stay in his loft while we rehearsed and did the gig. As it turned out, Moses wasn't particularly thrilled about having to play with me, so after a lengthy phone conversation I was witness to, Dave told Moses that I would be doing the gig and he could bow out if he wanted to, which he did. I always respected Dave Liebman for that, besides the respect I have for him as a musician. We did the gig, with Adam Nussbaum on drums and all in all it went pretty well, although I was in over my head in many ways. I had a lot of trouble finding the balance that the music required from the bass with such a strong front line of soloists. I wanted to get in there with everything and got so excited that the music was probably more chaotic than it needed to be. At one point during the week, or right after, there was a little get together at Liebman's with a lot of his friends and a who's who of modern jazz players in New York at the time. Pianist and longtime Liebman collaborator, Richie Beirach, cornered me and made the statement, "It's all about contrast! When Lieb plays high, you play low. When he plays fast, you play slow! Got it?" I also met many younger up and coming players at that time and it just seemed like an obvious choice to move there. I loved the energy and high level of every musician I met. I also continued to play with different Brazilian musicians during that time which helped me make enough to get an apartment and start playing with people. I think I already knew that what I wanted to play was jazz on the acoustic bass but having that greater range of experience really helped me in establishing myself as a working bassist in New York. Little by little I was able to let go of some of the things I really didn't want to do, and focus more on the things I did, but that took a while.

TC: What was the first venture you embarked on at that time in New York that you felt was what you really wanted to do, or be part of for the foreseeable future?

MF: The first thing was the Dave Liebman group that I actually stayed with for a while. Eventually Dave, at least partially influenced by Scofield, replaced me with Ron McClure. Dave felt he needed someone more experienced, and I couldn't really argue with his choice. Ron had been an important early influence on me, and I've always had a lot of respect and admiration for him. In those early days in New York, I was just playing all the time in a way I never had in San Francisco. My first actual gig in New York, even a little before that week at Sweet Basil, was with a pianist named Harris Simon at a club called the West Boondock, I think on 10th Avenue at around 17th street. It was a 6-hour gig that went from 10pm to 4am or maybe 8pm to 2am, something like that. Just a piano and bass duo, which was very common in those days. If one were to invent a format to really see how well a musician could really play, that was it. Forget jam sessions! This was tune after tune, solo after solo, and you just had to bring it for hours on end. No matter what I had done before and how much experience I had, this was really challenging. Not just at that place, but I ended up playing duo with many pianists during those years and it really laid bare all the things I needed to work on to be a better player. Eventually, as in over the following 10 or so years, I worked my way up to the more prestigious venues of the time; Bradley's, the Knickerbocker Saloon, Zinno. There were a bunch of them. And I played gigs in those places with Kirk Lightsey, Fred Hersch, Steve Kuhn, Larry Willis, John Hicks, Harold Mabern, all in duo or later on in trios when the Cabaret laws were finally overturned. I even got to play a night with Hank Jones when I subbed for George Mraz at the Knickerbocker one night.

Those gigs were really important in my musical development. You really had to have it all together; time, technique, sound, endurance, repertoire, patience, discipline, etc. It was so exposed that you could immediately hear anyone's weaknesses in that setting. Going back to the early days in New York though, it was seeing and hearing music at that level every night for sure, but it was a lot more. I was still playing with some Brazilian musicians at that time, especially at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s. The great, and late trumpet player, Claudio Roditi recommended me for Herbie Mann's band, so I ended up doing that for a while. I toured a bit with Herbie, and even though I wasn't so into it musically all the time, I did enjoy traveling and meeting different people. He had such strong connections to the New York recording and session musician world, and I was still willing to work in that scene, although it was really never my best thing. I was good enough at it to get some studio calls, but I was pretty far down the list, and for good reason. That was a serious time for commercial music and there were still lots of records being made, and a whole lot of advertising jingles as well. The busiest studio musicians were just going from session to session, pretty much all day, then hanging out or playing at places like Seventh Avenue South in the West Village which was co-owned by Mike and Randy Brecker with another partner. That was when Will Lee, Anthony Jackson, Steve Jordan, Steve Gadd, and all those guys had it all sewn up. Even though there was something about that scene that attracted me, at least to some extent, it really wasn't my thing and by around 1983 I made a conscious and deliberate decision not to take any work on the electric bass going forward, which almost instantaneously removed me from all of those lists and made it so I had to try to make a living as a jazz musician. Even though I hadn't really figured out exactly what I wanted to do yet, I really loved playing! Not the polite, tasteful accompanying of other musicians that was common in many jazz clubs and restaurants at the time.

PLAYING! There were some musicians that I would just go and improvise with. Some I liked playing with, and some I didn't. I met Tom Rainey in San Francisco and we got reconnected in New York. We would play with a great saxophone player we both new from San Francisco named Mel Ellison. Mel is kind of a legend amongst those who know and have ever heard him. In fact, the great saxophonist Ellery Eskelin knows Mel and was very inspired by his playing. Playing trio with Mel and Tom Rainey was an amazing experience every time we played. I got my ass kicked in a totally different way with those guys. It was deep listening and breathing and took a lot of concentration and endurance just to keep up, but it was just so open and beautiful. So many of these experiences happened during my first two or three years in New York that I knew I had to stay, at least for a while. Also, in the winter/spring of 1979 I got my first taste of European touring, which was pretty wild. I should probably leave that one for another time or another question.

TC: Well, I think that time is now. Let's hear it. Tell us what your first European tour was like.

MF: In early 1979 I got a call from the great Polish saxophonist, Zbigniew Namysłowski to go on tour in Europe with the band of an East German trumpet player and composer named Klaus Lenz. I don't think I had even heard any of the music and was just told it was a large (ten or eleven pieces I think) kind of jazz-rock fusion type band. This was all on very short notice but just enough time to get a ticket and passport so I would be able to get to Europe. The other thing was, as hard as it is to imagine now, the tour would be more than two months long! All I knew was that I needed to be in West Berlin by a certain date, with my electric bass. Of course, I did the only intelligent thing and bought the cheapest ticket I could find, and that was to Frankfurt, not Berlin. I arrived in Frankfurt and found a train station so I could go to West Berlin, not knowing that at least half the trip went through East Germany, which I only discovered when three East German border guards woke me up by yelling at me and physically shaking me out of my jet-lagged state of unconsciousness. Eventually I made it to the oasis that was West Berlin which in those days was a hotbed of all kinds of culture, nightlife, and various forms of debauchery. The hotel they had booked for me was something between an old school German pension and a very low-end house of ill repute. I finally met up with the band for a rehearsal and although I realized quickly that neither the music nor the bandleader were really my cup of tea, the level of the musicians in the band was high enough to make it a tolerable experience. I can't remember everyone, but besides Namysłowski, there were Markus Stockhausen and Jon Eardly on trumpets. Just between those two I could see that this was going to be interesting. Markus is of course the son of Karlheinz Stockhausen, and although he was not yet out of college, he had already been playing his father's music for years. He was, and still is, a truly amazing trumpet player. Jon Eardly was from the States and had come up through players like Chet Baker and Gerry Mulligan, and was a great jazz trumpet player with a beautiful sound. You can find him on recordings of the mid-1950s with Mulligan and others. There were a few German musicians and other Americans. The leader and the drummer were both East German refugees who had escaped the DDR a few years earlier. Besides the language, which I could actually understand a little of after a year of high school German, there was a big cultural divide between them and some of the other musicians. Probably more with me than the other people now that I think about it. We started off rehearsing at the main music venue at the time, the Quartier Latin. It was a few blocks from my hotel, so I was able to go and hang out there for free when we weren't rehearsing or playing. I remember an amazing gig with the Art Ensemble of Chicago in the Spring of 1979. It happened to be there in the afternoon when the Art Ensemble pulled up in their two tractor trailers full of instruments. The roadies had just about finished unloading the last of the gear when I happened to overhear a conversation, actually more of an argument, between one of the group members (I won't say who) and the promoter, who was a pretty old school European jazz promoter from how I remember him. There were evidently some contractual requirements that had not been properly attended to and the band representative had threatened to put all the gear back in the trucks and just drive to the next town. I'm not sure exactly how the issues were resolved but the Art Ensemble played a really amazing gig that night, the stage jam packed with gongs and other large percussion instruments, bass saxophone, and every imaginable reed and brass instrument. And of course, all in full costume. Those were the days!

What was amazing about that tour was that we played in more than forty-five venues, mostly clubs, and except for two or three, all were in West Germany. There was a gig at the old Bimhuis in Amsterdam, a gig in Zurich I think, and one in Luxembourg. Otherwise, all in Germany. I got my first real taste of German Jazzkeller as they had mostly existed since the end of World War II. There are still some there, and I occasionally still play in them, but I think a lot of these former underground bomb shelters that had become the centers of the German jazz scene for years are gone. The ones in Frankfurt and Nürnberg are still going, or were in pre-Covid times, but I'm not sure how many others.

Regarding the music, that part didn't go so well. Lenz had written music that was a mix of very notey, rhythmically inflexible, and unsubtle music that references things like Balkan music, which was not a bad thing, and also Don Ellis' big band music, which I heard a lot of in high school and was not very excited to revisit. I did make some good friends, both in and outside of the band and had some great adventures while I was there, even though the more than two-month long tour became closer to a three month tour after a number of gigs (and days off) had been added along the way. Back in New York I maintained a musical relationship with Namysłowski for a while and played in a band of his, which was another kind of fusion band. I also maintained friendships with Markus Stockhausen and Jon Eardly for a while after the tour ended. Eardly had recommended me for some very well-paid studio work at the WDR in Köln which really helped me out for a couple of years between 1980 and '81. There were two big bands on staff there at the time. One was more of the "jazz" band that still exists now, I believe with Bob Mintzer as the musical director. The second band, which I worked with several times under mostly two-week contracts, was the "Media Band." That was the one that played jazz big band music, but also played for various commercial projects with singers, variety shows, and the occasional society ball. This was really good work that enabled me to upgrade my instruments and musical equipment and helped pay my rent for long periods of time but once again, I knew this was not what I wanted to do.

TC: Your tour stories make me very curious – what do think is the biggest difference between international touring, now and then? (meaning pre-pandemic, of course)

MF: Well, I'd say that the more important question is about the changes leading up to pandemic time, at least since 2001. Between pre-pandemic international touring and now is basically just on or off. It was on, and at least for the time being it is now off. I was on tour with Mary Halvorson's Code Girl in March of 2020. Northern Italy had already been in the news as one of the first Covid hotspots. We were all aware of this before leaving the US but were confident that Mary would make the right choices regarding any cancellations or alterations in the tour itinerary. The two gigs we had scheduled, I believe Padova and Montova, were both close enough to the red zone to be of concern. They were both cancelled before we left home. After that we did as much of the tour as was feasible, but she ended up pulling the plug after our concert in Cadiz, Spain on March 11th. We were supposed to go to Geneva and then Zurich for our last two dates, but after Trump announced his nonsensical travel ban on the 11th, we all decided we should try to get home as soon as we could. As it turned out we got out just before the mad rush of people who overwhelmed the airports trying to get back before getting stuck in Europe. To the best of my knowledge no American groups that I'm aware of have actually toured in Europe since then. There have been some European musicians that I know as well as other people who live there that have been doing some gigs, but little or no touring from what I can tell.

I should add that with a few exceptions most of my touring in the last twenty or so years has been in Europe. The specific countries visited change from time to time but are mostly on the European continent and some in the UK. When I was younger and played slightly more traditional versions of jazz music, I toured in other parts of the world. It seems that the more "avant-garde" the music I play is perceived, either real or imagined, the smaller the touring world has become. At least for me that is the case. In the 1980s and 1990s for example, I toured in Australia, Japan, the Philippines, the US Virgin Islands, India, Brazil, and all over the rest of South and Central America, and later Israel and Turkey. Most of that had already dried up for me by the early 2000s with the only notable exception being Argentina. There are amazing musicians in Buenos Aires and people who have worked diligently to bring creative jazz musicians to perform, teach, and take part in residencies there. Due to changing economic realities it seems like that had already started to slow down even before the pandemic, but many of the musicians and promoters there are still very close to a lot of us, and I hope that some of those collaborations will be able to happen again someday. Canada is similar in a way, but besides some annoying immigration and customs paperwork that needs to take place it's a lot more like touring in the US, just better in many respects.

The reason I mentioned 2001 before is that since September 11th, 2001 not just touring, but all travel has gotten much more difficult. This has had a huge effect on touring in many different ways. First, it's made traveling costlier, so when we're talking about music without a huge fan base that will have a detrimental effect, and it most definitely has. It has made going in and out of certain countries much more complicated and stressful. Another significant change is that for musicians who play large instruments, such as the double bass as I do, it has also changed the way music sounds and is performed. For several years now a common verbal exchange between bass players might begin with something like, "are you bringing a bass?" to which the response would often be, "no, I'll be playing bass du jour on this one." Before the 2010s, bass du jour could mean a lot of different things, which in many cases would refer to a completely unplayable pile of wood with strings on it. In some cases, it could also be a bright, shiny, new bass from a music store window that has never been played or even set up properly. You could also look out and get a very good instrument, owned and played by someone who really knows what they're doing, and it can be a real pleasure. In the last 10 years, roughly, the number of bass players traveling with their basses has gone way down, and the overall quality of the provided instruments has gone up quite a bit. At least the gap between a poor instrument and a really good one has narrowed considerably. To varying degrees all musicians have been forced to compromise in terms of what they need to do to travel and still get a sound that they can live with. For many years drummer friends of mine have chosen to forgo the heavy cymbal case full of ancient treasures of sonic beauty, for whatever the baggage company provides. Airline overweight baggage charges and overhead compartment restrictions have made this much more common now. I have saxophonist friends who travel with a good quality student model horn just to avoid the stress of watching other passengers pile their big computer bags and suitcases on top of them before slamming the door on it. I know this sounds like complaining, but just remember that we have to do all this every day on little or no sleep, then get up on the bandstand and play a concert, most often in front of a very discerning audience. I still really love playing in all these different places. The actual travel part of it is the real work and what you actually get paid for.