Michael Formanek: Looping Back, Part Two

by Troy Collins



virtually everyone in the world, can look back on this time and try and make some sense of it, and how we handled it all. And it's not over yet! First, I'll say that I've been very fortunate to have a nice place to live and work, and I know that has not been the case for everyone. Another point is that I have a difficult

pandemic?

great artist and designer.

whatever this has been."

the pandemic. The politics and all the idiocy that followed the 2020 Presidential election, and of course the microscope being focused on policing of communities of color, and the related inequities that especially came to light after the George Floyd murder are huge social issues that are forever linked to this period in history. Having said all that, my part has been fairly simple. Mostly working on music,

time looking back over the last year without factoring in all the other things that have happened besides

TC: Your answer brings us up to date. The inevitable question then is how have you been handling the

MF: Wow, inevitable perhaps, but such a loaded question! I guess there are so many ways that we,

cooking, and trying to keep from getting the virus as best I could. In terms of what I have to show for it, there are some specific, tangible things that fortunately I'm very proud of. Thumbscrew managed to release the two CDs we had recorded back in September of 2019: The Anthony Braxton Project in June; and Never Is Enough in February, both on Cuneiform. I was able to release a duo record with my son Peter, Dyads, that we recorded back in late December of 2019 shortly after we completed our first tour together. Peter plays tenor saxophone and clarinet on it and I think it came out really well and represents our long and very personal connection. I was also able to prepare a solo bass CD for release, Imperfect Measures, that came out on Intakt in March. One of the releases I'm most excited about is a collection of my compositions that were composed in August of 2020. It was recorded in December 2020 with Chet Doxas on tenor and soprano saxophones and clarinet, and Vinnie Sperrazza on drums. I had been playing some with Chet and Vinnie in a few different settings before Covid, and they started coming out almost every week to play in my backyard. The sessions eventually became rehearsals and we managed to learn some pretty challenging music outside, with the birds, wind chimes, lawn mowers, leaf blowers, and fire trucks as part of the soundscape. The album will be released towards the end of 2021 or beginning of 2022 on a label I set up for the release, Circular File Records. There will be a vinyl release, and CD and digital releases as well. The album will be called Were We Where We Were. The music is all based on palindromic forms that I had first composed as graphic scores, reinterpreting them to conventionally notated pieces. Besides the music, which I love, I was also able to continue collaborating with two of my favorite visual artists,

Warren Linn and Steve Byram, who were also integral to the packaging of Never Is Enough, and

Imperfect Measures. One of the greatest things about the lockdown period and still now, is having more time to work collaboratively with like-minded individuals, albeit mostly remotely. Working with Warren's art and Steve's brilliant sense of design has in and of itself been revelatory, but being able to banter different ideas back and forth with them has been really amazing. I should also add that the CD package for Dyads, released by Out Of Your Head Records was created and designed by TJ Huff, who is also a

One more bit of collaborative work that I'd like to mention is a project that I initiated with drummer/composer/producer Mike Pride several months ago. We started sending some tracks back and forth, adding parts to them, and sending them back. We then looped in the great guitarist, Anthony Pirog, who I had worked with on several of his projects. We have several pieces finished, or nearly finished, and are still adding more. I've been playing more electric bass and using electronics more, which I've always enjoyed doing, but do mostly at home and in very special situations. I've actually gotten more and more into electronics and have been going down a bit of a rabbit hole lately with some new acquisitions. I have several very specific things that I'm looking for that are all based on things I want to express and convey in music, and I feel like I'm starting to hone in on them a little bit recently. October, and at the Village Vanguard in January. More recently I did one at Seeds in Brooklyn with the Drome Trio, and just last night I played a solo set at the Soapbox Gallery, also in Brooklyn, as a CD release performance for Imperfect Measures. I guess it's as good a time as any to say this, because it's relevant to this period of time and also to the music I'm trying to create. If there's one parameter of my existence on this planet that has been the most disrupted and turned upside down and backwards, it is time. I'm sure I'm not alone in this regard and have heard many people try and articulate what it is that they are experiencing. I can imagine that

the pieces on Were We Where We Were are all palindromes, as is the album title, which itself is a word palindrome. staying focused on the present. Beyond the pandemic, we've just survived one of the most divisive Presidential terms in American history, and I'm curious what your perspective is for where you think

we're at now, based in no small part on your comment about the title track of Never Is Enough, which speaks to "the ever-present feeling of being held captive by the insanity of the last four years of ...

MF: Ha, did I say that? Yes, I know I did! First let me say that since the national "leadership" has changed, at least for the moment I have been spending a lot less time and mental energy trying to follow what is happening in politics. It's not that I think we're OK now, because I don't, but at least the continually bizarre and destructive tweets, and diarrhea of the mouth that was our reality has subsided at least for the moment. The fact that we're still hearing about the big lie, and that history is being revised with regards to the January 6th insurrection, things are not really back to anything we can consider normal. In a way the most normal thing is that the party of Trump is working harder than ever to deny the ability to vote to people that won't vote for them. They've been doing this for many, many years, but I've never seen it done this quickly, in as coordinated a way, or as out in the open as it is now. I just find it difficult to see a way back from this. I hope I'm wrong, but it's very difficult to be optimistic about the future of our democracy. Sorry! TC: No need to apologize! But for the sake of the interview, let's get back to the music. You currently have three new albums out: Dyads, a duo recording with your son Peter; Never Is Enough, the sixth album by the collective trio Thumbscrew; and Imperfect Measures, your second solo bass effort, recorded well before the current pandemic (following 1998's Am I Bothering You). Can you give us some background on how each of these recordings came to be?

MF: Oh, right, the music! As far as the recordings themselves, Imperfect Measures was recorded first, then Never Is Enough, and Dyads last. They were released in the opposite order, Dyads, Never, then Imperfect. It just happened to work out that way. I recorded the solo CD in 2017, shortly before leaving Baltimore. It was just something I wanted to do and felt that enough time had passed since my first solo CD, Am I Bothering You, in that I didn't feel I would be self-conscious about it. As I wrote in the liner

collaboration with Warren and I to design the package, which I think looks incredible. I guess it's really more of a trio effort, than a solo in that sense. Never Is Enough was recorded during Thumbscrew's 2019 artist residency at City of Asylum in Pittsburgh. We went in with the idea that we would record two CDs, as we had in 2017 with Ours and Theirs, only this time the non-originals were the music of Anthony Braxton. The result was The Anthony Braxton Project, which was released on Cuneiform close to Anthony's 75th birthday, in June 2020. Never Is Enough is a different sounding record than our earlier recordings I think, but we followed more or less the same format we had previously; three new pieces by each member. I chose to play some electric bass on this one which I hadn't done in a really long time, with one exception; I did some recording sessions with the great guitarist, Anthony Pirog, a few years

notes, I invited my friend Warren Linn, a fantastic artist and illustrator who happened to live in Baltimore, to draw during the session. The brilliant artist and designer, Steve Byram, worked in

earlier and had played some electric bass and used some electronics. Those tracks became part of his 2020 release, Pocket Poem, also on Cuneiform. The duo recording with Peter Formanek, Dyads, was not really planned but seemed like an obvious thing to do after we had toured in the fall of 2019. The tour was great and also pretty crazy. Some long drives, mostly in the Midwest, and right in the middle of the tour I had to fly home, grab another bass, and then rehearse and record Susan Alcorn's Pedernal record, then fly back and continue the tour with Peter. We made the recording after being home for about a month while Peter was visiting us for the holidays. He lives in Michigan, and we are in northern New Jersey. We went into Sound On Sound, a great studio in Montclair, NJ, during an otherwise social, family

the core of our relationship just make everything else we try to do feel more connected and more organic. I think Dyads really reflects that. TC: As you mentioned, Pocket Poem and Never Is Enough feature your first recordings on electric bass. After all these years, why now? MF: Another long story that I'll shorten up. I may have said this earlier, but I stopped taking any work on electric bass in 1983, and at that time pretty much stopped playing it all together. Sometime in the late 1990s or early 2000s I started playing some electric bass again, mostly for myself at home. I did a few little gigs on it but mostly kept to my original idea of not playing it live or on recordings. My main reason has always been that I only want to play exactly what I want to play on it and not be influenced by style or expectations that anyone has with regards to that instrument. It sounds silly, but that's the reason. I guess in a sense that's all I do anyway, on whatever instrument I play, so at this point it was kind of a moot subject. I also found a bass that I liked that a friend of mine, Zach Cooper, had and sent to me. It's just a Fender Precision Bass from the 2000s, that's a copy of the early 1960s ones, but really feels and sounds good to me. I also started using it more with electronics to alter the sound, mostly on the sustained notes, and this is an ongoing obsession at the moment. For Anthony's record I played some different basses but felt that he would use it in a way that I would approve of, which he did. For the Thumbscrew record I decided to compose for it, which gave me complete control of how it was recorded and used. That's really why I did it now, if that makes any sense. TC: All this talk of solo projects, collaborative ensembles, and sideman gigs poses a question: What advantages and challenges have you found in contributing to so many different groups? MF: It's funny, but I don't really feel like I do that much "sideman" work anymore. They mostly feel like collaborations that are initiated by and are the responsibility of different collaborators. If it happens to be "my" project, it's up to me to make sure that there's a clear idea of what we're going to play, and then to try to create an environment that is conducive to letting that happen. I think that most people that hire me to play on a recording or a tour want me to bring my musical, improvisational, and to a lesser extent, compositional sensibilities to a project. Compositional only in the sense that I will sometimes offer big picture ideas or suggestions that go outside the lines of just being a sideman bass player. I'm very careful how I do this, and I seldom say anything unless asked, or if I have such a strong feeling about something that I would be really angry at myself if I didn't say something. That said, most of the musicians I work with in their projects have crystal clear ideas of what they want, and this seldom becomes a major issue. Obviously, cooperatives are a different story. Thumbscrew is a great example of a collective that works really well! Mary, Tomas, and I discuss everything we do. Musically we are usually the "leaders" when it comes to our individual compositions, but we still have the opportunity to give input or suggestions when learning new music. Generally speaking, I feel that the advantages outweigh the challenges significantly in keeping a good balance of solo, cooperative, and sideman projects going. The biggest disadvantage is that it's still difficult to be taken seriously enough as a leader sometimes. I

ensemble configuration. In light of this, as a composer, do you write parts with specific players in mind, or do you embrace a more egalitarian approach, where the tunes are open to interpretation by different groups of players? And in regard to such interpretations, how do the personal and/or stylistic dynamics of individual band members shape the inner workings of those groups?

TC: That's an interesting perspective. Perhaps it has something to do with working in so many collectives, or leading ensembles that feature musicians with whom you also work with as a sideman. Despite this paradigm, it seems as though your work is aesthetically very consistent, not matter the

I can tell.

understood that more when I was younger, but it still surprises me a little now after all these bands and recordings that I've been completely responsible for. If I thought it would make a big difference, I would cut back on the sideman work but I'm not sure how much that would change the perception. It's always been a bit of a frustration, and sometimes seems like it's some kind of accident that I've made so many good records, just by using the right people. The fact that I imagine, conceive, compose, arrange, organize, and produce just about everything I do seems to get overlooked. I'm not a bitter person by nature and I'm not angry or dark about this, but after all this time it does seem to be the truth as far as

with mine anyway, which is one of the reasons we could always work together. He's also a perfect example of someone who I could work with and immerse myself in his music, but when it was my music, he would always give it up to what I was trying to do, and not make it another Tim Berne project. He was always one of the best "sidemen" I've ever had play my music, which sometimes surprises people. Same thing with Mary Halvorson. Mary is so diligent and focused on playing what I've written, and what I want it to sound like that she actually makes whatever she plays sound like her music. Those two are probably the musicians I've felt the most musical connection with in my life. My son Peter, is probably the third, even though that is kind of a different situation since that bond is deeper and connects on so With regard to composing for specific musicians as opposed to writing for any groups of players or improvisers, it is and has always been mostly the former. If I were to assign a percentage, I would say at least 90 percent is composed and arranged for specific players and improvisers. That's not to say that every music sketch or fragment I commit to paper is meant for a certain person, but once I actually start writing music with the intention of playing it with, or having other people play it, I am clearly thinking about their sounds, approaches, strengths, flexibilities, and creativity. This began with my first Enja recording, Wide Open Spaces, that I made at the beginning of 1990 and has been consistent throughout my recording career. Several of the pieces that were written for and recorded by those musicians were later played with and sometimes recorded with other musicians, but that was almost always something that happened later, and is often difficult for me. There are a few of my pieces that people like to play for one reason or other, but I find it hard to do sometimes because the sound of the musician I composed it for is inextricably linked to it in some way forever. At least in my mind. I'm also not really a tune writer for the most part. I tend to write music that exists to create a mood or atmosphere, and to generate meaningful and relevant improvisation - to create a set of possibilities that probably wouldn't exist if we were just improvising. I understand that this can also sometimes stifle the freedom of improvisation, but that is part of the risk of composing music, especially detailed music, for improvisers.

would feel very satisfied. No one else could have done what he did with what I had given him to work with. Anyone else in the band would have done something great, but that is a truly unique and special moment, in my opinion. In my own, particularly warped sensibilities, I place it among one of the great

TC: I agree, The Distance is a phenomenal record. You mentioned directing the large jazz ensemble at Peabody for about a decade. But I've read that you actually taught full-time at Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory of Music for 17 years. In that time, or since, have you ever played with any of your former

MF: Thank you! At the time I started working on the music for Ensemble Kolossus in 2013 I had been directing the big band there for around ten years. Altogether I ended up doing it for more like fifteen. I have done many gigs with students from there over the years. Most with the drummer, Devin Gray, whose bands I've played in and recorded with. There are a couple of recordings with his group Dirigo Rataplan with Dave Ballou, Ellery Eskelin, and myself that are out there and available on Devin's label. I've played bass duo gigs with Adam Hopkins, Joel Grip, and Alex Fournier. Also a few gigs with Jarrett Gilgore, which have been good. The others have mostly been one-offs or little restaurant gigs near the school. I had a band when I was there somewhere around 2008 or '09 called Cautious Optimism that the excellent drummer Nathan Ellman-Bell played in which was really nice. That band really helped me into transitioning back to playing, composing, and bandleading after I had been away from it for some time. The next thing I did after that was the quartet with Berne, Taborn, and Cleaver, the ECM records, and all

voices all mixed together. I think David did an amazing job in achieving that!

students in a professional capacity, in say a live concert or recording situation?

and how does that affect your playing in each situation? MF: Good question! I really like both, fortunately, but they are different animals in many ways. It's great to play for a live audience, and it's also great to play live without having the option to do several takes, mix, master, edit, or pretend something never happened. I suppose these days with all the recordings and videos that people make of gigs that last one is impossible. Recording is great for paring music down to its essence, and to create a sound that is specific to and representative of the music being played. Not everyone records this way, and oftentimes when I record with other people it is more like playing a gig, especially since many recordings are just one day now, where two days used to be more the norm for a CD recording. I also like recording because I can usually get a sound on my bass that I really like. I know what kinds of spaces and microphones I like, and I have a better idea of how to play in such a way that translates to a good recorded sound than I did when I was younger. Sometimes it feels like an artificial process, but I prefer to think of it more like making a film. We obviously don't have the budgets to record tons of takes, nor would we want to since we like to maintain the freshness of first or second takes as much as possible. But once the music is recorded it's great to have the flexibility to do some editing and adjust levels, at the very least. I've been slowly learning a little bit about digital editing and mixing so that I can do some post-production, or maybe more like pre-post-production. My most recent recording, called Were We Where We Were was recorded in the studio, but saxophonist Chet Doxas mixed it with a lot of back and forth with me, and I really like the way it came out. I know that a little bit

of knowledge can be a dangerous thing, but I try and leave most of it to people who know what they're doing. The short answer to this question would be, I mostly go for it all the time in live performance, and in the studio I also try to go for it while also trying to imagine what it might sound like listening back to

TC: In the same line of thought, what are your thoughts on the state of the recording industry at large,

especially regarding archival copies (CDs, vinyl) versus more ephemeral formats (downloads,

TC: In reference to performing, how do you feel about studio recording compared to live performance

all plays out going forward. Any of the archival formats are more relevant when we're playing gigs and touring. People do seem to like taking something home with them after a concert they enjoy and also want to support the artists they like, or feel sorry for. Without the live performances it does seem a little

their streaming services become the dominant method for people to get their music. I think these services are fine, but their business models are completely out of wack in terms of fairness to the content producers. The only company I like is Bandcamp, who has taken a stand to be more fair to the musicians it works with. I not only hope that they continue to do well but that that other companies see that this is the right way to go in the long run. In the meantime, I still like to have the option to put out physical recordings in whatever formats make the most sense, artistically and to an extent business wise. I'm choosing to put out this next trio album on vinyl in addition to CD and digitally because I think it will look and sound amazing that way. Unfortunately, those were not particularly sound economic metrics to base my decision to do it on. Therein lies the eternal rub. TC: Considering the ongoing challenges of making music in a time such as this, what projects do you have coming up, whether they be recordings, performances, or the like? MF: There are few things that are starting to be scheduled now, but I have to say I'm still being a little cautiously optimistic about it all. I have a couple of recordings coming up soon, one with trumpet player and composer, Darren Johnston, who I've known for a while but have never actually played with. The other is with Tony Malaby for Kris Davis' label, with Ben Monder and Tom Rainey. Thumbscrew has a European tour on the books for July; we'll know more about that soon, and another residency in Pittsburgh in August, which I'm sure will happen no matter what, followed by another recording back in New York once we finish. The quartet with Ingrid Laubrock, Brandon Seabrook, and Tom Rainey is

supposed to tour in Europe in October, and Mary Halvorson's Code Girl in November, also in Europe. I'm starting to make plans for the Drome trio for 2022, as well as some solo and duo touring with my son

Peter. Then more Thumbscrew since it will be our 10th anniversary as a band in 2022. Seems like a lot now that I have written it down. I'll have to wait and see what actually happens. I'm still planning for another Elusion Quartet recording as well as another with Ensemble Kolossus but that may have to wait until I win the lottery, which is never going to happen since I don't play it.

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streaming)?

During this period, I have done a few live-streamed performances. Two with Thumbscrew, at Roulette in for some people it is the lack of socializing, moving around, or whatever, but for me it's the complete reorientation of my perception of the passage of time. Last spring I started composing music with this vague idea that I wanted to tap into the strong sense that time was moving in many different directions and at many different velocities, much more than usual. A big part of that involved the sound of music moving forwards and backwards within large or small sections of a composition. I eventually started to create palindromes based on the idea by creating a musical phrase that happens forward, then backwards, creating a palindromic phrase, one that is the same played beginning to end as it is played end to beginning. I know this sounds crazy, but it has been something I've been dealing with a number of different ways; compositioanally, improvisationally, sonically, visually, and even verbally. The titles of TC: There are a number of topics covered in your answer worthy of further exploration, but let's start by

visit, and recorded for around five or six hours. We recorded a lot of the music we had played on tour, and we also improvised a lot. That CD is a good balance, I think, of those things. We've been improvising together for a long time - since way before Peter was very skilled on any particular instrument, some on piano, guitar, then eventually saxophone, flute and clarinet. The improvisations have always been the great equalizer in our musical relationship since there were no stylistic, idiomatic, or technical skills that were required to be able to communicate musically together. Having that history and understanding at

MF: I think things happen for all kinds of reasons, and yes those are probably some of them. I do hope I maintain a consistent aesthetic across all the work I do, whether it is technically my or someone else's project. I am part of a musically community, or really several communities, who share certain aesthetics and practices, or are committed to embracing different ones. This is the main reason there's so much overlap of musicians between different projects. In a lot of cases I assume that who the "leader" is doesn't make much of a difference to a person who is interested in the music. They probably just like the people who are involved and the music they are all generally connected to. Another thing is that I have never, from the beginning of making my own records, featured myself in the way that many people choose to, to make sure that everyone knows that it's their record. At least in the jazz world I believe this is a factor. I never solicited much advice from others when it came to making my recordings, but when some was offered it was often that I needed to play the first solo on the first track, make sure I played more solos, was louder in the mix, etc. This never made sense to me. My goal was always to make the music the best version of what it could be, period! The only person who's advice I ever really listened to was Tim Berne, who helped me many times, but his take was always fundamentally in line

TC: Regarding composition, Ensemble Kolossus was your largest ensemble recording yet. What unique challenges did working with this size outfit offer that were new to you? MF: As you say, it was the largest group I had recorded but not the largest I had composed for. When I was teaching full time, around 2006 and 2007, I was commissioned to compose a piece for full orchestra and soloists who were improvisers. That one was so crazy to keep track of everything that Ensemble Kolossus didn't stress me out as much as it otherwise may have. The main thing was that I had been directing the large jazz ensemble at Peabody for around ten years by the time I decided to put Ensemble Kolossus together. I not only had gained some experience composing for the big band format, but I had also rehearsed and conducted a vast amount of repertoire while I was organizing and presenting an average of four concerts per year. I not only learned what I liked in large jazz ensemble composition and arranging, but also the things I didn't care for so much. When it came down to the music it wasn't really so much different than the way I compose for any other group of musicians. That music is essentially a series of very specific composed sections, composed with particular players in mind, in an environment for creative musicians to express themselves within the context of what I had set up for them to use. I wanted a set of music to run continuously, for the most part, and to be connected with sections of open improvisation. So, more or less the same as I would do in a trio, quartet, or quintet setting. The soloists were carefully chosen for what I felt they would each bring to the table that would be better than anything I could have written, or even imagined. If feel that I was successful in this regard, but it was those musicians who really brought it all to life. If I only consider Ben Gerstein's solo on "Part III," I trombone solos on a big band record ever, including Tricky Sam and Lawrence Brown with Duke, JJ Johnson, Dicky Wells, or whoever. But maybe that's just me. Also, the expanded rhythm section of piano, guitar, marimba, bass, and drums, is challenging instrumentation that I really enjoy writing for. One other thing about the recording, The Distance, was that when David Torn mixed it, I asked him to try and not make it sound like a typical big band recording, where each section is very clearly separated from the others, i.e. brass, reeds, rhythm, but to try and create the sound of a huge instrument that would have its own collective sound and character. More like an orchestral sound, I suppose, but not in any kind of precious way, but a more organic and unique amalgamation of all the individual instrumental

MF: It's hard to express an opinion without first acknowledging how insane the whole thing is now especially with CDs. At the moment, vinyl seems to have some support, but we'll have to see how that crazy considering that so few people seem to have CD players, or even CD drives in their computers. We can blame Apple and some of the other tech companies for that since much of it seemed to be to help