

INTERVIEW

apr - may - june 2009 | cadence |

MICHAEL VLATKOVICH

Taken & Transcribed by LudwigvanTrikt

CADENCE: I have long thought of you as being from the West Coast but you actually come from the Midwest.

MICHAEL VLATKOVICH:

St. Louis, Missouri, on May 4, 1951. After all these years, St. Louis is one of the cities in which I've spent the least overall time, 18 years. Los Angeles is the location in which I've spent the most time and the West Coast is where I mostly perform and record. Not much attention is paid to the West Coast improvising musicians, particularly the sort of music I choose to record and perform.

Were you a musical prodigy?

What a wild question! No, absolutely not. I consider myself to be a slow, methodical learner. Observation has always played a big part in my development. I have always been good at shutting up and listening. Creativity is certainly quite important, however; knowing how and when to use it is equally important. To have a large palette (ideas) from which to draw the appropriate strategy is also key to success. I've always loved creativity and my game has always been the expansion of ideas. After being on the planet for a while, I've learned how best to be me. That's always been my goal. No one does me better than me. Finding your voice. Finding your method for expressing ideas/concepts of others that have touched your life. Exploring the possibilities and then making them your own. All of it never has to stop. All of it keeps me going.

I had read in your Bio that you "distinguished" yourself while in high school thus receiving a musical scholarship to attend the St. Louis Institute Of Music.

After high school I did get a scholarship to St. Louis Institute of Music. At that point in the school's history it was a very, very small school. For many things a small school is desirable, but I guess the main negative was the fact that there were no ensembles of any sort. Not enough students playing instruments and no one creative enough to use the instrumentalists that were there. All the classes dealt with aspects of music such as dictation, history, form, harmony, etc.... All in all it was a good time for me.

You had some early contact with some of BAG (St. Louis Black Artists Group).

In 1969 I was fortunate to attend a six week clinic with Oliver Nelson at Washington University in St. Louis. Prior to this, I had very little contact or experience with Jazz. At the clinic, I played in both of the big bands. I guess you would say an A and B band. I was not involved in any of the classes. The A band included Julius Hemphill, Oliver Lake, Hamiet Bluiett, and Joe Bowie. We would play a concert every Saturday with guest artists such as Phil Woods, Ron Carter, Thad Jones, Mel Lewis, and Roland Hanna. We, of course, played a lot of Oliver's arrangements as well as those of the guests. The big band would play the first half of the program and Oliver would play the second half with a rhythm section. At that time I also had the opportunity to play in an orchestral concert featuring soloist Phil Woods playing an Oliver Nelson composition. It was all a tremendous learning experience. I knew so little then and to be thrust in this environment was incredible. I really loved his dense, tight harmonies. I loved playing his music. It was a long time ago now, but I do have very fond memories of that time.

Did you ever have any subsequent dealings with what would become BAG?

St. Louis, as with many cities in the United States, was segregated. As I said, I had little Jazz experience prior to this workshop and absolutely no contact with the Black Jazz players in St. Louis. Many ugly things were going on in the '60s. I was just a stupid White kid trying to figure out how to play music. At that point, I had no idea what questions to even ask, much less have the wherewithal to ask them. I had no clue.

How did you get from point A to point B?

Rather than an autobiography here is my answer. I have always had much support and encouragement along the way, both in terms of instruction, advice, participation, etc. Nothing will ever happen unless you are able to find people that will say yes to that which you wish to achieve. Fortunately, I have found those people, mostly with regard to performing in my ensembles. I started putting groups together to read through my music early on. I suppose it was late high school. I still record and perform some of that music. Two examples would be "Animal Circus of Snow" circa 1970 and "All of You None of Us Know" circa 1973. The former appears on Parlor Games and the latter on Across 36 Continents. I have always tended to write music for an ensemble with whom I was currently rehearsing and performing. The ensemble in the early '70s consisted of trumpet, trombone, two woodwinds, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and percussion. Someday maybe I'll revisit some of that music. The music from that time is rather programmatic.

As I said in an earlier question, observation has been vital. You can learn quite a bit from participating in another's rehearsal and I have. I used to play in quite a few rehearsal bands in Los Angeles. Often I find younger musicians forget the obvious: the musicians at your rehearsal are doing you a favor. Treat them well and in a professional way. You need them! It's amazing to me how often that doesn't happen these days.

After attending North Texas State for a short time I went to Los Angeles in 1973. As I said, I played in some rehearsal bands and performed and rehearsed my own group. At that time, I played somewhat regularly at The Cellar Theater. Drummer Les Demerle had the space. He lived there and performed with his band there as well.

Emmett Chapman was just beginning with The Stick. He would also perform. I was also performing trust fund concerts and with a ragtime orchestra, Crystal Palace. It was a wonderful band. Ian Whitcomb (Stomp Off Records) was the singer.

Slowly, I continued to experiment with the balance between written and improvised music. Also the question of the specific role of each member of the ensemble is very important to me. These two concepts have been and will continue to be my focus.

Would you still say that, in some form or fashion, Oliver Nelson is to thank for your being an improviser?

Without a doubt, the major influence of Oliver Nelson on me was his thoughts on voicing, specifically five and six part harmonization. It is not necessary to double a chord tone. Actually, I feel it to be more preferable, unless there is a specific reason not to do so. That concept was truly eye-opening for me. I will always use it.

Prior to those six weeks, my only opportunity to play in an ensemble with semiprofessional/professional musicians was a community orchestra. During that time we played the Overture to Candide composed by Leonard Bernstein. It was also a wonderful experience. Sitting in that orchestra and hearing those sounds, textures, counterpoint, etc. ... A similar experience occurred in the Oliver Nelson band. Hearing those solos voicings, phrasing, etc. It was very informative and a great introduction into that musical world. In retrospect, I wish I had taken more advantage of the opportunities. Youth is wasted on the young.

You developed outré interest at a very young age. What shaped your taste—was radio a factor?

Early on I did not listen to the radio. All the music I heard was through friends' suggestions. It was a long process, slowly checking things out. There just aren't many radio shows playing my interests in improvised music. There were two shows in Los Angeles on KPFK I liked, that played music and had interviews with musicians. This was the late '70s/early '80s. Neither of those shows exist now.

I have never owned a turntable. I always was in a living situation with someone who did. I would buy new and used records or make tape recordings. My priorities were such that I just never could afford to spend money on audio equipment and records, CDs, etc. I spent money on my own records and CDs.

As far as my direction in music, I would have to say it has always been conceptually driven. Some sensorial experience I found gratifying would inspire me to attempt to create a similar experience through music. For the last twenty years or so, I've chosen to make the subject/title of the music relate primarily by means of symbols. Transposing the symbols used to create music over those symbols used to create my subject of interest. As a result, there is a completely different relationship between the title/subject and the music. The concepts now with which I deal are primarily compositionally driven. The symbols of the music are predetermined by the above process. I must say that there can be quite a bit of processing when creating a composition. However, I have never wished the compositional process to interfere with the outcome and I often forget which special compositional process I used. For me it's a game.

Since you pretty much came out of the gate playing so-called avant garde gigs, I wondered if you had bread & butter gigs to survive?

A large percentage of my work has been playing with Latin bands, music copying, and arranging. I did that for many years, sometimes successfully other times not. Capitalism and I have never been close. As a result, without friends, my musical world would at times be rather bleak. It's difficult, particularly in Los Angeles, where the lowest common denominator means everything to have a product, the least common denominator which means nothing. It's a subject I would rather not talk about.

Judging from your current close associations (e.g., Vinny Golia, Jeff Kaiser), it would seem that at some point you discovered a fraternity of like minded improvisers?

I would have to say that's essential. There needs to be a common language. Leading an ensemble that utilizes improvisation as an important component needs musicians with a language that is compatible with yours. It is also important to know their capabilities and to use and accentuate those assets favorably. It is quite different if you are a sideman. The sideman needs to function as the composer wishes. The sideman is a member of the ensemble making choices based on the music, not on what makes him/her sound good. You can often find a situation: nice solo / wrong tune. All of the musicians with whom I play use in their ensembles musicians that know what is being asked of them. The written music directs them in a certain direction and they develop those ideas in a myriad of ways. Sometimes the developmental section is discussed, sometimes not. It is completely wrong to think that a member of the ensemble can choose to do whatever they wish. There are choices being made by every member all the time. All of the choices have consequences. I often use the analogy of a conversation about grapefruit. One involved in that conversation would not be likely to interject brake pads. It's the same with music. My Quartet (David Mott, baritone sax; Jonathan Golove, cello; and Chris Garcia, drums) is a perfect case in point. Each of the members is a composer and we all have a common language that we utilize when performing. We all understand how to make a musical event happen and we each function in the ensemble in a specific role when needed to help encourage the development of that musical event. I chose the instrumentation of the Quartet not only because of the individuals but also because of the instruments they play. The instrument one plays colors their interpretation of musical ideas and I love to exploit those ideas in my music. A success for me is when you can blur the lines between the written and the improvised.

I met Vinny in 1982. He asked me to play in the first Large Ensemble concert at UCLA. It was a very small group compared to now. Many in the ensemble I had never met. It was the beginning of my involvement with some truly marvelous, creative musicians.

In 1978, after being in New York City for six months, I went back to Los Angeles with a clearer picture of my musical focus. I was rehearsing several instrumentations and ultimately found the group that recorded my first record (Thank You Records), which came out in 1982. It was a few months prior to the Large Ensemble concert.

As well as playing in the Large Ensemble, Vinny was also participating in my ensembles. My Parlor Games CD, recorded in 1982, has a track with Vinny. It was the first of many performances he played with me. It has been a very rewarding relationship over these 25 years. During the '80s the Large Ensemble, because of its size, played much more than now. We were younger and there was a lot of energy and enthusiasm. The musicians in this scene have always been very supportive of one another. We often organized concert series for all of us to perform. Los Angeles can be a difficult place for this sort of music, but really, I would have to say everywhere is difficult.

Currently I perform with Bobby Bradford's Motet, and Bill Roper and I have a duo project I love doing. Both of them I met in the Large Ensemble. Rob Blakeslee is another I met playing in the Large Ensemble. I have some wonderful live/studio (1992) recordings with Rob, Vinny, Bill Plake, Anders Swanson, Chris Garcia, sometimes Bill Roper, and myself. That particular group played quite a bit in the early '90s. Various forms of that ensemble toured the United States in '92, '93, and '94. It was amazing!

I would say that the scene in Los Angeles is very slow right now. There are many musicians with whom I would like to perform, however, there's just nothing going on. It's unfortunate, but it does take energy and enthusiasm to keep a concert series going. And did I mention money?

What has been your experience with your own label?

It was a matter of doing what I want to do and figuring out how to do it. Prior to the release of my first record, the music I was doing was more accessible. I was collaborating with my wife [Devorah Vlatkovich] at the time (1975). She was an extremely talented composer, pianist, and vocalist. I was arranging her material and we were performing it with a group. We also had composed a longer work entitled "Bird Book." It was a story another friend and I had written. My wife and I set it to music. We recorded that composition along with others and did try—to some degree—to shop it, but there was little interest. I suppose I realized at that point that unless (and until) money can be made from your project, no one cares. It was at this time (1978) that I really wished to explore the relationship between composed and improvised music. Up until that point I was employing the traditional methods of arranging/orchestrating. So I began writing essentially two-part compositions which were to be played by any combination of instruments. I explored many instrumental combinations and began to find individuals that worked well in that format. For me, the individual was more important than the instrument he/she played. I found a group that I felt worked well together and we recorded and did a limited amount of performing. I was able to re-create with this ensemble, through my music, emotions other composers had created in me. It was a great time and experience.

My first record was recorded around 1980 and I finally got the money together to put it out in 1982. Although it did receive extremely favorable reviews, no one will ever be able to convince me that anyone other than myself would have put it out. Not long after that record came out we recorded again, which ultimately would become Parlor Games. Because I waited so long to put it out, it became a CD. I added additional material, also recorded around that time, to fill it out, being that the record length is 45 minutes and the CD 60 minutes.

My second record, *The One That Never Stayed* (Thank You Records 1983), was, I felt, the best project I had done because I had achieved both the balance between written and improvised music I was striving to accomplish and the blurring of the roles of the instruments I chose. The execution of those roles came off beautifully on this record. I thought this record was extremely successful. Unfortunately, I had little money to promote it and I felt it was often times completely misunderstood.

My third release was a duet record. I thought that the music I had been writing should be performed by the minimum number necessary. There are some overdubs on a few of the tracks, but I wanted to keep it simple particularly because the second record had been very complicated.

Now enters Chuck Britt and the formation of Transvalue. He is a poet/artist and we began collaborating around 1980. Originally the group consisted of tuba, trombone, drums, and poet. We performed many occasions with that configuration. When we started recording, we expanded the group and David Crigger became an integral component in both the recording process and production. Transvalue released two records and, at that point, Thank You Records went into hibernation. I had no money and the CD thing was beginning to really take off.

Finally, in the late '90s I was able to resume documenting the music I was composing/performing. Much of it is still to be recorded; many recordings I have done are still [waiting] to be released. The current situation for me is very reminiscent of the transitional period from record to CD I experienced in the '80s. Is it worth putting out any more CDs?

I deliberately and rarely discuss/explain the project and its goals because I wish to encourage responses that are free of my own thoughts. It's always curious.

Are you at the break even point with the label or is that a consideration for you?

I'm nowhere close. I lose money on most everything I do regarding this sort of music. You seem to forget that very few people care about this music. Just try to book a tour in this country. You'll find out exactly how excited the presenters are to talk with you. Every summer you'll see advertised "Jazz Festivals." There are many, but few ever have a substantial percentage of even mainstream Jazz. They have acts that are not Jazz but R&B, Soul, Funk, etc. Since I'm talking about the West Coast, the Playboy Jazz Festival comes to mind, which has never considered John Carter, Horace Tapscott, or Bobby Bradford. Tower of Power, and Earth, Wind and Fire are not Jazz groups. Why are they performing at a Jazz Festival? I hope it's not necessary to answer that question.

I know it's difficult in a capitalist society to understand why anyone would spend their own money to finance various recordings, tours, etc. It's really stupid, irrational, crazy, foolish... the list goes on and on. That's what I do. Why do I do it? Simply put, because that's what I do and need and wish to do. I have never done this music with the idea of anyone liking it. I wish to be creative and I wish to follow my own creative journey. Even if I wished to please an audience, what would you suggest? It's ridiculous to think in those terms and be creative. It's impossible to please everyone all the time. Do Smooth Jazz or Pop? Those folks are looking for some financial reward. They are the ones that commerce feels have a chance to make money. They get airplay and advertising. This society backs exclusively those that will make money. You don't find financial institutions and Wall Street backing/supporting companies that break even. They don't even like to back companies that make a 10% profit. They want winners and they do not care how they win, only that they win. I'm as far from that scenario as you can get. I don't get reviewed in the higher profile magazines because none of those magazines care much about the West Coast. They know nothing about what goes on and they know very little if anything about the musicians. Finally, I'm not willing to pay for ad space to get a review or an infomercial or both.

This society is truly two-faced when it encourages an individual to be his own man and then penalizes the ones that do exactly that. You'll notice that all professions, including those that are music related, have an unwritten code/rule book to be followed and those that stray are

considered inferior, losers, people to be excluded; people that should be feared. It's rather sick and most importantly sad when a society is incapable of making judgments. Society is told who to like. Society is told what to buy. Society is incapable of making decisions about which music or art or car it should embrace. The professionals know what's best. It's amazing how many believe this bullshit. It's more amazing that you hear supposed professionals making absurd statements such as, "No one is experimenting. No one is trying to expand the improvisational tradition." Please tell me again the date? Twenty-first century?

When I listen I hear a very open-ended style of composition which lends itself to some extended unselfish improvisation, as on Alivebuquerque (pfMentum Records).

My goal with these compositions, as with all my compositions, is to give the musicians a structure/framework on which to develop more completely their vision at that moment. Sometimes that concept is very precise and other times it's intentionally vague. In the smaller ensembles, the contribution of each player usually has a more profound effect simply because all are often needed to make the musical idea more complete.

The improvised portions of the music are always based on the composed music. How that is achieved is sometimes more predictable at times than other [times]. The familiarity of the music, and, more importantly, of the musicians, makes the improvising an extension of the written composition utilizing fragments as backgrounds, ostinatos, etc. We are re-orchestrating the themes each time we play. If you were to listen to either "Blue Fragments" or "Every Second..." on my duet CD with Bill Roper and then listen to the same compositions with the Quartet, you might notice the similarities and the differences. There is always a give and take, in these two examples, regardless of whether the group size is two or four. The concept by and large stays the same. The execution changes, depending on the players involved. I would also have to say that specific players make a big difference. On Alivebuquerque I specifically picked those musicians (Chris Garcia, d; Jon Golove, cel; David Mott; sax) not only for the instruments they play, but also because of who they are.

Several years ago I spoke with the late AEC trumpeter, Lester Bowie, and AEC drummer, Don Moye. Both of them said that their lives were examples that musicians can make money playing avant garde Jazz (improvised music).

I suppose if they said they are making it, I'm not going to say otherwise. I saw them in '79 on three consecutive nights at the Village Gate. I don't remember the audience being terribly large. I saw both of them again about four years ago with Brass Fantasy in Los Angeles. That was well attended, at least the night I was there.

Here is an excerpt from the obituary of Paul Rutherford. It appeared in the Guardian, written by Richard Williams.

"The last years were difficult. Apart from occasional appearances at the Red Rose and the Vortex in London, there were virtually no playing opportunities in Britain. To complicate the business of existing, his beliefs had prevented him from investing in home ownership and had cost him at least one of his three long-term relationships with women. Eventually he was forced to take a part-time job as a doorman at a working man's club, while health problems arising from a lifelong fondness for beer resulted in two major collapses."

I would have to consider Paul's music to be more difficult than mine for the listener. However, you know, if there isn't a snare on two and four, it isn't music for many. My experiences, whether as leader or sideman, have been less than desirable. The music, at best, is misunderstood.

Is it because of the difficult climate for improvised music in LA that you have done film projects including The Mask, Jingle All The Way, and John Cassavettes' The Tempest?

There are not many musicians anywhere that can solely make a living doing this sort of music. Most teach and acquire grants to make it happen. There are probably 5,000 hardcore fans of this

music in the world. Very few people care about this music and many hate this music, particularly musicians and educators. The lack of exposure certainly doesn't help, but music for many functions as little more than wallpaper. I will say, however, sometimes I have found that individuals at my performances who just freely observe without preconceived ideas of what should occur, enjoy themselves. A performance for the uninitiated is much better than a recording because they can observe how, who, and where the sound is originating and get a sense of the energy involved in producing those musical landscapes. Recordings make those observations more difficult, if not impossible. There are many different ways to enjoy and take in this music. You do not have to have perfect pitch, music theory background, and/or a vast knowledge of the instrumental techniques used in the production of the music. I think to some extent those involved in some way with the music intimidate those not knowledgeable, causing them to feel inadequate to appreciate a concert without having immersed their lives in a musical career themselves. We love. We hate. We live. We die. Most if not all, can relate to those themes. Music/Art is often about those themes.

Would you say that most of the possibilities for the acoustic trombone have been exhausted?

There are an infinite number of possibilities. Limits are more often than not imposed by the individual. These days usually it is the arrangement/use of concepts as opposed to creating new concepts which regularly appear in musical productions. In a world of so much excess it's not easy, even when you're vigilantly looking, to find those special abilities unique to an individual. Society often is interested and often focuses only on certain aspects of a performance that are easy to discern, such as speed and technique.

Making music should be the ultimate goal. No matter what you can do, it has to be appropriate for the occasion. Some are very good at incorporating their thing into the music and come out the other side with a musical product of quality. Those are definitely creative and sometimes innovative folks. That will never cease to exist. Those musicians early on are drawn to a particular path. They have a propensity for that path. A combination of both natural ability and luck are needed, then nurtured. All the ingredients are in place and—presto!—you get a creative musician. I don't see that stopping unless the process stops.

The danger occurs when exclusivity of certain techniques or concepts are employed. The performance can become static because the listener is not surprised; there is no anticipation of events. Variety is important to me. I much prefer to be inclusive and use it all in non-traditional ways. Keep them guessing.

July 6, 2007 - Los Angeles, CA