

Michael Gordon
www.michaelgordonmusic.com
info@michaelgordonmusic.com

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American Mavericks: An Interview with Michael Gordon
By Alan Baker
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ALAN BAKER: You were born in America, but grew up in Nicaragua. Can I get you to talk a little bit about where you lived, what the experience was like, and what the sounds around you were at that point?

MICHAEL GORDON: I basically lived in the jungle outside of Managua. It's funny, I don't remember the sounds; I remember what it looked like. There were a few houses and we had this cinderblock wall built around all the houses; outside that wall was the wild. As kids we used to climb over the wall and walk into the jungle. But the wild kind of came in: I remember iguanas and seeing tarantulas walking in our living room. Parrots lived right around our house. So there were all these animals and all this wild. I remember walking into the jungle and just getting into places where little boys shouldn't be. It's way, way back in my memory now because it really was a while back now.

What age did you leave there?

I was 8.

Did you come directly to New York?

My family moved to Miami Beach—which is also a very cool place, actually—and I lived there until I was seventeen. Not quite as wild on the animal side.

Do you remember music from that time period?

I started taking piano lessons in Nicaragua. I know my parents used to take me to this teacher and it was classic. I used to call her "la bruja" which means "the witch." She would slap my hands with the ruler and I would be terrified to go to my piano lesson. It's exactly the opposite of the piano lessons you want to give your child. But I really loved music and when we moved to Miami and I continued with my piano lessons, I figured out that I could write these little pieces of music and distract my teacher from the fact that I hadn't practiced. So I'd go to my lesson and my teacher would say, "Play your Mozart." And I'd say, "Well, let me show you this thing I wrote." And I'd be able to distract her and I wouldn't have to play the Mozart and I thought, "That's really good." And then I just started writing music. I was pretty young.

So that was age 10-ish?

Yeah, about 10, I'd say.

Do you have any pieces from then?

No. I have no idea what those pieces were like.

What's the earliest piece that you still have?

Well, I tried to throw them all away until I was about 24, 25. I have an early piece for clarinet and piano. The earliest piece I have is a piano piece that I used to play myself. That's kind of my first piece, or something like that.

Do you consider yourself a pianist?

No. But I play in public.

Does that make you nervous? Or is that something you enjoy?

Well, it makes me nervous and I enjoy it. Both.

Talk a little bit about your time at Yale, like what attitudes you went in with and how that shaped you.

I went to Yale for a graduate degree in 1980. Yale was very exciting because I was in a great class. My classmates included David Lang—who I started Bang on a Can with, Aaron [Jay] Kernis—who's a great American composer, Michael Daugherty—another great American composer, and a bunch of other very smart, very interesting people. With all due respect to my teachers, I learned more just hanging out with the other students there. We had a lot of fun together. We used to play pool and drink beer and talk about music and listen to music and go into New York to hear concerts or whatever. It was a very opening experience for me.

Did the school provide resources for ensembles? How did you actually make real the things you were talking about, thinking about, or writing?

I actually did very little writing while I was there. I was kind of trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I think people like Aaron or people like Michael Daugherty wanted to write orchestral music, and that's something I didn't want to do. So I was trying to figure out, "Well, what is it I want to do? If my music is really weird compared to [other musicians], am I really going in the right direction or not?" These are some of the questions I was asking myself, and, "How am I going to perform my music or play it in public if, in fact, I don't want to write orchestral music or I don't want to write a string quartet or I don't want to go down this path where all these ensembles exist to play [my] music? Then what am I going to do?"

How did you solve that?

When I got out of school, I started my own ensemble and I started performing my own music. I did that for thirteen years. The music that I was writing, first of all, was amplified. And classical music isn't amplified. I also employed electric guitar. Classical music obviously didn't employ electric guitar. I see Steve Mackey's name on this list. Steve Mackey played in my group for a bunch of years and we toured together. It was also for a different audience, quite frankly. The classical music audience is very contained. In a certain way, it's the most conservative audience that exists because it's a museum audience. It's like the audience that listens to the radio station that's the "oldies but goodies" or the "classic hits of the '50s." They're listening to the same pieces over and over and over again and they're getting this incredible thrill and enjoyment out of doing

that. They know what they want and it's not anything that's going to challenge that—or not even speaking about challenging that—it's not anything that's going to be different. They know what they want. If you want pasta and someone brings you chicken, that's not what you want.

Why fight it?

That's really my attitude: "Why fight it?" I'm very fortunate, in a sense, to have seen several generations of composers in this country create audiences for themselves. Harry Partch created an audience for himself. John Cage created an audience for himself. Steve Reich and Philip Glass created audiences, and Meredith Monk created an audience for her self. We knew that could be done, and I knew, "Well, I'm just going to go out and start playing!" My first concert was in an art gallery and people came. [This was with] the Michael Gordon Philharmonic. People came. At the time, I played in this very hip East Village art gallery called International With Monument. There was a very big East Village art scene for a very short number of years. There were all these tiny galleries. I just started playing and what I found was that you could come here and play in New York, in an art gallery, but then you could send your music or write letters to Europe. And, you could go and tour in Europe and play concerts there. That's how I started.

Several composers have talked about Europe being more receptive to new sounds.

I don't think they're more receptive; I think it is part of their history. In other words, classical music for us is something that came from Europe and already existed. But classical music for them is something that evolved. There never was a break between the creation of new work and the past. So it's just built into their system and into their consciousness. I was just at a festival in Basil, Switzerland. At the opening concert the prime minister of Switzerland came and gave a talk about how great it is that they have this festival where all the works are new. And I went to the opening of the Holland Festival a while back when I was living in Amsterdam and the Queen came to the first concert. Now just imagine President Bush coming to a concert—the San Francisco [American] Mavericks concert, right? You understand how absurd that sounds to us, but how natural it is to them. Of course, the Queen is going to come to the opening concert of the Holland Festival because it's a great Dutch event and they're proud of their culture and they want to support it. In Europe, things are totally different.

So you formed the Philharmonic while you were still at Yale?

No, when I left.

Did you move to New York then?

Yes, I moved to New York in '78. I had dropped out of several different schools several times and I came to New York. At that time, it was a very exciting period because it seemed like everyone was 20-years-old and their hair had been dyed purple, and it seemed like everyone was playing in a rock band. There was this huge kind of post-punk, new wave scene there. I started playing in a band called Peter and the Girlfriends. Basically, we'd go to a bar around the corner where people were hanging out and we'd say, "We're playing in half-an-hour at so-and-so," and 50 people would leave the bar, walk a couple of blocks, and climb up three flights of stairs into our loft. And then we'd just play. That's the way the scene was. You'd just put posters up on the streets and then we started playing in clubs and it was just exciting. It was a lot of fun.

What is it like to innovate today as it was compared to Ives, Antheil, and Varèse? How are things different today than they were for them in what you're doing?

These composers you mention: Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, Harry Partch, and Henry Cowell. These composers; they're like composers. Instead of staying safely at home in the suburbs, and when you want to take a vacation you fly to London or something, these are people who tried to climb Mount Everest or go deep-sea diving or something like that. I'm not sure exactly how to explain it. I always think of it as if the classical music world is a superhighway where—if you want to write string quartets or if you want to write orchestra music—all the apparatus for you is in place. If you don't, you're basically facing the Amazon. And the only help you have, really, is a machete. In this case, I think of Conlon Nancarrow as someone who pulled out his machete and started chopping away. The amazing thing for a lot of people is that they had to invent their own language, their own performance practice, in many cases their own instruments, in some cases their own tuning systems or their own theories, and most importantly, their own audience. When I think of Ives I feel kind of sad because, in a certain sense, I'm not sure he ever really got to enjoy the audience. Although he had a sense of the importance of his music, he was resigned to the idea that he was an oddball. Whereas someone like Harry Partch, who invented his own instruments and went out and started playing in front of people, wasn't that reflective to think "I'm an oddball." He just went out and did it and people started listening to his music.

Philip Glass and Steve Reich have been not only the leading experimental composers of this whole movement, music called Minimalism, but they've also—in a sense—helped popularize the avant-garde. I think that over the last 20 years, the avant-garde or experimentalism, not only in music but in dance and theater and so forth have become popularized. Now there's, in a sense, a whole audience of people who are going, "I want to see something new." It's not, "I'm afraid to see something new." There's the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the Lincoln Center Summer Festival. Even all over the country, like in Minneapolis with the Walker Art Center, where there are spaces that are presenting only new work to audiences that are actually interested in them. I think it's probably analogous to the end of the 19th century where classical music broke out of being supported by a system of patrons to very small groups ... where Liszt was playing in big halls and putting on shows for a paying public who wanted to see this new work. So in a certain sense, I feel like the beneficiary. And I think all these composers are the beneficiaries of the time and that new art is now considered an exciting thing. It's on the radar screen for culturally curious people. With Ives—in the early part of the 20th century—in an America that knew only classical music as this European music from the 18th and 19th century, I think he was facing a much harder situation.

Let's talk about your music. "Yo Shakespeare" is still such a rock-solid piece and one of my favorites. And for someone who's hearing your music for the first time, with that piece—and we can talk about others—what are we hearing?

You hear this piece and the first thing you hear is an electric guitar, for one thing. What I've always been interested in since my days playing in rock bands is rhythm. Rhythm that makes you energized and makes you want to move, but at the same time is complex. With "Yo Shakespeare" there's basically three types of dance rhythms going on at the same time. The three rhythms are almost as if there are three different dance rooms with three different dance bands playing at the same time. As if they're playing different songs and different tempos, but somehow you could dance to it or somehow you could feel that there was a common rhythm. That's how I think of "Yo Shakespeare," and that's how it began in my mind. It began as this thing I wanted to move; I want to feel like my body's moving.

Was that a breakthrough piece for you?

Definitely.

How did things shift when you got there? What were doing before?

I say that I'd been trying to write "Yo Shakespeare" for ten years before I wrote it. In this weird sense, I think one of the things that really helped me was the computer. It was the beginning of being able to write music on the computer. I had this very elementary software in which—it didn't have measures, it was just music paper, and then after you wrote the music—you could put the bar line anywhere you wanted. So I just started writing without any bar lines. I started writing one set of rhythms and I started writing another set of rhythms and listening back to them and I was going, "This sounds so great. I wish I could squeeze this into a measure." One of the weird things I was doing, and one of the things I did in "Yo Shakespeare," is I started splitting up triplet notes—which is a technical thing and I think you have to be a musician to understand this—but instead of dividing a beat into three triplets, I would write two triplet notes, a bunch of eighth notes and then two more triplet notes and a bunch of eighth notes. I started listening to this and I started to think, "This sounds so great, but there's no way this can be played and there's no way this can get into a measure." So I said, "Let me keep writing." So I started writing this music that had no bar lines. It was just one big thing, like non-stop, and I was working on it for awhile and then I kept looking and I kept looking and I said, "You know you can actually draw a bar line here." And still to this day when I talk to students, I write some of the rhythms of "Yo Shakespeare" on a chalkboard and say, "Where do you draw the bar lines?" They're all stumped and they're going, "This looks so weird to me." And I figured, "Well, you can actually draw a bar line here and you can put all of this in 4/4." That was kind of the moment that shifted everything for me, and I was fortunate to be working with this great group in England called Icebreaker. They looked at [Yo Shakespeare] and they were like, "We'll figure this out." When I showed the piece to Steve Reich, he got really excited, and he said, "The first thing you've got to do in this score is, on the front page, you've got to say, "This is the rhythm. Because if people look at this score, they're going to think you're an idiot. But if you actually tell them on the front page that you know you're an idiot, then they'll take you seriously." And that's what I did. When I made the score on the very first page I put, "Here's how you play the rhythm," and I gave them three options. And now people can figure it out and they get into it and they go, "Oh yeah, it looked really weird, but I realized I can play this."

So, that process of doing something on the computer, listening back to it, and hearing how it works—it's similar but different. But it's similar to working with a small group of musicians like a rock band, because you get to hear back and react to what you're hearing—like you can if you sit back and listen to someone playing something.

It's an important part of the process. A rock band, unfortunately, is a democracy. It's like the bass player wants to do something and everyone's working together and there's this group consensus of what sounds good and what doesn't, and when you're a composer it's like fascism. You just decide what you want and you're telling these musicians what to play and they can't say, "Well, I'd rather to do this," or, "I like this note better." They just have to play the notes you want them to play. But it is connected to forming music. In pop music, you're creating the music as you're rehearsing and playing and it's connected to that. It's always been an important part. Before computers, I used to use a four-track tape recorder and play things and listen back to them. So it's always been an important part of the process for me.

What recent piece points in the direction of where you're heading? What are the salient features of it?

I have to tell you quite honestly, I'm not sure where I'm heading. I'm trying new things all the time. The last project I did is a piece called "Decasia." It was a large orchestra piece in which the orchestra sits on scaffolding that's three tiers high and is a pyramid, and the audience stands in the middle. So the audience is completely surrounded by the orchestra. And the orchestra—I also deliberately detuned the orchestra so that there are three flutes: one is tuned an eighth of a note higher, one is tuned an eighth of a note lower. And there's a contingent of pianos that are all out of tune. The entire piece is an hour long and it sounds like five pianos fell out of an apartment building, landed on the ground, and then you went and played them all at the same time. That's basically what I was trying to do—make the orchestra sound different and make the orchestral experience different. Just the fact that the audience was in the middle, there was film and projections with "Decasia." In a sense, the hall had to be built to play this piece that happened. Writing a traditional orchestra piece isn't my thing. But given the opportunity to work with an orchestra, I asked them, "Are you willing to do this? Are you willing to do that?" And they said, "Okay." Again, it's much easier in Europe because this particular orchestra—like many orchestras in Europe—owns itself. So the management works for the orchestra and the orchestra picks its projects. So all the labor management problems that we have here in America with the musicians and the administration of orchestras didn't exist. And also, when you show up there they say, "Hey! We want to work with you," as opposed to the reaction you get here. So it was a great experience.

And the reaction here is, "Wait for your rehearsal slot"?

"Wait for your rehearsal slot," and "You're just some guy that management told us we have to work with!" And that's basically the experience of working with an orchestra in America. It's not universal, and I don't want to put it down, but it is a very frustrating experience all around—for the musicians, the conductors, the composers, and the management—the way orchestras are set up. The other project, my newest project that I've been working on all year, is a studio record that is a recording. I'm making a record that is being created in the studio, in the same way that pop musicians work or rock musicians work. I've been really fortunate to get the support of Nonesuch behind this record. They put out Weather, and I went in to talk to them and said, "What are you interested in? Are you interested in doing another record?" And they were thinking that I'm a classical composer and, "What piece do you have to record and put on record?" And I said, "I'm not interested in that. I really want to make a studio record." And they said, "What's that?" I said, "You know, like pop musicians work. I'll create the music in the studio." They said, "Yeah, but you're not a pop musician; you're a classical musician." And I said, "Well, I know. That's a big problem because, obviously, it's a huge expense. They spend a lot of money making these records." So they were kind of intrigued and they said, "Well, look. Why don't you go make one of these things, and we'll pay for just a little bit of it, and you'll come and play it for us because we have no idea what you're talking about." And I did and they really liked it and they've supported the whole project. I'm closing in on finishing this. I've been working on this for about a year. It's been a very intense learning experience—an intense experience in every way. People say that it's completely different and people say that it sounds just like Michael Gordon's music, but in a different way.

Is it like a throw back to doing stuff with a four-track, except with a lot better toys?

Well, in a certain sense it's freer than that. I'm combining a lot of different worlds. I'm working with this young man who is in the electronica scene. He just works with computers and programmed sounds. We'll sit around and basically invent sounds. We'll steal sounds and borrow sounds and create sounds and put them together. We'll run them backwards and out them upside-down and start working with that. And then I'll bring in five violinists and we'll record, and we'll

try to combine these things. And then I can listen to it and go, "Hmm, I need something, I need something else." And then I'll call in someone else. So it's a very unusual way to work. I feel like I'm walking into unknown territory, but it's a lot of fun.

Maybe we can talk about some basic stuff. What is a "Maverick" composer?

Being a maverick is being able to create something that everyone else acknowledges as being something that they haven't heard before. Where people turn around and say, "Wow, I haven't heard that before," or, "That's a new idea." In a sense, you've created something or done something that's entered the world and is new, which is an amazing thing to do.

What about the topic of American music?

American musicians and American composers have been on the forefront of pushing the tradition of art music forward. I think that, because of the lack of chains to a cultural heritage or history, we're free to create people like Harry Partch or Conlon Nancarrow. These are unique individuals and there are no European equivalents. In Europe, the cultural path is too ingrained in their consciousness to break away on that level. And I think that Europe and the rest of the world have really looked to America in the past 50 years for innovation in music.

Is there a characteristic sound? How do you identify something as being "American"?

Well, there's a characteristic sound to what I consider the "outlaw tradition." It's unpolished, raw, and different sounding. I think in Europe they think it's the "Wild West" or it's these American barbarians who have come to tear down this glorious history of classical music. But if it's connected in any other way, I don't know. It's more of a kind of freedom than anything else.

How do you find your audience these days?

The big job, in a sense, is to put music on the same map as dance or literature. Someone who considers him/herself interested in culture will buy the new book by this very fascinating author or will go see Bill T. Jones Dance Company, but they aren't necessarily going to go to a music event. Unless you tell them, we're the same thing. We're the equivalent of Bill T. Jones.

That's your approach with Bang on a Can, I take it? Can you talk a little bit about the organization and what you've done?

That's basically what we've been doing and how we started in 1987. And we really didn't start Bang on a Can to begin any kind of established thing; we just started a one-day, 12-hour concert and our feeling was, "Let's just make this seem like a cool, fun thing to do and let's advertise it to people who go to dance concerts." That was our aim. We did and it worked and we're so happy and so thrilled that we said, "Okay, let's do this again next year!" And out of that, Bang on a Can has grown up. And in New York, Bang on a Can has a lot of name recognition. People who haven't seen us or come to any of our concerts have heard of Bang on a Can. And they're always confused about what it is. They don't know whether it's classical music or pop music or this type of music. It's like, "Oh yeah, I've heard of you. You're a rock band, right?" or, "I've heard of you. You're a like a string quartet, right?" And that, in a sense, has been really good for us in that we haven't scared anyone away. Or, we try not to scare people away by saying, "This is classical music," or "This is serious music," or "This is concert music." That's a killer.

So what happens when you become the establishment?

Well, we're not the establishment. There's a difference between being established and being the establishment. We're one of a couple of groups, like the Kronos Quartet, who have been successful presenting contemporary music. But we're still on the outside.

Maybe you could talk a little bit about Steve Reich and his role as a mentor. He seems to be very supportive of Bang on a Can people and others. What is his role in American music and what do you think of his music?

I think Steve's the greatest composer on the planet, first of all. Going back to that image of the explorer chopping his way through the jungle or climbing Mount Everest, I really think he's a person who, 30 or 40 years ago, had a clear vision of where he was going, where he wanted to go, and what he wanted music to sound like. And he just unwaveringly created his own superhighway through the Amazon by himself, chopping away bit by bit. It's impossible to acknowledge his contribution to contemporary music, which in a certain way has become ubiquitous. His music is copied by film composers, sampled by rock bands, and remixed by deejays. There are rock bands like Stereolab and Tortoise. You put their records on and it sounds like they've been listening to Steve Reich all day, and then went in and figured out a tune. His sound has now become ubiquitous, and it is so ubiquitous that people don't even know what the source is anymore. The person I can really compare him to is Van Gogh. Where, here's this guy, and he's painting these paintings; everyone thinks he's a nut. They look at the paintings and think, "This is really stupid," and then—all of a sudden—it's the work that becomes in everyone's consciousness. You walk into someone's bathroom and the wallpaper looks like a Van Gogh. It's just everywhere. Steve is a very serious guy, there's no B.S. He just says exactly what he thinks. He doesn't flatter you; he doesn't try to present anything in a way that's easy to deal with. It's like, "This is my music. This is what I want to do. This is what I think," and it's amazing. Some find it difficult to deal with. I know when I talk to him he's going to tell me what he thinks, and that's really refreshing.

Talk a little bit about Steve Mackey—him as a person.

You know, I met Steve Mackey at the MacDowell colony. And I just remember we sat down to dinner and he started talking about dental floss and I swear we spent a half an hour talking about dental floss and I just thought, "This guy is a real nut." But we had a lot of fun. He's an electric guitar player, and at that time he had kind of put the guitar aside and we started talking about the guitar and he said, "I really want to get back into playing," and this and that. And I said, "I've got a job for you if you want." And he started playing with my group and then Bang on a Can actually commissioned a solo guitar piece from him, and that was like the first, "I don't want to." But then he got on this roll playing the guitar, which is a very good thing.

What characteristics of his music did you appreciate?

He's a real quirky composer; it's like the dental floss conversation. He'll retune an instrument and you'll start hearing things you've never heard and bring in all kinds of strange—it's kind of this weird Americana stuff. It's like all these different elements are put together and you go, "Wow, did I really hear that?" And you kind of smile and go, "Did that really happen?"

I have the same feeling about his stuff. If you want to, look at that list. And if there are any composers on there and something about them really intrigues you or you really appreciate their music—

There's so many great people and so many—here's Glenn Branca, who's another genius, innovator, Mount Everest climber, machete wielding composer who's completely done his own thing, completely eccentric. He's really smart but he's completely untamed. He's not trying to fit into the world in any way. That is an amazing thing when you think about society and you think about how the whole point of civilization is to make you fit in. It's very hard to break out of that box and be creative. We need that type of creativity, not only in the arts—we need it in science, we need it in every type of innovation. So when people come along and their mere being just says, "I have succeeded in not learning any of that. I have succeeded in not figuring out what I'm supposed to do," and instead, "I'm just going to do something else, something that you couldn't even imagine." That's an amazing thing. When you talk about some of the people on this list like Glenn Branca, it just blows my mind.

Briefly tell me about a career high and low. What's the high point? What's the low point?

High point was, I wrote a new piece for a European group called Ensemble Moderne. They're based in Frankfurt. And they premiered it with John Adams conducting at the Royal Albert Hall in London. The Royal Albert Hall is like this huge place; it seats 5,000 people and it was part of the BBC proms. I think that was a real high point for me. I was very excited about the piece and it was great to work with John Adams; he's just an incredible musical spirit, an incredible conductor, and again, a very supportive person. Walking on stage afterwards and taking a bow was an incredible thrill.

Sold out?

It wasn't sold out but it was pretty full. It was good. Low point is probably every day. Low point is waking up and going, "I have to bash my head against this wall for the next six hours and figure out how to write music," and I go through that every day.

So it's a struggle?

It's a struggle for me, yeah. It's a real struggle.

Not getting any easier?

It's not getting easier. I have less and less time. I just mean in the day, because I have a family. But it's not getting any easier.

So you're doing all this stuff with Bang on a Can, you've got the Summer Music Program and you've probably got outstanding commissions. Do you have to break away and lock the world out for weeks, months at a time? Can you do that?

No. I try to break away for four hours at a time or five hours at a time and lock the world out. Also for me, writing music is like a meditation. I shut the phone off, close the door, go into some other space, and I'm basically in a meditation for four or five hours. And then it's out, and then the phone's ringing and the kids are home and the bills have to be paid and the e-mails have to be answered and it goes crazy.

Does it affect you negatively if you're not able to get into that space?

Yeah, it drives me crazy.