A Conversation with Michael Rhodes
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic 8/2002)

This is the first interview we've done with a musician who's not been releasing CDs under his own name as an artist. But I dare say he has appeared on more recordings than any artist we have interviewed. In a town notorious for dangerous pickers, Michael Rhodes is certain to be in most anyone's list of the top three bassists, though the other two may vary. Beyond his profound musicianship, his look and his vibe have branded him. He doesn't appear American, really-tall and wiry, shaven head, loose clothing, frequently barefoot on stage. Penetrating eyes, quick to smile, a quipster in the extreme.

I will go to see him play regardless of whom he's playing with, and there is no one else in that category. When he's onstage, everyone plays their absolute best, I've seen it happen many times. I've even talked to other players about it, and they've said literally that they feel called upon to be as present and musical as they can be in his presence. It's rare, but some people just Do that. I've learned a lot about music just watching and listening to Rhodes play: groove, note duration, note selection, concentration, communication, playing off the other players and singers, playing your rig...it goes on and on. And he's not the kind of guy that talks about any of that stuff, he just is it, and does it, and it's there to be seen and heard. He's just showing up and getting in the zone, and having a good time.

Although he's a highly sought after session player and has probably played on a number of CDs in your collection, on our Listen page we will feature some clips of his work with a few Nashville bands of which he is a member:

The Fortunate Sons is a roots rock band with songwriter Gary Nicholson as the principal writer and singer, but guitarist/producer Kenny Greenberg is also a featured composer here. Chad Cromwell is the favored skinsmith in this fast running crowd, and the mighty Reese Winans is on organ and piano.

The Players is a collection of red hot session guys that did a CMT special and this is an accompanying CD. The legendary Eddie Bayers is on drums. John Hobbs on keys is not only a rare player, but turns in some beautiful writing. Paul Franklin on steel and Brent Mason on guitar need no introduction to anyone who likes inspired country playing, it doesn't get any better than those two.

Lastly, the Vinyl Kings is an amazing conglomeration of hit songwriters, session players and producers doing original Beatles type material. No, it's much more than that. They Sound like the Beatles. Check it out, it's mindblowing. Their shows are so much fun, an excellent dance party I never miss. The CD hasn't really been officially released yet, and it's already a best seller at CDBaby. Look for an interview with The Vinyl Kings in an upcoming issue of Puremusic.

Brunching recently at the Red Wagon on Nashville's East Side with Michael and Lindsay, I realized we had to get an interview with him; he's such an interesting character, so extemporaneous and aware. Popped over to his beautifully done house a week or so later, and we went next door. He showed me his current project, an old house that he was gutting and making

into his hang, think he called it the boy's club. He took obvious delight in uncovering original sliding doors and ancient custom windows that had been boarded up or over, stuccoed or drywalled into obscurity. Here's where the studio will be, here you step up to the asian style tub, the guest quarters...We went out back into his backyard, where he'd been planting bamboo, so I took a couple of pictures before he cleaned up. Messed around with his two Rhodesian Ridgeback puppies, and headed in to cool off and tape a conversation. Dusk was being swallowed by a slowly descending darkness as we settled into some modern but comfy chairs. Michael lit an Export light, smiled, and gave me that look that says "So…."

Puremusic: I notice that if I don't give myself some kind of a place to report to, a job to do, I just kind of lose my focus. You wake up and you've got sessions to do, half of your days, at least, or a lot of your days. On a regular workday, do you know what to expect?

Michael Rhodes: Well, it's one of those things that one never knows. One knows what the general prescribed scenario is supposed to be, but one doesn't know the details. I don't know what I'm going to face when I go in. I don't know what song I'm going to play—typically, I don't know. I know who the artist is most of the time, but that's it. So it's an audible at the line of scrimmage. Keeps it fresh.

PM: Just yesterday you said you were with Phil Ramone. It was an AIDS song, you said?

MR: As I understand it, it's a theme song for an AIDS awareness campaign. To put a little muscle behind the campaign.

PM: How did what's become a big and steady career as a session musician begin, and how did it develop?

MR: When I was living in Austin, Texas, back in the '70s, I had a taste of some session work. And the recording environment was intriguing to me. It was more about the music and less about all the trappings of live performance. It was just more principled. All that mattered was the actual music. That's the challenge of it, the microcosmic environment. And it's a good avenue of self-discovery. We kid about this in the studio, but it's a good place to work, it's small. The irony that's contained in that, you know, is that the smaller you get, the bigger everything else gets, the bigger the possible awareness overall. The more egoless I can become in the studio, the greater the reward, ultimately. That's not to say that we don't sign the painting somewhere, but it's not the signature that people are interested in.

PM: Except the artist. The artist is interested.

MR: There's a thing we kid about with one particular producer: we say, "What are we here for today?" "Well"—and we all address the producer and say, "We're here to make you rich." Then we look at the artist, "We're here to make you famous." And then we'll look at ourselves, "We're here to keep working." [laughs] So it's a laughing acknowledgment of the hierarchy for session players.

PM: Yeah, it's multi-tiered. And a lot of days you're seeing the same guys, a lot of days of the week, right?

MR: Yeah.

PM: So those early session experiences in Austin, were those with artists who became significant?

MR: No, they were more self-contained bands. But it was enough. It was like, "Okay, this is fine. I like this recording thing." You know, instead of bleeding out in a bar somewhere. And then I moved to Memphis and got a little bit more involved in similar recording. It was all custom stuff. Nobody noteworthy or to speak of. When I was in Memphis, it was in the mid '70s, and it was kind of dead there. About the only stuff that was being cut were bands. There were some good bands there, but I was doing, you know, custom gospel records and that kind of stuff. It was a very slow, humble beginning.

PM: Did you hang around Memphis long?

MR: No. I was there for about a year and a half. And then I moved back to Austin to be in another original band with some really good players. George Raines was playing drums, and Danny Rhodes followed me back down, we needed a guitar player. And Gary Brown, a sax player from New Orleans, he did a lot of Bee Gees stuff. He came over, too. It was promising, but it didn't pan out.

I had some friends in Nashville, this was in '77. So on a fluke I came up here, with no intention of ever moving here. But serendipitous as it may seem, I hooked up with some guys that I had met in Memphis. Jim Cotton, the engineer, for one. And he introduced me to a couple of people. And then I got involved with doing demos at Tree, which is now Sony/Tree.

It was a very active time. There were songwriters like Bobby Braddock and Curly Putnam—I mean, the really heavy hitters—Harlan Howard and Sonny Throckmorton. A lot of really vital stuff was being cut at demo level, and the songs were great. So I became very intrigued with the art of the song. Because up to that point, I'd been more jam band oriented.

PM: The art of the band.

MR: Exactly. And so it was very intriguing to me. I've always been a song player, anyway. That was always more where I was at. The people I admire are more compositional than chop oriented. With bass players or music in general, I always listen to songwriters. My record collection consisted more of Randy Newman and Van Morrison than...

PM: Chick Corea.

MR: Yeah, that kind of stuff. So it was a good fit. One thing led to another, and then all of a sudden, I moved up to Nashville. And then it just sort of built on itself, as it does. And God bless Jim Ed Norman's heart.

PM: There's always somebody at the start.

MR: Somebody. And Jim Ed allowed me in. The first guy, really, the guy I owe a lot to, who's no longer with us, is Don Ganz. He was the vice president of Tree at the time. And he was a song guy, man. And the second floor at Tree never closed. It was just very energetic for years. And it was a really closely knit family of songwriters.

PM: God, it's exciting just to hear about that.

MR: It was so different in Nashville back then. There were those enclaves everywhere in town. There was Pic-a-Lick.

PM: Right.

MR: And Roger Cook and all, and that bunch of guys, Tony Newman playing drums, and Spadey Brannon, and Joe Allen, you know, with Don Williams, and that whole bit over there. And there were these pockets of very intense family-bands, and teams. It was more team oriented. It was not competitive in a negative way, but everybody was just, you know, busy.

PM: It was more competitive like Motown was, it was families of people trying to outdo each other.

MR: Yeah, yeah. It was trying to one-up each other, and keeping tabs on the other guys, but everybody had their arms around one another, you know? So it was very great time to be here. The roots were deep. There was a lot of old growth that was still standing in the town at that time. Not to lament about the good old days...because, for some people, these are the good old days, too.

PM: But roots are roots. And if you were there, it's important to know.

MR: Well, I'm much more interested in and motivated by someone who knows who Lefty Frizzell is, whose history goes back at least that far, than by someone—and I don't mean this disparagingly, but someone whose roots don't go back any further than Garth Brooks, you know?

PM: Yeah.

MR: But there again, it's a different time, and a different place. And I'm not saying one's better than the other. But I feel pretty fortunate.

PM: It's funny, I know great songwriters in town whose first heroes were Kiss. They have no blues, no bluegrass, no country in their background. I mean, "What are you? Are you American?"

MR: Well, quite so, but it's more of a franchise mentality. It's the difference when people think, you know, a good Italian restaurant is the Olive Garden.

PM: Right!

MR: It's the same kind of thing. And that's not to say anything bad about Kiss. They're great. But they are primarily a marketable commodity. It's less about the music. And that's a good analogy, because there's a lot of that mentality driving the music business. These days it's more about business than it is about music. Not to say that there isn't some great music being made. But it's having trouble finding its way through. I know that you know what a pinhole a record has to squeeze through these days to get on the radio. It's such a controlled medium now.

PM: And to squeeze through that pinhole, it takes a lot of grease.

MR: Oh, man, it's the ultimate sonic sperm race.

PM: [laughs]

MR: You got to swim hard to get out ahead of the pack and hope it takes.

PM: And you got to grease that monkey down.

MR: Man, you know. It's *so* hard. There's so much stuff coming out. But there it is.

PM: Pardon my backtracking, but you had started to say that along with Don Ganz, that Jim Ed Norman really helped you.

MR: Oh, Jim Ed. Eddie Bayers, a drummer here in town, who's like the brother I never had and we're tight to this day—he and I had developed into a really, really good rhythm section from doing a lot of work together. We did hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of demos together, and just worked all day. And that's when we used to do like triple and quadruple sessions a day, you know, like we'd work from 10:00 until 10:00 at night. And later, because we were young. What else were we going to do? And it was fun, you know. So anyway, Jim Ed Norman had begun to use Eddie on some stuff. And Eddie hipped him to me, and so Jim Ed said, "Okay, I'll take a chance." And so Jim Ed used me on a Charlie Rich record, and that led to some other stuff. Jim Ed was really my first good solid account.

PM: And was that Charlie Rich record your first big record?

MR: Yeah, I'd have to say, I think it was.

PM: Do you know which of his records that was?

MR: No, I can't remember now. It had "Marie" on it, that Randy Newman tune.

PM: Oh, really? What a great song.

MR: Yeah, yeah. But anyway, then one thing just led to another.

PM: So Jim Ed became a first key account. And do you remember what that leapfrogged onto, or who else might have come into the picture at that time?

MR: Well, there was a lot of stuff going on then. I mean, it was a pretty crazy hotbed of activity at the time.

PM: And where are we, chronologically?

MR: Well, we must be around ’81 to ’84, somewhere. During that time I played on some little nickel and dime kind of things, and a few bigger things. Then I just continued to sort of simmer. But know this, man: some of my favorite bass players in the world were active and working in town then. There was Tommy Cogbill who was a mentor to me. God rest his soul. Tommy was heavy. He played all that early Aretha stuff, you know, produced “Sweet Caroline” for Neil Diamond, a major guy.

PM: Whoa.

MR: He’d moved here from Memphis. He played on “Funky Broadway.” Remember that?

PM: [laughs] Uh, yeah.

MR: So that’s how heavy the cat was. Anyway, he took a liking to me. He was a great guitar player. He would play guitar on some sessions, and I would play bass. I learned a lot from him.

But all that is to say that there were some great bass players here in town, and you pretty much had to take a number and wait for something to open up and you could slide in. They were taking the bulk of work. Joe Osborn was here, and he was doing a lot of work. He was doing a lot of work for Jim Ed. Whenever Joe couldn’t make it, or they needed something that was a little different sounding, then I would get a call. But I didn’t really catch a break—a record that would have really been instrumental—so I just simmered like that for two or three years.

And then I got to know Roseanne Cash and Rodney Crowell, and I went on the road with both of them. And then I did a record with Rodney called *Street Language*, which was in ’85? I don’t think it came out until ’86. Then about that time I was starting to work with Barry Beckett. And then things started to heat up. Working with Rodney, and working with Barry Beckett, and then Crystal Gayle, and Dan Seals. And then some stuff started to hit on the radio, and that’s when it really started to take off. Hank Jr.’s *Born to Boogie*, that was a big breakthrough.

PM: Oh, I didn’t know you were on that. That was fun.

MR: Yeah, that was a fun record. Hank can be fun.

PM: But he’s murder live. Awful loud.

MR: Yeah, I got trapped in front of his damn guitar amp.

PM: Whoa.

MR: I did a gig with him at the Astrodome and I got trapped in front of his amp.

PM: That hurts. Six 4-12 cabinets. Six Boogie Power amps, Strategy 400's.

MR: Oh, it was unbelievable. Just unbelievable. I had never heard anything that loud. But fortunately it was a forgiving venue. I mean, you know, you got about a three-second slap at the Astrodome, so it doesn't matter. And then we did *Diamonds and Dirt* with Rodney, which did really well. Five number one singles.

PM: Five number one singles?!

MR: Yeah. To this day, some of the best recording I've done is with Rodney, that record and over the years. And at the same time, I was working with Roseanne's band, and on the road with her. And then I took a gig with Steve Winwood, and toured with him in '88. And that was really cool. It took the better part of a year.

PM: Where was that in his career?

MR: That was right after *Roll With It*. He'd cut *Roll With It* up in Toronto. And he'd married a Tennessee girl, so they moved to Nashville, and he put a band together here. Everyone wasn't from here, but this was home base for him so he used some Nashville musicians. That was a great experience.

PM: Oh, man.

MR: I mean, you know, that's one of those "pinch me, I'm dreaming" kind of things. You'd hear that voice, those songs and everything, too much.

PM: Big time.

MR: When that ended, and then I came back in '89, I pretty much did the cool gigs that were happening in town. Before that I played with J.J. Cale some. I'm trying to piece all this together. I really should probably sit down and do a time line someday.

PM: Yeah. Never have done that?

MR: I've never done it, man.

PM: Never counted up the records or anything?

MR: I've never counted up the records. I've never put it all in sequence. I've always been more interested in tomorrow than yesterday, you know. But as I'm sitting here talking to you, it's like, wow, man, okay, this is something that probably needs to be chronologically accounted for.

So, I worked with J.J. Cale. Then I did another tour with Winwood. And we cut a record in between there. He cut a record here called *Refugees of the Heart*. A pretty good record, but it didn't do very much. But that's Winwood, man. His career seems to spike, and then recede.

PM: Yeah, *High Life* and *Roll With It* were pretty big. *Arc of a Diver* was less so.

MR: But before that he had sunk out of sight after Traffic, or after Blind Faith.

PM: Raised horses for years, right?

MR: After Blind Faith, he just went underground, and he came back with *Arc of a Diver*. Then he went back down again, and he came back with *High Life*. He's due for another one.

PM: Yeah.

MR: And so…it's a life, man. It's a life. It's a day-to-day, and it all adds up, especially in retrospect. I continued to work with Rodney. I mean, I did a lot of crummy projects, and I played on a lot of number one records.

PM: Would you say you've played on a couple hundred records, or…?

MR: Oh, yeah, more than that. I don't know, it would probably be closer to five or six hundred.

PM: Damn!

MR: I think, if I counted them, it probably would be. That may be an exaggeration, I don't know. The *All Music Guide* would be a good source for that. Have you ever looked at the *All Music Guide*? It's freaky, man. We'll look you up. Because you'll be there.

Oh yeah, and I'd been playing with Larry Carlton some. I did a record with him. It was a lot of fun. Playing with Larry Carlton is a trip, man. I felt like I was trying to catch a train all night. I felt like I was behind the guy all night long. That's not my strong suit, to play that kind of music. I mean, I can do it, but it doesn't come easily because I don't do it all the time. It was great. Larry is such a monster. He has such a deep sense of music.

And then, let's see, back in '96 or so, I did a record with Shawn Colvin—a little record called *A Few Small Repairs.* And I was really glad to get that call. John Leventhal called me, because I knew him from working with Rodney. And it just took off. It was Record of the Year and Song of the Year, "Sunny Came Home."

PM: Oh, that's right. Didn't I see you play with her on TV at some major award show?

MR: Yeah, it was the Grammys, the night she won. That was the night that Aretha sat in for Pavarotti.

PM: [laughs]

MR: Pavarotti did a no-show and Aretha sat in for him. She did the piece that he was going to do.

PM: She sang his tune?

MR: Oh, yeah, man. She's a great opera singer. I mean, the purists would flinch, but she really, really rocked. Anyway, it was a special night. It was a magic night. And what made it more special is that we won. They won the big Kahuna.

PM: And so how was it? Is it really a surprise?

MR: Oh, it's really a surprise. Oh, yeah. They do a really good job.

PM: That's good. That's the way it should be. What was that session like, the *Few Small Repairs* record? Was that a good vibe?

MR: It was a great vibe. It was very spontaneous. Let me see if I can say this right: there was more care taken in the setup of the tune and working out the arrangements. We probably didn't do more than three or four takes on any of the songs.

PM: That's the way.

MR: But it was the setup. And a lot of the songs weren't finished. We did them on the floor. So it was a lengthy process. Some of the songs, some of the bridges were completed when we were on the floor. The lyrics were incomplete. So it was sketchy. We didn't really know what it was going to sound like. It was a very small section, it was just the drummer Shawn Pelton, myself, John Leventhal and Shawn Colvin.

PM: No keyboards.

MR: No, it was a very, very small band.

PM: She's a good guitar player.

MR: Oh, she's a great guitar player. And it was very immediate, you know.

PM: Cut that in New York, right?

MR: Yeah. At Sear Sound. So then that record took off. A tour started, but I needed more to stay at home.

PM: There was just too much work at home?

MR: There was too much work. But I played some of the dates.

PM: Played the good shows. [laughs]

MR: Well, you know, it's always true that the best gigs are when they're launching the record, because the record company is paying for everything. That's where the flavor is.

PM: There've been instances, I think more in recent years, where you're also playing Artist now, not just playing session man, side man, accompanist. You're an artist now in several acts.

MR: Yeah, well, I play around town a lot. And my first real foray into that was a band with Rodney Crowell, Steuart Smith, and Vinnie Santoro. Remember?

PM: That's right, The Cicadas.

MR: The Cicadas. And I figured out pretty quick, from being a sideman all these years, it's like, "Show me the money." And then to be on the other side of it...it's always an education when the roles are reversed. So the good news and the bad news is, that record didn't take off. It's a great record, though. I highly recommend that record to anyone who hasn't heard it. It was on Warner Bros. And I think it may still be in limited print. And if it's not, somebody may re-release it shortly.

But to get back to what we're talking about: I've played with a lot of people, and lot of the best music I've ever played on is probably never going to get heard. You know how it is. I mean, I played on *your* record.

PM: Right.

MR: And I'm not saying that it's never going to get heard, but…

PM: It's not going to get heard much.

MR: And that's how it is with most of the stuff that's really special. There was a Delbert McClinton record, *I'm With You*, that we did in two and a half days. And it was the down and dirtiest, guerilla, sniper bullets overhead, and we had so little time to do this record. And we just knuckled down and did it. And it's a great record, for that, you know. It's so in your face, it's so first take. And Terry Radigan's last record, on Vanguard.

PM: That Terry Radigan record was the very first one I reviewed in Puremusic.

MR: Uh-huh, yeah. I thought that was a wonderful record.

PM: That's a wicked record. [see our review]

MR: Not to mention Jill Sobule.

PM: Whom I recently interviewed.

MR: Really?

PM: If you search your name in Puremusic, you'll see all the places where you show up in interviews and reviews.

MR: Oh, yeah… So there's all that, you know. Now I play in a band called Fortunate Sons. I had a band around here for the longest time, back in the '80s, called The Nerve.

PM: I just missed The Nerve. And everybody says that was a fantastic band.

MR: Yeah, that was a good band. Ricky Rector and Danny Rhodes—no relation.

PM: Now, where is Danny Rhodes?

MR: He's in Arizona.

PM: And how does he spell his name?

MR: The same way. Yeah, great songwriter. And anyway, that was a lot of fun. But over the years, you know, I've always played live. I've got to play live. So I'm always looking for outlet to do that. And now I've got several bands I play with. The Fortunate Sons is one of that stable of bands.

PM: I know how important live playing is to you, because you know how many times I've come to see you play live. I mean, I love to see you play live.

MR: And it's always a pleasure to see you there. You're always part of the equation. When I see you, it's like, "Okay, now we've got some synergy going. I know somebody's listening."

PM: And what I've said about you in print before is that the thing about Michael Rhodes is, that when he's on the stage, you know that everybody else better get it up.

MR: [laughs]

PM: Because it's like, "Yeah, Mickey's here, and hope you came to play, because he did." [laughs]

MR: Well, what's the point, otherwise, right?

PM: Yeah.

MR: I'd stay home if it wasn't a chance to look for the sweet spot. You know, you get out on the court and hope you get in the zone.

PM: Right. [laughs] "I'm under the hoop. Get the ball here."

MR: That's right. "I'm clear, man." So there's that. And another great record that I want to give you tonight is Randall Bramlett's last record.

PM: Are you on that record?

MR: Oh, it's a wonderful record, and yes. And there again, I have very fond memories because I know what went into doing the record. It was so immediate, and there was a lot of stuff that just came out, and it was just there. It was in the room, you know? I just really enjoy those sorts of situations.

PM: Who's drumming on that?

MR: Joe Bonadio. He's the guy that plays with Martin Sexton.

PM: Oh, I love Martin Sexton.

MR: Yeah, well, that's the guy, Joe Bonadio. He's a New York guy. Really good.

PM: How about other great records you've played on that more people should hear?

MR: I wish more people would listen to Ashley Cleveland.

PM: Hmmm, fantastic artist. I think when she gravitated into the Christian sector, she may have sacrificed the bigger audience she's always deserved. I mean, she's one of the best singers that any of us know.

MR: Yeah. But she's very principled in her beliefs, and so…

PM: And there you have it.

MR: You have to respect that. But she's due. Other really good records that I've played on? There are so many I can't recall.

PM: With a discography like yours, it's no wonder.

Oh, when I was putting together questions, I remembered—didn't you, somewhere along the way, without seeking it out, run into work as a model for someone?

MR: Oh, Jesus.

PM: Can we cover that? I don't really know the story.

MR: Well, okay. Here's the story. You can't make this kind of stuff up. It's just so out of left field. So Kahoutek-like, you know, it's coming out of the sky.

I got a call to go and do a gig with Yohji Yamamoto. He's a clothing designer, one of the premier clothing designers, and one of my favorites, and many other people's favorites. Anyway, I got a call to go over and do a gig with him in Japan.

PM: A recording gig.

MR: It was a live gig. He wanted to be a songwriter, and he's not a bad songwriter.

PM: He wrote in English?

MR: No, it was Japanese, yeah, which is strange.

PM: But he can compose?

MR: Yeah, yeah, folk songs, kind of folk rock kind of stuff. But it was conceptual. And the staging of this was very, you know…

PM: It was a designer being a singer/songwriter.

MR: I mean, it was beautiful. The setup was beautiful. And we all put his clothes on. You know, for once that didn't suck. [laughs] And so anyway, we were at the dress rehearsal, and his assistant came up, very demurely Japanese, and said, "Mr. Yamamoto would very much like for you to model some clothing for him." So we did a photo shoot, and that was trippy.

PM: No kidding.

MR: And then it was in GQ.

PM: It was in GQ! [laughs] I didn't know that!

MR: And then it was part of a campaign they ran in several magazines for a period of time. Anyway, then they called me and wanted me to go to Paris to do a runway show.

PM: Unreal.

MR: I know. So this was during the Gulf War. And I said, "Well, look man, I'd love to, but I'm really pretty skittish right now about flying anything other than, you know, a Swedish airline or something like that."

PM: Here to Detroit.

MR: [laughs] Well, anyway, by that time, long story short, he flew me over on the Concord.

PM: [laughs]

MR: Which was great. And so I went over there. And John Cale was doing it. It was all musicians. Curt Smith from Tears for Fears. Ottmar Leibert was doing it.

PM: The flamenco guy?

MR: Right. And Charles Lloyd was there.

PM: Wow.

MR: So it was a trip. It was a trip because none of us are models, right?

PM: Yeah, right. [laughs] And so, how did everybody look going down the runway?

MR: Like non-models.

PM: How was Charles Lloyd getting down the runway?

MR: Charles Lloyd was good, man. Yeah, he was a pro. I mean, you know, probably John Cale was the most natural, because he'd been around that. He's a New York guy, so he kind of had it down. But anyway, that was fun, something different.

PM: And your modeling career, a meteoric rise and a quick exit.

MR: Exactly. It burned out quick, you know. Yeah, typical story.

PM: But to leave that batting a thousand never hurt anybody.

MR: [laughs]

PM: So after all the people that you've been graced to work with, whom have you not worked with yet that you would like to?

MR: Oh, man, I'd love to work with Aretha Franklin. That would be amazing.

PM: How does one hook that up?

MR: I don't know.

PM: It seems like if somebody could hook that up, you could hook that up.

MR: That's going to be one of those things where you just dream it and it comes true, or it doesn't, you know?

Who would I like to work with… That's a really good question. I'm going to be doing a record with Aaron Neville soon, so that's another one.

PM: That's a big one.

MR: Yeah. I know Aaron from a few years ago, but I've never recorded with him. I've done Etta James records, so there's that, you know. I want to do some playing with Bonnie Bramlett. We've talked about it. She's got a new record coming out, it's absolutely terrific. And, obviously, I would love to hook up with some of my childhood heroes. I mean, McCartney… Let me play bass with McCartney.

PM: He likes to play guitar.

MR: Sure, let me play bass. That would be great. You know, Pete Townsend. I'd like to record with Chrissie Hynde.

PM: Hell, yeah. She likes a good bass player.

MR: I'd work cheap for Chrissie.

PM: I wish our readers could see the inside of your home. It's so beautiful. You know, they would know what a cosmopolitan and cultured person you are.

MR: Or a cracker from Louisiana, like I really am.

PM: Which you also are. [laughs]

MR: [laughs]

PM: What would you say, as both of those things, to readers who've never been to Nashville about living here?

MR: It's what you make of it. It's about the people. This is all about people, aside from songwriting and making music.

PM: And if that's true, and I believe that's true, it refers us back to what we were saying about what songwriting, and the camaraderie connected with it, used to be, versus what it is now.

MR: Well, I know there's just a lot more co-writers these days than there used to be. It's a lot easier to get artists to listen to songs that are co-written. It seems to me that it is rare to get a song cut anymore that is *not* a co-write.

PM: Now, what's the deal with that?

MR: I don't know. Unless they figure they'll just cover the board, you know, roulette style, let's just get as many songwriters as we can and… I'm not saying that it's right or wrong or anything,

but I think that's one of the big differences now than twenty-five years ago, as far as songwriting goes.

PM: Personally, I've rarely enjoyed the process of co-writing a song, and I've rarely seen an example where it isn't less than the sum of its parts, that it doesn't get diluted. I mean, it's supposed to be catalytically converted, but instead, to me, it's generally diluted.

MR: Yeah, I don't know where it all got started, man. I really don't know. I think that there was an artificial template made. Obviously there have been popular songs in the past…

PM: By songwriting teams.

MR: Songwriting teams—but typically that was music and lyrics.

PM: Yeah, right. And I do like to co-write that way. You know, give somebody a lyric, or give somebody a piece of music, that's fine.

MR: Yeah. Or there's Lennon and McCartney. And I mean, God knows, there is a good argument for co-writes. But from speaking to other people in other cities and songwriters and stuff, Nashville is an anomaly that way, in the writing appointment kind of mentality, and that all of the songs are co-writes.

Although some of the greatest songs have been co-writes. You know, Porter and Hayes, all that stuff out of Stax, and Motown…

PM: Lieber & Stoller.

MR: And Holland/Dosier/Holland, and all those. So I'm not, you know, disparaging co-writes, but at some point, when you get six co-writers on a song, I mean, what is that about?

PM: Yeah. And it's different, talking about songwriting *teams,* that's one thing. But instead it's just like, "Well, I'm writing with so-and-so at one o'clock, and then at five o'clock I got to finish a song with my next-door neighbor."

MR: Yeah, it's the shotgun approach. I think it's about quantity, and you can keep your pole in a number of different ponds that way.

PM: There's no question that you create more songs that way.

MR: Right.

PM: We've got to cover a little bit of gear for the technically inquiring minds. For the bulk of your sessions these days, what's the favorite setup, the bass de jour and what's setting in front of you when you're doing your session?

MR: To the left of me I've got a '63 Fender P bass, and a five-string Sadowsky, and a Hofner, and a hollow body Lakeland, and that pretty much covers it. You know, it depends. Then there's stuff that rotates in and out.

And it's going through an Avalon U-5 direct box, and a Tubetech compressor. And then I got some Gizmo pedals. But that's just for me. That's just for fun. And then I use a rumble seat, also.

PM: What's that?

MR: I designed it. It's a speaker, it's an enclosed speaker cabinet that I sit on. Euphonic Audio makes it. It's very cool.

PM: And what's the principle?

MR: Well, it vibrates. It's just an amp. I mean, it moves air. So it's hard wired, there's a mike inside of it. But I sit on it, so it feels like—I mean, vibration is a very visceral experience, more than just wearing headphones.

PM: [laughs]

MR: But it actually sounds very good, too. But it's just a more complete thing. Oh, it's very cool.

PM: That's really funny. So you record on the rumble seat almost all the time. You're sitting down.

MR: Yeah. It's like standing in front of an amplifier, but it's quiet.

PM: Right. But with your butt against the speaker.

MR: It's an isolated box. It doesn't bleed out into the room because it's a box, so it's all contained. It's very cool.

PM: And Euphonic makes it?

MR: Yeah, Euphonic Audio.

PM: All right. So I know you're not a very embarrassable person in this way, so I'll say that one of the most interesting and arresting things that I find about you, both as a person and a player, is that you're exceedingly present. How do you account for that? How did that come to pass?

MR: Isn't that the name of the game?

PM: For the people that are present, I think it is.

MR: Well, does anything else really exist?

PM: In the place of presence, I think what exists is avoidance, laziness.

MR: Oh, God, I'm one of the laziest people there is.

PM: But not when it comes to just showing up, like even for this conversation, or showing up for a dinner engagement, showing up for an exchange of any kind. I mean, I know some people find you almost disarmingly present. They go, "Oh, Michael Rhodes, I don't know, he kind of makes me nervous." And I say, "I know what you mean. It's this, right?" [I do my Michael Rhodes look.]

MR: Uh-huh. [laughs a little] Okay.

PM: [laughs] I say, "That's funny, that's what I like about him."

MR: Uh-huh.

PM: But were you always like that?

MR: I don't know. Early on, when I was a kid, I was shy. I was a late bloomer. I spent a lot of time by myself reading and practicing, kind of a nerd.

PM: But unlike a lot of musicians, and good musicians I know, you're socially astute. A lot of musicians are not really comfortable in that domain because they spent too much time practicing. When did you blossom in that way to where you're very eloquent and socially fluent?

MR: I think I turned a corner somewhere in the late '70s. Really, sometime in the '70s, something clicked, and I began to come out of myself. It's a difficult question to answer. I'm really not sure how to say that, except it's a development of, you know, how we are. It's the acorn theory. I don't know whether it's spiritual DNA or psychological DNA. Some things take longer than others.

PM: Yeah.

MR: So I can't really answer that. Except it's a very interesting world, and I get out of it what I put into it, you know, or however much that I pay attention. It's a big idea, Frank.

PM: Well, you know, it's your presence that brought it to mind, so I—

MR: Well, I'm just saying that this is *all* a really big idea. [laughs]

PM: Oh, that.

MR: But here's the thing: Whose big idea is it? It's our big idea. [laughs]

PM: What are you listening to lately, and what are you reading?

MR: I've been on this Nick Tosches jag lately, man. Have you ever read any of his stuff?

PM: No.

MR: Oh, he's great. Well, what I'm reading right now is that new Muddy Waters biography, *Can't Be Satisfied*. But the last book I read before that was *Power on Earth* by Nick Tosches. There was a huge European bank that collapsed back in 1974, and it's the story behind that, the principle players behind that. And it has to do with stuff like the Pope's bank account.

PM: No kidding.

MR: Oh, yeah, man. It's fascinating. And then a couple pieces of fiction of his, *Trinities* and *Cut Numbers*. But this is the guy who wrote *Dino,* and he wrote *The Devil and Sonny Liston*.

PM: Right.

MR: And he started out as a music critic. So anything you get by Nick Tosches is going to be worth the read.

PM: And who wrote that Muddy biography?

MR: Robert Gordon. It just came out. It's really good.

PM: It's hard to find a more fascinating character in the whole history of blues.

MR: Oh, man, he ruled. It was hard to get him off the Stovall Plantation, because he had this going on so much down there. Anyway, it's a great read. And there's a lot of stuff that I didn't know about Muddy. So that's what I'm reading right now.

What I'm listening to… [laughing] I was just listening to *Electric Ladyland* this afternoon.

PM: [laughs] Still raining, still dreaming.

MR: Exactly, man, you know.

PM: God, we'll be listening to that to the grave, and loving it.

MR: Yeah. And I still listen to a lot of John Coltrane. And Miles Davis. I mean, at the risk of sounding corny, man, *Kind of Blue* is one of my favorite records. Ten years ago, fifteen years ago, I was listening to it every day. I don't listen to it that much anymore, but it's been part of my vocabulary. And John Coltrane has a record that he did, *Ballads*.

PM: *Ballads* is unbelievable.

MR: Oh, I know. It's fantastic. But contemporary stuff, I don't know. I'm kind of out of the loop. I've got to say that I get most contemporary stuff through osmosis. It's media osmosis.

PM: Yeah—although you're cutting contemporary stuff.

MR: But not necessarily all of it is cutting edge. But I'm busy playing. I'm just busy playing. Oddly enough, I don't listen to that much new stuff. Frankly, a lot of it doesn't interest me, because I'm out of the age demographic that it's targeted at. It isn't part of my vocabulary. And that's not to say that there isn't a lot of great stuff that's coming out, but I'm just kind of in between right now.

PM: Yeah.

MR: And when I'm in between, I listen to touchstone music, stuff that connects me with what I know to be of value.

PM: And the classics, the level of mastery to which we all still aspire. *Kind of Blue*, I mean, come on.

MR: Yeah. And Donny Hathaway. Go back and get some early Donny Hathaway. *Extensions of a Man*. Oh, it's just the best.

PM: Wow, that's a hot tip.

MR: Oh, yeah. Great player, great songwriter. And the Beatles…

PM: Yeah, that's right, I saw you playing the Beatles the other night. I'll write about that in the setup, for sure.

MR: Well, I've got that Vinyl Kings record [*A Little Trip*]. It's not out yet, we haven't officially released it yet. It's Beatles songs you've never heard. [laughs]

PM: Oh, yeah, it's original. That's right.

MR: Yeah, it's original.

PM: We've been talking about music most of the night. What turns you on outside of music?

MR: Bamboo.

PM: Bamboo.

MR: My wife, Lindsay, she's my pal. And my new dogs, Mingus and Ella.

PM: Rhodesian Ridgebacks.

MR: They're the cutest things. I've got the best dogs in the world. [laughing] Just like everybody else that has dogs, they have the best dogs in the world.

And yeah, I've been leading a small life lately. And as I showed you, I'm building a studio next door. The technology is finally arriving—you know, we're finally going to get in, Frank.

PM: [laughs] That's great. It's wonderful to have this conversation, and to get it into the magazine. Thanks for talking.

MR: You bet, brother.

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