



Michael Gira, co-founder of the seminal, earth-moving band Swans, has developed his skills in the studio as an artist and producer. Searching for unexpected ways to create music while maintaining the integrity of the songs, he's taken a wide range of approaches in his twenty-plus year career. Gira's current project, *Angels of Light*, moves him forward into enlightenment in the digital age.

Since the interview, Michael's record label, Young God Records, has kept him extremely busy, creating history with records by Akron/Family, Devendra Banhart and Lisa Germano, but he still finds time for collaboration and touring.

*"I don't know about that, Martin...
it doesn't sound fucked-up enough..."*

- M. Gira 10/10/02

Tell me a little about your latest musical project, *Angels of Light*. How did *Angels of Light* come together? How is it different than your other musical endeavors?

The first project I did after disbanding Swans in 1997 was a very complicated soundtrack-without-a-film piece called *The Body Lovers*. It incorporated 24-track mixes of instrumentals, as well as unmixed material; bass/drum grooves that were later looped, guitar fragments, etc., from those same sessions, to ancient - from 1982 or so - tape loops and synthesizer drones, to hand-held cassette recordings (also ancient), found sounds, to more recent patches of live Swans recordings, and also a series of non-structured sounds and fragments I'd solicited from various friends like Pan Sonic, Deathprod, Origami Republika and Bill Rieflin. So I had all this material, most of it completely unrelated and recorded over a span of 15 years, and much of it had been sitting in a trunk in a basement this whole time, and I set myself the impossible task of figuring out how to make it all work together somehow. I dumped all of it into a computer, using a mastering program called Sonic Solutions with my friend Chris Griffin in Atlanta, and just dug in, cross-fading, re-sampling pieces and flying them back in, overlaying one thing over another,

**Michael Gira Finds Sanctity
in the Chaos of the Studio**
by Hillary Johnson
painting by Simon Hedwood

sometimes recording additional material directly into the computer, letting the computer feed back sometimes as things were dumped in, then recording that, never giving any preference to something that was "professionally" recorded over the cruder material, just hacking and mangling away until the thing made some kind of musical - and "filmic" sense. It took forever and was mind numbing and exhausting, but in the end I think it's one of the best things I ever did. After that, I was fed up with the stress involved in such complex studio undertakings, so when I had enough songs for the first Angels album, I vowed to keep it simple - just acoustic guitar and voice with a few adornments here and there. I got a variety of musicians involved in the overdub stage mostly, and it just grew. One sound or instrument would imply the need for another, and before you know it, it was out of control, as usual! My biggest fault - or maybe an inverse virtue - is never knowing when to stop. In the end it was much different than the Swans' recordings though, in that most of the instruments used were traditionally "quiet" instruments, and my preoccupation wasn't so much with an overwhelming force of sound - more just trying to create a sort of visual context for the stories the words and voice told.

How much have you learned about recording and producing in your 20+ years of making music?

Almost nothing technically about recording - intentionally! Well, I know how things work and what's possible, of course, but I have zero interest in the technical side of things. I'd rather tell someone else what I want, and let them figure it out. I've always had this sort of ridiculous self-confidence when I go into a studio, that just through force of will (and in the old days a lot of screaming and ranting at everyone involved) that I could make something happen sonically if I just pushed things enough. Often it worked, and sometimes didn't, in retrospect. Now I'm less maniacal, but I still enjoy the tension of being in a situation that's beyond my control - sometimes devolving into complete panic and chaos - and just being forced to wrangle it into shape. I enjoy the mistakes and random surprises that come from this way of working more than anything. As far as the production side of things goes, I think I've learned the importance of having the material worked out as much as possible in advance of going into the studio, but once there, to remain open to chance. Don't let your preconceptions about how things should be get in the way of new possibilities as they crop up. To me, the best thing is when things turn out completely different than how you've planned.

How has your interest in recording changed over the years? Are you more or less involved than when you first started out?

Oh, I'm more involved, having inevitably learned a few things, but I prefer working with competent people that make a daily business of getting good sounds, and then I'll push things in whatever direction is required from there. Still, "good sound" can be too precious, or fetishized. On a few songs, for instance,

I've removed all bass frequencies and everything up to, say, 1 kHz from the drums, which made them sound far more interesting to me than a "proper" drum sound in the context of the song... Or, mic'ing the little broken speaker on a Casio keyboard instead of plugging it in direct, or recording the vocal into a hand-held cassette recorder and using that instead of, or along with, the more "properly" recorded vocal. Things like that. I'd never, ever, pushed "record" on a multitrack machine until a few years ago when I produced this band Ulan Bator in Italy, and was just forced to take over the recording aspect for a while, since after a few hours into the project the engineer proved to have no idea what he was doing. Later, in mixing, a more pro engineer got involved, thankfully. Still, getting the settings on a compressor, that kind of thing, remains beyond me. When it comes to technical things I'm just lazy, in the end. I keep promising myself I'm gonna get a little Pro Tools system here at home, but when I picture myself sitting in front of a computer alone, trying to make something meaningful happen with this dead, glowing thing, it just seems like it would be incredibly boring and lifeless, so I continue to avoid it.

Who are some of the folks you've worked with in the studio whose work ethic, technical or creative, you've respected?



Martin Bisi at BC Studios in Brooklyn. We once spent a week, working 16-hour days or so, mixing one four-minute song. I slept on the couch when we weren't working, and Martin would come down looking chipper and energetic at ten or eleven a.m. (he lives upstairs) and we'd just start again, working without a break until we collapsed. I don't think I left the building the entire time. I absolutely can't work this way anymore. I'd have a heart attack! I can't think of anyone [else] who's been so willing to just press forward until things sound right. Every time we work together he says something like, "Okay, we're only going 12 hours a day this time," before we start, then it's usually him that wants to go over, to finish things correctly.

What do you, functioning as a producer of your own works, strive for during pre-production and during the recording process?

Since I've pretty much abandoned the idea of sound manipulation as a way of making music, and am just concentrating on trying to write good songs on acoustic guitar, the first thing that has to be there is a song that has a power or reality on its own, completely naked, just the guitar and voice. It has to be good enough to be performed live like that to be convincing in itself. I'm talking about my own work here, of course, but it also applies in an obvious way to someone like Devendra Banhart (*Tape Op #47 cover artist*), whose second album we recorded. His first was done on handheld recorders or cassette 4-tracks. But even when working with a band per se, that's got to be there first. Often, working with a band, the first thing I try to do is to get them to get rid of their obvious influences, get them to think about another way to approach the song. This might be intrusive on my part, I guess, since sometimes the drummer ends up not playing on a song and plays something else instead, for instance. Then, the next step (in my own work anyway) is just starting to sort of daydream about where the song could go, thinking about instruments that might work in relation to the words, or often just thinking about specific musicians,

their personalities and sensibilities, and just wanting them to be a "presence" on the song, or in the recording process in general. Often their "main" instrument isn't what ends up getting recorded. During the recording process the first thing is to have a credible performance or version of the basic song on tape, whether with acoustic guitar and voice, or with a basic version of the band I'm working with at the time, then to prod it and force it into some kind of atmosphere or picture that gives an evocative context for the voice and words, which are the most important elements, in the end - to me anyway. It's also important to me not to repeat myself from record to record. The last Angels album I finished, *Everything Is Good*

Here/Please Come Home, was a horrible struggle in that regard. I'd been basically working with the same band for a few years, so when many of the songs were first recorded they had an immediate similarity to the previous record in terms of instruments used and the feel of the players. After thinking on it a while, I realized I had to push it in another direction, so I erased a lot of stuff, re-recorded things, wrote new songs and orchestrated them in a different way, from the acoustic guitar up. The initial performances by everyone were great, but it just seemed like more of the same, so they had to go, or at least mutate into a different area, so I did it. Unfortunately, it damaged a few friendships, but I don't see that I had any choice. My intent for the next record - writing songs for it now - is to use absolutely no drums, as a way of forcing myself to think of the songs differently when I orchestrate them. I have no idea what's going to come of it, but that's a good thing.

Structurally and sonically, what do you look for in a studio? How important is the equipment?

Well, I've made records in all kinds of situations, in high-end, stupidly expensive studios, and very low-end studios as well. Good equipment is fine, but sometimes being forced to make decisions based on limitations is a very good impetus to finding new ways to make something happen you wouldn't otherwise expect. More important to me than the gear is working with an engineer that has a good sensibility, a good ear, and is open to the idea of letting chance or disaster in through the door, and especially not getting stuck. I made what I think of as a good record with Dan Matz from Windsor For The Derby, just in his office with one microphone, his computer and whatever instruments each of us could play. Vintage gear, a Neve desk - all that stuff is great, but on the other hand, who the fuck cares how Robert Johnson was recorded, what gear was used? Or, in another world, I've been listening to a lot of Throbbing Gristle again lately, and that stuff sounds fantastic. Who cares what mics they used? People get really stuck with the idea of a "proper" way to get good sounds. For instance, the idea of close mic'ing each drum on a drum kit, then a couple of ambient mics. Sure, that sounds fine, but maybe it creates too many possibilities. Maybe just one mic would be a lot better.

Are there any specific devices or tools you truly love?

I don't own one anymore, because I threw it away along with several trunks full of samples after I did *The Body Lovers*, but an Akai S900 is to me a really useful tool. Simple, easy to use, low tech by today's standards. I like the backwards/forwards looping function as it makes looping really easy. I made an entire record with one of those [*The Body Haters* - an out of print companion piece to *B'Lovers*]. I had a few samples in it, and pounded away on a keyboard, changing the tuning, decay/release and the relative loudness of each sample to the other as I went, in real time, and recorded it directly to DAT. Later, I dumped that performance into Sonic Solutions and further messed with it, but that was basically it. I

need to get another one of those, as I'm thinking of using simple loops again at times. Bill Rieflin and I used an S900 as a mic preamp on all the vocals on a solo album I did at his house in Seattle once - just kept it in record ready the whole time, and used it to boost the level. It also distorts nicely. Otherwise, I'm pretty indifferent to gear. Whatever's available, whatever sounds good. The most important thing is that a sound has a specific "character" and it doesn't matter how it's achieved.

You recently dived into the world of digital recording with Pro Tools. What was your experience with digital recording versus analog in terms of sonic quality, ease of use and the stigma?

I like it and I hate it. On one hand, it's good to be able to have the option to completely rearrange things, loop, extract sounds and place them wherever you want, etc. On the other hand, it's an incredibly tedious way to work, and having too many possibilities is really dangerous to the life of the music. But, like any tool, it's how you use it. I had just worked in Pro Tools on a few previous records, so when we went to record and mix the last Angels record completely analog with Martin, I found myself sort of subliminally terrified that I wouldn't be able to see the music on a screen. I think that's a little dangerous. As to its sound quality, I'm not bothered by it. If it sounds too clean or artificial you can always feed the sounds - or even the entire mix - out through analog gear, or even just a Fender Twin or something.

Did you do more editing or experimentation when you recorded digitally?

I guess so, but I don't know if that's a virtue. It's inherent in the medium, so you're sucked into taking advantage of all the possibilities. Then again, as I say, too many possibilities can be a very bad thing. My favorite sounding recordings are definitely not digital. The first two Pink Floyd records, all the Beatles material, Joe Boyd's work with Nick Drake and the Incredible String Band, all the Popol Vuh material, Led Zeppelin, Howlin' Wolf, James Brown, Phil Spector... I could go on forever. I have to say that most music I hear these days that's been recorded in Pro Tools or the like just sounds lifeless to me - too much separation, too perfect and falsely "hot". But then I've used it sometimes, and I'm sure there's plenty of good work out there where it's not even apparent it was recorded or mixed in that way, so I keep an open mind about it.

Why did you go back to working with analog tape for your latest record? Do you re-use analog tape? Have you had any bad experiences with doing this?

It wasn't really a qualitative or an aesthetic decision. I wanted to work with Martin again, and that's what he has. Yes, over the last several years I've mercilessly re-used the same tape over and over. This batch has got to retire now though, as it was basically decomposing all over the tape heads as we worked on the last record.

When you and I worked together on the first two Angels Of Light records, you were interested in capturing the natural room ambience as an effect, rather than using digital reverbs, delays, etc. Why?

That comes from listening to some of my old recordings from the '80s and '90s and realizing how I'd just ruined, or at least damaged, a lot of otherwise excellent material with excessive, phony-sounding digital reverb. The horribly huge snare sounds particularly irk me. I always wanted things to be BIGGER! LOUDER! MASSIVE! and confused reverb with other ways of achieving that goal. I guess I always heard "You've Lost That Loving Feeling" produced by Phil Spector somewhere in the back of my head, and just naively went for the reverb. Ha ha! Anyway, again, when I started Angels, I just thought it'd be a good idea to completely remove that possibility, to force things in a different direction. So for the most part - I did cheat a few times - any ambience on all three of those albums has been achieved through either recording the natural ambience of a room along with the performance, or later feeding the sound back out through an amplifier and placing a mic close, middle or far, depending on the length of the reverb/ambience I wanted. I think it sounds better that way. I hate the fake sound of digital reverb now - the whoosh, and the kind of granular quality of the decay. Then again, my placing these restrictions on myself might be turning into a trap by now, so I might open myself up to the possibility of at least a good plate reverb in the next recordings. I love the way the reverb and delays are used on the first Suicide album though, for instance, though this surely wasn't digital - probably an Echoplex.

When you're recording, how involved are you with mic selection and placement?

Almost never involved in that, unless it sounds like shit - then I have to intervene.

When you're mixing, are there any specific standard things you do for every song, like stereo bus compression or EQ?

Usually the engineers I work with take care of that, but it's pretty standard to group the drums together, the guitars together, the vocals and their attendant backgrounds, the string section, etc., for the "orchestral" sections. On the first Angels record we did a pre-mix of all the strings, wind instruments, etc., and fed those out through an amp, recorded that, and then didn't use the original 12 or so tracks. Somehow it gave it more of a sense of an ensemble, rather than a series of overdubs. Of course, some clarity and detail gets lost, but that's not necessarily a bad thing.

What are the benefits of using automation when you mix?

Unfortunately, I usually have such a ridiculous amount of things going on at once that it'd be impossible without it, in most cases. Things like sounds popping in and out, sudden changes in atmosphere and odd

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juxtapositions are really important to creating drama in the mix, so it'd be impossible without automation, for me. I don't think I've done a record - either for myself or someone else - where it was just a recording of a band in a room, a sort of credible depiction of how the band sounds - in years, maybe since around 1984.

How long do you spend, on average, mixing one song?

Usually 12 hours these days, though sometimes less, depending on how much is going on. Actually, I hate mixing. It's so horribly complicated and painful for me, but I love it. [laughs] The end result is always a letdown for me though, because all the questions are answered and it's finished, dead, gone forever. For that reason I usually can't properly hear anything I've done until about five years after I finish it. Usually after finishing a record, I can recite the whole thing through my head anyway, and obsess for a few months afterwards, late at night, lying in bed, doing just that...

How do you like to record vocals? What microphone was used on your vocals on the latest Angels Of Light recording?

I absolutely *hate* to record my own vocals. The gun's to my head, and it's almost impossible to relax. I don't think I've ever been able to come close to how I can actually sing in the studio, just belt it out, as when I've been on tour, say, for six weeks or so. Also, the whole stress of production, thinking about how it'll work in the mix, that kind of thing gets in the way and psyches me out. I've taken lately to drinking either Cognac or Jack Daniel's, along with tablespoons of honey and hot tea, but that quickly devolves into a torpor of drunkenness and asthma! Probably the most important thing is to sing "to" an engineer you trust and actually like, that seems to give a fuck how things turn out. I won't name names, but one asshole that was involved in one of my recordings, I later found out, was actually snickering and making fun of me while I sang, and I of course could sense that disdain, and so gave some of the worst vocal performances of my life, just completely stiffened up, almost paralyzed. So, nowadays, no one's in the studio that doesn't absolutely have to be there, and whoever's there has to be an empathetic person. Another thing I've found helpful lately is to record my vocals in a big room - recently, in Martin's massive basement - and just accept the inevitable ambience. When I want it "close" I just move close to the mic, and when singing/screaming hard, move back and let the room sound reverberate. It seems more natural. On an old Swans' record [*The Great Annihilator*], the studio we used had a closet-like room, sheetrock - not padded or soundproofed, with 12-foot ceilings, and I put a few mics up by the ceiling in addition to the main mic, and ended up with a natural live ambience that was pleasant to sing to, and later used in the mix. I've also had the vocal simultaneously bused to an amp or PA as I sing, and record that too, as well as mix some in with the headphones, to give it more "electricity". The most important thing is that the vocal sound good to the singer so he/she can perform relaxed. That's really hard to achieve. It's the worst part of making a record for me, in my own music. Especially horrible is recording vocals in a dead little booth, where it sounds clinical and lifeless. Martin and I always end

up reverting to an AKG 414 for my vocals. None of the Neumann's or "vintage" style mics ever work for me, because my voice is deep, and it ends up sounding like I'm singing with an old, dirty sock in my mouth. In fact, usually in the mix I end up rolling out most of the bottom end and lower mids from my voice, because it takes up too much space, and it sounds/feels deep anyway, even without the low end. I came across this solution after listening to a lot of old Johnny Cash records, and realized, as deep and dark as his voice was, there really wasn't a lot of bottom end in it. Probably had to do with the mic he used. I'd like to know what that mic was.

Have you ever done any home recording?

If you have, did you enjoy the liberty of being able to capture your thoughts almost instantaneously or did the technical process stand in the way? If you haven't, is this a conscious decision to keep home separate from the studio?

I always record the songs directly into the tiny microphone of my Radio Shack cassette recorder, once they're written and complete. I did release a special limited edition CD through our website of that kind of recording, but used a DAT recorder and a stereo mic instead. I just found the place for the mic where it would pick up a good "mix" of the acoustic guitar and voice, duct-taped it to my desk, and recorded. Some of it came out pretty damn good! But really, that's about the extent of any involvement with home recording that I want. I like the stress of going into a studio, the interactions that occur, all the random elements and influences. In a way too, it helps to focus. It's like going to church! ☺

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