

Stars Show The Way

Michael Bettine-solo percussion

A CD of composed and improvised percussion. The music is an exploration of alternate percussive realities.

(Stars Show the Way is) easily one of the best solo percussion records I've ever heard. Bettine is essential listening for percussionists and anyone interested in solo free-oriented music. —The Improvisor

The idea behind this CD was not to labor over the recording process, but to capture the energy and immediacy of a *live* performance. With this in mind, I came to the studio prepared with the compositions I currently play, some new works, and some impressions for various improvisations. To help create the *live* feeling, I set my instruments up as I would on stage, and played through my list of songs. All of the tracks are first takes, except for two, where technical issues required that I record them again. I'm pleased with the result, in that it sounds very much like I hear things when I am performing them. There are no overdubs or sonic enhancements on any of the tracks.

The music contained here explores two ideas that I have been investigating. The first one is the healing aspect of vibrating metals - like gongs, singing bowls, cymbals, and bells - along with the vibrational effect of Shamanic trance drumming. I find that in playing in the middle of my circular set up, I am immersed in a world of vibration, and, have noticed a profound effect on my body/mind/spirit when playing. The second idea is that of *chaos theory* and how it affects us. Much of the nature of the music I play, and techniques I use, involves random interaction between the player, the instruments, and the utensils used to manipulate the instruments. Because of this, no two performances are exactly alike.

I also am looking for what I call *The Providence of Accidents*, whereby out of the chaos, small patterns of intricate beauty will emerge. I then endeavor to find further patterns that bring a small sense of *order* to the chaos.

~ Michael Bettine

Produced by Michael Bettine. Recorded and mixed at JP Productions by Joel Bohlen & Paul Luy in May 2002.

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STARS SHOW THE WAY

The Recording Process

In today's digital recording studios, the nature of recording has changed drastically. Music can now easily be assembled from selected bits and pieces, with the final results often bearing little resemblance to what was originally put down during the recording process. Since my music is not high production pop music, it was possible to capture things in a much simpler and more direct way.

I came into the studio and set up just as I would for a live performance. The idea was to capture my music live, without any overdubs or digital manipulation. Since my very large set up is circular, with me at the center, it was decided to use 7 mics. They were Left-Center-Right on the drums and cymbals, Left-Center-Right covering the three gong racks, and a mic on the bass drum. Except for the bass drum, nothing was close miked. My music is about *space* and how sounds interact within that space. Using only overhead room mics, the sounds were allowed to open up and create a multi-dimensional soundfield.

One aspect of my set up is having over 50 pieces of metal instruments surrounding me. They all react and vibrate in sympathy with whatever instruments are being played. The result when mixing the music was that at the end of most songs, we found a low-level hum continuing after I had stopped playing. We finally realized this was the *noise floor* of the metals vibrating in sympathy to what I had just played and decided to let some of the songs ring on for quite some time before we cut them off.

I came to the studio prepared with both compositions I had played live, new ones, and a head full of ideas for various improvisations. As it is, all my compositions are *works in progress*; changing slightly each time they are played, depending on mood and atmosphere. So no two performances are ever alike. I also allowed for what I call *the providence of accidents*. This is the chance incident where something will happen to inspire a different melody or motif, or a certain sound will appear that needs to be focused on and followed. With this in mind, I try to approach my instruments with a sense of exploration each time I play.

Once the mics had been placed and the levels set, the tape rolled and I played. On certain songs that featured one instrument, like the 32" gong or the frame drum, a mic was repositioned to focus on that particular instrument. Otherwise, things stayed as they were. All tracks are 1st takes except for two of them. On one it was decided to move a mic to get a better sound, while on the other the tape decided to stop in the middle, so a new tape was then used. In the mixing

stages, very little was done to the initial recordings. The biggest thing was determining which mics created the most open and natural soundfield for each given track. A little EQ was used at times to balance things, and enough reverb was added to the fairly dry initial tracks to help give them a realistic sense of *space*. All tracks are presented as recorded, with no splices or digital trickery. The result is that the music sounds just like I heard it during the recording. Listening through headphones allows the listener to perceive the minute sympathetic vibrations.

The Performance

The actual recording was more like a live performance. I came prepared with a song list of compositions, along with a few *impressions* of moods and textures I wanted to explore. Besides my drums and metals, I brought along a case of small percussion items to play as things went along. One idea I had was for a series of short pieces to be called *Small Gestures*. The concept was to use sounds or textures that were interesting, but were not enough to build a complete song around. I wanted these to be transitional pieces between the longer compositions. This is like my live performances where I play *small gestures* while moving between things, or when making mallet/instrument changes. I can hit or shake something with one hand while picking up a mallet or gong with the other.

During this session, I never turned on the snares or used standard drum sticks (the one time I used a standard stick, I put rosin on the tip, using it to scrape the face of a gong). I find that the more I play this music, the further I move away from standardized rock or jazz drum styles and techniques. A big part of what I do is termed *extended techniques*. This includes all manner of sound manipulation beyond the normal stick/brush/mallet/hand techniques. One thing I favor is placing instruments on the drums and striking them, therefore using the drum as a resonator to enhance the instrument's sound. I can manipulate this further by pressing on the drum head to change the pitch, or by moving the instruments across the drum head from the center to the edge to change the resonating tonality. Further sounds can be created by placing multiple instruments on one drum and letting them *clatter* together. Another variation is sliding or moving an instrument, like a cymbal, off the edge of a drum while striking or bowing it. Again, the concept is to produce different harmonics.

One of the easiest ways of changing a sound is by changing the striking implement: wood, metal, wire, and plastic each have their own sound characteristics. This can be varied further by the shape, weight, thickness, covering, etc. of the stick/brush/mallet. For this recording, I used very thin wooden *Sabar* sticks, sticks with tambourine jingles, split bamboo sticks, various yarn covered mallets, hard and soft rubber mallets, plastic TUBZ, 5 different sizes & weights of gong mallets, a violin bow, and my hands and fingers.

The Music

The music can be divided into 2 types: the longer compositions and improvisations, and the shorter *Small Gestures*. I'll go through the various instruments, implements, and manipulations used.

Small Gestures: these are a series of short improvisations

Shaken, Not Stirred - A string of small, thin cymbals & cup chimes, and strings of Indian Camel & Elephant bells are shaken.

Whirled - A small REMO Spoxe on a rope is struck and then whirled overhead to create a warbling sound.

Chaos Theory - A 12" Chinese cymbal is bowed and struck while being maneuvered around on the snare drum.

Primordial Realm - Vic Firth BAMS (split bamboo sticks) are played on the gongs.

Chambre Noire - The large gongs are played with various mallets and Pro-Mark Sabar sticks. I also rubbed a Chinese cymbal in a circular motion across the face of my 24" Chau gong.

Circle of 5 - Mike Balter hard plastic mallets are played on an 8" Accent cymbal placed on top of 5 Sound Discs laying on the snare drum.

Aurora Borealis - I bowed a set of 5 Paiste Sound Discs for a very open, ethereal sound.

Dream Nebula - Bell cymbals played with Mike Balter soft yarn mallets.

Toy Hammers - A set of toy hammers, with whistles in them, are played on the drums.

Percussive Floor - I used Sabar sticks on all the various small cymbals, gongs, and bells lying on the floor under my gong racks.

Vertige - The rosined tip of a drum stick is scraped across the face of a 24" gong while it is also struck with various sticks and mallets.

Transcendence - A 13" Paiste Mega Cup Chime is played upside down with soft mallets on the gong bass drum.

Past The North Star - Paul Wertico model TUBZ are played on the larger gongs.

Compositions: some of these are scored out; some are more a framework I use.

Spiritual Resonance is inspired by my friends, Swiss drummer Pierre Favre and American drummer Alex Cline. Both of them use Gongs extensively. I was particularly inspired by Pierre's song, *Ballade*, from the fantastic ECM CD, **de la nuit...le jour**, and by the song *Sophia* from the **Right Of Violet** CD, by Cline/Gautier/Stinson (Nine Winds). I was going for the same vibe they had in those songs. All the gongs are played with Mike Balter soft yarn marimba mallets.

Trois Rivières is a piece for three sets of cymbals: 8" & 10" hi-hats and a pair of 12" & 14" Wuhan china cymbals. The piece explores various open and closed sounds between the cymbals.

A Sense Of Tension - Regal Tip *Jingle Sticks* (with tambourine jingles on them) are played on the drums and bell cymbals. The jingles add another dimension to the sound.

Harmonic Resonance keeps up the theme of vibrating metals. Against an ostinato pattern played on a Formula 602 20" Heavy Flat Ride cymbal, a 5-note cymbal melody is layered on top. The melody is played on tenor and soprano cymbal trees. Later, the ostinato is moved to the heavy bell cymbals where all manner of harmonics are set loose, creating an intense shower of sound. This is played with very thin Pro-Mark *Sabar* sticks.

Flow of Water - This was inspired by my good friend, Swiss drummer Fredy Studer. He played something similar when I saw him play with Pierre Favre in 2000, and I wanted to explore the idea. I use Pro-Mark's Paul Wertico *TUBZ* played on a lovely 20" Paiste Sound Creation Dark Crash cymbal. I cupped my hands over the ends of the *TUBZ* to change the pitch.

Gamelan Arcana uses the small gongs placed on top of the drums (as resonators) and played with Mike Balter yarn mallets. The gongs then have a short, pitched sound that is a bit like an Indonesian Gamelan.

Stars Show The Way is a Shamanic chant designed to produce a trance like state where the mind can be open to guidance from the stars on our journey. This song was inspired by the great Norwegian/Sami singer, Mari Boine, whose music is incredibly earthy and organic. I was listening to her fantastic **ROOM OF WORSHIP** CD and was struck by the lines: *I was born in 1954, Write with a Macintosh, Stars show the way, Foremothers lift the torches when necessary*, in the song *Risten*. I saw this idea that even though we have changed and

modernized so much, that the stars are still there, as they have always been, unchanged. And even if all of our modernization disappeared, the stars would still be there, and we could still navigate as our ancestors did, finding our way through life. The song starts out with pulses in 5 & 7 played on a frame drum. After varying the tones with different methods (hands, mallets-different areas of the head, and the drum shell), the pulse moves to the gong bass drum and toms played with a yarn mallet in the right hand and a TUBZ in the left, then back to the frame drum.

Dark Sun - This is about an eclipse and the fiery corona that is then visible around the sun. The 32" Paiste Symphonic Gong is played with a bow and various mallets.

Anarchy was inspired by the fantastic French/Vietnamese percussionist, Le Quan Ninh. I had been listening to his solo percussion CD, **Ustensiles**, trying to figure out how he gets such amazing sounds. I had an interesting trance vision while listening to it one time and could see him playing the music. This is an homage to him. It features Chinese cymbals first bowed while being maneuvered across the snare and gong bass drum. They are then played with yarn mallets and used to strike the drums, and each other.

Across The Dangerous Bardo - The origins of the word Bardo lie in the Tibetan traditions where it means a "gap" or "transition". There is the gap between the in and out breath, from sleeping to waking, and also between life and death. These examples are a starting point; a place to look for clues. The mystery of the Bardo is not an easy problem to be solved by one simple definition. In **The Tibetan Book Of The Dead**, the Bardo is described as *the afterlife state between heaven & hell*. Heaven is represented here by the pure tone of an Indonesian bossed gong, with hell represented by the more chaotic sound of an aluminum thunder sheet. The long tones of the various large gongs & cymbals signify the journey of the soul.

Geometry - Vic Firth **BAMS** (split bamboo sticks) are played on the heavy bells and the toms with the 2 hi-hats. The bamboo sticks change the texture of the instruments and draw out diverse harmonics.

The Healing Garden of Sound is a slow moving piece for larger gongs. All these instruments are struck in the middle with a large mallet so they will sustain their tones for a long time. These tones are set ringing and allowed to interact with each other, unfolding into different harmonics as each instrument is played. I wanted to end things on a calmer note, sending the listener away in a more relaxed mood.

Points of contact:

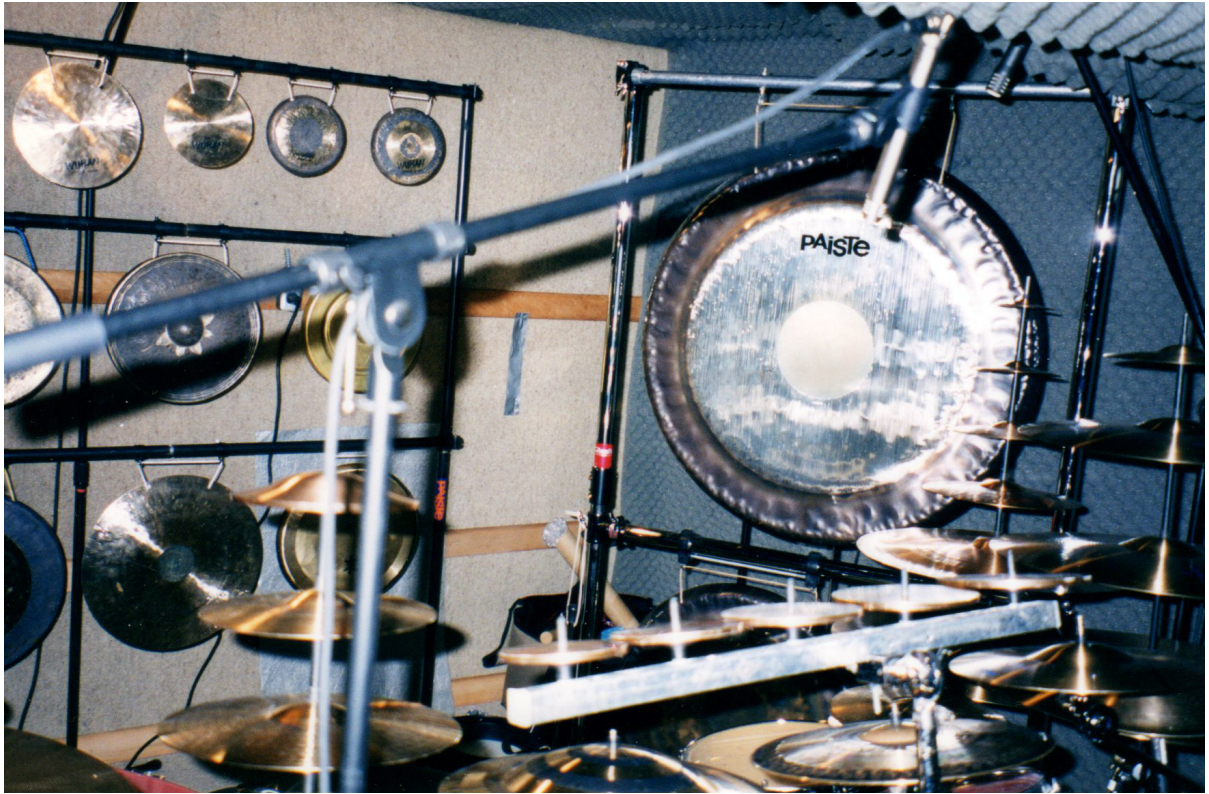
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The close quarters *live* set up in the studio





Cymbal trees at the ready



Addendum: The story of **Stars Show The Way** is a story of being in the right place at the right time. I was working in a music store selling drums, and had managed to convince the powers that be to let me put on a few drum clinics where I was able to talk about, and perform, my newly composed solo percussion music. I had been working on the idea of solo music for a while, but had not realized it until this opportunity presented itself. The feedback was positive and encouraging. I was also able to record the clinics to get a listen to how the music sounded out front.

I had also been thinking about recording my music. As fate would have it, one of the guys in the keyboard/tech department, Joel, approached me, saying, "I have a recording studio and I'd really like to record your stuff." Opportunity knocked, and I jumped headfirst through the open door. The best part was Joel's intrigue about everything and willingness to experiment.

So a few weeks later, I loaded all my gear into his tiny studio, and over the course of one day we recorded what would become **Stars**. We spent a few hours the next day mixing and tidying things up, and that was it. Everything was recorded live, making the session a lot like playing a gig. And that was the idea, to capture the sound and vibe of a live performance, but in a more controlled environment. The session itself was an adventure in sound & exploration.

~ Michael Bettine

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