

*In the conversation with Roger Breisch, Michael Jones explores the joys and struggles we all experience as we try to be true to the songline of our own heart.*

### **Excerpted from an interview with Roger Breisch, March, 1998**

**Roger:** Is playing your music different from hearing it?

**Michael:** I love Chopin because he emphasized the art of touch above everything else. He got exasperated with students if they focused on technique. For me much of the creation is tactile...much of my connection to the piano is kinesthetic. Hearing my music feels foreign because I don't hear it through my ears, I hear it through my body. If I listen to my music- particularly in a setting where I don't have a context-it takes me a moment to actually recognize it is my work. When I am recording, it takes a while to adjust to listening through speakers. It never sounds anything like the way I feel as I am playing.

People who get the most through my music, it seems, are those who take it in through their body...connecting to the way I create it.

**Roger:** Recently, you played an introduction for Meg Wheatley. She began by saying, "I hope I just don't stand here and cry." She was deeply moved. What is it about music that has that connection?

**Michael:** Music invites us to think from our heart, and when we are thinking from our heart we are never far from tears. John Keats said the heart is the only organ strong enough to educate the mind. Unfortunately, we start with the intellect and struggle to find some way of including our heart. It's hard to make that link because the intellect doesn't recognize the heart.

**Roger:** But you began your career as a consultant. You wouldn't let music be your public life for many years!

**Michael:** Finding my own voice was to find a way into my heart...and that was through the music. But it was not an easy journey. To publicly live the life of the heart, through recording and concerts, has been a challenge...the vulnerability of being present in my heart and exposed in front of a large number of people.

**Roger:** Could you tell the story of the gentleman who changed your thinking?

**Michael:** At the time, I was playing my music mostly for myself. I was doing a management program at a hotel near Toronto. I had joined a group for dinner and was coming back to get ready for the next day. There was a piano sitting

between the lounge and the registration desk. It was quiet so I decided I'd play- it's hard to walk by a piano without playing! I'd played for about 15 minutes when I sensed someone nearby. I looked up and this older gentleman was weaving towards the piano from the lounge. I grounded and thought, "Oh gosh, he's probably going to sit here and request things I don't know how to play!" He came over, a glass of red wine between his fingers, and plopped down in a chair beside the piano. As I finished he asked, "What music was that?" I said, "That was just an arrangement of Moon River." "No, no. There was something before that. What was that?" "That was a little of my own music." He said, "Well I enjoyed that. You are wasting your time with Moon River." It took me aback because he was so direct. He asked, "Do you work here at the hotel?" "No, I'm working with a group down the hall." He said, "What do you do?" "I am a consultant." I tried to express how important the work was...I was trying to change the world. He did not look impressed! "How many other people do this kind of work in Toronto?" I said, "20 or 30." He paused, looked at me...his eyes were very clear and sober. He said, "Who is going to play your music if you don't play it yourself?" I didn't know what to say. I just sat there, stunned! He stood up, steadied himself by putting his hand on my shoulder and said, "It's your gift, don't waste it." Then he meandered back into the lounge.

I came up with a number of arguments for why I could not do my music...I was going to starve...I wasn't that good. I had a whole list of reasons...but of course, he was nowhere to be found. He was gone. Somebody once said that angels come to us in the form of drunks and children.

**Roger:** And now, 18 years later, you have sold over 1-1/2 million CDs?

**Michael:** When I began I couldn't conceive how on earth that first album was going to sell. They weren't familiar tunes...they were extended piano improvisations. Now I'm about to record maybe my twelfth! To think there was that much music I was carrying inside and had no sense was there. At his invitation, I opened a channel that allowed all that music to come through. I think we all have that channel in one way or another. We have no perception of what is waiting to be made manifest.

**Roger:** If you ran into that gentleman today, what would you say?

**Michael:** How thankful I am. I would thank all those people who-in that moment of perception and courage-have been able to see into the essence of the other and give it voice. That's how we can best serve one another...to see in the other what they cannot safely see in themselves.

**Roger:** Prior to this, you would not allow yourself to be in touch with your emotions in a public way?

**Michael:** I took others' ideas and filtered them...protected myself behind charts, models, graphs, and theories. If anybody challenged me, I could say, "Call him, it's really his idea!" Where is our capacity for our own original thought?

There are many cultures where musicians would never think of playing anybody else's music! Not that they're exclusive...they play in collective, improvisation ways, but they all have their own particular voice. In the West we play almost exclusively other people's music-as a metaphor, but also literally. We pay a great price...we feel embarrassed to bring something that is our own.

**Roger:** Where does the embarrassment come from?

**Michael:** It came for me in bringing a piece of my music to a piano lesson. My teacher, a very kindly person, expressed relatively little real interest. The real work was to play the masters. This creation of mine wasn't going to measure up. I felt embarrassed and self-conscious. But I continued to pursue it because I had such a strong commitment to my music. I played for six years before I started piano lessons. I had a sense of belonging at the piano.

We don't get help in our culture to understand what it means to belong to ourselves and the world. That gentleman heard something in my music that I belonged to. But I felt embarrassed by it. It's as if we've been told it's not our rightful place.

**Roger:** Benjamin Disraeli said most people die with their music still locked inside. Is this changing?

**Michael:** I think more people are becoming aware there is deeper music in their life worth listening to...sensing the call to let their lives and work be a reflection of that music. My sense is there will be a time when what we do will be a reflection of what we love.

The challenge is, we have to put aside the script...the musical score. When that man posed that question I felt absolute clarity in terms of what was significant in my life, but I was totally lost in terms of what to do with it. That's part of the territory...being lost is part of the journey. There is something we need to access within ourselves that only arises when we feel lost, confused or uncertain.

**Roger:** Our culture tries to eliminate confusion.

**Michael:** This is one of the unfortunate myths...that a life well lived is a life of certainty. Judy and I met in '74. She began mapping out her life...she had real certainty. I didn't know what I was going to do the next day! Yet, I see where she is now-an artist-and I don't think she could have ever imagined where she would be today.

There is the tradition that says, if you can see the path clearly laid in front of you, chances are you've stumbled onto someone else's path! Antonio Machado says, "Wanderer, I do not walk the path, I lay the path as I walk." We are creating our life as we live it, step by step.

**Roger:** What about the importance of vision...having the end point in mind?

**Michael:** There is a wonderfully interplay between mastery and mystery. On one hand, you have the mastery of having and fulfilling a vision. But along with vision is imagination. Imagination is the path the heart loves to wander...it likes to be surprised. You find yourself in places you had not conceived of. The things I encounter at the piano I had not anticipated are the moments of grace I live for. If it was only hearing something in my head, then getting it on the piano, I don't think that would be enough to keep bringing me back. It's the mystery of finding things happening in my hands...composing through my fingers. This is not so much vision as it is life of the imagination. The things I am doing now-the integration of music and dialogue-didn't exist five years ago. I could not have said, "I'm going to integrate music and dialogue in corporate settings in this way."

**Roger:** You have said there are times you don't know whether you are playing the piano or the piano is playing you.

**Michael:** Those are the moments when I feel most grateful. By finding that particular place at the piano. I've been able to explore ways to let that be a reflection of how to live my life...I can't quite tell if I am living my life or life is living itself through me.

**Roger:** Isn't having less control scary?

**Michael:** Unfortunately, we've been taught that the future we ordain can be fulfilled the way we ordain it. If we live according to those rules the possibilities open to us become limited...it becomes a relatively narrow life. That's the risk. I was having experiences that contradicted everything I'd been

told about how to live one's life. If I control every note-play with absolute and total certainty-the music feels flat and one dimensional. It has no texture...no interest. When I began to explore my relationship with the piano, marvelous things started to happen. I began to question the rules.

**Roger:** How do the rest of us make that same discovery?

**Michael:** One thing that narrows our lives is the feeling we must honour the god of competence. It's important to find something that captivates our interest, around which we don't have to be competent. This liberates us to enter into the true spirit of curiosity...it becomes our practice. We can suspend the need for proving anything and enter for the joy of the exploration itself.

**Roger:** How do I discover what that is for me?

**Michael:** My impression is life does not abandon us...it gives us clues. I walked up to my first piano when I was about two. I loved the smell...the size...the feeling of the wood...the texture of the ivory...I loved the whole thing. I hadn't even heard the first sound! There was something about the instrument itself that drew me. I think each of us, at some time, has found ourselves totally absorbed in something for which we had no explanation. That is a clue that there is something to which we belong.

**Roger:** You spoke of integrating dialogue with music. Can you describe that?

**Michael:** Conversation means to turn together and improvise with words. Music becomes a metaphor for a way to deepen our capacities to authentically listen...to appreciate that the generative source is not in you or me, but in a space held between. These are all elements of musical improvisation. Music becomes a point of reference for a way we might engage in conversation oriented more around the question than answers.

**Roger:** You are playing music and your colleague, David Whyte, is reading poetry in "respectable" management seminars. Why is this happening now?

**Michael:** There's a part of us that has never belonged in corporate life...the part that awakens when we hear a poem being deeply spoken, or experience beautiful music. It's the part that sees the value of story and myth, responds to beauty, is enlivened through a sensory relationship with the world. our world, I think, becomes very flat in its absence.

**Roger:** You're talking about bringing all of who we are to the workplace. Is this possible? Is it sustainable?

**Michael:** The corporation of the future is going to have what we might call an artist attitude. We'll have embodied elements from the province of the arts as well as the province of work. I envision the two coming together. Work will become our art...what we bring to our art will be what we bring to our work.

Organizations will need a capacity to navigate in uncharted waters with greater degrees of uncertainty. Organizations--and those in them--will need to embody many of the things we have been exploring...what it means to live a life of uncertainty...a more improvised life.

Gary Hamel said that most organizations don't fail because of lack of resources or strategy but because of a lack of imagination. We don't create room for the imagination in corporations.

People are becoming attuned to a wider way of seeing things through music, poetry, and art. All of the artistic forms will find a more central place as metaphors--as grounds of emerging new practices--within organizations.

I'd like to see organizations where this is not another answer. We need to create communities of practice, communities that can balance action and reflection...knowledge and inquiry. An organization that can't hold to the larger uncertainty is not going to survive.

**Roger:** Even as children though, we get rewards for answers.

**Michael:** We live in a performance culture...we feel embarrassed by not being able to call up a legitimate answer. As a result we only work with relatively shallow questions. We need questions that are larger than our own life. Look at the great creators...it wasn't just talent or technique that made them distinctive. They had particular sensitivity to the questions they were willing to hold...ones that don't live out their completion through the span of one's lifetime. Questions of that magnitude--questions that draw us more into the mystery of things--are the kinds of questions we're seeking.

**Roger:** You have gone from musician to consultant to musician/consultant. Are you surprised you have been able to change your life and continue doing similar work?

**Michael:** The common thread is teaching...even at the piano I teach through my fingers.

In the early 1980's I was being trained to lead the Leadership and Mastery Program with Peter Senge and Charlie Kiefer. But I realized I couldn't teach vision and purpose if I wasn't living it myself! Music was a gamble...it didn't have a form...it had no certainty. yet my instincts said I needed to take the time and space for whatever was coming up.

As I moved into the music, I entered a "wilderness" for about 7 years. What was remarkable was how I found my way back. Dialogue was particularly suited to the seven years I spent exploring this deeper ground. What I was learning--through composing and performing-- was how to find a ways to let words come from the inside out, rather than the outside in. I felt I needed to let the words move from the same place the music did.

I remember speaking at one of the first dialogue programs. I thought, "Where are these words coming from?" They were forming in my mouth as I was speaking! I had not had that experience...I always had a script. Through the music a new voice was born. That's what's important in the work we do now...we become midwives for the birthing of a new voice. We bring new life to language so it can fulfill its original purpose--to bring us closer to a sense of our own interval...a way that we can rest in language and inhabit it again. We become and instrument for the expression of truth and beauty through language. This is our gift.

**Roger:** Do you miss the wilderness?

**Michael:** I haven't entirely left it! Having been in it I'm not as quick to want to leave. I carry the uncertainty moment to moment...like a state of being.

I was invited to perform for the International Piano Festival in Montreal a number of years ago. I was so delighted to be invited I didn't give much thought to the setting. This was just before Christmas and the concert wasn't until June. I had this image...this festival is like the International Jazz Festival, there are a number of concurrent events. This will be an intimate setting...a little church with maybe a hundred people.

I remember waking up in a cold sweat sometime in March and thought, "Gosh, I wonder what this might be? I've got this concert coming up, maybe I had better find out a little more." I called the concert organizer, George, and introduced myself. He said, "It's great to hear from you, things are really

developing. Can I help you? "Where exactly am I playing and how do I fit in the program?" He said, "Let me say how delighted we are you are joining us. We've been exclusively focused on the classical repertoire. You bring something quite different...more contemporary. We would really like to make sure you are well featured." I said, "What does that mean exactly?" "We have you scheduled for the last night...Saturday!" I said, "Oh...that sounds like a big night?" He said, "It will be the biggest night of the week, everything leads up to that night." I said, "Well, how many others will be performing?" He said, "You are the only one." Suddenly terror is beginning to rise up, like volcanic lava deep within. I said, "Ah hah! Well where am I going to be performing?" He said, "You will be in the Place des Arts, which has about 3000 seats." The biggest concert hall in Canada! About 2750 more seats than I usually play for. I realized why I was nervous. I swallowed hard, hung up the phone and thought, "This is serious!"

I spent quite a bit of time imagining an increasing number of people gathered around the piano. By the time I got to Montreal I was acclimatized...at least in my own mind. I was feeling solid and confident...until I got into the Green Room! I could feel the murmur of the audience as it was building. George was excited! Their best series yet...sold more tickets than ever before. I asked what was different from previous years? "We have far more piano teachers." At which point I came apart. I had an immediate flashback to the Kiwanis festivals I used to play; I would often walk off the stage long before the piece was done...or I would forget. All that terror came back.

I stood at the back of the stage, knowing I was soon to take a walk. My hands started to shake. They introduced me. I walked across the stage in kind of a daze...feeling the beginnings of stage fright, which can be totally debilitating. My hands were shaking as I sat down. I thought, "Well at least my feet are still"...at which point my feet started to shake. Now what do I do? I could always turn to the audience and say, "Here is a piano and audience. Would anybody out there like to do a concert?"

Fortunately, I remembered a penitentiary I played a few months before. I was doing a concert at Miami University and I said I would like to do outreach. They found an opportunity at a penitentiary. "It's minimum security, more like a farm, so you will probably really enjoy yourself. There's a group of men in a music appreciation program...they would love to have you perform." We drove up to the gate. I didn't see any farm. All I saw was guns and barbed wire! When they had me sign a waiver stating they took absolutely no responsibility for my welfare-- they had had riots in the past--I realized this was a real penitentiary. We went to the chapel. There were about 80 men and it was hot! They had a



big fan cooling down the piano...an old, beat-up, upright piano. One of the guys said the only other person who ever came here was a Russian. "He beat the piano to death and left! You're the second." I felt totally out of place.

I started to play. I could hardly hear the piano over the fan, it was making so much noise. Suddenly, a big guy in the front row stood up and walked out. I figured the rest would walk out too. "Is that going to be all right that 80 men walk out on me in a penitentiary music appreciation class?" Then I heard the door of the Chapel open...I sensed this guy coming in again. He walked slowly up the aisle, stood beside the piano with a glass of water, set it down, went back and sat down. I was feeling really touched! This glass of water was acknowledgment that whatever I brought that afternoon was enough. Wheel you are being true to the truth of what's flowing through your work, you really can't control how it's going to come out. Whatever feelings were in me were also in the room...nothing in my life experience would come as a shock. A floodgate opened...I could let whatever was moving in me come through.

Then I was back on the stages at the festival. My hands started to enter into a roll in the bottom notes...sort of like Fats Domino's Blueberry Hill...my hands were shaking anyway! I moved into a deep crescendo that began to get louder and louder...a growing crescendo up the instrument. That became the opening for the whole evening. Much of the music I played that night I have never played before...a lot of it I haven't played since.

Our way of experiencing life, and our participation in it, becomes the art of all arts. I have been reading a collection of William Stafford poems called *The Darkness Around Us is Deep* with an introduction by Robert Bly. Stafford wrote a poem every day...a tremendous output for a poet. Robert Bly once asked how he was able to accomplish that. He said, "First, I lower my standards!" Then he said a wonderful thing. He got up in the morning, sat, and waited for the first impulse. He would treat that impulse as the golden string, and follow it into the poem. As long as he was obedient to that authority, the thread would lead him into the poem. The important thing was not the pull on the string because he would break the connection.

As we have been talking today, we started around the theme of my relationship with Chopin and the art of touch...the beginning of the string. We let our conversation be a ways of following the thread into the story of the concert in Montreal and its significance to our way of being in the world. It seems complete.