

Interviewed by Laurissa Wieler, Vancouver, 2007

Try to describe Michael Waters's music. People have attempted using words such as 'beyond the beyond' and 'pure emotion'. Michael Waters has created a unique body of musical art for solo guitar. He calls it The Medicine Path, born of a variety of international and indigenous influences. In 2004, after playing guitar for 33 years as a spiritual practice, Michael encountered the healing ceremonies of the Peruvian Amazon. His deep explorations into the world of nature spirits led to a 16 month wave of composition, resulting in the music of his first two recordings: Famous in Mongolia and Lost in Tierra del Fuego. In 2005 a second wave of composition began leading to a more unstructured style he refers to as Acoustic Psychedelic Chill, played with layered electronics and digital effects. Fundamental to his music, Michael plays all his compositions in D minor 9th, a unique tuning for the guitar. Michael lives in Victoria with his wife Sophie and their three children.

Laurissa Wieler: How did you first encounter the indigenous healing ceremonies of the Peruvian Amazon? What have they meant to you?

Michael Waters: The ayahuasca traditions are several thousand years old, and exist throughout the Amazon forest. A lot has been written about the ayahuasca tea and the powerful visions that the ceremonies can produce, and of course there are a lot of ambiguities about the credentials of many who lead such ceremonies. I always tell people not to take it from anyone they wouldn't leave their kids with for a week!

As a founder of Hollyhock on Cortes Island, I experienced many of the world's spiritual traditions through the practitioners who visited there. Two of them were healers who use ayahuasca in the traditional way, and I was able to attend their ceremonies, in the early 90s.

At the time, I knew that the experience in the ceremonies greatly deepened my clarity about my own nature, and gave me my first experience of direct connection to the intelligence of the plant spirits. This was in some ways like a UFO encounter, in how out of the norm it was, and yet, since it was through the context of indigenous cultural worldviews and their set of realities, it did not produce a sense of craziness, but rather was personally deeply affirming. It also confirmed for me the use of plant substances like ayahuasca as medicinal, rather than recreational, or as part of a drug scene.

At this time I did not make the connection between the ceremonies and my experience of moving forward musically, which happened in the same period. After 20 years, two compositions suddenly appeared that I recognized as deeply truthful expressions, I knew they were different from everything else I was playing. These two things happened in the same period of my life, and I was grateful for both, but I did not associate them at the time.

LW: It seems many people are becoming curious about the use of ayahuasca for spiritual insights for its healing properties. What form did 'deep explorations into the world of nature spirits' take for you? What did you learn or come to believe as a result of exposure to this medicinal plant?

MW: My first contact with nature was in my daily life growing up in the forest of the west coast, remote from civilization. I have a clear memory of seeing a golden light filled with colours in the branches of a large spruce tree beside my house, when I was about 7 years old. "So that what an angel looks like" is the thought I remember having when I saw it. I went soon after to my grandmother and started showing her that I could separate everything into the world into "stuff" and "things", with stuff being man-made and things being God-made.

My next phase of this connection came as a young adult, exploring the worldviews of mystics, Carlos Castaneda, monks, philosophers and medicine men. I had several experiences of intense connection with the complexity and majestic power of nature that gave me the sense of there being far more going on than met the eye, or than was being taught in educational institutions of the day.

In my twenties I spent ten years traveling and met Alexandro Jodorowski in Paris. I started to study the body of knowledge that he was teaching, a lineage of understanding unbroken for five thousand years in the western world, from Sumeria until now. This gave me the spiritual foundation I recognized as being able to serve for a lifetime. In this worldview, Angels are treated with great respect and are regarded as a rare encounter, both in the positive and negative senses.

The integration of a spiritual history with my modern, though rustic upbringing, gave me a sense of navigation within my own culture. I found it less daunting to separate out the wisdom and insights from the abuses and deceptions within the Christian social framework I was raised in. From my thirties to my fifties I integrated and, in a sense, validated the foundation I had gained from working with Jodorowski.

LW: Jodorowski sounds intriguing, though I don't believe he is well known in North America. What are his core beliefs?

MW: At its core is the understanding of the human ego - that which changes in a person - as being composed of four distinct energies symbolized by Earth, Air, Fire and Water. In modern thought we call these the physical, mental, creative and emotional aspects of the ego. They surround the 'quintessence', the soul, or that which does not change.

By the time I was 30, I recognized that this was a foundation I could build on for the rest of my life, and at 50, after 20 years of validating it I decided to simply accept that it was genuine. I have no doubt that the balance this approach gave me made it possible for me to enter into another culture's spiritual tradition and have the experience for finding this music.

LW: I understand that participating in ayahuasca medicine ceremonies had a direct impact on your ability to compose music for the guitar.

MW: Yes, it was 13 years after my first encounter with the ayahuasca medicine ceremonies that I had the possibility to participate in them again. In the fall of 2004, I reserved a space in a ceremony being held by a shaman visiting the area.

Two weeks before the ceremony I sat down to play one of the two compositions that had come in the early nineties. Nothing else of note had appeared since, I just played as I had always done, with a sense of seeking the source of the beauty in music. This time, a new piece of music started to come out. I was understandably elated, as I had long since accepted that there was no guarantee of finding this muse again.

Two weeks later I took part in the medicine ceremony. The minute the shaman began chanting the traditional Shipibo songs that they sing only in ceremony, I knew that this was where the music I was composing was coming from. For sixteen months the compositions kept coming. I had never experienced anything like it, and I was more than happy, it was incredibly fulfilling.

By the spring of 2005 the shaman (who was just completing his apprenticeship of 14 years) brought his teacher to the region - Guillermo Arevalo, a well-known curandero from the Peruvian Amazon, from a lineage of curanderos, going back as long as they can remember.

Guillermo said two things before leading his ceremony that are worth noting: "We are one human family," and "you know, we all want to be up there, surrounded by the golden light... but it's a long trip. So it's very important to develop a daily discipline to help you on your way."

When Guillermo began to chant during the ceremony it was absolutely clear to me I had heard this somewhere before. His singing was so powerful. Finally I remembered. In 1969 my father took me to see Duke Ellington and his Orchestra, live in Vancouver, and I had not heard that power coming from anywhere since then, and here it was, emanating from a five-foot Shipibo Indian!

I went home the next morning and the composition I was working on (the Two Shamans) virtually rolled out and completed itself. Somewhat stunned I emailed one of the younger apprentices to say how amazingly strong the connection was between the music and the medicine, and that I would love the opportunity to come and play this composition for Guillermo while he was here. My thought was that I would do so during the day, when they were not conducting ceremonies.

A short while later I got a response saying I was invited to come and play it during the ceremony itself.

This was received by me as both an honour and a somewhat daunting prospect, since it is not uncommon to be unable to lift oneself off one's mattress for several hours after one has taken the medicine.

The next two nights of ceremony I was unable to gather the will to play. I could look at the guitar, touch it, but no way was playing it an option. The third night, however, I was able to play, and the experience was so deeply transforming that it adjusted my entire approach to music. I now look back on that experience as being the adjustment that finally allowed me to gain the correct approach, after 33 years of playing.

The compositions continued to flow until the spring of 2006. When Suite: Sophie was being written I had the clear sense that the wave was completing itself, and once I had recorded the full 16 months of

compositions in the two CDs that make up the Medicine Path I felt as though I had made my contribution to the musical world.

LW: That 16 month wave of compositions must have changed your life. It sounds as though you experienced something touching the miraculous.

MW: It was like pure elation to have this music just flowing into being, all the while knowing it was related to the experiences of the medicine ceremonies. I had read of this kind of thing - Castaneda, various Zen enlightenment accounts, but had not expected it would actually happen to me. It has moved me into a new relationship with other musicians, artists and seekers, where I feel I have something to contribute.

LW: What inspired your 2nd wave of composition in 2005, leading to playing what you call Acoustic Psychedelic Chill?

MW: I was about one year into composing the Medicine Path when music started to arrive that I knew was not from the same source - it was just as complete, but I knew it was of a different accent. It was more masculine, unstructured, sky-filling, as contrasted with the medicine Path compositions which are very female, highly structured and earth-spirit oriented.

I had no idea of the 'genre' of any of the music I was writing, as I had never met anyone who could pinpoint it, regardless of how much they liked it. It was only when someone in their twenties spoke up that I got a fix on it. "Cool", they said, "You're playing psychedelic chill, but on an acoustic guitar!"

This wave continued on until the fall of 2007 when, like the Medicine Path, it reached its natural summation with Mind Bandits.

LW: What are the origins of Psychedelic Chill, and how did you come across it?

MW: Psychedelic chill is an offshoot of the rave and psychedelic movements. The heavy pounding beat of rave was dropped, but the liquid transformational character was kept, along with the virtuosity and complexity. To this was added a 'chill' baseline, very downbeat, very cool. It is also called psychedelic dub. It is virtually all played with layered electronics and a lot of digital effects. Two well-known practitioners are Gaudi and Evan Bluetechn.

LW: How would you describe the technical process of Psychedelic Chill? Are you using a loop machine? How many tracks can you overlap at one time?

MW: I use a loop machine in several of the pieces, and sometimes a delay, so I can use the rhythm and echo to give some foundation. I have a few pieces that use three tracks, always recorded live on stage. Psychedelic chill is more of a mood than a technical approach, a very downbeat, minor-key oriented sound - but if you listen to Shpongles, you will hear it blend into world beat and even classical styles.

LW: Given your many years as a spiritual seeker and your tremendous outburst of composing for the guitar, what is next for you musically?

MW: Connecting with my audience is the only reason I am performing publicly. For 33 years it was important to me that I approach the music personally, and playing alone and with friends was my method. Once I reached the 'source' in relationship with the plant spirits, my entire outlook and approach changed. It was as if, after 33 years, I made the final adjustment to arrive at a correct approach. One aspect of this shift was the complete integration - not just intellectual - of the understanding that judgments about the music were actually completely irrelevant to the music. Whether they were my own or anyone else's, they had no more bearing on the music than the price of eggs in China. They mattered in terms of people's satisfaction or whether they wanted to hear more, but they had no intrinsic bearing on the music itself. This was massively liberating for me, and completely changed the experience of performing.

The other aspect of 'arriving at the sea' after so many years of following the river downstream was that there was no longer any meaning in seeking out the source of music, since I had gone as far as could be gone in this direction. So the next natural step was to play it with people. This is now for me the only way that playing music can have any personal significance.