



# MICHAEL BISIO

BY CLIFFORD ALLEN

Michael Bisio knows how to ‘walk’ the bass—indeed, at a recent duo concert with pianist Matthew Shipp at the venerable community space 5C Café in the Lower East Side, amid exhortations of “Slam Stewart!” from the proprietor, Bisio exhibited not only a robust, earthy and delicate stomp, but actually walked around with the bass. He danced with it, bringing it to a near-40-degree axis from the floor, plucking in counterpoint to the pianist’s cyclical motions or draping his body atop the instrument and exploring its registers with a meaty, incisive arco. Asked about his physical relationship to the bass, Bisio offers this: “[choreographer and composer] Meredith Monk has said that ‘all musical truth resides in the body.’ It rings very true for me, because I believe that everything can be broken down into vibration and therefore feel. Although I am sometimes aware of [dancing] happening, mostly I know because other people tell me. It is apparent I am a physical player and I have come to understand that the physical world and spiritual world are very intertwined and, at the best of times, for me they are one.”

Bisio was born on Mar. 4th, 1955 in Troy, New York and started on the bass as a teenager, partly inspired by the music—and physicality—of Charles Mingus and his approach, though initially his studies were in the classical realm. “Everything was all about the bass in my early years and the summer before I went to college at the University of Washington, I was at the Chautauqua Institute [in upstate New York]. My first teacher David Cobb was ready to ship me to Henry Portnoy, who was the principal bassist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, but I met Jim Harnett, the principal bass of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra who was every bit as heavy and we got along great. Because of my teenage years, I needed to go somewhere far away! He was the only person I knew in Seattle, which was a very different place in those days. One of the really good things about that is that I could develop at my own pace.” Bisio’s studies in Seattle were diverse, encompassing classical bass technique and new music, the latter in a chamber improvisation ensemble with reedplayer William O. Smith and trombonist Stuart Dempster.

Always a bit ‘different’ in temperament from his classical peers, Bisio made the switch to playing improvised music completely in the early ‘90s, though his playing history already included performing and recording with heavy-hitting West Coast figures like trumpeter Barbara Donald and reedplayers Bert Wilson and Carter Jefferson (appearing on Donald’s 1982 Cadence LP *The Past and Tomorrows*). Rounding out the ‘80s, he’d also recorded two dates as a leader—the sextet LP *Ours* (CT Records, 1983) and a beautiful quartet album titled *In Seattle* (Silkheart, 1987)—and filled out the ‘90s working with pianist Wayne Horvitz and in saxophonist Charles Gayle’s trio with drummer Michael Wimberly. Now, as then, Bisio is a temporal bulwark in ensembles, but with a spry, ebullient way of applying physicality that gives the music a bright, rounded sense of motion. In a word, he ‘swings’, but

not with the codified energy that such a word implies.

Bisio relocated east in 2005, landing first in the East Village and soon moved back to his hometown of Troy and is now instrumental faculty at Vermont’s Bennington College. Since landing in New York, Bisio has become an integral part of the environment. As he puts it, “here, I know I’m part of a community. In Seattle there was a scene but I knew I wasn’t part of it. I’d gig and go home. Here, my being part of something is due to Arts for Art [organization responsible for the Vision Fest] and I could never say enough good things about them. They’ve been invaluable to me in my maturation process. I always know someone has my back.”

In New York his activities have included membership in the Matthew Shipp Trio with drummer Newman Taylor Baker (a chair formerly occupied by Whit Dickey) as well as duos with Shipp. This partnership has resulted in seven recordings—the trio’s latest, *The Conduct of Jazz*, is forthcoming on Thirsty Ear and the Shipp-Bisio duo LP *Live in Seattle* will be released by Vinyl Revolution in early 2016. “Musically our rapport is very easy as our aesthetics are very similar and I feel like I was born to play music with Matt. We were both taught that you had to know what came before, you had to have a handle on it and you had to add to it if you could. I think that’s where our similarity is, in the drive to push a boundary while being conscious of lineage. Matt has also related it to the Bill Evans/Scott La Faro aesthetic—there’s just an understanding we don’t have to talk about and you have to allow people to be whoever they are. He’s great at that and I try to be!”

A similarly immediate rapport can be heard in Bisio’s own music with the Accortet, his latest band featuring Wimberly, Kirk Knuffke (cornet) and Art Bailey (accordion). A curious instrumental combination, in the bassist’s words, “love put that band together! With the tune ‘I Want To Do To You What Spring Does To Cherry Trees’, I was in love with a Frenchwoman and I composed that song, which I decided to record. I thought, ‘she’s French, so I’ve got to have an accordion.’ When I heard the results I thought ‘oh my god, this is a band.’ Kirk is melodic and avant garde at the same time; it’s not like he’s choosing, that’s just what he is and Michael Wimberly just brings so much, whether we’re talking about time or color or sensitivity. Art is just a very special musician and an incredible orchestrator in the moment. I think appealing is a good word for the whole record [just released on Relative Pitch]... Some of those compositions are way over 30 years old, but the way we seamlessly play them I would gladly offer a prize to someone who could tell the difference between old and new.” This writer, before noticing on paper that there is an accordion in the band, assumed that it was titled to reflect a musical accord, one that Bisio has worked continually to further not only in his own groups, but in his students and those whom he encounters daily. After all, creative music is music for living. ❖

For more information, visit [michaelbisio.com](http://michaelbisio.com). Bisio is at 6BC Garden Oct. 3rd, Bowery Poetry Club Oct. 4th and Zürcher Gallery Oct. 9th with his Accortet. See Calendar.

#### Recommended Listening:

- Michael Bisio – *In Seattle* (Silkheart, 1987)
- Joe McPhee Quintet – *Common Threads* (Deep Listening, 1995)
- Joe Giardullo/Joe McPhee/Mike Bisio/Tani Tabbal – *Shadow & Light* (Drimala, 2001)
- Michael Bisio Quartet – *Connections* (CIMP, 2005)
- Michael Bisio – *Travel Music* (s/r, 2010)
- Michael Bisio/Matthew Shipp – *Floating Ice* (Relative Pitch, 2012)

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