Voices Found Histories of Vocal Improvisation Interview Collection

Chris Tonelli Interview with David Moss
July 6 & 7, 2013 in St John's, Newfoundland Canada

Part I – July 6, 2013

CT: I thought it might be smart to start just by getting a sense of your preferred nomenclature for your vocal practice. Do you have a name for it? Do you call your vocalization anything other than vocalization?

DM: What to call what I do has been an issue for a long time. Now I simply say I sing, as a kind of a social-political statement, which is to say that what I do is as much singing as any other form of singing, using the apparatus and brain power to activate the voice. In certain circles, people refer to my work as extreme singing. The word "extreme," initially, years ago, was an interesting word for us. It indicated the extremes, the edges. Now it has been kind of subverted by pop culture to indicate danger and risk. You see all these extreme sports and other events that have the possibility of injury and bodily harm involved—and therefore I now shy away from this word extreme. I call myself a performer. I'm a performer who sings and manipulates time and rhythm with the voice. That's how I work.

CT: For the sake of the interview today, is there any preferred term that we could use to indicate a type of vocality that goes beyond standard speech or sequences of pitches? Is there a term that you like for this?

DM: I always used, for a long time in my own music, this simple word: texture. For me, music is textural or tactile; there's physicality a) to the creation of the music and b) to the presentation of the music. Both create tangibility. When you talk about a thing having texture, it has an outside and an inside, it has an inward portion that you can feel and touch, it has an outward presentational portion. But texture can be moved via *perception*, or through touch with your body. And that's what I feel with my voice. What I like to think about is that I'm dealing with textural music, ways of creating fields, three-dimensional fields, which have depth, which have texture and timbre as part of these fields. Tactility is part of it, that it can be touched, that it can reached into, that you feel like it has space in it. There's not one term for it.

CT: If I'm trying to refer to that body, I'll try to use the term textural vocals.

DM: Textural vocals is fine for me. Truthfully, people who work in my area or the area that I'm connected to are all so individual. There is no easy way to find a name that fits us all, aside from this old phrase improvisational singing - yes we use improvisation as one of our tools, but that's not the main focus of our work, that's one thing *inside* of our work. There is no easy word for this kind of singing. When I go into the opera world they all ask me what kind of singer am I. It's the first thing they ask me when I'm singing a new opera—I get a call from the opera house before

I sign the contract, because in the contract in Europe they have to put what kind of singer I am. So, am I a bass, baritone, tenor? They have to. It's almost a rule. And I always say I'm none of those, because I actually have made a stance against this categorization of the voice. For me, it's very uninteresting. But, then the opera-house says: “well, ok, *we* know you're not any one of those, but let's just put baritone in the contract.”

CT: Why a stance against categorization of the voice?

DM: There are two things to categorization. Categorization of the human voice is, first of all, dismissal of anything outside of the category. When you categorize something, you close it off from the outside world and you say: “aha, this is what it is, I understand it now. ” That's the first thing about categorization. And the second thing about categorization is once you categorize, you have rules and hierarchies to obey and to live up to, and people have expectations—their expectations are generated by these names. You can dash the expectations of people, or you can fulfil their expectations, or you can play a game with their expectations—oftentimes people think I'm a baritone and I come out and sing and they say “that's no baritone, what the hell was that?” For me, part of my history has been to say: “Look, I'm doing personal music. I love this stuff. That's what I do. It's been my whole life. It uses this, this, this, this. I think about it a lot. I bring these things together and here it is. You need more than this? Why?”

CT: I'd like to switch to some chronological questions about your background. You were born in New York City in 1949?

DM: Yes.

CT: Can you tell a little bit about what part of NY you grew up in and what your childhood was like?

DM: I was born in Queens. I moved when I was quite young to Long Island, when I was two or three years old and grew up basically in the suburbs. A normal U.S. American suburban lifestyle—developments, row-houses, little plots of land, completely middle-class normal American. Family—middle-class. Income—middle-class. Two younger brothers. The outstanding thing that changed my life was that my father was a drummer as a hobby. This came into play a few years later. The fact was that my father, because he was a drummer, had a connection to music and you could see this connection in the way he sang with music, the way he listened to it, and I heard in the house old, great jazz records being played when I was really young, as background—Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, big bands, and all the stuff from the '30s and '40s, Coleman Hawkins, I didn't know what it was at the time, but I just heard this melodic music, most of it instrumental, not so much vocal stuff. My mother also played the piano classically as a hobby. So, there was this 'love of music' background. Otherwise, an absolutely normal life. I took guitar lessons when I was a kid and hated it; couldn't stand the guitar, never wanted to play. I took accordion

lessons. I hated it. I couldn't stand it, never wanted to play again. I took piano lessons because my mother played it and hated it. I wish I didn't, I really wish I could play the piano now. So, basically, I rejected, for whatever reasons, all other instruments, partially because I didn't want to fail at something, I didn't want to be judged. Growing up as a kid I didn't want someone to say: "you did it right or you did it wrong." When you learn a new instrument you have a lot of rights and a lot of wrongs, and as a young kid I wasn't interested in being judged. I didn't like it and I just shut down when it came to that. I was more interested in finding another way to relate to music than correct or incorrect and it took a while before the drums came into my life.

CT: Where would that judgment come from? Were you performing for people or was it teachers judging?

DM: Not so much performing; the judgment came from teachers, pretty much. The style of teaching that I grew up with, which maybe doesn't exist anymore, where you go to a private teacher or a musician who was teaching at the conservatories part time and they'd give you a half -hour lesson, so you'd go in on Monday or Saturday for a 30-minute lesson which was actually 18 or 19 minutes. You'd go in there and you'd sit in a room and you'd play the song you supposedly learned and the teacher would sit there listening and he'd say: "no, no, start from the beginning, no, no, yes, no, do it again, faster, slower, that was wrong, that was wrong" boom, you're finished, "work on it for next time," and you're out on your ass. That was kind of the normal teaching style that for me was uninspiring, unconnected, pure "get it right or don't do it." Even though the teachers weren't inhuman; none of these guys or women was bad. They simply didn't connect to what I wanted at the time as a kid.

CT: Have you ever gotten yourself in a situation where you weren't passionate about the music you had to perform?

DM: Now, hardly ever. But in the past, as a young drummer, as a guy in college, as a guy at the age of nineteen trying to decide if music was my pathway or was some kind of other intellectual pursuit my pathway, I tried a lot of different music forms as a drummer, in order to test them, to test myself, to try to play with other musicians, to be a drummer in different genres of music. And I didn't necessarily like them all, but I was trying to find the thing that gave me pleasure. And I found a lot of things that didn't give me so much pleasure, and I began to zero in on the area of music that gave me pleasure, which had actually to do with sound and movement, physical movement and sound variability more than it had to do with exact rhythms or super virtuosity in any one musical genre. I began to find that my ears were interested in this textural realm. It was kind of what I wanted to get at. And, as I tried jazz and rock and pop and percussion in a classical ensemble, it became clear to me more and more that timbre and the sound changes and the flexibility of body movement to create rhythms was interesting to me.

CT: Did you have a drumming teacher?

DM: Yeah, I had several teachers I really liked and who influenced me quite a bit.

CT: Did it work better with them than the teachers you described earlier?

DM: Yeah, because I went to them of my own free will I and began a long-term musical relationship with them. I wasn't forced. So, my first drum teacher was a guy who's actually quite famous in the U.S. in certain circles, his name is Joe Porcaro. Joe Porcaro lives in California now, in his eighties. Joe Porcaro is the father of the famous Porcaro brothers who were part of the rock group Toto. Joe Porcaro became a super Hollywood studio drummer and, along with Emil Richards, became one of the most sought after percussionists in the Hollywood music scene and played on hundreds of records. Well, Joe Porcaro was living in Hartford, Connecticut and teaching at a little drum store there and we were living in Bloomfield, Connecticut and my father said to me: "David, do you want to have another instrument? I'll loan you the money for another instrument, you have to pay me back, but I'll loan you the money." And I thought, "What do I really want?" And I just said: "I want a new drum set, I really want a new drum set." So he said: "okay, well let's go to a drum store to see what we can find." So, we went to this drum store and there were these three guys behind the counter, they were sort of playful; they were drummers making their living running the drum store. I was twelve years old and they said: "so, you want to get a drum set, well first you need a couple of drum lessons, maybe you should try that first." And I said "oh, which one of you..." And, they said: "we all teach" And one of the guys said: "I'll take you on." It was Joe Porcaro. So it was by chance. I went to him for the first lessons and he said: "we can keep on going, or if you want you can try one of the other guys." It was very mellow, very relaxed, and we just had a good time. We sat together on Saturday and we had a forty-five minute lesson and it was learning rudimental and jazz technique and playing on a pad and learning to read the rhythms and all this sort of normal stuff, but there was a human relationship with this man, he was very friendly, making jokes, and it just felt right, it felt like something was good here, we can work on something and I had a good two or three years, and then he went to California and I got another teacher. Interestingly enough, this second guy, Richie Lapore, became one of the ensemble players in the Harry Partch ensemble. Now this really changed my world by chance, because Harry Partch, still alive at the time, yes he died in the early seventies, he was still alive at the time and had just made a big record for Columbia records, the only major label recording of his really weird music for personal percussion and self-built instruments and I was turned on by my teacher, by Richie Lapore, to these instruments made of wood and glass, and marimbas of giant wooden slabs that all made incredible sound, and things hanging and gongs and forty-seven note scale zithers and it was a complete mental revolution for me. I was pre-college at the time. Anyhow, what happened was, by *necessary* chance my undeclared love for texture and tactility collided with this connection to drumming and then with Harry Partch's instruments—which made me think about objects and things that weren't drums and things that were drums and surfaces and other things that you could hit and touch and the connection between hitting and hands, and words and stories

(Harry Partch's music involved singing texts), and the whole thing opened up. So, by chance this whole world opened up for me and I felt positively attracted to it. Then I went to Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut from 1966 to 1970 to be a normal professional. I wasn't going to be a drummer, I was hoping to be professor, my father wished I would be a professor.

CT: What did you father do?

DM: My father, Roy Moss, was a manager for different department stores. That's how he made a living for most of his life. But he was also a wood sculptor—that was the other thing—I should have mentioned that the ultimate basic reason that I was interested in tangible things was because my father carved wood. My father, for my whole life, was there with a knife carving mahogany and rosewood and making incredible abstract, beautiful shapes from pieces of wood, blocks and a week later they would have these strange, amazing, shiny, sinuous, sensual curves and shapes. And it was his thing and he loved it, actually probably more than he loved drumming because he always kept on carving. Although, I never carved; my father taught me, gave me the knife, helped me and I tried a lot, but I never had his skill or ability to touch wood, to shape wood three-dimensionally, though I think I did inherit his desire and perspective in my way of shaping sound-space in a three-dimensional way. These are the real over-arching connections in my world: my father with sculpture and drums, with touching and physicality, and then objects that are not normal drums that allow you to experiment. A huge tangible universe of ideas opened up from these sources.

CT: So, at seventeen you went to Trinity College. You had these drumming teachers before that?

DM: Yes. Basically, until I was about eighteen. At eighteen I was taking drum lessons at Hartt College of Music, which was a conservatory, right outside of West Hartford, Connecticut and some of my original teachers were all teaching there instead of at their little drum store. Which actually kind of stopped me from going further, because the conservatory atmosphere was so stilted for me, so concentrated on hyper-virtuosity that it brought back this 'right and wrong' thing really strongly. I didn't really think about it at the time. I tried to learn marimba, to learn everything that I was supposed to learn as a percussionist, but I found that the judgments, the 'win-lose' thing, the competitive edge now was popping in. Not only was I right and wrong to my teacher, I was a potential competitor to thirty-five other percussionists who could possibly end up taking jobs away from each other. By my own nature, I was not interested in this. I was repelled by it. I look at it this way now: I wished in my deepest dreams to create a community of people who wanted to work together without this competitive spirit, a kind of collaborative ensemble, as large as it could be, a group of collaborators who wished to work together without knocking each other down. So, as I took these lessons in the conservatory when I was still a college student, I was more and more repelled by the system and at the same time, twenty-five miles away, in Middletown, Connecticut was Wesleyan University, which had

just started a World Music program. And, I heard, I don't know how, that there was a South Indian contingent of drummers/percussionists teaching there and I said: "Hmmmm, what is that all about: the Tabla? Ravi Shankar?" I didn't really know. So, I just drove down one day to Wesleyan to go to a concert and I heard a thrilling concert by chance. I can't remember all the details now, but all I know was the name of the instrument, the veen, not the veena, but veen. It was a very rare instrument at the time, extremely long, like almost a two-meter fret-board with a huge gourd at each end—it was a really different instrument—and a guy playing the tambura. I was completely ignorant, I knew nothing about Indian classical music. I came to this concert, I was a nineteen-year-old kid, I sat down and this instrument started to play and this blew my mind. What this guy did was, he would pluck a string and then he would run his finger up and down on the string and the sustain of the instrument was so long that he could sustain this note for almost thirty seconds. Then he would pluck it again. And so, what happened was that in *thirty minutes* he had *sixty attacks*, the opposite of what a drummer does. Completely minimal and totally hypnotic. I was hypnotized by this music. I had no real connection to Indian music. And then he did something really amazing that I loved. He hypnotized the whole audience, played for thirty minutes and then he made this last movement, one last note—we didn't know it was the last note—and it disappeared into the air after forty-five seconds and there were two hundred people sitting there and silence in the room, and he just didn't move and nothing happened, nothing changed, complete silence, I don't know how long it was, and then he looked around at everybody in the room then he slowly played the notes of an ascending major scale and everybody exploded—it was a release from the hypnosis by a normal Western scale which was so simple and so silly to hear *now*—that the spell was broken.

Okay, why am I telling this story? Because of this amazing player, I said: "well, there must be something here for me." And I investigated and I found that there was a percussionist who played mridangam and his name was Tanjore Ranganathan. He was taking, I found out, private students, so I called up and I said: "I'm really interested, I don't know anything, I'm a jazz drummer." And he said: "yeah, come on down, we'll meet." I went there, went to his apartment and his wife let me in and she said: "Ranga is in the back making tea, he'll be with you in a minute. Please, relax, sit down." And I sat down, and here next to me on a chair was Ranga's record collection in a crate and I see John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, and Coltrane is my favorite, I'm kind of a Coltrane freak (that's absolutely another intense thing for me) and I thought: "this is meant for me, if this guy who I don't know at all is a Coltrane lover!" Ranga came into the room and we talked and he said: "Yes, Coltrane, it changed my life." And I said: "me too." We had this common thread. I took lessons for two years from him on mridangam. Of course, I was a terrible mridangam player because I was a kid, and I was a Western kid, and I didn't know anything about the commitment that it took. And he knew what we were like, American boys who were drummers who wanted to learn something now! He taught me the vocabulary, the basic movements on the drum. He taught me one stroke a week and he said: "you know, normally we teach one stroke a year. But, you know how it is here: we teach you one stroke a week because you want to learn quickly." I studied with Ranga and for me it

was a revelation about the tangibility of playing an instrument. Yes, there was a virtuosity, and yes there was a mathematical rigorousness to the music, and there was a gigantic history to this music, but the actual drum was *so physical*, it was *so minutely adjustable* by how you touched it, where you touched it, how you hit it, what part of your hand moved, where your fingers were, rubbing it, putting powder on it, it was like taking care of a baby, this drum. This was a real eye-opener for me. It made me understand that the objects are not really only objects, they are ongoing parts and markers of your life, they resonate with your life, these objects, *they* take parts of *you* into *them* because you impress your hand into the drum; so the drum that Ranga plays after twenty years I can't play because it has the shape of his hand on it. Isn't that wonderful? For me, that's a wonderful thing, you know, that this object becomes your life, shaped like your life.

So, these streams of things, my father the sculptor, my father the drummer, the drum set I had, the drum teachers I had, the not wanting to compete, the desire to move into a sound world, John Coltrane made a big effect as I said, and the tangibility, the textural thing all began coming together, purely in percussion. I was not opening my mouth, except that Ranga forced me to sing because all the Indian drummers learn to sing, they all sing rhythms, I had to learn to sing the rhythms (which I still can say 45 years later and I still feel them connected to my hand movement). I was never good at it but I learned that my voice, not as a singer, my breathing was connected to this physical action. So, all these little streams were interacting at this very formative age between fifteen and twenty when a lot of things get decided for people, when their pathways become visible for them.

CT: This started while you were at Trinity College. Was your Hartt Conservatory experience after you were at Trinity?

DM: No, at the same time. While I was at Trinity I would go over to the conservatory and take lessons.

CT: The vocalization with the mridangam, did that lead to you vocalizing with your drum kit?

DM: At that time, 1968-70, not at all. Vocalizing was purely circumscribed to this one area. I had no conception that I was ever going to use my voice in any clear way. It was a job I had to do, that I wanted to do, with mridangam, with the rhythms. I had no conception, I had no imagination that I would ever work on, or develop, or use my voice. There were some moments in my early life when the voice became an interesting thing, although not really focused on singing. When I was thirteen I had my bar mitzvah. I'm Jewish, so you have to study the singing of the Torah for the ceremony and there's a notated pattern that you learn. So, I went through this process and gave my bar mitzvah ceremony and sang my written part in front of everybody and it turned out, strangely enough, at age thirteen I had a pretty powerful voice which I never knew I had. My grandfather, my grandmother, and all these relatives of mine were completely shocked when they heard this voice of their

grandson coming out and they all immediately wanted to push me to go to rabbinical school and become a cantor. They were saying: “David has to become a cantor. He has a voice, he has a voice, he can do it.” And I can feel now that a hundred or two hundred years ago I *would* have been a cantor, I would have been pushed and forced or convinced by family to do that. It would have been a path for me to develop. But then I just kind of laughed. For me, it just wasn't an option at that point. I never imagined it. But my voice was a shock. What was interesting was in singing ancient rhythmic notation, which the Torah notation is, I was not connected anymore to the normal right or wrong because if you watch ten people sing this notation, it sounds very different for each person. It's a *general* shape that people try to follow and hopefully they come down to this particular pedal tone at the end. In a certain way, the traditional, but unknown to me, Hebrew/Jewish melody was a doorway for my voice that allowed me to create power, because no one was going to judge me very much. So that was one point. Another point was that I happened to be a very good reader and speaker of written words. My father had always said: “David, it can't hurt you to be a good reader. If you can read well aloud that's a very good skill to have and you should really work on that. It will always help you, it can't hurt you.” So, I would practice at home reading things out loud in my bedroom, just for myself. Take a book and read it out loud at age nine, ten. So, I became a good narrator/reader and bit-by-bit I began to be selected in school to read parts, to read things in school plays, to read things at summer camp when there was parents' day, to read the stories that the parents would hear. I began to be a narrator, which is to say, to use my voice to connect other people to a dramatic moment. Which is to *seduce them **into** something with my voice*. This was really interesting and I was, luckily enough, good at it and liked doing it. I never quite put these streams together in one package before, you may the first to hear it, but these are the things that gave me an indication that my voice might come into play in the future.

CT: I want to talk about some other early influences. Around 1970 you finish at Trinity and in Patrice Roussel's discography of your work he indicates that year was the year of your first recording, with Larry and Myra Spatz.

DM: There is one song from that album on the Internet now. I found it, but I don't think I play on that song. I can't remember how I first met them, but I think somehow I got a call at Trinity from these two people, Larry and Myra Spatz. They were a folk singing group. It was 1969 so folk singers were really strong, guitar and voice, harmonies, many people were doing it, and they were making a new record and they wanted to have a backing group, they needed a drummer. And they heard about me because I was playing in different groups, jazz bands or big bands, and called and asked if wanted to play a recording session. So I went there and I had bongos and my instruments, my drum set and they played what was, for me, pure folk music. But they had beautiful voices, very beautiful two part harmonies. I listened to one song and it sounded good. I was a junior in college then, it was 1969, and they represented the outside world for me: they were not in school, they were in the real world and later on I would go over to their house and rehearse with them and this was like: “Wow, the music world.” And we made a recording and it was my

first professional recording session. Actually we'd recorded our college big-band a few times but that never came out as a record. My high school big band got recorded circa 1965-66, and there was a record of that somewhere, they pressed it, I don't know if have a copy — I don't think so. But that was *really* the first record in my discography. It exists, you know, somewhere! But you have to understand it was 1969. Political shit was happening. You couldn't really be apolitical at American universities at this time. I had a draft number. When I graduated from Trinity in 1970 I was going to be drafted. I thought, no doubt, within six months I would be in Vietnam because of my low draft number, so there were a lot of things to think about at the time. Larry and Myra, they were alternative politically. They were very leftist, went to demonstrations, they were kind of the direction I was leaning towards. And they were still doing music at the same time, so they represented something interesting for me. They were doing music, but they were also politically active and aware and that was important for me to have that experience. And that was my first experience in the professional or semi-professional music world, because upon graduation I moved into a commune in Virginia for completely non-musical reasons, and everything changed.

CT: Could you tell me more about that?

DM: You're getting the *complete* biography here. In January 1970 I decided I wanted to do something different when I graduated. I was going to be graduating in June and I had this low draft number and I didn't know what to do. There was some discussion about moving to Canada, but that didn't happen. And, I thought: "Well, I have to see what I want to do, I have to figure it out. Do I want to play music or what do I want to do?" And at that time I had this desire, I really I wanted to work with children in a kind of alternative style like in the book about the Summerhill School, working with the Summerhill system of early childhood education. It was very much in the trend. I read *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* by A.S. Neill, and I was very excited about it and I did some volunteer work with kids and I was a good teacher and I thought this could be something for me, and maybe if I'm a teacher the military doesn't want me, I don't know, let's see what happens. But, I wanted something interesting, I didn't want to go to a school and be a normal teacher. I wanted something different, so I had a crazy idea. There was a magazine that still exists called the *New York Review of Books*. And back then it was the magazine of the "intellectual elite." My father read it and I got it from him. And in the back of the *New York Review of Books* there was a want-ad section, a personals section, where people wrote really crazy things, women wanting to meet men and men wanting to meet women but in the most intellectual way, like: "lover of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard wants to climb mountain in search of Goethe, please find me looking for your best heart on the pathway to nirvana, only 45 year old women please apply." That sort of thing. It was an opening to a different world. So, I put my own ad in the back of this magazine and ran it for six issues. My ad read: "Curious, crazy drummer with love for Coltrane and Bach wants to be with children in non-traditional educational system, please respond." That was my ad. It ran for six issues starting in January 1970 and this was just before Kent State happened, which was May 1970.

Universities were in an uproar already in January, but it hadn't gotten to this total stop that Kent State made. I got ten really interesting answers from my ad. One of them was from the Midas Foundation. I actually found out that it was the Midas Muffler Company who had put money into a foundation as a tax write-off or something, and the Midas Foundation was concerned with early childhood education. It was investigating ways to make interesting alternative, Montessori-style schools. They said: “Would you like to come? We're starting a new kind of school in Chicago and maybe you can be a teacher.” And then a woman from New York sent me a letter and asked if I wanted to take care of her two kids for a year, because she was going to take a round the world cruise, and live in their penthouse for a year. And another strange answer came from a hippie in Boston who wanted me to come up and share the solar eclipse with her and maybe I could teach her kids. And then I got a letter from a woman in Virginia named Carla Eugster. And she said: “Hello David. I feel you have the spirit we need. I'm starting a commune, an intentional community in Virginia with the purpose of changing the world.” And this is what she said that won me over: “Our goal is to break the link between income and work. So, no one is working only to survive, they are working at the thing they love and then are devoting a certain amount of hours a week to keep the community alive and do the necessary work, but no one is forced to stop what they love to do. I'm trying to gather people to do this, in this community and then if it begins to work I would like to export this, go to a city and begin to enlarge this.” She had gigantic dreams, this woman. She had been a union organizer in the South. She had been put in jail; she was a real activist. And so, I answered her letter. I had this feeling of connectedness already, and asked: “Carla, but what does it mean in real life?”
And, a week later, I get letters from her three kids. Amazing kids, around 8, 10, and 12. They wrote: “David, it would be so great if you came” and I’m into this or that, and love music, and I like these things, etc. Anyhow, I got swept away by this family and this woman's desire to change the world and to create a new way of living which was exactly what I wished for, to break the link between work and income, so you don't have to be slaving away and proving that you're good. You do what you're good at, because you love what you're good at, and maybe you work 20 hours a week helping plant tomatoes or whatever. So, Kent State happened. The university pretty much closed down. I managed to graduate, get my degree, and I drove down to Virginia, and moved into this commune for a year and a half, but not at all with the idea of doing music. Not with the idea of furthering my musical career, but with the idea to have a social world around me. This community, called Nethers, was about collaboration without competition to create something. I lived there for a year and a half. It was a great experience. They built a little shed for me and my drums, and mattress, and my Fender Rhodes electric piano, 500 records, all my books and my dog; and I lived in that shed and I played drums all night sometimes, and I kept on playing all that year while my job in the commune was being a “Be There,” which meant, in the language of the time, that I would *be there* for the children whenever they needed me. If they needed me, I would be there. That was their concept of being a teacher. So I wouldn't try to teach them anything, but I was *available* to them at all times. If I did what I liked to do, what I loved to do, when I wasn't weeding the tomatoes, that would be attractive to growing children to see a person working at

their passion, like my father attracted me by doing his passionate wood-carving, and they would want to learn, they would want to understand something, like the old style mentoring relationships. Mentoring was a big part of it, but we didn't use the word. So, I was a "Be There" and I spent time playing the drums and I spent time playing the piano and I would be singing little melodies and I would be writing music, writing notes for myself and I also taught myself how to play flute. So I would do flute duets with one of the girls who played flute. So there was all this musical salon activity happening and meanwhile I was there every weekend, all-night, in my shed, headphones on playing along with the last music of Coltrane, the most radical stuff he ever did, you know, with Rashied Ali, this incredible wash of sound. And diving into this world of sound was so important to me, even if I didn't know where it would take me or if I was going to go anywhere with it. My stay in the commune lasted about a year and a half and then I realized that my drumming, that my music was calling me, pulling me away, that I wasn't going to be able to stay there. That I couldn't be musically alone anymore. I couldn't develop, I couldn't go anywhere by playing only with headphones on to pre-recorded music, I had to have some live partners, I had to make a step into the music world. That was good, because I actually developed an undeclared virtuosity in my work on the drums without knowing what I was doing, just getting faster and better (it will do that if you play eight hours a day, you know). And now I asked: "what do I want to do, where do I want to go?" And, by chance, one of my college friends, a saxophone player, moved to Bennington Vermont, where Bennington College was, and he called me or I called him and said: "Hey Steve, what's going on, anything interesting?" And he said: "Oh man, you have to come up here, I'm working with this guy Bill Dixon and man there's no good drummers up here and he needs someone like you, you could play with the ensemble, you'd be in." And I said: "okay good, I'm coming up." And I packed my stuff up in my van, left the commune and drove up to Bennington in fall 1971 and auditioned for Bill Dixon. The saxophonist Steven Horenstein said: "yeah, my friend David is going to play for you." And Bill, this black musician, this trumpeter who played with Cecil Taylor (he was kind of a big deal—I didn't know how big a deal at the time) said: "Okay, show me what you can do." And this was an interesting moment for me because I had decided not to compete musically many years ago, and I had decided to move to a commune instead of moving to New York to play music. I decided I would not even try to go to New York. Truthfully, New York was the only option in the improvised music world at the time. But I had moved away from that business competition complex. Now, I suddenly found myself confronted with this 'play for me' thing, this 'show me how good you are.' And I realized I had to think of it in a new way that would help me at that moment. I thought of it as the master-student relationship. I needed a living mentor. I had several non-living mentors, Coltrane and Bach, now I needed a living mentor and perhaps Bill Dixon would be one for me. So, therefore, I could look at it as I'm not competing so much as I'm trying to establish this relationship. That was my way of dealing with it. So, I played for him and I was twenty-two and I was pretty good at the time, much better than any of the drummers he had access to at Bennington, the kids who were students there. And he said: "Okay, you're in." So, now I was the drummer for Bill Dixon's ensemble, which was eighteen students at Bennington

College, Bill Dixon, Steven Horenstein, who was Bill's main assistant, and I was the second outsider, which meant I was not at the bottom of the hierarchy, I was in the middle. So, that was the next switch, when I decided I was going to really *do* music, that I was going to be in the world with music, I was going to find players, and I was going to begin to try to make the collaborative thing start to happen.

CT: When you started playing in Bennington, were you using your voice?

DM: No, but it came shortly after. And very explosively, in a certain way. So, I was playing with Bill Dixon from fall 1971 until, maybe, 1973: two and a half years, something like that, maximum. Bill immediately got a guest professorship job at the University of Wisconsin; just after I played my first professional performance with him, he left for Madison. He replaced Cecil Taylor there, who had the previous guest professorship. So, right after I met Bill, Bill took me, he said: "I'm going to Wisconsin and anyone who wants to come with me, I'll see you out there." So he went out there, he had a job. And so, me and Steve we didn't have jobs, and one or two other guys we decided to follow him out there and see what happened. So I drove out to Wisconsin, found a farm house to rent a room in, worked with Bill, I was teaching in a music school, teaching drum lessons, hated it a little bit, but I was teaching to make money. Well, on the one hand, Bill Dixon was a wonderful, incredible trumpet player and a great composer. He taught me a tremendous amount about the kind of things I needed to learn about: space, rhythm, energy, commitment, attack, focus, power, being at the moment, ready, what's necessary, what's not necessary, how to hit what you need to hit, how to take away the non-essentials, a lot of very important things. Which I thank him for now and thanked him for then. He even had us all memorize and chant a text written by Charlie Parker in the '50's about the difficulties of the music life—the first actual words I ever sang/performed on stage. On the other hand, Bill Dixon was an extremely difficult human being. Very intelligent and very manipulative. And people who worked with him were manipulated all the time by him. He was a power and control freak and he was in an environment where he could exert a lot of power and control: at Bennington College in Vermont. Here was an intelligent, charismatic, black, improvising trumpet player at a white college of 95% women and there were no other black musicians around for twenty miles. And he could use this power vacuum. And he did. And I never was happy with that. I personally found it really difficult that he was so manipulative. To the point that after two years I was unable to accept it anymore. I couldn't accept it. I wasn't telling anybody else what they should do, but I felt completely pushed down and controlled by his desires. The way intelligent people have of manipulating other people is by giving them rewards and punishments in a way that binds them to the manipulator. The manipulator knows what someone wants and gives them just enough rewards so they stick around and crave more, and just enough punishment so they feel incapable of leaving. So there's this horrible balance of fear and desire, like a dog panting after a treat. And Bill gave the treats and he gave the slaps (and by slaps, I mean not real slaps, not physically). But to make a long story short, due to his incredible knowledge and ability, I learned a lot. I was rapidly developing my own musical talents and one day Bill gave me one of his rewards, he said: "David,

next month we're going to do a series of concerts in the Carriage Barn and I want you to compose a piece for the ensemble." So, he gave this reward to three players in the ensemble: to compose and perform a 15 minute piece performance time with 18 musicians of his ensemble. I felt like king of the universe, you know. This came at a time when I had been dealing with Bill's system for over two years and I was ready to break out of it and I wanted to make an emotional statement and I realized that to do this emotional statement I had to connect two things in my life: John Coltrane and my voice. And my voice had to come out in contrast to Bill (who had actively suppressed it; told me not to use it) and Coltrane was a symbol for my connection to the musical world that Bill was part of, but it was my world too. Somehow, I had to make this emotional statement. So, I did a piece for the ensemble, for 18 people. And I brought my brother, Jules—my brother was a drummer—I brought him up from New York to be a guest in the group, and I started the piece with a tape-recording of Coltrane playing "Naima." The beginning of *Live at the Village Vanguard Again!*, which for me was musical heaven. This beginning would be played on a reel to reel machine, then the ensemble faded in and I also faded in with my voice at the beginning on top of this—singing in a concert ***for the first time***—and singing very passionately, my newly discovered vocal sounds, over a tom-tom roll drone feeling. We had some rehearsals. And Bill said to me: "Hey David, you need someone to turn on the tape machine. I'll be over here, I'll turn on the tape machine to start the piece so Coltrane will go on — just give me a cue." And so I said: "Thanks Bill, thanks a lot." So comes the concert and there are one or two hundred people in the room. We're all in-position, waiting for the tape to start to begin my piece. Bill's next to the tape machine. I give the cue to Bill and he looks at me, doing nothing. And I nod at him again and he stares back, doing nothing. And I knew he wasn't going to start the tape, to play Coltrane's music. I knew he was going to sabotage this thing that was so important for me. And so I just had to start without Coltrane, I figuratively had to take the power out of Bill's hands and I had to sing for the first time. It was a very powerful, very emotional moment for me. To lose my mentor, to go away, to say "goodbye mentor, I can't be with you anymore because you do this to me, I thank you but I can't do it your way anymore." That was the first real singing moment in my professional performance life.

CT: Was your musical life entirely contained in working with Bill or were there other gigs, other outlets?

DM: Yes, thank god, at the time, I had been part of the starting of a group of players who were working with Bill at Bennington and some dancers. Bill did a lot with dance. He was working with Judy Dunn, who was a well-known dancer in the 1960s, and we did pieces with Bill's ensemble and dancers. So we knew the dancers at Bennington, which had a strong dance scene. So we started a group. Ten people—five musicians, five dancers— and we called it The Collaborative Ensemble of Musicians and Dancers, because we couldn't agree on a better name. This was going on from almost the beginning of my relationship with Bill. I had this musical, creative outlet, which was this collaborative ensemble. String bass, guitar, two saxophones, and me, and five dancers. And one of our interesting decisions, which

actually fits together with my life story, is that we decided there would be no leader to this group. We decided the leadership would revolve every month or even less. We rehearsed twice a week. So, for two weeks or four weeks one person would be the leader and it would change every month and a dancer or musician would tell everyone else what to do, would be the leader of that session. So, a dancer would have to formulate how the musicians should interact sound-wise and if the musician was the leader he would have to inform the dancers how to interact physically to create a situation, a beginning point, or structure. This was extremely important for me. I had just begun to use my voice. It was still extremely minimal. But, what was important was to create structure and to be responsible for structure, to see that structure could be created other than with an instrument and instrumental virtuosity, to see that the body of a dancer, or the bodies of five dancers, or the bodies of ten people could create physical, time-shaping structures which were perceivable, which were watchable and could be seen as pieces, organized work. This was another revolution for me: here, for the first time I was able to break away from the instrument and see that the over-arching organization system was a mental one; how I could think was more creative than how I could play. This was really important, this work we did together, the ten of us. And, we did a quite lot. We performed, we travelled, we gave concerts, we played gigs in New York and around New England. We did a gig in 1973 or 1974 at an art gallery in Jenkintown, PA. We walked into this gallery—it was filled with strange metal objects and these metal objects were *sound sculptures* made by Harry Bertoia, who I had never heard of at the time. They were these amazing huge rows of metal rods that would clang as you walked by or clusters of metal rods that would vibrate with this airy beautiful sound that was unknown to me but conjured up my earlier fascination with the work of Harry Partch. I had never fully explored the Harry Partch world, but now this personal, eccentric percussion sound was coming into my life from Harry Bertoia. I was fascinated and got Harry Bertoia's phone number from the gallery owner; Bertoia lived about 25 miles away. I called him up, he invited me to come visit sometime. Six months later I drove to Harry Bertoia's farm and met this amazing, wonderful man. He had a barn filled with hundreds and hundreds of his sound sculptures. And then he said something that both expanded my musical boundaries *and* bonded us together at the same time: "This barn, filled with hundreds of my sculptures, THIS is my instrument." And he put on big, thick socks—he had really slippery wooden floors, he waxed them super well. He would slide and run; he would slide across the floor to get to an instrument and then run and slide, and it was so physical, so incredibly physical, it was the human body creating time! And I was thinking, yes, yes, this is what I need, the three-dimensionality of performance, where music is not just this confined one-or-two dimensional event on a drum-set/ object in front of me, and tied to habitual patterns and ever increasing virtuosity. Seeing and hearing Harry Bertoia play his "instrument" was a revelation that changed the course of my musical life! Harry was a very open, intelligent man, and he seemed to sense that we shared some kind of time and sound-based knowledge and curiosity. It felt like we became friends. And every time I visited him he (a world-famous artist!) gave me a sculpture. I have 8 of his sculptures now.

Amazingly, that all happened by accident. So, yes, to get back to your question, I did have these other musical outlets. But as I started to sing during these years it was quite difficult for my musician friends. The improvised music scene looked upon voice as an *emotional, body-connected* element. This "pure improvisation" that I worked with after leaving Bill and then into the late 1970s (it was around '78 or '79 when John Zorn and I met and started playing together) had no desire at all for emotional sources, or statements, in music. They wanted fast changing, *abstract*, non-genre-related, noise-connected, attack-oriented movement. No emotion please! No story-telling. No connection to anything outside the sounds themselves, and certainly nothing like a song. So, every time I opened my mouth, over or with my drumming, my colleagues, even my friends, were bothered. They heard the voice as an annoyance, as extraneous material, not as a sound source. And I wasn't screaming emotionally or singing what anyone could call clear emotional references. I was doing [he sings briefly, beginning with a low droning and then fragmenting and modifying that sound, then moving into a tongue oscillation with higher pitch content, and finishing with a high sustained pitch] pretty sonically abstract sound things. But, they couldn't get past their own prejudice, their own training, and their own new rules. So at a certain point in 1975 or 1976, my friends said to me "David, we love your drumming and want to work with you as a drummer, but if you want to sing, we can't play together. We have to just stop because it's not going to work, it doesn't work."

CT: These were friends from the collaborative ensemble?

DM: No, actually, these were the players who I met *after* the Collaborative Ensemble ended, and post-Bill Dixon. Basically they told me: if you're going to sing we can't play together. It was never so exactly said, but it was like "don't sing." I said I can't stop singing now. I can't stop. I can stop but you're binding me if you ask me to stop. I'm finding something here; if you ask me to stop you're cutting off my arm here! What would you feel like if I cut off your finger or told you not to play that note on your instrument? Come on. So it was really a primal clash. Not meaning to hurt each other, but hurtful anyway. So I said: "Okay, cool, I'll go off and play on my own." And this is before I got involved with the John Zorn scene. So I set up my drums on the back porch of my little farmhouse in Hoosick Falls, NY. And I proceeded to practice solo music for almost two years. I never thought of being a soloist, I never wanted to be a soloist. But as I practiced alone I began to find interesting things, important things for my future. I began to add objects to my drum set. My drum set grew bigger and bigger as I wanted more sound sources. I needed to bring in a deep, resonating tone. I needed to have high attacks. I need to have a low pitch, a drone. And suddenly I needed to have sustained sounds. I had gongs and tam-tams. But the thing was, I needed to devote one hand to playing them and keeping the sound going and that was limiting. So I went over to the house of my guitarist friend, Baird Hersey and he had the first tape loop machine. Which was, I forget the name, it was quite well known at the time, it had a big piece of tape inside it, rolling around, and you moved these levers to make the tape longer or shorter, to change the length of

the tape loop. It was a big, heavy box. Guitarists used it. And I asked: "Can you plug a microphone into it?" "Yes!"

So, I borrowed it. I plugged a microphone into it, I began to sing into it so I could make a drone and I began, for the first time, to use loops. And it was a radical moment for me back then in 1973. The voice became a *bed of sound*, which I could sustain and I didn't have to devote a hand or two hands to make that sustaining sound. So, my first time using electronics was for my voice. Aha, I remember: it was called the Echoplex. Then something interesting thing happened. I saw an ad at Bennington College: "Drummer wanted to accompany dance classes, Washington University, St Louis, Missouri." So, I answered. And the head of the dance department said to me: "Well, actually we found someone, but you sound interesting. Why don't you come and give a concert next spring? Bring your group." And I said: "I have no group." And she said: "Well then, come play alone. We have five hundred dollars." Five hundred dollars! This was 1973, and that was a huge amount of money. I said: "sure no problem, I'm coming." So, suddenly I was committed to playing a solo concert, which I had never done before, at Washington University. And I spent about six months practicing in my drum-room with the gongs, and the tam-tam, and everything I had there, plus that Echoplex. And almost without deciding, I had developed personal loops, drones and all these layers of sound, and I was building a solo performance simply because I had to play a solo! Then something fateful happened: There was a thunderstorm one night and a huge bolt of lightning hit near the farmhouse and shorted out the electricity and blew up the Echoplex. I mean, fried it, smoke coming out. At first I said: "Oh god, it's not mine, it's Baird's Echoplex." Second of all I said: "Oh god, I've been practicing for six months with this thing to make these layers of sustained sounds and I don't have it now and next week I'm going to St. Louis." I couldn't afford to buy a new one. So, I said okay, I have to make those sounds acoustically. I had to sing that strongly and that continuously without the Echoplex. I had to do it ***live*** all the time. This was an amazing moment for me. I could ***not*** think I couldn't do it. I ***had*** to do it. This new concept, for me, of necessity and no-questioning was an interesting one. It gave me a lot. I learned: when something is a necessity, don't ask questions about what you can or cannot do. And I learned: take the challenge, see where it will take you, it will give you something. I kind of knew this would give me something if I did it. But it was dangerous; it was difficult. But I had the feeling I would get real information, I would get skills and shapes from this leap to being able to create it all from and with my own body. And this informed my work for many years: everything that I would do with electronics I imagined how I could do it acoustically. So, electronically generated sound would become information for my physical and musical development. Things that normally couldn't be done acoustically, I would attempt to do. Of course, I couldn't do them all—no one could—but the attempt was informational. The attempt generated new ideas and this enabled me to take a leap, to develop my own material, and further advance my sound-making ability with and through my voice. And with my drumming, but at that moment it had more to do with my voice. So, that was 1974, 1975.

CT: So, this was your first solo show. How did it go? How was it received?

DM: Well, I think it was received fairly well. I was playing a quite gigantic set up of things. It was very physical. I had to stand up and move around and there were racks of gongs. You have to look historically back. In 1974, there were not so many people doing this. There weren't many models. This was a little bit of a new thing. Not revolutionarily new, but a little bit new. There was Milford Graves who had been doing solo drum stuff in the "strict" jazz revolutionary improv world which didn't go into a lot of other sound areas at the time. There was Cecil's scene, but they weren't doing solo percussion stuff. There was Barry Altschul, Pierre Favre, Han Bennink, people from the world of jazz doing solo stuff based mostly on pulsative, not textural, variations. The only thing equivalent, I found out a bit later, was some of Stockhausen's music for solo percussion and electronics; in the contemporary world there was some stuff happening that was equivalent. But in America no one really had heard of this stuff. In 1974, no one talked much about Stockhausen in the improvised music scene—believe me, there wasn't much awareness of it.

CT: Were you aware of it at the time?

DM: I only knew the name because of the Beatles, like everyone else. My perception was I was developing my own personal work. That it was mine and it was, therefore, unique. Whether it was good or not, I didn't know, but I had a direction. And I also had virtuosity. I was really an incredibly fast, precise drummer at that time. I mean, when I listen back to some of the existing recordings of things that I did then, I was like super monster fast as a movement drummer, as a speed drummer. That means I could do certain things, virtuosic things. And I was using my voice. Then you have to understand I was hired by a *dance* department to give a concert. And at that time many dancers were extremely interested in the voice. This was something that had begun to filter into the dance world, with dancers speaking and singing on stage. And from the Judson Church movement and from the later postmodern dance movement, the voice, and breathing, had become really important for the dancers. And so to hear a drummer/percussionist singing was, for them, really intriguing, and I was invited to lead lots of workshops for dancers. They wanted this vocal information about breathing, about sound making, about using their voice integrally in their own performance. Perhaps this was part of the reason that my solo was well-received by that dance-oriented audience

CT: I came across information that you were working with Steve Paxton for a period. Could you tell me about that?

DM: Steve Paxton was teaching at Bennington College. Not when I first met Bill, that was fall 1971. In 1973, I came back. In 1973 and 1974, Steve was teaching at Bennington. Steve was at the beginning of developing what later was called Contact Improvisation. He was the father and the genius behind it. And almost nobody outside of the Contact Improvisation scene knows him now. Of course, it's forty years later, but it's strange. He is the most amazing dancer I have ever met. He was

teaching there and he saw our collaborative ensemble of musicians and dancers and he wanted to join us, wanted to dance with us. We said: “Oh, yeah, cool. Come on.” And he danced with us. That was great. We loved it. Then one day he came to me and said: “David, let's do a duo together. I think we could do a duo together, you and me. You could use your big percussion setup.” I thought: “incredible,” because I simply loved the way he danced. I was so happy. And so, we were a duo from 1975 to 1979. We performed as “Backwater” in New York at Dance Theater Workshop; we did a tour of England in the Dance Umbrella Festival, and our duets were amazing. We had an absolutely similar concept of rhythm, body, and sound. His body was his body. My sound was my sound. But rhythmically—how we moved, our senses of flow, shape and surprise were so connected, so similar—it was mind-blowing for me. So I could play and feel as if his movement was an extension of my playing. I could stop playing, actually be silent, and he would continue the shape I was working on. And, suddenly, the shaping would be back in my hands. It was a gorgeous improvisational duo, and I know he felt the same thing. We had an instant connection to each other. We loved it, and performed on and off for five years together, then our lives changed and we moved off and did separate things, but it was great work together.

CT: Were there certain points about his philosophy of contact improvisation that you felt strongly about?

DM: Yes, you heard me today talking about gravity. Well, gravity is a big thing for contact improvisation in that everything you do as a dancer is a game or a fight with gravity, or collaboration with gravity. To think of gravity as a collaborator is an interesting mental step. Then you are understanding that the moment when weight shifts is the moment when new shapes reveal themselves, when gravity itself takes control is the moment when energy is added to your system. When two things are in balance with potential energy, nothing much will happen. But, the moment when potential energy begins to be converted into kinetic energy, when this moment happens and weight shifts and begins to be pulled down to the floor by gravity, this is the moment when new shapes are formed. So, contact, for me, was all about this moment when new shapes form and how to use this added energetic push to move the work along and discover new shapes and thus to create never-ending progressions of physical shape. Which was really interesting for me because it allowed me to stop worrying all the time about deciding *where* things had to go. If I could follow this shift of energy, in other words, if I took my hand with the drum stick and I have a cymbal that is very tightly fixed so it's not floppy and I pushed against this cymbal as hard as I can with the stick so I feel the resistance of the metal, then I stiffen my muscles and I vibrate my hand and start moving it against this thing down to the rim of the cymbal, at the point when I go off the cymbal it's going to activate another gesture and a whole new moment and I don't have to decide things anymore. It's just going to happen and it will lead to something. That was ***really*** interesting, performance-wise, structurally, and that is what, for me, contact shared. Also, the collaborative essence of contact, which was two people or more, but mostly two, who have to agree on almost everything, without deciding

almost anything in advance —wonderful! You have to agree, you can't be fighting, you can't be the hero, you can only be one part of a necessary duality, which for me was a beautiful philosophy.

CT: When you did your first solo show that incorporated the voice in 1974 or 1975, at that point what other textural vocalists or unconventional vocalists or inspiring vocalists were you aware of? Were there other people working on that kind of vocalization that you were conscious of?

DM: I was mostly conscious of people from pop music. I actually thought of James Brown, Sly Stone, and Aretha Franklin as "extended vocalists". Which, in fact, I still think they are. I was not aware, until a little bit later, of Joan LaBarbara, of Cathy Berbarian. I had only very limited access to the contemporary music scene; I had to find it myself later on. Then, as fate would have it, I found an LP of Gyuto Tibetan monks chanting, playing gongs and horns. This deeply affected me, influenced me then, and does even today. (Somewhere there's a reel-to reel recording of guitarist Baird Hersey and I doing our own version of that music from 1974, with voices, drums and guitar). I was extremely attracted to that kind of extended voice, not knowing anything about multiphonics, or overtone/undertone singing at the time, attracted to its intensity and the fact that it was a historical music, a historical sound that was not avant-garde but that sounded completely experimental, contemporary, timeless and most importantly, necessary!
So, happily singing between the Tibetan monks and the pop world, I would drive to gigs in my Datsun pick-up truck, sometimes 800 miles in a day, and I would sing along with James Brown, Aretha Franklin, Sly Stone, the monks… I would sing an octave higher or lower, working on the extremes of my voice, getting it bigger and wider and looser and more in control—not thinking of it as experimentation, just thinking of it as practice, or a kind of "body-building." "Experimental" singers I knew almost nothing about. I didn't even know that they existed at the time. I heard Milford Graves, as I mentioned. He was doing a kind of ritualistic poetry/chanting with his drumming. I wasn't grabbed by it, but I thought it was interesting that he was vocalizing; that was fine, vocalizing with the drums. Otherwise, I had no role models. My models were non-singers: Coltrane, then Charles Ives, even Bruckner, and South Indian ragas. How could I reach *that* depth of music with my own sonic resources: my voice, my drums, my electronics, objects, toys, and words. How could I *get* there? It was a few years later that I heard the Demetrio Stratos records and Diamanda Galas. Actually, I shared a bill together a couple of times with Diamanda. In some way we're contemporaries. And Meredith Monk, there was an interesting first meeting with Meredith: In 1974 Steve Paxton, Lisa Nelson and I shared a farmhouse for six months, and I was invited by a professor at Goddard College to curate a concert performance there and so I asked Steve: "would you be interested in doing a concert together with Meredith Monk?," because I thought Meredith was an interesting mover, and I could imagine the two of them on the same floor. Steve said "sure." So I called up Meredith and she said "sure." This was 1974 or 1975. So, I got them both to go up to Goddard and it was a really weird, unexpected event because when I asked Meredith she was singing more than moving. She sang at a

microphone, sang at the piano, sang acoustically at one crouched position, worked with a few gestures . So they gave this incredible performance in which, as I remember, Meredith was there squatting on the floor singing for 30 minutes and Steve was dancing around the whole giant barn, sometimes seemingly trying to get Meredith to dance with him. But she wasn't going to dance, she was just going to sing and I thought: "wow, this is a weird moment, they're not actually going to dance together or **move** together." And they didn't.
So, Meredith was an influence. I heard of Meredith in the early 1970s. I thought it was magnetic. But I had my own approach/avoidance problems with Meredith then because she triggered something that I was having difficulties with at that time: storytelling. I was trying to develop an abstract vocal arsenal, a warehouse of sounds that were non-connotative enough to fit in with my percussion, that could do instrumental things and do sound things and not separate themselves so much from the percussion world. Meredith was telling stories, singing songs, and using narrative. Gorgeous, and I was attracted to it, but I didn't know what I could do with it. It was so different from my world, her tonal command, her sound range, her timbre qualities, her seduction of the audience was beautiful, but in a different way from mine. When I talk about seduction of the audience, this is important for me. Steve Paxton has a way. Meredith has a way, and this way is performed in front of, and with, people. You don't do what you do alone in your kitchen for your whole life and then die. No, you do what you do in front of, for people, in concerts, in shows, so that something is communal, something is shared. I don't know if this word is accurate, but something is emplaced between people. Some thread of energy is set vibrating, some invisible cable is laid between people that carries energy. That's what I feel you do things for. At the time, when I first started to hear Meredith it was too early for me to move into her realm, although later I loved her songs and their structural power and now I do it my own way and I credit her with inspiring me and showing ways to take that storytelling, the narrative, the meaning world into the relationship with the audience, through all realms of vocality.

CT: It's interesting that dancers vocalizing played this role. Are there other figures that you were aware of that vocalized in interesting ways?

DM: Well, Trisha Brown was telling stories. Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer, almost all the post-Judson-Church post-improv scene, they were all telling stories onstage, they were all speaking or singing songs. And now, thirty years later in Europe, the "dancer talking thing" and "singing thing" is so big, it's like they just discovered it themselves. The dancers are singing Bach, the dancers are singing Schubert, they're telling stories, it's a completely gigantic movement for dancers and they do this incredible physical body work and at the same time they've had to learn a new, different breathing control. And I've taught a lot of workshops for people touching on these areas, to be able to use your breath and do what you need to do to dance and tell stories or sing or whatever at the same time. The voice/rhythm/breathing/storytelling concept is a strong connection to the dance world for me. There are an untold number of dancers who are working with these materials.

CT: Were others, other than Meredith, experimenting with timbre in similar ways?

DM: Not so many. Dancers? Not so many. The timbre experiments now began to come from the new music world for me. In the mid to late 1970s, I heard players coming from new music and coming from jazz who were dissatisfied with the limitations of the genres. Around 1979, the experimental impulses began to spark out of jazz, from contemporary music and from what you would have to call alternative rock or punk or non-mainstream rock came singers who were unsatisfied, even frustrated, with what they could do, *or were allowed to do*, in their area and who were searching for another ground, another "sound space". And many of us met in the developing improvisation scene. Which only happened after this particular improvisation scene I was part of as a drummer finally, tacitly accepted the possibility that "the emotional, live human voice" could be part of it. It took a while. People like Phil Minton and Shelley Hirsch and me. Phil was a trumpet player first, so he had to break out of that world and people had to accept that from him. Jaap Blonk is another wonderful voice, who initially came out of a totally "other" scene that formed in the Netherlands and northern Europe. This "emotional live voice" finally became an acceptable and interesting spring of information for the improvised music world, and the theatre world, to incorporate. Several of us vocalizers who had jettisoned our genre affiliation quickly became very attractive to theatre people because we were new, energetic, and malleable material for them, we were usable, un-categorized stuff for their work; we were not formed and finished, we could be placed in a live situation and we would change and fit in and do something interesting and it would work. It wasn't as if we were a screw going into a hole, a director would find an entry point for us—and we were flexible enough to use it. By not being affiliated with one genre we could be seen as an actor or a singer or a performer, not just a jazz or classical or world music singer playing a role or being a weird sound maker. We could be part of this very different work and world, and that was a great change of direction for those of us who were able to "mentally" move there. And it all began to take shape not so much in the good old USA, but in Europe—which is a later part of the story for me, and for many of us—that we could begin to be theatrical in our outward performance.

CT: Where would you say you started working in that kind of theatrical space?

DM: It started exactly in 1991 when I moved to Germany, when I got the grant to live there for one year. I called Heiner Goebbels, an old friend of mine, and said: "I'm going to be living in Berlin for a year, maybe we can get together." He said: "yeah man, great you're going to be here now, let me call you next week." And he called and said: "I'm doing a new theater piece in Marseilles and I want you to be in it." And I said: "You want me to play drums?" And he said: "Yes… that too, but no… I want you *onstage* in the theatre piece. I think you'd be a really great character." 1991. I was 42 years old. I had never been asked by any person in America, or anywhere else, to be, quote-unquote, "an onstage character in a work." I was only perceived as a weird musician, a high-energy guy, uncontrollable sound destroyer,

noise-maker, anti-drummer… Then suddenly, this very intelligent musician/composer said: "No, you're a character David. You have a great persona, charisma. I want you onstage. Yeah, you'll have a drum set but there'll be some things I want you to do, some texts I want you to memorize. And you're going to have a solo." So, he put this piece together. He was the director and composer, and there was an actor, either German or French, with Heiner himself playing keyboards and singing. And me playing drums and singing. It was a staged concert of Heiner Müller's short story/text, *The Freeing of Prometheus*. And, at first, Heiner Müller himself was onstage with us, which was a big deal in Germany, in Europe: Heiner Müller, performing onstage, it was a hugely important experience for me, theatrically and intellectually. And we would travel around, the four of us, doing this piece. And I was, for the first time in my life, onstage as not purely a drummer. I was standing up, making a voice solo, giving a speech, interacting with the actor, doing a kind of improvised duo with Heiner Müller as he read the text in German, making gestures that were incorporated into the piece, finding my way into the concept of "theatrical time." Which, really, for me, is such a central thing now. Theatrical time is non-normal time, theatrical time is outside of normal life, time outside of clock time. And isn't this *exactly* what we all want, time out from clock time, or time away, this transcendental moment. And here was a powerful beginning for me. This was a doorway into my future, and it was opening in1991. And it took a German director who was a musician, a friend who saw me in a different way, who gave me an opportunity, who didn't categorize me as a weird percussionist who made strange sound with his mouth. No, he thought about me as a persona, on the stage.

CT: So this project was not what took you to Europe? It was the DAAD?

DM: Yeah, the DAAD took me there, gave me a year. I was so wonderfully lucky. You apply for this one-year grant that was established in 1964 by the Ford Foundation in cooperation with the German government to keep Berlin an open city culturally, influenced by the West when they were divided. So they would bring in all these artists. In the sixties, every famous person you can imagine, Stravinsky, Nono, Berio, everyone came to Berlin through the DAAD Berlin Artist Grant. And then they ran out of super famous names and they started to ask the not quite so famous names, or the up and coming names, and by the end of the '80s they were looking for up and coming, thoughtful creators in the experimental scenes who had established reputations in their circles but who were not, perhaps, at the height of their career yet, or widely known. And, I got a call one day from a friend of mine who said: "David, you should apply, your name came up and the jury knows you and you've played a lot in Berlin." I didn't ever think of applying for this. When I thought of the people who had gotten it before me… Well, there were a couple of people I knew but… So, I thought "okay, I'll apply." And I got it. It was an amazing moment and a life-changing opportunity. And my partner and I moved to Berlin for one year and we never left. After the grant, we decided to stay one more year and finally we were there for good. And it was the change of my life. All the things that I had been working for came together in a kind of explosion of performance reality. I was able to show and do and develop, create the things that I always dreamed of: projects

that no one before had given me the resources for, being in operas, to create an opera, create a play, do a one man show, sing with an orchestra, write a piece for the Arditti string quartet, sing with them… All this stuff that I never believed I would be offered to do, never fully thought that I could do. Every fantasy I've had, musical/theatrical/performance, I've pretty much fulfilled. I've really been blessed by this time in Berlin. But, everything that came about in the last 20 years in Berlin came from the ideas I had been working with, struggling with, and developing my whole life in America. Basically, I was working with *time*. How does a drummer work with time? How does a singer work with time? What is storytelling? What is rhythm? What is energy? How can time transform perception? How is sound connected to time? How can sound stretch time? How can the voice focus the mind so that time disappears? How can the voice let normal life in? How can the voice suspend normal life? How can I trigger memory? Memory is time. Everyone has memory. I was working on all of that, bit by bit, in my own concrete way, it was my mental pursuit. And in the German years since then, I've been able to, happily, make things happen.

CT: You said that the Goebbels piece was the first time that you appeared onstage without a percussion kit.

DM: No, I had a kit there, but it was the first time that I performed on a theater stage as something more than a drummer, and was allowed and even encouraged to be a character.

CT: But what about the Marclay piece?

DM: Oh, yeah, I completely forgot about that. That was “Dead Stories,” a very special piece; we performed it in NYC in 1986 and then in Europe maybe 3-5 times.
I have to say, when I look back on it, that was probably the first time I appeared without a drum set onstage, you're right. And, as far as I know, for Christian, that was the first piece he made as a performance/theatrical piece with turntables, props, lights, text, and a score performed by Marclay himself.

CT: 1986?

DM: Yeah, I think so. I don't know, but it was quite early. That was probably one of the first times I sang without my drums in New York City. It was the first time I was in a "theater-piece,” you're right, but it was an anomaly. It was great that it happened. I stretched myself at the time. I was doing things I never imagined I'd be doing by following Christian's direction. He made us do these things like stamp on record jackets and put things on our heads and dance with partners onstage and speak text from the actual LP jackets. For me it was, I wouldn't say uncomfortable, but it was really odd, challenging. I had never experienced this before as a professional musician. Never expected it. I was in some ways, not ready for it. I couldn't capitalize on it. I didn't capitalize on it at that time. It remained unused in my memory for a long time afterwards. But, it was there. I remembered that I had

done it, that I was capable of it and I'm sure it helped me when Heiner asked me. I realized I could do something different, be a character on stage. It's funny I spaced out on that piece.

CT: Did it involve abstract vocals or text?

DM: There was a lot of text, because it was all records, all voices, a lot of voices telling stories and singing songs from the records. *Dead Stories* it was called. It was about these voices. So, we were either echoing or pre-shadowing the songs or the voices or we were singing along with the songs or we were reading lyrics from record jackets. So, there was quite a bit of text. There wasn't so much abstract improvisation at all, it was more linked to songs.

CT: At the time, when you would do a performance, were there times where you would step away from the percussion and do just voice for a portion of the shows?

DM: Actually, with the exception of Christian's piece, I have to say I almost never did a show without the drums. Ah, but now I remember something else. When I had the duo with dancer, Steve Paxton, I always used a very extended, huge drum-set with a specially made 3-sided rack to hold gongs, bells, objects all around me. And I always played my complete drum-set with him in 1976-80, EXCEPT when we made a tour in England in '79. There was no budget for me to fly my drum-set over, and the organizers were unable to provide any kind of actual drum-set, so I built a special light-weight rack for hanging objects, and brought two cases of metal, toys, hand instruments, and homemade percussion objects, one sound-sculpture by Harry Bertoia; it was a very personal set-up. And this was not at all like my normal drum-set! It forced me to increase the level and amount of my vocal work, so that I was singing with these objects almost the whole show. But at the time, I truly never thought of myself as a "singer"—I was merely adding layers of sound and accents, abstract textures and densities and sustains to a limited percussion array. It felt like a unique one-time-only experiment for me
Then, around 1982/83 I began to stand up in front of the drums, and, of course, I had been using a headset microphone for several years by then. I started doing this acoustically with acoustic objects. But in the mid-80's I had a microphone in front of the drums and I would stand up and go to the front and sing. But almost never only my voice, I would bring objects, I would twirl things around my head or I would have a metal sheet or I would make a kind of combination of percussive sound, standing, singing into a microphone, almost never a pure voice alone. I don't recollect doing pure vocal shows while I lived in the US. I may be wrong.

CT: I found some vocal duets that you did in the early eighties with Arto Lindsay, just the two of you, you did a short vocal improvisation.

DM: Yeah, from my records, from the *Full House* LP in 1983 or maybe his *Ambitious Lovers* group around the same time.

CT: And live as well. I found a recording on George Cartwright's site.

DM: Yeah, we could have done some live vocal stuff, but it was usually inside a larger piece where Arto was playing guitar and I was sitting at the drums and we'd have a vocal moment together. And when I sang in his group, Ambitious Lovers, actually that's true, in Ambitious Lovers, most of the time I had, maybe, two tom toms; I had very little percussion. I was standing up playing two toms and a zither, or a gong, almost nothing, a snare drum and a cymbal and there was usually a drum set player or Brazilian percussionists playing time. And so I was standing up and singing with Arto. But I could not yet cut my drumming to zero. It was too scary. It was too unknown to get rid of it all. I had to have something there I felt would launch my voice. I needed a launch pad, a security pad to get my voice comfortable, which meant the object, the attack object, had to be there for the voice to be secure somehow.
But now here's a second new ingredient to throw into the soup: my first solo LP, *Terrain*, recorded in 1979 released in 1980. One side of the LP has at least ten minutes of multi-tracked, overdubbed voice. I did these very dense 8-tracks of my voice, usually together with an object—but there was one piece, called "Phrase," in which I sang only: a very high-energy, repeated minimal phrase, at first in 8-voice unison, and then in staggered rhythmic layers. "Phrase" can actually be considered a breakthrough for me; an important, almost revolutionary moment for me, which influenced the development and direction of my singing for the next 10 years.

CT: It's interesting looking back at some of the ways that you were represented in the late 1970s and early 1980s. On *Coessential*, the record you did with Baird Hersey in 1977, on the liner notes it acknowledges you as someone who does solo percussion *and* voice concerts. And sometimes when you'd be introduced playing with George Cartwright and Michael Lytle, you were a percussionist. What was it like the first time you met someone like Phil Minton?

DM: Phil was a big, big influence; a very important person for me, and in some unspoken way almost a mentor for me. Fred Frith turned me on to Phil. We were all playing in New York in the abstract sound world and at the same time Fred had this new record label he started and I think he released one of Phil's records, I don't remember. One day I was at his apartment and he played me something I had never heard: it was Phil singing solo! This was 1979 or something. And I thought: "Jesus Christ, this guy can do things I've just barely been scratching at and didn't know how deep and far you could go. I just knew there was something more, and Phil was actually doing it!" It was shocking. Almost too shocking. Not shocking intellectually, it was emotionally shocking because I thought I was by myself and now I found there was someone who was quite a bit ahead of me, or more vocally developed than I was in the improvisation scene. Yes, it was the shock of really realizing there were vocalists who had other powers than me. And then a little bit later Fred said: "You know, Phil's coming. How about if we do a trio tour?" And I went: "Wow, okay." And this was 1980-something and we did our first gig in Boston, I think, and I had a

drum set and Phil played trumpet still and Fred was playing guitars and I was totally learning what was possible by listening to Phil. I was really influenced by him. I was also frightened. Not by him, but by *where* I would actually have to go if I wanted to go as far as Phil went. Not to sound like him but to sound like *me*. He had gone so intensely into his own investigation and I hadn't gone that far. So, I figured it was good for me that I still had quite a few steps to go. And Phil and I had a good rapport, we never felt competitive with each other. We always felt pretty good with each other and since then we've played any number of duo concerts until just a couple of years ago, and also projects, and he was in the first opera I put together, "Survival Songs" (including Jeanne Lee, Sussan Deyhim, Sainkho Namtchylak) in 1996. I invited him there, and he invited me into one of his vocal pieces (Makhno). So we've had good contact with each other over the years and he's always been super supportive of me. He's obviously found something worthwhile in my voice, which I am very thankful for. I was completely influenced by his commitment to his performance style. When he sings, there's no turning back. There's no other thing than that which he is doing. He’s telling us: "This is purely what it is and here it is and I've got it and I'm going to give it." And I found that incredibly informative and gorgeous. I work on that for myself. It's not so much that Phil's exact sounds influence me. I can't sound like Phil. I can do some of things he does and vice versa. We can imitate each other, but that's not interesting. What's interesting is two different styles that are as committed as they can be but that can touch each other and give each other musical ideas and energy and new places to go. I feel really touched by Phil. Its been wonderful to know and sing with him, and to be inspired by him.

CT: What other vocalists, early on, did you feel similar about?

DM: I always liked Shelley Hirsch. We're about the same age although I never was influenced by Shelley, not in the sense that Phil inspired me. But, Shelley had access, has access to storytelling in a way that I never had—that instant, subconscious stream of consciousness from deep in her memory. Everything can come out and she can organize it in a second and tell stories and sing songs and contact people this way. I find this to be extremely beautiful and powerful, a source of getting to singing from storytelling, from memory. This deeply affected me. And Diamanda Galas, of course, really hit me hard with the power with which she takes a persona or a musical form on. She can take a form and use it for her own power. She's been dealing with musical genres, musical areas, from post-classical to screaming noise grunge, to blues, Arabic wailing. Whatever it is doesn't matter so much, it's that she can release herself into these things. The point is, when you sing alone, you only have your body, your memory, and this stream of air that comes out of you. You only have these things. It's a lot but it's only that, and only you. So you've got to use everything you are, you've got to access all your memory, all your history, all your stories, all your abilities, all your fantasies, all your energy, your possibilities, you've got to have constant renewed access or else you're doomed to repeat yourself. You’ve got to have access to the ongoing stream of your lifetime. It's important for me that I know Diamanda, Koichi Makigami, Meredith, Arto, Barbara

Hannigan, musically *and* personally. I've made an effort to meet the people I care about. I've met them, I've talked to them, I tried to invite them to gigs and festivals, to share ideas and take everything one step further. All these people who are really streams of energy and streams of personal history who are *not* me, who could never be me are voices I can learn from, gain something from. Vocally, I have to say I have no one main influence that really makes me say: "*That* was the person." But I always go back musically to John Coltrane and the reason is he was the first person who showed me the felt necessity of creating music. That there is a way to create a structure in which each note conjures its next note necessarily, that you are not making arbitrary or abstract decisions about where you should go, there is a kind of, I don't want to be mystical or magical here at all, but there is a trance-like flow which lets you access this concept of necessity that creates what *needs* to come next. i.e. I felt how long this note needs to hang in the air; and the next one, like in contact improvisation, will fall from it when the gravity shifts. So, for me Coltrane had, and was, the essence of this, and he informed and filled my young life; when I was eighteen I was falling in love with the Coltrane world. This shaped my drumming then, and, of course, happily, it shaped my singing later. If someone said to me: "what do you wish as a singer?" I would have then (and now!) said: "I wish to sing every note as if it has to happen that way and it can only happen that way and every new sound is going to be the way it has to be at that moment." Which is a hard job to do. You don't always reach that, you know. I don't know if Coltrane always reached it, but that is what I felt. Of course, along the way I was affected by completely other types of persona, like Screamin' Jay Hawkins. I loved Screamin' Jay Hawkins. I mean you watch old videos of Screamin' Jay Hawkins and you say to yourself, in another world this guy would be on an opera stage at the energy heart of a performance—in another universe. Or he would be like a director of theatre—in another dimension. There was a lot inside of him and it came out with a similar kind of unpredictable necessity. And there are many people like that who are underutilized and under-known who could have been more influential if they were given more possibility, support and room to grow. So I'm looking around, I've always been looking around for the people, the singers, the bodies, the personalities, the voices, that I can physically resonate with, or the ones that stretch and challenge me beyond all hope or reason. What's interesting to me about a live singer is: that person is making a *living* sound. What would it feel like for me to make that sound? I hear it. Can I get to it? How do I have to organize my body to get to that sound that that person is making or that kind of movement that that person is making? That is information that singers, all singers, give me. Of course, I can't sing like every singer, I can't sing high like some singers, or low or whatever, there are lots of things I can't do. But what I can do is try to touch on the way they go about their work. Breathing, placement of their muscles, of their vocal cords, projection of the sound, of their energy and focus and a glimpse into how their mind organizes time, that's incredibly precious information for me that I get from people.

CT: For people who listen to you, how do your vocal performances do the same to them? What is voice in terms of intersubjectivity? How does an audience take you inside them when they're experiencing your work?

DM: You know, there's never a known answer to this unless you go around after the show and ask everyone personally. I've always said, and I still say, you can't control your audience. Which is kind of nice; I don't want to control them. On the other hand, you can juggle them around a little bit and some balls will stay in the air and some balls will hit each other and a lot of funny things will happen. Audiences are human, they have memory, they have histories, they have experiences, they have clichés, they have needs, desires, expectations, they crave mystery and moments of unexplained ecstasy. A performer who has done enough performing can work with those things and have a playful back and forth with the audience creating systems, worlds, shapes for them to get involved with. Then you explode that balloon and place something new in front of them as a surprise. You can play a game of expectation and surprise with your audience. What the audience comes away with I only occasionally hear: "Oh that reminded me of ancient music or that reminded me of science fiction music." You hear these very simple statements. Or: "that was very emotional." I get a lot of people saying they find my music emotional; they react emotionally towards what I do. For lots of other people it's pure weird abstract noise. I mean noise in the sense of: "what does it mean?" It's always going to be like that, you know. I don't give people all the information about what I do. I don't explain everything. I want you, the audience, to jump into the pond with me. I ask you to listen to it, to put all the stuff together in your head, see what you enjoy, see what you don't enjoy and that's your job and your pleasure.

PART II – July 7, 2013

DM: From 1980 to 1990, this 10 years was a kind of interesting musical development with really hundreds of musicians playing in all kinds of combinations, largely instrumental music in that my voice was not the major component, but the voice began to appear and singers began to appear in different combinations and I began to work with people like Arto Lindsay, working with the voice and lyrics and other kinds of vocal sound. And I had my first experience, as I said, with Phil Minton right around 1979/1980. And I worked with Shelley Hirsch and sang with lots of up and coming singers during these years. So I began to feel a bond or connection to the production of my voice; my voice was becoming one of my prime characteristics. Vocally, I began to seek a new balance with all my percussion and it was in this ten-year period, from 1980 to 1990, that an important transition was really happening.

CT: I was interested in having you reflect back on some of the important venues that you performed in in that period.

DM: I played in them all. For me, I could talk for twenty minutes trying to name these places.

CT: Were there some that you performed in that you felt were special spaces conducive to the kinds of music making that ethically and philosophically you felt a part of?

DM: Well, in the beginning there were these lofts in the mid-1970s, the late-1970s that started to come up that were for the improvised, experimental jazz scene. And there were several little-known ones like Environ, where a lot of people, Perry Robinson and other jazz improvisers started to work in them and which we got invited to play in, or we used as performance spaces. But, the one space that developed in the early 1980s that was key for all of us was Roulette. And this space exists now still, but they've moved it to a beautiful new place in Brooklyn. It was on West Broadway, way down, and it was in the loft of Roulette founder and trombonist, Jim Staley. He had a performance room, his living room had turned into a performance space that was on the second floor, I think, and on the fourth floor of that building was Meredith Monk's apartment. It just happened that way. Anyhow, Roulette was a place where we all could play. There was also the Experimental Intermedia Foundation that was started by Phill Niblock, coming from the electronic minimalist experimental world, moving into the improvised scene and amplified music experimental scene. Whereas Roulette was coming a little bit more from the improviser world, the pure improvised world, not the jazz world. You can see that already there were these interesting definitions and divisions between our worlds, the pure improvisers were not jazz musicians. The pure improvisers were not genre players, the pure improvisers, who called themselves that, did not function in four bar, eight bar, standard group combinations of quartets like piano-bass-drums-soloist, and didn't play tunes, and didn't use chord progressions. So there was already a clear break. We, the improvisers (I was part of that scene), were declaring our freedom from jazz, we were declaring free improvisation as a scene of sonic exploration that was ours to work with and we could use anything that we wanted to. There were a couple of performance series that were interesting, like Jazz at the Public Theatre. I curated a project there—A Night of Ten Duos. It was two nights. I made 10 or 15 or 20 duets with different musicians and I picked them and organized it; later I played there with the Golden Palominos and Jamaaladeen Tacuma, and maybe (I'm not sure now) Ambitious Lovers. This Jazz at the Public Theatre wasn't jazz it was some kind of mixed message going out there from curators who had their ear to the ground, listening for current developments. And then, later on in the mid-1980s there was the Knitting Factory, which, for me, turned out to be a horrible failure as a place because it started off as a place where we *all* could play, go and have our groups and mix and match, and then the pressure grew and grew to make money in this very small place, and to make a profit, and this cut out a lot of the possibilities for us to play there. And there were always about twenty ever-changing venues: there was the Gas Station, there was the Garage, there was the Mudd Club, this was before Tonic and before the Stone that Zorn put together. There was 8BC, at 8th street between B and C in New York City, which was actually a closed, abandoned building that had one whole floor missing, the front of the ground floor was totally gone. So the audience went into the building from the door off the street and walked downstairs directly into the basement, and then up on the back of

the first floor was a room that became the stage. So the audience was in a hole fifteen feet below the stage and up there, on the stage, was us and we did a lot of crazy gigs in that room; it was very theatrical, a very odd place. We did a version of *Dead Stories* in that room. Arto Lindsay's band played there, I did some projects there. There were always new places opening and closing because it was so difficult to keep something going in New York; places would open up, they would lose money and they would close and the next thing would happen. Or someone would get energy, they would find a place, it would cost no money, they would start it. Or famous venues like The Peppermint Lounge, or Folk City, Max's Kansas City, or even CBGBs would transform themselves for a weekend or a month into "avant-garde" rooms. That was the normal thing at that time.

CT: And you were living in Vermont the whole time and commuting?

DM: Yeah, I was living in Vermont. It was a strange thing. A lot of people never believed that I lived in Vermont, but I had made the decision not to move to New York. I had made this decision quite early when I moved to the commune in Virginia as my first choice. When I left Virginia and went to Bennington, Vermont to work with Bill Dixon, then went to Madison, Wisconsin, then came back to Bennington, the question became where did I want to live, did I want to make the move to New York? And I said: "No, I don't want to go into this competitive, dog eat dog atmosphere." My brother, Jules, lived in New York in the '80's, he was a drummer in the jazz-rock scene. And there was killer competition going on. They were ready to steal each other's instruments off the stage, or out of the van, to make a living because it was so hard. And I didn't want that. I wanted a different kind of life. Plus my communal experience had given me the flavor of country life, living with trees and a slower version of time around me. So, I rented a house in the country in Vermont and decided to stay there and commuted for everything to New York, got a little minivan and drove, sometimes twice a week, three times a week I would drive three hundred miles to play a gig and then I would pack up and drive home at 3 in the morning and it was completely insane, sure, but my identity was not so connected to New York City and I wanted to keep that identity clear. For me, it was necessary to live somewhere that I felt good, to work there, do my development and then come to the city and find people to play with. And a lot of my friends were shocked after x number of years when they realized I actually lived in Vermont. Because in New York you only hung with people at bars or occasionally we'd meet at a restaurant, or at a gig. Nobody <u>ever</u> invited anyone to his or her home. It was totally rare when you went to someone's apartment. When they invited you for dinner you always met somewhere and sometimes you never really knew where anybody else really lived. Anyhow, I lived in Vermont during all of the '80s, never moved to New York, always drove down, for gigs, for rehearsals, for recording sessions, everything.

CT: In what ways do you think that affected your identity?

DM: My identity was pretty well-formed by then. What I needed was to feel I had a sphere of activity and a place that I could call my own and protect and develop my ideas without the pressure that someone might decide to buy or sell the apartment I was living in, or that the rent would go skyrocketing, or that I had to work 5 nights a week to bring in enough money to make it work. I needed some kind of minimal security. It was cheaper, simpler in many ways, to live in the country. For a while, I earned my living by driving a school bus. And then I developed a children's music program, a percussion program for kids that I started in around 1975. I wanted to bring music into the elementary schools, but I wanted to bring a program that would not be a normal program, because when I was a kid in school, I saw just two music programs: a percussion ensemble comes in and plays Bach on four marimbas and then the US Marine Band comes in and plays marching music. And I wanted something different. I had just gotten my first few instruments from Harry Bertoia and I had a weird collection of gongs and toys and objects and homemade sound-makers. And I wrote a narrative about the development of percussive music for kids, so they could understand it. And I put together a 50-minute kids show that had <u>not one</u> piece of normal, Western rhythmic music in it, not one piece of simple 4/4. My goal was to be highly educational and information-packed, but not to give them anything normal, so I played sounds and textural music with Bertoia sound sculptures, gongs, collections of drums, all kinds of stuff. But the story I told was so educational and so well made that all the teachers said: "great, that's so educational, really good for the kids." And I got a huge number of jobs. I was really successful with this because I had a good story and was already a strong performer (and as I think of that now, I can see a connection, a prelude, to my standing in front of the drum-set and singing, which would develop many years later). And at the same time I was giving them music that was completely weird in the normal school environment and that was the way that I earned a living for a couple years. I was living in Vermont, driving down to NYC on the weekends and at the same time in the '80s I started a new career, a new direction: I began to create programs for radio, which actually was important for me, for my voice, because the radio is a medium that uses the voice quite well. And with the narrator voice that I had developed, which my father had encouraged, I could be the moderator for a radio program, the host for a show. And so, with a couple of other partners (mainly Frank Hoffman, of WVPR) I began to put together radio shows, wrote scripts, and we won grant money from the National Endowment for the Arts. From 1982 to 1990, we produced in Vermont and made six different series that were all concerned with new music. There was almost no new music on American radio at that time. You could listen to John Schaefer in New York or Charles Amirkhanian in San Francisco, but there was very little in the middle of America, not much. American radio wanted simple packaging and reliable modular programs then. So, okay, no problem, let's do that, I thought. I developed a style of packaging my programs, like my school show, the content was completely radical but the packaging was super normal and totally professional and 95% of the radio stations didn't care what was *inside* because the packaging was so good. It was a kind of weird salesmanship, using their own system to trick them. So I made several different series, and the biggest hit was a series called *Soundspots*. *Soundspots* were three-minute program modules. A two-minute

piece of music, a 15 second intro sound, a 30 second script, and a 15 second outro sound, equaling 3 minutes exactly, not 2:59 or 3:01, 3 minutes exactly. And I made 120 of these pieces and I got a $3000 grant. That's not much money, but I used it to commission 60 musicians, composers, and performers to make pieces. That's $50 each. I didn't get any money, I lost money, I gave each artist that I invited $50 to give me a two minute piece. And I got people like Laurie Anderson, Bill Laswell, Fred Frith, John Zorn, Pauline Oliveros; people from many different scenes, and they all made 2-minute pieces which I then packaged as 3-minute *Soundspots*. And I got 100 stations around the US to use *Soundspots* and they played them at midnight or at four in the morning, or at lunchtime, wherever they needed to fill a three-minute hole. Radio stations have programming holes, they have problems, something goes wrong, and they have little cartridges they can plug in to the holes: "Oh we need three more minutes? Okay, put a *Soundspot* on." So, you could be driving, I had reports and letters from people, they were driving along in Pittsburgh or Houston, Texas and they hear *Soundspot* and they hear a weird piece of music they had never heard before in the middle of the day because the radio station needed something. So I was kind of subverting the system. I had developed another way to subvert the existing system, to use the existing system for my own ends, in order to bring this world of new sound into the larger community. For me, it was not interesting to be crammed into the avant-garde, tiny universe that was the New York music scene. You could live there forever, play there forever and still be playing for the same 17 people in the audience, and you never get out of it. Well, I wanted to go beyond that and this was my first attempt to expand, to give more people a chance to hear this music, and therefore give more people a chance to like it or hate it and move along with us. And the radio world was also an expansion of my voice because I was the narrator/host for these programs. I had a chance to invite vocalists and artists who then, later, perhaps, invited me to do something with them. So it was a kind of new connective web that was forming through the radio—which actually helped me quite a bit later on in Europe, as I moved into the hörspiel world and received composition commissions for German and Dutch radio. In fact, this was another direction that helped me develop from the 1970s into the 1990s, when I would end up in Germany.

CT: Other than *Soundspot*, what other radio productions were you involved with?

DM: I had three editions of *Soundspot*, *Soundspot* 1, 2, and 3*; Vox Box* which was 12 singers, 12 vocalists who I interviewed, Diamanda and Phil and Maggie Nicols and other people. And then *Sound Sculptors* were I interviewed people who worked with objects, like Harry Bertoia and Richard Lerman. And the last and largest was *U.S. Ear*. It was a magazine program, 30 minutes long, once a week for one year, so we had to create 52 editions of "US Ear: The New Music Review." As a magazine show, a journal like you hear on National Public Radio, it reported on new music around America. And we invited people to be our guest reporters in San Francisco, Houston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Miami, who would send us reports about what was happening there, or music that was happening there; and people sent us new music, we had a cassette corner, we played new cassettes, we played new LPs, we brought

people onto the show for live music and interviews. I went to the *New Music America* festivals and interviewed people and reported on the festival. It was all this artistic work that was pretty much never in one package before and never had a weekly outlet that was so full of information on the music that was not that well known. So that was the culmination of the radio work. *U.S. Ear* was broadcast for just over 2 years.

CT: So, with your gigs, the radio, and your educational programs that's how you made a living in the eighties?

DM: In the eighties it was pretty much that, because when you played in New York you lost money. There was almost never a time when you'd go to New York, play a gig and come home with money in your pocket. I mean you'd get $50 for the gig, when you'd play the Knitting Factory. For the series at the Public Theatre, which was the most prestigious series at the time, I got $2000 and I invited 12 players to play with me and I gave them each $150. So that's $1800 gone and I did my own publicity. I had to take ads out and rent instruments. So by the time it was over I spent $3000, so I lost $1000 to make this event happen. And that was how it went. If you wanted to live this life, you had to find a way to invest in your career so that it would build, so that things could keep on happening, because there was no support. That's the beauty and the pain of the American system. There's no help. If *you* don't do it *no one's* going to help you do it. So, on the one hand, you better have a good idea or you better be strong enough if you want to make this career thrive. On the other hand, that's a shame because I know quite a few musicians who couldn't and didn't find a way to do this and who stopped playing music after 15 years because they wanted a family, they wanted a life, they wanted some regularity, they wanted some security, and they had to stop. And that's a shame, there were some very talented, unique players, who couldn't make this somewhat aggressive jump by saying to themselves, "I have an idea, I'm going to do it. You don't like it? Okay. I have another idea, here it is. You don't like? Okay, I have a really good one. Here it is. You like it? Great. Here we go!" That was the world I grew up in, not too distant from my father's generation, a culture and society which was always whispering to you, "You have an idea? OK—do it! Make it strong! Show it to people and keep on doing it. No one will help you, you have to do it all yourself. You are responsible!."

CT: So that was the American system. How about after you moved to Berlin?

DM: Well, this was a radical change. Before I moved to Berlin I began coming to Europe around 1977/78. So, making trips. First with Steve Paxton. Then I began to build a network; people in Europe started to know me. I would call someone up, they would tell me I should try this person, that festival, this group, that project. And every year I would fly to Europe more and more. One trip, two trips, five trips. By 1987, it was almost 12 trips a year to Europe, that's once a month from Vermont. Going for one week, or three weeks; or maybe just for one day, for one gig, to Europe. So, I built a network without actually living there. Then when I moved to Europe, in a certain way, beautiful things were in place for me. There was a scene

that I was included in. Some people knew me. They wanted me to be involved, like Heiner Goebbels wanted me to be in his piece, but they needed me to be nearby: for rehearsals, travel and building professional relationships. To be in a theatre piece you have to rehearse for three, four, even eight weeks sometimes, whatever it takes, to make it happen. So, at some point you really have to live there. Of course, I didn't really want to be away from home all that time. So, first of all, my network, and travel system was built up and, second of all, there's 14 countries and each of them has 26 festivals and that's like 300-400 festivals a year and they're all supported by state/government money because culture has a different value there. And so almost nobody at that time was concerned about making their festivals pay for themselves. They didn't have to break even. They didn't have to book a "star" every night. And I didn't have to draw 500 people to a gig to get hired and to get a decent salary. So, I could go to Europe, travel around for three weeks, and come home with $2000 in my pocket and that would support my American existence. And I would pay that money out to finance my gigs in New York and then I would go to Europe again. That's the way it worked: tour Europe, play sometimes 22 gigs in 20 days in 10 countries, traveling by van with 7 musicians. All to earn enough money to bring it home and pay for "real" life: rent, cars, food, instruments, etc. So when I actually moved to Europe, it was amazing, it was a shock: that first year I had a DAAD grant that paid for *everything*.

I was in Berlin, about to live there for a full year, and I was an American musician in culture shock. When you hear: "we're going to pay for your apartment, we're going to pay for your travel and your wife's travel and we're going to give you a monthly stipend and..." And I said: "And what? There's a catch somewhere." "No" they answered, "have a good time." "What do you mean: have a good time? What do I have to do? Do I have to accomplish A, B, C D? Do I have to play a concert every week? Do I have to give you this, this, this?" "No, you have to do *none* of those things. You are entitled to this money, to this time, to do your creative work and you *must* do nothing. Just take the keys to your apartment, open a bank account, and do exactly what you want, and we'll help you if we can." This was like living in an alternate universe to me, to an American who had struggled and worked since 1971—and it was now 1991, for twenty years—to make a living, while still keeping my focus on the music that I loved. Now, a stranger, a German stranger, an organization, was saying to me: "Here! Here's your life that you love: go ahead, develop it. Don't worry about these other things, we're taking care of it for a year." This was a shock, a beautiful but devastating shock. It took me a while to accept that I didn't have to produce, produce, produce. I was used to constantly producing concerts, projects, events, radio, articles. And of course I love to play concerts, and I had a backlog of ideas. So I wasn't at all prepared to sit back and think about, say, composing my first symphony, while not playing or producing things for one year. So what was the result of this "free" year in Berlin, when I was not obliged or pushed to do anything? An explosion of energy! I did 120 concerts in this year all over Europe. People just kept on asking me to be involved in amazing events, and it was a heavenly feeling, it was beyond imagining, almost too much, you know? All the combinations, Heiner Goebbels, the first talks about an orchestra piece, everything

began to fly into existence. I felt a) wanted, b) appreciated, and c) valued as a member of the culture.
It's true that as a foreigner, as an American, I was different. I wasn't a German, I wasn't European, but I was valued as a *producer of ideas*. Of course they wanted my drumming, and valued me as a virtuoso drummer/vocalist. But somehow it was wonderfully, stimulatingly clear that my ideas and my thinking were valued just as much. This had the effect of allowing me to blossom. Allowing my ideas to grow, not just keep me where I was, to meet challenges, and break through personal creative barriers. Feeling valued was allowing me to grow at that point. So it was a giant change.

CT: Why do you think your ideas tended to gravitate more towards voice than percussion after that?

DM: Well, it was very interesting. I've thought about this a lot. A lot of the people who wanted me to work with them were from the theatre world, which is text-based, and the radio world, which is text-based, voice-based. In the radio world, my body and my instruments had diminished importance, because they were invisible. In the theatre world what was important was the persona I could create or the character I could embody, and my instruments were plus or minus, needed or not needed, an extra option in a way. Directors who wanted me didn't care so much about my drumming (a drum-set on stage was a bit too music-world and concrete) as they cared about the energy and the sonic/emotional qualities I could create without them. So that was the first thing. The second thing was (as I had begun to experience in the U.S. via the radio work) was a growing fascination with certain writers and books. I did two short radio pieces in the '80s which I haven't mentioned, mini radio plays, based on texts by Italo Calvino from *Invisible Cities* and *Mr. Palomar.* I fell in love with his worlds. Italo Calvino's writing influenced, stimulated and nourished me incredibly— *Invisible Cities* very much, *Cosmicomics*, which was kind of a sci-fi philosophical investigation. The rhythmic language, both in Italian and English, of these works was amazing, and the metaphorical spaces that he called into existence with his imagination were mind-blowing for me, nourishing my mental processes. So I began to "sing his books." I began to travel with his books and I began to sing fragments, used them as fragmentary beginnings, these little mini-phrases which stimulated me. That was an undeniable, creative impulse to do something with words that I loved. And then when I came to Europe I remembered this amazing love for text, and the intense playfulness you can generate at the border of meaning and nonsense, that is, words and sound. And here in central Europe, the intellectual need for the word, which was both attractive and repelling to me, was so powerful it was almost overwhelming. The *word*, the text, meant so much in the European intellectual scenes, in theater and radio, the written word in journals, the notated word in musical scores. The deeply rooted *a,b,c,d,e therefore f* argument was incredibly important in intellectual European art scenes. So, the people I was working with were talking about writers and authors and poets, and words put to music. I didn't even know a lot of the names and I thought: "Wow, there's a world here, an intellectual world that a) I need to explore and b) might give

me an entrance into some new information, would give me some material to play with." Plus, directors and colleagues would give me text to sing, to speak, from different writers. English, German, Russian; other languages I couldn't really speak. At that time I could hardly speak German. Italian was a kind of pseudo-language for me—I could fake the sound. But with a little bit of study and a little bit of work I could carve out fragments and sentences of these languages and use them in my music. The producers, radio producers, directors in theatres, and composers wanted me to use these languages, they wanted my voice enunciating and re-forming the language particles and words. This was another revolutionary thing for me, to find here, in Germany, this deep focus on language, which I had touched on in the '80s but used mainly as a tool to go deeper into my percussion world. And there was something more: the storytelling thing, but more than storytelling, this was a doorway into philosophical ruminations and manifestos. And shortly after that, 1992, I found Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—and this was the next thing that took me away. It was a dual-language translation, German and English on facing pages, and for me it was just like Calvino. Crazy! It was amazing language. It was rhythmic, it was blocks of sound, world-building, it was storytelling, but if you really try to understand it, it was completely mind-bending. When you get deep into *Tractatus* you go crazy trying to understand what he's talking about, but the rhythmic narrative that he's going through and the "a,b,c, *by the way,* q" mind-jumps… amazing! Wittgenstein tells a story of the two horses and the boy and the lily white parade, and the writing is exactly like a gestural-metaphorical universe, it's close to how I sing/talk sometimes. I was shocked to find a new unknown partner using a kind of language game and it happened to be Wittgenstein. So I begin to use Wittgenstein in my performances quite early in the 1990s: just open to a page and begin to sing Wittgenstein's text in both English and German, which I never thought I would or could do. And probably if I had known more, was "better educated," I would never have attempted it. But for me it was simply pure music. I wasn't worried about what I was trying to say at all. It was playful and I had wonderful feedback from a lot of people. The playful quality that I felt in Wittgenstein was what they felt deep in their culture, they loved and wanted more of it. My work was stimulating, fun and slightly provocative for them. This playful quality that I as an American performer could bring to the forefront, this idea of play, that a human is a playing animal, *homo ludens*: he plays, games, makes, and destroys rules for the fun of it, to see what comes, to make relationships. This game-playing idea was extremely interesting for the Europeans. They wanted it, they thought it was a powerful performative attractor, and I was touching on it without really knowing how or why. I was working on it in my own my. With their "sacred texts": Wittgenstein is pretty sacred, Heidegger pretty sacred, some other texts that were very deep founts of knowledge for them. Calvino was not so sacred because not so many people knew his work. So, that's how the word and the text and my voice as a carrier of those things became stronger. And as my linkage to the drums started to loosen, once it was not necessary for me to travel with the drums and to perform with them on *every* gig, something interesting happened. It was purely practical and technical, but powerfully linked to the human body, to my body. I never realized how much of my time/energy was tied to carrying, setting up, and

packing up the drum set. For a single concert with my percussion set, six hours of my day would be involved with the non-performative aspect of getting it ready and taking it apart. For the forty-five minute or one hour event in which I would be playing, it took six hours (and I'm not including travel-time), getting everything ready in the room, putting all the stuff onstage, set-up, sound-check, warming up, doing all that work. Now there's nothing at all wrong with that. That was, in fact, my life. I had done it for over thirty years and never thought about it. But, now, in the '90s, when I traveled to give a *vocal* event, I began to realize, to feel, how much more time I had to talk with people, to think about ideas, to rest my body, to summon up my energy, to imagine new beginnings and endings. And of course, I couldn't plan projects with people, or hang out and have those needed bonding talks and collegial moments when I was ALONE on the road setting up my instrument for hours. Now I had chances to talk about playful possibilities with other colleagues, because I had the time to sit down and have a meal together and to share ideas and actually brainstorm. It feels a bit weird to say this now, but with the drums, the physicality, the physicality of carrying them, packing them, opening them, setting them up, caring for them, concentrating on them, compressed my ability to meet, to be a social performer/person. It was a really odd contradiction. Of course, I could be social onstage (you can be social in a very limited way, onstage). If there were three of us performing in a group, I do what I do, you do what you do, and we try to make those things mesh or influence or change or distort or work together, and so we have certain things we can do with/to each other. That's our job as professional musicians, and we do it. "Thanks a lot, see you later." "Want to get a drink?" "No, I have no time, I've got to get up early to catch a plane, see you next festival." Boom, like that. And now, in the '90s extra hours suddenly sprang into existence: I could have a meal with the guys, and we'd actually have time and energy to talk: "Have you heard about this guy? We should really find this guy and sing with him, he's really great. Ah, and Makigami... I've never heard... And have you read… And let's play with 5 men singing..." Suddenly, just from this surprising social time, new realms opened up, and that was really important. Plus, I suddenly had more body energy that manifested itself in my singing and my movement in the room. Well, I didn't want to *stop* playing the drums, there was nothing telling me to stop playing the drums, but I began to realize that I had ingested, incorporated the physicality of the drums so strongly into my body that in many ways I didn't need them in front of me anymore. I could physically imagine their position if I wanted to. I could use them as icons, as loved objects, as personal history and stories and memory traces in my mind's eye. I could imagine my hands moving them, using them as surfaces and have my voice be the expresser of that music. So, I was starting to jump into new worlds. The drums now became the diving board from which I was leaping and at some point I didn't need the diving board; but it was always there if I wanted it.

CT: Tell me about *Provokalia*.

DM: It started off as a festival. I made three or four independent festivals in Berlin in mid-1990s at an arts center called Podewil. The first one was *Touch*, which was a percussion festival, that was 1993 or 1994. I invited percussionists of all kinds. The

second one was *Provokalia*, which was vocalists. The title was a small joke for me—"pro" plus "vocalia" and the sound of "provoke"—nobody really got it, but that was the joke—to be for and against at the same time. I have a big thing about *for* and *against*. It's interesting for me to mix those two things together. A few year earlier, in 1992, I made a performance piece called *Music by, for, and against John Cage*, playing with this idea. It was commissioned by the Inventionen Festival in Berlin just before Cage died. I performed it then as an homage to Cage but also as a tickle, as a kind of a provocation and homage at the same time. So, let's see, the theme by for and against: *Provokalia* was for and against the existing ideas about voice and singing. *Provokalia* actually foreshadowed the Institute for Living Voice, it was the model that turned into the Institute for Living Voice. And then the third festival was a really special one called *No Tech*. 'No' was a play on Japanese Noh and *no*, and *No Tech* meant no technology shall be used that is newer than the microphone. So if a piece or a performer was dependent on technology created say, after 1945, they couldn't be part of the festival. So that meant body-oriented, physical performance that could be amplified, could have movies, but no video; speakers, but no computers; light but no lasers, etc. I made these limitations as a challenge, and of course, like with all my rules, the challenge was to break it or use it in a surprising way. You see, it was a time in Berlin, in 1996, when technology, the internet, cell-phones, was getting more popular, everything was starting to roll with the web and the "invisible," and I wanted to make a statement that bodies and minds were the sources of work, and "No Tech" was that statement. Okay, so *Provokalia* was one of those three festivals and then I took that name and used it as the name for a project, a movable project that I could bring to life anywhere by creating fresh Provokalia Choruses.
It worked this way. An existing chorus or a festival or theatre that didn't have a chorus but wanted to involve and invite the local community (singers and non-singers) would invite me to come there. They would organize these people, and I created a new vocal choir with a few short, intensive workshops. This new Provokalia Chorus would then make short, but vocally surprising, musical interventions in the daily life of the festival, theatre, town, whatever it might be. So this happened several times in Berlin, and other cities where festivals called me in to do this with existing choirs and with lay groups that were formed especially for this; ranging in size from 30 to 220 people. So, I would arrive and work with them for two or twenty rehearsals, depending on the time and budget available. And at the end or during the workshop run we would make these intervention events to bring the voice into daily life in a different way. We've done this around Europe but never in the U.S. Virtually none of my projects have happened in the U.S. after 1992—after I left for Berlin.

CT: What was your methodology for working with choirs? And how did it change over the years?

DM: Choirs are basically machines trained to do one or two things very well. Nice things, good things, to sing certain things. And there's a hierarchy in choirs and a system, commitment, a camaraderie that makes a choir work. My view was, again,

for and against. I love the fact that choirs exist almost everywhere in Germany. I was ecstatic to hear about the tradition of amateur choruses there, and amateur choirs existing which rehearse from once a week to once a month for years and years, and give concerts on holidays or whatever. And some of these choruses, who have been doing the same kind of music for thirty years, found that their membership and audience was aging; perhaps because vocalizing as a social act was moving away from the mainstream, or the church-going populations were getting older, or classical concert-going populations were getting older, or choir singing was not taught in schools anymore. These choruses were mostly a volunteer thing and, of course, everyone was aging; so what are you going to do when people get too old to get to the rehearsal, or the audience gets too old to go hear the same music one more time? How do you keep this "system" alive and invigorated and maybe evolving? So, since I had a reputation for doing different things in music "different" with my voice, I got calls from chorus leaders and festival directors, who were in effect saying: "we need to do something different, we need a different energy, and you're it!" It was amazing. They didn't know what the heck I *really* did, but I was a man with different energy, I had a good pedagogical reputation, and I could communicate. I was not a dictatorial or overly pedantic or manipulative leader—I was simply a good teacher. It was fun for everyone. Good. I was called in to give a creative energy shot, which meant in a certain way I had amazing freedom, because no one really knew what the musical content of my work would be. So, in addition to being able to give new energy and ideas to a chorus, I was able to get something from them: I could use choral work as a compositional tool for my own music. The choir was a wonderful tool that allowed me to experiment with and develop layers of sound that I couldn't make on my own or with electronics. And this was gorgeous! That's how I looked at it: that I could take my fragments, melodies, rhythms, chants, loop things that I'd been producing for years with electronics, loop machines, and delays, all these multiple layers generated by my own voice but now give them to living human beings, who I could work with at the moment, live. And I could see at the moment, at that instant, how to alter them, change them, what worked, what didn't work. So, for me, the first pleasure of the choir work was that I had a chance to hear my music live, sung back to me with human energy. It gave me a lot of input, surprises, and new ideas for my own music, for my own ongoing solo performances and for the music commissions for scored music that were now coming in. That was the first thing. And then the second thing I found out was that the choir was a body, very physical, very dramatic, and the potential for theatrical activity was very high. BUT they almost <u>never</u> used that physical potential. If they did it was "hokey" or somewhat old-fashioned or clichéd because these choruses had no theatrical training (even opera-house choruses had some problems with this, strangely enough). Most never had a director coming to them. looking at them and saying, "you move this way, and you move that way—no, slower!" And truthfully, fifty people in a choir moving, just fifty people in a massed group, lined them up across the whole back of the stage, thirty meters from the audience, and then having this choir sing a random cluster and move forward very slowly as a mass singing a cluster, was incredibly theatrical and powerful. And I made markings on the floor and when they came to a mark all they had to do was change their pitch. And it was

amazing what happened. They didn't have to worry about anything. When they walked to the mark they changed their pitch. So you had this incredibly changing choral cluster, and nobody knew how it was working. You couldn't tell what was going on, yet you had these bodies coming at you, these beautiful interesting faces, different bodies, different human shapes. Simple, very simple. This chorus work was kind of an entryway, a doorway into my own dramatic, theatrical notions. Until these opportunities arose, what did I know about organizing a theatrical event, putting people onstage, moving people in space? I now had a chance to experiment with this. So as I said, it was twofold: I could use the choir as an experimental body for musical and theatrical ideas, and at the same time I had a flood of ideas and energy of my own to give to them: ideas about the body, rhythms, melody, song and memory; and how to produce these things in different ways. I could give them musical material they normally would have no access to, and talk about things I had been working on as a drummer that perhaps would offer some new information. So that's what I started doing. And this chorus work is a long-term project that I'm still working on and developing. More and more, I see these choruses as an opportunity. Of course, on the one hand, I would rather be invited to make my own piece for a chorus than to lead a purely "educational" workshop for them. When you make a piece, you develop something that can have an ongoing life. But, all in all, it's just a pleasure to be in the middle of large group of singing people. I feel the pleasure of working with their minds and bodies, and don't forget, because choruses are a part of natural, daily life for many people, they are like doorways into, and *out of,* normal life.

So, amazingly enough, the call by the Neukölln *Opera* for singers to form a new choir making unknown music with an unknown leader got, on a Sunday in January, 2010, eighty people of the most mixed cultural heritage you can imagine. From age 5 to 85 and 7 or 9 nationalities, in this room. A gorgeous, amazing group of people. I walked in, looked around and thought, "Wow, I never saw such a diverse, age and background group." And almost none of them were singers. I think there was one guy that had done some improvising. There was not a professional singer in the room. But, they all wanted to sing. It was really a unique opportunity. You don't get these so often, you know. And it was a protected space created and supported by the Neukölln Opera, and we met once or twice a month developing a unique chorus we called "New Babel Sounds Choir." We decided at the end of one year we would make two or three performances, a short one and two long ones, culminating in a festival to show our work to the Neukölln area. And the people were great—open, giving, warm, and full of energy and unplumbed power. Usually it's really hard to get eighty normal people together, and when I say normal, I mean non-performers/non-musicians who have a normal life, are working jobs, have families. It's a hell of a lot of work to get them to come together. And the thing that actually helped was that we made a real social event of it. Everybody cooked, people brought food, Neukölln Opera gave drinks and a kitchen and volunteers to smooth the path so that all these varied people could continue working together. But, we never talked about making art, about being artists or professionals. What seemed to keep a group like this together was the feeling that it was a team, a club, a social group, a social being that could laugh and talk together. The break that was in the middle of the rehearsal was

as important as the rehearsal, when everyone is talking, laughing, breaking into smaller groups of friends and new acquaintances, and grabbing food and kids are running everywhere. It was just purely beautiful. Of course I knew a lot of this before, but it really made it clear again how rarefied the New Music professional performance atmosphere is; how much you dedicate, how much you cut out of your life, how much you have to sacrifice and not care about to do this professionally; and how few people are able to commit to that, for whatever reasons. And on the one hand, how lucky I was that I could deeply experience both sides. But, on the other hand, how sad it was that I didn't have a lot of social experiences like this. I couldn't do this kind of work every week, because I would be going crazy with all these people. There's just too much input, really so much input from the 80 people who all wanted to talk to me after a rehearsal: "yeah, well my voice felt... David tell me about... how did that feel… what about the moment when… How do you warm up for..." The truth seems to be that people want love, to give and receive it. They get stimulated and energized in the collective and they have no defensive boundaries anymore because it's not the art world, they don't deal with art world boundaries, they're ready to go, they're bursting with energy, they want to know how to do more, go further, they want *to sing*: "Hey maybe we could do two rehearsals, maybe three, what about that, David?" And as I said, no matter how much everyone wants to do it, normal life is still stronger and it's always hard to get everyone together, to keep them together over the long term.
Perhaps my voice, and singing/teaching style were attractive because they came from my drumming (aha, everything comes together now!). My work was not based in one style or genre of singing or a particular critical evaluation of what it meant to be a singer. And that simple fact was attractive to non-professionals and even professionals from different areas; conservatories wanted workshops, believe it or not, music schools, actors, dancers, theatres wanted workshops. They all felt there was some important information to gain, and that was partly a function of my voice coming from a non-traditional source.

CT: You describe one piece, the lines on the floor changing the pitch. I came across a description that said Provokalia pieces are usually 3-10 minutes long and that they take no more than 2 hours to learn. Could you describe some of the other ways you worked with, say, the New Babel Sounds Choir? What were some of the other pieces?

DM: It always depended on how far or close the group was to professionalism, how I could work with them. If I was working with a non-professional group I could never say that we would be singing scores. In other words, if I had to seduce people to join this thing, I had to find out what would seduce them, what would be the thing that would bring them in. Non-singers, non-professionals are scared about notation, they don't know how to read music. They can't memorize, they're scared about memorizing, they don't really want to do any of that stuff, it’s frightening and they can be judged right/wrong. They will not show up if that's a pre-requisite. So, I announce immediately that no one will have to memorize a piece of music, no one will have to read a piece of music, we will come for a short amount of time, we don't

have to do any homework; I make it as easy as possible. There are also other systems that I use, for instance if I'm working with dancers, I say we'll be working with rhythm, rhythmic events, storytelling and memory, we're going to be doing exercises with these things. I tell them that each person will create and develop a three-minute vocal solo during the course of the workshop and at the end they will show this piece and we'll have a critical evaluation, we'll talk about the work. If they're composers, I'll outline some different possibilities connected with the idea of structure and dramatic shape using the voice. Professional singers happen to be, strangely enough, the most difficult to work with because they have so many expectations about their own voice and what they want. They have so many specific desires, that it's really almost impossible to create a group feeling with a workshop of fifteen professionals. Conservatory singers want so much technical information from you that it's almost impossible to break through to make a group event coalesce. So, in every workshop, at any level, I'm working with my own musical sense of structure, frameworks, my notebook full of rhythmic ideas, some in normal rhythmic notation, some graphic notation, all denoting loops, fragments, phrases, occasional melodies that are interesting and can be sung by a group together. These days, for each choir I have a key melody that I write, a kind a signature melody for that choir that is like basic information that people enjoy singing, that they can possess, and even chew on, I hope. And now I must admit: I've changed my mind about *melody*. In the 1980s, we improvisers around the New York noise music scene, as they called it, were unwilling to play melodies; we cancelled melodic playing from our repertoire. Creation of a repeatable segment of notes that could be sung by a human voice and understood by a listener as a melodic fragment was anathema to us, we wanted to get rid of that, it was simplistic, old-fashioned, passé. Now, 20-25 years later, for me, the melodic *moment* is quite important, even primal, or primary. The melodic framing of sound into a memorable event by a human mind and body is, for me, much more important than pure abstract sound, which I can always make any time I want. So, I've made a kind of unexpected journey toward personal song and away from continuous abstract sound creation (which I still love and still do). But I frame much of my music (and theatrical work) in song-creating, memory-triggering meta-structures.

CT: Is there an element of collaboration in the pieces? Do the members of the choir come up with structures themselves that get used?

DM: It depends on their willingness and how far we go and how much time we have. I have lots of choirs, impromptu choirs who give very little information to me because time is short. And when time is longer, I set up systems in which I ask for information. I say "okay, who would like to be a soloist now? Who would like to speak a text? Who would like to sing?" I give people the freedom or I make a group selection. Usually I divide the choir into thirds, and occasionally I'll make a mini-group of two people and give them something special to sing, and they'll be completely surprised with that and that will, sometimes, cause an explosion of unexpected things to happen. Or I'll make a melody and I'll say: "who would like to experience the pleasure of singing this melody on their own?" I gave everyone a

chance and see what will come out of it. Of course, I can't force anyone to do any of this because I don't have real institutional or economic power, nor do I wish to have that power. And then, usually, slowly, the ideas seem to self-generate and people become composers, directors, conductors, choir-leaders, all for the first time in their lives. In certain workshop situations, like when I'm leading a choir of theatrical people, actors or dancers, I'll even say to some of them: "Well, okay I see you have some ideas, why don't you organize a piece, take 10 minutes, 15 minutes, take everyone aside and make a piece, make a three-minute piece and come back in half an hour and let's see it. But the only pre-requisite is everybody uses their voices at some point during the piece, whatever else happens I don't care, it can be quiet for fifteen minutes and one sound happens, I don't care what you do, but at one point I've got to hear everybody." And this is when we can jump to the next quantum level. But, as always, it depends on the desire, the passion, of the people. Of course, I can give a workshop doing exactly what I want all the time, a "show them what I do, what I think" workshop. But, for me, it's always more pleasurable to get surprising input from one person or hear something from a voice that allows me to change my plans or direction. Because I like to see what *might* happen, because of my roots as an improviser, I have to say that I enjoy the moment of not knowing what's going to happen next. And going for that. Then I trust myself enough to organize that moment into something interesting. I have enough experience, I have some ideas, I've heard enough music, I can use that surprising open window, I can lean out of it and describe the unknown view. It's a question of trust and risk at the same time.

CT: How long did the New Babel Choir project run?

DM: One year.

CT: Can you tell me more about the trajectory of that year?

DM: At the beginning, we had a two and a half hour rehearsal, including a 30 minute break. We sang for 90 minutes, basically. At the beginning, the whole 90 minutes was warm up. I didn't tell them they were warming up, but basically it was warm up, getting used to the idea that you're putting your voice in the room, getting comfortable hearing your voice, knowing you're not doing anything wrong, that your body is loose, that you're not cramping your system in any way, dealing with questions "oh, I don't feel good, this hurts," getting everyone to come to a mutual, warmed up feeling at the same time. Really, the first several months were almost fully, completely warm-ups. People felt happy and they were relaxed. Once we reached a certain point where we had gotten everyone singing happily with the voice that they had, nobody worrying too much that I could see, then I started introducing my material, rhythms. I didn't ask them if they could do it. I didn't say: "I don't know if you can do it." I assumed they could do it. And I made it clear to them, I always make it clear to my groups, that I believe they are intelligent people, I believe they are capable people, capable of using their minds and their intellect to analyze what's going on and understand it, and I won't talk baby-talk to them, even in German. I started making phrases and sounds for them that they had never heard

before, that this group of people musically had no connection to. They began to sing with me. It developed, and got more and more powerful. And as the voices developed, the trust between us had to develop. I had to show them that I was a trustable person; that I wasn't a weird, eccentric, difficult artist; that I wasn't a crazy artist and I wasn't some guy who was going to *use* them. I had to show them all of this and make it clear. And once that trust happened they really jumped into my phrases, jumped into my melodies. They would move, they would walk, do something in the room, and after a year of meeting, we had this amazing parade. This wasn't something we had decided on beforehand. The opera house said "we'd love to show this to the city, to that area of Neukölln." It ended up we got police permission, a license to make a demonstration, a police escort at the front and back, and they closed off the main shopping street in Neukölln. So, I had to create this huge event.
We had the 80 singers in our choir. I said: "I can't do it with 80 people. We need more people on the street. What are you going to do? We need musicians, we need bands, we need lots happening to make a real parade." So they got a Turkish traditional horn and drum marching band, and they got a Persian religious band, so we had bands in front and back doing drumming, horn music, ritual and traditional music with a beat. I had my 80 people in the middle and we put out a call for volunteers to come join and sing with us. In the end, we had 220 people marching and singing on the street. And I was leading the voices with a megaphone. I had written a short, simple melody for the group that was our marching-song, and the melody got published in the newspaper so anyone could learn it. The newspaper said if you want to sing with us and join the parade all you have to do is learn this melody. What was really funny was I wrote the melody in C, no sharps no flats and I handed it to the opera house and it came back to me, just before it was going to be published, in three flats, because they told me that was the better way to write it. And I said: "No, I'm sorry, we can't write it like this. I don't care. We have to put it in C. As soon as anyone who can't really read music sees something in three flats, they're not going to look at it anymore. I wouldn't either, because I can't read music in three flats, forget about it. Put it in C, please!" It was a real primal musicological argument. And so, the melody returned to C. Well, that parade was big, crazy, semi-chaotic, but a lot of fun. We had 220 people on the street and to make it a demonstration and get the "official" license, it had to be a *political* demo. Even in Berlin, you can't just have an art demonstration, *with* police escorts, that closes the street. So we made signs that said: "Everyone has a voice," "We all have the freedom to use our voice," "Your voice is powerful," "Use your voice," "Voices are what is necessary in our society," "Vote with your voice," etc. And that was enough, we got permission. Of course, it was a game with the city bureaucracy, but once we fulfilled their regulations it worked. We marched on the street, and we had a completely "scored" plan of action. It was a hell of a job, let me tell you, we had about 50 volunteers helping us, and still it was on the edge of chaos the whole time. But we had all these people marching, singing this melody and people on the sides of the street, the most diverse drunken or non-drunken or normal people singing along. I have a great recording of it somewhere. We ended up in this indoor shopping mall. I'd made a piece for escalators and we all went up and down 4 flights singing

pitches. And kids were yelling: "Mommy, daddy, what's going on? What does that mean?" and the parents said, *every time*: "that's *music*." I felt like crying. It was such an emotional event for me. It was a part of life, a social and surprising moment connecting to the larger community of a city, that I never imagined I could have, or expected I could have, or would have thought about when I was playing drums and trying to be the best, weirdest player there ever was. It was a lot of work, but it felt amazing. It may never happen again, but we made it happen once, and wonderfully!

CT: Could you put a percentage on how much of your work with choirs is improvised music?

DM: The material I give them comes from fifty percent improvisation and fifty percent my self-created phrases. What the choir itself improvises is a very small amount, because I've never had enough time to create a group of powerful improvisers. I can give them a piece of material or a texture and they will improvise with it in the sense that they will not be exact, yes, they're free to move around in the timing, timbre and pitch, but they don't think they're improvising. Hopefully they think they're being playful with an idea. The concept called "improvising" is a difficult and negative idea for most people, I'm sorry to say. The idea of improvising is unreachable for most people. They can't improvise, they don't know how to improvise. It seems and feels beyond them: "What sound do I do? The music should be abstract? How should I sing with it? What should I do with it? I'm singing, I don't know how to change it. What should I sing? Am I right? Am I wrong? Is this the right note? Where am I?" There are so many thoughts and barriers that sabotage and hem in the average person, that just to sing without complete instructions is already a huge leap. I started with improvising very early so there wasn't that kind of leap for me. So, I don't ever say to people that they're *improvising*. I say: "Work with this. Work on this. See what happens when you do this for a while. Make it a little higher. Sing a little lower. Enjoy the feeling of "sliding your voice around;" maybe a bit slower or faster; or you could join the voice of your neighbor…" I give them "jobs" to do that allow them to chew on the material and manipulate it. And then I might do a trick, like saying: "okay everyone, keep on going, keep singing, don't stop, but I'm going to make a big change soon and, whatever it is, *follow me*." And I would change something and they would have to find a way to re-organize their voices, to get to the next thing, and a process of unanticipated movement of their voices would create what you could call an improvised change. So, I found ways to utilize improvisational tools with these choruses, but the concept and experience of "improvisation" that we're speaking about is pretty much foreign to most people.

CT: Not speaking about choirs now, but your own practice, in 1986 you told Charles Amirkhanian 90% of your work was improvised. Is that still the case?

DM: Again, it depends on how you think about improvisation. In the sense that I don't preset my performances when I'm doing my own work, then I'm quite close to 90% an improviser. In the sense that the material I am using is largely fragments that are pre-formed or pre-known, I would call myself 40% an improviser, because

my material is not ever completely new. I'm re-organizing the material. Re-organization of the material allows me to be 90% an improviser. Everyone is re-organizing their material, more or less. There is no such thing as 100% improvisation. It's a joke, a fantasy, it doesn't exist. You do what you *know* how to do. And you re-structure it, depending on how big or small your units of information are. As a soloist, I would say I'm pretty close to 75%, in that I'm always reconfiguring the larger structural units of my material. As a player in groups with other people I'm not anywhere near that anymore. I use material that I know works a certain way, but since no single person controls the temporal flow, improvisational moments, surprises, seem to "appear" more frequently.

CT: I want to move to a few quick questions about various different topics that I'd like to get in before the end of the interview. When you were talking about your *Music by, for, & against John Cage* you said you were compelled not just to present an homage but also a challenge. Is this something you've done in other areas of your work?

DM: I'm doing it *here* [at the *Festival 500 International Festival of Choral Music*]. In fact, you did it by inviting me here. I don't, truthfully, easily fit into *Festival 500*. Not that I shouldn't be here, but I'm not a normal fit. The reason I do certain things is, I think, that for a long time the music that I cared about, and was developing starting in 1972 or 1973, was not central to many people. I had to make some choices: should I get angry, should I get bitter, should I get negative, should I get mad, should I get aggressive, should I get smarter? How do I deal with this fact that they laugh at it, call it noise, or animal sounds. And my answer to this was to contrast it with what existed, to present both things next to each other—like that Indian veen player at Wesleyan university who played the Western chord at the end of a gorgeous thirty minute, mysterious, heavenly Indian music concert and brought us all back to normal everyday life. The concept or framework of *contrast*—that was my ultimate material: contrasting the daily, normal, mainstream real world with the wider sonic realm I was developing. I wanted these things to rub up against one another, to create usable friction. Unless I brought them together, my world would always be untouched, unseen, unfelt, or when rarely heard, almost always rejected. I had to find my own ways to do this—through special projects or unique groups. For example, I did a sport/performer project for Olympic athletes and soloists in Berlin and I'm doing another one next year; both completely wrapped in the idea of contrasts, and while softly commenting on our cultural norms. This is the way I've found to bring my work back into focus as a counter-weight to the mainstream, to what is considered important in our society. Another example: a piece like *Music by, for, and against John Cage*. I met John Cage, I knew him a little bit, we talked, we had not a friendship but a collegial acquaintance, we liked each other, he gave me some great feedback, and he laughed a lot when he came to my concerts. But in Europe in the 1990s, he was becoming a guru, an almost overpowering icon in a nice way. And when you make a person into an icon you lose sight of who that icon once was and you lose sight of the human being and it's particularity of focus. In fact, you lose sight of a lot of things because the icon is frozen. It *has* to be frozen. My desire was to

re-release the ticklish quality of John Cage to put us next to each other in one performance. He stimulated me, so perhaps I could stimulate thinking about him, he gave me information that I could re-cycle in a new way. And oddly enough this program was quite successful. It was interesting for people to think about, and use the framework of "music by for and against *someone*." A lot of people later used this idea to make other programs like "by for and against Ligeti" or "by for and against Elliot Carter" etc., because it was stimulating to put these ideas together. And, as I always told my audiences, "I do this out of love, love for this work, for this person." And this stance of contrast, the friction of unlike surfaces rubbing against each other, creates sparks of energy from which ideas develop. It's always been that way. And without these contrasting surfaces you remain unchanged, or you remain happy (maybe that feels better, or at least easier) doing what you do for the rest of your life. I always wanted change, so I rub the edges against each other to make things happen.

CT: How about in the example of your version of *Pierrot Lunaire*?

DM: I have to say, this was a result of living in Europe. I never would have come close to *Pierrot Lunaire* had I stayed in the U.S. I knew the name *Pierrot Lunaire* when I lived in America, but I had never even listened to the music. Schoenberg was, for me, of course, as a drummer, impossible. Then I got the call from Ensemble Alter Ego in Rome and they said they wanted me to do a new piece. In fact, they wanted to commission a new version of *Pierrot Lunaire* with me as the singer. And I thought: "Oh, my god." I said "Wait a minute, I've never looked at the score." They said: "we'll send you the score." And they sent me the score and I really and truly freaked out. I thought: "I can never sing this, this is impossible." I had never sung anything like that in my whole life. And they said: "Do it your way. We like your voice. We want your singing." And then I found the Universal publisher's facsimile of Schoenberg's score in which he had written the forward, in maybe 1909/10. And what he says is incredible. He talks about the voice, what he wants from the voice, that the voice shouldn't actually sound like a normal singer, that the voice shouldn't actually sing the notes that are written, and about the importance and "hair-sharpness" of the rhythms. And I thought: "Aha, here is the revolution." This was 1910. And this vocal revolution was not paid attention to at all, it was forgotten, brushed under the rug. Yes, people know *Pierrot Lunaire*, it was appreciated or not, sprechstimme was a new concept, but nothing so strange, etc. But what he wrote and what he seemed to be thinking regarding the human voice, no composer had written about this. Now, personally, I happen to like Charles Ives more than I like a lot of Schoenberg, but Charles Ives didn't think about this for the human voice. Nor Mahler, Debussy, Stravinsky. Nobody. It was a revolutionary moment in music history. And I thought: "Just this Forward alone gives me courage to do this." I spent a year and a half. I worked hard as hell to learn the shapes and energy thrusts of these 21 pieces. I decided I would not sing the actual pitches. I would sing the sprechstimme as I believed it was meant to be sung/spoken. In fact, I listened to sixty recordings of *Pierrot Lunaire* and fifty-eight of them are complete bullshit, I mean good bullshit, the singers all sing *exactly* the notes written on the page, yes, with a little bit of

glissandi here and there and sometimes a small leap. But, I thought: "What is going on here?" It's a hundred years later and they're all singing exactly what he said they shouldn't. So, I did my own version of *Pierrot Lunaire* in 2010. I made a tabletop staging and scenario for it. It was a theatrical event with objects. Every song had a specific grouping and movement of objects, shapes, and colors that I moved around as I was singing. And now comes my revolutionary moment: I amplified my voice and sang loops. It was beautiful, and powerful. It was the second Schoenberg work for me, because before that I did *Ode to Napoleon*. That was, in many ways, much simpler. But too many revolutionary moments in one package can't always succeed. We were forced to stop performing that piece. We were called up by Universal Editions, who still own the copyright, and they said that our version was unsuitable; and that we would be sued if we continued to perform it. Amazing, huh? 100 years after it was written!

CT: Wow. The copyright was still in effect?

DM: Yeah, it got renewed until 2022 or 2023, *then* it goes into the public domain.

CT: Do you know who precisely who deemed it unsuitable?

DM: Ahh—let's talk about other things...

CT: Okay we'll move on then to other re-presentations you've done. You've done a lot of covers of popular songs. What has compelled you to do that?

DM: There was a time when I thought, in the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, that I was getting closer and closer to pop music in structure and beat and timing. The bands or groups I was in were closer to rock bands, or popular groups. And our scene was now touring in rock festivals, as alternative acts in pop festivals and as the "weird" bands in jazz festivals, and we were even occasionally perceived as challengingly mainstream. And this was interesting for me. How far could this go? So, I formed my own bands. *Dense Band* was one of them and then the *My Favorite Things* project. The idea was to take songs from funk, pop, jazz, Brazilian music (not so much rock because I was never a rock fan) that I had heard and loved, add old songs that my father and mother used to sing, and incorporate all these as recognizable material to contrast with my voice and my concepts of rhythmic energy and sonic depth. Doing it this way would give people access to my personal realm while giving them some "comfortable" information to hang on to. The idea was: don't push people away! Why do that? Give them something to grab so that while they're hanging on something else that they never imagined tickles their brain, but they can stay with it, can enjoy it because they recognize structures that keep them involved. So this was an attempt to reach, to touch a bigger world. I did this for a while. I don't do it with many bands these days. Now I do it do it with texts, words, stories and memories. The only thing I've kept doing for a long time is the *Goldberg Variations*. I do it live with a pianist or with an ensemble sometimes; or with a sample of Glenn Gould playing it. I sing and improvise *live* with the Goldberg

Variations while they are played exactly as written. This is collision of my vocal world with a world that I've always loved, Bach's world, a world that I know very well, and one which takes me very deeply into the passions and meanings of music.

CT: Is it entirely love or is there an element of critique somehow?

DM: It's love. I could never critique Bach. Bach and Coltrane were the source of perfection for me. They were these wellsprings of what it meant to get it right. They were mentors that never left me, partially because they died before I got to them, so I couldn't experience them in any way except through the sound worlds they gave me. There was no critique of either Coltrane or Bach; it was just my world touching their world.

CT: In your Amirkhanian interview, an audience member asked you about what kinds of images appear when you improvise. I wanted to revisit that question. Is there an element of mental imagery at all when you perform?

DM: I have some mental imagery. It largely has to do with three-dimensional spaces. A sphere or an empty void in my mind, which is three dimensional, or four dimensional with time, and in this empty space I can put objects or shapes which interact with each other. Depending on their placement they appear or disappear and each have foreground and background relationships, depending on their size and intensity, which I control with my voice and electronics, and this is like an ever-changing globe of information which I build and play with in the air. The audience then has the option of looking at it from their perspective: what's foreground and what's background. I gave them some indication of what I think is foreground and background when I build my structures. The audience, being the non-makers of the sound, have a chance to hear it in a different time grid; the audience hears linearly, I see these events happening as blocks of change, things going in and out of existence, blocks of movement, not really so linear, more simultaneous energy/intensity fields that influence each other. The audience has a choice of how they want to hear it, what they want to focus on. I give lots of focal points and structural hints. I work with time and timing, I think of theatrical shape—beginning, middle, end. Where do things end? What happens when they end? Is it a real end? Is it a fake end? Does the end start something new? Is it only the end of the middle? Is it the point for renewal? Is it a time for surprise? I think of structural moments in terms of a flow of time. What can you do to make fifty minutes feel like five minutes? How can we change the perception of time with sound, with meaning, with non-sense, with this pure vibrational energy called music? As I'm performing I think: What does the time need now to make it alive? Also, memory is very important. Prefiguring. Pre-shadowing. Using memory, using ideas from before that I set into the world at one point and return to later so that the human mind as a perceiver goes back to the original thought while the music is still going into the future and thus suddenly the mind is perceiving the past and then the *new* future has a different layout when you come back to it as the present. These are the things I'm thinking about and playing with, structurally and musically.

CT: Memory, re-presentation, imitation. We've talked about memory and re-presentation. How does the term imitation fit in?

DM: Imitation is not so terribly interesting.

CT: You said once: "I live to inhabit other people's bodies via their sound."

DM: By “inhabit” I mean that I learn what is possible by feeling the flow of another person's body, breath, and energy. I learn how another person organizes time in performance, and sound, by trying to be inside of all of that. Remember that when you're outside of it, you're a perceiver. As a perceiver you have a different relationship, you're going through your own thought patterns, and your own history, and you're connecting to the performer, the doer, in various ways. When you try to put your body, metaphorically, into the body of another person, into their breathing rhythm, into their gestural system, into their muscular/structural choices, it's a huge source of information. And that's how I change. That's how I developed a lot of my ideas, not by *imitating* but by trying to be, as much as I am able to, what they are biologically. In some way, it means feeling like an animal. It seems to me that animals don't imitate, they might be doing the exact same thing because that's what they have to be doing at that moment; they show the sum of all vectors.

CT: Could you be more specific about when in your career your collaborators found your voice, and perhaps voice in general, to be too emotional?

DM: It's interesting, the seed of the conflict began right after the Collaborative, five musician, five dancer, Ensemble in 1972-3. The dancers didn't have the same pre-conception of what experimental music was that we had. Therefore they asked us to do things, to sing or use our voices, that we as musicians would never have imagined trying. And I began to feel the freedom from the dancer point of view that things were possible, it was possible to do unknown things. There was no reason why not. I didn't do them all, of course, I just felt the breeze of possibilities. Then when I had the break with Bill Dixon, this ensemble also broke up, and I was own my own. I performed my first solo concert in 1973. I began to work on the potential of my own voice in 1974/75/76. At the same time I was working on developing super virtuosity with my hands. I drove to New York City almost every week to perform. Everyone liked me as a drummer, they thought I was a pretty interesting percussionist and I felt, without anyone really saying it, that the drumming was what people wanted from me at the time, and that the vocal ideas weren't wanted. I wasn't strong enough or secure enough with my voice that I was going to push it onto people, but my drumming was strong and secure. At the beginning of that time, the end of the 1970s, I was pretty much pure drumming. Then with George Cartwright and Michael Lytle, there was a trio in 1980/81 called *Meltable Snaps It*. These two guys were very accepting of my voice, partially because George came from a poetry tradition, George wrote and spoke poetry. He spoke text inside our extremely abstract improvisations; this was a *very early* text thing for me: George

speaking text with a Southern accent, a Mississippi accent speaking beautiful, personal words. And Michael singing/humming into his bass clarinet. And this was both permission *and* stimulation to bring back my voice to go into the drumming, to make them equal, for the first time, in improvised music. At the same time, I felt then that the rest of the New York scene was not at all interested in the singing voice and tolerated my voice because I was drumming in an interesting way. And so I held my voice back, forced myself to stop singing; and there were complete gigs where I wouldn't make a single sound with my voice. I felt like I had a hand clamped across my mouth. I knew I was being silent for a good reason. It seemed clear to me, that in this abstract noise scene, if I started opening my mouth and singing what I felt, I wouldn't be asked back. Because human voices with all their messiness and connotations and emotional resonances weren't acceptable yet, until the idea of quotation jumped into our music, around 1983. When quotation came in, it entered via cassettes. Mark Kramer played cassettes, pre-DJ, and he would play these fragmentary voices, words, speeches, and quotations of songs. And that was more easily acceptable, even funny and cool, because it wasn't a person doing it. It wasn't alive, and it was actually a *new* technology for us then. At that time things were pretty primitive, technologically speaking: a few microphones, guitar amps, and maybe an electric organ. Well, we had almost nothing. This was just before Christian [Marclay] came into the scene with his turntables and hand-made records. So, with the cassettes, and then Christian, suddenly a new level of acceptance was reached for the human voice, and I could actually join in with my vocal ideas. The use of quotation and samples allowed my voice to re-enter. It gave me a new conceptual opening. And that also gave an opening for Shelley Hirsch. She joined that scene and did a huge amount with quotation of songs and genres, while adding her own energy and sound. And then other voices from other parts of the world came into the scene, Sussan Deyhim came into the scene, and one by one new voices came from other genres or cultural musics. Although generally I still felt that all these voices were being seen and used as new sources of sound/rhythm material, and any emotional/song-making qualities inherent in the voice were simply side issues and not dealt with.

CT: Just to be clear, when you said "we" had this guy who played cassettes, you don't mean Meltable Snaps It.

DM: No. I meant the pool of 50 players in New York that made up the scene.

CT: One last question. You met George and Michael at the Creative Music Studio. Could you talk a bit about the Creative Music Studio?

DM: I was at the Creative Music twice. The first time I met George and Michael and once when Italian percussionist, Andrea Centazzo, was there and he brought me in to make a duo concert/recording with him. Because it was Karl Berger's place, for my New York scene it was way too connected to the "jazz" world. And Karl Berger had his own scene, his own circles and groups. But he was quite open, and invited a lot of players to the Creative Music Studio to give concerts and lead workshops. So

first time I came and gave a workshop, there was George and Michael teaching there too—we first met there. Wonderful that Karl made it possible for these meetings and new collaborations to happen! But I had no deep connection to CMS. And at that time there were many new, small places opening, galleries popping up in small towns; in Albany, there was Joel Chadabe's electronic music center. Some of us in the improvising scene were trying to break out of the NYC "prison" and find new audiences, new partners, and things were beginning to develop, so we just kept touring around. I was not deeply connected to CMS, but it was one of the first places to offer workshops on improvisation and group-playing, and it was a wonderful place to play and meet musicians in the late '70s and early '80s.

CT: Thank you David!

Two Post-Interview Addenda from David Moss:

A. October 2014

DM: There are 3 additional projects, one from 1986 and two from 1989, that should be mentioned regarding my development as a singer/vocalist without the drums.

In 1986, dancer/choreographer Kenneth King asked me to create music, and perform it live, for his new company piece *The Cook's Name is Sam*. For this piece, I stood in front of a table that held my small collections of 2-second delays and electronics while singing/speaking *live* through a headset microphone. Although the dance was largely set, the music was improvised in the sense that I had no exact score and my singing was slightly different each performance. For the first time in my life, my position in the middle of the dance floor of St. Mark's Church placed me amidst the action *without* my drum-set (note: these performances took place just a few weeks before the performances in Christian Marclay's *Dead Stories*).

In 1989, John Oswald, the Canadian improvising saxophonist and sound-collagist/composer, invited me to be one of the singer/performers in a dance piece called *Zorro*, by choreographer Bill Coleman, in Toronto. The other singer/performer was Shelley Hirsch. And it turned out that John wanted us to create, sing, vocalize all the sound/music/text for the performance, and I mean *all.* John created a score with exact timing/text and indications of sounds, and we sang it, a cappella, on both sides of the stage as Coleman's company danced the story of Zorro. To be truthful, I had no idea when John and I first talked about it, that we would be performing *alone*, with no other instruments, players, or pre-recorded music, or that I would <u>not</u> be drumming.

Then, in May/June of 1989, I organized and toured a group of five singers called: "Direct Sound" with Shelley Hirsch, Greetje Bijma, Anna Homler, Carles Santos and me. The project was conceived of as a focus on the solo human voice and its amazing differences, extremes, and characters. Each concert started with 5 solos in a row,

then an intermission, then duos, trios and a quintet. This project performed in Europe in 1989 and later at *New Music America* in Montreal.

Both of these 1989 projects were realized 2 years before I moved to Berlin, and certainly influenced the direction my post-drumming musical career would move in.

B. August 2015
Also in 1989/90 I recorded my album *My Favorite Things* (Intakt CD 022) in Vermont. I sing on every track—some with drums, and some without. Using the structures and musical information of some of my favorite musical works, I began to present my voice in a new way. I don't remember *deciding* to do this at the time. But looking back now at singing Ayler's "Ghosts," Monk's "Round Midnight," Bach's "Art of the Fugue," Jobim's "The Girl from Ipanema"—all as vocal solos or overdubbed voices by myself in 1990—I see that it was a very big step into the unknown, and one that still affects me even today.

This interview was published with the permission of the interviewee, David Moss, who has reviewed and edited the transcript. More information on Moss can be found at www.davidmossmusic.com.