

MICHAEL HEDGES by John Stropes

Michael Hedges is gone. The world has lost one of its great composers. I lost a friend. I worked with Michael Hedges for 12 years, documenting his compositions and his guitar technique. For me, this work was a labor of love. It was a great joy to work on the codification of some of the new masterworks for guitar. It was an honor to work with Michael Hedges. He had an openness to life: good things happened in the vicinity of this man.

I first met Michael when he performed at the American Finger-Style Festival in Milwaukee in August of 1985. Like everyone who saw him for the first time, I was profoundly affected. The powerful truth of his music convinced me that this is how music should be. I asked him to return as soon as possible to give a presentation on his archetypal composition "Aerial Boundaries."

When he arrived in November for the presentation, he brought the standard notation for "Aerial Boundaries" which he had previously written out as a theoretical reference as part of its development process. In this composition, one of the basic concepts was that it might be interesting if the left and right hands each played independent parts. There are as many as four, independent lines played simultaneously in a minimalistic fashion, lines that evolve. He was attempting to write it out in tablature in order to actually describe how to play it on the guitar. After about an hour discussing the first few measures, it was obvious that this task exceeded the current capability of guitar notation. And after listening to his brilliant formal lecture, a dream materialized: written music that would give the complete picture – the composer's musical intent and a thorough technical description for performers. It was clear that this would require an extended vocabulary for notation, expanded technologies for transcription and music typesetting, and a new vision in music publishing.

Considering the enormity of the undertaking, the understanding we reached was that I would develop and implement a plan to capture his compositions in a music literature that would be understandable to all musicians and, by taking responsibility for this

work, would free Michael up to concentrate on composition: I would write out his last composition so that he could write his next composition.

We began by organizing and videotaping concerts, master classes, lectures, interviews and special sessions. These special sessions used three cameras (left-hand, right-hand and wide shot) running independent, time-coded tape. Working from these videotapes and using half-speed video and half-speed audio, a rough draft of a transcription was made. Then, discussions with Michael Hedges explicated the composer's intentions. Next, this revised draft of the transcription was compared with the original Windham Hill audio recording to arrive at an exact correspondence. Finally, the material was tested using intermediate and advanced students to ensure that the notation was clear and thorough, and study notes were added to clarify any remaining ambiguities.



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The first element of this adventure was the book *Michael Hedges/Rhythm, Sonority, Silence* (1995) which contained original essays written by Michael on composition, electronics, and tunings, a moving automusical biography, and transcriptions of six of Michael's recorded works along with comprehensive technical information.

Our plan was to begin by producing written versions of Michael's most significant finger-style compositions and then turn our attention to his equally compelling pick-style compositions. Given his prodigious talent, however, the list of "most significant finger-style compositions" just kept getting longer, and, in fact, the first part of this task is still not completed.

Fortunately though, in retrospect, we had decided that the best time to document a composition was right around the time that he recorded it. He was an artist, he didn't look back. So the video documentation, interviews and analysis exist to complete our comprehensive plan. And it gives me a great feeling of comfort to continue this work now.

I am thankful that I was able to work directly with

Michael Hedges and publish this book while he was alive. He was an inspiration to me. I can't begin to sum Michael Hedges up, but I'd like to mention a few things that I noticed.

Early in his life he had put in the time and diligence to develop his compositional craft and innovative guitar technique. Then he moved on to develop other aspects of life and performance. He brought an immense presence to the stage, harnessing a palpable cosmic energy and making it all look effortless. At first he may have seemed like a guitarist from another planet, but, in truth, he was one of the most brilliant and disciplined people I have ever known. In the words of Leo Kottke, whom Michael always referred to as his big brother, "It was kind of a childlike take on life and I think he would have retained that all the way into his old age – that sort of warrior elf kind of trip. Boy, if he caught me on the wrong day I just didn't want to be around it and maybe the thing that irritated me the most was, especially on those days, after a few minutes I'd be laughing and I'd be having a good time, shaking my head and enjoying everything he was up to."

How could someone pull this together? It would seem to take several lifetimes to bring these elements into play. In the book *Michael Hedges/Rhythm, Sonority, Silence*, Michael wrote a profound and intimate account of his early years and his growing passion for music. At the age of eight, a soundtrack by Henry Mancini sparked his interest in composition. He took every opportunity to study music, exhausting the conventional process and then following his inner voice. He studied piano, guitar, flute, played in a rock band, stage band, high school marching band, jazz combo, loved the National Music Camp at Interlochen, and already in high school had begun studying college level music theory with the man who he always described as his mentor, Dr. Eugene J. Ulrich. At the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore he studied composition.

With extensive background in electronic music, he had a new vision for live reinforced sound for acoustic guitar. He didn't just want more sound. He wanted the sound of a bigger guitar. His singular step forward was to use a three-dimensional piezoelectric transducer pickup for the highs and high mids, and a magnetic pickup for the lows. He didn't try to get each pickup to sound as good as it could and then blend them. He treated it as if there were a crossover involved. The transducer, especially, by itself sounded like the thinnest, raspiest sound you would ever want to encounter. But together they made a larger-than-life composite.

Michael's total authority over a soundcheck was

legendary. He had memorized the frequency for each note on the neck of the guitar. When he had a problem in a room, he'd find the note that was hot in the problem area, he knew what that frequency was and he'd pull it.

With the release of *Aerial Boundaries* in 1984, he was able to bring his vision of the next generation of reinforced sound for acoustic guitar to recording. Working with producer Steven Miller and Windham Hill founder Will Ackerman, he added a lush landscape of electronic effects and set a new standard which still prevails today.

The stunning results that he achieved in concert and on recordings inspired new products from Trance Audio, Rane and other equipment manufacturers.

Michael Hedges' innovative guitar technique has, without a doubt, changed the guitar forever. Both his finger-style and pick-style technique have effectively raised the bar. By carefully controlling the duration of notes, using an endless variety of alternate tunings, and introducing a broad array of percussive effects, he was able to find much more room for expression on those six strings we know so well. The independence of his left and right hands in the application of all these techniques, and even when using both hands on the fingerboard, was astonishing.

But none of this would make any difference if not for the fact that Michael Hedges was also one of the world's great composers. Everything was driven by his desire to compose music – to express himself through music. In today's, shall we say, fast-moving world of music commerce, the word compose almost seems out of place. But it was the depth of his compositions that set Michael's music apart.

Andres Segovia, in his desire to promote the classical guitar, looked for fifty years for a composer who would do for guitar what Chopin did for piano. Michael Hedges has done this. He has left us with a substantial body of fresh, virtuosic music that touches our souls. It's spirit and energy will light our way. This is the high purpose of music.

He brought an orchestral sensibility to composing and arranging music for guitar. According to Leo Kottke, "The first word that comes to mind is space. His stuff was 3-D. It didn't proceed like language, like Jimmy Raney or somebody. It proceeded as geography. Like "Rickover's Dream," for example: I think the first time I heard it I was going to fall down. It just gave you vertigo there's just so much room in there."

Michael Manning, a long-time friend and musical

collaborator, summed it up: “He was both a brilliant intellectual composer and a wild man. Both existed within the same person. He used both of those ideas and got them to work together and it was just masterful and breathtaking. So much music that we heard was either pop music with lot of energy but kind of stupid, or really intelligently written contemporary music which was dry and not that much fun, or music that was just terribly cliched – that was so idiomatic that it just didn’t seem to say much. And we were really interested in the idea that things didn’t need to be that way – that you could make music that was intelligent and fun, that the two things were not in opposition to each other. We used to ride around in Michael’s van talking about these ideas, and the next thing I know, here he was having dealt with these things on a level that was just unbelievable. To actually watch that take place was pretty dang inspiring.”

Michael Hedges often said that music is not about music – it is about life. And he had a gusto for life. Between 1981 and 1996 he released a total of seven solo recordings on the Windham Hill label: Breakfast in the Field, Aerial Boundaries, Watching My Life Go By, Live on the Double Planet, Taproot, The Road to Return and Oracle. With the extraordinary pace of his personal evolution, these recordings sound like they are each 15 years apart. According to Will Ackerman, “Michael was a man of staggering talent and intelligence who really did live as big as his music sounded. He will be greatly missed as a philosophical being and as a musician who blessed us with power and beauty.”

In a 1997 television interview, Michael expressed the essence of his approach to music: “What possessed me to play the guitar like I do is the music itself. You can’t make your music good. You can’t try to be good. You can try to be present and you can try to remain open so what is going to speak to you can speak through you.”

John Stropes, a leading authority on finger-style guitar, author and teacher, is dedicated to honoring Michael Hedges by producing a literature which documents his compositions and by challenging guitarists to take his example to heart and reach for the high purpose of music. For more information about his work with Michael Hedges call 800-733-2520 (414-636-9912 outside the USA and Canada) or visit www.stropes.com.